

Ethiopian Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Ethiopia

Primary Language(s): Amharic, Orommo, Tigrinia, Somali and English

Percent of Iowa's Population: .02% (20, 21)

Background

Ethiopia has a long and very old history. In fact, the oldest human remains ever found were in this country. (1, 8) It is the oldest independent country in African. It was never colonized by outsiders except for a 5 yr. occupation by Mussolini, whom they eventually defeated. (2) There have been many rulers and monarchies in Ethiopia, with the first recorded around 700 BC. The last monarchy ended in 1974. The Derge, a socialist government known for its brutality, governed the nation until the Ethiopians People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) defeated them in 1991. The EPRDF established democratic rule and currently governs Ethiopia. However, there is still opposition, corruption, and prosecution. War, drought, health problems, and unrest have left Ethiopia one of the poorest countries in Africa. (1) Ethiopia is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country. It is home to one of the oldest Christian churches—the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Religion is central to many in Ethiopia and has close ties with the government. Almost half the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. There is also a large Muslim population, and other religions such as Judaism. (2, 11, 23) As many as 70-80 languages are spoken in Ethiopia. English is the most common foreign language and is used in secondary schools and universities. Amharic, Oromo, Tigrinya and Somali are common local languages. One of the most ancient languages in the world—Ge'ez—is still used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. (2, 3, 11, 18) Ethiopia's economy is based on agriculture, although it suffers from poor cultivation practices and drought. (1, 4, 8)



Ethiopia is in northeast Africa—the main part of the “horn of Africa”. (1, 9)



Injera is a large, sourdough flatbread served with spicy stews containing meat and/or vegetables. (1, 3, 7, 10, 11, 13)

Education and Literacy

Before 1974 the illiteracy rate in Ethiopia was above 90%. Since 2015, the literacy rate has increased to 49%. Education is compulsory and is free for children between the ages of 5-16 years. However, many children cannot access full-time, high quality education because of poverty and poor facilities. Males have more opportunities. However affirmative action is now supported by the Ethiopian government and women and men may attend universities/colleges. There is no cost for tuition at some Ethiopian colleges or universities, but some are run by the government who requires payment of service after completion of studies. (1, 3, 4, 12)

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

- Traditional dress varies by ethnic group or tribe. Women often wear long dresses. Men wear pants and long shirts. In Ethiopia, more primitive tribes may not wear clothes. (3, 4, 7)
- Women that are pregnant may avoid certain foods such as, dairy, linseed, fatty meats, honey, eggs, and some fruits and vegetables due to fears of a hard delivery, “discoloration of the baby, and miscarriage.”(5, 6, 10)
- Homosexuality is not approved of, and may be outlawed in some areas of Ethiopia. (7)
- Virginity of the bride when married is important and proof of lack of virginity may be grounds for a divorce or more severe consequences. (8)
- Some may practice female genital cutting which is illegal and not practiced in the U.S. They may seek a practitioner from Ethiopia. (27)

Holidays & Celebrations

January 7: Ethiopian Christmas (Genna). This is the end of the 40 day fasting period of Advent. Church services are attended on Christmas Eve, and the celebration continues with family and friends on Christmas day.

January 19: Timkat or Epiphany. This is a reenactment of the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan that last for two days.

April: The Ethiopian Easter, Fasika. This marks the end of a 55 day fast when no meat or dairy is consumed. Church services are on Easter eve, and families and friends celebrate the end of fasting with feasts and celebrations that can last a week.

September 11: Enkutatash. Ethiopian New Year, celebration of the end of the rainy period and the Feast of John the Baptist. Children dance through villages wearing bright clothes & give flowers, garlands, & brightly colored paintings. At the Yohannes church it's a 3 day celebration with prayer, psalms, & hymns.

September 27 or 28: Meskel is to celebrate the finding of the remains of the actual cross on which Jesus was crucified. Celebrations start the night before with bonfires topped with flowers and the cross. (14, 15, 16)

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Health Disparities

Common health issues for Ethiopian immigrants are infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, vitamin deficiency, anemia, and the long-term effects of malnutrition and physical and psychological trauma from war. Changes in lifestyle and diet for Ethiopians in the U.S. have brought Western diseases, such as diabetes Type 2, hypertension, and high cholesterol to this population. A common belief among Ethiopians is that well-being is based on a balance of spiritual, physical, social, and environmental forces. In addition, they place a high importance on cleanliness for staying healthy. Illness can be attributed to God, destiny, nature, demonic spirits, emotional stress, or a breach of social taboos or vows. Ethiopian medicine relies heavily on magical and supernatural beliefs, such as the belief that miscarriages are the result of demonic spirits. Ethiopians often use home-based therapies and herbal remedies, such as animal products, mineral, eucalyptus leaves, oil seeds, and spices to heal health common ailments.” (11) There is a stigma associated with mental illnesses. Ethiopians may avoid marrying into families that have members with mental illnesses or other disabilities. (11)

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Traditional Ethiopian foods are injera, a sourdough unleavened bread made from a native millet gran called teff. Injera is eaten with a spicy vegetable or meat stew called wat (or wot). The injera is torn and used as a scoop or spoon to pick up the stews. It is polite to eat with your right hand, as the left hand is considered unclean. Hands may be washed at the table before and after meals. Several may sit around the same large, loaded, injera to share the meal. Wat is often made from beef, lamb, or chicken, and/or carrots, cabbage, spinach, potatoes and lentils. Ethiopian foods are often flavored with a spice called berbere which contains hot red peppers and other spices. For religious reasons, pork is not consumed, and during Christian fasting periods no animal products are consumed. Some Ethiopians are vegetarians. Coffee (bunna) is produced in Ethiopia and is the favorite drink. A coffee ceremony is the traditional way coffee is made and consumed. Coffee beans are roasted over a fire, ground and placed in a Jebena (black pot) with water to brew. When ready, coffee is served in small cups up to three times during the ceremony. If you are offered coffee or food you are expected to accept it. Ethiopians usually have one or two meals and some snacks each day. (1, 3, 11, 13)

Considerations for WIC

- Ethiopians are soft spoken and appreciate a quiet, gentle approach.
- Weight gain during pregnancy may not be desired due to fear of delivering a large baby.
- Punctuality may not be valued, so educate and stress the importance of coming on time to appointments.
- Handshakes should be soft, and some may not approve of touching between members of the opposite sex. Always shake hands with the right hand.
- It is polite to greet Ethiopians and inquire about their family before taking care of other business.
- Ask to address them by their first name before doing so.
- During fasting periods some foods may not be consumed, and they may only eat during certain hours of the day.
- Some experience PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) because of atrocities they have experienced or been witness to, but since mental illness is feared they may not discuss or accept help for this issue. (1, 3, 6, 10, 11, 19)
- Resources for Ethiopians:
 - Bureau of Refugee Services, 515-875-5606
 - Department of Human Services
 - Public Health Offices
 - Catholic Charities, 515-244-3761
 - Iowa International Center, 515-282-8269
 - Lutheran Services of Iowa, 515-271-7335
 - Nisaa African Women’s Project, 515-288-0881
 - ESL(English as a second language) classes in each community(17, 19, 24,25,26)

What’s the Iowa Connection?

According to the 2013-2017 American Community Survey, there are approximately 757 Ethiopians in Iowa. Most who arrive here from Ethiopia are refugees fleeing their country due to unrest or dangerous conditions. Some are immigrants who voluntarily leave their country. They come to Iowa for a safe place to live and earn a living. Common employers are meat packing and manufacturing plants. (17, 19, 20, 21, 22)



Picture of Ethiopian Coffee Ceremony (1, 27)

How are we Living?

Ethiopians may come to America as a family, or only one member of the family may come at first. Some have more priority—for instance a women who is pregnant may be allowed to leave the country first. Extended families often live together. In more traditional homes, the women do all domestic chores and they cook and serve the meals. Men work outside the home and handle all financial and business matters. (3, 25, 26)

