

# Feature



## Creating Miss Fiji's Traditional Attire Costume **Ashley Phaneuf Wakai**

*A professional hair and makeup artist tells how he created Miss Fiji's award-winning Traditional Attire costume for the 2015 Miss Pacific Islands Pageant.*

When Zaira Begg was crowned Miss Fiji last October to represent our country at the Miss Pacific Islands Pageant in the Cook Islands in December, she asked me if my company, [Hair and Makeup Perfectionist Fiji](#), would sponsor her with our hair and makeup services, which I was happy to do.

Two days after being crowned, Zaira was called in to do an official photo shoot for her portfolio. At the time we had just finished creating an outfit made of an old white wedding gown, but we modified it and added more traditional material over it. I suggested that she wear the dress for the shoot. It turned out amazing! The dress looked like it was custom made for her.

Everyone who saw the images suggested that we should be the ones to design her Traditional Attire costume for the Miss Pacific Islands Pageant. The Miss Fiji Pageant committee also saw the images and



Miss Fiji, Zaira Begg, in her Traditional Attire costume at the 2015 Miss Pacific Islands Pageant. Photo: [ABC Australia](#).



Outfit worn by Zaira Begg on a photo shoot two days after she became Miss Fiji that won her the honor of creating Zaira's Traditional Attire costume.

was impressed with the outcome, so they agreed, even though they had their own people who normally do it each year.

It may seem surprising that someone whose business is hair and makeup has enough experience to take on designing and creating the most important costume for this international pageant. Over the years I have participated in local transgender pageants, and among the requirements for contestants is providing their own wardrobes to wear. I

learned to sew as a matter of necessity and whenever I participate, I usually design my own attire. Luckily, Zaira and the Miss Fiji Pageant committee thought the skills shown in that first outfit were up to the task.

## Design

The first question was what kind of traditional costume to design. Fiji is an ethnically very diverse nation, so there is no single ethnic attire that I could look to for the design. Taking Zaira's ethnic roots in India as a starting point, we thought about using the design of a 'choli suit' a traditional outfit worn by Indian ladies for special occasions, yet choosing traditional Fijian materials and accessories. We would use something different from the usual *tapa* material though, as we wanted our design to make a statement and to bring peace and unity within our people.

When Zaira was chosen to represent Fiji, there were controversies about her not being of a full Fijian race. This crushed her at first and she went through an unsettling period in her life. However, it ultimately inspired us to come up with this idea so people can see the beauty that can be created when different cultures and religions come together as one. We wanted to step a little outside our traditional boundaries, and explore what other traditions have to offer, yet remain true to the spirit of our homeland.

## Construction

The costume we finally came up with has five pieces – skirt, bow, bodice, pauldrons, and headdress. I'll discuss each.

One constraint on materials was that the Miss Pacific Islands Pageant forbids the use of beads, sequins and rhinestones in any outfit worn by pageant contestants for the duration of the pageant. I guess this is to encourage designers to use materials that are of Melanesian and Polynesian origin, and keep the costumes as traditional as possible.

We used traditional Fijian mats woven from pandanus leaves, *magimagi* (coconut fibre), printed *tapa* cuttings, *pandanus* leaf cuttings, sea shells, mother-pearl shells, pearl beads, strips of *tapa*. and wooden miniature war clubs.

## Skirt

The skirt and bodice are made out of a traditional Fijian mat, a material never used before by Miss Fiji representatives. Most of them preferred to use *tapa*, probably because it is easier to work with. For the details on the skirt, we used *magimagi* (coconut fibre), and *tapa* cuttings to create *tanoas* (kava mixing bowls). This also applies to the Fijian fans and painted *bures*, with the addition of shells and pearls to accentuate them more.





Six-piece set of wire hoops help give it a more balloon or fuller shape. Note pattern sewn into bottom of skirt.

Since the costume was a completely custom design, there were no existing patterns to use in creating it. Everything had to be imagined, sketched, and directly put to work as we thought of it. The normal process would be to drape the various pieces directly on Zaira. However, Zaira and I live 3 hours apart, and it would have been very difficult for us to get together enough in the

short period of time we had to work that way. Instead, I took her measurements and then created the costume according to her body size.

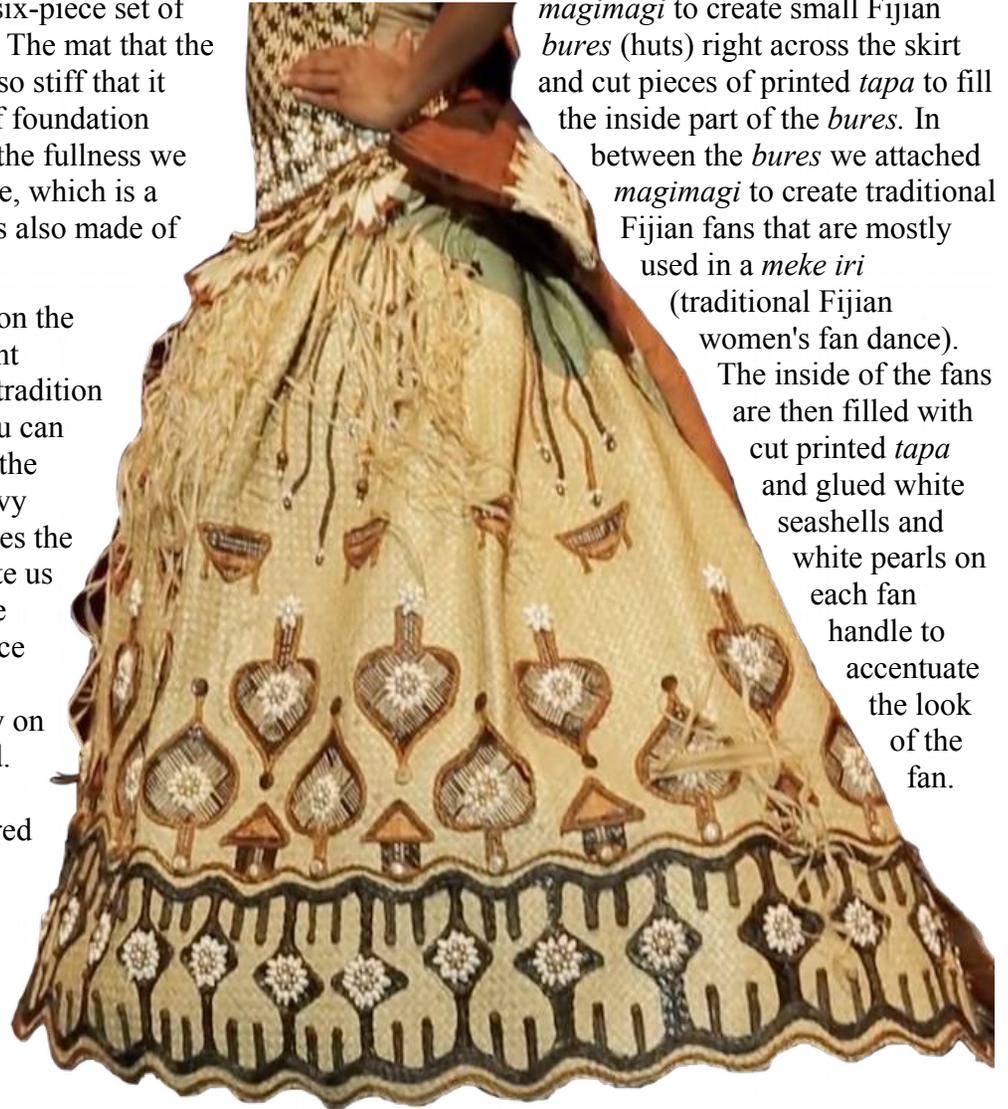
The skirt has a special foundation garment to give it a more balloon or fuller shape. We used a six-piece set of wired hoops. (left) The mat that the skirt is made of is so stiff that it needed this type of foundation garment to give it the fullness we wanted. The bodice, which is a separate piece, was also made of mat.

The patterns on the skirt have important meaning in Fijian tradition and culture. As you can see, the bottom of the skirt is cut in a wavy form which signifies the oceans that separate us from the rest of the world, and is a place where most of our Fijian families rely on for their livelihood. The bottom of the skirt is then bordered with *magimagi* to hold the weaves together as they were cut raw. Using black paint we drew a well-known Fijian

print, which is the symbol of the *I cula ni bokola* (cannibal fork). To complete this pattern we glued sea shells and pearls amongst each print, arranging the sea shells in a pattern to form a flower.

Above the painted print we glued *magimagi* to create small Fijian *buress* (huts) right across the skirt and cut pieces of printed *tapa* to fill the inside part of the *buress*. In between the *buress* we attached *magimagi* to create traditional Fijian fans that are mostly used in a *meke iri* (traditional Fijian women's fan dance).

The inside of the fans are then filled with cut printed *tapa* and glued white seashells and white pearls on each fan handle to accentuate the look of the fan.



Skirt embellished with Fijian *buress* (huts), Fijian fans, and *tanoas* (mixing bowls) above pattern.

Above the row of Fijian fans is a row of *tanoas* (kava mixing bowls). Again we used *magimagi* to create these and filled the inside, gluing cut pieces of printed *tapa* on the inside of the *tanoas*. Then we glued black and brown *magimagi* in tear-drop patterns from the top end of the skirt drooping down between the darts on the stiff skirt towards the *tanoas*.

To finish off the skirt and give it a fuller look we added curled strips of *vau* fibre (dried bark of *vau* tree). These strips are curled using scissors just like the way you would curl up gift ribbons.



Putting on skirt in green room. Long fibers attached to top of skirt are scraped from a local *Vau* tree.



Traditional bow in back of dress is made of printed *tapa*, and attaches to skirt with Velcro..

### Bow

In our traditional Fijian costumes, we mostly wear 'tapa' around our waist, tied at the back in a bow. The bow in this costume is made out of printed *tapa*. *Tapa* is a bit stiff, so it gave the bow a nice shape, with a long trailer down to the end of the bottom of the skirt. This bow is attached onto the skirt with Velcro and the bow sits right on top of the meeting point of the two ends of the skirt so it serves as coverage as well to give it a neat finish.

### Bodice

The bodice material is made out of *gafigafi* (woven pandanus leaves like a mat but with finer plaids; mostly worn by women from the Lau group of Islands). In this case, black dyed and natural coloured dried pandanus leaves are woven together.

Just like the skirt, once cut we had to be careful that the weaves didn't open. We actually cut the *gafigafi* hoping to achieve more like a corset look, so we cut a modern sweetheart shape on the front top, folded the darts along the waist area to accentuate her silhouette and sealed everything with a piece of cloth glued across the cut bodice. The



Bodice made of *gafigafi* (woven pandanus leaves) is woven with black-dyed and natural coloured leaves.



White and black pearls, and mother of pearl shell off-cuts glued to top and bottom of bodice look like garland worn by locals in traditional functions.

cloth was pieced, overlapping both ends of the bodice with hoops to secure the lace.

On the top of the bodice, we glued *magimagi* on the edge as a border and arranged white pearls, black pearls and mother of pearl shells off-cuts. The same was done at the bottom of the bodice but we pasted (from inside the bodice) a long piece of *tapa*, pleating and folding it across the bottom of the bodice. It was meant to look like a traditional garland that locals wear in traditional functions.

## Pauldrons

The pauldrons (shoulder pieces) are made from 2 coconut shells. They are sandpapered and the edges have been smoothed. Mother of pearl shell off-cuts are

then glued around the edges so that they sit comfortably on Zaira's shoulders. Small white sea shells are then glued onto the top of the coconut shells in rows. For the middle row, we combined sea shells and wooden beads.

The pauldrons are held together by long strips of *magimagi*, and a printed piece of *tapa* was glued onto the *magimagi* strips to secure them. This strip of *tapa* can be seen on Zaira's back when she is wearing the



Pauldrons are made of coconut shells covered in small white sea shells in rows. Middle row combined sea shells and wooden beads.

pauldrons. To secure the pauldrons when they're worn, we used a wire cord (wire wrapped in cloth). The wire cord is glued right across the inside of the coconut shells and they wrap around Zaira's shoulder and arms when they are worn.

## Headdress

The headdress was the most challenging of the pieces to create. Headdresses worn in the past by Miss Fiji representatives were always flowers made from *tapa* or *pandanus* leaves. In the Fijian tradition a headdress is only worn by women of chiefly background, made of *lawedua* (a Fijian bird) feathers. We thought that we would go over-the-top with the design for this headpiece, but still keep it traditional.

I think that Zaira is worthy to wear such a headdress. With her personality and her experience in life, even after the Miss Fiji pageant when she was criticized, she is quite a warrior. She fights for her own rights as a young Fijian woman in this modern day and age, and also fights for respect and equality for all women in Fiji.

First we created a papier-mâché base from ordinary cooking flour and newspaper strips. We simply mixed one part flour with four parts water to make a cake-like paste that acts as glue. We wrapped a mannequin head with Glad plastic wrap. The head was slightly smaller than Zaira's, so that the base would fit nicely on her head, and wouldn't need straps or slides to hold it down.



Making the papier-mâché base for the headdress on a mannequin head that is slightly smaller than Zaira's.



Pandanus leaves cut into fish scale like shapes with painted tips are pasted along left side of base.

We pasted the newspaper strips diagonally, and carefully moulded them to form a round or a head shape. Once dry, the newspaper became stiff, allowing us to draw the shape of the headdress base after removing it from the mannequin. The headdress base was then painted to add more security in holding the headdress together and also making it look neater, even though it will be fully covered with the detailing.

We pasted shells, pearls, mother of pearl shells, shell off-cuts, wooden beads, and coconut shell off-cuts, in a manner that sweeps towards the right side of the headdress. *Pandanus* leaves are cut into fish scale like shapes and pasted along the left side. The tips of the *pandanus* leaves are painted lightly with light brown paint to create an effect.



Miniature war clubs attached to papier-mâché base: *i ula tavatava*, *dui*, *kinikini*, *sali*, and *i cula ni bokola*.

Five miniature Fijian war clubs which were bought from a tourist handicraft were then glued upright across the middle. These war clubs were used by Fijian warriors in the days of cannibalism. Each war club has its different name and use. The Fijian war clubs are:

**Iula tavatava.** A short-handled club with a fluted head. This is a throwing club used in war, made from the stem and buttress roots of the shrub used in making it. Tattoo designs decorate the handle.

**Dui.** A moderately rare form of Fijian club, described in the *New Fijian Dictionary* (Capell, Government of Fiji, 2003) as having a broad head shaped like a fan.

**KiniKink.** This club is very broad and could double as a shield. It was used by chiefs and priests as a symbol of rank. Due to their association with chiefs and priests and the ornate nature of their blades these clubs are rare and highly collectable native weapon.

**Sali.** A broadly curved club with a blade on the end and a spur on the upper curve of the club. The heavy end is highly decorated. These are sometimes called musket clubs because of their shape, but it is more likely to be inspired by the clawed cauliflower, a species of wild banana (Musasp). The club is mostly used to bring the blade end down on a victim, cutting through flesh and bone. The spur may have been used to penetrate the skull of a victim and to parry other weapons. This is a very heavy club but lighter ones were often carved for dance. The broadend of the club has a carved representation of tattooing.

**I cula ni bokola or bulutoko.** A priest or chief's fork, used in eating human flesh. The two faces at the head of the handle and others carved about the haft are unusual features. Length: 33.5cm.



Old brown wig attached to back of headdress meant to give impression of *yaqona* bundle at local markets



Specially carved forks were used exclusively by priests and chiefs when eating human flesh. While it was accepted for the general population to handle and eat human flesh with their hands, certain chiefs and priests, as living representations of gods, could not properly handle any food at all. They were either fed by an attendant, who placed the food carefully in their mouth avoiding any contact with the priest or chief's lips, or, the priest or chief fed themselves with a wooden fork. This fork, having been in contact with sanctified fingers was then considered 'tabu' (sacred) and could not be handled by ordinary mortals, becoming a religious relic in its own right.

On the back of the headdress we attached an old brown wig and stuffed the inside so that it created height to accentuate the look. In between the hairs of the wig we glued long coconut fibres that had small white sea shells and brown pearl beads glued at random places along it. The wig and coconut fibres are then braided together. The purpose of this is to give the impression of a bundle of *yaqona* that we would see at our local markets.

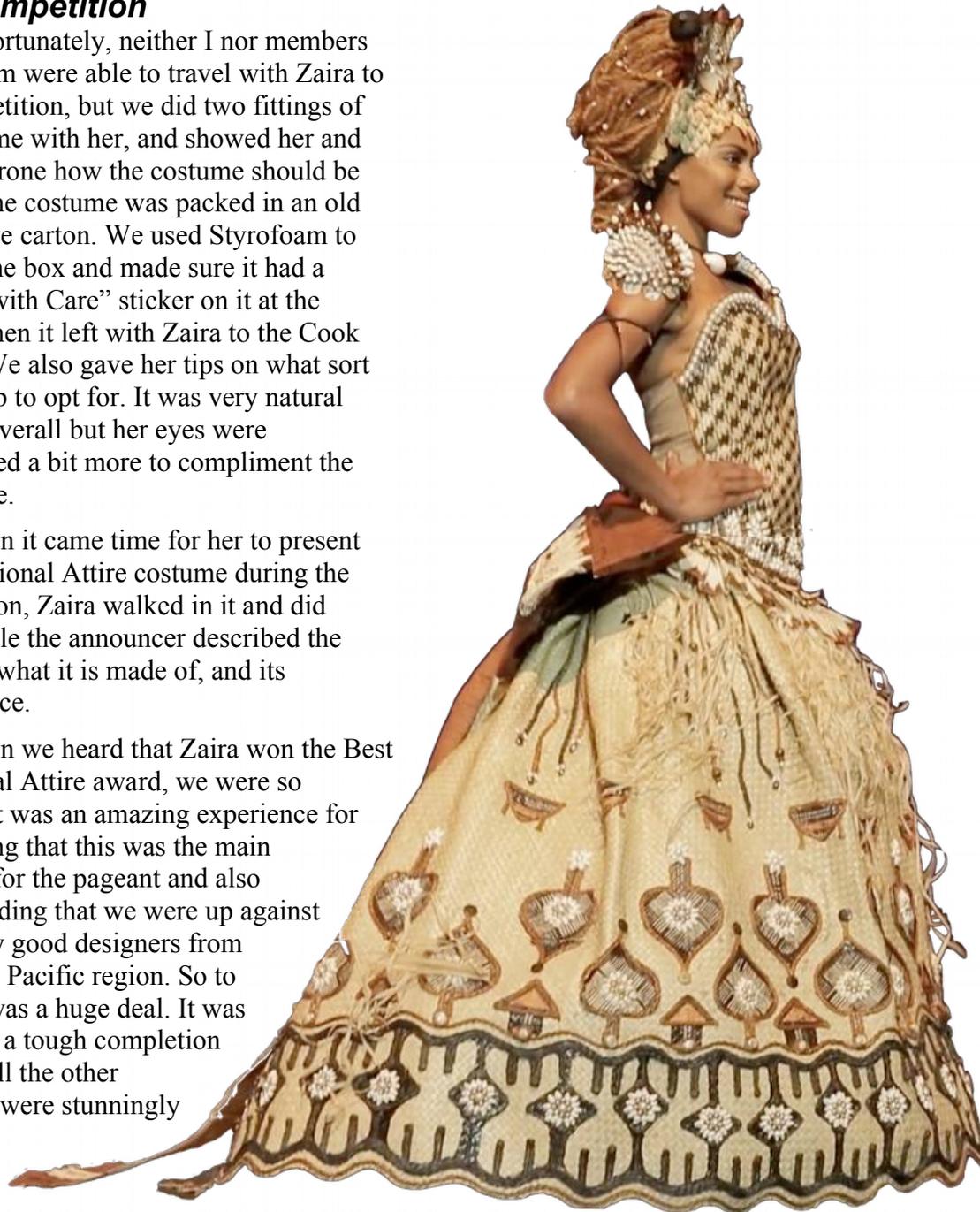
*Yaqona* is *kava* in its root form. *Yaqona* is presented during traditional Fijian ceremonies. This root is sun-dried, cleaned, and ground into powder form before it is mixed and drunk. It tastes like mud water, but will make you a bit drunk if taken excessively.

## The Competition

Unfortunately, neither I nor members of my team were able to travel with Zaira to the competition, but we did two fittings of the costume with her, and showed her and her chaperone how the costume should be put on. The costume was packed in an old microwave carton. We used Styrofoam to stuff up the box and made sure it had a “Handle with Care” sticker on it at the airport when it left with Zaira to the Cook Islands. We also gave her tips on what sort of makeup to opt for. It was very natural makeup overall but her eyes were emphasized a bit more to compliment the head piece.

When it came time for her to present the Traditional Attire costume during the competition, Zaira walked in it and did poses while the announcer described the costume, what it is made of, and its significance.

When we heard that Zaira won the Best Traditional Attire award, we were so excited! It was an amazing experience for us knowing that this was the main category for the pageant and also understanding that we were up against some very good designers from across the Pacific region. So to win this was a huge deal. It was also quite a tough completion because all the other costumes were stunningly made.



## Final Thoughts

It was such a satisfying and rewarding moment for my team and me, knowing that we were there for Zaira in spirit, and sharing in her happiness. We felt privileged to be a part of such an important endeavor for Fiji, and grateful to be chosen by Zaira and the Miss Fiji Committee to create her Traditional Attire Costume.

*Ashley Phaneuf Wakai has over seventeen years of experience in the industry. Ashley specializes in hairdressing and makeup for weddings, and has done over 500 in his career. He is well-known in Fiji for his finishing touches and attention to detail. His international clientele base challenges him to work on many different skin tones. Ashley trained at Fiji's top hairdressing academy Pivot Points which is globally recognized, and finished his makeup studies with Napoleon Perdis of Australia. His work with professional photographers enables him to tailor makeup to suit a wide variety of lighting and occasions. He also enjoys designing his own costumes for local pageants.*

See a [promotional video](#) about the 2015 Miss Pacific Islands competition and a [greeting from Zaira Begg](#) on YouTube.

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