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## SOMALI - INFORMATION SHEET

### BACKGROUND

Somalia is a long narrow country on the east coast of Africa. It is bordered on the north by the Gulf of Aden, on the east by the Indian Ocean, on the southwest by Kenya, and on the west and northwest by Ethiopia and Djibouti. Independence from former British and Italian colonisation occurred in 1960. Since the 1990s the country has suffered from civil war between rival clans. Bantu Somalis, a minority clan, have been discriminated against. During the civil war many Bantu Somali experienced violence including theft, rape and witnessing the murder of family members. Many have spent years in refugee camps prior to being accepted into Australia under the humanitarian program.

### LANGUAGE

Somali is the official language and is spoken by the Somali people, with some regional variations. Written Somali uses the Roman alphabet. The majority (90%) of the population are Muslims and hence Arabic is a common second language.

### RELIGION

The majority of Somalis are Sunni Muslims. The religion is called Islam and provides the fundamentals for living, dying, family life, child rearing and maintaining health. Muslims pray five times a day: at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and in the evening. Before prayer hands, face, and feet are washed.

### ETHNIC MAKEUP

Dissimilar to most African nations, Somalia has only one ethnic group, divided into various clans and yet they are united by language.

### SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Somali family structure is based on family and clan groups. Members are determined through the father's lineage. Fathers are the final authority on decisions. Somalis moving to Australia must adhere to the laws here. Several generations live together in households. The values are maintaining group harmony over the individual. Women are responsible for the care of children and the household whilst the father is the primary decision maker.

Somalis do not celebrate birthdays. They commemorate the anniversary of a family member's death. As Muslims, Somalis do not touch dogs. Muslims do not eat pork.

SLEEPING: Children might share a bed with their parents up to the age of 10.

MARRIAGE: Under Islamic law, a man may have as many as four wives, but only if he can support them equally. Women, when they marry, do not change their names. By keeping the name of their father and grandfather, they maintain their affiliation with their clan of birth.

CHILD REARING PRACTICES: Somali mothers do not let their babies cry for a long time. They respond immediately, by soothing and comforting the baby. By eight months old toilet training begins. A mother puts her baby's bottom on her feet that are a little apart. She gently pats the back of the baby, trying to soothe it and help with toilet training. (Source: Personal interview with Shukri Hassan, a Somali case manager at International Institute of Minnesota, St. Paul, May 7, 2002). Most children are breast fed up until they are two years old. Circumcision is viewed as a rite of passage and is practised for both Somali males and females. For boys this occurs between birth and 5 years of age. For girls this occurs between birth and adolescence. For girls the health risks are numerous; infections and chronic pain. Somali men and women are fearful that if their daughters are not circumcised, they will not be marriageable. Female circumcision is not a requirement of Islam.

**NAMING:** There are three parts to a Somali's name. The first name is the given name and is specific to an individual. The second name is the name of the child's father, and the third name is the name of the child's paternal grandfather. Thus siblings, both male and female, will share the same second and third names.

**SOCIAL ETIQUETTE:** Muslims use their right hand to eat, write and greet people. It is considered impolite to use the left hand for these things. Children displaying a preference for the left hand are trained to use the right instead. Men and women do not have physical contact outside the house. They don't use finger gestures to gain attention as it viewed as disrespectful.

**References:**

Culture Matters: The Cultural Competency Initiative, Stratis Health, Minnesota, 2007 8SOW-MN-1d2-07-08 05.2007

<http://www.everyculture.com>

Somali Cultural Profile

[http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/somali/somali\\_cp.html#ceremonials](http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/somali/somali_cp.html#ceremonials)