SOMALI 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 the Somali community young seniors are between the ages of 65 and 70. Those above 70 are considered to be older seniors.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

• The Somali originally came from Somalia, which is on the horn of Africa.
• The country shares borders with Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti. The capital
• Mogadishu has approximately 2 million inhabitants out of a total population of 9 million.
• 80 per cent of the Somali who came to Canada were refugees fleeing from the civil war.
• There are now 70,000 Somali immigrants in Canada.
• Approximately half live in Toronto. In Ottawa there are 13,000 Somali people while in Edmonton there are 5,000.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

• Somalia has only one language, Somali. Different provinces have different dialects but they can all understand each other (Arabic is widely used because of the Islamic religion. English and Italian are also used)
• 92 per cent of the immigrants prefer to speak Somali at home.

Communication styles
• There has been use of oral tradition till 1972 when the Somali language was written. Sometimes communication may be indirect, through examples or stories, or may be direct, without diplomatic language. It is common to speak in loud voices and use hand gestures

Greetings
• Assalam Alaikum (Peace be upon you)
• Nabadi miyaa (is their peace).
• Subah Wanaagsan (Good morning)
• Galab wanaagsan (Good afternoon)
• Habeen wanaagsan (Good night)

Meaning of different gestures
• Somali use sweeping hand and arm gestures to dramatize speech. Many ideas are through specific hand gestures:
• A swift twist of the open hand means "nothing" or "no".
• Snapping fingers may mean "long ago" and/or "so on"
• A thumb under the chin indicates "fullness".
• It is impolite to point the sole of one's foot or shoe at another person.
• It is impolite to use the index finger to call somebody. That gesture is used for calling dogs.
• The American "thumbs up" is considered obscene.
Most of the young Somali seniors (age 65-70) have some sort of literacy. Older seniors (70 and above) are less literate. Male seniors are more literate than female seniors. Since the Somali language was only written in 1972, many seniors are illiterate in their own language. Those who are literate can read and write the Arabic language because of the Quran (Muslim’s holy book).

Somali seniors encourage the young generation to get good education especially in their own faith. It was not common for seniors to go to school back home. In Canada it is very common because of the new language, mainly English which they need to learn.

**RELIGION AND FAITH GROUPS**

- Almost 100 per cent of the Somali are Muslim. The religion is called Sunni Muslim.

**FAMILY STRUCTURE**

**Familial roles, responsibilities and relationships**
- The structure is based on family and clanship. Clan membership is determined by the paternal lineage. The average Somali household has seven people. Under the Islamic law, the father is the head of the family and must support the family. In the event of divorce, the children belong to both mother and father, but usually they live with the mother and father is supposed to support them.
- Children become adult at the age of 15. Young adults and unmarried children live with their families.
- Traditionally the father has been the breadwinner for the family and mother has been caretaker and educator of the children. The mother still exercises considerable influence in running the family affairs.
- The situation has changed because of the refugee experience. Many families were separated because of immigration. Many families lost fathers in the war. The divorce rate is high in the Somali community because of the stress, new life style, reversed roles and underemployment. There are now many single mothers in the Somali community, (but traditionally this was not the case).
- In Somalia, it is the community that raises the children, not just the nuclear family. Somalis usually prefer to problem solve within the clan or community.
- Traditionally children spend lot of time outdoors. They are safe and neighbors watch out for them.

**Families values and the role of a senior in the family**
- From a society where lines of authority are clear, respect and obedience are expected of children to new rules of discipline, altered parent-child roles, and limited external
support. There are now many female headed households. Many families are struggling with basic settlement needs, i.e. income/employment, housing and language barriers.

- Seniors play a great role in the Somali culture. They are well respected because of their age and wisdom. They mediate when there is conflict and they are educators of the new generation to carry on the history and the culture.
- There are social pressures such as fear of speaking broken English (even though they already speak several languages)
- There is anxiety about not fitting into the new society and not understanding mainstream social norms.
- Many things have changed for the Somali seniors since they emigrated from their country of origin. They lost everything including education, assets and friends, and families were destroyed. They lost a way of life that they were used to. They only brought their faith and few family members. Faith is more meaningful to them and it is obvious through the way they dress. Somalis fear they might face some prejudice because of their religion.
- Bicultural stress: There has been disruption of family dynamics due to cultural change. Parents feel powerless to support youth in their education. Sometimes there has been pre-migration trauma or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder where family members suffer from depression and anxiety. This is contrasted with Nomadic tradition where moving around the land is easy. In the new environment life depends on extended social support as opposed to nuclear family support.

HEALTH BELIEFS, CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON HEALTH AND HEALING

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

Traditional medicine, herbal medicine and home remedies

- In the absence of other forms of treatment, most Somalis rely on traditional healers. 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 before carrying out the surgery.

Mysticism, spirituality, supernatural beliefs, superstitions

- A faallow healer practices some form of ‘astrology’ (*1), using drawings, cards, coffee grinds and tossed shells to diagnose patients. Some diseases are believed to be caused by an 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.

Notes (1). In African medicine a diviner is used to diagnose a sick person. Reference to ‘astrology’ has the same meaning. A diviner throws bones or seeds in the air as part of ‘gazing into the crystal ball.

Caring for a senior

- Seniors access both modern and traditional medicine. They also use religious healings.
- There are no seniors’ houses in Somalia. Ones’ children care for them as a senior, whether they are sick or getting old. It is hard for Somali seniors to accept the idea of being in a seniors’ home or away from their own family.

SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL ISSUES

Change of roles in family life

- Seniors lost their role as leaders and educators. They were the key resource persons for every question that kids had when they came back from school. Kids used to sit beside them and listen to their stories. Now they are in a new culture that they do not know much about. Everybody is busy trying to catch up with this fast paced life and they do not have time to listen to grand mom’s story.

Social isolation

- Seniors are very isolated in Canada. In Somalia seniors were busy mediating and telling stories. Male seniors get together and play some special seniors’ game called Kabdoot where they use bow and arrow to shoot a target, also known as the shah a board game or they go to the mosque and get involved in the programs offered there. Female seniors also get together and have some rituals called Abay Abay. The special rituals are accompanied by food and incense. When there is a wedding, seniors are the first ones to be invited to the ceremony.
- In Canada there are very few seniors and they are isolated because of the busy life, physical setting and lack of transportation. They lost the recreation they were familiar with and do not have access to the facilities that are available in their neighborhoods.
- Senior abuse is not common in Somali community.

Financial situation

- Seniors live a life of poverty because they depend on their family. At weddings they receive some money called Guf. They are not eligible for pension until they have lived in Canada for at least 10 years if they came to Canada through family sponsorship.
- Somali seniors do better when there is a large Somali community such as in Toronto.
SOCIALIZATION AND HOSPITALITY

- Each person is greeted by name or, in the case of relatives, by a word that shows their relationship (uncle, cousin, etc.). Older or learned religious persons are addressed by a title that comes before the rest of the greeting. General greetings vary according to the region and the situation, but Nabad (“Peace”) is accepted nearly everywhere. The common southern variation is Nabad miya? (“Is there peace?”). Its equivalent in the north is Ma nabad baa? The Islamic greeting Asalaamu aleikum (“Peace be upon you”) is a common formal greeting, to which the response is Aleikum ma salaam (“And peace be upon you”). Such phrases are followed by inquiries about how the person has been and an exchange of information. Iska warraan? (“What’s the news?”) and Maha la shegay? (“What are people saying?”) These terms can also mean “How are you?” in some parts of the country.

- Men firmly shake hands with each other three times before putting that hand to their heart. In some southern areas, women shake hands with each other and then kiss the hand they have shaken. Somalis of the opposite sex who are not related usually do not touch when meeting.

- Once two people know each other’s names and clan membership, it is possible for them to know exactly where they fit into society and what their responsibilities are to each other. In rural areas, one can ask about another’s lineage directly, but in an urban area it is more polite to identify it through indirect questions, such as inquiring about the person’s home region.

- Women often visit with one another, either in the home or the market. Occasions such as holidays, weddings, or births merit home visits. Visitors need not take any gifts or food to their hosts. Before entering a family compound, one announces his or her presence and waits for a while in order not to surprise the family. Sweet, spicy tea with milk is served to visitors in urban settings, and other refreshments might also be available.

- In rural areas, tea or milk is offered. A favorite time for visiting in urban areas is late afternoon, when most work is done and it is not too hot to stroll around. Also, in rural areas, night is a better time, as farm chores will have been completed and animals have settled down. When families socialize, men and women usually interact separately. Tea shops, which generally have tables outside, are centers for men to socialize and discuss current affairs.

Cultural celebrations and their significance

- Islamic holidays observed include the month of Ramadan; ‘Eid al Fitr, the three-day feast at the end of Ramadan; ‘Eid al Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, honoring Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son; and Mawliid, the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday.

- Prior to the current crisis, independence from the United Kingdom in the north was celebrated on the 26th of June, and from Italy in the south on the 1st of July. The ancient Persian New Year (Dab Shiid or “Starting Fire”) is celebrated in many parts of Somalia.
• Birthdays are not celebrated.

DEATH AND DYING

• When a person is terminally ill, it is considered uncaring for a physician to tell them or their family that they are dying. It is acceptable to describe the extreme seriousness of an illness. When a death is impending, a special portion of the Koran, called yasin, is read at the bedside.
• Following a death, a person called a sheik is called to prepare the body. A female sheik cares for women, and a male sheik cares for men. The sheik cleans and perfumes the body, places it white clothes, and says the appropriate prayers. The deceased's next of kin is responsible for digging the grave. When there is a death the whole community comes together and supports the family.
• The Somali observe the anniversary of someone's death through commemoration.

DO’S AND DON’TS

• When visiting a Somali senior try not to shake hands until they initiate, unless you are greeting someone of the same sex. It will also be respectful to wear fully covering cloths. When offered food, accept even if it is not familiar food for you, it is a sign of respect and humbleness.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS/ASSESSMENTS

• Somali seniors are usually open and willing to answer most of your questions but because they came from a dictatorship, they tend to be cautious in the answers they give. For this reason they might be hesitant to answer until they trust the interviewer. It is helpful if you introduce yourself fully and explain the reasons for the interview.

COMMUNITY AND MEDIA RESOURCES

• There is a Somali radio program that is on FM 88.5 every Sunday night.
• There is also a TV program on Sunday morning on Chanel 11.