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**SOMALIA: BRIEF ORIENTATION**

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## HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Somalia today comprises the former British Protectorate of Somaliland and former Italian Trust Territory of Somalia. The British and Italians occupied the North and the South respectively through 1960. Upon gaining independence in 1960, the two former colonies were unified on July 1, 1960 as the independent "Somali Republic". In October 1969, a bloodless coup was staged by the Armed Forces and the country was renamed what is officially known today as the "Somali Democratic Republic". Somali origin still continues to be controversial. However, there is a belief that the oral tradition indicates a connection to the Arabs.

Somalia is an ethnically and religiously homogeneous society with 99% of the population both Somali and Moslem.

The prevailing climatic factors are monsoon winds, hot climate, and scarce irregular rainfalls with recurrent droughts.

Extended family plays a very important role in the life of the Somali people. Unlike the West, in Somalia, the individual has social and economic obligations to his extended family members. Extended family members are primarily those related to one or both parents by blood (genealogically), and this can go as far back as ten generations or even more. Each individual has a position in his extended family structure corresponding to his level of decision making and obligation. Later in life, through marriage, the extended family is further expanded by addition of the family members of the spouse. This increases both the strength of the extended family and one's obligations.

The extended family provides protection against economic or physical disasters and against enemies. Hence, it could be considered as an insurance policy. However, the extended family structure does not encourage economic dependency on the family unless there is valid justification. On the contrary, it is a fundamental element in Somali culture that an individual must stand on his own two feet; in other words, he must work to support himself and his family if he is able.

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RELIGION

Somalia is officially a 100% Muslim Country. The people strictly follow Islamic practices. The most obvious religious activities that a foreigner can notice are as follows:

- 1) The five daily prayers:
  - a) morning at 4:30 AM-5:30AM
  - b) noon 12:30 PM-3:00 PM
  - c) afternoon 3:30PM-6:00 PM
  - d) dusk 6:15 PM-6:45 PM
  - e) night 7:15PM-3:00 AM

(Note: It is preferred to pray collectively with other people rather than by oneself.)
- 2) Fasting: Fast the month of Ramadan in the lunar year.
- 3) Observe the following Islamic Holidays:
  - a) Id-al-Fidri which takes place after the end of the 30 days of fast and is officially two days.
  - b) Id-al-Adha: The day after the last Haj day and lasts for two days.
- 4) Prophet's Birthday: This day is officially announced by the Government and lasts for one day.
- 5) Haj: This is a pilgrimage to Mecca made at least once in lifetime if one is financially capable.

In Islam all actions are determined by Allah. Therefore, a Muslim usually says "Insh-allah" meaning "God willing" in referring to any future action.

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### RESOURCES

Economic and natural resources found and used in Somalia include the following:

Livestock: Livestock is the backbone of Somalia's economy. Live animals (goats, sheep, cattle and camels) comprise 60-80% of the total exports from Somalia and generate over 70% of the country's foreign exchange. Somalia is truly a nomadic society, and nomads make up about 60% of the population. Most Somalis who are engaged in agriculture, and even those who live and work in cities, own livestock which may be kept by nomadic relatives. While earnings from sheep and goats outrank both camels and cattle, the camel is the most important animal to the Somalis, providing milk, meat, and transportation for nomads living in harsh desert conditions.

Agriculture: In the past, with the exception of limited rainfed farming, agriculture was never given much importance in Somalia outside of the riverine areas. However, since the time of the country's independence, agriculture has become increasingly widespread, and many Somalis now take an interest in farming. Major crops are maize (corn), sorghum, sesame, cotton, rice, and vegetables, which are all grown for domestic consumption, and bananas, which are the country's second major export.

Fishing: Due to Somalia's nomadic history, development of a fishing industry has been very limited. However, recently, as a result of crop failure and droughts, fishery has gained increasing attention as a source of food for the nation.

Minerals: Mineral resources are the least developed sector in Somalia. However, exploration is underway.

### EQUAL PARTICIPATION (WORKING TOGETHER)

In the Somali culture, communication in general, and in particular at the workplace, is not restricted by one's position. Based on Somali egalitarian cultural values, any Somali individual can advise or criticize another Somali at any level of the administrative hierarchy. This does not mean that one does not respect authority, but each individual considers himself a member of the working team and feels that his input and cooperation are important, regardless of his position in the hierarchy.

Somalis are cooperative and are usually eager to learn from others on a mutual basis. Therefore, an expatriate in Somalia should be prepared to share his knowledge and expertise, not only with his counterpart but with any member of the work team who shows an interest, regardless of his position.

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Dealing with conflicts: Conflicts between expatriates and Somali counterparts arise largely due to the lack of a full understanding of procedures, practices and limitations of individuals on both sides. For example, at times the Somali counterpart does not have full knowledge of the procedures of his expatriate counterpart's agency or Government. Therefore, he may believe the expatriate is the sole decision-maker on the project. As a result, when the American counterpart fails to fulfill what the Somali counterpart believes is a U.S. commitment, the counterpart may interpret this as a lack of cooperation, and trust diminishes. Likewise, an American may not be fully aware of the limitations on his Somali counterpart and often does not consider the demands their superiors may exercise upon project resources. As a result, the work relationship suffers. Difficulties in English language comprehension and ability to express oneself may also affect a Somali counterpart's understanding of your message or the way he/she states his position, thus resulting in misunderstanding or emotional reactions by either party.

Another potential situation for conflict concerns counterparts and contractors. For instance, a contractor (particularly, the Chief of Party) may feel his Somali counterpart does not meet his expectations regarding education, experience, etc. Instead of working with the counterpart to share his expertise and attempt to correct these problems, the contractor may attempt to assume the responsibilities of the Somali project managers or to ignore his counterpart. Due to the frequent contacts between the contractor and American officials, both at work and social gatherings, an atmosphere of trust and cooperation is easily developed; this can overshadow the role of the counterpart in project implementation. Discovering the above situation, the Somali counterpart may develop an uncooperative attitude which causes the project to suffer.

An action which can improve the working relationship between expatriate and Somali counterparts is sharing issues prior to either party making a decision. One is very likely to fail to gain the confidence and support of his Somali counterpart when an issue is presented to the counterpart for his signature or concurrence if his input was not sought in advance. FSN professional staff can be of great assistance here, but they must be involved in all areas of project implementation, not only when disagreements arise between the counterparts. This involvement of the FSN staff in all levels of the project will also strengthen project continuity.

Expatriates may experience frustration due to time values. Traditionally, as a nomadic society, Somalis have few exact time limitations. Inefficient communication systems and extended family obligations may also affect a Somali's punctuality. Understanding this may help reduce frustration. At the same time, it is important for expatriates to make every attempt to be punctual and keep their commitments. One should not excuse his being late by saying one is on "Somali time."

Before 1972, the Somali people were a totally oral society. Things were orally passed on from generation to generation. Important events were recorded orally in poetry. Since 1972 the Somali language has been written and is the official written language. However, still the Somali people like to communicate orally.

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### HISTORICAL SITES

For more information on official historical sites in Somalia you can contact the following:

- 1) Ministry of Information, National Guidance and Tourism
- 2) National Museum
3. Somali Academy of Sciences and Arts (Archeological Dept.)

In Mogadishu, historical monuments include statues of Somali warriors and freedom fighters like Ahmed Gurey, Sayid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan and the heroine Hawo Tako, as well as the tombs of the Unknown Soldier and Dhagahtur, a statue of a man throwing a stone which represents the collective freedom fighters. Main areas of tourist attraction are the old quarters of Mogadishu, like Homer Wayne and Shangani (near American Embassy), and the various handcraft shops found in the Lido and near the American Embassy.

### SOME SOMALI TRAITS AND VALUES

1. Most invitations offered by Somalis are oral, and often no written announcements are issued, due to the scarcity of printing facilities and the cost. Guests are not expected to bring anything such as food or drinks, but women guests might offer to help the hostess prepare or serve the food or in washing up afterwards. It is culturally unacceptable (and viewed as unmanly) for Somali men to enter the kitchen, let alone do any kitchen chores. All guests at a party are expected to socialize and participate in conversation.
2. At traditional Somali parties, the sexes sit and eat separately, but at modern parties, whether diplomatic functions or informal gatherings, this is not the case. However, Somali wives do not often accompany their husbands to social functions, due to their responsibilities at home.
3. Generally, most Somalis dislike being photographed, mainly due to religious beliefs. However, many will agree to posing for a picture, but permission should always be obtained before including a Somali in a photograph.
4. Most Somalis enjoy having their foreign friends visit their homes, but leave your pet behind. You should also restrain your dog when around Somalis. According the Kuran, a Muslim must wash seven times any part of his body which is touched or licked by a dog.

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5. Greetings: The "Hi" and "hand-wave" sort of greetings are informal and acceptable among friends or people who know each other fairly well. The Arabic greeting "Asalama aleykum - Alaykuma Sa-alaam" is very common and appreciated, as well as the Somali versions such as "Nabad ma sheegtay - Nabad baan sheegay or "Ma nabad baa? - Waa nabad". It is accepted and appreciated to say "hello" to your neighbors, even if you have not been formally introduced.

Handshaking is an important tradition here. Friends and co-workers who see each other daily shake hands at least once a day. In addition, important figures like sheikhs, chiefs, and elders may expect and accept handkisses from their followers and equals, but never from a non-Muslim foreigner. Bowing or kneeling down are not used as greetings here, even with important persons.

There is a type of handshaking, sometimes called a "thumb-shake", that is very common in the countryside and among traditionalists. It simply is a strong handshake with momentary thumbholds.

You might also notice somebody touching his chest with his open palm after handshaking. This simply means that your handshaking is accepted and highly appreciated.

A touch of the elbow is sometimes used to replace a handshake if one's hands are wet or engaged.

Somalis often hug or embrace good friends of either sex in greeting, but this is not usually done in public with the opposite sex. It is accepted in Somali culture for people of either sex to walk in public holding hands with good friends of the same sex, and this should not be construed as homosexual behavior, as it is in some other countries.

#### GENERAL PRECAUTIONS

1. Handshakes and physical contact with the opposite sex should be avoided or, if necessary, be done with prudence near prayer hours, since this can invalidate one's preparations for prayer, making it necessary to wash again before praying.
2. Clean and proper dress is always highly valued here. There is a Somali proverb, "Hugagu waa kula shir taga", which means, "Dressing well will help you be accepted and appreciated." Adult females in shorts are not accepted, except in sporting events, at the beach and in privacy. In track-and-field games, shirts with sleeves are preferred. Adult men should restrict wearing shorts to when they are engaged in sports or when required for work. Jogging is not popular among Somalis, but they walk a lot instead.
3. According to the Islamic faith, good conduct requires married women to cover their hair, especially with black handkerchiefs.

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Braided hair styles indicate one is an unmarried girl, especially in the countryside. Men with long hair and anyone with long fingernails are not acceptable in Somali culture. Somali men never wear earrings.

4. Cleanliness is also very highly valued here. Islam requires all Muslims to be clean if they want their prayers and other good deeds to be accepted and registered by the angels. Somalis wash parts of their body five times a day for prayer, and they are generally very clean in their bodies and their clothing. In addition, the fact that most of the Somalis eat with their hands requires that one washes one's hands often.

5. Security: Somalis are traditionally hospitable, peaceful people unless provoked first, and they have a high sense of mutual coexistence. Besides this, respect for others is part of their Islamic teachings. In the Kuran there is a passage which says, "Keep your religion and beliefs and I keep mine, and let us co-exist peacefully." A foreigner need not fear being harmed in Somalia because he is a foreigner. Of course, one should always be careful, just as anywhere else in the world, but generally speaking, it is very safe here. Burglary, pickpocketing and car thieves can be found in Mogadishu, but such incidents are rare compared to other cities like Nairobi, Cairo, London or New York. A very good example of how secure it is here is that you often see Somalis carrying a lot of money in sacks or pillow cases to and from the banks without a single guard.

6. Buying things in most Somali markets depends on the art of bargaining. Some sellers ask high prices from foreigners, especially Americans, but it is valid and acceptable to compare prices by walking around and to bargain hard for items one wants to buy. It is sometimes helpful to have a Somali friend help you in the beginning, until you are more familiar with the cost of things and the art of bargaining.

7. Calling by a finger or pointing a finger when discussing is considered offensive and should be avoided.

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Each society has its own values that guide the individuals daily behaviour. In this section we will try to make a contrast between some American values (Ref. L. Robert Kohls, Washington International Center Publications) and Somali values.

AMERICAN

VALUES

SOMALI

1. Personal Control  
Over the Environment

Americans no longer believe in the power of Fate, and they have come to look at people who do as being backward, primitive, or hopelessly naive. In the U.S. people consider it normal and right that Man should control Nature, rather than the other way around. More specifically, people believe every single individual should have control over whatever in the environment might potentially affect him or her. Most Americans find it impossible to accept that there are some things which lie beyond the power of humans to achieve.

Somalis believe in the power of fate. Because of their strong belief in the Islamic faith, everything is controlled by Allah, the Almighty God. Somalis believe that the destiny of the individual is pre-determined. However, they try to take initiatives to bring about improvements without challenge to God's will. Whatever success or failure, it is attributed to the will of Allah.

2. Change

In the American mind, change is seen as an indisputably good condition. Change is strongly linked to development, improvement, progress, and growth.

As a nomadic society, Somalis appreciate their ancient heritage. However, they are open to changes that do not interfere with the fundamental elements of the Somali culture. Nowadays in urban areas they are open in adapting other cultures - mainly Western.

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AMERICAN

VALUES

SOMALI

3. Time and Its Control

Time is for the average American, of utmost importance. To the foreign visitor, Americans seem to be more concerned with getting things accomplished on time (according to a predetermined schedule) than they are with developing deep interpersonal relations. Schedules, for the American, are meant to be planned and then followed in the smallest detail. Americans may appear to foreigners to be completely controlled by the little machines they wear on their wrists, cutting their discussions off abruptly to make it to their next appointment on time.

Due to the nomadic culture the Somali people do not have time limitations. Therefore, time is not a problem. The Somalis make plans for the future but not in a strictly predetermined schedule as in the U.S. Their plans are based on days, weeks, months, years, etc. instead of seconds, minutes and hours.

4. Equality and Egalitarianism

Equality is, for Americans, one of their most cherished values. This concept is so important for Americans that they have even given it a religious basis.

This is a shared value.

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AMERICAN

VALUES

SOMALI

5. Individualism and Privacy

The individualism which has been developed in the Western world since the Renaissance, beginning in the late 15th century, has taken its most exaggerated form in 20th century United States. Each individual is seen as completely and marvelously unique, that is, totally different from all other individuals and, therefore, particularly precious and wonderful. Americans think they are more individualistic in their thoughts and actions than, in fact, they are. They resist being thought of as representatives of a homogenous group, whatever the group.

In the United States, privacy is not only seen as a very positive condition, but it is also viewed as a requirement which all humans would find equally necessary, desirable, and satisfying. It is not uncommon for Americans to say -- and believe -- such statements as "If I don't have at least half an hour a day to myself, I will go stark raving mad!"

Each individual is born unique and different. However, he has to conform with commonly accepted values. The individual must respect, honor and represent the values and style of life of his group. Individual actions are referred to his group and extended family. Due to the obligation one has to his extended family members privacy is viewed as a negative attitude which causes resentment.

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AMERICAN

VALUES

SOMALI

6. Self-help Concept

In the U.S., a person can take credit only for what he or she has accomplished by himself or herself. Americans get no credit whatsoever for having been born into a rich family. (In the U.S., that would be considered "an accident of birth.") Americans pride themselves on having been born poor and, through their own sacrifice and hard work, having climbed the difficult ladder of success to whatever level they have achieved all by themselves. The American social system has of course, made it possible for Americans to move, relatively easily, up the social ladder.

Take a look in an English-language dictionary at the composite words that have the word "self" as a prefix. In the average desk dictionary, there will be more than 100 such words, words like self-confidence, self-conscious, self-counteracted, self-control, self-criticism, self-expression, self-importance, self-improvement, self-interest, self-reliance, self-respect, self-restraint, self-sacrifice -- the list goes on and on. The equivalent of these words cannot be found in most other languages. This list is perhaps the best indication of how seriously Americans take doing things for one's self. The "self-made man or woman" is still very much the ideal in 20th century America.

Even though we share the value that an individual gains credit for his effort, in Somalia an individual gets credit from the position of his extended family in the clan structure as well as being born to a prominent family (rich, educated, hero, etc.).

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AMERICAN

VALUES

SOMALI

7. Competition and  
Free Enterprise

Americans believe that competition brings out the best in any individual. They assert that it challenges or forces each person to produce the very best that is humanly possible. Consequently, the foreign visitor will see competition being fostered in the American home and in the American classroom, even on the youngest age levels. Very young children, for instance, are encouraged to answer questions for which their classmates do not know the answers.

This is a shared value.

8. Future Orientation

Since Americans have been taught (in value no. 1) to believe that Man, and not Fate, can and should be the one who controls the environment, this has made them very good at planning and executing short-term projects.

For those coming from a culture such as those in the traditional Moslem world, where talking about or actively planning the future is felt to be futile, even sinful activity, they will have not any philosophical problems with this very American characteristic but religious objections as well.

The Islamic Religion does not, however, outlaw planning for the future. Indeed the Islamic Religion urges striving for betterment of one's life and exploiting resources provided by Allah. It does not preach that one should sit back and wait for his destiny. Therefore, Somalis (as a Muslim society) to the best of their knowledge control environment.

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AMERICAN

VALUES

SOMALI

9. Action/Work  
Orientation

"Don't just stand there," goes a typical bit of American advice, "do something!" This expression is normally used in a crisis situation, yet, in a sense, it describes most Americans' entire waking life, where action -- any action is seen to be superior to inaction.

Americans routinely plan and schedule an extremely active day. Any relaxation must be limited in time, pre-planned, and aimed at "recreating" their ability to work harder and more productively once the recreation is over. Americans believe leisure activities should assume a relatively small portion of one's total life. People think that it is "sinful" to "waste one's time," "to sit around doing nothing," or just to "daydream."

Because of its nomadic cultural heritage which provides ample free time and also the extended family dependence, Somalis don't have a strict, routine, plan, and schedule.

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AMERICAN

VALUES

SOMALI

10. Informality

To foreigners from a more formal society, Americans may appear to be extremely informal, even disrespectful of those in authority. Americans are one of the most informal and casual people in the world, even when compared to their near relatives -- the Western European.

Dress is another area where American informality is most noticeable, perhaps even shocking to some non-Americans.

This is a shared value except for "Dress". Somalis dress formally almost for all occasions. (See General Precautions Section.)

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AMERICAN

VALUES

SOMALI

11. Directness, Openness  
and Honesty

Many other countries have developed subtle, sometimes highly ritualistic, ways of informing other people of unpleasant information. Americans, however, have always preferred the direct approach. They are likely to be completely honest in delivering their negative evaluations.

This is a shared value.

12. Practicality and  
Efficiency

Americans have a reputation for being an extremely realistic, practical and efficient people. The practical consideration is likely to be given highest priority in making any important decision in the U.S. Americans pride themselves on not being very philosophically or theoretically oriented. If Americans would even admit to having a philosophy, it would probably be that of pragmatism.

This is a shared value in terms of Practicality. However, a foreigner may find it difficult to notice it in a short period.

Will it make any money? Will it "pay its own way?" What can I gain from this activity? These are the kinds of questions which Americans are likely to ask in their practical pursuit, not such questions as: Is it aesthetically pleasing? Will it be enjoyable?, or Will it advance the cause of knowledge?

The popular American "trial-and-error" approach to problem solving also reflects the practical. This approach suggests listing several possible solutions to any given problem, then trying them out, one-by-one to see which is most effective.

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AMERICAN

VALUES

SOMALI

13. Materialism/  
Acquisitiveness

Foreigners generally consider Americans much more materialistic than Americans are likely to consider themselves. Americans would like to think that their material objects are just the natural benefits which always result from hard work and serious intent -- a reward, they think, which all people could enjoy were they as industrious and hard-working as Americans.

This is a shared value.

But by any standard, Americans are materialistic. This means that they value and collect more materials objects than most people would ever dream of owning. It also means they may give higher priority to obtaining, maintaining and protecting their material objects than they do to developing and enjoying interpersonal relationships.

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SUMMARY

Now that we have discussed each of these 13 values separately, if all too briefly, let us look at them in list form.

U.S. Values

Personal Control over the Environment  
Change  
Time and Its Control  
Equality  
Individual/Privacy  
Self-Help  
  
Competition  
Future Orientation  
Action/Work Orientation  
Informality  
  
Directness/Openness/Honesty  
Practicality/Efficiency  
Materialism/Acquisitiveness

Somali Values

Fate  
Mixed - Change/Tradition  
Human Interaction more important  
Shared Value with U.S.  
Group's Welfare  
Mixed - Self-Help/Birthright,  
Inheritance  
Shared Value with U.S.  
Mixed - Future/Fate  
Shared Value with U.S.  
Shared Value with U.S. except  
Dress  
Shared Value with U.S.  
Shared Value with U.S.  
Shared Value with U.S.

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