

Somali Culture & Foods

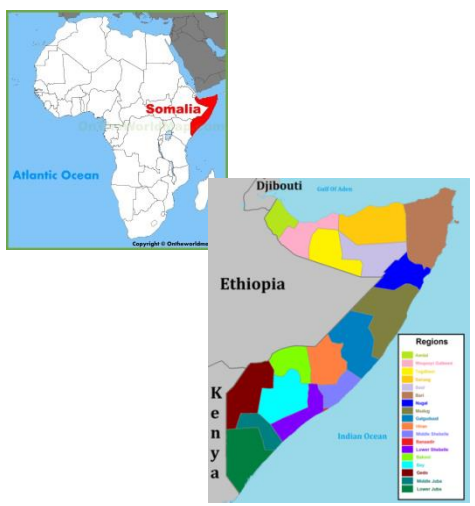
Country of Origin: Somalia

Primary Language(s): Somali, Arabic, English

Percent of Iowa's Population: 3.1% from East Africa¹

Background

The Republic of Somalia was formed in 1960 by the federation of a former Italian colony and a British protectorate and is known as the horn of Africa.² Mohamed Siad Barre led a coup and held dictatorial rule over the country from 1969-1991. The legal system was based on Islamic law and human rights were often put to the way side. Barre was overthrown in a bloody civil war waged by clan-based militia groups. These clan-based political coalitions formed the governments of Somaliland and Puntland on their own, neither of which is recognized internationally. Ten attempts at peace were made throughout the 90's. In 2004 two events occurred: a Transitional Federal Government (TFG) for Somalia was based in Kenya and a Tsunami hit the coast of Somalia which destroyed fishing communities and killed hundreds. TFG was backed by the United Nations and African Union. Wars continued to wage and piracy along the coasts occurred. Decades of war have deteriorated Somalia's economy and infrastructure while splitting the country. Today the number of displaced people within Somalia is 1.5 million and over 1 million have fled as refugees.⁶



Somalia adopted their flag in 1954.³

Blue: refers to the United Nations, which managed part of Somalia for many years.

Star: represents the 5 areas Somalis live and traditionally occupied: Northern and southern Somalia, northern Kenya, southern Ethiopia and Djibouti.²

White: indicates peace and prosperity.

Somalia is a country ravaged by a series of wars and coups so this is dear to Somalis.³

Education and Literacy

In Somalia, primary and secondary schools have recovered since the civil war in 1991.² However, resources, materials, and teachers are in low supply. Due to warfare, many higher education institutes were destroyed. Approximately 20% of Somalis that are 15 years and older are literate.

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

Somalis are clan based Muslims with 60% following a nomadic lifestyle due to livestock farming.² The 40% that are settled live in areas where rain or river irrigation makes agriculture possible. Clans are groups of people that can trace their ancestry back to a single father. Sub-clans join to form clan families. Clans have a strong oral tradition and firm beliefs in astrology. And with more than 1880 miles of coastland Somalia has been a center for the fishing industry for centuries. Physical contact between opposite genders is not appropriate including shaking hands yet is common towards those of the same gender.⁸

Holidays & Celebrations

Somalis have rich traditions in poetry, folk dancing, performing plays, and singing.² These are performed in local costumes for religious ceremonies, family events, and state ceremonies. Soccer, known as football, is a popular sport to watch and play. War has ceased many celebrations. However, as 99% of Somalis are Muslim they do celebrate Eid al-Fitr which marks the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting from sunrise to sunset.⁷

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Health Disparities

Somalia has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world and an average life expectancy of 50 years.² More than 40% are under 15 years old. Those arriving directly from refugee camps are at risk for malnutrition, vitamin D and iron deficiencies, TB, and Hepatitis B.⁸ Due to their dark skin and modest dress, women are particularly at risk for vitamin D deficiency. Due to the content of their foods, Somalis are at a higher risk to develop obesity, T2DM, and cardiovascular disease. Somalis may also have anxiety and PTSD from the violence seen in their country.

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

On the coast much more fish such as tuna or mackerel is consumed whereas inland camel, goat, and camel milk is consumed.⁸ Halal is observed, therefore they cannot eat pork or consume alcohol. Fruit depends on the growing season, but may include grapefruit, mango, papaya, and banana. Tea with lots of sugar is a preferred beverage. Three meals are eaten a day with lunch being the largest. Lunch is always eaten as a family so they may wait for children to arrive home from school to eat. Silverware is not used and it is considered unclean to eat with your left hand.

Considerations for WIC

- Visual resources may be useful, but always ask what their literacy level is and which language that they speak.⁸
- Rather than asking if they speak English, ask if they would benefit from an interpreter.⁸
- Men might consider food preparation a woman's business and disregard questions pertaining to nutrition.⁸
- Due to cultural influences, many mothers will breast feed their child for the first two years of life or until their next pregnancy. Often they may also supplement with formula or sugar water.^{8,9}
- Some Somalis may believe that Colostrum is harmful, that breastfeeding with a cold or flu is harmful to the child, and they may also feed infants honey for healing within their first 12 months of life.⁸
- Longevity of life itself will not motivate a Somali. Staying healthy so that they are not a burden to their family and the ability to continue to worship will be motivating to a Somali Woman.⁸
- Due to authority structures in Somalia, they will expect advice to be given to them confidently. Negotiation may be perceived as the health professional having limited knowledge on a subject.⁸

What's the Iowa Connection?

Since 2002 Iowa has helped resettle 601 Somalis.¹⁰ 550 of these Somalis lives in Des Moines. Often Refugees have waited for years in camps to be allowed to come to America.¹¹ By the time Somalis come to Iowa they have probably already been away from their home country for three years. Secondary Migration, movement to a new state from the one they originally resettled in, brings additional Somalis to Iowa for employment, better wages, lower cost of living, and education.¹²



Angero/Injero: sour dough flatbread eaten with meals⁴



Sambuus: fried and stuffed with various meat and vegetables



Suqaar: cubed beef often made into stew and eaten with angero

How are we Living?

Households usually consist of 7 or more people with 2-3 generations living together.⁸ It is the mothers' and older daughters' role to prepare foods. Frying in large amounts of oil or stewing are the most common cooking methods. Foods are often high in sugar, salt, and fat.

