

CULTURE PROFILE: SOMALIAN

Origins: Ancient Somali history is uncertain, but the Somalis and Cushitic groups from whom the Somalis descended have lived in the Horn region at least as far back as 1000 AD. In those days, this area was known as the Land of Punt, the source of much of the myrrh and frankincense mentioned in the Bible. The Somali population began converting to Islam sometime after its introduction to the region in the 7th century. During this time the Somali also moved into what is now eastern Ethiopia and northern Kenya, and set up trade routes that would last for centuries. The southern part of the country developed a farming economy; northerner clans developed trade centers and watering-hole routes that enabled them to keep their families and



herds alive in dry seasons. Coastal trading cities like Berbera and Zayla controlled Indian Ocean trade through the Red Sea. Colonialism changed these patterns. In the 19th century, Somalia was colonized by France, Italy and Britain. Because the Somalis refused to respect their new rulers, colonizers encouraged clan rivalries and gave political power to various tribes. Increasing anger against Barré's government led to the formation of opposition movements, and a brutal civil war erupted that devastated communities, fractured power into territories controlled by warlords and left millions homeless. In 1992 a coalition government accepted UN assistance for relief efforts and in 1993 signed a peace agreement. In the north, clans reconciled and in 1991 formed a state government called Somaliland, with Muhammed Ibrahim Egal as president; however, Somaliland is not yet recognized by the international community. Southern Somalia still has no formal national government. <http://www.settlement.org/cp/english/somalia/index.html>

Why they immigrated: Civil war and factional fighting have besieged Somalia for more than a decade, causing more than 500,000 deaths. Conditions were particularly severe during 1991–92, when war and massive population upheaval produced famine and left 2 million Somalis internally displaced and 800,000 as refugees. In 2000, a fragile new national government formed in Mogadishu, the Somali capital, for the first time in a decade. The new governing body, known as the Transitional National Government (TNG), immediately encountered armed opposition from local warlords, some of whom continued to control large parts of Mogadishu, as well as significant territory outside the capital. Escalations in violence worsened already dangerous conditions in much of Somalia during 2002. Widespread anarchy and violence compounded the already difficult lives of people suffering from persistent drought and food shortages throughout central and southern Somalia. Nearly 300,000 refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia lived in about two dozen countries at the end of 2002, including more than 15,000 Somali asylum seekers in various European countries and the United States. <http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/africa/2003/somalia.cfm>



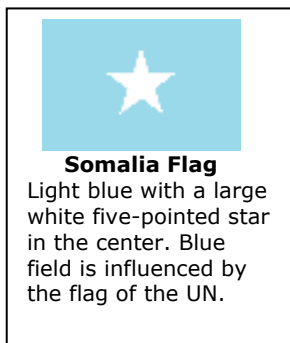
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Language: Somali (official), Arabic, Italian, English

<http://www.nationmaster.com/country/so/Language>

Religion: Sunni Muslim <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/so.html#People>

Family Structure: Somali society is based on clans. While there are over 100 clans, most Somalis belong to one of the four main clans known collectively as the Samaal, who are nomadic herders. Somalia's other two main clans are called the Sab; they live as farmers along the rivers in the south and have village leaders as their main decision-makers. Clans provide protection, support and resources to their members, but also divide society when there is competition for resources. Somalis often live in extended families. There is no strict hierarchy in the home, though fathers are usually considered the heads of their families economically and women as the heads of the household. While women are by no means considered equal to men, the traditional Somali love of freedom and self-expression means that women speak their minds and exert much power at home. <http://www.settlement.org/cp/english/somalia/index.html>



Somalia Flag

Light blue with a large white five-pointed star in the center. Blue field is influenced by the flag of the UN.

Cultural expectations: Marriages in Somalia are valued more for their economic and political importance, rather than religious or romantic aspects. A man may have more than one wife. Families prefer arranged marriages; when matching a couple, lineage and bride-price (dowry) are of great importance. Somali women and girls are expected to have *hisaut*, a sense of modesty or shame. To show respect, women follow behind men when walking, while children follow behind their mother. Before marriage, girls often undergo a ritual called infibulation, which involves the removal of parts of the girl's genitals. The procedure has increasingly spawned international criticism and controversy, though is still widely practiced. <http://www.settlement.org/cp/english/somalia/index.html>

Major Holidays: The important Somali holidays are religious. Muslims follow a **lunar calendar**. Perhaps the most important Islamic holiday is after the **month of Ramadan**. Somalis decorate their homes with lights and flowers before Ramadan begins. All adults and children past puberty mark the month by fasting during the day. At sunset, families gather for *afur*, the breaking of the fast. At the end of the month of Ramadan is a feast holiday, *Eid-al-Fitr*. Somalis celebrate their **new year** at the end of July. In rural areas, people hold a festival called the dab-shid or fire lighting. The non-religious, public holidays include on May 1, **Labor Day**, June 26, Somalia's **Independence Day**, and July 1, the **foundation of the Republic**. <http://www.settlement.org/cp/english/somalia/index.html>



Other Resources:

- The TakingITGlobal Sudan website is a platform for ideas and expressions to be showcased; a resource of opportunities and a network of projects, initiatives and inspirational young people from Somalia. <http://somalia.takingitglobal.org/home.html>
- The CIA World Fact Book <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/so.html>
- The latest news from Sudan <http://www.banadir.com/>
- An annotated guide to internet resources about Somalia and Somaliland for students, faculty, teachers, journalists, and others. <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/somalia.html>

