

Making it work

Intercultural and interfaith marriage

Alicia Maldonado-Zahra

There's a beauty of intercultural relationships that is often admired but rarely discussed beyond the superficial. For the last five years, I have been married to a man—and married into his family—that adds a new cultural dimension to my already intercultural family. While I have navigated cultural differences my entire life, I have learned a new way of being with others who are unlike me. I have also learned that, though we are bound together by marriage, being family is more a choice that requires intentionality, grace, and patience.

Learning about my culture by encountering my husband's

As a Puerto Rican in the United States, I used to imagine two marital options that fit into the narratives of my family and the dominating culture: Puerto Rican or white. Anything beyond that seemed unreasonable and unlikely—until I met Omar. Born in Iraq with Palestinian ethnicity to a Muslim family, Omar—my now husband—and I had an “on again, off again” year and a half of dating before deciding on marriage. As I reflect, I cannot help but chuckle at the lack of conversations about our differing cultures due to being hung up on our contrasting religions. Even though I read books with topics regarding conversations you need to have before marriage, none of them considered vast cultural differences like those between Omar and me.

I am a Puerto Rican who was born in Southwest Florida into a Christian family. Though I spent much of my life in a variety of different cultural settings, I had not engaged with many Arabs or Muslims. I had been coopted into believing that white people are better. Because of this, I rejected the ethnicity, language, culture, and traditions that are inherently a part of me. After spending a few months in Palestine, I realized that I knew more about Omar's history than my own. I made a commitment to myself that I would do better by myself and my ancestors and began to unlearn the dominant ideology of my youth that was rooted in white supremacy. I learned the history of the colonization of Puerto Rico, how

to make cultural dishes like *arroz con gandules*, the Spanish language of my people, and so much more. It was in this journey that I began to develop a deeper understanding of and appreciation for “culture.”

My journey gave me the understanding that culture is far more than one’s ethnic or racial identity and religion. It gave me the freedom to be deeply curious about who Omar is and the many things that shape him, as well as the ability to navigate our differences in a way that encouraged conversation and adaptability. He and I are nowhere near perfect in embracing these differences. We have experienced challenges and found areas of growth in the midst of the overwhelming joys of being in an intercultural marriage.

Challenges of intercultural marriage

Like most other marriages, the first year or two of our marriage was riddled with conflict. There were many times that I questioned whether our union was done out of an idealistic version of the other or false love. Either way, we made a commitment for better or worse. Our biggest struggles were implementing boundaries, sanctifying our marriage, and communicating in healthy ways in conflict.

I heard a therapist say recently that implementing boundaries is not necessarily about *telling* others how you want them to be but about *showing* them. This was not easy, as we had to do it with some of our closest family and friends. This brought such intense conflict that communication

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ceased for long periods of time. Although this was not our preference, Omar and I had to learn how to lean into the preciousness of our union without letting such issues interfere.

This was not easy. One of the most beneficial changes we made was giving ourselves space. Space is not meant for everyone, and it does not fix everything.

However, giving ourselves space made it clear that access to us was limited, and the time—while it is everything—needing to be tended to with love. Herein lies another challenge of merging our cultures: being together.

As an outsider to Arab Muslim lifestyles, I continue to find it challenging to gain my new family’s trust. Omar and I have had many discussions and conflicts regarding our families, which are quite different from

each other. Now that we are adults, my siblings and I have developed new relationships with our parents as friends. While they have always been expressive with their love and support, I had not known my parents the way I do now. There is a recognition of and respect for our decisions, and guidance is offered when we desire it. My appreciation for this phase

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of our parent-child relationship has ballooned and altered my expectations of others when engaging with my husband and me.

Even as I knew that not all families and peoples are the same, I still did not expect the hovering hand of control that my in-laws had over my husband. The fact that he married someone of a different ethnicity, religion, and country of origin was worrisome to them for

many years. On numerous occasions, they asked Omar when I would convert; demanded that, should I have children, they would be a certain identity, thus following those norms; stated that we would be divorced in a few years; or expressed fear that he would become Christian. Because of these concerns, fears, and perception of me and our relationship, there were plenty of occasions that I did not want to talk to them, much less visit them. For many years I did not care about how my distance impacted our relationship, until I had the realization that I needed to show them who I am and who we are together.

Embracing family across cultural divides

It took time, but I finally felt comfortable enough to be intentional and try my hardest to be family with my in-laws. Over the last year or two, I have made it a habit to regularly send my mother-in-law pictures and call to check in. Although I do not speak Arabic well, I have been learning, while my mother-in-law learns English. They share their recipes with me and make my favorites for me to bring home. It has been challenging to take regular trips to visit them—as they live ten hours away—but we go a few times a year for about a week without an agenda. In these visits we always try to take them gifts, whether it is a picture of us, a hat from a local store, or souvenirs from our travels abroad. On our most recent visit, we decided to get them a throw blanket for movie nights in the living room—a regular occurrence after dinner. I was pleasantly surprised when

my father-in-law immediately began to enjoy it. Though there were only six of us in the house, he made it clear that I had chosen the blanket for him; it was his and no one else's. I remember that with a different kind of joy, as the relationship between my father-in-law and me has been especially contentious.

Even accounting for the more obvious cultural differences between us—ethnicity, religion, and birthplace—I struggled to understand why my husband's family had a hard time accepting me. I was reminded that culture is not just the obvious but also includes language, food, communication and conflict styles, emotional expression, body language, clothing, unspoken rules, and more. When culture is broken down in such a way, I can recognize why they may have been reluctant to consider me one of their own. It was an unpleasant realization that I had been—and likely continue to be at times—disrespectful to them and their culture.

Respecting each other across cultural differences

One day Omar and I had a vital conversation, after a few days of conflict, about *respect*. It may seem odd that there needed to be a dialogue about this specific word, but we were both in a place of realization about the different and conflicting ways in which we and our families define re-

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spect in communication and behavior. Up to that point in the merging of our families, I had worn shorts and tank tops around my in-laws, I had rejected or not participated in certain traditions, I openly questioned Islam and Muhammad, I argued with my father-in-law about how my potential daughter would

one day dress and what she would be allowed to do, and so on. I was open to being unlike them and their culture. I believe that Omar's parents have always had a desire to know me deeply and thus did not have a will to silence or suppress me in any way. However, I was going about this in all the wrong ways; I was pushing them away, making them not want to know me.


Though I do not have any intentions, most of the time, of causing conflict, I have typically been unconcerned with being disruptive, which is in itself conflictual. I have learned that there is a way to have discussions and share my beliefs and opinions that are respectful. In defining *respect*, we concluded that there needs to be adaptability based on our

settings. My parents, having come from oppressive and abusive families, were determined to not only nourish our independence but also our critical thinking skills. They valued and encouraged asking questions, standing up for oneself, and standing against injustices and controlling behaviors. My parents did teach me respect, especially for my elders, but they also gave me the freedom to challenge, or question, things that I did not understand or was unsure about. Their childrearing, in addition to my character, has made me a confrontational person. When used correctly and in the appropriate situations, a confrontational personality can be beneficial. With age I am becoming aware of when and how to use this part of my personality.

Omar and I still struggle with a variety of things as an interethnic, intercultural, and interfaith couple. Big emotions and disagreement are not unique to us; we have just had to work hard at traversing challenging situations. The work we have put in has made it easier to enjoy each other and our loved ones.

The benefits of intercultural marriage

While I have focused on the challenges of intercultural marriage, there is also an abundance of reasons why Omar and I work. Like many others, I had a few prerequisites for the man that I would marry: he had to be (1) a



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God-fearing and humble person, (2) caring towards his family, (3) a hard worker with solid goals, (4) loving toward others, and (5) humorous. Though I am the follower of Christ in our relationship, he has given me another example of what it means to be like Christ. This has encouraged me to be generous, patient, kind, and hopeful. Both of us are close to our families, but he has shown

me how to appreciate mine in a way that overcomes faults and flaws. He works all day to make things happen and provide for us. And the genuine love he gives to people, animals, plants, and all of life is palpable.

There is a plethora of other reasons, for both of us, that allows us to maintain unity. In addition to exchanges and experiences that challenged our sense of self, we have had, and will continue to have, conversations that are filled with learnings about the other and so much laughter. We share a love for travel and indulging in cross-cultural encounters. We have

learned to do this with a mindfulness of our intention and impact. We have a curiosity for random things that lead us to discussing UFO's, wild-life and plants, sustainability, true crime, food, religion, human needs, and so much more.

Knowing that we have a lifetime of both joys and hardships, we have a mutual set of values that maintain a healthy relationship, which include *agape* love, respect and dignity, thoughtfulness and compassion, and an equal amount of conviction and curiosity. We falter at times and need to continue bettering ourselves in the name of God—for God and each other. Being in an intercultural marriage has shown us a way of doing just that. While personal growth is possible in a monoculture relationship and setting, there is something about discomfort that forces people to

step out of themselves—if they are willing. Extending oneself in this way causes a depth of change that is mental, emotional, and spiritual. Sometimes one can even expand physically if there is delicious food to enjoy in the discomfort.

Besides what it can do for a single person, couple, or immediate family, there is something bigger that happens in intercultural marriages. By knowing Omar and his family, and them knowing

me, I have seen a shift in our automatic assumptions and judgments about those unlike us. This was not immediate, but with time and the right way of communicating, these changes do happen. With change comes the power of not just intercultural competency but also the intentional inclusion of the “other.” From my perspective as a Christian, I can see and experience the love of Christ being extended *because of* and *regardless of* my intercultural and interfaith marriage.

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Conclusion

Being in an intercultural relationship is not easy, but it is not merely a challenge. It pushes and pulls a person to be uncomfortable, while simultaneously creating or maintaining a sense of stability of oneself. It encourages personal and communal growth that outpaces the that of monocultural settings in authenticity, curiosity, understanding, empathy, communication, and more. It is a beautiful thing to reflect and recognize

the magnitude of impact one friendship, marriage, or experience can have in creating a more just and right individual and community.

About the author

Alicia Maldonado-Zahra is part of the second generation of her Puerto Rican family to be born in the United States. Originally from Fort Myers, Florida, she now resides in South Bend, Indiana, with her husband, many animals, and her parents—who are their neighbors. She is a graduate of Hesston College and Eastern Mennonite University, where she received a bachelor's degree in social work and another in global development. Alicia is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in theology and peace studies from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. She works with the Intercultural Competency and Undoing Racism department at the seminary, collaborates with her church community in leading their youth, and manages her conflict transformation business, Prodigal Processes.