



# Working it Out

*Stories from  
African-Australian  
relationships*

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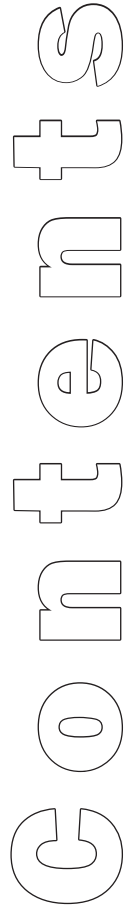
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# Introduction

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One of the many great things about living in a multicultural society is the opportunities it affords to meet, mingle and sometimes fall in love with people of very different cultural backgrounds from our own. The fact that intercultural and interethnic relationships, marriages and families are on the rise in Australia is something we can be proud of. That doesn't mean of course that intercultural relationships are a bed of roses. All relationships face difficulties at times, and people who fall in love with someone from a different cultural or ethnic background from their own often find that there are both great benefits, and many challenges, associated with living with difference in everyday life.

African Australian relationships are no exception, and may in fact face more stressors than some cultural combinations, due to such factors as ongoing economic needs of extended families in Africa, considerable differences between some African and Anglo Australian (for example) cultural practices, and overt and covert racism toward African partners. The children of mixed African and non African Australian parentage may benefit immeasurably from a rich mixture of cultures and familial connections, but they also struggle sometimes with the complexities of being 'in between' two or more distinct cultural and ethnic identities, and with the lingering tendency in Australian society to associate 'true' Australianness with particular appearances and behaviours.

The three of us who produced this manual are all members of African and non African Australian families, and parents of mixed African Australian children. Along with other members of our community group Australian African Network, we felt that mixed African Australian couples and families might benefit from hearing about other African and non African Australians' experiences. With the help of a grant from the University of Western Sydney, we conducted interviews in three Australian cities asking people who are or have been in mixed African Australian relationships about their experiences.

Interviews were conducted with a total of 15 men and women, with almost equal African and non African representation. In the following pages you'll read extracts from their interviews about their relationships, and their advice to others. We hope that you will find this manual both interesting and helpful, and that this is just the beginning of hearing a lot more from, and about, African Australian relationships, families and communities.

# Who's who

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Our thanks to all who agreed to be interviewed for this project. All names and some other details about people's lives have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

## Adjei

Adjei is from Ghana. He is now separated from his partner of 4 years, Elena, who was of European background. He is in his early 40's.

## Angela

Angela 32, met her partner Okello in Kenya when she was working there. They have one daughter but are now separated.

## Athien and Simon

Athien is from Sudan and has a daughter from a former relationship. Her new partner Simon is Anglo-Australian. They are both in their 20's.

## Erin and Jalloh

Erin is Anglo-Australian and her partner Jalloh is from Senegal. They have one daughter. They are both in their 30's.

## Fiona

Fiona, 36, is currently separated. Her first husband and the father of her first child was from Ghana and her second husband, to whom she was married for twelve years, was from Nigeria. She has four children and shares custody with their fathers.

## Jack

Jack 40, is Anglo-Australian and was married to Amadika, who was from South Africa. They have two children and are now separated.

## Kate

Kate 33, is Anglo-Australian, her partner Ismael is from West Africa.

## Kofi

Kofi is from Ghana and married to an Anglo-Australian woman. He met his partner in Ghana. They have three sons. They are in their 30's.

## Kwesi

Kwesi is from Ghana. is currently married to a Ghanaian woman but was previously with an Anglo-Australian woman, Joanna, with whom he has one teenaged son. He is 55.

## Mariam and Harry

Mariam is of Ethiopian background and grew up in Australia. Her partner Harry is an Anglo-Australian. They are in their early 20's.

## Moussa

Moussa is Somalian. His wife Sophia is of European background. They have been married ten years. They are both in their 40's.

## Owusu

Owusu is married to an Anglo-Australian woman. This is his second marriage to a white woman in Australia. He has adult children in Ghana and Australia from previous marriages. He is in his 50's.

# 1:

## Living in Australia Cultural difference

*Research into intercultural relationships has found that cultural differences can be a source of stress or conflict for some couples. Understanding more about the cultural origins of your partner's behaviour, communication style and values can help to resolve problems. However cultural difference is not an issue for all intercultural couples. It might be that differences such as level of education or class are the source of misunderstandings and conflict, or you may find your differences a source of joy and celebration rather than difficulty.*

### Athien

I'm a very African person and I'm very proud of my culture and no matter who I meet I always talk about my culture. I think I'm very lucky that I found a partner who admires my culture as much as I like Australian culture. People keep saying, 'Oh you speak English', and I keep telling them that if you socialise with people then it's easy to get to know their culture and their language as well, and both of us, we learn from each other's culture all the time.

My daughter's dad was from my country but between us there was a bit of cultural difference. It's nothing to do with me and him directly, it's a cultural thing. My tribe and his tribe, they don't really meet, his family didn't like it that he was with me. I think it's quite funny that you have a person from the same culture and things are not working.

After the relationship had ended, I found that there were social contexts for my wife's behaviour. It would have been tremendously useful if I had been able to understand that while we were together. We met here and although we would have liked to travel to South Africa together, and Amadika would have loved to take the kids there, we never did go. But if I had gone – and I think now that I should have placed a higher priority on it – I would have understood the cultural context a lot more. It's just the thing of seeing other people do the same thing your partner does, so you know it's not just something that's associated with that individual; you can see it's part of a social practice. That puts a whole different spin on things.

Amadika came from a tribe that's quite war-like. If somebody had said that to me a few years ago, I wouldn't have really seen how that applied to my situation. I think how it played out was that there seems to be this desire to be dominant, even in personal relationships. And if a person feels slighted, or there's some sort loss of face, the reaction is actually quite strong. I think it's funny - it's not an eye-for-an-eye, it's more like two eyes-for-an-eye. I never really understood that, I thought it was just her approach to life, but it actually turned up somewhere in a speech and I saw it in black and white and I thought, 'My God, that's exactly the same.'

My approach to life is very different. What I aspire to is more about dealing, put your cards on the table. Maybe you have a very different opinion about things, but you at least say what your position is and then the two of you work out whether there's any common ground. And also, I'm happy to lead or to follow and I want to have the freedom to move between those roles and not always be a follower. But we couldn't deal, we couldn't level with each other. I think it was because that involved vulnerability for her. It meant a letting-go on her part that she was really uncomfortable with.

Being married to Amadika has changed me. Obviously I haven't taken on her cultural attitudes wholesale, I haven't become an African person,

but there are things, there are ways of talking, ways of seeing things, sense of humour, that are changed in me. It's become a part of me and so it really feels like a relief when I'm with my African friends because there's a part of me that I can easily express with them.

It's like an imperative in my life to get a better grip on this, to understand more about Africa and Africans. I feel I have to go there and I'm gearing up for that, doing a lot of reading. Even in a short time I feel my understanding has grown quite a lot. It's a challenge, and it's incredibly rewarding. One of the things that I really like about it is that - the attitudes and ways of doing things from my own heritage, it holds them up to a different light.

## Mariam

I'm not the type of person that likes to impose my culture on anyone. There are some people like that - 'Listen to this, eat this, ra-ra-ra'. But I'm a bit reserved about that. At Orthodox Easter Harry wanted to bring a couple of friends over, but I didn't want people to just make a party out of something that's more of a family gathering. It's like I'm trying to hold on to something.

## Angela

We didn't have the same long term expectations of life. Okello wanted things to be much grander and he had a sense of entitlement, a sense of expectation. I could plan my life with a one or two or three year goal whereas he couldn't. He'd never had to think that much in advance in Africa. I think he misses the life in Africa very much, just the spontaneity, the living from day to day, all that sort of stuff.

## Jalloh

If you have relationship with someone from a different culture it's good, because they give you more experience. They give you more alternatives. It's good to know another culture. Everyday I'm learning something and I know the country better. I'm very happy to be here, my life is going well.

There are some things I can't change. They are in my blood, they live here forever. Some people, if they go somewhere they change. Okay, I'm changing. I'm here, I'm learning to be here, but I can't change my culture, that's impossible for me, because I grew up with it. I can't come here and turn my back on it, no.

You have your culture, you have your tradition. I don't want to tell you, stop your tradition and live my tradition, no. And you don't tell me to stop my culture, and come to live your culture, no. You can have a relationship with a different culture. Don't worry, you have your culture, I have mine.

## Adjei

I'm from a Christian background and I was brought up in a certain way, but it's very, very different here. I was taught to respect the elderly and that comes from my community based kind of background. Where I lived as a child I knew a lot of people my age and a lot of grown-ups as well, but here it's entirely different. Here you don't even know your next door neighbour. So much talk about privacy, privacy. The truth is that human beings are interdependent. In Ghana we don't have that independent, privacy thing. We have to interdepend. But I guess this is the kind of society that Australia is, so there's not much I can do about that.

The thing is, there is a great difference when you get into a relationship with somebody here. Most times I would say that it doesn't work

out, because you just don't understand why people act like they do. Sometimes it ends up in breakages because it's a whole different thing from what you've been brought up to expect.

## Fiona

When Africans come to Australia, the first thing they notice is how unsociable we are or how alone we are. I try and point out to them, look at the high fences around us, we don't know our neighbours that well, whereas in Africa in the small communities and villages everyone knows each other. That's the biggest cultural shock they face coming here. And they think we're rude. But we might think it's quite rude for someone to just come walking through your house, like they do. Knock first - we have different rules.

I don't think Africans have trust and I think that's because their survival skill in Africa is learning how to manipulate and get things from one another. 'Oh I have to do this to get more money'; 'The strong survive, the weak die off'. West African people I've known do the same thing here and I think that's a challenge, because we're more trusting really. We do give of ourselves, we do trust our policemen, we do trust our doctor, we do trust. They don't. You can bribe a policeman in Africa.

I think they become scared to have that trust. If you're nice they'll think 'What do you want from me?' They'll back off. But no, I don't want anything from you. I'm just here because I like you, or I'm here because I want to help you. So I think trust is the biggest issue and it relates to everything else. They've really got their shield set up in front of them, and to break through those shields, saying 'I genuinely do care', it's hard. I think that's why a lot of couples break up, because of that struggle.

## Harry

I've been to a few Ethiopian parties and it's just fun and interesting, getting to learn something that I don't know about. I've taken Mariam to my parents' farm on the coast and she liked that. I think at the end of the day there's a lot of similarities and maybe people overlook that.

# The migration experience

*You may have met your partner here, in Africa or somewhere else overseas. Wherever and however you met, migration is likely to have an impact on your relationship. Settling in a new country, finding work, housing, and getting used to a new culture can all be very challenging and it's important to get support. Talking to other people who've been through the process may help. If you are intending to migrate here, plan it carefully to reduce stress. If you met here, remember that the challenges of migration may still be affecting your relationship.*

## Angela

Okello didn't expect to have many difficulties migrating to Australia because he came from a family that are all inter-race marriages, he's got family all over the world. He was a businessman in his own country, a bit of an entrepreneur. He is a very charismatic person, he played soccer for his country, so he was fairly popular there and I think it was difficult for him coming over here and being a nobody. His expectations of life in Australia were definitely not fulfilled and that was very disappointing for him. Even though he knew that he had to work to get money and all the rest of it, I think he thought that the whole process would be easier.

We were both naive and didn't realise that there would be a complete change or a shift in the power structure within our relationship when we came here. We didn't realise it would be as hard as it was, that suddenly I was the only breadwinner. He became very depressed and after our daughter was born had a mental breakdown.

I think it is a common experience. My friends who worked overseas and then brought their husbands back found it was the same. There's always a level of depression that happens with the men because they miss the spontaneity of life in Africa and they have financial problems.

Looking back, if we could do it again I would not have gone straight

into studying when we came back to Australia. I just would have taken any job so he had time to settle in.

We didn't know of any service, we didn't seek any help, we didn't have a clue. We went to Department of Immigration but because he spoke English well, they couldn't offer him any services. Nowadays they have courses that teach people how to understand Medicare and how to manage finances. I think that would have helped him to understand the systems here, and also would have got him out of the house and meeting people.

Even though we're separated I still help Okello fill out forms, do his driver's test, call Centrelink and things like that. I've tried to help him understand the way that we think. You don't realise that the concept of a multiple choice is a western concept. You know, the 'most right' answer - but if you've never been taught that from a child, as an adult to try and start doing it is an incredibly difficult task.

## Kofi

My dad died not long after I met Anna. I was working but I partly depend on my dad, and when he died it really affected me and my plans for the future so Anna asked me if I wanted to come to Australia to live. I thought I would get a better life here. Because my dad has died it's going to be very difficult for me in Africa, but I wasn't sure because I'm very close with my family. I discussed with a friend who is now in America and he said, 'I think it would be a good idea, if you would like to go'.

My mum hasn't traveled before so she wasn't sure of me leaving, and I'm the youngest child so she was very much attached to me. Anna hadn't met my mum, so we went and talked to her and my mum got to know her and realised she's not a bad person, she's actually trying to help me. So my mum approved and Anna left Ghana and started processing my process to come to Australia. It took about 18 months

and Anna visited Ghana in that time. She lived with my family so she got to know them very well. Finally my visa got approved and I migrated to Australia in 1997.

## Erin

As soon as Jalloh arrived, he was relaxed and just tried to find his way, and he's totally adapted now. At first I think he was lonely and it was that whole thing of coming from seeing so many people all the time, to just being me and my parents – we were staying with them for the first few weeks. But now he's used to it. He's got friends now. They're not from his country, and they're refugees, but they speak the same language as him. They'll ring and say 'Come and have lunch'. I say, 'Yes, cool, no problem, do that', because it's good for him to just be able to do spontaneous things, like he would back in Senegal.

He goes to TAFE and has free English classes and the teachers would say to him something about being a refugee, and he'd say 'No, no I'm not a refugee – I'm here because of my wife'. I guess around here, there's not that many African people and people just automatically think he's from Sudan or something, although he looks totally different than the Sudanese. I know that he does look different, but to most Australians, they're just like – 'He's black, he's from Africa, he must be from Sudan'.

## Owusu

Most of the time when you live in the West you feel lonely, loneliness is a very big thing. You work, go home, come out, work, go home. But with my culture you finish work the moment you walk on the street. 'Hi, how are you?' - you can talk to everybody, but here the people are always inside. When I say inside it's not just inside the house - there's a mask. Back home when people laugh from within, that is inside. I asked someone, why in this place where there are so many opportunities,

people are not happy? They couldn't tell me. They say 'because we work so hard', and I said, 'Well, it is the culture, because when you go to places in Africa that are very poor, if a stranger comes they will cook their small things they have to share with them. That is different from the western world'. Loneliness is a big problem in this place and I for one feel I have to go back to my roots, because it's better.

## Fiona

I dated quite a few guys and the number one issue was always permanent residency because they're coming from poor countries and they won't want to go back, they'll do anything to stay. So they'll be the sweetest guy, they'll be the nicest person until they get their permanent residency then out they go. Even my husband, I supported him but I did fear he was using me. I'd already been through it with my first boyfriend, so with my husband I thought 'Man, you're going to leave me'. I had no trust. And I think I was burnt from my first boyfriend's community because that's all I saw, is how everyone gets residence, goes back home, brings back a black woman.

But I went through with it. Well, you have to try and see whether they do love you or not and I did it out of love so if he does use me, it's nothing I've done. I always say 'Well I don't care, I'm doing this out of love'. I'm not expecting anything back in return... So if you try and do something else that's your choice not mine, I did it because I wanted to. Maybe I like to play that guilt game, and make them feel a bit guilty. I think with every relationship you ask if they've got permanent residency, I'd say it's the number one. 'What do you want from me?' So if I'm up front, that's my choice then to help you or not.

## Kwesi

In my opinion it is very shame and it is very bad that if someone wants to migrate to Australia he has to get a woman to marry, and then later as soon as everything is settled he pushes her away, and the children. That is really bad thinking. It is not only me, most Ghanaians also think that.

It's not that they came with that idea. Most of them actually mean to stay with their partners, but - I was not making any research but what I know is that sometimes it is very difficult for the partners to stay together.

**[www.immi.gov.au/](http://www.immi.gov.au/)**

*Department of Immigration and Citizenship*

# Racism

Fiona

I've experienced racism on both sides, black and white communities. Even my own family have no understanding and I've had to be a spokesman for Africans, to my family, to people in the community, to my workplace. Even though my workmates say they understand they are still quite racist.

I've lost one of my closest friends because she made racist comments. At first she was supportive and babysat for us and then the Sudanese refugees come, and she thinks there's going to be black gangs like in America, that there's going to be all these problems. I haven't been friends with her since. How can she say that, she's saying my children are going to be gang members?

I think whites don't know how to communicate with the black community, I think they're afraid what to say and what to do instead of just being themselves. Thinking they might say the wrong thing or thinking they're going to be racist or something. They just don't know how to talk and relate and I think the blacks feel the same in some ways.

African women I've met are more outspoken to white women. I've sometimes felt they're attacking me - 'You don't understand me, you don't understand about racism'. But as a white person who's got mixed children, I do understand it because of the racist comments coming back to my child, it does affect me. They don't understand that part, they don't understand that we also are feeling this and whereas their parents might have taught them how to live with it, we're new to it.

## Mariam

When we first met, knowing that Harry hadn't been with an African girl before, I was wondering what his perception would be. I felt a bit cautious. You see many African men and Caucasian women together but not the other way around. So I wondered, as an Australian man, what his expectations were. It was just an idea, just a thought. 'Oh I wonder what his motives are, what are his friends saying?' I still have that caution, because – as an African, you're pretty much an outsider.

## Jack

There have been a number of times when Amadika and I have been in a public place together, when people's mouths have just dropped open. We'd just go down the street or we'd be in the supermarket and somebody would come along and be absolutely gob-smacked that we were together. We'd just smile. It wasn't really offensive. It's interesting. I hadn't anticipated that people would be so surprised.

I was lucky in having a partner who showed me a lot, she taught me a lot about racism, about colonialism and the position of black people in the world. But I know another white man, partner of a black woman, who just didn't get it. It was a funny situation where the woman was very aware, even teaches me about it, and yet the partner she's actually sharing her life with – it was just not visible on the radar.

It turned out that he was inviting some white South Africans to Christmas lunch. Amadika and I discussed it, and then in a very African way really, I approached my sister-in-law as an intermediary and sent this message through her, that I wasn't terribly sure that this was a good idea because white South Africans do have these very strong residual racist view-points. Looking back, it was exactly what an African would have done.

All I was trying to say to him was, this could lead to awkward moments, this is a heads-up. Anyway, the way it was perceived was that I had gone around in this suspiciously indirect manner and that it reflected on him as if he had racist friends, and, secondly, that he'd never seen them being racist so they weren't. Which makes you say to yourself, 'Well, where am I going to start with this?'

I've often acted as an intermediary for Amadika because I know about this culture. So I've often seen things, like her asking for things across shop counters, for example, and people just basically being unwilling to try to understand her. If you're going to communicate with a person from a different culture, you can deliberately choose to move your frame a bit, but I've seen lots of examples where people haven't. I've seen people being quite rigid, and in some people the first response is to blame the other person because they can't understand. And put-downs follow from there.

## Angela

Okello experienced a bit of racism. Once on Anzac Day, he went up just to see what this carry on about two-up was and somebody called him some very offensive name and he was shocked. In East Africa they are quite friendly with westerners, when you go there everyone is so polite and so inviting and when he came here he expected it to be like that. He didn't believe me, that racism could be an issue. I think he had one or two things like that happen. I live in a semi-Anglo area and one day he went to drop our daughter off at school when I was working and one of the teachers came up and said 'can we help you?'. Even though it's not racism it still a suspicion. We laughed about it to ourselves, but still in a way I felt that he was probably asked because he was a black man, standing looking a bit lost in the school yard.

## Kate

It was hard finding a house to live in. When we were looking for a rented property, I put Ismael and myself on all the applications, like 20 applications. Then I decided just to put my name on it and got the first one. So there's some stigma within the real estate world about having Africans living in your property.

**[www.humanrights.gov.au](http://www.humanrights.gov.au)** *Australian Human Rights Commission. Support and resources related to discrimination and your legal rights.*

## 2. The big issues

### Being a couple

*“Let your love be like the misty rain, coming softly, but flooding the river.”*

- Liberian proverb



# Meanings of marriage

*Marriage has had many meanings in different cultures and different periods of time. In most African cultures, marriage is considered to be a union of two families, whereas for people born in Australia marriage is more likely to be seen as a contract between two individuals. Another key area of difference is that until quite recently polygamy has been a common form of marriage in Africa, while people from western cultures usually prefer monogamous relationships, and may even find polygamy abhorrent. Whether you choose to marry or not, it's important to talk about how your cultural backgrounds influence your ideas about intimate relationships. In this section people talk about how ideas about marriage and gender roles have affected their relationships.*

## Moussa

I think it's important to never allow cultural beliefs to interfere with the marriage institution, because that has set guidelines. You shouldn't get married if you don't know what that means. Simple. This relationship has to be maintained. Your cultural background is a separate issue, don't create any cultural related problems on top of what you are facing. But if we are on the same level of understanding about the issues we face we stand a better chance of actually tackling it.

## Erin

In Senegal, if you were in a group of people, and if you didn't know that someone was together, you wouldn't know that they're a couple. The first time I went there, spending two or three weeks with these people, and I didn't know they were together, because they were in his dance company, and they all just act so close together, they're all like brothers and sisters because they spend so much time together. There were two or three couples in that group, but you just didn't know because they don't act like a couple in the daytime - the relationship is in the

bedroom. So that's different here, in that I'm always really affectionate with him. I think next time we go back, I'm going to have to control myself in front of everyone!

I remember Jalloh's dad saying to me that now that we're married it's part of bringing peace to the world and and connecting the world: 'I could say I want to keep my son here and your dad could say he wants to keep you there, but you're together and need to share your life together and share your cultures'.

## Owusu

The way I see marriage is to compromise and West African marrying non-African brings out the difference in the way we view marriages. It would be different if I'd married a Ghanaian because that person is not your only family, it stretches far and beyond. In the western world what I have seen is that the family is just what you have with the husband and the wife, but with Africans you have the whole extended family. Also because we extend our family, I have an obligation to help them and only a few Anglo Saxons do that, or understand that.

## Jalloh

Before in my village, if you want a wife, your dad is going to find one. He'll tell me, 'Ok, I find wife for you, next month we're going to celebrate the marriage'. I'm going to say nothing. I say 'Ok, yes'. And he gives you the wife, and you don't know her, and she comes to live with you. But now, it's different.

Mixed marriage, sometimes it's hard, sometimes its not hard, it depends on the people. My theory is, all people are the same, yellow, white, black, pink, person is person. It's in the heart, the colour is not important.

## Jack

I think I made a major mistake in my relationship with Amadika's family, because I didn't pay the bride price. We fluffed that a bit. Perhaps she didn't want to say it too strongly, or she might have been being diplomatic, but if you really want to be taken seriously in that family, in that culture, then you do pay the bride price. I've often thought it would have been a much wiser thing to have a smaller wedding and use some of that money to pay the bride price so that the family knew that I respected the tradition and was taking it really seriously. I just didn't quite get it.

Also it was a lot of money for us because we were both studying and we were actually quite poor. But in terms of practical advice, I think that would be one thing that I would underscore. You still have to think about what's going to feel all right for you, and it does seem a bit open-ended from a western point of view, because you deal with a third party who's a member of the extended family, and you do a bit of horse-trading. It's easy to feel vulnerable - how much are they going to ask for? 'Well, here I am, I have no idea what the ground rules are or what the reasonable expectations would be, and they're going to come up with a figure, and I'm going to have to think about whether it's okay or not, but I don't really have anybody to advise me.' So that's a little bit scary, but I would tend toward the view that it's better to give it a go. I suppose I really needed somebody who was my friend from the culture to advise me, who perhaps wasn't glued to the family. If I'd had that, perhaps I would have had a better grasp of it.

## Kwesi

It wasn't my decision to get away from Joanna, it was her idea. I never thought of leaving her, and I've been friendly with her up to date. After we separated and I went home to Ghana I met someone. Then when I came back to Australia I got seriously sick and my mum thought since I was interested in that girl they should send her here to support me. Our

families took their decision about the marriage. I filled the immigration form, I put no name on it, I left all that for my mother.

If I see my old partner now, it feels to me as if we are still living together and she also has the same feeling. And my new partner too, fortunately she is a very friendly woman and she also loves my old partner and my son. There is nothing that we can hide from her, there is nothing that she can hide from us. When I got sick I was not living with my first partner, but she was able help me to get my healing until this new one came. I think nothing can separate me from her, the problem is it's not my habit to go with two ladies. We always help each other and everything is going on well.

[www.kimchimamas.typepad.com/kimchi\\_mamas/2006/12/questions\\_for\\_i.html](http://www.kimchimamas.typepad.com/kimchi_mamas/2006/12/questions_for_i.html)

*This blog post by a white American woman married to a Korean addresses questions that intercultural couples might discuss before deciding to marry.*

# Polygamy

Erin

There is polygamy in Senegal. Jalloh's dad's got two wives and then he had kids with a few other women as well. Jalloh is actually from a relationship that was outside of the marriage. So when I think about that – well, I can't think that's a bad thing, because else he wouldn't exist. But on the other hand, I don't know how to really cope with that. There are families where the wives don't get on and there's constant bickering, but Jalloh's dad and the two wives all get along really well. There's however many kids – 10 or something. I don't know if it's always been sweet, but Jalloh said he can't remember there being any problems. The wives help each other out – they share the responsibilities and the duties. Polygamy is so foreign to us here, but if you see it for its cultural values — it's just about understanding.

I think it's changing now with people our age and younger. I guess it's exposure to other cultures, and women just want one husband, but then, I'm sure there are people that are happy to be the second wife.

We talked about it before we married - 'There's no way you're going to be having another wife, honey. I'm it, or I'm not! When we got married, we had to either choose polygamy or monogamy. So when the guy said 'What do you want?' and Jalloh asked me, I said, 'No, no, you say it! I made him be the one to say 'monogamy'. And when the guy read that out in front of his family and friends, there were all these guffaws. I don't know if they were joking or serious, like – 'Jalloh what have you done?!'

Before I met Jalloh I had a Ghanaian boyfriend for a while, and I thought he was so fantastic, and it was all good, and then I found out that he had three or four other girlfriends. When I was with him, he used to get phone calls, and he'd say, 'I'm a little bit busy at the moment'. I just thought it was a friend or work or something, and then I realised that when I'd call him, he'd say that to me. So it all got found out in the end.

I guess some people might be a bit naive – you have to be aware of what you're getting into, because that is quite common in West African culture. But then some people say – well, that's common here as well.

## Fiona

I knew a guy when I was in my 20s who's come back into my life recently. He's asked me to be a second wife. I've been asked by three people to be second, yay. I have husbands everywhere. I joke about it but no, I'm not going to step on anyone's turf. As white women we're one person, one man and we find it very, very difficult to share our men. I said to them, 'It's about respect and if you really want me to be happy, if you really care for me, well to see someone that I care about being with some other woman doesn't make me happy, I'm sorry'. That's how I address it to them. But I said, 'I think it's sweet of you'. Man, I could have these different husbands every day of the week.

# **Gender roles & responsibilities**

## **Kofi**

In Ghana women do a lot of things at home. The man doesn't cook, he doesn't do the washing and stuff. So when people come here they're still in that culture. They want to relax and have the wife do all that. But that is one thing we have to compromise on, you know. Australian culture doesn't teach that. You both help each other, you can do the dishes and the washing. If that understanding's not there, it always creates a problem.

I was the youngest child so my sisters and brothers were at boarding school and I would be home and I would help my Mum. So I was used to doing that stuff and when I came here I still do a lot of cooking. I love cooking and I don't mind doing the dishes. But I don't want Anna bossing me around. These are the terms, I don't want her to tell me 'Do this, go and do the dish washing'. If she does that I wouldn't do it. But I know when to do it and I know when to give her a break and take over. So it's all compromise and understanding.

## **Erin**

In his country, the men don't cook – that's a woman's job. Jalloh might have cooked sometimes, like eggs or something in the morning, to go with his bread, but that's all. Since he's come here, he's just flourished in the kitchen. He jokes and he calls himself 'Jalloh at Home' – like 'Jamie at Home', and he washes the dishes and sometimes he calls it his kitchen. He thinks that's so funny, and when his sisters call him and he asks – 'How do I cook such-and-such?' - they just laugh and laugh and laugh, and say, 'Where's your wife?'. They must think I'm a terrible wife! If he wasn't an easygoing person, he might not have ever taken up the

cooking side of things, in which case I would be a terrible, failed wife, because I don't cook all the time. It's a very give and take, easygoing relationship really.

Maybe deep down his sisters wish they had a man who would cook. Or maybe they genuinely think that to look after your husband, you have to feed him. But I find – and Mum always says this – a lot of the things that they hold strong are things we had in our culture maybe 50 years ago. It's just things have changed a little bit here. So maybe in another 50 years, those things that they hold onto now, they won't anymore.

## Adjei

In my culture the mother is more or less the keeper of the home. A husband takes care of the woman and protects her and in turn the wife shows respect for the husband. It's a lot different here. Here there's something called equality. But I don't believe in that. My background doesn't tell me that.

Also there is the area of respect. In this society a lady can just get up and tell you something and it's a bit questionable to me. I believe that I wouldn't speak like that to a lady or my wife so she in turn shouldn't speak like that to me. But in this system here, the lady has the power. I don't believe in that. I believe that the man is the head of the family and as the head, the head always is protective of the rest of the body.

## Jack

I don't know how cultural this is, but I needed to set my boundaries much more firmly right from the start. For example the boundaries on who did what in the house. To a certain extent a lot of boundaries were set for me rather than by me.

There was a particular day, I remember, when Amadika came home and our laundry was full of the week's dirty washing. She washed everything

and left it there. She didn't hang it up, so I did. And then I did it again, and again, and again. And I absolutely hated it. I loathed and detested it. I would rather have done all the washing myself and hung it up as a complete job, but having somebody take one part of the job and then block me into doing the other part, that felt like a loss of autonomy.

Nothing was negotiated, it was all unspoken. I raised it, but talking about things doesn't always set a boundary. I should have left those clothes in that laundry until they rotted, if necessary, because that would have established boundaries. And I wouldn't have been, consequently, storing up a big store of anger, which subsequently poisoned my relationship to a certain extent.

## Fiona

My husband's friends were saying 'Ah you don't know white women, they do this, they do that' saying all the negatives about us. Just how we make more drama, we don't have this understanding, we're trying to boss them around. In their culture the men are the rulers of the house. I just say as if black women don't do it anyway. It's called women in general.

That idea of the man being the dominant one, the king of the house, the woman the queen of the house, she can run the house any way she wants but outside, the men rule. We find that hard as white people, we find that extremely hard. We think it's about partnership and they think it's more 'You do what I say'. This is the power struggle I had with my husband constantly. And his brothers would hassle him too, saying 'Your wife rules you', which made him feel inferior and he would think one of us has to back down so it became this power struggle.

Especially now that I'm separated my kids are constantly in the middle of that power struggle. I had them three days, he had them three days and we rotated the fourth day, but he'd bring them when it was his day and leave them so I couldn't go and see anybody. That was his whole purpose, he doesn't want me to move on.

# Connections & support

*“Talking with one another is loving one another.”*

- Kenyan proverb



# Family

*Family support can be important to the success of any relationship, but when partners are from different cultures, it can be more of a challenge to gain that support. Parents may not understand or appreciate the culture of their son or daughter in law. Some white families may be prejudiced towards Africans. African family members are often overseas and the Australian partner may not even meet or speak to them. Africans in Australia may have significant obligations to a large extended family back in Africa. They may also expect to have a close, supportive relationship with their new Australian family similar to what they would have back in Africa. However Australian-born people may believe that family should not be closely involved or consulted about the relationship. All these kinds of differences in understanding and commitment can place pressure on relationships. The stories in this section show that if it's possible to do so, building close, supportive relationships with your partner's family can contribute to a stronger, happier relationship.*

## Moussa

God bless him now, my first wife's father wouldn't accept the fact that I was marrying his daughter. He just said no. That was the biggest challenge. It created a bit of a problem within the family because she said 'Well if you're not going to let me marry the man I want, then I'll just have to leave, I won't have anything to do with you'. Her mother and her brother intervened and the matter was resolved positively, but there was a good month that things weren't moving and everyone was stressed.

It was different with my second marriage. Sophia's mother's family are originally from Europe, they came here as refugees in the 50s - so that was an eye opener for the family to be multicultural. It's a bonus to our relationship because it was taken for granted - maybe he's a different colour but who cares, so long as they're happy. They are sensitive to the

needs of my family and they're very supportive. They are well aware of what's happening in Africa and they attend functions for fund-raising. They actually say 'What can we do to assist?'

My mother-in-law's side of the family have very strong family values, like you couldn't miss a Sunday lunch. When I first met Sophia her grandmother was alive and the whole family would go there on a Sunday and you eat and drink and that's what's expected. When Grandma got older she had to go to a nursing home so we made sure that she never felt like she was abandoned, it was like a religious thing that we visited her every weekend. That also played a role in bringing the whole family together. In my culture it's like that too. For example when my grandma died she was 102, and my father was looking after her - an 87 year old man.

We had an opportunity to work in the Middle East and it was easy then to stay in contact with family in Somalia. Because of security, we couldn't go there, but we got to a point where my father would speak with Sophia on a weekly basis. Whenever I speak to him now, he always asks for Sophia and talks to her. He's gone out of his way to learn English.

## Fiona

My grandparents live in the country and they find it hard because in their time black and white didn't mix so that's been a struggle, but I understand it because that was their era. I didn't have any family support, and in a way I sort of understand how as an African they're alone here. I'm the same, my family's overseas and your family's overseas, and so we're supporting one another.

## Kofi

My family like my marriage because they've met Anna, they've lived with her and they know her very well. So they support us a lot, and so do Anna's parents.

I didn't meet Anna's parents until I came to Australia. I talked to them on the phone. I think before they met me they were not so sure about the marriage but Anna proved to them that I'm a good person. They're very, very good people. They help a lot - financially, with work around the house, doing the gardening, looking after the kids.

I got a job about a month after I got here and I was there for about two years. Later I realised I'd better learn a trade. My father-in-law suggested that. I started doing my apprenticeship and then went to TAFE full-time and I had to stop working. During my apprenticeship we had our first born and Anna had to stop work and it was very difficult for us. So that's where the in-law's came in, they were paying our rent for about two years.

I've been here almost 13 years but I'm not actually very confident when I'm with Anna's parents. I still have that type of respect I would have in Ghana, that you have to respect your elders, especially your in-laws. But they don't want me to be like that. They want me to be free, talk to them. I still feel shy. That's how I was brought up and it's very difficult to change that.

## Jalloh

Two days before our marriage in Senegal, I tell Dad I'm going to marry and he says 'What!' But then he says, 'Ok, it's your life, don't worry'. My mum is the same: 'Oh, ok, , no worry', and they came to my marriage.

Long time ago, if you tell your parents you're going to marry a white person, they'll tell you no, because they think the white person will

take you to another country and they think, 'Oh, maybe I lost my son'. But now, if you want to marry, it's your life. I've never had that problem because my dad went to Europe many, many times, he went to America, he knows the life. I'm not the first person in my family to have white wife, I've got mixed family.

Erin has a good family. My first time to come here, me and her dad, we don't have good relation, he didn't know me exactly. But we keep going, we talk, and now he knows exactly who I am and it's good. Now sometimes he tells me 'Come to my boat', and we go fishing.

## Angela

I didn't realise how important my family was for Okello until he said to me not very long ago, 'You don't understand, when we separated I lost my new family as well', and I said, 'You haven't had to lose your new family. They're still there'.

## Mariam

I wasn't really sure as to how his parents would perceive me. It wasn't so much an issue to me but I was getting advice from friends to be careful of his parents, they might not receive me well. They were just trying to protect me I think. Possibly they've experienced racism. And I think with his parents not being in the city my friends were a little bit more wary. But there were no problems.

As to my parents, they were living in Greece for many years and then here in Australia for 20 years. They haven't been in a Africa for a long time, they've been around Caucasians and other nationalities, so they're quite open to it. My older sister married a non-African.

I think they realise that there's not that many Ethiopians here so it's a limited selection and so they're just happy as long as I'm happy. They're

still quite cultural though. We still follow all the traditions, like Easter and Christmas. We speak Greek Amharic at home. Their mentality is still Ethiopian. The fact that Harry doesn't have a religion, my mum can't really understand that. But they've very much taken to Harry because he's very easy going and he enjoys the food, he's taken to the culture and the dancing and they see that and they definitely appreciate it.

## Erin

When we first were together Mum was supportive, but she was sort of – 'Just make sure you're doing the right thing' – because they hadn't met him before he came here. My dad was very non-supportive. When we got married, he was like – 'Erin, I hope you know what you're doing'. Then Jalloh finally arrived, and Dad was a little bit funny with him at first, but now he thinks Jalloh's fantastic. It didn't take him long to realise – she's chosen a good one. And now, they all love our daughter, and they see that he's a wonderful father. I think he's much better than any Australian partner I've ever had – otherwise I wouldn't have married him!

## Jack

I haven't had a lot of contact with Amadika's family. I've spoken to them on the phone. Most of them are in South Africa but there's a nephew and his family here. He's a really nice guy who I haven't met but I've talked to him on the phone.

In terms of my family, things went really well. Mum and Dad have often stated the point of view that they don't get too involved in their children's relationships, because you might end up losing contact with your own child. My brother and sister have both been good, but I've been quite strongly conscious at times that Anglo-Saxon people behave in ways that can be perceived as quite rude by African people.

And I suppose over time, I twigged to this and they didn't. For example my family are quite an intellectual family and they like to probe and ask questions. And that really is perceived as rude by the Africans I know.

## Athien

Me and my mum are not really very close because I haven't seen her for eight years and she didn't like me having a child with my first boyfriend. I disconnect from my mum but I talk to my step sisters and brothers. Simon told me that he wants to bring me and and my mum together and I said to him that in my culture if you're going to bring us together it means that we're going to forget the past and move forward in future. That means we don't have to be close to them but at least once a year we see them, or talk to them, which is great for our children. I said to him that if he resolves me and my family he has to promise that I'm going to do that for him as well. So both of us are going to resolve with our families.

They don't know about our relationship yet, we don't really think they have to. But I think it will be okay with my family, we've already got a couple of white boys in our family. But I'm going to introduce him and I want him to meet my dad too. I don't want him to back off from my mother because I have a conflict with her. I'm going to introduce him to every single person, even the animals.

## Harry

Our parents, even though they're from different ends of the earth, they're good people. I'm lucky enough to have pretty good parents who want me to just be happy. Her parents are scared - quite naturally I reckon - it's pushing their boundaries, but I love them, they're great. They're very welcoming, very accepting. I mean there have been comments like, 'Be careful' - but it's just like any parents would do for

their child. And maybe they weren't serious but they said I should come to Ethiopia with them. That's a pretty big thing for them to offer, that they would even want to take me there.

## Kate

I wouldn't say my parents disapprove, but I think that Mum just wanted me to marry some investment banker and be rich - that's her issue. In the early years my parents thought I was under undue stress and they'll always probably be on my side. If I go to them in a state of crisis, then they're probably not going to hear the best of Ismael. I don't think they really appreciate how amazing it's all been for me. I've talked about problems but it's also been a really amazing journey for me and I probably don't talk about the positive things enough. They should see how happy I am. But I don't really worry about them.

We don't spend a huge amount of time with my family, and he probably feels very welcome, they don't do anything to ostracise him. But I know some other families that are all embracing and supportive and my family are not like that.

I get along quite well with most of his family. It's hard with his parents because his mother doesn't speak very much English. I don't know if they like me. I lived with them for four months there and I always find it hard to tell because I was Kate Moneybags. I was paying all the bills and sending everyone to school and buying all the food and that makes it hard to tell who your friends are. But I had pretty good time there. I felt welcomed, they really looked after me, so I assumed it was all good and that they liked me.

# Friends and community

*People in intercultural relationships often find that they get more support and understanding from friends who are also in mixed relationships. Friends who don't share your experience may want to be helpful but because they don't understand the complexities and challenges, may distance themselves, over-react or give bad advice. You might find they benefit from reading this booklet. As migrants, African partners are likely to seek out support networks within their own community. It's important for non-African partners to understand and support this, and equally important for African partners to find a balance between friends and family. Some people find it difficult to gain acceptance from their partner's ethnic community and this can be distressing, especially when there are children involved. Although only non-Africans interviewed for this booklet mentioned this concern, Africans can also have similar painful or uncomfortable experiences with their partner's friends and community. If this connection is important to you, get your partner's support to make friends in that community. Learning your African partner's language may also help.*

## Fiona

When I first started dating an African - people are always looking at you in the shopping centres, people make comments: 'I see black and white are together'. You hear snide remarks. Some people are nice - 'Oh the baby's so gorgeous, you should put them in a baby contest' and stuff like that. And then you've got the other side, the Africans disapproving if you wear an African outfit - 'You're just trying to be black'. That's from women mostly. I find the women are a bit harder to get involved with. Some African communities are more accepting than others. I dated a Ghanaian just a couple of years back, he told me that the preachers said that because of what happened here with the Aborigines and how they tried to put the whites and the blacks together so it makes the colour lighter and eventually the black race will die out, that he should

not date whites because of that. That made me really angry.

Nigerian community is completely different. They stay married to their white wives and if you go to a Nigerian party they'll talk their language plus English and they'll have both national anthems. They are trying to mix in with the Australian culture. And you'll see a lot of white women in their dress and they will tell them they look beautiful. I felt more accepted as a white girl in the Nigerian community.

I was going interstate to see someone and one of my friends who I didn't think was racist, she's been very supportive, she made comments like 'you might get AIDS'. I was quite surprised and I thought 'Hey, this isn't the first African I've dated, please remember that'. There is really no support from most people I know because they don't understand, they just think of the stereotypes of Africa - AIDS, war, poverty.

## Kofi

People in my community who've met Anna and know her, they like it that we are together. Every friend of mine who's met Anna has liked her. She is very easy going and because she's been to Ghana she knows how to interact with Ghanaians.

## Moussa

If I let my Somali friends, they would want me to be with them every day after work. 'Be with us, one blood', we have that idea. Weekends they expect me to be there with them but I have family commitments. So it's up to me to say to them 'Sorry. I'm committed to my family and that's it' and they have to understand that basic value. Some people actually want to see your marriage break down because they don't like Muslim being married to a non Muslim, simple as that. They will sabotage.

## Erin

There are other Africans in our area, but he is the only Senegalese person as far as we know. We're friends with some of them, especially with the Mauritians. If he's there and I go to pick him up I'll always go in and sit and chat with them, and they like to see our daughter, and we stay for tea and that sort of thing. There's quite a few families that we're very friendly with.

## Angela

I think African men associate with their friends differently than Australian men. He didn't develop any friendships here with people that he could talk to on more than a pub level. He said to me, 'In Kenya as men we can talk about the meaning of life, talk at a deeper level, but in Australia all you do is talk about women or rubbish when you're at a pub with a group of men'. He felt that friendship was much more surface here and he didn't get anything out of it.

## Kate

We're part of the African community and it is really fun, I love it. We go to a lot of community events.

Communication or lack thereof is very challenging. I get pissed off when I'm sitting with a group of five or six men west African men who will waffle on for hours and hours and hours in their language. Some of his friends will very kindly translate something but Ismael would never ever, in his wildest dreams think of including me because it's boy's talk. They'll be laughing and I'll ask what's funny - 'Men's business'. If I ask one of the guys who would usually tell me: 'I cannot say, only your husband can tell you that'. So it must be really funny and how left out do I feel now? Even though I'm there, it's like I'm not privileged

enough to be part of the conversation, so I feel like a piece of furniture. When there's people from other communities it's okay because they have to speak English.

I think most of his friends know me quite well now, and we get along, I have a very honest relationship with them. I think they think we've got a really good relationship. But they were always hassling him about having children, and I'm not ready for that. That makes it really hard, I can tell when they've been at him about that, when he comes home, there's more insistence on it.

**[www.africanoz.com](http://www.africanoz.com)** and **[www.facc.org.au](http://www.facc.org.au)** list African community organisations and sometimes language classes or tutors.

*You can find other people in mixed relationships online, for example the Australian African Network Facebook group.*

# Religion

*Intercultural relationships are often also interfaith. In general, Australia has a more secular society than most African countries. Shared faith can be a source of support, but even if people's religious beliefs differ, a relationship can thrive when partners are tolerant, generous and recognise shared values.*

## Erin

Religion's not an issue. I don't follow any religion, but I just think that with our children, I want them to be able to see that you can still be a good person and have good morals and good ethics and be nice to people and not necessarily have to be religious about it. They'll see that Dad's a Muslim and he has this and Mum's not and she has this same thing. They can choose whatever they want to believe.

Unless you saw Jalloh praying or something, you wouldn't know that he was Muslim. He'll go through stages where he'll pray five times a day and do all those things for a few months at a time, and then he won't pray for ages unless there's a special occasion. He's pretty relaxed about it in that way, but he very strongly believes in it.

It's not an issue for his family that I'm not Muslim, as far as I know. No-one's said anything to me. Maybe they say things that I don't understand - but I love his family, and they all like me.

## Kofi

We are both Christian and that's very important. And part of it is her lifestyle too, she was brought up to be easy going, accepts everyone, and she's very generous, and knows how to talk to people.

## Moussa

My understanding of my religion is a Muslim can marry a Christian or a Jew. The religion allows you to do that, but some people don't understand. My wife is Catholic and the Catholic church, even though they know I'm Muslim, allowed me to become her nephew's godfather. The priest was happy to tell me, 'I don't see any conflict there'. But the Somali community always bring things up. Things like that don't bug me. I don't give them the satisfaction of criticising me. Basically their belief is that I shouldn't be married to a non Muslim, non Somali, they think that is a very strong point to get across to me. I say 'Well look, that's where you're mistaken, this is my choice and my choice alone, that's it and you have nothing to do with it so don't even consider asking me to stop'. That's it, simple as that.

## Simon

I wasn't really brought up strictly, I didn't get religion from my parents, and I've kind of guided myself on my own with a bit of help from friends. But I think I'm going to learn a lot from Athien, I think it's possible for her to change my mind about things, possibly for the better. If I've got no work we try and squeeze Church into our timetable. Athien's friends came over and did bible study for an hour, so that was introduced to me and it was completely different. I've never done it before, we enjoyed it very much.

**[www.thelinkbetween.wordpress.com/](http://www.thelinkbetween.wordpress.com/)**

*A Christian woman blogs about interfaith marriages.*

**[www.marriage.about.com/od/interfaith/Interfaith\\_Marriages.htm](http://www.marriage.about.com/od/interfaith/Interfaith_Marriages.htm)**

*Tips, strategies and resources for interfaith couples.*

# Money matters

*“Rain does not fall on one roof alone”*

- Cameroon proverb

*Money can be a cause of conflict in all kinds of relationships, but when one of the partners is from Africa there are often additional financial commitments that can cause stress to both partners. It's important to discuss these commitments and come to agreement about how they will be met.*



# Responsibilities

*In this section people talk about their financial responsibilities, the pressures these responsibilities have placed on their relationship, and the different ways they deal with them.*

## Kwesi

I think many separations come from financial problems. Most Africans need to support their family at home and if the partner doesn't like it, that becomes a problem. Also most Ghanaians when they come here, they want good living, like buying a house or a property to invest, and if the partner thinks she can't get her own time but always has to work for the property or the mortgage, that can also bring separation. And also, Ghanaians think once you've started life, getting your partner whom you really like, all you have to do is start saving money. You can enjoy with your money, but if she says 'We need this, we need that, we have to go on holidays', and the other person is trying to struggle for his side, all that will bring confusion. You have to know if you will benefit from it, or the children will benefit from it before you take decision. Like going on holidays - it is good to know different cultures but that is not the most important thing in life. Money first. If you have no money in the bank, or if you spend all the money on holidays and have to come and start again - I think it is something the African partner may not like.

## Angela

My husband went home to visit and we'd decided there was enough money for three months. Within two weeks he called and said the money was gone because everybody came and asked him for something and he spent it. He said he'd never go back again without a lot of money because that's what's expected, that's their culture.

His sister in Africa would sporadically would ring up asking him to send money. She'd say, 'Your father is close to death'. I'd ask 'What's wrong with him?'. 'Oh, he's very weak', but it would be something like malaria and the treatment costs only a dollar.

I think I was fairly understanding, but he has five sisters who are very well off, married to very successful businessmen in Europe. I thought they should have a family meeting and come up with a plan that they all put money into an account every month. It would only cost fifty dollars a month maximum and they would be living very well - but they didn't seem to get their act together and do it.

I wasn't as supportive towards the end when he wasn't working and I was trying to work and study and do everything. That's why we separated actually. I couldn't afford to keep him and his whole family. I couldn't afford to have a house and provide for my daughter and that was where my priority lay, but his priority lay in sending money home. I thought there was an unfair burden put on him, but I couldn't take it anymore, I couldn't live up to the expectations that he wanted to pretend to his family that he had. We couldn't afford to be spending as much money as he wanted to.

## Kofi

In my culture, we understand that your parents look after you to grow up and you look after them until they die. My mum doesn't work and sometimes it's hard to live in Africa. So if I send money to my mum I don't expect my wife to be angry. She's come to understand that.

For a long time I felt that Ismael was useless with money. He'd have friends from Africa who'd come to Australia and it seemed like they would just mooch off him for months and months at a time. That's before I really cottoned on to how it all works and really understood the nature of these relationships - that you could stay with your mates and they'd support you and when you need to go home they just give you the money and off you go. Meanwhile, he's coming to me for a loan and I thought oh, poor Ismael, it's really bad back home - but who am I really supporting here? That was difficult.

Things are always going to be really hard in Africa. There are lots of little kids and they need education, food and all those basic necessities, and it all seems to come back on him. I try to keep my own head above water and help out where I can. I'd like to send the kids to school so they have half a chance of being able to support themselves, but I can't support 30 kids! It's not sustainable.

You need to set up a business for them or something over there so that they can do it themselves. Ismael has hopes and dreams of doing that but it doesn't eventuate. Now I just try and support him so at least he doesn't have to worry about his expenses here. I don't send vast amounts of money to them anymore, but I put a lot of time and energy into trying to run his business, so that he can contribute to the family. I see that as a contribution, but what I see as being helpful, putting in my time and my effort and the personal sacrifices I make - unless it's hard cash it's not really seen as a sacrifice.

We went home one year to Africa and he didn't go with any money, and you may as well not come at all unless you've got something to give. How heart breaking. I feel really sorry for him, having that pressure. Not be able to share any of your joy or any of your achievements with them really because then they'll think you're even more rich and have even higher expectations of you. I've never had that, I've always been taught to be independent and to be able to look after myself.

## Jack

Amadika's family did ask for money, but I never thought that they were over-the-top. I was happy to send it. She managed that. She took the view that if we opened the purse strings too much, they'd really come to rely on it and it would blow out.

## Owusu

When I came to this country I took things for granted - like being able to manage money affairs. I thought this place is full of gold and when the money goes it comes, so instead of trying to save money, I did make a mess of things. But now I have learned and have integrated into the system.

## Erin

My husband does have his financial commitments back home, but so far it hasn't been too much. I understand that he has to help his family out, and of course I want us to be able to do that. But also, now that he's on the other side of that exchange, he understands that you really do have to work hard to get money – you can't just pick it off the trees – and he's a little bit more wise to that whole Babylon thing. In his country, people think if you go to Europe or America or Australia, it's like going to Babylon, and you just all of a sudden have money. Or they think that just because you're white, you've got money, which I think is hilarious! If you're in a lot of debt, they actually have more money than you, because you've got all this minus money.

## Moussa

I never let financial commitments to my family in Africa interfere with my life here. Every month you're expected to send money back and I've been lucky enough to have had jobs that paid well. Sending \$200 per month, it isn't more than what you would drink in Australia anyway. I've been able to do it in a way that it never impacted on my life here.

## Fiona

My husband's mother died and that became a really big thing. I was trying to be practical, thinking \$4,000 for a ticket to go there is quite a lot of money, and we have four children, with only one wage coming in. The importance of the funeral wasn't big on my agenda. I was thinking practical and I talked him out of it. '\$4,000 plus the funeral costs, that's like \$10,000, which we don't have. You can send some money home instead, your mum can have a big funeral and a big party'. I didn't understand the emotional side, how important funerals are in his culture.

It was a major cause of our separation. After that he gambled, he drank, felt misery that he never gave his mum a good thing. Now I understand how important it was. I was working with a South African woman and she was saying how it never is over until you go there. She helped me understand a bit more how big it was. My husband's gone back since then and done the ritual. He's starting to come out of it now, he even says he understands my point of view too.

# Gambling

*While there are gambling problems in all communities and cultures, the attraction of gambling can be particularly acute for people who are under extra financial and/or psychological pressure, such as new arrivals in Australia and people whose family in poorer countries have high needs or expectations of financial support.*

## Owusu

During my first marriage, I got into gambling. My friend goes to the pub and starts to play the poker machines, and I thought you just put ten dollars in, but after a while it becomes the norm. You start to lie and cheat to get the money to play. In the middle of the night you run away to play. I went to Gamblers' Anonymous and I've been rehabilitated for a long time now but I was down very low.

I've seen lots of African men trying to make a quick buck on the poker machines because I'm a security officer in clubs. I just go up to them and I tell them, 'Mate, forget about it, can I tell you my whole life? The more you put in, that machine takes 99.5% and that minuscule amount left is divided among millions of people, so when are you going to win?'

I talk about what has happened to me, how I lied and cheated, borrowed money and can't pay it back, and you can't even pay your child's school fees and it's a very, very degrading attitude in life. I say 'Look, that's not how we make money here, in this place you put money into the bank, so if you want to help someone back home you only have to go to the bank. If you think gambling is what will make you make quick cash, my dear brothers, please, forget it and try to work hard and save your money!'

## Angela

When we first came to live in Australia I was at university full time and working part time. Okello had on and off jobs and I think that not having constant employment knocked his self esteem big time. The first time he got a job he was going to work so hard and had so many expectations of himself. When he got retrenched, he felt like there was no loyalty between an employer and an employee and that's very different from what he had in his own country. So he realised that it doesn't matter how hard you work, it doesn't make a difference.

He liked the concept of gambling. He liked the idea of instant gratification. He was really into Lotto. Every day, he spent hours thinking about winning the Lotto, but then he was also becoming unwell probably at that point and I think it was also because he had financial issues. I think he became quite obsessed because he'd had expectations of living in a degree of grandeur and it wasn't happening. It never became a big problem, he never lost buckets and buckets of money, but I think if we had more money then he would have.

## Adjei

Initially our relationship was all joyful. It was good, it was happy. But the thing is, gradually you get to know people, what is underneath have to come out and you have to be open. She didn't tell me about the gambling. I just put two and two together. Finally I found out and I was just broken hearted. I was so disappointed because the truth wasn't told to me, like some money was lost and she would say 'Oh I dropped it here, I lost it'. But the truth is it went that way and she couldn't be faithful enough to tell me.

The thing is, it keeps going backwards and forwards. She'll promise, 'Oh I won't do it again. Take the credit card.' Within three weeks I'll have a big problem - 'You control me, give back my cards!'. And I'll give it back and within just a week everything is gone and she will come and say,

'Oh I'm sorry. Take it back, I can't handle it! I'll take it again. A month and a half, we go through the same thing, over and over and over. We're not getting anywhere.

Eventually I asked her permission to get help with the gambling. I said: 'Look, this thing is driving us apart. You're still not being able to handle it, so I'm going to go to these people'. She promised, but then we just get back to the same thing again in a month, and then the whole cycle repeat itself. So to me that was a big disaster.

*Multicultural Problem Gambling Service NSW*  
**[www.dhi.gov.au/mpgs/mpgs/default.aspx](http://www.dhi.gov.au/mpgs/mpgs/default.aspx)**

# Children

*“Children are the reward of life”*

- Congolese proverb



# **Finding common ground**

*We all have ideas about children and parenting that are deeply rooted in our culture. In countries like Australia, there are also many different theories and even fashions that influence how we raise our children.*

*When both parents are from the same culture it's more likely that you will be able agree on these issues, or at least find it easier to understand your differences. However in a culturally mixed relationship you may find that you and your partner have very different, very passionate convictions about when to start a family, how big it should be and what is the best way to raise your children. It's a good idea to talk about your opinions and values before you start a family.*

## **Athien**

Simon's actually the first guy I've introduced to my daughter. I am very protective of her and I never really introduce a person as a boyfriend to her, but they get along really well. He surprised me a lot. They're really, really close, they have special things they do – wrestling, reading books, he takes her to school sometimes.

## **Kate**

I think there's enough children in the world. I don't feel very maternal and that's a huge issue. I mean to the point where he packed his bags a few times and said, 'That's it, I'm out of here'. It was like: 'You won't breed, I'll find somebody who will'. Well, that's not going to change my mind. He didn't actually make it out the door, it was emotional blackmail.

If I have a child I can't work. I really am fearful of losing my independence and not being able to support myself. And knowing that he's got huge financial responsibilities, I'm really stressed about money.

There must be good points to having a child of course, but right now I just prefer to get myself set up in a situation where I could afford not to work for a while. And I'm just getting where I want to be in my career and my music. I'm busy enough with that.

I really can't see that he would be making dramatic lifestyle changes if we had a baby, and nor could he because of the kind of work he does. Every few weeks though he says, 'When are you going to have a baby?' The answer hasn't changed. In five years maybe.

Ismael has a daughter in Africa. I'd like to get her here but he's not really good with paperwork and I'm sick of instigating things. I'll help him if he instigates it but I'm not going to do it all for him. Hopefully that will happen one day.

## Owusu

In my culture, everyone helps to bring up a child, so if you're not there you don't worry because someone will take care, but in the western world you have to be there. Actually we came to the western world to try and make money so that we can look after our extended family, so that the family will stay stronger and everybody will be able to live.

My partner doesn't really understand that obligation. It's a bit of a challenge. She also doesn't understand why if I have grown up kids I still have to support them. She says 'No, these kids are grown up, you can't give them money, they have to find their own way'. But to me it's not like that, you have to try to build them up, you don't leave them to find their own way. When I'm old I have to stay with the family, the young ones will look after me so I'll never feel lonely. For instance my mother gets sick so my son takes her to the hospital, and my sisters' kids have the same obligation to look after her. In Australia they put the person in the nursing home and they'll be by themselves there.

I've been here for 20 years so in some ways I've changed, but it's hard when someone is trying to drag me to do something. For instance my partner wants an adopted child, which we all agree with, but if I cannot look after my own blood how can I look after somebody I have to get from somewhere else? I don't mind to look after that person but only if my partner also understands what I have to do for my kids and my mother in Africa. You talk about it, but if it doesn't reach a compromise then you have to leave the relationship. I have got kids already so if the person doesn't want to agree to what I have, then there is a problem.

## Angela

We came back to live in Australia because I didn't want to have a baby in Africa. I was scared, I wanted to have decent pain relief. The plan was to wait until our baby reached about a year old, to make sure my husband had his citizenship and then to head back and live a life between two countries. But unfortunately we broke up and that never happened.

I planned the pregnancy because it was the right time for me. I told him that I was ready to have a child but I don't think that he would have chosen that as being the right time. If I'm completely honest, I think that he probably blamed me for that a little bit.

In spite of that, he is a wonderful father. When our daughter was little he looked after her a lot. He was so gentle and so incredibly patient and she bullied him, she had him twisted around her finger from the very first minute and she still does. He was very, very sensitive to her needs. He would dance and sing to her till she slept and it was just a beautiful thing to watch how gentle he was with her.

We're separated now and I was complaining after he left us, 'What is it, you don't want to see your daughter anymore?'. He said that his role was to provide for her and if he didn't have time to build the relationship, that wasn't as important as the physical provision. But

he sees her, he rings her almost every day and she calls him anytime. We're great friends actually, he's a very good person and she sees him whenever she wants to.

## Jack

I ended up doing a lot of the parenting with the kids. I wasn't unhappy about that, but my partner seemed to progressively remove herself from the practical effort of parenting, so I found myself doing more and more. To an extent, that was okay because I really like doing that and I felt I was getting a lot out of it, I was very involved and richly rewarded in my view. But I felt that my partner wanted, in spite of that, to retain quite a large say about how things would go. I didn't want to dominate, I wanted a partnership, but I couldn't quite understand her attitude, which was kind of the opposite of mine. Mine is: you put in, you get a stake and you have a vote. I felt that the other approach expressed a view that she was a mother simply by virtue of being the mother and that involved certain rights of deciding on certain things.

As I understand it, middle-class people in her culture do use other people to bring up their children, it's to signify a social status and it improves your sense of your social standing. And it's very easy to get somebody to look after your kids for you, you don't have to pay them much. But to me the thing that is wrong about this picture is what sort of care are the kids going to get? And also, from my Western point of view, I'm missing out on time with the kids; what's the state of my relationship with my kids if I just treat them as something to be outsourced to somebody else?

I haven't had kids with anyone who isn't African, so I think it's nice to have a different input and different way of seeing things, and our daughter's got access to different languages and different foods and different ways of seeing things. So far, we're pretty much on the same track. He's very much into children respecting their parents and having good discipline and a good education and good food and good health and all that stuff.

One thing about the parenting is – in Africa there's so much more family involved. My Mum's very involved in helping out and we see her every second day, if not every day, but in his village, there'd be family every day. The mum gets more of a break because someone will always take the baby walking or take the baby to put to sleep or take the baby to go and visit someone or take the baby to the shops. Whereas here, I'm constantly with the baby.

I've always, since she was little, if someone wants to hold her, go for gold! People ask: 'Can I hold her?' - 'Yes, you don't have to ask – just take her!' Because that's what I've seen happen in Senegal, where they come up and they just take the baby and you don't get a choice. I like that – to just expose her to lots of people and have the baby eating with the family. Like when he cooks, for example, we quite often will just put a bit of material on the floor and eat there and she comes up and has a go at it.

# Discipline

*One area that mixed couples may disagree is the issue of discipline. In some African cultures physical punishment is an important part of discipline, whereas people of other backgrounds, for example Anglo or European backgrounds, may strongly disagree with this and favour other methods. These differences may also be connected to how your culture thinks of children. It's another issue that it's important to talk about before you have children.*

## Fiona

In my husband's culture they're a bit slap happy with the kids. We're told not to and we're teaching other ways of discipline, whereas they think: 'Well it was good for me, it's good enough for my child' sort of thing. I had a lot of clashes with my husband over that.

## Kofi

I was trained to respect your elders. Not just your parents, anybody who's older than you, you have to respect. And I've been brought up in the way that, in the community everybody looks up to each other. Somebody can just call you, 'Kofi, can you can you go and buy this for me?' 'Yes, yes', you go and do it. When you see your elders carrying something, you pick it and take it home for them. That's how I've been brought up.

Here the children have got too much power. They've got too much freedom. And also they've got a lot of influence from school, even from the teachers as well. And so when they come home and they are being naughty and you want to train them the way you want, they go to school and they're taught different things. So that's another challenge.

My wife has been brought up where you don't hit a child. I've been

brought up in the way that a child needs to be hit to understand what you mean. I don't hit my kids - I'm not someone who likes hitting because I didn't like that when I was a kid. And so if Anna sees me hitting one of the boys it means he's been very, very naughty and I've been warning him for a long time, and I'd give them a little smack on the bottom. But she understands, she knows whenever I hit the boys they deserved to be hit and even she will do that. I do more talking than hitting. I talk to them a lot. That's something that I learned from here, from Australian culture. I now understand that the hitting doesn't actually solve the problem but if I talk to them, gradually, they understand more than using force.

*Legislation regarding the physical discipline of children varies from state to state but in NSW, it is illegal to hit a child around the head or neck and/or use a stick, belt or other object to discipline or punish a child.*

*More information about this and other parenting issues at:*  
**[www.community.nsw.gov.au](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au)**

# Circumcision

*Circumcision can be an issue that causes conflict in relationships. Many people are strongly against the practice and others are equally strongly in favour. Even if it is not an issue between you and your partner, you may find that your decision about circumcision causes conflict with your extended family here or in Africa. It is important to discuss your points of view about this early in your relationship but be aware that it may still flare up as an issue after your baby is born and theory becomes reality.*

## Kofi

One challenge that was hard for me was circumcision. When we were going to have our first born and we find out he is a boy, he has to be circumcised. In my culture circumcision is very important, I have to because I am a Christian. I talked to my wife about it. She wasn't sure. Well she hasn't done it before, that's the first time. But I let her go and then left it for a while. That's my culture too, to think it over.

The son, he's not going to live just here, he's going to live both in Africa and here. Where he's going to live when he grows up, that's his problem. But once he's a baby, I mean we have to come together and do this. It's not going to hurt him for being Australian and it's not going to hurt him for being in Africa. I think it's good for a baby too. So later she came to understand, and lucky we did the first one – all our children are boys. If we didn't do it, it would have created a lot of problems between us. But she understood and all the boys were done and now there's no problem.

## Erin

My partner's culture is very traditional, they still do their traditional ceremonies, like initiation ceremonies and he says if he has a son, he wants him to go and do that. It's only once every generation, every 20 years and they get taken into the forest for a week or a month. If we have a boy, he's going to have to do that. I'm happy with that.

As for circumcision – it's not part of the initiation ceremony, but as Muslims they circumcise. My mum's very against circumcision. I'm not really decided one way or the other but I know that if we do have a boy, I'm going to be the meat in the sandwich between him and her, and he says, 'Well, it's our child and not hers'.

I don't really know how I feel about it, one hundred percent. But if it was vitally important for him and his religion and his culture to get it done, then I probably would get it done. But I'd maybe make my partner wait until the boy was about 10 and then he'd at least have some understanding of why he's going through this pain.

I've told my partner that there was no way anyone's taking my girl into the forest. In his country female circumcision is outlawed but I think they still do do it. I think all the women in his family have had it done I don't think they would expect our daughter to have it done. I know my partner doesn't think it's necessarily a good thing, and wouldn't want it done to his daughter, for sure.

## Kwesi

I wanted to circumcise my son but the mother didn't want it. She said most Australians don't do it. She told her friends, and they tried to persuade me not to do it. She had a friend whose son is not circumcised, and as the boys would grow up to be friends, this one circumcised, this one not, whenever they meet I think one will feel shame, so to let them feel free I just agree.

I talk to my friends and they say it cannot be possible for me to leave my child uncircumcised. I tried my possible best to do it, but because my son's mother still resisted, I just stopped and left it like that so we all can be free.

In my country, it's the man who always takes decision about all this. Whatever you name the baby, it always comes from the father's side. In Australia, what I know is that the mother stands on the strong side – we always take the mother's decision. I could have opposed the mother's decision but I just leave it like that because of the love I have for her and the respect I have for her friends and her parents.

I still regret, I still don't like it. He's a lovely boy but because of that, he has something left behind. If he says he will do it now, I will appreciate it. But if he doesn't prefer to do it, I will let him. It won't bother me, and that will not bring my love for him down. I will still like him as he is.

## Fiona

Of course the boys had to be circumcised. The last one hasn't been done yet and now his dad thinks he's too old. He's now five years old and he hasn't got him done. But I know with my first one, whose dad was from Ghana, he was very adamant about doing that. I didn't mind. My father had an operation when he was a teenager because the foreskin didn't come back, so I thought maybe if it was done when he was a child it would've been better. I didn't want my own children to have the same problem as my father.

One of the cultural things we've argued about is female genital mutilation. That's been a big problem, the whole men's apathy: 'It's women's business therefore I shall not know, I shall not act'. My partner's got a daughter who's been circumcised. Heaven forbid I have a daughter, I wouldn't dream of leaving her alone with his family in Africa, they'd whip her off to get it done. They don't see anything wrong with it: 'We're going to a girl's circumcision party, whooh'. He probably sees the problem because I've inflicted a lot of information on him, but he wouldn't intervene. I'm probably equally as gutless because I talk to them but I won't do anything directly to intervene while I'm over there. I have a go at him: 'It's your daughter, you knew what was going to happen to her, if you didn't agree with it why did you let it happen?'. It's a cop out.

*Although it was common up until the 1970s, circumcision of baby boys is no longer routinely done in Australia except by some religious and cultural groups.*

*The Royal Australasian College of Physicians does not recommend that routine circumcision in infancy be performed. See [www.racp.edu.au/](http://www.racp.edu.au/) for more info.*

*Female circumcision is illegal in Australia.*

*If your family is affected by female circumcision you can contact the Family and Reproductive Rights Education Program (FARREP) for information and support at [www.thewomens.org.au/FARREP](http://www.thewomens.org.au/FARREP).*

# Identity

*As parents of mixed heritage children we may feel a responsibility to make sure they have access to all the cultures in their heritage. This can be a particular challenge if you are a single parent.*

## Mariam

There's something rich in knowing about a culture and even a language. If my child wanted to learn a language, whether it be mine or any other, I would be happy, I'd be pushing for it actually. But I'm planning on staying in Australia so I definitely want them to take on the Australian way of life. I've grown up here and been brought up in a fairly western way so I'd probably bring up my kids in that way too. But hopefully give them that advantage of knowing about Africa or Greece, which is where a lot of my family live.

## Jack

It's important to me for my children to have a strong connection with Africa. If you don't know where you come from, that leaves a vacuum to a certain extent. I'd like them to have a grasp of both sides. My daughter recently was asked to do a school presentation on her background. It was actually a little bit confusing for her, because she had the two backgrounds. I think the African side is a little bit easier to see, in some way, a bit more salient somehow, possibly because white Australian culture just isn't terribly clear about what or who it is.

When the time comes, I'm keen for them to go to South Africa. I'd really like them to know the other family and have good relationships with them. I don't really know when that will be, or whether they will go with me or their mum. It's important for them to know and to have those connections and it's part of them. If you don't, if you can't get a grasp on part of your heritage, you're a bit impoverished.

It is always good for the children to understand the father's language, because once the child's 50/50, if his parents separate and have more children, then they can understand each other. I'm happy that I went to Ghana with my son, and I really liked the way he was playing with his cousins there. He can play Ghanaian games like draughts and oware. They can talk about anything that they feel like talking about. I feel very happy that my son was not isolated. He's the only child of his mother but he's got other brothers and sisters, and cousins, and they can do everything together, so I really appreciate that he got to understand more of the language. It was an advantage for my son that he was learning the Ghanaian language from them and they were learning English from him.

I feel happy to be with him all the time, I feel happy to go out with him. I feel proud of him. People ask me, 'Who is this?'; and once I say he's my son, the first thing they will ask is 'Wo ho te sen' (how are you?) and he's able to answer it. I feel proud that I have Australian child who can speak my language and who can go with me anywhere in the country without having any problem. But if he's not used to the language, if we reach somewhere and are conversing with someone, he becomes isolated and I wouldn't feel happy. He can't speak very much but he does understand a lot.

I think that my son is proud of the way he is. He's happy and he's enjoying himself and he's proud that he's got Ghanaian brothers and sisters. He's proud that he saw his grandmother before she passed away, and he's glad that he's got a lot of cousins who don't separate him from anything but always want him to join them, whatever they're doing. And I think he is proud that he's 50/50 because – dreadlocks maybe started from Africa and he is lucky to get bushy hair. It looks like he feels like disguising himself to be really, purely African, so he has started growing dreadlocks now.

## Fiona

I went to an African party not long ago, in my first husband's community, and I was looking around and I know half of the men there have mixed children - where are they? The men stay with their African women, they all go to the parties together with these fully African children but the children they had with white women are nowhere.

In my second husband's community it's not like that. The parties are all mixed, even whites go with white children. I think that's a really big support for the mixed kids. They don't look like their white mum and they get constantly asked: 'That can't be your mum?'. My children had to face that. There's issues of 'Am I white, am I Australian?' My daughter says: 'No I'm Australian'. One son dresses like an Australian with thongs and things and my older 14 year old tells him: 'No you're black, you're African that's it, you have to try and adapt to the black community'. So it is a total debate among my children.

It's alright when they are with their dad because he's dark and the children are dark, no-one asks questions, even though they're lighter. When they're with me, people think I'm babysitting, they don't see that that's my child. The children have to face this every day.

## Harry

My ideal is that I would just support them to learn everything about both of us and make up their own world out of it. You don't have to believe this way or that way, but this is Mum's history and family, learn and be as much of it as you can, and this is mine. Become yourselves and take whatever you will ... just have open minds about everything. I think sometimes if we had kids, it's a chance for me to get out and learn more too ... they're an inspiration to let's go and see ...

*You may find the 'Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage' is a useful resource to share with your older children:*

**[www.drmariaroot.com/](http://www.drmariaroot.com/)**

**[www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIHFupQm5wk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIHFupQm5wk)**

*Young Americans talk about what it means to be biracial.*

**[www.parenthood.com/article-topics/article-topics.php?Article\\_ID=3366](http://www.parenthood.com/article-topics/article-topics.php?Article_ID=3366)**

*Tips for raising children with two cultures.*

# 3. Solving problems

*“Unless you call out, who will open the door?”*

- Ethiopian proverb

*Couples have many different ways of dealing with relationship difficulties, including trying to sort it out by themselves, talking to friends and family, finding someone to mediate, or seeing a professional counsellor. When your relationship is in trouble you might want to seek help to get it back on track. In this section, people talk about their experiences of solving relationship problems and seeking help or their ideas about what they might do if they were having difficulties.*

## Jack

We went to Relationships Australia. It was a bit of a mixed bag. We had different bites of the apple. The first couple of times didn't go very well. We encountered people who just weren't really all that good. Anyway, we did go back and we found somebody who was good. We went for a few months but the upshot was to make it terribly plain that things were over. That was a pity, it didn't seem to start out that way. My wife went on her own at first and we were still reasonably cordial at that stage and she said 'Oh I just want to go along and have a talk with somebody', but when we did get into it, it unravelled very quickly.

We did discuss with the counsellor - who was really quite wonderful - the possibility of being referred to someone who both had a solid counselling background and was part of the African community. I thought my partner could be more comfortable with someone who knew a bit more about the ways of handling these things, because there are quite well defined ways of handling marital and family differences in her culture.

I think an African person was identified who had the the formal counseling skills, but in the end, we were advised against it. There were doubts about confidentiality. It is difficult because the African expatriate community is pretty small, and there is that inherent risk that people could end up knowing a lot about your business. The rumour mill is quite extraordinary at times in that community, so you wouldn't need to be giving them much.

That was a pity, it would have been great to see someone who had a foot in both worlds, someone with really solid qualifications in counseling and somebody who knew about the cultural mores and possibly could have described a few of those differences to us both and helped us define them.

If we'd been in Africa, I think we could have found an intermediary in the family. I don't know whether it would have made a difference, but I think it probably would have been really positive. It's difficult to place that amount of trust in somebody who's not a member of the family.

## Mariam

If we had problems I'd probably seek advice from friends, I wouldn't go to family. It depends on what the issue was, but obviously my family would just take my side and my mum probably wouldn't push the idea of working at it. She'd just say 'Oh forget him'. I'm a lot closer to my dad so he would realise that it was important. Mum just works a bit simpler - 'As long as my girl's okay. 'She's like, 'You're educated, you don't need to worry'. That's just the mentality. But my dad is a lot more diplomatic and he'd see Harry's side and he'd see my side. I could probably talk to my dad, but I'd probably go to my friends. Most of my friends are in inter-racial relationships anyway, so they would have a better idea I think.

In Ghana if there's a problem in a marriage and you wanted help the first thing you do is try and talk to maybe her uncle or one of the family, the most respected one. You have to try because marriage is basically two families coming together. So during the marriage the one who is leading her group, you make contact with him or her first and you try to see if that will solve things. If that doesn't help there's not much you can do.

When I realised Elena was gambling I asked her sister to try and help but she didn't want to get involved so it didn't work out. I got a bit upset because I couldn't find any headway with her family. Eventually I stopped getting in contact with them, because if they don't want to help me, why do I have to bother?

I didn't ask my family to help. They knew but I didn't allow them to confront her or do anything about it. I wouldn't like her to feel so naked before them - that what is secret to her is out in the open. I didn't want her to be embarrassed or to put her through any pain.

I decided I would go to an organisation to help her. I was able to get some things, able to get her to do some courses so that she could get herself a decent job but trying to overcome an addiction, that is a big issue. If you cannot put that under control things are not going to help anyway.

I was prepared to tolerate the relationship problem for a while but her addiction was the number one problem I really wanted to get sorted out. If that was put under control, then there could be trust. But one thing I found also is that the reason for such addictions is that there is no trust.

I find that our African friends and community are quite supportive. If there's a problem they usually do try and step in in some way and do a bit of mediation and we've certainly sat with other friends and family in the community and had these really amazing, very frank discussions with them about their behaviour and their relationships. People haven't really sat down and done that with us when we've been going through problems but people do get very involved.

At one time our relationship was really, really hard and it got quite abusive and self destructing. There wasn't communication, there was just pure frustration. I was depressed and sick, I was working really hard in our business and felt he didn't appreciate that. That's when we decided to have some time apart.

Technically, we didn't break up during that time. That probably would have meant that Ismael would be long gone and have babies by now with someone else. I just wanted to be away from the situation but not leave it for good and I suppose I manipulated that so that I could come back. I did leave him sort of hanging on here but at the end of the day I did want to come home to him.

Although i needed that time apart that was a big problem for him. He doesn't trust me anymore, he feels insecure. It's created trust issues and now he feels very insecure. He doesn't drink anymore, but when he used to, he'd let it all come out when he was drunk, how hurt he was and how betrayed he was. I know it's there, it won't go away and I can't change it so I just try and re-assure him.

I think the time apart gave me time to reflect on it all and I appreciated what I had and saw ways of working it out. I don't want to go back to how we were before we had a break. Now we are much better at talking to each other and giving each other time and space and not demanding answers and being a lot more patient with each other.

## Simon

We've dealt with a lot of things from our past, and because we're both on the same level, we're on the same page, we don't have any conflict. We know how to deal with it before it goes into conflict. We have great communication, I think that's standard for a great relationship. We talk a lot about the future and we're always making plans.

## Fiona

I cope with problems in an individual process. There isn't much support out there really for people in mixed couples. People just don't understand. When you're with black, the white community don't understand the challenges you're facing, like having children of mixed culture who could be teased and so on. And they don't understand the African culture. I find it hard to mix with other whites who don't understand that, whereas I can mix with other people who have dated Africans because they have an understanding of what I'm going through.

## Jalloh

Listen to your wife, listen to your husband. In Senegal, one proverb they tell you is: 'Teeth and tongue, they live together, but sometimes you bite your tongue and it is finished'. It's same. African marriage, Australian Marriage, Japanese marriage, all in the world is the same.

Sometimes a little problem comes into your life. Have a talk, bla bla bla and find solution, and it's finished. But if you keep your mind on this problem, your marriage won't go anywhere. After maybe one year, two year, it's broken, it's finished. Don't concentrate on the problems.

## Angela

Breaking up was a fair, tough struggle. I think one of the ways we coped was not separating completely to begin with, because that gave us a period to get used to the idea. He stayed living with us for several years. We were leading separate lives but living in the same house. That probably made it easier when he finally left.

I don't really know how we coped – we just did. There was a lot of stress and tumultuous times. Friends, family, talking. I think it was good also that when he became ill, he got a case manager with a mental health team.

I thought that if he got more involved in the Kenyan community it could help him, but there wasn't really a network for that to happen. When we first got here, the Consulate had a party, and every now and again he ran into somebody from his country but it was me pushing for that and not him. He seemed a bit lazy in keeping up his African links and with our child I push her African cultural links a lot more than he does. Now he's okay, he's got a group of friends that he goes out with.

We're good friends. He never betrayed me, it wasn't his fault that he got sick or that our priorities lay in different areas. I always said to Okello that love wasn't enough to keep people together, there were too many outside things that happened that made it impossible for our relationship to survive. Because we still care about each other, we still get on famously and we don't have any problems with each other. When people ask 'What went wrong, you were so happy together?' we just say life, life happens. Many people I speak to have exactly the same issues. I've got lots of other friends who married African men and there's very few relationships that work and none of it's got to do with not liking their partner.

## Athien

Both of us have been married before and when we met we realised we have a lot in common in terms of relationships. In our lives we went through a hell of a lot and it makes us very strong and we always want to learn from it. We never had a conflict. We sit down and talk and resolve, if there is something affecting either one of us. We work as a team. We don't really consider ourselves as partners, we're like friends, we're like sisters and brothers, we really look after each other. We understand that people have differences. We always knew that we come from different countries and sometimes we have different beliefs. We just have to respect that. The word respect is always in our family.

*When relationships are in trouble it is always worth considering getting professional help from a qualified couple or family therapist. Couple counsellors vary in experience and cultural knowledge, and it may take some time to find the right person, but it's worth persevering.*

**[www.relationships.com.au/](http://www.relationships.com.au/)**

*Relationships Australia provides a range of counseling and other support services for individuals, couples and families in all states and territories.*

## **4. I'm new to all this, what's your advice?**

*You've met the man or woman of your dreams – and they happen to come from a very different cultural background. And between you, you have family, friends, and commitments in at least two different countries. As other chapters in this booklet have shown, however much you love each other and however well you get on, these simple facts can bring challenges to the relationship. In this section, people talk about what has helped them make their relationships work, what made things harder, and what advice they would give to couples who are new to inter-cultural relationships.*

### **Adjei**

I'm here. I'm learning. I've seen how the white world is so I'm trying to adjust, but what about the other side? It would have been also good for my wife to see how it is done in my country as well. There should be a balance, if you really want to marry an African. Sometimes they don't ask the questions. How are these people like? How do they live? How is their life? How do they do things? You've got to have a little bit of knowledge about these things. The other thing I would say is take time. Take time, put a lot of things on the table, we all see our cards. Right from the beginning, let it be open. It's better that way. That would be my advice before you rush quickly into it.

### **Jack**

It's so important to do the things that you need to do to forge bonds with the wider family. In my case, that would have been to pay bride price because it would have proved my commitment. It would have

helped to visit Africa, too, but we were not well-to-do and that would have cost us at least \$4,000, which was massive. We just didn't have it.

I suppose the other side of it is that I was introduced to people in my wife's community and I did really try to have a good look at how they did things and to forge friendships. They were just so good to me, they were very welcoming. I couldn't imagine my culture being as welcoming in a lot of ways, so it was good. And fun.

I probably didn't actively seek out the sort of information that I'm seeking out now - reading books and so on. I didn't do that as much because in my family it's almost a control mechanism where you read up on a particular subject and you consider yourself to have some sort of expertise in it. I really, really didn't want to do that. I didn't want to intellectualise it, I wanted to do it another way. But if I'd found a way to take advantage of those information streams more and not intellectualise and be appropriately humble with that information, I think that would have been good.

## Owusu

The couple has to sit down and talk about things, this is how we do things here, and how we do things there, how can we come to a middle ground and hold it there? It is very important for the non African partner to go to Africa so that they can understand the ways of the people. It will help the relationship to be stable.

## Fiona

When I met my first African boyfriend I didn't even know where his country was. I read every book in the library about it. I watched and learned about people, I asked a million and one questions, I adapted to his culture. After I had children, I was doing it for them too, because I want them to learn the culture too.

Be honest right from the beginning. Let the person know you the way you are. Tell the truth. Don't pretend to be different and later change to be the way you actually are. It creates a problem. I think people do that because they are in difficulties. They want a place to stay or they want to live in Australia and so they'll do whatever they want to get whatever they need.

Also you need to understand each other. You are both from different parts of the world and totally different cultures so coming together is something very new to both of you. There's a lot of compromising that you have to do and also a lot of talking to understand both cultures.

I haven't had any of the problems that some of my friends were facing, but I've seen them. I think I was lucky I met Anna, who is so understanding and has been to my country. Lots of my friends that marry an Australian, they find it difficult because the wife hasn't been in their country and doesn't understand anything at all about it. I'd advise them to go and maybe live with their family for a little bit, so they can understand the actual culture. That helps a lot. For those whose wives have been in Africa before they got married, their relationships are still going, most of them.

Anna is very easy going person. She actually adopted my culture and when I came here I have also adopted the culture as well. I've got a lot of friends who are married to Australians and their partners, when they are cooking traditional food at home, complain 'Oh no, it stinks'. That creates troubles, it puts people down, it's not going to get a relationship going.

You've got to be free to do what you want to do. I think that's why we've been living together so long, because she understands my culture and she allows me to do whatever I want to do, so I trust her. If she wants to go out with her friends I allow her to - 'Go, go see your friends, I will look after the kids'.

Some of the changes I've had to make are very hard, like doing the dishes, looking after the kids, and visiting, going out all the time. In my culture we don't like going out all the time or going on holidays. But I think I've come to understand that everything that I come to compromise with helps a lot. And when you think about it, it's actually helping you as well. Like holidaying, I wasn't someone who liked holidaying but I have learned that when you go on holiday you actually take some of the stress out. It helps with the body, so when you come back you feel relaxed.

## Erin

Probably it has been a help that I studied anthropology and cultural theory and am more open to different ways of living than someone who hasn't traveled, or who hasn't studied different cultures. And also, before Jalloh came to Australia he'd been to Europe several times, so he had some idea of what he would be coming into. I think it's vitally important to visit your partner's country. When I was there, I managed to fit in well with his family and his friends and everybody, and I think it was important for him to see that.

## Kwesi

It will be good for your Australian partner to understand your language. There are things we cannot explain properly in our second language, but if your partner can understand your language – I know that is a second language also to them - but once you can speak my language and I can speak your language, I think we can manouvre and talk about things and it will be easier to come to compromise. Also it will be good to know how much the partner is showing her love to you.

When you have disagreements I think it will be good if the partner can understand the language. She will know where she stands.

## Angela

We lived in Africa for four years before we came here. Life was easier there for us because I had a job, I had friends, we were financially stable, we had a housekeeper; he had family and friends and ways of making money.

When we came back here, Okello couldn't get permanent work. We had a few good years living here, but then it fell apart. If he'd had a job constantly since the beginning of our time in Australia I doubt we would ever have broken up. We just couldn't afford to stay together because he had to keep sending money to his family. Even now, if he had a secure job I reckon that his whole life would change and it would be a hell of a lot easier. If you bring someone over, I think they've got to get a job, they've got to have a bit of self esteem and fulfill whatever they feel their role needs to be within society and then everything else will fall into place.

The other thing I probably could have done would have been to link up with other people. If we had made friends in similar situations it probably would have given him more support and maybe would have given him more cultural ties. Also he would have had more opportunities for employment.

I think the problem for Africans here is that they don't have the community set-up that allows them get to know someone who is going to get them a job. I've got a friend who's just got a new Lebanese husband - he arrives, the family's got a business so he can automatically fall into a role, even if it's a fairly minimal wage to begin with and they're a big enough community, and well enough established in business to support each other.

Think long and hard before you bring someone over from Africa. Plan it well. Financially you've got to prepare yourself. When a relationship is built on the good times and then suddenly everything falls to pieces, it's incredibly difficult.

## Moussa

I make sure my commitments to my family and friends don't interfere with my commitment to my wife and her family. That is quite deliberate, to make sure things go smoothly in our marriage. I fully participate in family events on my in-laws' side, for example I go to Sunday lunch every week. I'm actually the godfather of my sister-in-law's son. I see him as my own and I fully participate when there are sports activities and things like that.

## Jalloh

Don't think that you can just have your wife so you can come to this country, and then you can tell her goodbye, oh no. Person is a person, if you have love for the person, you have this love forever. Think about where you start, because before, you live in Africa, you have nothing and she helped you. And after you come here, don't make something bad out of good relationship.

## Harry

Mix it up, grow strong. Ignorance keeps people blind to the possibilities. We're all just humans. We all just want the same things.

# 5. Resources

*Throughout this booklet we have listed organisations and resources that may be useful to you. This page lists some additional websites that may be relevant.*

**[www.africanoz.com](http://www.africanoz.com)**

*A one-stop-shop to African community organisations, businesses, events and resources across Australia.*

**[www.australianafricannetwork.org.au](http://www.australianafricannetwork.org.au)**

*A Sydney based group for people in mixed African/non-African relationships, couples & families, and who are mixed African & non-African heritage. The website lists social events and resources.*

**[www.ag.gov.au/childabduction](http://www.ag.gov.au/childabduction)**

*Guidance and assistance for parents whose child has been illegally taken overseas by the other parent, or is at risk of being taken.*

**[www.dhi.gov.au](http://www.dhi.gov.au)** *Diversity Health Institute Links to health resources.*

**[www.fecca.org.au](http://www.fecca.org.au)** *The Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils. Resources and links to a range of services for Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.*

**[www.gorigirl.com/intercultural-relationship-resources](http://www.gorigirl.com/intercultural-relationship-resources)**

*Gori Girl is a white American woman married to an Indian man. Her blog includes a comprehensive list of blogs and websites about a wide range of intercultural relationships and issues.*

**[www.intermix.org.uk](http://www.intermix.org.uk)** *A UK website for mixed-race families, individuals and anyone who feels they have a multiracial identity.*

**[www.maamej.wordpress.com](http://www.maamej.wordpress.com)** *A blog by a white Australian woman reflecting on her experiences in a mixed Ghanaian-Australian family.*

**[www.pozhet.org.au](http://www.pozhet.org.au)** *Poz Het - A support service for heterosexuals living with HIV or AIDS, their partners, families and friends.*

