

Diversity Tip Sheet

Somali Culture: An Overview

History

Somalia is an arid country in East Africa with a mostly rural population of farmers and herders. Many of those raising camels, cattle, or sheep, are nomads, leading their flocks and herds wherever water may be found. Somali society is clan-based, with clan leaders often wielding greater authority than the national government. The Somali clans trace their roots back to the 12th century, with conversion to Islam taking place around the same time.

At the end of the 19th century, Somalia fell under the control of four colonial powers—England, France, Italy, and Ethiopia—until 1949 when the nation became a U.N. trust territory. In 1960, the Somali Republic was granted independence as a democratic state. The United States became involved in Somalia in the late '70s to counter communist influence in the region.

A variety of internal conflicts led to the outbreak of civil war in 1990, and the nation slipped into anarchy. It was at this time that many Somali refugees fled to the U.S. War and unrest have continued up to the present day.

Values

Every culture encompasses a spectrum of people, and regional and individual expressions of that culture may vary widely. Below are some generalizations about Somali cultural values that may help you better understand and relate to Somali coworkers. Keep in mind, however, that not every Somali person will subscribe to all of these values, and the degree of influence these principles wield will vary from person to person.

- Extended family and respect for elders and authorities are valued over individualism.
- Interdependence is valued over independence.
- Relationships are valued over punctuality.
- Tradition is valued over being up-to-date and cutting edge.
- Strength and pride are valued over humility and self-effacement.
- Loyalty is a strong moral principle, extending to family, clan, and friendships.

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Values, Cont.

- Saving face is an important cultural concern, as is the protection of family honor.
- Somalis view destiny as predetermined by Allah rather than controlled by the individual.
- Men are the head of the family. Although Somali women tend to have more education and independence than women in other parts of the Muslim world, equal gender rights is not a goal of Somali culture.
- Generosity is highly valued and is expected of all Somalis. Generosity as a way of life has been an important factor in the survival of the people. Many Somalis regularly send money back to extended family in their home country.

Communication

- Because of the Somali respect for strength and pride, boasting is generally not considered socially inappropriate as it is in the U.S.
- As with many African and South American cultures, Somalis may speak at a louder volume than is generally considered appropriate in the U.S., particularly when they are talking to each other. An American listening to a group of Somalis talking amongst themselves may interpret the discussion as a heated argument, when they are simply having a friendly conversation.
- Somalis can be very expressive, and often use sweeping arm movements to express themselves.
- Because of the cultural emphasis on saving face, Somalis' communication style may be more indirect than the typical American style.
- Somalis do not often express appreciation verbally.
- Poetry and oral tradition have a place of honor in the nomadic Somali culture. Somalia has produced many great poets, and the oral culture continues to flourish among expatriate Somalis. Political poetry also plays an important part in Somali culture.

Dress

- Western dress is common in urban areas of Somalia. Traditional Somali dress comes in many styles, varying by region.
- Traditional Somali dress is influenced both by the desert climate of Somalia and by Islamic values.
- Islamic principles of modesty require men to be covered from neck to knee and women from neck to ankle in non-form-fitting clothing.
- Traditionally only unmarried women wear headscarves, but as Islamic fundamentalism increases, more Somali women are wearing head coverings.
- Henna is used to paint elaborate designs on women's hands or feet, generally in celebration of special occasions such as weddings.

Naming & Clans

- The Somali system of naming is different from the Western system. Western names: First (individual) + Middle (individual) + Last (family)
Somali names: First (individual) + Father's first name + Grandfather's first name
- Because of this naming system, husbands, wives, and children will all have different last names.
- First and middle names are generally used for identification rather than first and last, which may lead to some confusion in Western societies. The person you know as Hodan Mohamed may be known in her own community as Hodan Ibrahim.

Religion

Somalis have been Sunni Muslims since the inception of their nation centuries ago, and Somali culture is inextricably entwined with Islam, affecting diet, dress, and daily routines. Although Somali observance of Islam was traditionally fairly casual, fundamentalism has been gaining support in recent years as the Somali people seek security in times of anarchy and chaos. Islamic fundamentalism also offers a unifying force in a nation fractured by inter-clan conflict.

The five pillars of Islam

1. The confession of faith: "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet."
2. Prayer five times a day:
3. Giving alms
4. Fasting during the month of Ramadan
5. Making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime (The Hajj)

Scheduling

Islamic observance may conflict with the traditional Western work schedule on occasion. The following factors may affect your Somali employees:

1. **Daily Prayer:** One of the five pillars of Islam, the daily prayers occur at dawn, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset, and night. Ablutions are required before prayer, during which the hands, face, head, and feet must be washed in running water.
2. **Friday Prayer:** Obligatory for observant Muslim men, Friday prayers take place at noon and last for about an hour.
3. **Ramadan:** Another of the five pillars of Islam, the Ramadan fast is observed from sunrise to sunset for a month. Islam follows a lunar calendar, so the dates of Ramadan will change from year to year.
4. **Major Festivals:** The two major festivals observed by Sunni Muslims are 'Id al-Fitr and 'Id al-Adha. 'Id al-Fitr means the Feast of Breaking the Fast and celebrates the end of the Ramadan fast. 'Id al-Adha means Feast of Sacrifice and commemorates the day Abraham offered his son to God.

Religion, Cont.

Intersex Relations

The Islamic emphasis on modesty affects not only dress, but relations between the genders. Traditional Somalis do not date, and men and women may even eat separately. Somali immigrants may be uncomfortable touching members of the opposite sex. When meeting a Somali person of the opposite sex, allow him or her to initiate a handshake if they desire.

Loans

Islamic law forbids charging interest, and observant Muslims wishing to buy a house or borrow capital for a business must seek out special companies offering financing that is compliant with Islamic practice. You can read more about Islamic finance at www.ijaraloans.com.

Resources

Want to learn more about your Somali friends and coworkers? Here are some excellent books to get you started, all available at Rochester Public Library (except *Desert Dawn*).

- **Culture and Customs of Somali**, by Mohamed Diriye Abdullahi
- **Desert Flower** and **Desert Dawn**, by Waris Dirie with Cathleen Miller. International fashion model and U.N. Special Ambassador for Women's Rights in Africa, Waris Dirie tells the story of her journey from camel girl to top model in *Desert Flower* and of her return to her homeland in *Desert Dawn*.
- **Infidel**, by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The story of a Somali woman who rose to become a member of the Dutch parliament, *Infidel* may be unpopular among Somalis because of its criticism of Islam, but the gripping story gives an excellent insider's view of Somali culture and clan life.
- **The Last Camel: True Stories of Somalia**, by Jeanne D'Haem. A Peace Corps worker writes about life in a small Somali village in the '60's. Although several decade old, this book will give you a taste of traditional Somali life.