

## **Culture Profile: Oromo**

Origins: Currently the plurality ethnicity within Ethiopia, the Oromo people live in the central, western, southern, and eastern parts of Ethiopia (Oromiya province) and make up approximately 40% of the population. Refugee arrival in the U.S. began in the early 1980s and peaked in the early 90s. Over 12,000 Oromo live in Minnesota.

Why they immigrated: Beginning with the conquest of Oromiya in the late 1800s by Africans supported by European colonists, the Oromo have been subjected to much persecution from ruling governments. From imperial rulers, to Communist dictatorship, to the current ethnic Tigrayan governments, human rights violations have been used frequently to suppress dissent. Continuous civil war with liberation movements has contributed to an unstable and dangerous political environment. This worsened already widespread starvation during a series of severe famines between 1984 and 1990.

The dominance of other ethnic groups, particularly Amhara and Tigray, in the new government continues to be a point of strife for the Oromo. In 1991, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) reignited a guerilla war to seek Oromiya's liberation. The current Tigrayan government perceives the Oromo as a threat by virtue of their demographic dominance. Along with suspicion of OLF activity, this has led to repression, abuse, and torture of Oromo citizens.

Language: Oromiffia (or Afaan Oromo), which uses a Roman alphabet. Many Oromo from urban areas also speak Amharic, Ethiopia's official language, since studying Oromiffia is currently banned. Literacy remains low in Oromo society, at about 5%.

Family Structure: Family is the center of Oromo culture and clan allegiance is strong. The father is the head of the household, but the mother has much authority and leadership in family matters. It is typical of Oromo households to include extended families in the same home. Children depend on their family until they have their own job or get married, and even then maintain strong feelings of responsibility for relatives.

Immigrants may be separated from family members who remain in refugee camps or in danger in Ethiopia. Their families may have been subjected to torture or imprisonment. This is very stressful, especially for children who immigrate alone.

Cultural expectations: Traditional Oromo society was based on *gada*, a democratic system of societal law, a system that has declined with their loss of freedom. Members of a *gada* gained seniority as they aged, taking new responsibilities every eight years. Elders, considered to be wiser, were responsible for teaching, resolving conflicts, and nurturing Oromo culture. Seniority is thus an important factor in Oromo relationships.



Children were taught respect for elders, and disciplined by a combination of familial pressure and occasional spanking. In America, the fear of child protection services (and deportation) can lead to a fear of correcting their child's behaviors. In addition, children may learn an independence from family in America that is unfamiliar and stressful to parents, making discipline more difficult. Education has been limited for Oromos, as resources are limited in Ethiopia and in refugee camps. Many children arrive in the U.S. far behind their American classmates, and they may also need to work to support their families. This can create great stress and loss of confidence for the children. For this reason, and possibly due to the frightening results of speaking out in Ethiopia, children may not ask for help when they need it. Parents often don't understand the American educational system, and in addition, the demands of multiple jobs may make parents unable to be involved in their child's schooling.

Religion: Islam, Christianity (Catholic, Protestant, or occasionally Ethiopian Orthodox), or the traditional Oromo monotheistic belief (Waaqefata) in Waaqa, or God.

Major Holidays: Holidays generally follow either the Christian or Muslim holiday schedule. Traditional Oromo religion celebrates a thanksgiving festival in fall, Iiraycha. New Year's Day (January 1) is also an important family holiday, and there are several holidays in remembrance of people who have died.

Names: A person's first name is their personal name, followed by the names of their father, grandfather, and so on. "Last" name is a funny concept to many Oromo people. Popular Names for Males: Gemechu (Geh –meh' –choo), Challa (Chah – lah')  
Popular Names for Females: Lensa (Len' – sah), Chaltu (Chahl' – too)

*If a student from this culture has difficulty or presents challenges in my classroom what would be the most culturally appropriate way to deal with this problem?*

Despite the challenges parents have in disciplining children, it is important for the teacher to tell parents of the problems, if they speak English and are in America. The teacher should also offer advice on what parents can do about the problem, such as telling them to do their homework on time or making sure they show up at school each day. It can also be helpful to contact the Oromo Community Center elders to aid in problem solving reoccurring difficulties/challenges faced by students, parents and teachers.

*Is there anything I should or should not do when first meeting a student, parents, or family from this culture?*

Oromos are generally used to an American greeting style. However, it would be culturally sensitive to show concern about the individual, by asking how they are and what their story might be, in order to build the relationship.



*For more information go to the following websites...*

[www.ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/oromo/oromo\\_cp.html](http://www.ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/oromo/oromo_cp.html)

[www.lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/ettoc.html](http://www.lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/ettoc.html)

[www.gadaa.com](http://www.gadaa.com)



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