

# Missionary Marriage Issues: I'm Marrying a National!

Living as a single person without adequate social support in another culture can be very lonely. It is common for people to marry someone they meet while serving in their host culture, and it has been so for many years.

Dorothy Carey's sister, Kitty, had agreed to help Dorothy with her children in India, but that did not last long.

- November 11, 1793, Kitty arrived in India.
- February 6, 1794, Kitty met Charles Short.
- November 15, 1794, Kitty married Charles.

A year and four days after she arrived in India, she married a man from her passport country, a man she had known for nine months.

Though William Carey's marriage to Dorothy was undesirable, he remarried soon after her death.

- December 8, 1807, Dorothy died.
- May 8, 1808, William married Charlotte.

Five months after Dorothy's death, William married a cross-cultural worker from Germany, a woman he had tutored in English eight years earlier while living in India.

Just as singles do marry expats from their passport culture and expats from other cultures, they frequently marry nationals from their host culture. Such singles have usually lived in the culture for some time and have developed an understanding and appreciation of the host cultures even though they are quite different from their passport cultures. Though the couple realizes they are different because of their cultures, they are "sure" that their love will overcome any problems that arise because they are not from the same culture.

## Don't opposites attract?

People may initially be attracted to others who are different, but in long-term relationships, similarities are much more important. Differences may change from attractive, to tolerated, to annoying, to grating, to destroying a relationship. Understanding and appreciating a culture is quite different from internalizing it. It is easier to adjust to differences between families in the same culture than it is to adjust to the deeply held values found in different cultures.

Differences that complement each other, such as one person being talkative and the other a listener, are relatively easy to adjust to. However, deeper cultural values, such as male vs. female roles or honesty vs. saving-face may be very difficult to live with. The single woman may be attracted to the macho male in her host culture but may not like the way he treats her after marriage. The single man may be attracted to the way the woman in his host culture avoids hurting anyone but may not like her lying to him to do so after marriage.

## What does the Bible say?

The Old Testament forbids cross-cultural marriages for the Israelites.

- Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons (Deuteronomy 7:3).
- You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves (Nehemiah 13:25).
- Also see Joshua 23:12 and Ezra 9 (whole chapter) among others.

These prohibitions were for religious reasons, deeply held cultural values. The reasons given were that intermarriage would result in people changing their concepts of and relationships with God and with false gods.

- For they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods Deuteronomy 7:4).
- Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Nehemiah (13:26).

Of course, when marrying a national, people may say that they are both Christians. However, maintaining a marriage relationship when the couple has disagreements between deep cultural values of any kind is often very difficult. Marrying a national is not sinful, but it makes marriage more difficult. People may be very unhappy in such a marriage and be tempted to look for companionship outside the marriage.

## What problems may occur?

Would any of the following disturb either you or your spouse-to-be? Since at least one of you will have to live in a host culture, that one will probably experience some, if not all, of the following.

- Your children do not really know your parents, their grandparents.
- Family members, such as grandparents and cousins, are not able to communicate well with your children.
- You do not celebrate your culture's holidays and observe its traditions.
- You have to explain jokes and/or ask for them to be explained.
- Your children grow up with a different set of cultural assumptions than you have.
- You experience discrimination because of the ethnicity of your spouse.

- Your children grow up with gender roles you do not approve of.
- Etc....

## What can we do?

- Five things are absolutely necessary.
- Have at least one language in which both you are fluent. Explain a subtle emotion to your spouse-to-be, and ask him or her to explain it back in different words.
- Do not assume anything, especially things you would call "common sense." Remember that you have much less in "common" than couples reared in the same culture.
- Do talk about every aspect of your future life together. Include at least the following aspects: spiritual, financial, marriage and sexual expectations, family, friends, gender roles, children, leisure, communication, and conflict resolution.
- Do not avoid talking about any subject. If your spouse-to-be says it is not important, press for discussion. If he or she refuses to discuss something, treat that as a red flag!
- Remember that what your in-laws think of you is extremely important. In many cultures their opinions may be of great importance to your spouse-to-be.

## Are men and women alike?

Men marry national women and women marry national men, just as was the case in the OT cross-cultural marriages. Member care providers have observed that men tend to be more satisfied with their cross-cultural marriage than are women. This may be a result of the roles women are

expected to play, especially if they live in their husband's culture. Here are examples.

- A woman may be attracted to a Latin macho man because he seems to be more like a Biblical "head of the house" than do many sensitive men she has met in her passport culture. However, when his attitude turns out to be real machismo with full emphasis on male superiority, she may realize that even in him it is the old male chauvinism she despised in her own culture.
- A woman may believe she would be happy living with the convert she marries in the Middle East. However, when she actually lives there as his wife, she despises having to cover her entire body and being unable to express affection at all outside the privacy of her home.
- Even though a woman married to an African man is not forced to walk ten steps behind her husband, both of them may feel uncomfortable walking together when all the other women are behind their husbands.

### What about TCKs?

Notable exceptions to women not being as satisfied in cross-cultural marriages are Third Culture Kids (TCKs), especially those who have grown up in their husband's culture. If the woman has internalized parts of that culture, she may be comfortable with women's roles there—perhaps more comfortable than with roles in her passport culture.

The same is true of female TCKs who grew up in cultures *similar* to their husbands'. For example, a woman who grew up in one tribe in an African culture may be happy with a similar role expected of her in another African culture. Similarly, one who grew up in one Latin country may be happy in similar Latin American countries.

### Conclusion

Cross-cultural marriage adjustments often are more difficult than those in which both husband and wife are from the same culture. These marriages have an extra level of differences to work through.

- All husbands and wives have to work through differences between them as individuals.
- All husbands and wives have to work through differences between their families of origin. One marries a whole set of family traditions and expectations, not just an individual.
- In cross-cultural marriages the couple has to work through not only individual and family differences but also the much deeper cultural differences.

This does not mean it cannot be done, only that it is more difficult, often much more difficult. The cultural assumptions are much more central to our persons than people may expect.

Even more disconcerting are times when previously agreed upon items change.

- You find out that your spouse is more interested in working on a permanent resident card (Green Card in the USA) than on the marriage.
- Your spouse does not want to live in your passport country.
- You find out that you do not want to live permanently in your spouse's country.
- Your spouse does not want to join your agency as agreed upon.

Cross-cultural marriages are difficult, but not impossible. Two people more interested in giving than in receiving are able to make them work. Just be prepared to be the one who gives.

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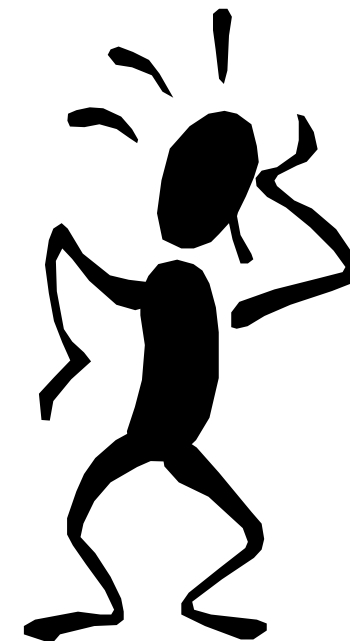
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