

POLISH-AFRICAN LOVE RELATIONSHIPS¹

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This article presents issues of mutual communication between representatives of different cultural, ethnic or national groups using the example of sexual relations between Polish women and Africans staying in Poland. It shows how various 'little details' prevent people who seemingly have shaken off prejudices and even love each other from being together.

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Artykuł przedstawia problemy we wzajemnym komunikowaniu się między reprezentantami różnych grup kulturowych, etnicznych czy narodowościowych na przykładzie relacji seksualnych między polskimi kobietami a przebywającymi w Polsce Afrykanami. Ukazuje, jak różne „drobne szczegóły” nie pozwalają być razem osobom, które pozornie wyzbyły się uprzedzeń a nawet się kochają.

Keywords: Africans, Polish women, migration, love relationships, integration.

Regardless of gender, ethnicity, origin and social status, people usually display ambivalent attitudes towards so-called 'strangers' or simply 'others', ranging, when it comes to their overall perception, from fascination to dislike. Poles are no different in their attitudes towards dark-skinned Africans, who for many of them are so different as to be 'fantastic', alluring but at the same time arousing fear and anxiety. It should be noted, however, that this ambivalence in the perception of the 'other' intensifies radically when in addition to 'otherness' the person in question is also of the opposite sex. A foreigner of the opposite sex, especially one who differs in terms of skin colour and appearance, such as an African man or woman in Europe, is doubly marked with 'otherness', with all the ensuing positive and negative consequences. This rule is confirmed by the statements of the interviewees quoted below, who were involved in bi-national (commonly referred to as 'mixed') relationships, mostly involving women from Poland on the one hand, and men from Africa, mainly Nigeria², on the other, and by the opinions of witnesses to these relationships. They direct our attention to

¹ This article is a revised version of the text which appeared in my book, published in Polish, on Polish attitudes towards Africans (Ząbek 2007).

² Nigerians predominate in these relationships, as they are the most numerous group of Africans in Poland.

the nature of the difficulties in mutual communication between representatives of different cultural, ethnic or national groups, as exemplified by people who are close to each other, love each other, seemingly have shaken off prejudices, but various 'little details' do not allow them to be together.

SEDUCTION OF THE 'OTHER': FOR ONE NIGHT, OR FOR GOOD?

Dark-skinned men, mostly young, who live in Poland (students, refugees, athletes or other immigrants) are quite willing to talk, and do so favourably, about the women they have met in Europe. Successful contacts have often helped them survive in a foreign land and often work as a kind of support group facilitating learning the language and generally adapting to the new environment. Even if in the first years of their stay away from home they experience culture shock and perceive Poland as almost a racist country, often their opinions are an exception when it comes to women:

"With women it is easier to establish contact. They are usually more open than men. With a man you can immediately sense a distance, women are more open" (a post-graduate student from Ethiopia, aged 44).

"Girls are nicer than men. From women I have never experienced anything unpleasant" (Senegalese student, aged 26).

"I have no contacts with Poles, I don't know their language. But Polish women are the nicest in the world" (a Sudanese refugee, aged 34).

One should keep in mind, however, that with strangers otherness is always perceived not so much as a different norm, but as an anomaly, although, paradoxically, this does not necessarily mean deprecation. The different looks of representatives of the opposite sex can be perceived as both repulsive and attractive, especially after an immigrant has become familiar with the differences in what is considered good looking that function in the culture of the country s/he has arrived in. As one of the African men said:

"Before I came to Poland, I had seen white women in my country and they all seemed ugly to me. In Poland, when I was in Lodz at the Polish Language School, they were all ugly, too. But after some time I look and they are all beautiful, even though earlier they were ugly? Back home, they have a different build huge bottoms! I think this is a state of mind. One easily deceives oneself or gets hypnotized" (a Kenyan, aged 23).

The 'other', somebody of a different 'race', culture or gender is always perceived a little differently than somebody from our own country. S/he becomes more mysterious and therefore more attractive. After all, opposites attract. This popular saying explains to some extent why many young white girls become fascinated with young men from Africa, and vice versa. Women admit that black men appeal to them with

their physical appearance, strength, masculinity, elegance, eloquence, and finally their agility and natural gift for dancing. The stereotypes about Africans' stupidity, lack of cleanliness and an unpleasant odour that sometimes appear in Poland in other contexts, are not present here at all:

"Blacks are more cultured, and more charming towards women. Apart from that they are clean. They pay special attention to personal hygiene, smell nice, and seem to be able to impress a girl not only with their appearance, but also with their intelligence" (a female student from Warsaw University).

"Blacks look very elegant. Clean and fragrant, and also highly cultured" (a female student from the Warsaw University of Technology).

Many 17–18 year-old girls seem so enchanted that, according to some slightly older young women observing them at discos, they behave 'in a teasing and provocative way', ready to do anything to pick up an African. They also hang about outside the hostels where students from Africa live, and even at the gates of some refugee centres, especially those located in a town.

It is noticeable that what in Polish men's courtship of women is rare and even considered among 'their own' as unacceptable, the so-called 'skipping of preliminaries', audacity and lack of reservation, appear natural and very desirable when it comes to strangers. A Pole does not usually say to a girl within five minutes of meeting her: "When will you go out with me?" or "I would like to have sex with you". Many Africans, according to Polish girls, do so, and will at worst provoke laughter:

"Declarations of love and assurances that Allah must have had a hand in this came up at the first meeting" (a female student from Warsaw University).

Love relationships between Polish men and girls from Africa are much rarer in Poland (but not so in Africa). First of all, it is because there are many fewer African women in Poland, and they usually expect somewhat different patterns of behaviour than those prevailing here:

"I have a boyfriend and he is Polish. I never thought that I would go out with a Pole. But he is a man like others, only he's got white skin and blue eyes" (a Kenyan female student, aged 25).

"Poles are more gentle than Ethiopians" (an Ethiopian female student, aged 20).

"Sometimes they told me that they would like to try it with a mulatto or black woman, because she is a bit different" (a girl born from a mixed Polish-Ethiopian marriage).

But like the Polish women, they definitely attribute 'real man' characteristics to Africans. In this context, some even poke fun at Polish men, who "don't know how to get down to it"; "for half a year, a girl goes out with you and doesn't know where she stands, does he have serious intentions or is he just deceiving me". African women who have had closer contacts with Polish men, say for instance:

“Polish men are stupid. Dumber than Polish women. I never know what I can talk to them about. They are funny. I was teaching English to a Pole. He was in love with me and wanted to invite me to a museum? I just didn’t know how to react. Africans always know what they want and go about getting it. Maybe the Poles have more respect for women, but they are soft, shy. Our men are not like that. They are very proud. They don’t talk to girls about their own problems” (a female Tanzanian teacher of English, aged 26).

Female students participating in research on Africans or employed at various offices or agencies dealing with foreigners, could always expect love-making when dealing with Africans:

“He kept interrupting me, saying that he loved me, that he would miss me, that he could not live without me, etc. He kept trying to touch me or hug me” (a student talking about a Liberian man she conducted an interview with).

“He brought some chocolates and five minutes into the conversation he said I was beautiful and he loved me” (a female clerk).

Even some African lecturers at the University would take similar liberties towards female students attending their classes, for example, by visiting them at the student hall of residence or inviting them home:

“At the end of the evening, around midnight, when the teacher was leaving, I heard the question: J., do you want to see Socrates? Knowing that this was the name of the hotel where he lived, I felt rather embarrassed... (...) It was quite normal for him to catch me by the hand, or embrace me, whether in the building of the Institute... or outside” (a female student from Warsaw University).

Even more direct in their approach to girls are young Africans at events in student clubs or dorms. One of them said:

“All the black boys were in the company of Polish, mostly fair-haired, girls. When I sat down, at a certain distance from N.’s circle, he came over and pulled me towards him, hugged me, and pointed out that there was no need to feel embarrassed” (a Warsaw University student).

African men are well aware of their attractiveness. Hence their self-confidence: “Sometimes I know the girls here look at me and say, ‘Not bad!’” (a Somali refugee, aged 27). That is how they sometimes explain, not without some justification, their conflicts with Polish men, which most often occur at discos, in the context of competition for women:

“Polish men think that *Murzyni*³ are more manly, that is, they think they are in every respect. I once heard them say that *Murzyni* have such big dicks! Poles think so always, especially at discos and when they see a black man who is kissing a girl and holding her close to him. They think that in love we

³ *Murzyn*, pl. *Murzyni* is the most frequently used term in Polish when referring to dark-skinned Africans. Its etymological origin is from the Latin *Mauri*, Greek *Mauros*, in English known as ‘Moors’. The use of the Polish term *Murzyn* is quite neutral, an exonym used in the same manner as ‘Indian’, for example. However, it is sometimes perceived negatively by Africans in Poland as it is often understood as being

are physically stronger. I think that's why they attack us. Maybe they want to prove, we too are good, we can beat the black man. They think: 'these *Murzyni* are so strong', so they want to hit one and say, 'Look at me, I've knocked him down'" (a Kenyan man, aged 25).

"When Polish women go out with us, the men are jealous and think they are after our money. But all the girls who are with Africans help those guys, and not the other way round. Polish guys suffer from an inferiority complex when they see a girl with you" (a Nigerian man, aged 23).

According to some young Poles who work as vendors at bazaars alongside Africans, they pick up girls "inappropriately, not in accordance with what they themselves want... They do it crudely", and that's why they don't like them, they declare. This type of statement overlaps with one of the most common stereotypes of the American-European world, namely the image of a black man as a potential sex offender and rapist:

"A *Murzyn* is a man with raging hormones, has difficulty in adjusting to social life and, let's face it, culture in his case is not far from nature... To put it bluntly, he's fit for where he's come from, the African jungle (a Polish male student, aged 24).

Some do admit, however, that "the girls let themselves be picked up by blacks", although this realisation bothers them even more. They try to rationalise this as a "desire to try something exotic", "to impress their female friends", or as "willingness to make the most of their readiness to spend money" They say: "blacks often pick up women by showing them money" (a gardener, aged 21). Only one of the Polish men we interviewed said he could understand the Africans because he himself, when he was in Spain, was picked up like that by Spanish women. According to white women, they simply make a great impression on black men, which incredibly boosts their ego. A good illustration of this kind of attitude is what one woman says of her relationship with an African man in a book she has written:

"Every black just yearns for a white woman. They devour us with their eyes. They look at a white woman with a dog's lustful eyes, they vow to be faithful and subservient, and promise the earth just to get into bed with her. (...) For them to sleep with a 'woman without skin' is something extraordinary. Sex with a white woman is an honour and brings prestige. Every black man wants to add a white woman to his conquests" (Tunzvi 1994, 67–68).

The author also seems to share the views on the extraordinary sexual potency of Africans:

"It is widely believed that a black man's sexual needs are greater than a white man's. Basing on my experience, I can only confirm this opinion" (Tunzvi 1994, 67–68).

synonymous with the English 'Negro'. In Poland, *Murzyn* is used both in informal contexts and in *belle lettres*, both high and low literature, as well as in academic works, although in the last mentioned, due to political correctness, it is gradually being substituted by 'African' or 'Black'. However, the associations with the latter are much more negative in colloquial Polish than *Murzyn*, although in certain circles today – following the English norm – it is being used more often.

In this context, the stereotypical associations of blacks with animals come to the fore:

“Sometimes I get the impression that they are like animals. It is difficult for me to say whether their sexual needs are greater than ours, or whether we only pretend to have everything under control. In any case, they externalise them more than we do” (Tunzvi 1994: 67–68).

The quoted author is obviously not an exception. On this occasion, the question of symbolic ‘purity’ often comes up. It is characteristic that the ‘other’ is usually ‘dirty’, but not necessarily so when s/he is of a different gender than the person expressing the opinion. When sexual interest is involved, the opposite sex is inherently ‘clean’, which somehow justifies contact: “Men in Poland are very dirty, but the girls are very clean” (a male Zimbabwean student, aged 27). A Pole working in Sudan spoke in a similar vein, and felt the need to emphasize that the black women whom he invited to his place “were very clean girls”.

The atmosphere of a foreign country is often perceived by newcomers as full of sexual freedom. Many Europeans, among them Poles, perceive African countries in this way, but it is a similar story with Africans who have found themselves in Europe. African couples who have come to Europe together are put to a hard test:

“Martin constantly compares me with any woman passing by in the street. He has a grudge against me that I am not like them, and he tries to pick up all my friends” (a Sudanese woman refugee, aged 26).

Under these circumstances, informal relationships with foreigners from Africa are quite frequent in Poland, although stable marriages occur much less frequently. In spite of their mutual fascination, each party keeps a certain distance. Africans notice that women’s interest in them as men is often limited to curiosity about the exotic or, at best, to short-lived fascination. It shocks them that the women do not treat the contact they had with them at a disco as obligating them in any way, even when they have given them their phone numbers:

“There are girls who know 4, 5 or 6 men and have given phone numbers to all of them. I go to a party, I meet a girl, and ask if she likes Africans. She says yes. She gives me her phone number. Then I find out that my friend has got the same number. And she sends me a text message as if everything was fine” (a Somali refugee, aged 25).

They often complain that it is not at all easy to start such a relationship, especially one that would be rewarding for them:

“I would like to have a Polish wife, but it is very difficult for a black to get to know a white girl. The girls who get close to us are mostly those with little education, the kind of girls who are not very popular and look for just anyone. I would like to have a woman with higher education, it would be best if she had her own business, if she was clever and obviously very pretty... Even if a girl gets interested in me, it’s just because I’m exotic...” (a Congolese refugee, aged 28).

“For blacks in Poland it is difficult to find a good wife, one who’s been to college. Girls always think it’s something exotic” (a Nigerian, aged 26).

Among immigrants seeking refugee status and those facing problems with the legalization of their stay there are of course some who want to get married quickly, and even pay for it, just to achieve this in Poland:

“He was a football player, but suffered an injury and no club would have him, so he couldn’t prolong his visa, hence such a quick search for a wife..., rather desperate, everyone laughed at him for marrying some old woman just for the sake of a Polish visa. How much did he pay for the marriage? – I’m not sure, I think about five thousand euros” (a Polish woman, aged 26).

On the other hand, some of the immigrants are very ‘fussy’ when it comes to marriage, especially when it is to be taken seriously and not something just ‘on paper’, arranged only to legalise their stay. Many Muslims from Africa, but not only, believe for example that a candidate for a wife must be a virgin. A woman who has previously been with another man is, in their opinion, no longer ‘pure’ and one can never be sure of her fidelity. Others avoid stable relationships, being reluctant to make commitments that would complicate their lives when they know their stay in Europe is temporary. There are also those who are aware that in the event of a permanent relationship with a white woman there may be a lot of problems, both cultural and financial. That is why the majority of those who are serious about returning to their homeland, tend to avoid legalising their relationships:

“I think that a Polish wife would have a difficult life with me. I would expect more than a Pole would” (a Kenyan man, aged 27).

“With me, the [wife’s] dress should be long. I wouldn’t tolerate a mini. No question about it. This part of the woman, from the waist down, is private. The legs are private. When they are exposed, it’s the same as if I had a hole in my trousers” (a Tanzanian man, aged 29).

“My uncle has a white wife from England. Such a wife costs a lot of money. She can’t take a normal bus but must have her own car, she can’t buy food in town because it would put her husband in a bad light, people would think he was poor” (a Kenyan man, aged 23).

This does not mean, however, that they give up on temporary relationships. One of the Polish female students even said that African men are after only three things: “to lay them, play about with them, and forget them”, so they take that into account. They even say that they “do not count on extending the relationship beyond one night”. African women, too, are sceptical:

“We have different customs, we think differently. That is why there are no mixed marriages in Poland that could last longer than five years. I would never marry a Pole again, because the situation is too complicated. With the Poles it’s sometimes easy when we don’t want anything from them. Polish men are so undemanding. With us, the woman must always cook and take care of the home. I couldn’t stand it if my boyfriend didn’t demand this of me because that’s what I was taught at home” (a Tanzanian woman, aged 28).

According to this interviewee, such difficulties with mutual adjustment occur both when the woman in the mixed relationship is African and when she is Polish: “Either

the guy runs away, or she does. This is a very difficult situation, with us marriages are completely different". A black friend of hers was also very sceptical about mixed marriages, although on the basis of her own experience she did see some benefits to them, including some positive features of Polish men that in her opinion Africans lack:

"I have a disability, and maybe no guy in Africa would want me to bear him children. This is one thing I like about white people, that they don't look at it, or maybe they do, but not so much. I was in hospital when I met my [future] husband and we fell in love. We really loved each other very much. Things went wrong only when I brought my family to Poland. Jealous, why do we need so many people, he said" (a Guinean woman, aged 36).

However, the prospect of a permanent relationship with an African, especially when this involves moving to his country of origin, poses for most Polish women a considerable risk. Here, anxiety often outweighs curiosity:

"I'm not opposed (to a relationship) with an African, but I would not decide on one myself. As you read in the newspapers, it's all right if they live here, but if they leave, the women there are treated differently, and it's an altogether different story [a housewife, aged 38]. It would suit me if it were in Poland. I wouldn't want to move there. It's quite a different culture and women there are treated differently" (a Polish female student from Warsaw, aged 26).

Even more forthright responses were obtained from mature women. When asked – "Would you let your daughter marry an African?" – they answered: "Well, reluctantly, because it's a different language... different customs... different everything" (housewife, aged 40); or:

"To be honest, I'm a tolerant woman, but if my daughter fell in love with a black man, it would probably drive me mad! (...) I'd be anxious that she might want to go away, and I would worry whether she would come back. I'd be afraid of their habits. For they have their habits, their beliefs, their rules..., and then those ugly things happen (a Polish woman, aged 45).

Statements of the type "I'm tolerant, but... would not decide to marry a black man", or "I'm not a racist, but... a relationship with a black woman is not an option", are the most common responses, and it can be said that they reflect the whole ambivalence of attitudes towards the 'other', almost resembling attitudes to the sacred, arousing both fear and attraction (Otto 1968, 9–11). It also reflects the fear of not being tolerated by in one's own environment, of emigrating, of the spouse having some 'strange' habits. Going abroad can obviously be very attractive in itself, but equally great is the fear of burning one's bridges. In the minds of many people, as in myths, the crossing of the border of 'our world' is not without consequences:

"Marrying a foreigner is something you have to think hard about. After all, moving abroad is not just crossing the border and then you come back" (a Polish woman, aged 38).

What is more, among the people who have already been to Africa, opinions about Polish-African marriages tend to be even worse:

“When I was there, I met dozens of Polish women married to Nigerians, and perhaps just two or three of them had been lucky. I once met a Polish woman and her daughter, the wife of a Nigerian, who after eleven years of marriage went to Nigeria. I met her at the embassy, where she was crying: ‘Where have you brought me, it’s dirty here, it stinks, it’s unimaginable’” (a Polish man, aged 50).

The same interviewee, when asked whether he would let his daughter marry a black, replied:

“There’s no fear of that. My daughter has been there a couple of times and is now a racist like myself. Although we went there with a positive attitude, that it’s all wonderful and we are all children of the same God. But we are not! There are children and there are disgusting brats”.

Traumatic stories are also told in which the ‘other’ (usually an Arab or a Black African) changes like Dr. Jekyll into a tyrant and a despot when he returns to his homeland with an exotic newly-wedded wife. They are also the subjects of stories, whose authors are the main characters themselves, unfortunate victims of failed marriages⁴. They only confirm their readers in the belief that such a marriage is dangerous and is bound to end in failure. Their authors usually tell the story of their fascination with a ‘foreign’ man, of their great love for him and even greater disappointment, and the misfortune that befell them in his country, in his family and in his culture. An anthropologist is bound to notice, however, that they have not tried to understand the contexts of the local culture, but blindly try to impose their own (in their opinion the best) patterns on their new environment which, obviously, cannot end well:

“I don’t know (Shon’s) language and I’m not going to learn it because I don’t want to... It was enough for him to tell me to receive one of his relatives for me to rebel. I hated sharing everything I had: food, dresses, underwear, money. I couldn’t stand it...” (Tunzvi 1994, 104).

In the book one can also find a very instructive comment by a more culturally competent friend of hers:

“Magda could not put up with the habits of the blacks and the pressure from her husband’s cousins. With them taking away everything, so that her private possessions became communal property or meant for common use. The relatives of Magda’s husband were greatly impressed by him, an educated man highly placed in the social hierarchy. But above all, those black cousins sought his help, and he took it for granted. His door was always open and swarms of relatives would descend on their house in Harare. If there was food in the fridge, everything got eaten without the slightest reflection that there would be nothing left for tomorrow. Such was the way of life. But if Magda were to go away to her husband’s relatives, say to his cousins in the countryside, they would receive her in the same way and share everything” (Tunzvi 1994, 149).

However, not all women read these books, and not all of them are equally biased or simply equally cautious, while their fascination with the exotic representatives of the

⁴ In Poland, for example, Magda Tunzvi, *Biała niewolnica* [*White Slave*] (1994).

opposite sex, the attractiveness of such a marriage, the hope for radical improvement or change in their lives, or maybe sheer curiosity, often prevail over their fears and the warnings coming from their social environment. Such marriages actually quite often happen almost by accident:

“First he asked me to dance with him, then we had a drink, we exchanged phone numbers, and he walked with me to the bus stop... The pregnancy was a surprise. It was not planned. And so at the beginning, he probably was not very pleased” (a Polish woman, aged 26).

Thus, for one reason or another, there are couples who try to put their relationship on a permanent footing, including formal marriage.

POLISH-AFRICAN RELATIONSHIPS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POLISH WOMEN AND NIGERIAN MEN

People who have decided to marry someone from outside their own cultural circle are usually aware that they will have to face difficulties other than those arising only from the differences of personality. But they usually believe that they are capable of understanding and overcoming them. They are, after all, educated people, modern and tolerant, free of prejudices and racial stereotypes. They are also full of good will and often genuinely in love with their partner. Unfortunately, those ‘cultural differences’ are not just limited to a different language, religion, way of preparing meals, dressing or celebrating festivals, which one can try and adjust to or ignore, but it is not these things that pose the greatest problems: “We don’t talk about culture. Polish culture is simple and is limited to Christmas Eve..., not a problem” (a Nigerian man, aged 20).

Things that really matter are often at first imperceptible, such as the way people think and behave in everyday life. Clashes and complications usually occur because of small things, not so exotic:

“I had just finished eating and left a plate on the table. Maybe I was tired or did not feel like washing up at that moment, when my girlfriend came into the room and saw it, and began to shout: Why the hell have you left it on the table. I’ve just finished cleaning the place, and here you go again making a mess. Why the hell is she yelling at me? She creates problems herself” (a Nigerian man, aged 25).

Disputes between men and women over the division of household duties are not really due to the fact that one of the partners is African, yet it remains one of the more common causes of frictions within Polish-African couples: “It is the order and tidiness I mean, for example when he cooks, he makes such a mess... or, when he has a bath, he never cleans the bathtub afterwards”.

The cultural differences that lead to quarrels between the spouses concern, in the case of African men, mostly their social contacts, which in the opinion of their Polish

partners are excessively complex and time-consuming, but according to the Africans constitute the essence of life:

“We argue mostly because of me. Mostly about what time I get home. I’m at a friend’s home at 5, 6, 7, 8 p.m. I’m not at home. She calls me: “What’s going on? Why haven’t you come back? We were discussing something...” A man is not a boy, nor a toy that is to sit at home in the position you place him in. No normal man will tolerate such behaviour on the woman’s part... Two days ago, a friend of mine and his girlfriend went to a pub. The guy went to get the drinks and met his friend. They had not seen each other for a long time, so he told his girlfriend that he wanted to talk to him for a moment. The girl immediately had a problem, because they had come to the pub together and he wasn’t spending time with her. In Africa, when you meet an old friend, you want to talk to him, to renew the friendship. And now she says I don’t pay attention to her, I don’t show her any love, I care for a friend more than for her. What the hell is it all about?” (a Nigerian man, aged 25).

Most African men, both back home and even more so in their small diasporas, maintain very strong and frequent contacts with friends from their home country. And as long as their professional work, studies or other obligations permit, they meet with them almost every day. What is more, they are ready sacrifice a lot for long meetings with their friends, even their relationship with a Polish partner. Even if they saw them only yesterday, they make a dozen, or even a few dozen, phone calls a day. This is a kind of ritual because, as their partners say, the first thing he does in the morning is check the voice and text messages he has received during the night and reply to them. And although modern means of communication are used by everyone, the frequency of their use by blacks can be extremely frustrating for their partners. Meanwhile, asking an African questions about who he keeps talking to, and why, is perceived as an attack on his privacy and usually ends in a quarrel, which will not bring any change in his behaviour. It is a similar story with his going out. When he says that he is going out for a short time because he has something to do in town, it generally means that he will not be back for at least a few hours. This is connected with the specific African perception of time, more fluid and less measurable than in the west, which in almost all white people dealing with Africans often causes a kind of neurosis. Time in Africa often has its social dimension, hence it is treated differently depending on the rank of the people one meets and the place involved, whether it is at work or during the time reserved for the family and friends. During working hours, one must indeed demonstrate punctuality and conscientiousness, but during leisure time one can, and indeed must, derive pleasure from meeting people and not rush. Meanwhile, from the Polish women’s perspective, such behaviour is irresponsible:

“He said that he was going to see his pal, so I asked him to come back at eight, because I didn’t want to be on my own and feel bored. But he didn’t come back until eleven. And I had told him to not to come back so late, because I wanted us to be together or do something. On the way back from work I had thought to myself: I’ll bet my right arm that he won’t be back before ten. So there you are. This is also reflected in him not informing his partner where he is going: I come home from work, and

he goes out. I ask: “where are you going?” And this is what I hear: “Somewhere”. He will not tell me where he is going, just this ‘somewhere’, or that he is going to meet ‘someone’. Just ‘someone’ and not so-and-so. But when I’m going somewhere, he wants to know everything. And if I’m late, he calls to say that he’s waiting for me because he wants to go out”.

Nigerians get together regularly, in a café, a pub or at the flat of one of them, where without hurrying they hold heated discussions on various topics, drink beer, eat their favourite dishes, or watch football matches. In their home country they are usually raised from childhood in such peer groups, which develops in them a very strong sense of belonging to a group, thus they become virtually incapable of organising time on their own, independently and creatively. In exile, they try to stick to these patterns of behaviour as far as possible. Consequently, they induce strong dissatisfaction in their Polish partners, a sense of being abandoned or suspicions of betrayal, often justified:

“I was never jealous, I was never possessive but with him I’ve become so, and it’s only because I was getting those signals. I would find some text messages, some kind of love you, don’t love you, stuff. Silly messages from the chicks he’d met at the club”.

When Polish women try to discuss the problem with their men, it makes no effect. The African partners defend their right to meet with pals and flatly refuse to change their behaviour. That, from their point of view, would be tantamount to submission to a woman’s will, and in the eyes of their friends would earn them the label of ‘hen-pecked’. Besides, even if they do not go out, according to Polish women they do not behave like real men:

“That lack of tenderness, of showing interest. I don’t have the feeling that this guy is the man in this house, ‘cause sometimes I have the impression that in this relationship it’s me who wears the trousers” (a Polish woman, aged 26).

“I’m his woman, so he should take care of me. Take me out somewhere, show some initiative. Well you know, something that guys do..., and I’m missing it all the time. He is twenty-nine, a grown-up man, and he sits all day in front of the computer? He behaves like a sixteen-year-old who’s been given a game and has to play it all day long” (a Polish woman, aged 26).

Their favourite activity even when at home is continuing their conversations with friends via telephone or the internet:

“It looks more like an addiction than normal behaviour, that constant checking if someone has sent him an e-mail, or being non-stop on Facebook and chatting. I would understand if it was family, or friends from time to time, but every day for umpteen hours?!!!” (a Polish woman, aged 23).

Thanks to Skype and Facebook they talk with their relatives and friends from home, but also with newly-met women. In the last case, they explain to their partners that they do not have any bad intentions and do it just for fun. Brought up in a culture that allows husbands to retain considerable autonomy in (often polygamous) relation-

ships, especially when it comes to spending leisure time, they do not see any problem even when their Polish partners feel hurt. In Africa it is normal that men and women maintain a measure of separateness from each other. They have separate groups of same-sex friends and standard types of interests, and neither side raises any objections as long as they perform their duties towards each other and the home. Generally speaking, the man's duty is to provide for his wife and the home, and the woman's job is to take care of it and everything connected with it. In return, in their free time both do what they want, also being able to meet up with friends. The attempts of African immigrants to transplant these patterns onto European realities, however, meet with strong resistance from their partners.

But the most important reasons for the break-up of relationships appear to be, in the Polish women's opinion, the Africans' betrayal and lack of responsibility. Stories on this theme keep reappearing in interviews with the women:

"She was in love... Well, it so happened that she discovered by chance he had a photo of a child. He told her it was a friend's photo, and only later did he admit that he had a child in Poznań. She forgave him, but then, when he was absent for days, she began to suspect something. Well, she learned that he was meeting two other girls. For a year he had been borrowing money from her, because of course he could not find a job. She again forgave him everything, but he finally said he didn't want to be with her after all. He packed his belongings, and about the money, he said he would pay it back, but now he didn't have any. It was a terrible shock for her. And later it turned out that he had some twins in Sweden... in brief, a total disaster" (the sister of the woman in question).

The Polish partners of African men are also greatly concerned about them not thinking seriously about life, by which they mean that they do not make plans for their future together, that basically there is no telling what they intend to do, that they might abandon them and return to their own country. We can say that all the women we interviewed had similar concerns about their common future:

"The way it looks, they are simply having a good time, even if they're in a serious relationship like marriage. It is rare for them to actually think about the future. Recently, I was talking to S.: 'What are you thinking about?' And he said that he was thinking what it would be like when he went to Nigeria. So I got the impression that he'd never feel at home here, and would never be happy here, that he'd always want to go back, regardless of whether or not he had a family here, wife and kids..." (a Nigerian's fiancée).

"If only I knew I'd be happy there, that I'd have a good job, it wouldn't be a problem" (another partner of a Nigerian man).

"He has different plans, first he wants to go abroad, then he changes his mind".

The uncertainty about the relationship's stability or a sense of disappointment is not, however, the only unpleasant experiences that befall Polish women who have African partners. Often the worst thing that happens to them is the intolerance of their own family and community.

POLISH-AFRICAN COUPLES IN THE OPINION OF THOSE AROUND THEM

In many societies, especially those that are known as traditional, bi-national or inter-ethnic marriages are usually banned or condemned. This is because they violate the established order, threatening to bring chaos and other unspecified consequences. In the Old Testament we come across a multiple strong 'No!' to 'mixed' marriages, but on the other hand, biblical stories are also examples of constant violations of this prohibition, treated as 'acts of disobedience to God' threatening cultural disintegration:

"Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things?" (Neh.: 13, 25–26).

In the so-called modern world, these fears have only seemingly disappeared. In many circles, in certain contexts, they continue to come to the fore. Parents, relatives, and friends frequently try to discourage the given couple from getting married. They warn them of the dangers that may be associated with it, especially when the girl is to leave for her husband's home country: "Do you realise what awaits you? They will be pointing fingers at you". Stories are told of African husbands who, after returning home, changed beyond recognition and turned into tyrants. What's more, some are convinced that a girl who has married an African and has a child by him must feel ashamed because she avoids other people:

"She does not want to be seen taking a black child to school or to the doctor. I think that she is ashamed of what she's done. She simply feels ashamed... nothing to brag about" (a Polish man from Szczecin).

African women remaining in relationships with Polish men also notice this:

"Polish people are so critical: "Oh look! He's going out with a black woman!" One of my friends fell in love with a guy, but because of his family she decided to leave him. It's very hard to withstand this pressure" (a Guinean woman).

It is the closest family, those that have to receive the 'other' into their fold, that find it hardest to put up with such a relationship:

"My mother tends to think in those categories... from the 1950s, that blacks are only in Africa... she can't imagine him walking on her floors, washing himself under her shower, and drying himself with her towels. She's so horrified, as she knows that he touches me, kisses me, makes love with me" (one of the fiancées).

The neighbours, especially in rural areas and small towns, where everyone knows everything about everybody, often comment on a girl they know entering into such a relationship. It does not concern them, but they cannot help commenting because for them it is a shocking event. A good example is a story I was told by a neighbour in one of the smaller towns in north-eastern Poland:

“He was pitch black! Such a tragedy for the parents!... It was really a disaster for them, a great shock, for us too, anyway. Fifteen years ago, here, such a thing could only be seen on TV. And she being the only daughter, it gave such a shock to her parents, her bringing home someone like that. Oh, what a to-do it was! Such a pretty young blonde, went to college in Poznan and that’s where she met him. The first time she brought him home, she didn’t warn her parents, just said she would come with a friend. At the beginning nothing terrible happened, a friend is a friend. Everyone was friendly towards her. They watched from behind the curtains, took a good look because they had never seen one up close. Her parents also came to like him, but not as a son-in-law. Well, she would bring him for Christmas or Easter, for the holidays. Her parents understood that he was far from home, they felt a bit sorry for him, took in the orphan. So when we all more or less got used to it, she played such a trick on us all. What a tragedy it was for the parents, how they pleaded with both of them, tried to explain. It was an awful tragedy... their only daughter. They did not agree to the marriage, but she was an adult, and in love with him. So they were married in Poznań. After that, she didn’t come home for a long while. All of a sudden, she appeared, with a belly. It turned out that he had gone to his Africa, and she was to go there later with the child. The parents were happy that the daughter was back and everything was forgotten. A son was born, I must say at the beginning he was cute, a nice little mixed race child. At first he was just swarthy, with curly hair and small black eyes. But then he turned darker and became as black as his father. But people got used to it, as she went by with the pram they would stop and stroke the baby, praise it. After six months, his father came back. He was some kind of prince and he had to settle some matters concerning the ‘throne’, and get everything ready for their arrival. And she, stupid, went away with him. And again the parents pleaded, begged her, explained that it was a foreign country with a different culture, you never know what might happen. I tried to comfort them, though I myself knew that nothing good would come of it. So she went, and came back after two years, one child a toddler, and the other in her belly. Apparently she had been a ‘queen’ there, one of his many wives. But probably she wasn’t all that happy if she decided to come back. Herself, she didn’t say anything, God knows what she’d been through. She now lives in Suwałki, the children are big and she’s coping somehow” (a kindergarten teacher, aged 50, Suwałki).

Finally, we must not forget about the children born of Polish-African parents, who are not able to hide their origin and have to live their lives with the stigma of ‘otherness’, even though they were born and raised in Poland. Here is how one of the mothers of such a child put it:

“All I can say is that I don’t want anybody to have to break provincial stereotypes. First, it’s not realistic, and secondly, it’s exhausting. I know that ever since local people were confronted with the fact that I was the mother of an illegitimate black child, I was identified as the one with the black kid, even though a lot of time has elapsed. People pointed fingers at me and were gossiping. We fell in love while at university... I got pregnant, and then it all started. He announced he had to go back to the Congo... Our son Artur is twenty now. From an early age he was bullied a bit by his peers, he always attracts attention. He’s very shy. At secondary school here, he was the best student. This year he started studying law at Warsaw University. I hope he won’t be attracting the same type of interest there” (a teacher from Gołdap, age 40).

It should be borne in mind that marriage has never been solely a personal matter of the two people in question, but also involves the family, as broadly understood, and the community which they are part of. It differs from cohabitation or other short-term

relationships in that it has to be accepted by the community the couple are to live in afterwards. It is no wonder, therefore, that it causes interest. All the more so if it is marriage with an 'other', which is often very difficult for the parents to reconcile themselves with. As in other situations, the ambivalent treatment of the 'other' gets extended to the person with whom the 'stranger' comes into contact, especially sexual contact. Such a person becomes equally 'suspicious', 'unclean', 'infected' or 'foreign', and is often ostracised. Thus, women who go out with an African constantly expose themselves to remarks like: "You love a black man? Are you crazy? Aren't there any Poles around? Or maybe none will have you?", or "There are so many Poles around, why did you have to choose a bloody black?" In the street, they may hear from a perfect stranger: "How can you do it with a golliwog?" or "What is this lass doing with him? Either he's with her for her money, or she's with him for sex".

The worst situation, however, is when representatives of the administrative authorities and the police give vent, like ordinary citizens often do, to their condemnation of such relationships, and when the so-called 'modern' state inscribes such magical thinking into its codes, thus intervening in such a delicate sphere of human relations as those between the sexes. A ban on marriage to the 'other', taking the form of prohibition on any sexual contact with a representative of an 'alien race', was at its most bizarre and dramatic during apartheid in South Africa. At the same time that country also provides an excellent example that no code has ever prevented people from 'breaking the law' in this sphere⁵. What seems to be all the more embarrassing against this background, are the practices of the authorities in many European countries, Poland included, which arbitrarily apply restrictive legislation to foreigners who get married to their citizens. This extraordinary officiousness is difficult to explain simply through provisions of the law. The administrative apparatus in Poland can in fact be both meticulous and sluggish in their application of the law. It is certainly so in the case of the law concerning foreigners from outside the European Union, whose restrictive rules are often resorted to more eagerly than others. Sometimes in the course of registering the marriage not only the legality of the foreigner's stay is tested, but also attempts are made to complicate the legalisation of the relationship. Many foreigners from outside the European Union who decide to marry a Pole, and thus also to settle in Poland, sometimes come across different forms of harassment⁶. Officials often focus on exercising their powers to expel a foreigner, rather than on trying to find arguments that work in his/her favour. And this happens because representatives of the administrative authorities, just like other

⁵ Despite strict legal sanctions against inter-racial contacts of a sexual nature, violations of this prohibition were frequent in South Africa. A literary illustration of this phenomenon are the great novels by Alan Paton Stewart (1956) and Lewis Nkosi (1986).

⁶ A lot has been written on this subject by members of *Stowarzyszenie Matżeństw Polaków z Obcokrajowcami* who are actively involved in securing the rights of foreigners married to Polish citizens (republika.pl/obcokrajowcy).

people, perceive 'mixed' marriages as a 'threat' to law and order. Moreover, many of them stress that those marriages pose a 'threat to national security'.

On the other hand, various human rights defenders wish to reveal these things. They publish articles criticising the officials who too readily apply restrictive provisions to 'foreign spouses', sometimes even abusing the law. There are lawyers who are ready to defend the couples who are discriminated against, and often do so successfully. Thus, attitudes towards marriages with the 'other' have their supporters. Fascination and aversion often intermingle, but it is not entirely that people fall into two categories: those who love (in this case both literally and figuratively) the 'others', and those who hate them. These dividing lines can be observed within the groups playing the given roles, and sometimes even in spite of the roles they play. In real life, many a 'perfect administrative clerk' has in fact had a relationship with an exotic 'other'; while many a 'humanitarian activist' has not broken down sexual apartheid.

CONCLUSION

The preference for marriage within one's own group, if not explicitly ordered to do so, is in fact universal, although not in all societies has it taken the form of a strict law enforcing endogamy. However, even in formally open societies marriage to the 'other' has been hindered, especially when the 'other' differs physically and comes from a foreign cultural background. Due to the magical perception of blood, this type of 'cross-breeding' has always provoked profound anxiety about its effect on the purity of the group perceived as a specific 'race' (Béteille 2006, 312–328)⁷. Contemporary African societies also provide many examples of mixed relationships⁸. On the other hand, the exchange or lending of women, so-called 'sexual hospitality' or 'ritual prostitution', in many communities belonged to the rituals of integration, and would remove the strangeness of the 'other', as would eating together with him (Gennep 2006, 57). Besides, even in very endogamous groups, never and nowhere has a ban on sexual contact with a stranger been fully respected, even though such cases usually occurred outside the law. What is more, those breaking the prohibition to marry within their own group did indeed risk severe sanctions on the one hand, but on the other their romantic stories aroused sympathy evoking extremely strong fascination, which formerly found its expression in songs and poetry, and today primarily in films. Despite the widespread belief that the patterns of romantic love

⁷ See also: (Myrdal 1944).

⁸ For example, in the Igbo community, when someone is planning to marry outside the group, the whole family tries to persuade him/her not to do so, warning them against the negative consequences of such a step. The strangers are then accused of cannibalism, arrogance, crudeness, etc. (Smith 2001, 129–151).

are limited to the Euro-American culture, we can also find them in Africa⁹. But even they leave no illusions as to how such relationships may end. Maybe that is why the very thought of marrying the 'other' may cause, as the interviewees readily admit, a 'trembling of the heart'.

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⁹ In Nigeria, a film that met with very emotional reception by massive audiences was 'Taboo', set in the Igbo community, which tells the story of an inter-caste love relationship between a free woman (*diala*) and a slave (*osu*), predictably with a tragic ending.