



# SOMALIANS

Somali refugees have been resettled in the United States primarily because of the devastating war in Somalia, which has continued for over a decade now. The first Somalis to come to the Greensboro area arrived in the early 1990s. Most of them were from the Benadir tribe, a sedentary ethnic group from the the southern coastal – Benadir – region of Somalia , which includes Mogadishu.

Unlike other Somalis who are nomadic, the Benadir have a long history as urbanized merchants and artisans. They exhibit strong clan allegiance through intra-clan marriage and self-governance. They are devout Sunni Muslims and are well known for their peaceful, non-violent ways.

Since the arrival of this initial group of Somalis, others have followed, introducing different tribes, particularly the Barawan, and more recently some of the nomadic tribes. Some of the early refugees migrated to other parts of the United States where there were larger Somali communities. However, the refugees who have remained are a stable population.

## • DID YOU KNOW?

- About 300 Somalis live in Guilford County, many of whom arrived during the Lutheran Family Services resettlement project of 1996.
- Somalia is located in East Africa (east of Ethiopia) and borders the Gulf of Arden and the Indian Ocean.
- According to an Immigrant Health ACCESS Project Survey conducted in 2001, the most common illnesses among Somalis in Guilford County are diabetes and hypertension.
- Almost all Somalis are Sunni Muslims.

- Information included here is provided to help you become more aware of the culture and traditions of your clients, students and co-workers. Please use this only as a guide, keeping in mind that all people within a culture are not the same. Be sure to ask your clients and their families about their specific beliefs, practices and customs. Showing respect and openness toward their traditions will help you build better relationships and provide more effective services.

## • | CULTURE

**LANGUAGE** Somali is the official language of Somalia. Other common languages include Arabic, Italian, and English. Two different dialects are spoken in Somalia: Somali and Barawe.

**RELIGIOUS PRACTICES & BELIEFS** Religious practice is central to Somali culture. Most Somalis demonstrate a strong adherence to the Islamic faith. For example, during the holy month of Ramadan most Somalis will not consume food during daylight hours. Additionally, most Muslim Somalis believe that the right hand is clean and use the right hand for eating, handshaking, and the like. Conversely, the left hand is considered impure.

It is important to note that Muslims are forbidden to drink alcohol and to eat pork products. Service providers working with this community should avoid making dietary recommendations that include either of these products.

**SOCIAL CLASS** While Islam and the Somali language unite all of Somalia, the societal structure is marked by patrilineal clans (descent through male lines). There are a few main clans, and multiple sub-clans, sometimes

with geographical and even social class orientation. The Benadir clan, for example, is comprised mostly of merchants and artisans living in southern coastal regions. The Barawans, who are also recent transplants to Guilford County, lived in the Kismayu area of Somalia where they were predominantly fisherman and small-scale artisans.

**EDUCATION** In America, Somalis participate in the Western-style primary education system. Many Somalis pursue secondary and post-graduate studies. In addition, many Somali refugees educate their children in the traditional Somali studies of Islam and, particularly for young women, home training.

Among Somalis, one who is educated is expected to be well-mannered, well-behaved, and well-dressed. Educated Somalis are frequently conversant in Arabic, English, Italian, and/or Russian, depending on their experiences with the former colonial powers.

**TIME ORIENTATION** Somalis are not overly concerned with the Western concept of being “on time.” Somalis do not perceive tardiness as a demonstration of disrespect. Specific appointment times, therefore, may not be kept.

Somalis may state, “I’ll be there after this afternoon” leaving a large range of uncertainty in their exact estimated arrival time.

### FOOD & DIET

In Somalia, geographical location and occupation influence diet. On the whole, the Somali diet is low in caloric intake and high in protein consumption. The largest meal of the day in Somalia is eaten at midday. The morning and evening meals are lighter. Beef is less popular than goat and camel meat. Somalis may feel that certain cuts of meat are suitable for men while others are reserved for women and children.

**DRESS** Most Somalis wear Western-style dress in public. But for leisure, or in rural areas, traditional dress prevails. Men wear a macaawis, a brightly colored cloth similar to an Indonesian sarong. Men may also wear a Western shirt or shawl and cover their heads with benadiri kufia, a Somali cap.

Women’s dress is even more diverse. Somali women usually wear full-length dresses. These come in a variety of styles. The traditional Somali guntiino is similar to an Indian sari but worn differently as it is tied over the shoulder of one arm and wrapped around the body.

Somali women may also wear a malqabad, a thin silk head scarf that can be worn in a variety of different styles.

## • **FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS**

**GENDER ROLES** Somali culture is publicly male-centered although women are included in making important decisions for the family. Somali women are not considered inferior; they simply fulfill different roles in Somali culture than men do. Males are traditionally viewed as the bread-winners, but female labor is valued for productive tasks as well as for household chores, as long as the male is still considered the primary financial contributor to the family purse.

Responsibility for the pride and honor of Somali families rests mainly with the women of the family. If a girl is well-bred and maintains her dignity, Somalis feel she reflects well on her family. Conversely, if a girl behaves poorly, she will bring her family shame. A girl's behavior is, therefore, considered very important.

Women carry their own name after marriage and never use their husbands' surname. This has been a Somali tradition for generations.

Somali families are particularly large, sometimes consisting of as many as ten or more individuals. Adoption is unusual among Somalis, and elder family members are rarely sent to live in nursing homes.

### **CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Somali people are very peaceful and like to avoid conflict. If a conflict does occur it is best that the people involved settle it individually. In the case of a family conflict, if a Somali family cannot find a resolution among themselves, they will ask elders to intervene.

### **GREETINGS & SHOWING**

**RESPECT** Somalis value generosity and showing respect is an essential aspect of Somali culture. It can be observed in the practice of greeting elders with the title "uncle" or "aunt", for instance, rather than by using their first names. Somalis respect strength and often challenge one another to test the limits of their strength and power. While Somalis can be opinionated, they are generally willing to reconsider their views if presented with adequate evidence to refute their position.

### **GESTURES & CUSTOMS**

When speaking to Somalis, it is

considered polite to always maintain eye contact and it is considered disrespectful to rush. Smile and watch your tone of voice. One should avoid shaking hands with members of the opposite sex. One should also avoid unnecessary physical contact. Gesturing to someone with the index finger is a sign of disrespect.

## • **HEALTH & WELLNESS**

**HEALTH BELIEFS** Somalis believe that poor health and illness are acts of God (Allah). Consequently, they do not typically practice preventative care. Unless they are actively sick or required to visit, Somalis will usually avoid visits to health care providers.

High blood pressure and diabetes are common health problems among Somalis.

**OUTREACH TIPS** Due to expense, availability, and religious restrictions, Somalis may have difficulty adhering to prescribed nutrition regimens. It is important for service providers to build trusting relationships with Somali clients. If possible, the same provider should meet with a Somali client for each visit.

Additionally, Somalis will feel

most at ease with a same-sex service provider. As already discussed, Somali women are considered responsible for the honor of their family. It is considered taboo for unmarried Somali women to engage in sexual relations. Service providers should tread cautiously when inquiring about an unmarried Somali woman's sexual history!

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