ERITREAN COMMUNITY

Note: Not all the template categories may be covered in this profile by the community writer—some categories may not have been relevant to this culture.

INTRODUCTION

• In Eritrea, seniors are the most respected people in the society. According to Eritrean culture, the criteria for seniority is not only age but also other factors such as social status, religious position, being a grandparent and so forth. For example, religious leaders such as priests and imams are considered seniors or elders, even though they are young in terms of age. Grandparents are also considered seniors because they are the main source of information for birthdates, baptism and other important ritual records.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Global context

- Eritrean history is one of the oldest in Africa and possibly in the world. Together with the western Red Sea coast of Sudan, it is considered the most likely location of the land known to the ancient Egyptians as Punt (or "Ta Netjeru," meaning land of the Gods) whose first mention dates back to the 25th century BC. The earliest known reference to the Sea of Eritrea is the Red Sea ("Eritrea" meaning "red"), from which the modern state takes its name.
- Eritrea forms part of the Horn of Africa. It is bordered by Sudan to the north and west, the Red Sea to the east, Djibouti in the southeast and Ethiopia to the south. It is a small country of approximately 121,300 square kilometers and has a population of approximately 4.5 million.
- The region was largely independent, with periods of rule and influence by the Ottomans, Tigray Kingdom and Egyptians, until it was occupied and colonized by Italy in 1890. Italy ruled until its defeat in 1941 by British forces.
- British mandate governed until 1952 when the United Nations (UN) formed a federation of Eritrea and Ethiopia. In 1962, Ethiopia, under Emperor Haile Selassie, declared an end to Eritrean autonomy and proclaimed Eritrea a province of Ethiopia. Eritreans have fought for independence since that time.
- Although Eritrea was awarded formal independence after a referendum vote in 1993, there have been continued border disputes with Ethiopia since 1998. Due to the border conflict problems, many Eritreans left the country. They were forced to flee to refugee camps in the neighbouring countries of Sudan and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), and all the way to Kenya.
- In addition, economic instability, national service, the threat of another outbreak of the border war with Ethiopia, and suspected insurgent activity along the Ethiopian and Sudanese borders means that many Eritreans are continuing to flee their country. Eritrea’s recent history is closely intertwined with Ethiopia and some Eritrean entrants may have married Ethiopians.

Immigration history

- Most Eritreans leave their country for political reasons. Many come as refugees, but others have come here to study or work. The Eritrean people have spent 30 years fighting for independence from Ethiopia. During these years, more than 750,000 people fled Eritrea, taking refugee status in neighbouring countries, particularly in Sudan.
- A small percentage of those who left Eritrea managed to settle in Europe and North America. Many started to return to Eritrea after the war drew to a close in 1991 and when independence was won. However, the border war with Ethiopia in 1998–2000 caused many to again leave their country.
- At the end of the dispute in 2000, approximately 356,000 Eritreans were refugees and another 310,000 people were displaced within the country. At this time about 25 per
cent of the Eritrean population is in the diaspora.

**Demographic profile**
- Even though it is not clearly known when Eritreans started to immigrate to Canada, a number of Eritrean families have lived in Canada for more than 30 years. A high concentration of Eritrean immigrants is found in the Toronto area and recently Edmonton and Calgary are becoming destination cities for Eritreans. It is believed that more than 5,000 Eritrean families live in Edmonton and Calgary. About three per cent of the population is seniors, made up of two per cent who grew old in the past 30 years and 1 per cent new refugees and immigrants who came in the past 10 years. For newcomers (younger generation) to Edmonton, the common practice is,
  - First rent an apartment around 107 Avenue, close to downtown.
  - After some time, buy a house and move to the north and northeastern part of Edmonton. There are some exceptions to this settlement process.

**LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION**

**Languages spoken, written and alphabet used**
- The most spoken and national language of Eritrea is *Tigrinya*. Tigre and Arabic are the two 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* is thought to have descended from the ancient language of *Ge'ez*. It 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 varies 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, where Arabic is the official language.
- 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.

**Communication styles**
- In Eritrea, communication is not only confined to verbal conversation. For example, approaching an elderly person and bowing down one’s head, not making eye contact, and showing signs of shyness, could mean the person needs something important or is simply being humble. At that point that person doesn't have to mention what he/she needs. The elder person will understand the situation and start to ask questions. In many cases, it is not common or polite to request a favour from a friend or a relative directly. Most people use indirect words such as, “If I could manage to get $100 I
would buy food for my children.” In this case, the person is really in need of money. People then understand his/her situation and offer to lend or give him/her money.

Greetings
- Eritreans are very friendly and hospitable people. In formal situations, Eritreans shake hands with each person with a big facial smile, asking about their health and detailed situation of each member of their family. Close friends greet each other by kissing several times on both cheeks. Most men greet each other by joining their shoulders three or more times. Giving a hug is common among friends. Seniors are greeted with high respect and in most cases bowing down one’s head and handshaking with both hands simultaneously is a sign of great respect for an elder.

Meanings of different gestures
- Different gestures are used to communicate with friends and seniors. For example, bowing down one’s head means greetings to an elder. For same age friends, just shaking or waving hands is enough to communicate your greetings. There are many other examples of gestures that are common among children and young people. For example, children protrude their tongue to annoy schoolmates or whoever has made them angry.
- When there is a fight between two young adults, one of them will turn their body, lift their leg and show the other person the bottom part of his/her leg. This is an expression for telling the other person to shut up his/her mouth.

EDUCATION

Literacy levels and seniors’ education
- Most of the Eritrean population is illiterate. The proportion among women is even higher. 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.
- The most spoken and national language of Eritrea is Tigrinya. Tigre and Arabic are the two main languages, although there are many other indigenous languages and dialects.
- To help preserve cultural diversity, primary school instruction is given in the native language of each region. At higher grades, Arabic and foreign languages, such as English are introduced. From grade seven through universities, 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 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 is passed down through the generations.
Seniors’ attitudes towards education

• The majority of seniors in Eritrea are not educated due to the old colonial system where no Eritrean was allowed to go for higher education. During the British colonial period, the maximum grade allowed for an Eritrean was elementary 4th grade. As a result, Eritrean seniors have a positive and excellent attitude towards education. Almost every senior mentions that, “I don’t want my children to be uneducated.” For this reason, every Eritrean senior encourages their children and grandchildren to go to school.

• In the Eritrean culture, an educated person has a higher status. In many cases, people prefer to consult an educated person in many social and family issues. Professional individuals like doctors and engineers are highly respected and appreciated.

• When it comes to decision-making about their health status, seniors trust anyone with a higher educational status. Medical doctors are the most respected and appreciated members of the community.

RELIGION AND FAITH GROUPS

Religious practices and Holy Book or Scriptures

• The two major religions in Eritrea are Christianity and Muslim. Christianity was introduced in the 4th century to the coastal region and then it 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.

• Muslim Eritreans belong to the Sunni sect of Islam. The first people who were 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.

Influence of religion on culture

• The Church and the Mosque are integral to the everyday life and culture of Eritrean seniors. For example, in the Christian society cultural practices are intimately connected with the rituals and calendar of the Orthodox Church, even when an individual is not a regular church member or is a member of another Christian denomination. Many Eritrean Christians do not eat meat or dairy products on Wednesdays and Fridays, as these days are considered days of fasting by the Orthodox Church. Most Muslims are expected to pray five times a day, give alms to the poor, and fast during the daylight hours in the month of Ramadan. If possible, they are expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.

Influence of religion on health and healing

• Religion plays a significant role in the health and well-being of seniors and all Eritreans. When an individual is sick it is a common practice for parents or seniors to take him or
her to church for a ‘holy-water’ shower and prayer of a priest. This is especially true if the type of disease is related to epilepsy or hallucination. The first action that seniors take is to bring the person to the church for a seven-day holy-water shower.

- Since all churches do not have these facilities, people have to travel long distances to get there. Even though this practice is common in the Orthodox Church, other religious groups also practice the rituals.

FOOD AND DIETARY GUIDELINES

Religious or other guidelines

- The staple food in Eritrea is soft bread made of a grain called “teff”. The name of this bread is ‘injera’. Injera is eaten with all kinds of meat and vegetarian hot and spicy sauce commonly called ‘tsebhi’. The urban traditional eating habits and culinary tastes have also been strongly influenced by the Italians. Eritreans eat more bread than other African communities and they also enjoy pasta. Most restaurants in Eritrea serve both the traditional ‘injera’ and Italian food.
- Religion has a strong influence in the eating habits of Eritreans, especially among the senior community members. The majority of Eritrean seniors do not eat pork because of religious restrictions. This applies both to Muslims and Christians.
- Muslims do not eat meat prepared by Christians and vice versa. In most weddings and other holidays, if Muslims are invited to a Christian family, a special food will be prepared for them and vice versa. This practice is common mostly among the senior members of the community.
- Among the Coptic Orthodox and Catholic Christians, only vegetarian food is eaten during the fasting periods. Most seniors, both Christians and Muslims, do not eat meat if the animal is not ‘blessed’. Almost all seniors believe that an animal has to be blessed before it is killed.
- Whenever an animal is to be killed, the name of God or Allah has to be mentioned and a prayer has to be offered so that the meat be blessed. This is commonly called ‘hallal meat’ in the Muslim community. In the Christian community, when someone is killing a lamb or goat he is supposed to say, “In the name of God the father, God the son and God the holy-spirit’ and then slaughter the animal. Seniors in Edmonton follow the tradition the same way as back home as much as possible.

Eating protocols in home visits

- The traditional food is eaten using hands and the Italian food is mostly eaten using forks and spoons. In the Eritrean culture, it is common to visit friends, neighbours and relatives, and join them for lunch or dinner. One does not have to inform them that you are visiting them. Everyone is welcome to join during lunch or dinner. Actually, if you visit a friend’s place during lunch or dinner, they will insist that you join them. It is common to wait for each other before starting to have lunch or dinner. Lunch time or dinner time is a highly respected time and the entire family
members will gather, make a circle, and eat from the same big plate. It is common for visitors to show signs of shyness at the beginning but the host will beg the visitor three or more times to join them. It is also common for people to put food into your mouth (feeding). This is a good sign of friendship and being close to each other.

- During religious holidays, especially Christmas, Easter and other Christian holidays, it is common to buy a live sheep or goat and slaughter it at home to make a big feast with traditional alcoholic drink (‘siwa’), also prepared at home. Every time food is prepared, male seniors first have to bless the food before anyone starts to eat. It is very impolite to eat food that has not been blessed by a senior.
- Special hot food is prepared whenever a baby is born, whether it’s hot or cold season. This food is mostly made of barley or wheat flour and is called ‘ga-at’.
- In the cold season, there is comfort food like potatoes, corn in a hot thick mix or single grain flour, meat and vegetables stew.
- In Eritrea there are two seasons, rainy and hot and dry, and people eat according to the season. Seniors in Edmonton practice the same habit for all seasons.

FAMILY STRUCTURE

Familial roles, responsibilities, and relationships
- The family is very important to Eritreans, and generally they extend this sense of welcome to strangers. The average family in Eritrea has approximately six children. Traditionally, families arrange marriages.
- In urban centres, young people frequently choose their own partners and get an approval or a blessing from seniors. There is a high regard for the elderly and seniors, and their role is often to settle household conflicts. In the traditional Eritrean culture, senior men have more power than others.
- In some cases a grandfather is the most powerful person in the extended family structure. Women have more recently been accorded more respect, following their role in the fight for liberation. Since independence, the government has pursued an active policy for women’s equality and has allocated a quota of 30 per cent for women in the local and provincial assemblies. Much of Eritrean society, however, remains traditional and patriarchal, especially in rural areas.
- Eritreans in Canada maintain their culture if their parents live with them. Parents or seniors are respected in the community and in the family. Big decisions such as marriage, moving to another city, or getting a new job are mostly taken in consultation with a senior family member. Approval and blessings from a senior family member are very important in the social life of Eritreans.

Parenting styles and senior’s roles in raising a child
- Even though the biological parents of a child are considered mothers and fathers,
grandparents or senior members of a family have almost equal responsibility to discipline, give advice, and take care of the child. Most children are trained to respect their elders. An Eritrean senior has a cultural obligation to discipline or correct the behaviour of all the young and adolescents in the community. The children and the young people are in turn expected to respect the senior’s advice and words.

**Intergenerational relationships**

- Most Eritreans live in rural areas in an extended family of several generations that includes parents, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents. 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 settle household conflicts. They are the main source of information regarding intergenerational history. In most cases seniors in the family play a vital role in arranging 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.

**HEALTH BELIEFS, CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON HEALTH AND HEALING**

**Relationships and attitudes towards health care professionals and institutions**

- Eritrean seniors respect and appreciate healthcare professionals and institutions. Even though hospitals and clinics are highly concentrated in the urban areas, the government has launched a program to decentralize facilities, including setting up medical care centres between villages since 1992. Yet the challenges of providing adequate staff and equipment continue. Private healthcare is also available in Eritrea, but is very expensive.

**Senior’s views towards Western medicine**

- Most seniors in Eritrea are influenced by the tradition of the Italians, starting from the earlier colonial periods. Western medicine is not a new thing to Eritreans. They comply with the doctor’s advice and in most cases they consult a medical doctor before they use traditional medicines. For seniors in Edmonton, the herbal medicine is a secret they keep from their doctors because they believe doctors don't accept it.

**Traditional medicine, herbal medicine and home remedies**

- In the absence of an adequate medical system, Eritrean seniors 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. In the old times, healers did not take any monetary form of payment.

- Patients compensate for services by giving food or clothing, and sometimes even jewelry. In some remote, isolated areas, the tradition is still alive. However, nowadays in most areas payment is required for such services.
- The challenge with using herbs and some cultural treatment in Edmonton is the English botanical names for the herbs, and knowing where to buy them. Most herb purchasing involves smelling or testing.

**Chronic diseases, mental health, diabetes and others**

- In Eritrea, most chronic diseases are caused by malnutrition, poor diet, poor water quality, and stress. The numbers of mental health and diabetes-affected seniors and young community members grew during the 30 years migration period in North America as well as in homeland. Seniors and all other members of the community are treated with care if they develop a chronic disease. Often mentally ill people spend their entire time in churches, mosques and with the family.
- A number of herbs and seeds are used for chronic diseases. It is a common practice to go to bush doctors, the traditional healers, for advice and treatments. Western treatment is not widely available in Eritrea. Therefore, when seniors arrive to Canada they tend to use more western medicine than the herbs they know, until their body rejects them.

**Caring for seniors**

- Seniors are highly respected in the Eritrean culture. They are the most precious part of the society and they have a special place in the community. It is very common to give priority to seniors in buses, lineups, shopping, and other public and social gatherings. Immediate family members take full responsibility for seniors when they are ill or when they retire from work.
- Taking care of seniors is not only a social and cultural responsibility but also a religious obligation. Taking care of seniors is considered a way of making God happy, and as a way of accumulating righteousness. There is a strong belief in the religious community that helping an elder or a senior is a righteous deed.

**Rehabilitation for a senior**

- In Eritrea, rehabilitation or nursing home centres are not common. Almost all seniors live with their children or grandchildren until they die. It is the responsibility of the son or daughter of a senior to take care of his/her mother and father.

**Seniors’ life in a nursing home**
In some cases, if a senior does not have a son or a daughter they live with a close relative until they die. So far most seniors who immigrate to Canada live with their children. The concept of a nursing home is strange and is perceived to some extent as cruel.

SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL ISSUES

Change of roles in family life

- In the Eritrean culture, seniors get special attention from their children and from their immediate family members. In addition, seniors get together in churches and on special occasions such as the death of a community member, weddings, and other celebrations. It is also common to create a small regular gathering once a month to memorize or celebrate saints and religious leaders. Eritrean seniors are not socially isolated.
- When they immigrate to Canada, loneliness and isolation become major concerns. The women are still expected to cook and serve their husbands and family, and the men are usually staying home doing nothing. As a result, the men get frustrated and fragile.
- The adult children are the decision makers, providers, the drivers to doctor's appointments or church and social activities, and the resource for all their needs.
- The language barrier and western lifestyle are extremely intimidating, limiting participation in senior activities available in their area. Currently a small group of seniors is getting together to organize Eritrean senior community networks in Edmonton.

Elder abuse

- No incident of elder abuse in the Eritrean community of Edmonton has been brought to the attention of the community or reported to the authorities.

Financial situation

- When seniors do not qualify for Old Age Pension, their adult children take the responsibility of supporting them financially. A senior who qualifies for the pension plan normally gets full support from their adult children in management of their finances. They help them to do their day-to-day banking transactions, shopping, bill payments and so on.

Transportation

- In most cases if a senior is not able to drive, an immediate family member is happy to give them a ride to churches and other places. Some seniors who are not too old take a bus.

Access to recreation and enjoyment activities
Language, cultural barriers, transportation and financial issues are major obstacles to participate and enjoy recreational activities for Eritrean seniors in Edmonton. They do, however, participate in the most common traditional holy days, church events such as celebrations of Saint Mary or other saints in the Christian community and Ramadan in the Muslim community, and weddings. This is only possible if transportation is provided by their children or community members.

SOCIALIZATION AND HOSPITALITY

Appropriate clothing – National or cultural apparel and valuing modesty

- In cities, most Eritrean seniors like to dress up in their best attire, with western style suits being usual in offices. Many urban dwellers prefer somewhat formal attire: men wear suits and ties, and women are modest but fashionably dressed. Western dress predominates in the capital, especially for young people. The traditional dress for women is a dress of white cotton with colourful trim. The traditional dress for men is also white and is common in rural areas, where it is worn daily. However, in cities it is seldom worn except for ceremonial occasions. For some Muslims, dress is influenced by religious standards. Military-style clothing is also extremely common throughout the country.

Cultural celebrations and their significance

- There are many cultural and religious celebrations in Eritrea. These celebrations are still practiced in the Eritrean communities in Canada. 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.
- 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 Hajj 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. Most seniors
in Edmonton carry the calendar from back home and try to celebrate the special holidays preparing special food and clothing.

**Cultural norms around hospitality**

- In Eritrean culture there are few cultural norms around hospitality. For example, for a senior visitor, cooking the delicacy dishes (spicy chicken sauce with ‘*injera*’), whether within the budget or not, shows high respect for the visitor. It is very common to make many offers to visitors.
- People would insist you eat or drink so many times. This shows their care for you. In some instances, people would wait until they get the offer or the request two or three times, because it is considered impolite to accept the offer the first time. However, in the modern society these traditions are getting outdated.
- Visiting relatives or friends without advance notice for a few hours is common practice. Some seniors still carry out that practice in North America (Edmonton). The host has to accept the unexpected visitors and offer the best hospitality with a happy face, despite the costs.
- Going out to restaurants or coffee shops usually results in big fights during the time for paying bills, no matter what the arrangement were or what the occasion is. Such practice is even worse among seniors.

**DEATH AND DYING**

**Meaning of death**

- Death of an immediate family member or senior member of the community is the most feared and painful event of life in the Eritrean culture. After dying, the body goes through special cleaning and preserving with frankincense smoke, herbs and oil, which is a procedure more like Egyptian mummies.
- The idea behind the common cleaning and preserving of the body is to keep the body and all organs intact for as long as possible. In Eritrean culture, the concept of reincarnation is offensive and sinful.
- The burial ceremony can take anywhere from three to 10 days. People would mourn for more than 40 days, doing different kinds of rituals after 10 days, after a month and so on.
- At a certain time a big event is prepared in memory of the deceased individual, and many relatives and community members get together to eat and drink. This is very common in the Christian culture. Similar activities are carried out in the Muslim society.

**Rituals and rites at time death and after death**

- The beliefs and practices concerning rituals and rites at the time of death, funerals, and the afterlife follow some of the norms of the two religions, Orthodox (Coptic) Christianity and Islam.