

Eberhard Mühlán

# **CROSS-CULTURAL COUPLES**

Loving against all odds

MuehlanMedien

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## Introduction

It is always a thrilling and exciting experience for me to meet cross-cultural couples. Every time I do, the thought strikes me: "These two must share a very special history. I wonder how they met? They look so different, how do they get along?"

Cross-cultural couples do indeed experience an exciting adventure. They face not only their own individual personality differences, but also have to come to terms with the differing patterns of their own particular cultures. Compared with a German/German couple they face a double challenge! From running Marriage Seminars with our Family organisation Team.F<sup>1</sup> I know all about the adjustment problems and painful learning processes which two different strong personalities have to go through in order to create a shared life together. The two of you will go through similar struggles. You will also have the even more challenging task of coming to terms with the dynamics of your cultural differences.

That's what this book is about. I shall only touch briefly on the classical themes of marriage. These topics are dealt with in our Team.F seminars or through studying our publications<sup>2</sup>. Instead I would rather help you to recognise more clearly both your own cultural identity and that of your partner. What is cultural identity? We shall discuss that later in greater detail, but in short, we understand culture to mean the learned strategies by which a person's life is shaped, and by identity the

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<sup>1</sup> The interdenominational Family Organisation *Team.F* offers a great variety of seminars on Marriage Preparation, Marriage topics and Family life. [www.team-f.de](http://www.team-f.de).

<sup>2</sup> Visit our internet website [www.MuehlanMedien.de](http://www.MuehlanMedien.de).

particular combination of personal characteristics which each human being displays.

You have probably had the same experience as I've had, namely, as long as we remain solely within our own cultural environment we rarely think about life in other cultures, indeed we rarely even think about the essential characteristics of our own culture. The way we live, we assume, is proper and correct. Only when we are confronted with another culture – for example our partner's culture – do we begin to think not only about their culture, but also about the roots and essential characteristics of our own culture. This must be understood in order to recognise, talk about and compare differing attitudes, expectations and needs. The purpose of this book is to enable both of you to finally develop and live out your own particular marriage identity.

Each couple has their own history, their own dynamic. There are therefore few one-size-fits-all solutions. It's more a matter of recognising important basic principles which can then be applied to each couple's unique situation. Learning from the experiences of others as well as asking the right questions can be a great help. Hence the structure of this book: two cross-cultural couples - the Gads and the Walters – relate their experiences and the lessons they have learned. Then each chapter ends with a series of questions to encourage both partners to discuss the relevant topic and make concrete decisions which will apply to their particular situation. I hope that each couple will pause and take lots of time after each chapter to discuss the issues raised with one another. To make it easier for the foreign partner to discuss the questions, I have had them translated into different languages – Arabic, Chinese, German, French, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Thai and Turkish. These translations can be downloaded free from [www.MuehlanMedian.de-shop](http://www.MuehlanMedian.de-shop).

How did we become interested in the topic of cross-cultural marriages?

My wife Claudia and I have always loved travelling. We are passionate about getting to know people of other cultures. As well as our personal travels we have often been invited to Marriage and Parenting seminars internationally, in connection with our Family organisation Team.F, especially in countries like Albania, Egypt and India. This has considerably extended our horizons. We have frequently visited Albania where, after detailed study of the culture, we made a TV series on Family Life. Our large Family Handbook has been translated into Albanian. In Egypt, together with Elia and Judith Gad, an Egyptian-German student couple in our Team.F Academy, we had begun to set up a Family Relationships organisation. This venture was sadly curtailed as a result of the political unrest arising from the so-called “Arab Spring”. Nevertheless we succeeded in producing and distributing audio-tapes, videos and texts in Arabic as seminar material on marriage and family life. A special area of study for me was family life among the Adivasis (original inhabitants) of North East India. Over a period of ten years I visited the Adivasis regularly, analysing their family structures and interrelationship patterns, with the aim of providing the young churches with culturally relevant teaching on Christian marriage and family life. This was the subject of my Ph.D research in Religious Studies.<sup>3</sup>

Here in Germany we have come to know and love two cross-cultural couples, Elia and Judith Gad (Egyptian-German), and Thomas and Rose Walter (German-Philippino). Several years ago under the auspices of Team.F, Claudia and I together with these two couples began to run seminars for cross-cultural couples, and soon other invitations began rolling in.<sup>4</sup> The invaluable experience and encounters arising from these seminars have of course found their place in this book.

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<sup>3</sup> Mühlan, Eberhard, *Familienstrukturen in Indien. Fremden Kulturen eine christliche Familienlehre bringen*, edition afem, mission academics 33, Nürnberg, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Information on seminars for cross-cultural couples can be accessed at [www.MuehlanMedien.de](http://www.MuehlanMedien.de) and [www.team-f.de](http://www.team-f.de).



## **Judith and Elia Gad**

Judith was born in 1979 and grew up in Osterode, Harz in North Germany. Elia was born in 1976 in Aswan, Egypt and grew up in Cairo. Judith trained as a Nursery School teacher in Germany, Elia studied German and English in Cairo and gained his Diploma as a Tour Guide. From 1999 up to 2009 he lived and worked for a travel company in Hurghada on the Red Sea. In 1997 they met in Germany and were married in 2004 in Cairo. From 2003 up to 2009 they lived together in Hurghada. Since 2009 they have been living in Munich, where Judith is working in a Kindergarten and Elia works for a travel agency. They share interests in music, reading and sport – for Elia that means especially football.



## **Rosemarie and Thomas Walter**

Rosemarie was born in 1965 and grew up in Butuan City in the Philippines; Thomas was born in 1967 in Marbach on the Neckar in South Germany. Rose trained in Hotel and Restaurant Management while Thomas trained as a bank clerk and has done further study to become a specialist in online banking. In 1991 they met in the Philippines and in January 1993 got married there. In 1994 their son Benjamin was born, followed by David in 1996. Since 1997 they have been living in Germany, where their daughter Rebecca was born in 2002. Thomas' hobby is tending a small vineyard, Rose's is hospitality and baking cakes. Both love people and come alive in company.







## Chapter 1: Individualism versus Collectivism

### Me-Culture encounters Us-Culture

*Judith:*

*I'm excited as I sit in the plane en route to Cairo. "Now you'll be meeting Elia's family for the first time and you'll see where and how he grew up," I thought. I had come to know Elia six years previously when he visited Germany and up until then we had carried on a long-distance relationship, initially through letters, then after a few years by email followed by online-chat which we did often. As students we had of course very little money, so there were only very occasional visits to our partner in their mother country.*

*"How will his family receive me? Will they accept me?" Before the flight I stood for a long time in front of the mirror and tried various outfits on. I wanted to make a good first impression. I kept thinking how I could best present myself and what I was going to say. And now at last I enter their apartment in Cairo and there they all are, waiting expectantly – dressed in what appears to me to be pyjamas! I think, "Funny, it's the afternoon. Have they all just got up from an afternoon nap or don't they think it's important to dress up a little, seeing that I've come on a visit?" It's all very strange. And even stranger - scarcely have I sat down when they ask when I'm going to change. I am totally baffled and look at Elia. "Yea, they think you should also change into some comfy clothes." This is really the limit! At home I'd racked my brains as to what I should wear and now this! "Those aren't*

*pyjamas, that's what we wear relaxing at home. The fact that my family receives you dressed like this and is offering you something similar to wear is a real compliment. They are wanting to say from the outset that you are really welcome and you belong in our family," he explains. On this first visit I cannot bring myself to change into "pyjamas", however on later visits I did. But I am touched and relieved that I have been so warmly welcomed.*

*Then we sit down in a large circle to eat and Elia explains who everyone is: his parents, four brothers and sisters with their families, aunts and uncles, the grandmother and some neighbours and friends. A delicious meal is served. I stare amazed at my place – no plate, no cutlery, no glass, how does this work? In the centre is a huge tureen of soup and a single glass – for approximately 25 people? A large pitta-bread is passed around, everyone breaks off a piece and dunks it in the soup, and everyone drinks out of the one glass. This I find a real challenge. I simply cannot bring myself to eat with my fingers, so I ask for some cutlery and a glass for myself. Of course I should have researched Egyptian cultural habits earlier, but suddenly now to be here with this family is really quite something!*

*It took quite a while for me to come to terms with the comfy house-clothing and to be able to adopt this strange way of eating. Later I was even able to tear roast chicken legs apart with my fingers. What eventually helped me to accept this other, strange culture was a growing understanding of the special features of a community culture.*

*Exactly as one reads in the reference books, there is indeed a very strong sense of "us-as-a-community" and of family cohesion - which can also come across as rather confining. They all live together as a family in one house. The parents on the ground floor. Elia's eldest brother and family in the apartment above them. The next brother then added on another apartment above that. Their sister moved across the way, and they are all constantly in and out of each other's lives. Free time is spent together, and what I really learned to appreciate, was that they are all there for each other. When it really mattered I knew that they were there for me. That wasn't the case in Germany. Once I had to go into hospital for a minor operation. Everyone contributed to the cost, as much as they could. There is no such thing as health insurance in Egypt. I was so touched. I had scarcely emerged from the effects of the anaesthetic and there they were, the whole family at my bedside. Elia's*

*mother and one of his sisters stayed with us for two weeks in order to take over the running of the home and to care for us. I have learned to appreciate so much this sense of closeness and being there for one another that I now sometimes feel strangely isolated in Germany. In the meantime, as far as that's concerned, I've actually come to feel more comfortable in an Us-culture.*

*Elia:*

*Egypt, the land where I grew up, is a classic example of an Us-culture. For us it is completely normal for all the family members to participate and help make the decisions in important issues like education or marriage. That has been my experience since childhood. In my school leaving exams I achieved very good grades. In Egypt we can't simply choose any subject to study at University, our grades determine which course of study we may pursue. With my grades I could have studied Architecture or Civil Engineering. But I was really set on Languages, which had fascinated me ever since I was a child. But for Languages I didn't need such high grades and besides, that was regarded as a typical course of study for females! When I said what I wanted to study, there was quite a scene. My aunt protested, "But that's only for girls who want to work as secretaries. You and your good grades, are you crazy?" And with that statement she was expressing the opinions of most of the family; I had a great deal of trouble getting my way to study German. And that's how it is in our culture. It's such a pity that many young people do give in to pressure from the family. In the end my father, a wise and level-headed man, determined that his son should make the decision himself, for it was after all, his future.*

*It was quite exciting when I informed my family that I wanted to marry a German woman. Again they all came up with their own proposals and objections. My parents eventually had the last word: for them the most important factor was that Judith was a Christian, just as our family was. Apart from that, they trusted me and accepted my decision. However as preparations for our engagement began everyone interfered. My mother, for example, insisted that for our wedding I should present Judith with an expensive piece of gold jewellery, as is our custom in Egypt. "But, Mum, I have already discussed this with Judith. We need the money for the small house that we are going to build. We have jointly decided to buy two nice rings and nothing else. And anyway, Judith doesn't like gold." But my mother was*

*not to be persuaded. "No way, my son. What will people think of us? Just because her parents can't be here for the engagement, you can't treat her so shabbily. As a man that is just not acceptable. You must do your duty." For the sake of peace I had to give in.*

*Judith:*

*For the wedding preparations I thought I'd head off with Elia and look for a wedding dress, but no, his mother had decided that the sisters should accompany me. They knew exactly what the dress should look like, bargained loudly with the sales girl and had one dress after another brought out. At that point my Arabic wasn't good enough to express my wishes or to join in on the conversation. After trying on lots of dresses one was chosen and the sisters left the shop satisfied, with me in tow. Next the hairdresser arrived at the house, and the sisters instructed him as to how their future sister-in-law should have her hair styled. Then came the make-up. Finally the moment arrived when the mirror was held up before me. My make-up was chalky white as pale skin is considered beautiful in Egypt. To me I looked ill and ugly, an impression reinforced by vivid pink lips. I have to confess that it was really a cultural "surprise attack", an attack reinforced by its unexpectedness and my inadequate language skills. Nevertheless the wedding celebration was fantastic – really Egyptian! This baptism of fire into another culture had the effect that I talked a lot with Elia. Again and again I asked him, "Why is it like this? What kind of thinking, what traditions are behind all this?" I simply wanted to discover the positive factors which lay hidden underneath. And the more intensively I took the trouble to understand more deeply the otherness and the strangeness, the more positive, beautiful and enriching elements I discovered.*

*Elia:*

*Basically I enjoyed the fact that at home in my culture everything was shared and that we discussed everything and reached decisions together. With us not everyone has Health insurance as they do in Germany, and so in emergencies the family are all there for each other.*

*Some years ago my father was ill, he was already 78 years old so it went without saying that we children all came home immediately. We sat down together and discussed which hospital would be best and how Mother could care for him*

*there. In our hospitals after an operation the patient is looked after not only by the nurses but also by the relatives. According to our various means we got the money together, as we wanted of course to do the best for our father. At that time I was working at the Red Sea and took leave immediately, for as long as it would take until my father was out of hospital. Now I live in Germany and skype my family for an hour and a half every week. Recently my mother was ill, she needed an operation on her eye, and again we all got together. They were sitting in a room in Cairo – about 13 people – consulting each other, and I was able to be involved on my laptop and give my input. I was moved as I watched this family scene far away in Germany, and I thought back to the time when, very early on in our marriage, Judith needed an operation. We thought it would be better to have the procedure done in Germany, simply because conditions are better here, and so Judith came to a hospital in Hamburg. As a faithful Egyptian husband of course I took leave and accompanied Judith to the hospital. But of course I wasn't able to stay with her as I would have done in Egypt, and had to get a room in a hotel. When I came to visit her in her ward, there she was, lying on her own and lonely, no parents, no brothers or sisters! At that time I simply couldn't get my head around it! I had gotten to know them all as a loving family – why did they behave like this? Even the doctors and nurses wondered why I was hanging around so long in the ward and couldn't be chased away. Only then did I realise that there were visiting hours and I should have disappeared at 8 o'clock. So I too, just like Judith in Egypt, experienced my own culture shock.*





## Individualistic versus Collective Society

Judith and Elia describe wonderfully what it was like for them growing up in typically individualistic and typically collective societies and what behaviour was expected of them. They have each given us an insight into their daily lives.

Now it's time to give a technical explanation of these frequently used terms: Individualism i.e. individualistic society and Collectivism i.e. collective society.

The world's population can be divided roughly into two main categories: those with a collective set of values (e.g. Asia, Africa, Latin America, East and South Europe) and those with an individualistic value system (West and North Europe, e.g. Germany Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, UK, Scandinavia, as well as USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand). If one looks at a map of the world, one notices that area-wise individualistic societies are considerably fewer than collective societies. The Western reader who tends to believe that his way of life is the only way, and the most wide-spread, must take note of this fact. In differentiating between individualism and collectivism it is not a matter of better or worse, it is simply different. And the "different" must be understood and tolerated in a close partner relationship.

The overwhelming majority of people in our world live in societies where the interests of the individual are subordinated to the interests of the group (the family). Geert Hofstede<sup>5</sup> characterises these cultures as "collectivistic". This concept "collectivistic" can easily be understood as a political term, as for example the collective farms in the former GDR, but the concept has no political connotations. It is a

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<sup>5</sup> Hofstede, Geert, *Lokales Denken, globales Handeln. Interkulturelle Zusammenarbeit und globales Management*, Beck-Wirtschaftsberater im dtv, 2. Auflage 2001, S. 77ff.

neutral term, referring purely to the power of the group. This may be the state or a business or of course the power of the family. The family is the first and most important group in the life of a child. In the majority of collective societies children grow up in extended families, that is, not only the biological parents, but also the grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and perhaps servants and other persons who live together in the same house or on the same property. They all love and influence the child, so that it learns from early on that it is part of an us-group. This us-group influences and shapes the identity of the little person and becomes a safeguard against the dangers encountered in life. Therefore they have a lifelong obligation of loyalty to the us-group. A relationship of dependency develops between the individual and the us-group which is of a practical as well as psychological nature. This process occurs subconsciously subconsciously mainly because it happens in the formative early childhood years. But it affects the whole of life and is almost impossible to eradicate. To simplify, instead of collective cultures we can also say Us-cultures. Figuratively speaking the growing child displays an “interwoven self”.

A minority of people in our world – among them we Europeans – live in societies where the interests of the individual take priority over the interests of the group. These societies are described as individualistic. Most children in this category are born into a family consisting of two parents and possibly other children. This is called the nuclear family. In most individualistic societies there is a high incidence of divorce and an increasing number of single parents, mainly women. Relatives live elsewhere and are rarely seen. When a child grows up in such a family, it learns quickly to conceive of itself as “me”. This “me”, this personal identity, is different from the “me” of other people. The aim of upbringing is to train the child to stand on its own feet. The expectation is that the child should become increasingly self-sufficient, leave the parental home and become financially independent as soon as this goal has been achieved. Many grown-up children keep the relationship with parents and siblings to a minimum

or break it off entirely. Friends are chosen on the basis of affability rather than according to family relationships. Even among relatives one keeps contact only with those on the same wavelength. In an individualistic culture the strong emphasis is on one's own needs. The group one would like to belong to is chosen freely; some even battle their way through life as loners. For individualistic cultures one can simply say "me-culture". Figuratively speaking the person growing up displays an "autonomous self".

It wasn't until I took up this topic that I myself realised how strongly I have been influenced by autonomy and individualism. My family of origin is not wealthy. From my early teenage years I always earned a little extra money to be able to buy those little luxuries which a young boy needs. My wife Claudia became my closest confidante. I had only loose contact with my parents and with my sisters scarcely any at all – nor they with me. Friends, whom I chose, were more important to me than my relatives. I always wanted independence and freedom, to make my own decisions, to be responsible for myself and as far as possible not to have anyone speaking into my life - as I said, apart from Claudia. A prime example of a strongly individualistic culture.

<b>Collectivism</b>	<b>Individualism</b>
describes societies in which one is integrated right from birth into strong, closed Us-groups which offer lifetime protection and expect in return strong loyalty.	describes societies in which the bonds between individuals are looser. It is expected that each will care for himself and his immediate family.
This is referred to as the „interwoven self“.	This is referred to as the „autonomous self“.

### Collectivism and Individualism in the family.

How did you grow up? How and where did your partner grow up? In what sort of cultural and family environment did you both spend your first years of your lives? I suppose one of you in a nuclear family in an individualistic culture and the other in an extended family in a collective culture. That has shaped each of you in a different way.

Now I'd like to describe how a child in a collective culture grows up as opposed to a child in an individualistic culture. In making such a comparison one runs the danger of thinking in black-white terms. Nevertheless I am deliberately going to compare a strongly collectivistic culture, such as I found in India for example, with a strongly individualistic culture such as is found in Germany. In doing so I run the risk of possibly exaggerating. You need to discern for yourself what applies to you. Comparisons can be of help in finding out one's own point of view.

Children who grow up in an Us-culture are rarely alone. Children who grow up in a Me-culture are often trained even as small babies to fall sleep on their own in their cot, separate from their parents. In many Us-cultures the idea of a pram, where the child is placed outside in the open air, is unknown. There the child is tied on to the mother's or older sister's back and is taken everywhere – out to the fields, to the market, to the neighbour's for a chat or to play with other children. It has constant body-contact and always hears well-known voices. In one of the tribal groups in India where I pursued my studies, small children are not allowed to be on their own or even to crawl on the ground in case evil spirits could harm them.

But I don't even need to look so far afield. Many Germans on holiday in Spain or Southern Italy are surprised when they see children romping around up to midnight in restaurants with their parents or falling asleep in an adult's arms. "Disgraceful! Children should be in bed by now," they think in annoyance. But having a baby-sitter or the idea of one parent staying at home is an unknown concept in these

warm cultures. One of the adults among the celebrating diners will always find the time to look after the child. They belong to the family!

In a typical individualistic culture babies are trained, often wailing pathetically, to fall asleep in their own little bed, separated from their mother. There are series of specialist books which instruct parents step by step how to cut the emotional umbilical cord. In many cultures the thought of having a “children’s room”, a room for the child alone, is inconceivable. Training babies and small children how to fall asleep is an invention of individualistic cultures; likewise the idea that children should be in bed early – probably so that the parents can more easily pursue their individual interests.

The child in an Us-culture grows up in a network of relationships with different authority figures, while the child in a Me-culture grows up ideally with two parents, sometimes only with a single mother. In an Us-culture it is not only the parents who participate in the upbringing, but also the powerful grandparents, the grumpy and much feared uncle, the ever-negligent auntie, the caring or hated siblings – and all of them pamper, educate or order the child around. The child learns quickly to fit in with the various authority figures and above all never to lose the favour and security of the larger group.

Empirical studies have shown that in Us-cultures the tendency is to train by means of fear and later, when the child is older, through shame. This can often be seen as threatening the disobedient child. “If you don’t come immediately, the evil spirits will get you!” Or “The bogey man will come and take you away!” I have discussed this with many Hindus and very many report that in childhood their mothers threatened them with “...in the next life you will come back as a dog.” In Albania we produced a parenting course for TV. In preparation for that Claudia and I conducted extensive interviews with teachers, parents and teenagers as to how family life plays out and which training methods are frequently applied. We were amazed that the teens reported very little physical punishment on the part of the parents (as opposed to many other parts of the world), but that the