

# SQUAT BIRTH JOURNAL

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# *Sarah and her mother, Martha:* A Story of Traditional Mexican Postpartum Care. The Cuarentena – From Mexico to the United States



by Christina Urina

Introduction by Jeramie Peacock

I love the week just before the submissions deadline. Articles and artwork start to roll in and the process of discovering the content for the next issue begins. At times there comes a lovely surprise, as in the case of the two articles focused on traditional Mexican Midwifery featured here — *Sarah and Her Mother, Martha: A Story of Traditional Mexican Postpartum Care. The Cuarentena – From Mexico to the United States* by Cristina Urina, and the *The Mexican Postpartum Bath: Closure of a Cycle* by Hannah S. Borboleta. We have long hoped to have bilingual articles in SQUAT, and an email introduction with Hannah got the ball rolling. After some dialogue back and forth about potential article topics we decided to start the bilingual series with a piece explaining the traditional art of the postpartum bath as practiced in Mexico. - Jeramie Peacock, Editor

I began this project when Wendy, from the *Imeinu* Doula Collective, asked if I could help her document the postpartum care of her friend, Sarah. Sarah immigrated with her family from Mexico when her mother, Martha, received death threats after she organized a fight for clean water access in her village. In America, after her third labor, Sarah received special support from her mother who followed the rituals of the *Cuarentena*, a traditional Mexican postpartum care. Sarah now lives in Miami but came back to Napa for her grandmother’s funeral and was staying with her mother. While she was in the area, Sarah decided that I should pay her a visit.

It was a beautiful hot summer day when I arrived to their home in a working-class neighborhood of Napa. Sarah greeted me at the door and introduced me to some of her relatives and friends who filled up the living room to pray for her grandmother. Sarah is in her early thirties and has light brown skin and a constant smile. Unlike her family who is Catholic, Sarah practices Orthodox Judaism and covers her hair with a scarf. Sarah handed me a glass of cold water and made small talk while she picked up her crying one-year-old, Jacob, who needed to be fed. Then, visitors started to leave, but in traditional Mexican fashion, saying goodbye is never short, and Sarah handled many

tasks at once: mother, family, friend, and host.

In between everything, Sarah shared that she took special prenatal care during her last pregnancy: “I walked a lot. I ate right and took time off before the birth. I wanted to be really healthy.” Sarah explained that her first two pregnancies were very difficult; she worked right up until she went into labor and did not take good care of herself afterwards. Her second birth was particularly traumatic because the baby was born breech, and she suffered from postpartum depression. Sarah decided that it was important to make healthier decisions in order to have a more fulfilling and safe third birth experience. This is why Sarah asked her mother for support and advice in traditional Mexican postpartum care.

Sarah was relieved when her mother, Martha, arrived to the house and was able to talk to me while she fed her baby and tended to guests and relatives. Martha sat down with me and was very warm. We spoke in Spanish and as I patiently waited for Sarah, she told me about her birth experiences — the sources of much of the valuable wisdom she would use to help her daughter.

### **Martha’s Cuarentena**

Martha told me that before she came to America, she de-

## Martha and Sarah's Cuarentena Activity

livered her babies at home, as was the custom in the rural areas of Mexico when she was a young mother. Sarah overheard our conversation and proudly added that she and her father were born in the same bed. After labor, Martha would begin her Cuarentena, the time that a mother stays at home with her newborn and receives special care. The traditional care system is designed to begin from the time of birth and lasts forty days. The *Cuarentena* is an old ritual, whose roots are as mixed as the history of Mexico, but the *cuarenta dia* or forty day length of the practice is rooted in the Bible (Leviticus 12: 1-5).

Martha explained why the mother's body goes into such special care during the *Cuarentena*:

*You know, when you go into labor your body suffers extensive trauma. It does a lot of work. You feel that you're pushing even with the tips of your hair! Your body gets stretched open when it houses the baby and it needs time to get back to normal after the baby is born. All your organs and bones have to find their places again. I don't understand how I see women now walking about outside after they just delivered a baby! For the first two weeks after labor I was in bed.*

After labor, Martha said that she was dressed in warm clothing, including a headscarf. A girdle was placed around her stomach to help hold her organs in place. She was also given an orange and lemon leaf tea with sugarcane alcohol. Martha explained that it is very important for the mother to rest and stay warm throughout the *Cuarentena*.

Martha said that visitors usually brought chickens for the mother's nourishment since a postpartum diet typically consists of chicken soup prepared with a simple broth of garlic, onion, cilantro, and salt. Chicken soup is considered beneficial for breastfeeding. She was also fed noodle soup, milk, Mexican hot chocolate, and atole. Certain foods were avoided like any spices, tortillas, or foods such as cucumbers that were considered too fresh to keep the mother warm.

Seven days later, her mother bathed Martha for the first time. She did not bathe herself so that she would not strain her body or accidentally slip. Martha gently brushed her wet hair with her fingers because it was believed that using a brush would let too much cool air hit the scalp, which causes migraines, punzadas. After Martha's hair dried, she would put on her scarf again.

During the *Cuarentena*, Martha fed, changed, and bonded with her baby. Martha's mother lived two blocks away and constantly tended to her needs. Also, other women washed dirty diapers and bathed the newborn when Martha's mother needed extra help. Martha's husband and mother looked after the other children and the older children helped with any extra chores. Martha also did not sew, knit, read, or do anything to strain her eyes because every part of her body needed to heal.

The *Cuarentena* allowed plenty of time for Martha and her baby to spend intimate time together after the sacred ritual of birth. Any time that Martha felt the desperation to get up and tend to her own chores, her mother reminded her that everything was taken care of and to rest with her baby. "Everyone helped back then. That's why you never heard of mothers suffering from postpartum depression," said Martha. Sarah chimed in and explained the importance of early mother-baby bonding: "You give birth to

### Day 1

Dress warm, including headscarf. Place girdle around stomach.

Drink orange and lemon leaf tea with sugarcane alcohol.

Eat chicken soup with garlic, onion, cilantro, and salt.

Eat noodle soup, milk, Mexican hot chocolate, and atole.

### Day 7

First bath with hands-on support; brush hair with wet fingers.

### Day 12

Second bath; brush hair with comb for the first time. Special massage.

### Day 15

Get out of bed and walk around the house using girdle, scarf, and rebozo.

After this day, bathe in intervals of two or three days.

### Day 40

No bath. First day out of house with the baby.

Blessing and thanksgiving ritual.

**Precautions:** Do not sew, knit, read or do anything to strain eyes. Avoid spices, tortillas, or foods such as cucumbers that are considered too fresh to keep the mother warm.

a little human who is a part of you but they are also a stranger and it is important for the both of you to get to know each other. So, this time is very special.”

On the 12th day, Martha was bathed for the second time and finally brushed her hair with a comb. Martha was also given a special massage with warm olive oil by an experienced elder in order to help relieve the pain her spine and back muscles endured during the birth. The experienced elder also helped put her organs back in place by massaging her stomach.

On the 15th day, Martha got out of bed and walked around the house. She continued to wear her girdle and the scarf on her head. At that point, she also wore a *rebozo* to keep her back and shoulders warm in order to promote healthy lactation. Martha walked in her backyard until sunset, when *el sereno*, a dreaded mysterious element in the night breeze that brings morning dew and sickness to sensitive bodies in Latino folklore, fell. Martha was then bathed after the 15th day in intervals of two or three days and finally bathed on the 39th day.

On the 40th day she was not bathed and finally went out of her house. On that special day, Martha presented her baby to the church for a blessing and thanked God for a healthy birth. She then resumed her regular activity but would not become pregnant again in the next two years. Martha explained that, traditionally, if a woman wants to become pregnant again, she waits at least two years after her *Cuarentena* in order to allow more time for her body to fully heal.

Martha explained that the *Cuarentena* is very important for a woman’s mental and physical health so that she does not suffer from depression, migraines, and later in life from rheumatism arthritis, high blood pressure, bad skin, and other ailments.

“I’m in my sixties now and I don’t have any rheumatism arthritis, or anything. My skin looks good and I feel healthy. A woman’s health is very important,” said Martha. As she fed her baby shredded chicken, Sarah added that her mother’s friend did not take care of herself after labor and now suffers from rheumatism arthritis and looks much older than her mother who is the same age.

Martha said, “My mother took such good care of me! When she became sick in her old age, I did not want to put her in a nursing home. So, I took care of her until she past away. Now, that I am no longer taking care of my mother, I want to go hiking. I feel very good and I want to keep taking care of my health.”

### Sarah’s *Cuarentena*

Sarah said that she was excited when her mother agreed to help her follow the ritual of the *Cuarentena* for her third birth. However, since the *Cuarentena* is traditionally practiced in a rural environment, slight changes had to be made and new challenges overcome in America.

Sarah’s postpartum care began in the hospital, but once at home in Berkeley, Martha made the hour and a half trip from Napa to assist and advise her daughter in the rituals of the *Cuarentena*. Since Martha worked and could not travel every day to Berkeley, Sarah’s husband also learned how to assist Sarah. Sarah also had the support and encouragement of her friend Wendy, who is an experienced doula.

Traditions were closely followed. Sarah even hired a woman to massage her back and organs. However, living in an urban area, Sarah ate store bought chickens. Finally, Sarah was very grateful that she received extra support

from her synagogue that sent family meals to her home. It became very obvious to me during the visit that communities that value cooperation and family care facilitate the *Cuarentena* care even in a new country.

Theories and opinions abound over the function and effectiveness of the *Cuarentena*. In this case, I will not attempt to relate the *Cuarentena* to traditional postpartum care in other cultures or to Western science but instead offer Sarah’s story as one account of alternative postpartum care. Our goal is not only to document a traditional Mexican rural practice that is disappearing or evolving in the face of globalization and industrialization but also to offer options to pregnant women and their partners.

As Sarah’s story demonstrates, pregnancy is a space where many women have an opportunity and a right to plan for the healthcare that they are most comfortable with, whether with the help of licensed health practitioners, their partners, mothers, relatives, friends, doulas, or on their own. They can draw from various traditions and practices made available to them whether through family, privilege, hard work, love, education, and/or resistance to the normative healthcare system in their society.

I was inspired by Sarah’s determination to be more active about her healthcare during the process of her third pregnancy. Sarah said that she did not suffer from postpartum depression after delivering baby Jacob. Sarah and everyone who supported her throughout this journey are very happy with her third birth experience, as am I to have been given the privilege to document it.



### Christina Urista

is a student doula at the Nia Birth and Family Life Services Center in Oakland where she works with pregnant foster youth in Alameda County. She also volunteers at the Imeinu Birth Collective in Berkeley. She graduated with a BA in Cultural Anthropology

from UC Berkeley, 2011, and is pursuing an interest in becoming a trained midwife. As a first generation Chicana, Christina has cultural knowledge of *Cuarentena* rituals from female relatives and her mother who was a local village midwife in Mexico.