Listening to Diverse Voices: Multicultural Mental Health Promotion Research Project

Eritrean, Ethiopian, Somali & Sudanese Communities in Western Australia
Citation

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Acknowledgments

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- Murdoch University
- East Metropolitan Population Health Unit

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For further information about East African Communities in Western Australia see Office of Multicultural Interests, *2004 Western Australian Community Profiles, 2001 Census – Horn of Africa-Born (Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia Born)*, Government of Western Australia, Perth WA.
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Research Overview

Depression has been identified as a significant global health problem. However, to date, there has been little research into the most appropriate strategies to use in the prevention of depression. There is even less research about the understanding that people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have of the conditions encompassed by the term ‘depression’, (or more culturally and linguistically specific representations of unhappiness) and of the ways in which these conditions may be prevented.

The Listening to Diverse Voices: multicultural mental health promotion research project, a collaboration between Murdoch University and the East Metropolitan Population Health Unit, funded by Healthway, investigated these issues within a number of minority communities and in consultation with service providers in Perth, Western Australia, during the period 2001-2004. The objectives of the research were to identify cultural differences in understandings and experiences of ‘depression’ and appropriate ways of dealing with such issues.

The research used focus groups and interviews to explore understandings of social and emotional well-being and of ‘depression’ among members of a number of communities in Perth. These included Sudanese, Somali, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Croatian, Bosnian and Chinese communities and also Indigenous Australians. The information in this document however pertains only to the Horn of Africa communities in the study. Service providers too were canvassed for their concerns and experiences. Participants came from a variety of ethnic and class backgrounds, and while some entered Australia under the ‘skilled migrant’ category, many came under the ‘humanitarian program’ and had experienced life in refugee camps in other parts of the world before coming to Australia. Over 200 people participated in the research.

Because of cultural sensitivities, separate focus groups were conducted with men, women and young people for some communities. Within the Sudanese community separate focus groups were conducted with North and South Sudanese and, within the Ethiopian community, separate focus groups were undertaken with Oromo men and women. In the Eritrean community Arabic speaking men and Tigre speaking men participated in separate focus groups. Most focus groups, apart from those with youth, were conducted by bilingual facilitators, in community languages, and were then transcribed verbatim and translated. Some focus groups and all interviews were conducted in English.

It is important to note that the use of such groupings does not imply internal homogeneity of individuals, experiences, perspectives or concerns.

All interviews and focus groups were undertaken using a semi-structured, standardised schedule. Interview and focus group questions were designed to elicit participants’ understandings of mental health, social and emotional well-being, depression, causes of depression and recommendations for appropriate treatments and/or interventions. Interviews and focus groups were taped, transcribed and translated, where necessary, and the transcripts studied for common themes. These themes were then taken back to the communities for comment, and the summaries adapted according to this further
feedback. While it is not claimed that the participants are ‘representative’ of the communities of which they are members, the research team feels confident that the issues identified are among the most common concerns of these communities.

The most significant finding was that issues seen by communities as likely to cause emotional (or mental) distress, are social and settlement issues, rather than being biomedical in nature, or being seen as the result of pre-arrival trauma (although this was one factor identified). The result of this is that while some of the issues may be dealt with from within a ‘population health’ perspective and organisation, most are outside population health parameters. Therefore this information is being provided to a wider audience in the hope that other government departments, non-government organisations and individuals will also take action to address some of these issues.

This document contains brief summaries of the various issues identified by the Horn of Africa communities as leading to what Westerners might call ‘depression’ and their suggestions for solutions. Our commitment to hearing the voices of these communities themselves is reflected in our use of direct quotations taken from the interviews and focus groups. We also provide profiles of the communities, including historical and cultural information and a brief history of arrival in Western Australia.

This document provides information about the new and emerging communities from the Horn of Africa. Horn of Africa. The opinions expressed are from research participants and do not necessarily represent the views of the authors. For information about the findings from all other communities, see the East Metropolitan Population Health Unit Website: http://www.healthyfuture.health.wa.gov.au or Murdoch University Website: http://www.cscr.murdoch.edu.au/
Eritrea

A CULTURAL PROFILE
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Your interest in reading this profile may be because you have met newcomers from Eritrea at your workplace or place of worship or you may be learning about Eritreans at school. Whatever your source of interest, this cultural profile will help you learn more about Eritrea and welcome Eritrean newcomers to Australia.

Most Eritreans leave their country for political reasons; many come as refugees, and others have come here to study or work or to join family members. As you would if you moved to a new country, Eritrean immigrants will have numerous questions about their new home. They will want to learn about their neighbourhood or how to register their child at school. They will probably need information on transportation, health care and grocery shopping. Answering these questions will help make your friends’ or clients’ transition into Australian society smoother. You’ll also find that you have a lot to learn from your new friends or clients.

Although this cultural profile provides insight into some customs, it does not cover all facets of life. The customs described may not apply in equal measure to all newcomers from Eritrea.

Summary Facts

**Official Name:**
State of Eritrea

**Capital:**
Asmara

**Type of Government:**
Transitional democracy

**Population:**
4 million

**Area:**
121,320 sq. km

**Major Ethnic Groups:**
Tigrinya, Tigre, Saho, Afar, Hedareb/beja, Nara, Kunama/Bezien, Blin, Zubed/Rashaida, (Note: official group names may vary)

**Languages:**
Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic, other indigenous languages

**Religions:**
Christianity, Islam, traditional beliefs

**Unit of Currency:**
Nakfa

**National Flag:**
Three triangles arranged in a pattern: red on the hoist side, green above and blue below. A gold laurel wreath and an olive branch appear on the red triangle.

**Date of Independence:**
May 24, 1993

Did you know?
The name Eritrea comes from the Greek word erythrea, meaning red. The word is referred to in a famous shipping manual called Periplus of the Erythrean Sea. The name Erythrean or Red Sea refers to the way that the water’s turquoise colour changes to scarlet when algae form at certain times.
ERITREANS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

At the time of the 2001 Census there were around 240 people recorded as living in Western Australia who had been born in Eritrea. Of these 27% were under 25 years of age, 66% were aged between 25 and 54, and 6% were over 55 years of age. Many more Eritreans have arrived in Western Australia since the 2001 Census.

2001 Census figures provide the following information about Eritreans living in Western Australia:

Location
At the time of the census 49% of those born in Eritrea were living in the Stirling Local Government Area, 14% in Bayswater, 6% in Canning and 5% in Gosnells. Those arriving since 2001 have continued to settle in these areas.

Religion
When asked to identify religious affiliation, 70% nominated Islam and 23% Christian. The figures were similar for those of Eritrean ancestry.

Occupation
34% of those employed were working as labourers or related workers, 12% as professionals and 11% as intermediate production and transport workers.

Income
Just over half of all Eritrean-born aged 15 and over received less than $300 per week. This compares with 40% of the total West Australian population. In the higher income range a lower proportion of Eritrean-born (6%) had incomes of $700 and over per week than the total West Australian population (23%).

Language
In the 2001 census 76% of those born in Eritrea reported speaking Arabic at home and 20% spoke Tigrinya. 77% reported they spoke English very well or well and 1% spoke only English.

COMMUNITY GROUPS
For details of Eritrean community groups please contact:
Office of Multicultural Interests
Level 26/197 St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6000
Phone (08) 9222 8800
E-mail: harmony@dpc.wa.gov.au
Web address: www.omi.wa.gov.au

CULTURAL IMPACT ON HEALTH CARE

Please note: the following information is intended to alert you to some of the ways that culture impacts on health care but may not apply to all Eritreans.

Communication
• Eye contact is valued.
• Religious leaders and elders are given significant respect.

Approach to the health system
• The family may make health decisions collectively. It may be best to check with your client how they wish to approach prognosis.
• Concern that too much blood is taken for tests (particularly for pregnant women).
• Hospitalised patients tend to take a passive role.
• Eritrean patients may expect the physician to direct their health management.

This section has been modified for use in Western Australia with the permission of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the University of Toronto.
ERITREANS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Traditional health practices

• Illness may be caused by:
  • Disequilibrium between the body and the outside world (either temporal or spiritual).
  • Mental equilibrium is considered important to health - giving bad news needs to be handled with this in mind.
• Treatments
  • Herbal medicine is highly developed.
  • Spiritual remedies include amulets and ritual.
• Medications are highly valued
  • Injections are thought to be more powerful than oral medications.
• Mental illness - attributed to evil spirits:
  • Harm can be inflicted by people with the 'evil eye'.
  • May present as somatic complaints.

Gender / Women's health

• Prefer same sex physician.
• Female circumcision is practised traditionally (irrespective of faith).
• Pregnancy and childbirth:
  • A time of increased vulnerability.
  • Some mothers may practise a symbolic rejection of the infant.
  • Breastfeeding is the norm but some mothers may withhold feeding for 24 hours.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For further information about services and community groups the Directory of Services for New Arrivals in Western Australia is available from the Office of Multicultural Interest, 2nd Floor, 81 St George’s Terrace, Perth, telephone (08) 9426 8690 and online at www.omi.wa.gov.au

Further information for health professionals about cultural diversity can be found at http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural

REFERENCES


Office of Multicultural Interest, 2001 Western Australian Community Profiles, 2001 Census – Horn of Africa-Born (Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia Born), Government of Western Australia, Perth WA.


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Located in northeast Africa, Eritrea is bordered by Sudan to the northwest, the Red Sea to the north and east, Djibouti in the southeast and Ethiopia to the south. The country's coastline stretches over 1,000 kilometres along the Red Sea.

Eritrea can be divided into three main regions: the central highlands, the western lowlands and the eastern escarpment and coastal plains. The capital city of Asmara is located in the central highlands, which is a narrow strip of land running through the middle of the country about 1,980 metres above sea level, and accounting for a fourth of the country's total area. Seasonal rivers and streams drain the highlands, and over the centuries flowing water has dug deep gorges and formed small, flat-topped tablelands called emba. The highlands receive the most rainfall, with an annual average of 40 to 60 centimetres; the region's fertile soil and favourable climate (averaging 18°C) make it the most populated and cultivated area in the country.

To the north and east, the highlands become narrow and hilly. The plateau drops into a coastal plain with poor soil and little vegetation. Accounting for a third of the country's total land area, the plain is only 15 to 80 kilometres wide in the north. In its southernmost section, the plain widens to include the Denakil Plains, a barren region that contains both the Denakil Depression, one of the hottest places on earth, and the Kobar Sink, a depression that descends more than 300 kilometres below sea level. The Sink is one of the lowest places in the world not covered by water.

The western flank of the central highlands is a broken and undulating plain that slopes toward the Sudan border. The sandy soil retains little water, and vegetation consists mostly of scattered trees, shrubs and grasses. Typical wildlife in Eritrea's hot savannah areas includes wildcats, warthogs, gazelles and jackals.

Off the east coast in the Red Sea is the Dahlak Archipelago, a group of more than 300 small islands, only a few of which are inhabited. The islands are home to a large number of nesting sea birds, including the Arabian bustard and osprey.

Did you know?
The camel is the national emblem of Eritrea. During Eritrea's war of independence from Ethiopia, the camel was the main mode of transportation for moving food supplies, arms, ammunition and people across the country.
A Look At the Past

Eritrea is a young nation that only recently won its independence from Ethiopia after a long war. However, this youngest country of Africa is an ancient land whose history goes back thousands of years. Eritrea has a diverse ethnic population, with nine major ethnic groups and many subgroups, each with its own distinctive language, customs and religious beliefs.

Occupying the lowlands, the earliest known settlers in Eritrea are said to have come from the Nile valley around 4,000 B.C. Later, migrants from the North African kingdom of Cush (now southern Egypt/northern Sudan) settled in the highlands. About 1,000 B.C. Semitic people from the kingdom of Saba (or She’ba, located in the southwestern Arabian peninsula) crossed the Red Sea and invaded the Cushitic settlers. The Semites established the kingdom of Aksum, which rose to prominence between 400 and 700 A.D.

Different groups dominated the area until the 16th century, when the area came under the control of the Ottoman Turks, who ruled for over three centuries. Colonizers were attracted by the area's access to the Red Sea, and by 1875 Egypt had defeated the Turks and taken over control of the region.

Beginning in 1882, Italian colonizers gradually usurped Egyptian control of Eritrea, proclaiming it an Italian colony in 1890. Italian rule lasted until World War II, when British forces occupied the territory. The British administration continued until 1952, when the United Nations created a federation of Eritrea and Ethiopia. In 1962, however, Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie ended Eritrean autonomy, imposing the Amharic language of Ethiopia on Eritreans and making Eritrea Ethiopia's 14th province.

Eritreans wanted their freedom and their own nation. In 1961, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) launched an armed struggle for independence. Revolution spread across the central highlands, beginning what was to be a brutal 30-year war (September 1962-May 1991). In the early 1970s, the ELF split apart and some members left to launch another movement that was later named the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). The EPLF eventually came to lead Eritrea's war.

In 1974, Selassie's regime in Ethiopia was overthrown and replaced by a new ruler, Colonel Menigstu Mariam, who secured the Soviet Union as Ethiopia's new and powerful ally against Eritrea. Yet when the Soviet Union stopped its military aid to Ethiopia in the late 1980s, Ethiopia's military power began to falter. In May 1991, the EPLF liberated Asmara and the war ended victoriously for Eritreans.

In a referendum vote held two years after liberation, Eritreans voted for full sovereignty, with President Isaias Afwerki as their leader. On May 24, 1993, the country declared independence. Afterwards, Eritrea enjoyed good relations with Ethiopia, though a border dispute erupted into war in 1998. In December 2000 the two countries signed a formal peace agreement.

Did you know?

In 1995, one of the oldest human fossils ever found was discovered in Eritrea, leading experts to speculate that Eritrea may well be the cradle of our species. The fossil is estimated to be over one million years old.
Most Eritreans live in rural areas in an extended family that includes parents, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents. Eritreans have a strong sense of family unity, and this familial feeling extends even to strangers: it’s not uncommon for an Eritrean to greet a stranger using terms like brother, sister or grandfather. Similarly, an Eritrean adult will readily discipline or correct the behaviour of other people’s children, even ones the adult doesn’t know. The children in turn are expected to respect the adult's words.

The elderly have a special place in Eritrean society, where they are treated with great respect and often asked for advice. Families usually desire elders' approval for any major decision. Elders also settle household conflicts. Women's major role in Eritrea’s liberation struggle created a strong sense of respect for them and helped foster gender equality. About 30% of the fighters were women, and many were frontline soldiers. Women who stayed behind in the villages took over the roles of men who had gone to fight. Since independence, the government has pursued an active policy for women's equality and has allocated a quota of 30% for women in the local and provincial assemblies; however, much of Eritrean society remains traditional and patriarchal, especially in the rural areas.

Except among the Kunama, families usually arrange marriages. Traditionally, the boy’s family proposes marriage to the girl's family; however, in the cities, young people are increasingly finding their own partners. After a wedding, an Eritrean bride stays in her house for two weeks, during which time her relatives and friends pamper her.

Eritreans live in many styles of houses. The Tigrinya, who constitute about 50% of the population, live in hidmos, a traditional house in the highlands. A heavy, earthen roof is supported by poles and pillars made out of juniper, wild olive or eucalyptus trees. Elsewhere in rural areas, homes may be made of clay or wood, or of portable materials that are easy to dismantle and carry on camels. In the cities, homes are small; recently, apartment buildings have sprung up in Asmara.

Did you know?
The Kunama are the only matrilineal group among the Eritreans. Kunaman women head families, and only people from a mother's side of the family are considered relatives.

Did you know?
Most Eritreans are known by their first name, followed by their father's first name.
After independence, Eritreans set about reviving their economy with their characteristic optimism and determination. The country enjoyed strong economic growth and a low inflation rate. However, the economy was greatly affected by the recent war with Ethiopia. Since 1999, the country’s revenue has fallen by 50% and inflation has soared. With the two countries reaching a truce, Eritreans have begun to rebuild their economy again.

Important to the economy is the Red Sea coastline, a strategic location on the international trade route and a potential tourist attraction. Besides working to promote new industries, the government has begun to rebuild the port cities of Massawa and Assab and is trying to develop coastal regions for leisure travellers.

Nearly 80% of the country’s population depends on agriculture for its livelihood; however, soil erosion, poor rainfall and outdated technology present major obstacles. As a result, most families practise subsistence farming, growing crops mainly for their own consumption, with a small surplus for trade. Agricultural products account for less than one-fifth of the country’s revenue. Teff (a traditional grain), wheat, barley and corn are the main crops of the highlands. In the lowlands, farmers grow sorghum, millet and corn, as well as fruits and vegetables. Certain nomadic groups like the Hedareb and Afar keep large herds as a form of insurance against bad years, but war and drought have hit the herds hard.

Salt is one of Eritrea’s most important exports, with Assab being a major centre for salt production. Apart from some basic machinery, salt is produced today as it was thousands of years ago: pools of seawater are left to evaporate in the sun and wind, and then the salt remaining is gathered.

Industrial production accounts for about 20% of the country’s revenue, and exports include textiles and processed food. Salt and cement plants operate in Massawa, and a petroleum refinery in Assab.

In the cities, women are increasingly opening up their own businesses and joining the civil service. However, in rural areas, women are relegated to helping in the fields and taking care of the home.

Did you know?
In 1997, the Eritrean government named its new currency after the town of Nakfa. The site of an important battle during the war, Nakfa symbolizes freedom and resilience.
**SPORT & RECREATION**

Eritreans’ favourite sports are soccer and cycling. There are an estimated 200 soccer clubs and more than 5,000 registered players nationally. As there are very few designated soccer fields, children play the game on the streets with balls made out of compacted cotton. Eritrea also boasts numerous cycling clubs, and women have recently begun to take up this sport seriously. In rural areas camel racing is also gaining ground, especially among the Tigre and Rashaida peoples.

Traditional games include *gebetta*, (called mandala elsewhere in the world), which is played with 48 dried peas. The board is usually rectangular, with two facing rows of six hollowed cups each. The game involves picking up the peas in a chosen cup and redistributing them in an attempt to capture as many peas as possible.

Another traditional game is *fti fti*, usually played by a group of girls and set to the rhythm of certain songs. Girls squat-hop up and down to the beat of the tune. The goal is to see who gets tired first and who can outlast the group. *Handai*, similar to jacks, is played by both boys and girls. The game usually uses seven pebbles. Players must toss pebbles in the air and catch them while picking up other ones from the ground.

In the cities, government-run youth clubs offer both recreational and educational activities. Cities like Asmara also have a strong café culture; Asmarinos love to hang out and socialize on the tree-lined streets.

**Did you know?**

Making Eritrean coffee or *bun* involves an elaborate ceremony usually performed for guests at home. The raw coffee beans are roasted over a small charcoal fire, then ground with a mortar and pestle. The grounds are slow boiled in a clay pot with a long neck, and then the coffee is poured into tiny cups and mixed with lots of sugar. The process takes over an hour.

**Did you know?**

Eritreans derive their passion for cycling from the Italians. One of the toughest cycling races goes along the Asmara-Keren road. The 91-kilometre route has many hairpin bends, steep slopes and winding roads. The winner of this race goes on to represent Eritrea in international competitions.
Years of war have destroyed Eritrea’s health care system, and recurring droughts after independence have worsened the situation. With independence, the country faces the difficult task of providing national health care.

Most medical facilities are concentrated in Asmara, leaving the rest of the country without adequate care. Even in Asmara, hospitals are understaffed and under-equipped.

The government has launched a program to decentralize health care and medical facilities, including setting up medical care centres between villages. Yet the challenges of providing adequate staff and equipment continue. Private health care is also available in Eritrea, but is very expensive.

Malaria afflicts many Eritreans, especially on the coastal plains. Dengue fever is also prevalent, and according to the United Nations, HIV infection has been spreading. The government has launched a grass-roots program aimed at HIV prevention.

One of the biggest problems facing Eritrea is the size of its displaced population. Over half a million Eritreans sought refuge in Sudan during the war of independence. Afterwards, most of them returned to Eritrea, but lacked homes and resources. The sudden influx of refugees put severe pressure on the existing infrastructure and health care facilities. Within the refugee community, malaria, meningitis and cholera are common; there is also a high incidence of diarrhoea, respiratory and skin infections, and many people suffer from malnutrition. The Ministry of Health has taken steps to address these problems among displaced persons by constructing hospitals and network clinics, but in the absence of an adequate medical system, Eritreans depend on traditional medicine. Traditional healers use medicinal herbs and other local ingredients to treat both diseases and common sicknesses. People also use home remedies. For example, eucalyptus leaves are boiled in water and the steam inhaled to help fight congestion, while for children, the herb rue is ground with warm oil and rubbed on the chest. Onion and garlic fermentations are used as antibiotics.

Healers do not take any monetary form of payment: patients compensate for services by giving food or clothing, and sometimes even jewellery.

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Healers do not take any monetary form of payment: patients compensate for services by giving food or clothing, and sometimes even jewellery.

Did you know?
Rather than going to a doctor or hospital, many Eritreans prefer taking a dip in a maicholot, one of the country's numerous hot springs that are believed to cure sickness. The border dispute with Ethiopia has slowed improvements.
Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic are considered the country’s three main languages, although there are many other indigenous languages and dialects. Most Eritreans speak more than one local language, and a few also speak Italian and English.

Tigrinya, which is spoken by the majority of the population, is considered the country’s working language, along with Arabic. Thought to have descended from the ancient language of Ge’ez, Tigrinya has over 200 characters in written form, each with a distinctive sound. Although Tigre is also descended from Ge’ez, it is not similar to Tigrinya. Tigre’s pronunciation and usage also vary between geographic regions.

A large proportion of Eritrea’s Muslim population speaks Arabic; this number is increasing with the return of Eritreans from Sudan and the Middle East.

Each ethnic group in Eritrea has its own language. Afar, Hedareb, Blin and Saho are Cushitic languages. Kunama and Nara are from the Nilotic group. Apart from Tigrinya and Tigre, many Eritrean languages use Latin or Arabic scripts. Eritreans are very friendly and hospitable people. They will commonly stop tourists and ask them about their travels and well-being. Greetings are elaborate. In formal situations, Eritreans shake hands with each person, asking about their health and family. Close friends of the same gender greet each other by kissing several times on both cheeks.

The words ‘thank you’ are rarely used in Eritrea, possibly because the Tigrinya word for ‘thank you’, yeKenyeley, sounds quite formal. Eritreans also do not expect to be thanked for small favours. They consider it their duty to help friends or acquaintances. Television in Eritrea is limited to cities. Radio reaches most of the rural population and is the best way to disseminate information; however, the government censors all media in Eritrea.

Did you know?
War veterans have their own unique form of greeting called the shoulder bump: they clasp their right hands together and bump shoulders three times. The gesture is a sign of great camaraderie.

### Communicating With The Eritreans

<table>
<thead>
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<th>English</th>
<th>Tigrinya</th>
<th>Tigre</th>
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<td>Selam Alekum</td>
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<td>How are you? (male)</td>
<td>Kemayla-ka?</td>
<td>Kefo Mileka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are you? (female)</td>
<td>Kemayla-kee</td>
<td>Kefo Mileki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am fine</td>
<td>Tsebuk</td>
<td>Gerum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Did you know?**
War veterans have their own unique form of greeting called the shoulder bump: they clasp their right hands together and bump shoulders three times. The gesture is a sign of great camaraderie.
Eating the Eritrean Way

Eritrean food habits vary regionally. In the highlands, *injera* is the staple diet and eaten daily among the Tigrinya. Made out of teff, wheat or sorghum, *injera* resembles a spongy, slightly sour pancake. At mealtime, people share food from a large tray placed in the centre of a low dining table. Numerous *injera* are layered on this tray and topped with various spicy stews. The head of the family says a prayer and people break into the section of *injera* in front of them, tearing off pieces and dipping them into the stews. Eritreans use only the right hand for eating and consider it rude to lick one’s fingers or let them touch the lips.

The stews to accompany *injera* are usually made from beef, mutton or vegetables. Recently, fish was introduced to the Eritrean diet and is becoming more popular because of its wide availability and low cost. Most Eritreans, with the exception of the Saho, like their food hot and spicy. *Berbere*, a kind of dried chilli pepper, accompanies almost all dishes. Stews include *zigni*, which is made of beef; *alicha* which is made without *berbere*; and *shiro*, a puree of various legumes. Other dinner accompaniments include *samboosa*, a filo pastry filled with meat and deep fried, and *mushabak*, a round, woven sweet-pastry, also deep fried.

In the lowlands, the main dish is *akelet*, a porridge-like dish made from wheat flour dough. A ladle is used to scoop out the top, which is filled with *berbere* and butter sauce and surrounded by milk or yogurt. A small piece of dough is broken and then used to scoop up the sauce.

Tea can be considered Eritrea’s national drink, consumed by most people at least twice a day. In the lowlands, tea is spicy and made with dried ginger, cardamom, cloves and cinnamon. Eritreans also love strong coffee, which, when time permits, is served using a coffee ceremony at home.

**Did you know?**
Eritreans will commonly scoop up food and put it in the mouth of a loved one or guest. The act is a sign of affection.

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**Injera (flatbread)**

**Ingredients**
- 1 tsp dry yeast
- 600 ml warm water
- 960 ml flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- Vegetable oil for frying

**Preparation**
In a large mixing bowl, dissolve the yeast in the water, then add the flour and mix well. Let the mixture stand at room temperature overnight (for two nights if the room is cold). Stir in the baking powder and let stand 10 minutes. In a large frying pan, heat 1/2 teaspoon of vegetable oil. Add 120 ml of the batter and fry over low heat for one to two minutes. When bubbles appear in the batter, cover the frying pan for 15 seconds. Uncover, and turn out the bread onto a plate. Fry the remaining batter the same way, cooking on one side only. Serve the injera at room temperature with a meat or vegetable dish.
At the time of Eritrea's independence, only 20% of the population was literate. The proportion among women was even lower. Today literacy levels have improved, though they remain below those of other developing nations.

Although education is free for all Eritrean citizens, school and educational facilities exist for less than half the population, and many are located in urban areas. A typical public school in Asmara has two shifts: primary school usually starts at eight in the morning and ends at noon, while the higher grades have their classes in the afternoon from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. Access to education is a serious problem for children living in smaller towns, villages and remote regions. More boys go to schools than girls, who are often expected to stay home and help with household chores or in the fields.

Eritrea's school system is divided into three phases: primary school lasts for five years, middle school for two years and upper or secondary school for four years. Enrolment varies for different levels and is estimated at 45% for primary schools, 22% for middle schools and 14% for secondary schools.

To help preserve cultural diversity, primary school instruction is given in the native language of each region.

At higher grades, Arabic and foreign languages like English are introduced. From grade seven through university, all schooling is in English.

Children also receive education outside the state school system. Many Muslim children go to a Khelwa (Islamic preschool) to study the Koran.

This education provides them with a knowledge of Arabic before they start public school. Some communities also have strong oral traditions in which knowledge of language and stories about the community and family are passed down through the generations.

Did you know?
Blin, the language of the farmers in the north, is slowly being displaced. The Ministry of Education has taken steps to keep the language alive and Blin academics have begun documenting the language to create a Blin dictionary, grammar and primer books.

The University of Asmara is Eritrea's only university, with a capacity of 4,000 students in total. Girls now require a lower percentage for admission than boys—a policy adopted to encourage more girls to take up higher education.
Eritrea is almost equally divided between Muslims and Christians, who have co-existed peacefully throughout Eritrea’s history. Christianity was introduced in the 4th century to the coastal region and then it was spread to the plateau. The majority of Eritrean Christians belong to the Orthodox (Coptic) Church; there are also small numbers of Roman Catholics and Protestants.

The Church is integral to the everyday life of Eritrean Christians. Their cultural practices are intimately connected with the rituals and calendar of the Orthodox Church—even when an individual is not a regularly practising church member, or is a member of another Christian denomination. For example, many Eritrean Christians do not eat meat or dairy products on Wednesday and Fridays, as these days are considered days of fasting by the Orthodox Church.

Services in the Orthodox Church are still conducted in the ancient Axumite language of Ge'ez; however, since this language is no longer spoken, sermons are usually given in Tigrinya or another local language. Veneration of icons is an important part of Eritrean religious life: Christians will often carry small icons in their pockets and hang them in their homes, offices or vehicles.

Roman Catholicism came to Eritrea in the 16th century. The first missionaries were Portuguese priests and were involved in religious and political activities, helping the locals fight against the Turks. Recently, Protestant missionaries established congregations in Eritrea.

Did you know?
Annually on May 21, Eritrean Christians make the colourful Miriam De’arit pilgrimage near the town of Keren. The event has religious roots, but it is now celebrated like a carnival. A small shrine is built in a baobab tree situated some distance from town. After a morning service, cows and oxen are slaughtered for a feast that often goes on into the afternoon.

Eritrean Muslims belong to the Sunni sect of Islam. The first people who converted to Islam were the coastal inhabitants in the 8th century. The religion spread rapidly with the invasion of the Turkish Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. Islam is now predominant in the lower plains of Eritrea. Devout Muslims are expected to acknowledge that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed is his prophet; to pray five times a day; to give alms to the poor; to fast during the daylight hours in the month of Ramadan; and, if possible, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.

Animism is the indigenous belief system of Eritrea, and most Muslims and Christians have incorporated some animist beliefs into their faith. Followers believe that evil spirits can possess people and cause sickness or death. Most Eritreans fear Zar, an evil spirit who can enter and kill a person. The Afar believe that trees as well as the dead have special powers, while the Hedareb believe in the “evil eye”—the notion that some people have the power to bring on bad luck.
In Eritrea, statutory holidays include religious, national and cultural events. Festivals vary regionally, but usually include a feast, followed by singing and dancing.

Eritrea has 16 public holidays, three of which honour the country's nationhood and independence, as well as those who died in the freedom war. National holidays are marked with speeches, public demonstrations, seminars and cultural shows.

Christian religious holidays are celebrated with prayers, followed by feasting and dancing. On Timket (Baptism) eve, people flock outdoors in colourful processions. On the day itself each church's tabernacle is paraded through the streets. People follow the priest to a river, where the baptism of Jesus is re-enacted.

Meskel, also called Mashkela, is a Christian festival that marks the finding of the true cross, although its roots seem to be in a harvest ritual. Villagers carry lit torches to a clearing outside the village, where they light a huge bonfire, dance until the last ember burns out and then gather the new harvest. Fresh drink is prepared from the new grain and offered to the ancestors. Only after these rituals have been completed do the people eat some of the harvest themselves. The three important Muslim holidays are Eid-al-Fitr, the feast that marks the end of Ramadan; Eid-al-adha, the pilgrimage to Mecca; and Mawlid al-nabi, which is the prophet Mohammed's birthday. These occasions are marked with prayers and family gatherings. On Eid-al-Fitr, people usually wear new clothes and visit friends. The most famous local pilgrimage for Muslims is to the Eritrean town of Keren; people who cannot make the Haj to Mecca may undertake this journey.

Because Muslim holidays are based on the lunar calendar, their dates vary annually. The dates for Orthodox Easter and Good Friday also vary annually.

Did you know?
Eritrea has festivals for children. On Hoye Hoye children go singing from house to house and receive roasted chickpeas as treats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Holiday</th>
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<tr>
<td>January 19</td>
<td>Timket</td>
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<td>March 8</td>
<td>Women's Day</td>
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<td>May 1</td>
<td>International Labour Day</td>
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<td>May 24</td>
<td>Liberation Day</td>
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<td>June 20</td>
<td>Martyr's Day</td>
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<td>September 1</td>
<td>Start of Armed Struggle</td>
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<td>September 27</td>
<td>Meskel</td>
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<td>December 25</td>
<td>Christmas</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 1</td>
<td>New Year's Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 7</td>
<td>Eritrean Christmas</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Music is a vital part of Eritrean life and has both secular and religious roots. Eritrea has several traditional instruments. The krar is a stringed instrument played like a guitar. The Kunama play the abangala, a banjo-like instrument. The cira-wata is a single-stringed instrument played with a bow like a violin.

Drums are known as the kebero in Tigre and Tigrinya and are played by both sexes. However, the style of playing varies regionally. The role of the drum player is quite important, as the energy of an event depends on the energy of the player, who is judged by his or her movements.

Dancing is very popular across the country. In some parts of the lowlands, men dance in a group known as someeya. This style is very energetic and involves leaping and stick waving. The Kunaman dances are beautiful, colourful and highly sensual; people usually dance in couples, freely expressing their emotions. In the lowlands, Tigre and Blin women dance the sheleel. They shake their long, plaited hair so it swings across their faces.

Eritrean art has been deeply influenced by the war of independence. During the war, the artists’ goals were to uplift the national spirit and to honour those who were fighting or had died. After independence, the government asked artists to go beyond military themes and look to the local landscape and cultural heritage for inspiration. One of the country’s foremost artists is Tirhas Iyassu, who promotes gender equality through her images; for example, she paints pictures of men looking after children.

Eritrean handicrafts are known for their vibrant colours, and each ethnic group has its own specialty. The Nara are known for their saddles and baskets. Men in the Beni-Amer tribe make a type of dagger that has an ebony hilt and a curved, two-edged blade.

Did you know?
People show their appreciation for singers by kissing or hugging them. Sometimes people also place banknotes on the singer’s forehead or hand.
If You Want To Learn More

A travel guide with in-depth coverage of the region's history, geography, natural landscape and travel destinations.

A brief children's guide to the culture and history of Eritrea.

Details of Eritrea's war of independence.

Here are over 100 easy-to-follow recipes that will allow home chefs to bring a real 'taste of Eritrea' to their tables. The author's informative and insightful introduction, which covers aspects of Eritrean history, culture and traditions, also offers the reader a fascinating look at this lovely country.

Construction of identity and community in an African diaspora of Eritreans, Ethiopians and Oromos.

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A CULTURAL PROFILE
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Ethiopian Airlines

In preparing this profile, AMNI has made every effort to use reliable sources of information and to reconcile the views of different groups within the country.

This cultural profile is designed primarily for volunteers working in organized HOST Programs, which match newcomers with volunteers who offer friendship, orientation to the community and an opportunity to practise English or French, if needed.
Every year, people from other countries come to Australia to begin a new life. They bring many talents and skills and the hope of contributing to their new society. You may be reading this profile because your work or daily life has brought you into contact with newly arrived Ethiopians.

Migration is a new experience for Ethiopians. Traditionally they did not move abroad permanently or change their citizenship. The 1974 revolution and the years of chaos that followed sparked migration. Today, dire poverty, development issues and ongoing political conflict in Ethiopia continue to compel many people to leave their country. Ethiopians coming to Western Australia will have many of the same questions that you would have if you moved to a new city or country. They will wonder how to find a job, which schools their children should attend, how to find a doctor and what their new community will be like. You can help your new friends or clients settle by answering their questions. You will also find that you have much to learn from them.

Although this cultural profile provides insights into some customs, it does not cover all facets of life. The customs described may not apply in equal measure to all newcomers from Ethiopia.

Official Name: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Capital City: Addis Ababa
Type of Government: Democratic Republic
Population: 60 million
Area: 1,251,282 sq. km
Major Ethnic Groups: Amhara, Tigrinya, Oromo, Afar, Somali, Omo and others
Languages: Amharic (official), Tigrinya, Oromo, and others
Religions: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity, Islam, Judaism, traditional indigenous beliefs
Unit of Currency: Birr
National Flag: Three horizontal stripes of green, yellow and red (top to bottom). At the centre is the country’s coat of arms: a yellow star on a round, blue background.
Date of Independence: Never colonized
According to the 2001 Census there were around 400 Ethiopian-born people living in Western Australia at that time with 24% residing in the Stirling Local Government Area and approximately 14% in Bayswater. Many more Ethiopians have arrived in Western Australia since the 2001 Census.

2001 Census figures provide the following information about Ethiopians living in Western Australia:

**Language**
The 2001 Census indicated there were a variety of languages spoken at home within the Ethiopian community. The languages spoken included Amharic 38%, Tigrinya 13%, Oromo 11%, English 10%, and Arabic 9%. 74% reported they spoke English very well or well and 10% spoke only English.

**Religion**
Among those who were Ethiopian-born, 71% were affiliated with Christianity and 18% with Islam. The figures were similar for those of Ethiopian ancestry.

**Occupation**
42% of those employed were working as labourers or related workers and 15% as elementary clerical, sales and service workers.

**Income**
Just over half of all Ethiopian-born aged 15 and over received less than $300 per week. This compares with 40% of the total West Australian population. In the higher income range a lower proportion of Ethiopian-born (8%) had incomes of $700 and over per week than the total West Australian population rate of 23%.

**Community Groups**
For details of Ethiopian community groups please contact:
Office of Multicultural Interests
Level 26/197 St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6000
Phone (08) 9222 8800
E-mail: harmony@dpc.wa.gov.au
Web address: www.omi.wa.gov.au

**Cultural Impact on Health Care**
Used with permission
www.diversityinhealth.com/regions/africa/ethiopia.htm
Access date 8 July 2004.

Please note: the following information is intended to alert you to some of the ways that culture impacts on health care but may not apply to all Ethiopians.

**Communication**
- Eye contact is valued, particularly between men. However eye contact between men and women may be inappropriate.
- Elders are given significant respect.

**Approach to the health system**
- It is culturally inappropriate to convey 'bad news' directly. It is thought better to give patients hope.
- The family may make health decisions collectively. Check with your client as to how they wish to approach prognosis.
- Hospitalised patients tend to take a passive role.

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ETHIOPIANS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

- Ethiopian clients may expect the physician to direct their health management.
- There is a wide disparity in the amount of biomedical information Ethiopian clients may possess.
- GPs / family doctors are highly valued.

Traditional health practices
- Illness may be caused by:
  - Disequilibrium between the body and the outside world (either temporal or spiritual).
  - Mental equilibrium is considered important to health.
  - Bad news needs to be handled with this in mind.
- Treatments:
  - Herbal medicine is highly developed.
  - Spiritual remedies include amulets and ritual.
  - Medications are highly valued.
  - Ethiopian clients may expect a medication for every illness.
  - Injections are thought to be more powerful than oral medications.
- Mental illness - attributed to evil spirits:
  - Harm can be inflicted by people with the 'evil eye'.
  - May present as somatic complaints.

Gender / Women's health
- It is culturally inappropriate to describe intimate body parts (euphemistic language is used).
  It is important to use an interpreter in such situations.
- Female circumcision is practiced traditionally (irrespective of faith).
- Pregnancy and childbirth:
  - A time of increased vulnerability.
  - Belief that Western doctors are too quick to perform Caesarians.
  - Some mothers may practice a symbolic rejection of the infant.
  - Breastfeeding is the norm.
  - Mothers stay home for 40 days after birth.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For further information about services and community groups the Directory of Services for New Arrivals in Western Australia is available from the Office of Multicultural Interest, 2nd Floor, 81 St George’s Terrace, Perth, telephone (08) 9426 8690 and online at www.omb.wa.gov.au

Further information for health professionals about cultural diversity can be found at http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural

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Ethiopia lies in the Horn of Africa, in the northeastern part of the continent. To the north is Eritrea; Djibouti lies to the northeast, Somalia to the east, Kenya to the south and Sudan to the west.

A little smaller than the Northern Territory, Ethiopia has varied and spectacular landscapes. Most of the country consists of an enormous plateau more than two kilometres above sea level. The plateau has mountains over 4,500 metres high and some of the world’s deepest canyons. Fertile areas called tablelands are used for agriculture and livestock rearing. The Great Rift Valley, an earthquake fault line traversing Africa, runs from northern to southern Ethiopia and splits the plateau into west and east sections. The western section, called the Amha Plateau, includes the Simn, Entoto and Choke Mountains; Ras Dashen, at 4,572 metres, is the country’s highest peak. The majority of the population lives on the Plateau, which constitutes the country’s weina dega or temperate zone. Temperatures are pleasant, averaging 15° to 20°C.

The capital city, Addis Ababa, is located in the Entoto range of the western plateau. Northwest lies Ethiopia’s largest body of water, Lake Tana. The Blue Nile river, Ethiopia’s greatest river and the chief tributary of the Nile, begins at Lake Tana and flows through the plateau’s western section.

The eastern or Somali Plateau section includes the Mendebo and Ahmar mountain ranges, and a semiarid region called the Ogaden. The plateau area is called the dega (cool) zone: temperatures can drop to freezing during winter. Rainfall is less plentiful than on the west side, and growing crops more of a challenge.

The plateau drops off on all sides to hot lowlands (the kolla areas). In the northeast is the Dnakil Depression, a desert area that is one of the world’s hottest places. In the southwest, Rift Valley lakes such as Ziway and attract wildlife in the otherwise dry environment.

Ethiopia has a wet and dry season, but the country’s diverse topography means rainfall varies widely. Much of the land is rolling savannah, fertile in good years, but vulnerable to drought. Fertile areas have bamboo and rainforest. African birds and animals such as lions, elephants, zebras, and flamingos are common, as well as seven species of indigenous mammals. The country also has the world’s largest remaining concentration of antelopes, giraffes, gorillas and rhinoceroses.

**Did you know?**

Coffee originated in Ethiopia. The word coffee comes from Kefa, the name of a province in southern Ethiopia.

**Did you know?**

Ethiopia is famous as the country of “13 months of sunshine.” The Ethiopian year is based on the Julian calendar, which has 12 months of 30 days each and a 13th month called Pagume, which has five days.
Humans have lived in the Ethiopian region for over three million years; the oldest discovered human remains were found just north of Ethiopia. Settlers came into Ethiopia from the Arabian peninsula and different regions of Africa. Many groups developed their own culture and customs, interacting little with each other. Today, the country has more than 70 distinct ethnic groups.

In the 1st century AD, the kingdom of Axum was established in the highlands of southern Eritrea and Ethiopia. During the 4th century the people of Axum became Christian. Some centuries later, power passed to the Agaws and then to the Amharas, who moved their capital and their empire progressively south until they ruled most of the central plateau.

Islam reached Ethiopia in the 7th century, but initially there was little conflict between Christians and Muslims.

By the 15th century, however, territorial disputes led to clashes; the emperor called on the Portuguese help to defeat a particularly serious threat from Muslims in 1541.

The Portuguese attempted to colonize Ethiopia for many years, and missionaries tried to persuade Ethiopian Christians to adopt Catholicism. However, except for Emperor Menelik II would-be colonizers, the British, Ethiopia is one of the few African countries that was never colonized.

Haile Selassie (1892–1975) was Ethiopia’s last emperor. In the early years of his rule he outlawed slavery, introduced a constitution and parliament, and encouraged education and health reforms. In 1923, he succeeded in getting Ethiopia admittance to the League of Nations, yet in 1936 had to fight another Italian invasion. Allied forces helped Ethiopia defeat the Italians in 1941. Peace did not last long. In 1952, the former Italian colony of Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia, and in 1960 the Eritreans launched a secessionist movement that led to war, which continued for 30 years.

Despite various reforms, Emperor Selassie did not modernize Ethiopia’s economy, and citizens had little political freedom. Public discontent grew and strengthened after a 1973 famine caused the death of 300,000 people. Demonstrations in 1974 led to the overthrow of the monarchy, and in 1975, a new government called the Derg (Committee) declared Ethiopia a socialist state. Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam became the leader of the Derg and later declared himself president.

Mengistu’s regime was often brutal; in the “red terror” campaign of 1977–78, more than 10,000 people were killed in Addis Ababa alone. Government repression, war and repeated drought caused the displacement of millions; many sought refuge abroad. Various liberation groups took up arms against Mengistu’s government, toppling the regime in 1991. A transitional government ruled until 1995, when an elected legislature took over. A new constitution defined the country as a federation of nine states and two cities, headed by Prime Minister Meles Zehawi since 1991.

**Did you know?**

Yeha in northern Ethiopia was the site of its earliest known capital and is considered the birthplace of Ethiopian civilization. The sandstone temple ruins there date from between 800 and 500 BC.
Ethiopian society is built on cooperation. The majority of the population lives in the countryside, usually in small clusters of houses close to relatives and neighbours. Families usually operate farms with neighbours and friends. Every village and town also has mutual aid societies. People make weekly contributions, and the funds pay for marriage and funeral expenses and local road repairs. Society members who are ill can receive money from the fund for treatment. Even small business loans are handled by the local society, rather than by a bank. However, due to widespread poverty in the country, many people have been moving to cities in search of work.

Because Ethiopia has over 70 different ethnic groups, marriage and family practices vary widely. In general, families are patriarchal, with the male as the head and main decision maker. Parents usually arrange their children's marriages, and some girls undergo ritual infibulation, a controversial practice that removes parts of the female genitalia. Newlywed women come to live with their husbands' families.

Wedding settlements for all marriages include possessions and perhaps livestock. Divorce can be initiated by either party, though wedding dowries (telosh) are not returned. Women retain their names and possessions after marriage, and society expects husbands and wives to show equal respect for each other.

When a rural couple marries, everyone pitches in to build a house for the newlyweds; in urban areas, neighbours donate furniture and money. Throughout Ethiopia, neighbours feel responsible for the behaviour of each others' children; they commonly take care of them and may even informally adopt them.

Did you know?
Ethiopian people have some very creative hairstyles. Hamar, Geleb, Bume and Karo men mat a section of their hair with clay and insert feather decorations. Harar women part their hair in the middle and wind it into two buns behind their ears.

Ethiopian children are expected to respect their parents and adults, and obey their decisions.

Although cities like Addis Ababa have high-rise apartments, most Ethiopians live in traditional houses. In rural areas, these are based on the tukul, a windowless, circular hut with a conical roof supported by a central pole. The walls are made by erecting a frame of poles, plastering them with mud, dung and straw, then covering this with branches and bundles of straw.
Ethiopia is an agricultural country; over 85% of its 60 million people live in rural areas. Traditionally, land was owned by the kin group or by landlords. Farmers paid taxes to their landlord and sometimes to the church. The 1975 revolution eliminated the nobility and landlord classes, and the new socialist government encouraged farmers to form co-operatives and work toward collective ownership. However, collective farming never became the norm, and citizens now lease their land from the government.

Ethiopia’s diverse countryside produces many crops. Farmers’ main food crops are cereals such as teff, barley, maize, wheat and millet. Families also raise livestock. The country’s trade crops include coffee, cotton, tobacco, tropical fruits, sugarcane, beans, and oilseeds like flax and sesame. Agricultural production is unstable due to recurrent droughts, pests and soil erosion: hundreds of thousands died in severe droughts during the 1970s and ’80s. Widespread poverty and economic insecurity have caused large numbers of people to migrate.

Industry accounts for only about 10% of Ethiopia’s income. Manufacturing centres mostly on the processing of agricultural products, beverages and textiles. The country’s production has been small, but numerous areas have been identified for future growth.

Ethiopia is also rich in untapped minerals, metals and stones. Significant petroleum and gas discoveries have been made and have attracted foreign attention. The government has privatized many businesses and is encouraging foreign investment and tourism.

Most Ethiopians who don’t farm work for the private or public sector in government positions, business or the service industries. Women tend to work long hours, both in farming, keeping the home and child rearing. In urban areas, some women have entered the professional ranks, but most work in low-paying jobs. The Revolutionary Ethiopia Women’s Association encourages women to create labour groups in their workplaces and addresses issues of gender inequity and discrimination.

**Did you know?**

Until the 20th century, some Ethiopians still used an ancient form of currency called amole, which are salt bars. The system arose because salt was scarce in the highlands and much desired for cooking.

**Did you know?**

Ethiopia is the world’s main supplier of civet (zebade), which is used in perfumes throughout the world. The musky substance is produced by the civet cat, a mammal related to the mongoose.
Sports and Recreation

Visiting family and friends is the most common pastime in Ethiopia. Ethiopians often celebrate being together through the traditional coffee ceremony; guests are expected to drink three cups of coffee. In urban areas, men may get together for coffee in a café.

In both rural and urban areas, Ethiopia’s most popular sport is football (soccer), which people play almost anywhere, sometimes using a bundle of rags as the ball. Other popular sports include boxing, basketball, volleyball, tennis and cycling.

Ethiopians have become famous for excellence in running. Numerous male and female athletes have won Olympic medals and set world records. Abebe Bikila won gold medals at the 1960 and 1964 Olympics. Belayneh Densamo held the world record for marathon running for almost a decade (1989–1998). At the 1992 Olympics, Derartu Tulu became Ethiopia’s first female gold medalist when she won the 10,000-metre event.

In rural areas many men enjoy wrestling, pole-vaulting, and horse racing. Gugs is an equestrian game played by men at festivals. Sitting on brightly decorated horses, riders race at high speeds and throw mock spears at each other. When fleeing, riders fend off spears with shields made of animal hide. Riders also show off their horsemanship by running alongside their horses then leaping onto their backs. Traditionally, the game helped prepare young men for war.

Girls enjoy jacks, skipping, swinging and hopscotch. Card games are popular. Gebata is a board game played throughout Africa. Players try to accumulate as many pebbles as possible by moving them on the board, which has six holes on each side.

Did you know?
The runner Haile Gebrelassie has set 14 world records. His times for the 5,000- and 10,000-metre races are unbeaten. At the 1960 Olympics in Rome, Abebe Bikila ran the marathon barefoot and won the gold medal.

Genna, which resembles hockey, is played traditionally at Christmas. Players use bent sticks (t’ing) and a wooden ball (irur). Unlike hockey, genna has no limit on the number of players and no defined playing area. The goals may be any two spots and can be as far apart as two villages.

In cities such as Addis Ababa, people enjoy modern entertainment such as films, theatre and nightclubs. Some bars offer biliardo (Italian billiards) tables.
In the absence of other treatments, most Ethiopians rely on traditional medicine. Ethiopian healers are of two kinds: ones sanctioned by the church, and faith healers. Healers employ plant, animal and mineral products, honey for chest ailments, rosewood for tapeworm and jasmine for an upset stomach. Many Ethiopians also believe that a *zar* (spirit) can cause mental and physical illness. Spiritual healers use a variety of techniques to drive out the invading force. Childbirth usually occurs at home, supervised by a midwife. Women are supported through labour by other women. Western medicine was introduced to Ethiopia in the 19th century.

Throughout the 20th century, governments initiated programs to train healthcare staff and establish care facilities. Since 1977, free medical care has been available to the needy, and there are many private hospitals. Yet the country still has a severe shortage of physicians and nurses. Most facilities are in urban areas, where only a minority of the population lives. Consequently, people often seek care from local pharmacists, who have training in identifying diseases and prescribing medicines.

Ethiopia has one of the world’s lowest life expectancy rates: only 44 years. Infant mortality is high, at 100 deaths for 1,000 live births. Many health problems in Ethiopia are related to poor sanitation. Three quarters of the population has no access to clean drinking water. Dysentery, gastrointestinal infections and parasites are widespread. Malnutrition, linked to the famines of recent decades, has also made the population more vulnerable to epidemics; consequently, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and hepatitis affect many. Particularly in the cities, HIV and other venereal diseases have become a serious concern.

International organizations such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization have been working in Ethiopia for decades to provide relief and help build the country’s healthcare infrastructure. With foreign assistance, the government has been able to launch preventative programs, including vaccinations. Yet people’s isolation from facilities makes effective immunization programs difficult. Furthermore, low literacy hampers the dissemination of information on sanitation strategies, such as preventing well contamination and preserving food. However, smallpox has been eradicated, and the incidence of malaria, typhoid and other diseases greatly reduced.

**Did you know?**
*Some children wear charms to deter spirits and diseases.*
*The *katab* is a type of talisman made from a parchment scroll.*
Communicating with the Ethiopians

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Amharic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hello/greetings/goodbye</td>
<td>Teanastellen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Dehna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please</td>
<td>Ebakeh (m)/Ebakesh (f)/Ebakon (formal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td>Amesegenallo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Owo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>ie (it's untrue)/Yellam (it cannot be done)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With so many ethnic groups in one country, Ethiopia is rich in languages. People speak at least 70 distinct languages as mother tongues, and there are over 200 local dialects. The majority of these languages belong to three families of Afro-Asiatic languages: Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic. Language distribution is roughly geographical, with Semitic languages spoken in the central highlands, Cushitic languages in the north, and Omotic in the south. Languages in the Nilo-Saharan groups are spoken in the southwest and along the Sudan border, and Somali in the southeast.

Amharic, a Semitic language related to Arabic, is Ethiopia’s national language and used for all media and government communications. Approximately one-fifth of the population speak Amharic as their first language, and many others speak it as a second or third. Since 1991, however, Tigrinya and Oromo, the second and third most spoken languages, have gained semi-official status. In written form, both Amharic and Tigrinya use a Geez script, which has over 200 letters. Oromo uses a Roman alphabet. Ethiopians greatly value eloquence. Speakers are expected to talk clearly, slowly, and make skillful use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, allusion and witty innuendoes. People enjoy riddles and teteq, a game of cross examination.

Courtesy is considered important in Ethiopia. When young, children begin to learn the rules of courtesy: being polite and soft-spoken, and avoiding confrontation and boasting. Ethiopians are taught that their actions should speak for them and that they should not put themselves forward. In new social environments, they often appear formal and reserved.

When meeting, Ethiopians usually shake hands or kiss on the cheek several times. Friends of the same sex often hold hands or embrace each other in public as a sign of friendship. People commonly spend time exchanging inquiries about their families and farms before moving on to other topics, even if the meeting is for business purposes. These queries are a sign of respect and caring.

Did you know?
Traditionally, Ethiopians do not have last names. Ethiopians receive a personal name at birth. Their second name is always their father’s personal name; if they use a third, it is the personal name of their paternal grandfather.
Eating the Ethiopian Way

Ethiopians traditionally don’t use cutlery, preferring to eat with their right hands. Meals usually begin with hand washing: a decorated metal or earthenware jug is brought to the table and a child or adult will then pour water over guests’ outstretched hands into a small basin.

Ethiopia’s national dish is wot, a spicy stew with many varieties. Wot can be made of meat, fish or vegetables, although chicken and beef are the most common bases.

The base is cooked with onions and red peppers in a spicy, currying sauce or berebere, which contains garlic, ginger, cloves, nutmeg, cardamom, fennel seed and coriander. A similar yet milder meat stew is alicha, which is flavoured with onions and ginger instead of berebere. Before wot, Ethiopians sometimes also eat a bland appetizer of curds and whey.

Wot is served on injera, a large, bread made from teff flour that has been fermented as dough for several days. A server spoons different types of wot onto one injera. Diners eat communally, tearing off pieces of the bread and using them to scoop the stew. Only the right hand is used for eating.

Pork is forbidden for Ethiopian Christians, Muslims and Jews. Because there are so many fasting days in the year, Ethiopia has a well-developed vegetarian cuisine, largely based on lentil beans. While Ethiopians love butter and oily foods, they eat very few sweets. The exception is honey, which is often served as a dessert.

When guests arrive, the host offers tea or coffee, perhaps served with popcorn, which is a popular snack.

Yesiga Alich’a (Spicy Beef Stew)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>red onions</td>
<td>480 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water</td>
<td>720 ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beef with bones</td>
<td>90 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>butter</td>
<td>480 g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>garlic</td>
<td>1/2 tsp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ginger</td>
<td>1/2 tsp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chili peppers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salt</td>
<td>to taste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tumeric</td>
<td>1/2 tsp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a deep frying pan, chop and cook the onions at medium heat without any oil. Take care they don’t burn. Before the onions brown, add 480ml of the water. Cut the beef into small pieces and add it to the onion mixture, bones included. Simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the butter and garlic and stir until the butter melts. Add the ginger, salt and tumeric. Seed and slice the chili peppers and add them with the remaining 240 ml of water. Simmer for 10 minutes, then remove from heat and serve with injera or bread.

Did you know?

Ethiopians have many legends concerning the discovery of coffee. One story is that a goatherd noticed his goats were prancing around excitedly after chewing certain berries. The goatherd tried the berries and felt very stimulated. Not until the 14th century did people begin to roast and brew coffee beans: before that, the plant was eaten.
Traditionally, Ethiopian education was connected with religion. Church schools for boys taught Biblical texts in Ge’ez. Muslim schools taught the Koran. In general, literacy was limited mostly to religious officials.

Emperor Menelik II established universal secular education in 1907. However, schools were still connected to religious institutions, and for several decades students were still mostly boys from wealthy families. The number of public schools and teachers increased only gradually, and a private school system flourished.

After the 1975 revolution, the Derg nationalized all private schools not affiliated with the church and launched a program aimed to improve rural access to education. The number of schools, teachers and students enrolled increased significantly.

An ambitious national literacy campaign also offered literacy training in 15 languages. The national literacy rate has since increased to approximately 35%, with men twice as likely to be literate as women. The long war with Eritrea disrupted schooling, particularly in the north, and there is a chronic shortage of teachers and facilities. Education is free at all levels, including university, if students attend full-time. School is compulsory from ages 7 to 13, though attendance is generally low and the drop-out rate high. Primary school lasts for eight years. Beginning at age 15, secondary school lasts four years and consists of two phases, the second of which prepares students for post-secondary education. All schools follow a national curriculum. Instruction is in Amharic up to grade eight. English is taught as a second language, and after grade eight is used for all instruction.

After secondary school, students can attend one of the country’s 17 institutions of higher learning, six of which are universities. Women often study teaching. The higher education of children is very important to Ethiopian families, and many children go abroad to study.

Did you know?
Canadian missionaries established the University of Addis Ababa in the 1940s.

Did you know?
Ethiopia’s literacy campaign won international recognition when UNESCO awarded Ethiopia the International Reading Association Literacy Prize in 1980.
Most Ethiopians are Christian or Muslim. There is a small Jewish community, and there are a number of groups who practice animism or other indigenous beliefs.

In the 4th century, the inhabitants of Aksum practiced Judaism. Perhaps because Christianity arrived so early, Ethiopian Christianity has some distinctive features related to Judaism, such as the restriction on eating pork. Christians belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. They observe Wednesday and Friday fasts, and longer fasts during Lent (before Easter) and Kuskam, which marks the 40 days preceding the feast of the flight to Egypt. On fasting days, people do not eat or drink before noon; after noon, animal products are forbidden. Members of the clergy fast for 250 days of the year.

Islam also came early to Ethiopia. The country's oldest mosque (al Nejashi at Tegray) dates from the 8th century. The majority of Muslims live in the eastern, southern and western lowlands. Muslims follow the teachings of Mohammed. They pray five times a day, give to the poor and observe 30-days of Ramadan when they fast and practice celibacy between sunrise and sunset.

Living so long apart from other Jews, Ethiopian Jews (sometimes called Falashas, although many prefer to be called Bete Israel) developed their own customs of worship. Even their Bible is written in the Ethiopian language of Ge’ez rather than in Hebrew.

Some Cushitic peoples in the western and southern lowland areas practice indigenous beliefs such as animism. Animists believe that all objects in nature are sacred and alive with the vital energy of the universe. Some Afar and Oromo peoples practice forms of ancestor worship.

Did you know?

Ethiopian churches all have replicas of the tabot or Ark of the Covenant in their inner sanctuaries. According to legend, the Ark was taken from Jerusalem and brought to Ethiopia in 5th century BC.
Holidays

Other than New Year, most Ethiopian celebrations are Christian and Muslim religious events. Kiddus Yohannes, New Year’s Day, comes on September 11, which coincides with the end of the season of heavy rains and the beginning of spring. On New Year’s eve, people gather around neighbourhood bonfires before visiting friends and relatives to offer them New Year’s greetings. On New Year’s day people dress in new clothes and celebrate with feasts, visits and games such as gugs.

Important Christian holidays include Meskal, Christmas, Timket and Easter. Timket, which marks Christ's baptism, is the most colourful event of the year. On Timket eve, priests dressed in elaborate robes parade each church’s tabot to a body of water. There people hold a night time vigil; the priests then bless the water and anoint the faithful. Singing and dancing, crowds parade the tabots back to their churches. In September, the two-day feast of Meskal marks the finding of the True Cross.

Each town builds an enormous bonfire, a cross decorated with flowers, and after dark the townspeople encircle the fire three times, singing Meskal hymns. During the day, horsemen parade through the streets wearing lion’s-mane or baboon-skin headdresses and carrying shield and spears.

Muslim holidays are based on the lunar calendar and thus fall at different times each year. The ninth month of the Muslim calendar is devoted to Ramadan, which is marked by fasting. The greatest Muslim feast of the year is Eid al Fitr, which celebrates the end of Ramadan. The Eid al Adha is the feast marking Abraham’s sacrifice. On these days, after praying and listening to the imam (religious leader) preach, Muslim Ethiopians sacrifice animals and distribute part of the meat to the poor. Wearing new clothes, they visit friends and relatives as well as family graves. Horse races are also traditional on these days. Muslims also mark the anniversaries of numerous martyrs.

Did you know?
Ethiopians usually do not celebrate their birthdays. Dates of birth are registered only in some urban areas, and many Ethiopians don’t ask what day of the year they were born.
Every region of Ethiopia has its own crafts and its own musical and artistic traditions. Baskets, carpets, leatherwork, wood carvings and jewellery are made in many areas of the country, but each region has distinct designs. Musical instruments found in different regions of the country include the krar, a six-stringed lyre, and a one-stringed instrument called a massinko, which is played with a bow. Church music known as the aquaquam is played with a drum and a tsinatseil (also called a sistrum), which resembles a rattle. Modern Ethiopian music shows the influence of various international styles. Mulatu Astatke is a notable contemporary classical music and jazz composer. Telahun Gessesse and Astere Awoke are popular singers. Ali Birra sings in his native Oromo and other Ethiopian languages.

Dancing is very important to most Ethiopians. The most common form is iskista, where the dancers move their shoulders while keeping their lower bodies stationary. As they move, the dancers breathe in sharply, making a sound like iskista. They may also sing a high-pitched folk song (zefen). Ethiopian painters developed a style of depicting religious stories in a series of panels, complete with captions. Eventually, secular artists used this style to depict everyday themes. Ethiopia has many modern artists. Afewerk Tekle, the country’s greatest contemporary painter, has achieved international recognition for works such as The Meskel Flower.

Ethiopians have a strong oral culture, which includes thousands of proverbs and stories. Stories teach morality, history and culture. Abbe Gobegna, considered one of Ethiopia’s best writers, focuses on Ethiopia’s feudal social situation. Hadis Alemayehu’s novel Fiker Eske Mekabir (Love until Death) is considered a masterpiece.

Important architectural sites are the stelae of Aksum and the churches of Lalibela, located in the north. The stelae – enormous stone columns with elaborate carvings – are the most famous pieces of Ethiopian art. Placed on graves, they were believed to act as gateways for the soul to the next life. The largest one still standing is nearly 21 metres high. The medieval churches of Lalibela were built by Emperor Lalibela as a New Jerusalem. Still in use today, the 11 buildings were carved out of a huge, rectangular rock.

Did you know?
Artisans in Ethiopia use cattle horns to make drinking mugs and shoe horns, and often use horn in lamps, vases and combs.

Did you know?
Music is a part of all church services; even the liturgy is chanted.
If You Want to Learn More

This book for children covers the geography, history, government, people and economy of Ethiopia.

The author lives in Kenya and has travelled extensively in Ethiopia. As well as providing tourist information, this
visitors’ guide covers Ethiopian history and culture.

Explores ceremonies and other aspects of culture, with many photographs.

An anthropological account of a 60-year-old woman’s life in rural society. Of special interest is the woman’s role
in mediating rural politics.

Though limited to the northern and central highlands from the Middle Ages to 1855 this book provides rich
historical details of social life, particularly the lives of women and children.

Web Sites
http://www.ciagov/ciapublications/factbook
http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy
http://www.ethiopiaonline.net
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This cultural profile is designed primarily for volunteers working in organized HOST Programs, which match newcomers with volunteers who offer friendship, orientation to the community and an opportunity to practise English or French, if needed.

Published by Anti-Racism, Multiculturalism and Native Issues (AMNI) Centre, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 2002

The sections Somalia to Western Australia and Somalis in Western Australia have been modified for use in Western Australia with the permission of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the University of Toronto. The Western Australian component of this work is copyright.
Every year, Australia welcomes people from other countries who move here to make a new home. Newcomers arrive for many reasons, but all bring their skills and talents, as well as the hope of contributing to their new society. Your interest in reading this may arise from working with someone from Somalia, or meeting Somali students at your school. Whatever your source of interest, this profile will help you understand something about Somalia and its people.

Many Somalis in Australia today are refugees or have arrived under the family reunion visa category. Sometimes their departure from Somalia occurs quite quickly. Consequently, they may be anxious, frightened, curious and relieved about their arrival here. Somalis will have many of the same questions that you might have if you moved to a new country or city. They will wonder what their new community will be like, where to buy food, which schools their children should attend, where to find a doctor and how to get around.

You can help your new friends or clients settle by answering their questions. You’ll also find that you have a great deal to learn from them.

Although this cultural profile provides insights into some customs, it does not cover all facets of life. The customs described may not apply in equal measure to all newcomers from Somalia.

**Did you know?**
Although the country is named after its people, Somalis also live in many neighbouring countries due to the partitioning of eastern Africa by colonial powers.

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**Somalia to Western Australia**

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**Capital:** Mogadishu  
**Type of Government:** In transition  
**Population:** 10 million  
**Area:** 637,657 sq. km  
**Major Ethnic Groups:** Somali, Bantu  
**Language:** Somalia, Arabic, Maay, English, Italian  
**Religion:** Islam  
**Unit of Currency:** Shilling  
**National Flag:** Five-pointed white star on pale blue background  
**Dates of Independence:** June 26, 1960 (Northern Somaliland); July 1, 1960 (Southern Somaliland)

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There were around 480 Somali-born people living in Western Australia at the time of the 2001 census. Of these 52% were under the age of 25, 45% were aged between 25 and 54 and the remaining 3% were aged over 55. Many more Somalis have arrived in Western Australia since the 2001 Census. Many Somalis have also migrated to Perth from the Eastern States so it is difficult to ascertain accurate numbers.

2001 Census figures provide the following information about Somalis living in Western Australia:

**Occupation**
33% of those employed were working as labourers or related workers, 29% as intermediate production and transport workers and 12% as professionals.

**Income**
62% of all Somali-born aged 15 and over received less than $300 per week. This compares with 40% of the total West Australian population. In the higher income range a lower proportion of Somali-born (4%) had incomes of $700 and over per week than the total West Australian population rate of 23%.

**Religion**
The vast majority (96%) nominated Islam as their religion. For 3% the religion was not stated and a very small number were Christian.

**Language**
The majority of Somali-born in Western Australia reported they spoke Somali at home (88%) and another 6% spoke Arabic. 69% reported they spoke English very well or well and 4% spoke only English.

**Community Groups**
For details of Somalian community groups please contact:
Office of Multicultural Interests
Level 26/197 St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6000
Phone (08) 9222 8800
E-mail: harmony@dpc.wa.gov.au
Web address: www.omi.wa.gov.au

**Cultural Impact on Health Care**
Used with permission
www.diversityinhealth.com/
regions/africa/somalis.htm

Please note: the following information is intended to alert you to some of the ways that culture impacts on health care but may not apply to all Somalis.

**Approach to the health system**
- Somalis may expect to receive medication for every illness. This may lead to:
  - 'Doctor shopping' if their health professionals do not conform to their expectations.
  - More than one medication being taken at a time.
  - During Ramadan (holy month where food and drink is forbidden between sunrise and sunset) Muslim patients may only be willing to take medication at night.
  - Preventative medicine may be an unfamiliar concept.
Traditional health practices
• Illness may be caused by:
  - The 'evil eye' - excessive praise attracts evil spirits.
  - Angry spirits.
• Treatment:
  - Somalis have an extensive herbal medicine tradition.
  - Fire-burning - applying a heated stick from a particular tree to the skin.

Health status
• Parasitic illnesses are relatively common.

Mental Health
• Somali refugees may have significant acculturation issues, particularly in a community like Australia where they 'stand out' physically.
• Children are often placed in schools on the basis of their age, despite the fact they may have spent ten years in a refugee camp, and therefore have no schooling.
• Torture and rape have been relatively common throughout the civil war, leading to high incidences of PTSD in Somali refugees.

Gender / Women's health
• Same gender physicians preferred
• An estimated 98% of Somali girls undergo "female circumcision" (irrespective of faith) though this practice is limited in Australia. It should be noted that Islam does not sanction female circumcision.
• Contraception and abortion are not widely used (primarily for religious reasons).
• There may be a fear of Caesarean delivery.
• Breastfeeding is the norm. Some women may have a traditional belief that colostrum is not healthy for a newborn.
• Women's status is enhanced by bearing a large number of children.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
For further information about services and community groups the Directory of Services for New Arrivals in Western Australia is available from the Office of Multicultural Interest, 2nd Floor, 81 St George’s Terrace, Perth, telephone (08) 9426 8690 and online at www.omi.wa.gov.au.

Further information for health professionals about cultural diversity can be found at http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural

For more information on female circumcision contact: FGM Community Education Officer Child and Community Health Directorate Department of Health WA Telephone: (08) 9323 6699

REFERENCES


Office of Multicultural Interest, 2001 Western Australian Community Profiles, 2001 Census – Horn of Africa-Born (Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia Born), Government of Western Australia, Perth WA.


Fremantle Migrant Resource Centre, 1999. Profile of the Somali Community in Western Australia. Perth, Western Australia.

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Somalia is located in the most eastern part of Africa. To the northwest is the tiny country of Djibouti. The Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean lie to the north and east, Kenya lies to the south, and both Kenya and Ethiopia to the west. Somalia’s north and east coastlines form what is known as the Horn of Africa.

An escarpment of sandstone and limestone mountains rises above the gulf in the north, reaching as high as 1,200 metres; parts of the mountains receive rainfall sufficient to support forests of cedar trees and farming, while other areas are dry.

On the eastern coast lies the granite Ogaden plateau, covered with thorny grass that grows up to 1.3 metres tall. The rest of the country is mostly savannah. Farming occurs mostly in the far south, in the land between the country’s two permanent rivers, the Juba and the Shebelle. Here farmers grow sorghum, millet and maize, as well as fruit such as bananas. Aromatic frankincense and myrrh trees have also grown in Somalia since Biblical times.

The rest of the country is very arid. Acacia trees, whose roots plunge down deeply for water, provide welcome shade on the otherwise barren plains. Animals and people alike wait for evening to travel and hunt. Despite the severe climate, periods of rain bring relief, and the savannah is able to support much wildlife: lions, giraffes, rhinoceroses, leopards, zebras, antelope, warthogs and wild asses live here, as well as many species of birds, such as eagles, storks and bustards. Varieties of snakes and scorpions live in the dry plains, and crocodiles in the coastal waters.

Rain and drought dominate much of Somali life and all the four seasons: gu, hagaa’, dayr and jilaal. The rainy gu season, from April to June, is the most pleasant time of year in most of the country, though floods can ruin crops. The dry hagaa’ season (July to September) is the hottest time of year; the red, dusty soil can be bare of all vegetation, and temperatures average 27°C, but can reach 65°C. Hagaa’ is broken by the dayr rains in October and November.

In general, northern Africa is becoming more desert-like every year; droughts have been increasing in frequency and severity.

The harshest, longest season is jilaal, the hot windy season, which lasts from December to March. Jilaal is the most dangerous time of year for nomads and their herds because temporary water holes dry up. Life becomes a constant search for water.

Did you know?
Traditionally, age in Somalia is calculated by the number of gu’s a person has lived. Gu is also normally the peak season for marriages, contests and dispute settlements.
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 Somalis 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 centres 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. Somalia still feels the bitter effects of these policies.

By the late 19th century, Somalia was divided between British Somaliland in the north and Somalia Italiana in the south. The British allowed the northern Somali to continue with their traditions, yet Italy forced Somalis to adopt Italian laws, language and customs. Using Somalia to launch its invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, Italy eventually incorporated Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia Italiana into Italian East Africa.

In 1960, Britain and Italy ceded possession of these territories and Somalia gained independence. Yet Somalia and other newly independent countries were left with the old colonial borders. While the Somalis in British Somaliland and Somalia Italiana were united, three groups of Somalis were trapped behind the borders of Kenya, Djibouti and Ethiopia. Families were permanently separated, and traditional herding routes stopped at now impassable borders, cutting off vital water and grasslands.

In 1969, Somalia’s fledgling democratic government, headed by Prime Minister Muhammed Ibrahim Egal, was toppled in a military coup led by Major-General Mohammed Siyad Barré. Barré’s regime attempted to abolish clanship power and introduced the Latin script for the Somali language. After an initial period of modest successes in social reform, the regime became known for corruption, brutal repression and increasing tribal rivalry. In 1974, Barré allied with the Soviet Union and adopted communist economic policies. An attempt to regain traditional lands in Ethiopia ended in tragedy when Soviet and Cuban troops joined the Ethiopians to destroy the Somali army, leaving a million people destitute and creating a severe refugee problem within Somalia.

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.
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. The Samaal operate democratically, with important decisions made by a council of men (shir). Egalitarianism, at least among men, is deeply ingrained in Somali views of society and authority. 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.

Most Somalis live in the country. The Samaal people tend to live in very small settlements near wells. A typical dwelling consists of a collapsible shelter called an aqal, which is a small hut built of wood and animal skins, with grass mats on the floor. Samaal life is difficult, involving much work for scarce resources. Camels, both as transportation and food, are central to the Samaal way of life. Sab people are more likely to live in villages in one-room, thatched mud-huts called mundols. A house with a metal roof is a sign of prosperity. In cities, Somalis may have larger homes with Arab- or Western-style furnishings.

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. Somali parents and children tend to spend time with friends of the same sex; the family may get together in the evenings.

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. Divorce and remarriage are common; after divorce women keep their valuable possessions and often become independent through acquiring land and goods by inheritance or purchase.

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 it is still widely practised.

**Did you know?**

*The Samaal people’s possessions must be quite light in order to be easily transported. Families use mattresses made of woven palm-leaf ribs, which are supported on four wood stakes and covered with animal skins.*
Almost 75% of the Somali population—one of the highest percentages in the world—makes their living off the land, either in agriculture or herding. Even urban Somalis are likely to have family in the country and have experienced the traditional Somali way of life.

Over the centuries, Somali herders adapted to breeding livestock in a vast area without any source of permanent water. Every clan has its own herding routes, which during the course of a year allow herders to take their herds from one seasonal waterhole to the next. Sheep, goats, cattle and camels are common livestock animals and still Somalia’s main export. Camels are the most important animal; able to survive dry seasons better than any other animal, camels also serve as sources of milk and meat, and carry portable shelters as well as the elderly and the sick.

Although livestock is Somalia’s main export, cash crops are also important. Exports include maize, sorghum, sugar cane, cassava and beans. Grown in plantations along the Juba and Shebelle rivers, bananas are also one of Somalia’s principal crops. This dependence makes the economy vulnerable to international price fluctuations and poor harvests caused by drought and flooding. Fishing, formerly a small activity along coast, is now being exploited for commercial export; however, the industry still relies on traditional small-scale methods.

Industry in Somalia consists of some mining, especially of salt and precious metals, though recent discoveries of natural gas and petroleum have attracted interest from US and European companies. Manufacturing is mostly concentrated on processing foods such as sugarcane, and animal hides.

Somalia’s economy has suffered from years of civil unrest and war. A formal banking and taxation system wasn’t reintroduced until 1993, and the 1995 departure of UN forces resulted in lost income through unemployment. Because wages are very low, many Somali have second jobs, often small businesses run by two or three family members. Women make up one-third of the labour force, including a number of independent business owners.

Children of nomadic herders usually take care of the animals. Boys are responsible for their family’s camels, which must be fed and milked three times a day, while girls tend the sheep and goats.
SPORTS AND RECREATION

The favourite leisure activity of adult Somalis is conversation with their friends and relatives. Somalis are famous for their eloquence, wit and stories, and often judge a person based on their abilities as a speaker. Electronic communication and books are luxuries in Somalia; people communicate and entertain themselves through games, sports, songs and by telling stories and poems.

Women entertain each other at home. Often they light incense burners made of gypsum during these visits and pass their hair over small vents in the burners to scent it with fragrant smoke. In the north, coffee shops (which actually sell only tea) are favourite gathering places for men. Men also play games of skill such as shah, which is similar to chess; in rural areas and the north, they compete against each other in running, wrestling and jumping.

Somali families cherish sitting outside on the sand in the moonlight, telling the ancient tales Somalis have told for generations. Nowadays, the chewing of qaad, a mild stimulant, often accompanies recitations or songs.

Children usually spend their time playing outside. Children's games include versions of skipping, hopscotch, jacks and a type of hide-and-seek that can cover a lot of territory. Boys love football (soccer), volleyball, table tennis, basketball and games with home-made cars. Girls have more duties around the home and less opportunity to play outside, but they enjoy basketball, home-made dolls or dancing with each other to the latest music.

Nationally, Somalis adore football and basketball; the Somali men's team placed third in the 1982 African Men's Basketball Championship. Families often cannot afford to buy balls, so children play the game with a ball made of paper and string or whatever other materials are available.

Did you know?

Somalis view language as a means of saving face and presenting a powerful character to the world. People often use humour to combat an opponent’s criticism or smoothly escape from an embarrassing situation.
Health conditions in Somalia are poor. Globally, the country has one of the highest rates of malnutrition, both in children and the general population. Infant mortality is high, at 126 per 1,000 live births, and life expectancy is low: only 47 years on average. Particularly during the dry season, the population is afflicted by outbreaks of cholera, a potentially fatal disease caused by unsafe water. Insect-borne diseases like malaria and Rift Valley Fever are also problematic.

International Health agencies such as UNICEF and Doctors Without Borders have been working in Somalia for years to provide relief. One of the main public health concerns is access to clean drinking water. In the countryside, people can travel up to six hours a day to reach wells, which may be contaminated.

Somalia’s health care system used to offer free Western-style treatment through hospitals and dispensaries, but both in the north and south, years of war have disrupted the hospital system, reducing facilities and limiting their resources.

In the absence of other treatment, most Somalis rely on traditional healers. Sancoole practitioners perform operations such as bloodletting, scarification, cauterization and teeth-pulling. Cauterization is a common therapy for treating diseases such as hepatitis and parasites; the practice is based on the belief that disease and fire cannot coexist. Healers also use therapeutic massage and natural materials such as wood and plant extracts to treat fractures. A tonsillectomy can be performed by first sterilizing simple instruments in a fire.

A faallow healer practices a form of astrology, using dirt drawings, cards, coffee grinds and tossed shells to diagnose patients. Some diseases are believed to be caused by the evil eye or by spirits called jinn, or by the sufferer’s own sins. In these cases, a Somali might rely on an exorcist, who uses dance and animal sacrifices to drive out the supernatural invader.

**Did you know?**
Sheep fat is used to treat a variety of ailments, from rheumatism and broken bones to chest pains and tainted blood.
Somali is an extraordinarily rich and expressive language, and poetry is a national passion. Though Somali is the official language, it has many dialects. The most prominent is the Digil/Raxanweyn dialect spoken in the south; this language is very different from standard Somali, though most dialect speakers also know both. Many Somalis also speak Arabic, which is taught in schools as part of Islamic instruction. Older or university-educated Somalis may also speak English or Italian. English classes have recently become more popular in cities.

Somalis formerly used Arabic for writing. Although Somali has a long oral history, it had no orthography or writing system until 1972, when a Latin alphabet was adopted. Somali has now replaced English and Italian as the language for government and education.

While English uses images based on farming, (“plant an idea in someone’s head” or “stubborn as an ox”), Somalis use images based on camel herding. For example, a fleet of government cars is called a gaadiid, which also means burden-bearing camels. The word laylis means student workbook exercises as well as exercises used to train young camels.

Somali proverbs play an important role in everyday communication, and people tend to use them frequently. Aqoon la’aani waa iftiin la’aan means “To be without knowledge is to be without light.” Other proverbs are “An old wound will not go away” and “Think before you act.”

Somalis like to shake hands, but may not welcome a handshake from a stranger. Muslims shake hands only with people of the same sex.

Did you know?
Somalis have three names: their given name, followed by their father’s and grandfather’s names. Because of the clan system, many people have very similar names. Many Somalis also have a nickname (called a naanays) that is based on the individual’s time of birth, birth order, or appearance. For example, a person whose birth was delayed is named Raage.
**Eating the Somali Way**

Somali cuisine reflects the people’s clever use of scarce resources. People usually begin the day with a flat bread called canjero or laxoo, liver, and either cereal or porridge made of millet or cornmeal. The midday meal is the largest and consists of rice or noodles (pasta became very popular under Italian rule) with sauce and perhaps meat. The evening meal is very light and might include beans, muffo (patties made of oats or corn) or a salad with more canjero. Somalis adore spiced tea, but sheep, goat and camel's milk are also popular.

Milk is a staple food for many rural Somalis, and men who travel with the camel herds may drink up to nine litres a day. Stored in either a covered pitcher called a haan or a wooden bucket, fresh milk will keep for days despite the hot climate. By shaking milk, Somalis make butter; cooked butter becomes ghee, which will keep for several months when stored in a leather container called a tabut or kuchey. Camel milk fermented for a month becomes jinow, a solid, yoghurt-like substance.

**Somali Crabmeat Stew**

- 480 ml white rice
- 960 ml water
- 60 ml peanut oil or butter
- 240 ml onions, finely chopped
- 1 tsp curry powder
- 1 tsp powdered ginger
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp crushed red pepper flakes
- 1 tbsp tomatoes cut in small wedges
- 908 g crab meat or other seafood such as scallops
- optional: empty scallop shells for serving

In a saucepan, wash and rinse the rice. Add the water, cover and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and let simmer for 15 to 20 minutes. Meanwhile, heat the oil or butter in a deep, heavy saucepan. Add the onions, curry, ginger, salt and red pepper flakes, and sauté until the onions are lightly browned. Add the tomatoes and simmer until soft. Add the crabmeat or other seafood and sauté for 10 minutes. Serve over the rice in scooped-out scallop shells or alone.

**Did you know?**

Some nomads drink a fermented beverage called chino, which is made by burying camel's milk in a leather flask for a week.

People on farms in the south eat a more varied diet that includes corn, millet, sorghum, beans, and some fruit and vegetables. Millet is made into porridge or mixed with milk to form cakes. Beans are usually served with butter or mixed with corn, while sorghum, a type of grain, is ground to make flour and bread. People also frequently eat rice, which is imported.

Favourite meats are goat, camel, sheep or lamb, and to a lesser extent, beef. Muslims are forbidden to eat pork or pork products. Only young male animals or females too old to produce offspring are used for food. Camel meat also includes the fat contained in the camel's gol (hump). A camel whose gol has grown very large (sometimes as high as one metre) may be slaughtered for this food.
LEARNING IN SOMALIA

Traditionally, education in Somalia was connected to the duksi (Koran) schools that instruct students in the Islamic faith. Because Islam encourages reading and the search for knowledge, the duksi schools were responsible for introducing literacy in Somalia. Somali cities like Merka and Mogadishu became Muslim centres of learning.

During the colonial period, the Italians established Roman Catholic mission schools and the British introduced a primary and secondary education system. Only a small percentage of children attended these schools, where instruction was in Arabic, English or Italian—languages few students could understand beyond a basic level. After independence, the government developed the official Somali writing system, created Somali-language schoolbooks and introduced a national literacy program. The program raised the literacy level to 83%.

Unfortunately, the civil unrest of the 1990s resulted in the collapse of Somalia’s education system. The literacy rate is now about 30%. A few state-run schools have gradually been reopening in the north and south. In general, Somalis have limited access to education unless they come from wealthy families, who can pay for private school education.

Officially primary school is compulsory and lasts eight years. The curriculum includes instruction in basic subjects, plus agriculture and animal raising. However, very few children attend school. Providing education for nomadic peoples has been especially difficult, as herdsmen who wish their children to complete school must send them to a permanent settlement. As well, children in both herding and farming families often must work at home. Secondary-level education includes four optional years of high school, technical or vocational courses. All secondary schools are situated in towns, limiting access. Before the war, almost twice as many boys as girls attended classes. Teachers’ salaries are amongst the lowest in Somalia; most teachers have been forced to hold down extra jobs. Partly as a result, the school year lasts only six months. After high school, students may attend one of several technical/vocational institutes or Somalia’s only university, the Somali National University in Mogadishu, which was established in 1970.

Did you know?
An 8th-century Somali theologian named Shaykh Uthman bin Ali al-Zeylai wrote the only authoritative text on the Hanafi school of Islam. His book is called the Tabayin al-Haqa’iq li Sharh Kanz al-Daqa’iq. Its four volumes are still in print.
Islam and poetry have been described as the twin pillars of Somali culture. Over 99% of Somalis are Muslim, mostly Sunni Muslim; a small minority is Christian, both Anglican and Roman Catholic. Despite the influence of religion on daily life and culture, many Somalis are not strict adherents of their faith, but follow only some of the more important rites.

Muslims recognize one God, Allah, and Muhammad as his prophet. Muhammad is believed to be the last in a line of prophets that included Abraham, Moses and Jesus. In 610 AD, Muhammed introduced Islam to the city of Mecca. His revelations are contained in the Islamic holy book, the Qur’an or Koran. Muhammed’s other teachings were recorded by his followers and are known as the hadith (tradition). Muslims follow the “five pillars” of the Islamic faith: professing the faith; saying daily prayers; fasting during the month of Ramadan; giving aims to the poor and religious scholars; and, if possible, going on one hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

Prior to adopting Islam, Somalis followed a belief system that included folklore and reverence for ancestors. Elements of this spirituality still thrive in Somali culture. Clan members offer ceremonies, gifts and prayers to ancestors in the hope that they will protect the living. In addition, clan leaders are often revered as people who have baraka, which confers the ability to bless or curse.

Like many Africans, Somalis believe in various kinds of spirits. Jinn and zar are evil spirits who cause mental and physical illnesses, which can be treated by a wadaad. Certain people can also cause harm by the “evil eye” and by casting curses. The spirit of a helpless person who has been injured may enter the injurer and have to be exorcised.

Did you know?
Both traditional and hospital treatments commonly involve using the Koran, the sacred text for Muslims. Sometimes patients wear healing amulets that contain Koranic verses written on small pieces of paper; in hospitals, families may read the Koran to a sick relation.
Holidays

Somalia’s most important festivals are religious. Probably the most important is Ramadan, which marks the month that the Koran was revealed. Since the Muslim calendar follows the lunar cycle, Ramadan occurs at a different time each year. 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 iftar, the breaking of the fast.

Special foods such as dates, samosas and barley soup are eaten for iftar; afterwards, people visit their mosque to pray or observe Tarawih, a special prayer said each night of Ramadan. Between midnight and dawn, people may also eat another meal called suhur. Village announcers or drummers wake people so they can have this meal before the day’s fast begins.

The largest Muslim celebration, Eid al Fitr, marks the end of Ramadan and continues for three days. Around 8:00 a.m. people attend a special prayer. Families get dressed up in new clothes for a round of visits, and children receive gifts of money at each house. People wish each other eid mubarak, meaning “have a happy and blessed holiday.” Everybody who can donates money to the poor, and at midday there is a special feast.

Eid al Adh commemorates Abraham’s offer to sacrifice his son Isaac. As with Eid al Fitr, children particularly enjoy this day. In cities, amusement parks are set up and shops have special displays of clothes, toys and sweets. Those who can afford it sacrifice an animal and give its meat to the poor.

Somalis celebrate their new year at the end of July. In rural areas, people hold a festival called the dab-shid or fire lighting. People build bonfires and in some places perform stick fights and dances. Robdoon is a ritual performed in times of drought and asks God to bring rain. Religious leaders read the Koran aloud at the locations where rain is desired and may also make an animal sacrifice, with the meat distributed to the poor.

Did you know?
After a marriage, Somalis hold dances for three to seven consecutive days.

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May 1 Labour Day
June Mouloud, Birth of the Prophet
June 26 Independence Day
July 1 Foundation of the Republic
July 28 Dab-shid
While Somalia has a long musical and artistic tradition, the Somalis are most famous for being a nation of poets. Oral poetry is central to Somali life. The alliterative, highly metaphorical Somali verse form is used for communication, for preserving history and commenting on current events. Clans use poetry in reconciliation meetings; the government hires poets to praise its achievements, while the opposition uses poems for its critique.

Many Somalis can recite poems that are centuries old. Poetic combat - oral contests between competing poets - have always been a feature of Somali life. Traditionally, men and women have had separate poetic traditions, and only men gained prestige and political power through their skill in poetry. However, women have recently begun to compete with men in these contests. One of the most famous literary figures in Somalia is Mohammed ‘Abdille Hasan, who was also a warrior and political figure.

Since the 20th century, Somalia has also produced authors who write in English, French or Italian for their works. Nurudin Farah, an acclaimed English-language novelist, writes about Somalia and connects the mythical with the local in his work. The poet and playwright Mohamed Warsame Ibrahim was jailed during the Barre regime for his politically critical writings.

Somali music combines African and Arabic influences. Traditional instruments are the shareero, a type of lyre; the kaban, a Yemenite keyboard lute; and the buun and simbaar, types of trumpets. While dancing to music is important in Somali culture, people dance mainly during ceremonies and courtship. Maryam Mursal is one of Somalia’s most famous musicians. Her first CD, Waaberi, is a collection of traditional Somali songs sung with the oud (the Arabic lute) and percussion as backup.

Somali craftworkers make numerous items, including woodcarvings and cloth, and baskets in the Benadir region. Leather is used for items such as bags, food containers and dagger sheaths. Somali women practice hand and foot painting using henna and khidaab dyes. Women artists apply the colours in intricate styles, covering the entire hand or foot.

Did you know?
The multilingual writer Nurudin Farah was named the 1998 Neustadt Laureate. He was the first African to receive this award, a literary prize which is considered to be secondary in prestige to the Nobel Prize for literature.
Written by a native Somali, the book gives an in-depth look at the land and people, past and present, with comprehensive and accessible general reference on this country.

Aided was the Somali ambassador to India from 1984 to 1989. The book includes sections on tradition, history, social structure, culture, economy and politics.

Besteman worked in Somalia and argues that the breakdown of the Somali state was caused not by clan conflicts, but by underlying race and class issues.

Written by a Peace Corps volunteer teacher who lived in a village in northern Somalia.

Part of the Enchantment of the World Series, this book for children contains many photographs of Somali people and places.

Canadian author Laurence spent a few years in Somalia and became a writer there. This book is her account of what it was like for a Canadian to encounter Somali culture in the years before independence.

Rima Berns McGown’s book explores the dilemmas and choices of Somalis who have migrated to two major cities in the West: London, U.K., and Toronto, Canada. In her study of this single ethnic community, McGown explores two issues: (1) the Somali immigrants’ experience in the West and (2) the transformation of Islam as it is practiced by diaspora Somalis.

Web Sites
http://www.somalia.com
http://ww2.saturn.stpaul.k12.mn.us/somali/culture.html
http://www.cal.org/rsc/somalia
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This cultural profile is designed primarily for volunteers working in organized HOST Programs which match newcomers with volunteers who offer friendship, orientation to the community and an opportunity to practise English or French, if needed.

In preparing this profile, AMNI has made every effort to use reliable sources of information and to reconcile the views of different groups within the country. Published by Anti-Racism, Multiculturalism and Native Issues (AMNI) Centre, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 1998. The sections Sudan to Western Australia and Sudanese in Western Australia have been modified for use in Western Australia with the permission of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the University of Toronto. The Western Australian component of this work is copyright.
Every year people from other countries come to Australia to start a new life. They come with many different talents and the hope of contributing to their new society. If you are reading this, you may be interested in finding out more about where Sudanese are from and what it was like in their original home. While this cultural profile provides insight into some customs of the Sudanese people, it must not be taken as a blueprint for how all Sudanese newcomers will respond to Australia. The customs described may not apply in equal measure to all people from this profiled country.

Perhaps you are learning about newcomers in school or working with Sudanese who have settled in Australia recently. This information will help you understand what changes they are experiencing.

Sudanese, like many newcomers to Australia, probably arrive with mixed feelings. They may be relieved to be safe at last, but sad to leave behind their friends and family.

People must leave behind everything familiar. Most Sudanese leave their country to escape war or discrimination.

As you can imagine, Australia will seem quite different from Sudan. Perhaps you can help with practical information that you think anyone would need to know when they move to a new place. You would need to learn new customs and how to get around, what school to attend, where to shop for food, where to find a doctor and, last but not least, where to find new friends.

You will probably find that you have much in common with your new Sudanese friends or clients and many things to learn from them too.

This section has been modified for use in Western Australia with the permission of Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the University of Toronto.
The Sudanese community is Australia’s fastest growing ethnic community. In Western Australia the Sudanese are the largest African group. Most have come from refugee camps in Kenya with others from Uganda and a small number from Egypt.

The internal conflict between the North and South Sudanese, which is based around claims for self-determination by South Sudanese, also exists within the West Australian Sudanese community. The conflict in the Sudan, which from the point of the South Sudanese has included political marginalisation, discrimination, human rights abuses, neglect of socio-economic development in the South, and the imposition of Arabic culture and Islamic values in an attempt to destroy traditional African cultural beliefs and practices, has resulted in there being several Sudanese communities and community associations in WA. These are mostly framed around differences between North and South Sudanese (although there are also a number of internal division between the South Sudanese) and between Muslims and Christians.

There were approximately 425 Sudanese-born people living in Western Australia at the time of the 2001 Census. Nearly half of these were under 25, 43% were aged 25 – 54 years of age, and 7% were over 55 years.

2001 Census figures provide the following information about Sudanese living in Western Australia:

**Location**

There were 31% of Sudanese-born living in the Stirling Local Government Area, 14% in Gosnells, 11% in Wanneroo and 9% in Bayswater areas. Many more Sudanese have arrived in Western Australia since the 2001 Census. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) settlement database indicates that 655 Sudanese have arrived in Perth over the last six years (1997-2003) with most settling in the Stirling area and some also in Canning.

**Religion**

75% of the Sudanese-born living in Western Australia at that time nominated a Christian faith and 18% Islam.

**Language**

Languages spoken at home included Arabic 68%, English 8% and Tigrinya 4%. 73% reported they spoke English very well or well and 8% spoke only English.

**Occupation**

26% of those employed were working as professionals, 16% as associate professionals and 15% as labourers and related workers.

**Income**

65% of all Sudanese-born aged 15 and over received less than $300 per week. This compares with 40% of the total West Australian population. In the higher income range a lower proportion of Sudanese-born (9%) had incomes of $700 and over per week than the total West Australian population rate of 23%.

The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) settlement database indicates that 655 Sudanese have arrived in Perth over the last six years (1997-2003) with most settling in the Stirling area and some also in Canning.

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

For details of Sudanese community groups please contact:
Office of Multicultural Interests
Level 26/197
St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6000
Phone (08) 9222 8800
E-mail: harmony@dpc.wa.gov.au
Web address: www.omi.wa.gov.au

LANGUAGE / INTERPRETING

Arabic is the official language of Sudan, with Sudanese Arabic widely spoken. There are also many other languages spoken and regional varieties of these. It is important to consider the particular dialect when engaging an interpreter. English is also widely spoken.

CULTURAL IMPACT ON HEALTH CARE

Please note: the following information is intended to alert you to some of the ways that culture impacts on health care but may not apply to all Sudanese.

Approach to health system
- Most Sudanese are familiar with biomedical processes.
- There may be a tendency not to seek medical assistance quickly.
- Religious background may be important in approaches to health care.
- Medicine:
  - There might be an expectation that medication will be prescribed with every visit to a doctor.
  - Medication may be shared.
  - There could be a tendency to discontinue once symptoms have resolved.
- There may be a strong cultural fear of hospitalisation.
- Patients may be keen to receive visitors.

Traditional health practices
- There is a traditional belief that:
  - Serious diseases are an "act of God".
  - Diabetes is caused by shock or being upset.
- Herbal remedies may be used in conjunction with biomedical processes.
- Theories of disease causation will often depend on the patient's level of education.

Health status
- Most Sudanese have not had regular health care in the Sudan and may therefore present with conditions of which they were unaware.
- Parasitism is common.

Mental health
- Mental health concerns are possibly a source of shame within the Sudanese community.
- Political and religious repression, famines, floods and warfare have been occurring for generations in the Sudan. The result is that the incidence of post traumatic stress disorder may be high.

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SUDANESE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Gender
• Strong preference for same sex physicians
• Female circumcision is practiced traditionally (irrespective of faith) amongst some groups.
• The practice of female circumcision may cause significant problems with child birth, sexual intercourse and urinary function.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
For further information about services and community groups the Directory of Services for New Arrivals in Western Australia is available from the Office of Multicultural Interest, 2nd Floor, 81 St George’s Terrace, Perth, telephone (08) 9426 8690 and online at www.omi.wa.gov.au

Further information for health professionals about cultural diversity can be found at http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural

REFERENCES


Office of Multicultural Interest, 2001 Western Australian Community Profiles, 2001 Census - Horn of Africa-Born (Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia Born), Government of Western Australia, Perth WA.


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LANDSCAPE AND CLIMATE

“Sudan is not a country, it is a continent,” say the Sudanese. Sudan covers more than 2.5 million square kilometres, an area slightly smaller than Western Australia. Located directly to the south of Egypt, this vast country is also bordered by the Red Sea to the northeast, Eritrea and Ethiopia to the east, Kenya, Uganda and Zaire to the south and Central African Republic, Chad and Libya to the west.

Sudan, surrounded by mountains, is like a huge, wide bowl. Lush and tropical in the south, the land slopes down toward the Sahara desert in the north. The waters of the Nile are the main source of irrigation and Sudan’s lifeline. From the humid southern forests, the wide river flows northward through the enormous Sudd swamp region. At Khartoum the branches of the Blue Nile and White Nile meet to form the main stream of the Nile, which flows north through the desert in a giant S-curve to Egypt.

In the desert north of Khartoum, the average summer temperatures reach 40°C. The southwestern rain forests have average temperatures of about 26°C. The summer rainy season in the central farming area depends on the haboob winds from the Congo River Basin. These winds come each year creating a violent dust storm that throws up walls of sand and reduces visibility to zero. At times the winds and rains are delayed, or do not come at all. This causes drought and famine. In the 1970s and 1980s, these winds failed, bringing economic disaster.

Animal life in the south is typical of the African savannas and includes lions, rhinoceroses, leopards, zebras, giraffes, crocodiles, hippopotamuses, monkeys and antelopes.

In the north about five million people live in the largest urban clusters of Khartoum, Khartoum North and nearby Omdurman, situated at the junction of the rivers. In 1988, the worst floods of the 20th century struck the urban area around Khartoum. Two million people were left homeless.

SUMMARY FACTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Official Name:</th>
<th>Republic of Sudan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital:</td>
<td>Khartoum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Government:</td>
<td>Islamic Military Regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population:</td>
<td>28 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area:</td>
<td>2.5 million sq km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Ethnic Groups:</td>
<td>Black, Arab, Beja and 570 additional groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Languages:</td>
<td>Arabic, Nubian, Indigenous Languages, English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religions:</td>
<td>Islam, Indigenous beliefs, Christianity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit of Currency:</td>
<td>Sudanese Pound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Flag:</td>
<td>Three horizontal stripes of red, white and black with a green triangle at the pole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Independence:</td>
<td>January 1, 1956</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A LOOK AT THE PAST

For at least 9000 years farmers and herders have lived along the Nile River in what is now Sudan. Ancient fortresses, castles and temples dot the banks of the Nile in the north. The importance of the Nile River has meant that Sudan and Egypt have culturally influenced one another since ancient times. The Kingdom of Cush, which is now the north-east corner of Sudan, was Egypt’s rival for over 1000 years.

In the sixth century A.D. the region flourished as the Kingdom of Nubia, gradually embracing Christianity. At this time Nubia was a great source of ivory, gold, gems, aromatic gum and cattle for the Middle East. Later, Islam spread throughout the northern region during the 1400s to 1700s. Other African kingdoms, such as Shilluk and Azande, and herding peoples including the Dinka and Nuer, thrived in southern Sudan.

Ottoman-Egyptian rulers controlled Sudan with British help, from 1821 to 1885. In the 1880s, a Sudanese religious teacher named Muhammad Ahmad ibn Sayyid Abd Allah proclaimed himself the Mahdi, or guided one, and launched a jihad, holy war, against the Ottoman rulers. The Mahdists captured Khartoum in 1885 after a long siege in which British General Charles George Gordon was killed. In 1899 Anglo-Egyptian forces regained military control of Sudan which was under joint British-Egyptian rule for over 50 years.

Sudan proclaimed its independence on January 1, 1956. The civilian and military national governments that followed kept the deep-seated differences between the mainly African south and the Arab north. Sudan’s current leader, General Omar Hassan al-Bashir, took power in a military coup in 1989. His government abolished the constitution and all political parties and made Arabic the language of instruction, replacing English.

Sudan has survived famine for more than 10 years and civil war for 40, causing many people to flee. Recently there have been agreements to cease hostilities between North and South Sudan, and a deal to distribute oil revenues to ensure equitable development in the South.

Did you know?

Cushite civilization, which reached its peak between 1750 and 1500 B.C., is thought to be the oldest Black civilization in the world. Its capital was Meroe on the Nile.
FAMILY LIFE

Sudanese extended families include uncles and cousins going back several generations. They determine a great deal about one’s life, work and marriage opportunities.

Traditionally the focus for Sudanese people has been the local village or nomadic community. These relatively small communities are made up of extended families based on lineages of male relatives and ancestors. The members of a lineage act in the group’s interest, safeguarding territory or forming important ties with other families by marriage. Usually a family leader is a respected elder.

Did you know?
In tribal life, which is specific to the south, cattle are the symbol of wealth for the Dinka and Nuer people. When a man marries he must pay the bride’s family a certain number of cows. The more beautiful the bride, the more cows he must give. The groom’s family will then secretly keep track of the given cows, how many calves were born to them, the number that died of natural causes or snake bites. If the couple divorces, the wife’s side must give back the number of cattle that were originally given, plus all the offspring from them.

Most Sudanese families hold strong traditional values in a rapidly changing world. Whether in rural or urban society, the woman’s world has been domestic and the man’s world, public. From everyday meals to formal socializing, such as a wedding feast, men and women are segregated. Men and women lead far less separate lives in the south.

It is difficult to say how years of war, famine and migration have changed families in Sudan. Some rural Sudanese have recently moved to cities, where family and ethnic groups mix at school and work. Upper-class families living in big cities like Khartoum and Omdurman tend to be closely connected to the government, business and the professions.

For people in the north who are herders, family status still depends on the size of the herd. In settled villages, certain families hold the rights to own land. In the past, colonial governments sometimes gave powerful positions to certain families. These family groups have gradually become part of the modern political system, but traditional ideas about power and status endure.

Did you know?
In tribal life, which is specific to the south, cattle are the symbol of wealth for the Dinka and Nuer people. When a man marries he must pay the bride’s family a certain number of cows. The more beautiful the bride, the more cows he must give. The groom’s family will then secretly keep track of the given cows, how many calves were born to them, the number that died of natural causes or snake bites. If the couple divorces, the wife’s side must give back the number of cattle that were originally given, plus all the offspring from them.
The World of Work

In spite of often harsh conditions, Sudan is primarily a farming country. Four out of every five Sudanese still make their living in farming or raising livestock, or both. People have small family farms where millet, vegetables and fruit are grown or cattle and goats herded.

Did you know?
80% percent of the world’s gum arabic, or gum acacia, is produced in Sudan. Harvested from acacia trees, it is used in inks, adhesives, certain types of candy and soft drinks.

Around 70% of that work force is composed of women. There are also large, government-operated farms in central Sudan that produce a long-fibre cotton famed the world over for its softness. Peanuts, sugar cane, sorghum and sesame crops are also exported.

The vast, semi-arid region of Sudan has been home to herds of cattle, sheep, goats and camels which once numbered in the tens of millions. Droughts and civil war have reduced the traditional grazing lands, but livestock are still very important. Many of the roads are impassable and there are few trains.

Urban Sudanese work in government or light industries. People also work in the service sector and make handicrafts. Marketplaces, or suqs, full of food, clothing, and locally made household items, are busy places in the city. Schools, government offices and shops open early in the morning and close around 2:00 p.m. due to the midday heat. Shops open again from 6:00 to 8:00 in the evening.

Over the last 20 years, many young men and women in search of jobs have moved to the Khartoum area, only to face disappointment. Wages are low and housing is hard to find, making life for city dwellers very difficult. For many Sudanese, income from relatives working outside the country is essential for survival.

Did you know?
Sudan exports many camels and sheep to Saudi Arabia and Egypt.
Soccer is popular in Sudan. Its players rank among the best in Africa. Basketball and volleyball are also played. The Sudanese have always been good fishermen and boatbuilders. Fishing is more of a necessity than a sport in Sudan. Popular traditional sports are wrestling and a kind of martial art performed with long sticks and shields. Men also hunt deer and other game for sport. Women and men enjoy traditional dancing together. The Sudanese have a game they play at night or at “moon time,” called shelel, which involves stones, sticks and holes made in a wooden board or in the earth. Young Sudanese girls enjoy playing with dolls, jump rope and hopscotch, which is called arika. Backgammon, or tawal, and a board game called mangala using stones are also played.

Men and women have different ways of socializing in urban Sudan. Women entertain friends at home and men socialize with friends elsewhere. In rural areas, men socialize in a diwanya, a hut used as a meeting place.

Did you know?
The longest river in the world, the Nile runs from south to north in Sudan. Since ancient times the historic Nile River has been the main route of travel and communication for Sudanese people to the Mediterranean Sea.
Health care in rural Sudan is hard to obtain. In the 1970s the Sudanese government began making medical care more available. In principle, visits to clinics and medicines became free. There are not, however, enough trained doctors and nurses or medicines. Recently privatization has made health care more expensive.

In the countryside people often have to travel long distances and wait a long time to see a doctor or nurse. Refrigeration for medicine is also scarce. Most doctors and hospitals are in the north, but even in the cities people rely on expensive private pharmacies. Compounding the decline in health care have been the years of famine, resulting in malnutrition among children. Malaria, dysentery, tuberculosis, tropical diseases such as sleeping sickness and now HIV has spread unchecked.

The few medical facilities that remain open are frequently controlled by military factions. They are without trained medical practitioners, basic supplies such as syringes, and the most basic antimalarial and antibiotic medicines. International nongovernmental organizations or NGOs, manage some health care facilities today.

Traditional healing practices coexist with the remnants of war-ravaged westernized medical clinics. A traditional way of healing called zar has had an enormous impact on the health and social life of northern Sudanese women. Zar ceremonies are conducted by women ritual practitioners to release or cleanse others from sicknesses brought on by evil spirits, or jinn. For women suffering from psychological illnesses like depression, such social rituals are helpful. Problems such as infertility and other organic disorders are also treated.

Did you know?
For pre-natal care and giving birth, Sudanese women have traditionally relied on midwives, or geem, a Dinka word, which means literally the “receivers of God’s gifts.”
Sudanese public schools have gone through huge changes recently, moving from a Westernized curriculum taught in English, to an Islamic curriculum taught in Arabic. The government of General Bashir announced sweeping educational reforms in 1990. Now all schools use a Muslim curriculum and all course elements are drawn from the Koran.

Most schools in Sudan are clustered around Khartoum, where they originally followed a British model. There are still some Italian run Christian missionary schools in Sudan. Canadian Jesuits operate a theological school and there is also a school run by French nuns in Khartoum.

Most of the colleges and universities are in the northern regions. Skilled technical workers are needed in southern Sudan, but civil war erupted before the vocational schools were completed and many teachers and students fled. More universities tailored to Sudan’s needs were opened in the capital region in the late 1980s. As with health care, recent privatization has made education less affordable and accessible. The continuing warfare has closed schools for long periods of time in some parts of the country.

The current campaign of "Arabization" is highly controversial, particularly in the south, and has significantly contributed to resentment and hostility towards government policies. Islamic education has traditionally been available in the north. In the past, girls’ education was primarily of this religious kind, although many girls received secular schooling, too. More women than men entered professions such as medicine, law and economics, the only professions open to women in the 1980's.

Did you know?
In the Muslim areas of Sudanese villages, the local religious leader or imam often runs a religious school for the children called a khalwa, where the holy teachings of the Qur’an or Koran are studied.
EATING THE SUDANESE WAY

Sudan is famous for its Guhwah coffee served from a Jebena, a special Sudanese pot. The coffee beans are roasted in this pot over charcoal then ground with cloves and other spices. The grounds are steeped in hot water and the coffee is served in tiny cups after straining it through a grass sieve.

Tea or chai is also very popular and served in small glasses without milk. Some beverages enjoyed in the non-Islamic areas are Aragi, a clear strong spirit made from dates, merissa, a type of beer and tedj, or wines, made from dates or honey.

Sudanese cuisine is as varied as its cultures, especially in the south, but it has certain unique characteristics. Millet porridge and fool medamas, a savoury dish of mashed fava beans, are popular breakfast foods in the north. Lamb and chicken are often eaten, but pork is prohibited to Muslims. Wheat, and dura sorghum, are the staple starches. Breads include the Arabian khubz, and kisra, an omelette-like pancake which is part of the Sudanese dinner. Maschi, a beef and tomato dish, is also typical. Fruits are peeled for dessert and a favourite treat is creme caramel.

In the south, dinner is served on a low, bare table. There may be five or six dishes to dip into with large pieces of flatbread. These dishes are accompanied by a salad and shata, a red-hot spice mixture served in small dishes. After the meal, dessert is served, then tea. On special occasions incense may be lit. The ritual of hospitality is important in Sudan. Here’s a Sudanese recipe to try:

Sudanese Meat Sauce

**Ingredients**
- 1 kg lamb or beef, cut into pieces
- 2 tbs oil (vegetable or sesame)
- 1 onion
- 1 can tomato sauce/paste
- 1/2 tsp cumin
- salt & pepper
- 1 or 2 garlic cloves chopped
- lemon juice

**Preparation**
Brown the meat pieces in oil. Add onion, tomato sauce, cumin, salt, garlic, pepper and lemon juice to taste. Simmer on stove in covered pan for 30 minutes. Serve with kisra.
You will find that many Sudanese know English which they have learned in school. Today, however, Arabic is the official language spoken by a majority of the people and is also taught in schools. Though hundreds of languages are native to Sudan, Arabic has, through government policy, become the common language. It is the language of prayer for Muslims. It should not be assumed that Sudanese can read Arabic.

Sudanese greetings are very polite and rather complex compared to ours. Saying, “Hello. How are you? How is your family?” would seem simple to Sudanese. In Sudan, or among the Sudanese anywhere, two friends might greet each other with smiles and gentle shoves on each other’s shoulder. Then they will shake hands and embark on a pleasant ritual of exchanging formal greetings, inquiring if all is “well,” or tamam. You might hear enthusiastic replies of tamam!

Here are some basic Arabic words and phrases to try:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hello, welcome!</td>
<td>Mar haban!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello, peace be with you</td>
<td>As-salammu alaykum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And peace be with you also</td>
<td>Alaykum salaam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are you?</td>
<td>Kayf haaluk?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine, thanks. With Allah’s mercy.</td>
<td>Quwais el-hamdu li-laah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My name is...</td>
<td>Ismii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your name?</td>
<td>Ismak shinov?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a student</td>
<td>Aanaa talib</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleased to meet you</td>
<td>Tah-sharafna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good-bye</td>
<td>Ma’asalaama</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Did you know?
While Arabic is the official language of Sudan, Nilotic and Nilo-Hamitic languages are spoken in the south and Darfur is spoken in the western provinces. There are more than 100 spoken languages in Sudan and over 570 ethnic dialects or indigenous languages.
Most Sudanese, who live mainly in the north, are Muslim and follow the religion of Islam. The Sudanese living in the south follow Christianity, which is expanding rapidly and sometimes has been combined with traditional spiritual elements. Sudanese Christians follow practices very similar to those in Australia.

Alcohol and pork are not permitted for Muslims. Their dress is conservative. Men wear jalabiyyas and loose turbans. Women cover their heads and clothing with brightly colored, sheer wraps called tobes. In offices, they tend to wear plainer white tobes. Muslims are required to fulfil the five pillars of faith. These are: making a profession of faith, praying five times during the day, giving to charity, fasting during the month of Ramadan, which is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, and making the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if possible.

Friday is a day of rest and congregational prayer at a mosque for most Muslim men. The mosque leader, the imam, is a preacher of sermons and frequently a teacher of the Koran, the holy text.

In northern Sudan, as in much of North Africa, there have traditionally been religious brotherhoods which honour a founder believed to possess baraka, or blessedness. Brotherhoods have also sometimes been a way of organizing politically. An example is the Ansar order which has its roots in the 19th century Mahdist movement.

Traditional religions in the south and other parts of the country vary a great deal. Their followers believe in a Creator. Ancestral spirits act as intermediaries, who powerfully influence rain, seasons and community welfare. For some of the traditional herding cultures such as the Dinka and the Nuer, cattle have symbolic importance. Naming and sacrificial rituals involving cattle are meant to inspire and protect.
The important Sudanese holidays are religious. Muslims follow a lunar calendar.

Perhaps the most important Islamic holiday is after the month of Ramadan. For the entire month, faithful Muslims fast from dawn to sunset in order to strengthen themselves spiritually. No food or water is allowed until sundown when the fast is broken with the family meal called fa-tur. At the end of the month of Ramadan is a feast holiday, Eid-al-Fitr. Another religious holiday marks the annual Hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca in the middle of the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar.

Every Friday for Muslims, and Sunday for Christians, is considered a day of worship and shops and offices are closed. Christmas Day is celebrated on December 25.

The non-religious, public holidays include January 1, Sudan's Independence Day, when there are military parades. Unity Day on March 27, commemorates the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972.

Did you know?
On Mulid al-nabi, the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed for Muslims, and Christmas and Easter for Christians, there are celebrations in the streets with festivals, lights and special sweets.
Sudanese art is primarily decorative. Rather than images, you might see intricate geometric designs or beautiful carvings in ebony or ivory, or metal or leather work, such as daggers and sheaths. Women make decorative items for their households such as doilies for serving trays.

The Institute of Fine Arts and Technology has encouraged graphic artists including a number of printmakers, calligraphers and photographers who have achieved international recognition. Ibrahim al Salahi is perhaps the best known artist and is proficient in all three media.

There are a number of museums in Khartoum: the National Museum, which has a collection of ancient artifacts, the National History Museum and the Ethnographical Museum. The Khartoum Library is noted for its African and Sudanese collection.

Music is popular. Some Sudanese musicians, such as Abdel Karim al-Kabli, are known outside the country for interesting, restrained blends of Arabic melodies and African rhythms. The Nubian musician, Hamza el-Din, who plays the oud, (a stringed musical instrument), has been well known in North America for some time.

Literature, including poetry, is sophisticated all across the Arab-influenced world. Tayeb Salih writes fictional accounts of life in northern Sudan. His novel Season of Migration to the North explores the relationship between Sudanese and Western culture. Two other internationally acclaimed writers are poet Taban Lo Liyong and Sirr Anai Kelueljang.

Did you know?
Historically Nubian artists and architects who lived in Sudan, were influenced by Christian images and symbols developed from Egypt and the Mediterranean world. The Nubians added details, design combinations and proportions of their own. This is seen on the excavated walls of the Cathedral at Faras, a monastery at Qasr el Wizz and a large town containing churches with frescos at Serra East. Architectural information was recovered along with objects of daily life, including superbly painted Nubian pottery.
This book is a good summary in words and photographs of the cultural diversity in contemporary Sudan.

This is a special study by a Muslim social psychologist which makes for interesting reading.

This is a reflection on the roots of political differences in Sudan and the search for solutions by an esteemed Dinka academic. Deng has also written a biography of his father, an important Dinka chief, *The Man Called Deng Majok* (1986), as well as a novel called *Cry of the Owl*.

The author investigates how the state, political and religious groups work for political and cultural domination.

*Welcome to Kakuma* [video], 2002, University of NSW Centre for Refugee Research and Australian National Committee on Refugee Women.

Web sites  
http://www.raitnet.net/raitnet/  
http://www.arab.net
Project Director
Usha George

Project Co-Directors
Wes Shera, Esme Fuller-Thomson,
Ka Tat Tsang

Project Team
Rupa Amolik, Linda Nicholl,
Leny Prabhu, David Shewchuk,
Shewanesh Tewolde
Eritrean Community in Western Australia
The following is a summary of the issues raised by Eritrean community members who participated in the research

**Fundamental differences in interpretations of mental health issues:**

**But our concepts are not like their concepts [like Australian’s]. We don’t complain from these things like the Australians do. We either treat them in our own way socially or we would never reveal them.**

**Men’s focus group**

**Firstly I think we have more resistance regarding mental health problems and secondly we have a difficulty in expressing these problems. We do not tend to express unhappiness and anxiety unless at a crisis level. Hence I believe the stress we suffer from is the same as the Australian concept, the difference is the ability of expression. When some one of us says that he/she is unhappy we mean there is a serious problem.**

**Women’s focus group**

**Our main problem is the way we are brought up, a person is not supposed to talk the way he/she feels. You do not talk about your household and secrets of the family.**
Reasons identified by community members as sources of emotional distress:

- Problems gaining employment

  Getting a job. The most difficult one because I do not know how they select people and pick who is the best. You know what I mean? So when I apply for a job I do not know if it is the right thing to do or if I might be among the good ones. It is just like betting. So it has been hard to get the job here.

  - Lack of recognition of overseas qualifications.

  The ones who are not educated want to do any odd job and they do not even know how to look for a job, even a cleaning job, they do not know how to look for it, how to ask or even how to write a resume, they do not know, so they are totally blank. But the ones who are educated they want to do something in their field and they can not do it. So they do other odd jobs and it really depresses them because our people say, ‘You see? You have a degree and you still working with me,’ and some people are bothered by such comments.

  - Employers demand ‘local experience’.
  - Racism.

  Acceptance from others is also a problem and racism does exist. The way you look, your colour, the way you speak all are factors, which affect you negatively in your competitiveness to get a specific job.

  - Lack of driving skills.
  - Whilst extreme gratitude was expressed in relation to the provision of social security payments by the government, many feel that they were raised ‘as workers’. Thus, a lack of employment opportunities leads to discontent.
  - Sleeplessness caused by lack of employment.

I was brought up as a worker, I worked for the whole of my life. In this country the Australian government, may God bless it, gives me social security pension. However I feel that if I was working and earning for my living, I would not have suffered from sleepless nights.
- **Language problems**
  - A barrier to gaining employment.

**Women's focus group**

If you do not have any English background, 500 hours would not do much good. Even to be a cleaner you need English. They tell you that you have to learn English, you can work if you understand English. You need to have a driving licence. You don’t have a driving licence or English, what do you do?

- **Separation from extended family**
  - Concern for welfare of those still in Eritrea.
  - Further stress caused by inability to send money to support family back home.
  - Concern over political situation back home, which will place further demands on limited resources if families back home need support.

**Female interviewee**

So you feel all stressed because you think about so many people [at home] and I think it is because we are in a better place we feel guilty somehow. Because you are in a good place and the people are suffering ... So if there was peace it would contribute to much of our being happy.

- **A lack of a strong, united Eritrean community in Perth**
  - However, the two distinct groups within the Eritrean community (Tigrinya speaking and Arabic speaking) recognise themselves as Eritrean and believe they are strong within their own groups and that there is no animosity between them.

- **Accommodation availability**
  - The suburbs in which the government provides accommodation to new arrivals are typically areas with high crime rates, resulting in stress. The community is committed to helping each other find more suitable accommodation.

- **Financial strain**
  - The cost of living is high and with car, childcare and other expenses there is little money remaining to send home to family.
  - Men are traditionally the wage-earners, but now women also need to work to support the family.

**Female interviewee**

...the main problem they have is financial. Because the Centrelink gives them very little and they want to do so many things, they want to buy a car, they want to build a house, they want to make a good future for their children, ...and at the same time they want to help their family back home or sometimes in another country, and they can not do all that with the Centrelink money.
• Culture clashes and interference of Australian law with affairs of families

Men’s focus group

- Women being encouraged by service providers to leave their husbands when there are difficulties between husbands and wives.
- Children being encouraged at school to report problems with their parents.
- Traditionally elders or other community members help resolve family disagreements.
- Distress from the struggle to get to Australia for a safer and happier life to find interference from government and police with raising and disciplining of children.

Socially we come from a conservative culture, values and way of thinking. Australian society is an open society and the law protects this openness. This [the conservative values versus openness] creates a shock to a family or an individual.

Men’s focus group

- Conflict between parents and the younger generations due to clashing of Western culture with Eritrean culture.
- Children’s English is often better than parents’ and they become ‘master’ of the household.
- Concerns that the law prevents traditional forms of disciplining children and as a consequence they do not learn the traditional respect for family, teachers and the law.

The law in this country interferes grossly in the affairs of the families. In our culture this is very strange, we were not brought up that way. When the law stands on the side of my child who even doesn’t differentiate between what is good and what is bad, this situation affects me mentally.

Men’s focus group

In the school they tell children to report on their parents if there is a problem between the parents and the children. They tell them that they will assist them. On the other hand if there is a problem between the husband and wife they encourage the wife to leave her husband. This act doesn’t help a family to function properly. This causes pressure, gastritis and even vomiting. This system does not fit with our system. We Eritreans have a very good culture, which needs to be passed to the new generation. But we have to follow the rules of this country, which is causing us different problems. I can see these problems in many families.
• **Lack of general knowledge about Eritrea**
  – Among wider community, including government departments.
  – Can exacerbate difficulties with finding employment and also in dealing with Centrelink. Eritreans can make themselves known and educate the community now that there is more information on Eritrea available.

  **Men’s focus group**
  The government should make study about each society of the new arrivals so that to be able to provide them with the suitable environment to make their transformation to the new situation as smooth as possible, without losing their real identity which relates them to their culture.

• **Child care is seen as a major issue by women**
  – Cultural differences between traditional Eritrean child care and Western models regarding discipline.
  – Preference for leaving children with a neighbour or friend.
  – Preference for childcare provided by Eritrean families so children learn Eritrean ways.
  – Cost of formal childcare is prohibitive (consumes entire wage, so women prefer to stay at home).
  – Formal childcare is often culturally inappropriate.

  **Women’s focus group**
  We have extended families, we leave our children with our uncles, grandmothers, etc., and we bring them up that way. But here we do not have our extended families, so our children have to go to childcare. I didn’t know about childcare, … our people do not like childcare.
Suggestions made to improve the mental wellbeing of the community:

Community members felt that the community already had a number of protective factors, such as strong religious commitment (particularly for Muslims), traditional systems of support, and a tendency not to see difficulties as ‘mental health problems’ needing to be solved by external agencies.

However, some suggestions for improvements were made:

- The community feedback session identified a playgroup as a solution to assisting with childcare in the community
- An Eritrean community centre to act as a place for community meetings, a venue for youth activities and for providing information to the community
- Support for existing community initiatives
- Provide information about Eritrea to government departments
  – If necessary, information could be sought from the Ministry of Education in Eritrea.
- Provide more training opportunities for women outside working hours so as to allow men to look after the children whilst women attend evening training to improve their employment prospects
- More emphasis on employment opportunities, particularly valuing of experience, rather than welfare approaches

Eritrean society is extremely strong society, otherwise we couldn’t have overcome our environmental, financial and psychological difficulties. Our strength is due to our faith in Allah - praise be upon him - and our social coherence and bond. Had it not been for this we could have been adversely affected psychologically.

The soccer team it is a big gathering which is functioning with internally raised funds. Consideration should have been given to these activities. If the government could assist these activities it is real investment in the society, because you can direct young peoples’ energy in a positive direction.

I believe that experience is more important than theory. I can do much better than those who acquired their mechanic skills theoretically. I have 40 years experience. People have to be tested to be provided with a job and if they can match that job they should get it. We acquired our skills through many years of practice.
Suggestions for disseminating mental health promotion material in the community:

- Consult the community before attempting information sessions with the community, as a previous attempt was not well received.

- Information may be best passed on to the community via the men.

- Word of mouth would be the most effective means of promoting issues within the community, although some written information (for Tigrinya speaking and Arabic speaking) may also be of benefit.
  - The community is currently unaware of any mental health materials currently available for Tigrinya speaking or Arabic speaking members.

- A community centre would provide a suitable forum for information sessions on issues such as mental health.
  - Such sessions should include discussion of traditional ways of treating mental health problems, and discussion of the importance of the family.
Ethiopian Community in Western Australia

RESEARCH SUMMARY 2004
The following is a summary of the issues raised by Ethiopian community members who participated in the research

Fundamental differences in interpretations of mental health issues:

**Male interviewee**

We come from a talking culture. It is really a talking culture and it has a meaning. Because when you talk you are making your mind busy. And making your mind busy means making your mind healthy. You are not worrying, you are not bothered, you are not depressed, you are not stressed, you are not... you are having coffee, chatting, laughing and all that sort of thing. And that is the easiest way of keeping mentally healthy than employing psychologists or psychiatrists...

**Men’s focus group**

We express our feelings, specially those intimate ones, and those serious threats to our personal feelings only and only to the closest persons. .... It is not part of our culture to say to everyone on the street, ‘I am quite depressed today’ ‘I am feeling low’. We do not say that. We do not do that.

We have an age-old tradition which tells us to overcome any difficulty using our own resource, stand by ourselves, for ourselves. This tendency is very likely to worsen the situation because any person is very unlikely to express his state of mind or seek help.
Reasons identified by community members as sources of emotional distress:

- **Family issues**
  - A lack of traditional support systems and networks such as family.
  - Loneliness and separation from family.
  - Being unable to provide financial support to families back home.
  - Worry over the future prospects of children.
  - Contrast between traditional cultural practices and the expectations of mainstream society, especially in relation to parent-child interaction.
  - Distress caused by marital breakdown.

**Men’s focus group**

Stress comes from loneliness. This affects specially us greatly. We have been in refugee camps for many years. We have never had any contact with our loved ones. We do not know the dead or alive. We always think about our relatives. Here we have no one to share our feelings. People under such circumstances suffer from stress. Just staying at home does not help. For instance people who work occasionally meet and talk about work or other personal matters. This helps them. Generally our women, specially those who stay at home, suffer most.

When the majority of a part of us not there [family back home], whether we deny the part, whether we smile and laugh and everything, I think we still are burning inside. That’s really the major depression or the major anxiety.

Here we are not able to conduct our life according to our culture. We have many impositions and constraints to do that. Here you are not in charge of your kids. You can’t punish or scold your kids here. ‘My teacher told me to report to him/her if my parents hit me’, your kids tell you. This is a reality. Could we practice our culture here? That is a fundamental question. We can not.

Unemployment and idleness cause a great deal of problems in marital relationships. Conflicts erupt every now and then. In raising children, the father wants to discipline and mother says no or vice versa. The legal system tends to differentiate rights along gender lines. This worsens the family situation. But had it been at home such problems are jointly resolved. But here due to the justice system and the over-all cultural influences we see problems prevailing in many of our community members.
– Single motherhood.
– Problems with children and not being equipped to handle them. The parent-child relationship in this country is seen as a central issue for the community.
– Young people also saw this as a serious issue, identifying inter-generational conflict caused by a discontinuity between parents’ expectations (which youth felt reflected more ‘traditional’ patterns of social relations) and the desire of youth to take on what they regarded as patterns of social relations which reflected more closely the mainstream culture. They also identified their own feelings of social isolation, and a feeling of having too much work, including school work, to do, which caused stress.

Youth focus group

You know sometimes they [parents] can go on about you having, only twenty four seven and ..... how they never had that opportunity .....sometimes it just gets too much... Makes you, like work hard, study hard and I’d be like at school from eight thirty to three thirty, four o’clock, come home they’d expect me to hit the books straight away. Yeah but you don’t, you don’t compare me, don’t put me in your situation cause ..... I’m over here now it’s different. It’s not the same, you can’t just live African ways when you’re in Australia. If you’re in Africa maybe you might live that way, I don’t know.

Youth focus group

And some of us that are teenagers you know, don’t want any what we lived, .....our country or their culture. Everything they still want to do it like back at home and we don’t want to do it.

– Young people recognised the stresses their families are going through.

Youth focus group

Centrelink makes them unhappy I reckon. Because ..... most families over here ..... they don’t know the English as well and when Centrelink sends them a letter every fortnight to fill, they have difficulty filling it and you know, this is one thing that my mum unhappy because she’s got to fill the form. Yeah there is too many papers to register their pay. An easier system would help out ..... you know a set payment instead of having to send so many letters and make us fill in so many forms especially when they don’t know English.
- **Language barriers**
  - Language barriers for adults.

  **Women’s focus group**
  One can not work because of language barrier. Even if one knows English well there is no job in his area of interest and skill.

  - Loss of native language by children.

- **Lack of employment opportunities**
  - Unemployment.
  - Lack of recognition of existing qualifications.

- **Identity crisis in second generation**

- **Lack of community services such as counselling**

- **Misunderstanding within the community**

- **Lack of strong community support from within**

  **Women’s focus group**
  We are not able to organise ourselves because people do not cooperate. Because we do not respond to getting organised. It is because we have tcheneqet1. Therefore, you think had the Ethiopian community been strong it would have been able to listen to problems and bring some solutions.

- **Lack of transportation**

- **Racism, including issues surrounding being black in Western Australian society**

- **Government imposition of Australian law with no respect for cultural and social tradition**
  Again, this was particularly in regard to child-rearing, but also in regards to marital relations.

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1. Tcheneqet means both worry and worrimage. It can also be translated as anxiety. In Tigrinya Tcheneqet may represent both an insignificant worry as well as anxiety.
Suggestions made to improve the mental well being of the community:

Some community members felt that the community already had a number of protective factors, such as traditional systems of support and the tendency to be a ‘talking’ culture.

Our community is not as exposed as the mainstream to such moods. Because we are still continuing with our social life as dictated by our tradition and custom… Therefore, thanks to our forefathers who left us a culture of social harmony and negotiation, we are in a safer position.

Men’s focus group

When we meet on the road we do not just pass by. We talk and chat and have coffee if we have time. When it comes to our relationship and support system … it is done through the already established network or through personal contacts and relationships that we already have individually. But there does not seem to be much relationship with the Australian community.

However, some suggestions for improvements were made:

- **Youth suggested that adults in the community could be educated about lifestyles in Australia**
- **An African community centre where youth could socialise would be helpful**
- **More government funding to support other community initiatives such as a community church**
- **Increased airtime for Ethiopian Community Radio**

Men’s focus group

The government should find a way of extending the community radio programs by funding them. It is then both the government and the community could benefit. The government can pass any information that should be known by the community and the community could educate itself on various issues.

The other thing is the radio program should be supported by written articles. There could be people who may not listen to the program or even if they listen to it, it would be better to have written material for passing and exchanging information.
• **Use of traditional cultural systems to solve individual and community problems, including the inclusion of elders**

**Men’s focus group**

What could disrupt and threaten our community in the future is the unwanted and unwelcomed imposition of the legal system on our family affairs. ... I think a serious recommendation should be made in this respect. This should be seriously considered. This brings stress. Yes, it does.

We have respected community members. We have elders. If there happens to be any problem in our community, these elders should play the role of counsellors, conduct conciliation among community members. It is only after our elders find it appropriate to pass the matter to the justice system that the matter could go on.

• **Opportunities for employment**

**Women’s focus group**

People should get employment. In our community no one wants or loves government handouts. Every one wants to work. If one works he can be free, can get and buy whatever one pleases and help himself and his families. If there is no work he will be dependant on handout, he will neither help himself nor anyone and will end up in problems.

• **Job oriented training to allow for obtaining skills and qualifications**
Suggestions for disseminating mental health promotion material in the community:

- **Organise social gatherings to facilitate the provision of such information**
  - It is considered important that these events are perceived by community members to be ‘fun’ social get-togethers, rather than simply a ‘meeting’ or ‘talk’.

- **Other possible communication channels identified**
  - An upcoming community magazine.
  - Existing community radio show.
  - Pamphlets left in the hall of the Australian Asian Association of WA.

- **It was considered imperative that information be available in community languages**

- **Youth suggested that they may be the best people to design educational pamphlets and posters for their community**

  Youth focus group

  About this topic, you know how it’s going to be made into pamphlets and that and posters, wouldn’t it be a better idea if it was made by the younger generation?

- **Use of respected community members to pass on information**

  Men’s focus group

  What would be better is for the government to ask the community for capable persons in the community who are educated and can do what is required. Then these people will take responsibility for such matters and, of course, government should provide support and guidance.

  Male interviewee

  The first people to support anyone is community members and I believe [it would be better] if we had or if we can have a highly organised community which can provide support and which is well connected to the service providers and then can provide support at the very early stage of arrival like job advice, educational advice or life skills.
Somali Community in Western Australia

RESEARCH SUMMARY 2004
The following is a summary of the issues raised by Somali community members who participated in the research

**Fundamental differences in interpretations of mental health issues:**

**Male interviewee**

I have seen some of my friends from Somali community saying that we did not have stress in Somalia and I said yes we do have stress in Somalia but we didn’t feel it because you are a member of your family. Whenever you got problem you get support from your family, friends and you don’t realise that you have stress because you got much support from your family but here … some people say ‘I am really under stress and I cannot cope with the system, no family support no friends’, because some of them left their families back home or in refugee camps and they have to wait for a long time.

**Men’s focus group**

We say we do have mental health problems such as stress, depression and anxiety but we don’t commit suicide as European people do because we believe if you commit suicide you will go to the hell. What saved us is our faith which builds our morale, it stops us from using alcohol and drugs.

Yes we do feel them [stress and depression] in Africa but it is different from the way I feel them here because their reasons are different. In Africa it was personal problems but here I feel as I am a bird without wings. All my people who were supporting me in Africa are not here.
Reasons identified by community members as sources of emotional distress:

• **Separation from family members who are left back home or still in refugee camps**
  – This was seen as especially difficult in the context of coming to terms with a new culture without this familial support.
  – Family members miss those left behind - often wives separated from husbands and children separated from parents.

  *Men’s focus group*
  
  Because if the family is not reunited, it is absolutely obvious that the person will suffer from mental health problems.

  *Women’s focus group*
  
  There are many things which are disturbing the families, for example, a woman and her children are living in two different places, a woman and her husband are not reunited. All these issues are bothering some members of our community.

  – Many feel an obligation to send money to these family members, which also adds to the financial strain.
  – Difficulties with reunification exacerbated by lack of documents (eg marriage licence) and DNA testing.
  – Long length of time to process applications.

  *Women’s focus group*
  
  As we are aware, it won’t take more than six months to finalise family reunion applications at USA embassy in Nairobi, but for Australian embassy it takes from 2-7 years.

  *Men’s focus group*
  
  You see some people who have been waiting for reply for five or sometimes ten years.

• **Men felt that they have been disempowered due to:**
  – Changing gender roles in the household.
  – Having to take jobs for which they feel over-qualified.

  *Men’s focus group*
  
  What do you expect to see? That person was a highly qualified person or a manager in his homeland and he had dignity. He is now ashamed to beg for government benefit and there is a huge barrier if he wants to get a job and it seems that nobody wants to give him a job.
• **Community members’ concern about their youth**
  - Youth using alcohol and other drugs, which is not a traditional part of their Muslim culture. This was seen by some as arising from a lack of opportunities for youth to meet people and socialise, other than at nightclubs and bars where drinking and drug use are common.
  - Cultural differences surrounding the negotiation of male-female relations were also identified as causing problems, leading in at least one instance to rape allegations against young male members of the community.

• **Experiences of discrimination against community members**
  - Due to being non-English speaking.
  - Due to being black in a predominantly white society, and having different features such as unusual names or accent. Members of the community often changed their names on job applications in order to be offered interviews for positions.
  - Problems such as overseas qualifications not being recognised were seen as discriminatory.
  - Community members felt discriminated against in their attempts to gain rental properties. This was seen as being due not only to skin colour, but also due to the typically large family sizes within the community.
  - Religious discrimination was also identified as a problem post-September 11 for the Muslim community.

  Male interviewee

  "...and also religion ... especially after what happened after September 11, those people who are Muslim they think they are really discriminated by these people and they say, 'Oh I don't want to give my house to a Muslim person' and that creates another issue for another part of community, those who are Muslim. Also I know some people who went to do their shopping and they see this Muslim scarf and they have been discriminated by the community and they were told 'go home' do not stay here."

• **The social security system in Australia was seen as conflicting with traditional family values within the community**
  - The government was seen as encouraging ‘adult’ children to leave their families by providing financial assistance for them to do so.

• **Female members of the community who had not been reunited with their husbands felt discriminated against due to a perception that Australian society’s negative attitudes towards single mothers**

• **Language difficulties**
  - Perception that qualifications are not accepted because of lack of English.
  - Language barrier is an obstacle to integration with the broader community.

• **Lack of knowledge and understanding about Somali culture by Australians and lack of culturally appropriate services**
• **Lack of employment opportunities**

   There is a lot of expectations among refugees, for example, they think they will get a job as soon as they arrive but in reality they will face a lot of barriers, so accessing employment and socialising are difficult for refugees. All these barriers deteriorate your mental health problems therefore it is very important to take into account all problems which can create mental health problems and should be prevented.

   – This is also related to language problems.

   **Men's focus group**

• **Settlement issues**

   – Having to cope with a new language, new systems and starting a new life.

   **Women's focus group**

   If we knew the language we would have got a job so we would be free from Centrelink, if we tried to look for a job we will be told that we couldn’t speak the language. The rule is no language means no job.

• **Ongoing effects of trauma experienced**

   – Recovering from civil war and refugee camp experiences.

   **Men's focus group**

   Our social [wellbeing] and health depend on our settlement situation. I think it’s clear that if you are not resettled well you cannot have what you are asking me, I mean social and mental health.

   **Male Interviewee**

   I would like say all of these issues are related to the settlement because those people who left Somalia because of the civil war, they have seen bad things, people killing each other. You may see someone who lost all of his family and they ended up in refugee camps for long time. You may see people who are in refugee camps for 10 years 7 or 9 years and when they come to this country which is completely new to them, new language, new culture, new system and new life, so first three months would be alright because you are in honeymoon period, you go to English classes, you go to Centrelink, and later they start thinking and saying am I in right position or not, what is happening and that is the time, thinking about their life and future and is the time to start having stress or depression.
Suggestions made to improve the mental wellbeing of the community:

- A suitable community centre to provide a break from the isolation
  - There was seen to be a need for culturally appropriate recreational activities.

  **Men’s focus group**
  “…refugees should be encouraged to establish their club where they can meet and share their experiences in this country. This would help me to be free from isolation. It is our culture, we feel relief when we talk.”

- Providing greater numbers of free English classes
  - 510 hours of language classes were seen as insufficient for gaining employment.

  **Women’s focus group**
  “It is very important to take action against causes of all these problems. For example, a woman should be reunited with her husband whom she sponsors, and same thing applies to a woman who sponsors her children, otherwise there will not be a solution for our problems like stress.”

- More government action in relation to family reunion, including more flexibility in the definition of family, and more sensitivity in the determination of proof of marriage

- Start the process of resettlement in refugee camps by giving refugees an orientation about Australia and what they can expect

- Provide information about Somali culture to Australian services and organisations, and develop more culturally sensitive services

  **Male interviewee**
  “…for example, for a Somali patient the first few sentences are not telling the real problem. They are not going to tell you what exactly is bothering them, but if you keep asking a few different questions they will start sometimes crying or telling you what is bothering them, which means they require to have more time with them. If you say I am going to see you for 15 minutes you will lose them because that is part of the culture.”
• Information sessions for Somalis about how to access public services

• Employment

   Men’s focus group

   I think if the person got a job he will be able to manage his other problems.

• Employ bilingual Somali workers as they are familiar with cultural and religious issues

   When the person came to Australia, the government should contact him/her through the Somali Community in Western Australia Association and trained workers should handle the refugee cases in order to give appropriate information about the system because we came from Kenya where police loots people. My first time in this country … I was so scared to see police although I was an educated person. I was asking myself is he going to arrest you and that made my trauma worse.

   Men’s focus group

   The government must get Somali workers because they know the source of our problem and our culture.

   Women’s focus group

   We do have evidence on this issue, there was a woman and her husband who had marriage problem and their case went to every office including immigration, we - the Somali elders - solved the problem according to our culture.

   There are many places like Centrelink and Homeswest where we need to have a Somali worker because many Somali people are visiting these offices every day.

   – A Somali female to be trained for improving emotional and social well being among the Somali women. It is traditionally inappropriate for women to receive health services from men.

• Greater support for the Somali Women’s Association to assist single mothers
Suggestions for disseminating mental health promotion material in the community:

- Radio was cited as a popular way of receiving health information
- Videos using Somali actors that can be watched privately, as mental health problems are not discussed directly within the community (preferable to listen to an ‘expert’ speak on such issues).

  Male interviewee

  It is good to make this video tapes which tells about mental health issues and what services are available and how they recognise the basic symptoms and signs of mental health issues such as depression or stress. I am sure they will like it. If you give a video tape to a lady she will call her friends and they watch together.

- Access to pamphlets on stress, depression, anxiety and how to cope with these, should be available in Somali language, at English classes, social gatherings or through government agencies.

  Men’s focus group

  Whatever information is to be provided should be based on our culture otherwise nothing is going to be reached.

  Male interviewee

  If you put effort on information related to stress and depression they will listen because they know this is something bothering them and they would like to have a solution for their problems. Or if you talk about discrimination and how to cope with or how they can be part of this society with their own culture, knowledge and religion. Just take into account all issues related to refugees and migrants plus Somali culture plus Australian system.

- Use existing bicultural community educators to provide information and support
- The importance of Islam for the community was stressed
  - Most members of the community would turn to religious activities before considering help such as counselling.
- Important that public health initiatives involving the Somali community be based on their cultural practices, through trained Somali workers
- A cross cultural network group to share experiences and coping strategies for mental health issues
Sudanese Community in Western Australia

RESEARCH SUMMARY 2004
The following is a summary of the issues raised by Sudanese community members who participated in the research.

Fundamental differences in interpretations of mental health issues:

- People may suffer some sort of depression, but traditionally people only seek medical help when it is very serious

  If someone from your community knows you have a problem … this person could give this information to others and that makes you in a position or situation … of feeling shameful. And the other thing is our nature, you always keep private things in disguise. Do not make others have a look or make any notice about what is going on inside.

Mixed gender focus group

- I do not want to say that there is no depression in Sudan. This is very misleading. There is depression but it is not depression to be treated by doctors. It could be chronic sometimes but it is very difficult to go to a psychiatrist because according to our culture you are not going to a psychiatrist unless you become uncontrollable.

Male interviewee

- Back at home people are a community … they live in a community, they wake up every morning before work … you knock at your neighbour and say good morning and that happens to check and make sure everybody’s okay … but here it’s different, here … everybody inside so they feel like they’re isolated, … just like a prison for them, like a punishment and they say ‘Why are people not together? Why is everybody alone?’
Feelings of sadness (depression) are expressed in different ways:

- Sudanese keep private things in disguise and hide problems so others do not notice

Mixed gender focus group

We, Sudanese, are professional actors. We can hide our problems and when someone comes to visit us he will find me laughing and there is no way for him to know if I have problems or not.

Mixed gender focus group

We are not like Australian people who are able to speak up openly about their problems. We are not like them. We always try to hide our problems.

Reluctance or difficulty expressing family problems

- It is difficult for a wife to express a problem with her husband unless it is something unbearable.
  For a husband it is absolutely impossible to publicly express unhappiness with a wife.
Reasons identified by community members as sources of emotional distress:

- **Unemployment**
  - Difficulty finding jobs despite appropriate knowledge and skills.
  - Lack of recognition of Sudanese qualifications or experiences.

  - Lack of information on migrant unemployment provided before migration.
  - Technical disadvantage such as lack of access to and knowledge of computers and internet.
  - Traditionally men do not stay at home or like to be without work so this can lead to feelings of shame and depression, particularly if the search for work seems hopeless.

- **Concern for those left behind**

- **Cultural differences in interpersonal relationships, including a perception that people cannot talk and visit with each other as freely here**

- **Wariness of immigration process due to the negative experiences of some members of their community**

  - Some of our husbands came with their degrees from home, yet they had to do the same thing over again, and this can be very stressful not only to our partners, but to the whole family.

  - … they came here full of hope, expectations and when they came here there is the reality. Some of them have very good knowledge and skills. They do not find jobs here, you see! Become very stressed. In our culture usually men do not stay at home. … if they stay home looking for job without any hope they really become very depressed.

  - There are orphans in Africa who are still looking out for my hands, … whatever I put in my mouth, I see hunger in their faces, this makes my nights sleepless.

  - The problem is related to the migration experience. We as Sudanese faced very strange things, for example our experience in Sydney taught us to be very cautious. I don’t want to hide or deny the fact that we became a very cautious community.
• **Family issues**
  – Family conflict caused by differences between the traditional gender roles in Sudan and those in Australia.

  **Male interviewee**
  It’s good for some women, but it’s bad for men because they feel they have lost control … because what the wife is doing is not culturally acceptable … so for the men they still like power and responsibility of protecting their house. So this is another source of stress ….

  **Female interviewee**
  It’s always the finance issues. … now things are changing, before like during our mum’s regime, mums will stay home, look after their kids and the husband would work, would bring the money, give it to the woman, for the woman knows what to buy at the market. … here … what I’m seeing is the men want to like control the money and then the women might have things to do with the children or maybe they want to buy things you know, but you find that the man wants …. You have to ask ‘do you want to buy this’, then you have to ask for money. Some people find it really annoying.

  – Men in the community feel disempowered due to their traditional role as the head of the household being undermined by Australian cultural norms and the legal system, which they argue favour women.

  **Male interviewee**
  You see according to the government your wife does not belong to you, your children do not belong to you. But according to our culture they belong to you.

  – Problems with official documents such as marriage and birth certificates, which are a requirement for sponsoring a spouse or processing cases.

  **Women’s focus group**
  I have filled in the forms for my husband to join me and the children, but I was told to produce a proof [marriage certificate]. When we ran from our country for safety we valued our lives most, so in this case I am going to be separated from my husband because I don’t have proofs, I don’t understand.

  – Concern for children’s future (and their own), particularly in relation to carrying on Sudanese traditions, including respect for family.
  – Concern that Australia is only interested in their children, to mould them into Australians, ignoring the needs of the parents.
  – Parents feel a sense of disempowerment due to inability to discipline their children in the same ways they would in Sudan, and as a result have no control over their children.
  – Concern that the social security system here supports ‘adult’ children moving out of the family home.
  – Children speaking English at home.
  – Daughters bringing boyfriends to the house, which is seen as inappropriate by parents.
  – Worry about teenagers going to nightclubs and what is watched on TV.
• **Financial issues**

**Men’s focus group**

- Many newly arrived community members find it difficult to budget so as to be able to meet their bill payments.
- Frustration caused by not having enough money left over to send to relatives overseas.

The money that people get from Centrelink they thought that that money is theirs. … so as soon as the money gets in their account and they access the money, they can do whatever they like with this money, then tomorrow we get a telephone bill, you get the electricity bill, you get your rent and then you get a gas bill and then you ask yourself where am I going to get this money for paying this. … so they said but why does the government give you this money, it’s taking it away … Why don’t they just pay my bills? But because their money is going for bills, they are not able to help and they feel angry that they are here and are not able to help their relatives back at home.

**Male Interviewee**

Let me tell you a fact because whatever they are doing, your culture is a hundred percent parallel from ours. So whatever you say in your culture does not count in our culture.

When a couple marry, you are not a single person… and the contribution for that marriage is a collective contribution of the whole clan. And you can’t hurt your wife. You can not beat her. Your wife is not your wife, it is the wife of the whole clan, you see. So if she is doing anything wrong you have the right to say there is something wrong. If she is going astray, how could she go astray from a clan. That is why we have little divorce … when a counsellor tells me why would I bother about her instead of getting another [wife], it is an insult to me already.

• **A lack of appreciation of Sudanese culture by social workers and counsellors**

- Advice is given which may be offensive to Sudanese.
- Perception that counselling is inappropriate and does not provide solutions. This included a concern that often the problems can not be solved here in Australia.

Let me tell you a fact because whatever they are doing, your culture is a hundred percent parallel from ours. So whatever you say in your culture does not count in our culture.

When a couple marry, you are not a single person… and the contribution for that marriage is a collective contribution of the whole clan. And you can’t hurt your wife. You can not beat her. Your wife is not your wife, it is the wife of the whole clan, you see. So if she is doing anything wrong you have the right to say there is something wrong. If she is going astray, how could she go astray from a clan. That is why we have little divorce … when a counsellor tells me why would I bother about her instead of getting another [wife], it is an insult to me already.
• **Food**
  – Newly arrived members of the community often find it very difficult to buy the types of foods that they are accustomed to eating.
  
  **Male interviewee**
  
  *The food that they want to eat is not here, so we don’t want to buy food because we can’t eat the food here.*

• **Racism**
  – The colour of skin and number of children seem to be used to refuse access to accommodation.
  – Homeswest houses are often too small for large families.
  – The legal system is perceived as favouring whites against other races/communities.

• **Disappointment with expectations of Australia (as a paradise)**

• **Perception that false promises were made about being able to bring family to Australia**

• **Language problems**
  – A barrier to gaining employment.
  – Makes shopping difficult.
  – Community members find it difficult to read the letters they receive from Centrelink.
  – Causes problems with bureaucracies, including landlords, hospitals etc.

**Male Interviewee**

*Also because of lack of language, they find it very hard to operate in the environment and many of them get letters either from Centrelink or from hospital or from schools or from landlord which don’t know what those letters mean.*
Suggestions made to improve the mental wellbeing of the community:
Community members felt that the community already had a number of protective factors which assist with problem solving. These include close family and community relationships and, for some, not using alcohol and drugs.

We are a unique community. It is very hard for any stranger to know about our problems. We like to solve our problems on our own and if we are unable to do so then help will be sought from others.

The kindness and the good relationship between us plays an important role in decreasing the problems both directly and indirectly. Despite our cautiousness we still can help alleviate each other's problems through our friendly and close relationships.

Usually people don't like to talk about their problems. But if we find out, accidentally, that someone has problems we will rapidly be by his side to give him a hand and try to help him overcome the problems.

Alcohol drinking or drug abusing is not part of our nature and we do not use them as an answer to our problems. We never resort to alcohol drinking to solve our problems.

However, some suggestions for improvements were made:

- **To be treated as an equal (part of the Australian community), particularly when talking to government departments**

- **Use traditional ways of dealing with problems**
  - Elders talk through the issue with the person/people involved rather than involving authorities as Sudanese prefer to try to solve their own problems before government intervention.
  - The extended family traditionally acts as a support, but this is lost in a migrant situation.

One of the ways is, for example, the wife has extended family, you can go and tell her dad, her uncle, and her auntie, one of the other family members and these people can come and interfere in the relationship and in any other purpose. Here, in Australia or abroad you cannot find that. You cannot find that person who can serve that purpose.
• In Sudan, a ‘medical visitor’ undertakes home visits, particularly for women, to provide advice and support. The community here could have its own health and social workers, who would be sourced from, and approved by, the community itself to:
  – Advise members of the community who may be having difficulties, such as family conflict (provide community mediation and solve family matters).
  – Provide assistance at Centrelink.
  – Provide assistance with banking.

• The provision of a community place or a club for social gatherings and community activities

• Provide a community family court to hear family/marriage disputes

• Religious leaders to provide comfort and listen

• Families traditionally provide support for young people

Mixed gender focus group

Most of the youth are actually under the close care from the relatives, the Mum and Dad, and they can recognise and solve all the problems immediately. For that reason you actually find very rarely these actual issues when you compare. Most of the youth do not leave their families, they even stay after they are married. But when you compare here, it is this actually that increase the number of depressed in Australia because most of them live away from their families . . . they have not very close care. For us in our country most of the kids they stay with their families under control, very close care, actually, they comfort them.
Suggestions for disseminating mental health promotion material in the community:

- **Word of mouth and informal methods are better than the provision of reading materials**
  - Provision of information, through a community worker, about symptoms and the role of medical professionals such as psychiatrists, would be helpful.

- **The provision of a gender appropriate Sudanese worker, qualified in dealing with relationship issues and community issues and therefore with a greater level of cultural understanding than mainstream health workers, to do home visits**

- Presenting the information in the form of a ‘drama’ in which the main protagonist finds her/himself in a situation that members of the community can identify with

- It may be useful to consider using a video to promote mental health issues, as some community members commented that such techniques were used in Sudan to promote HIV/AIDS awareness, with some success