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# Somalian Immigration and Assimilation to Minnesota

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## Somalian Immigration and Assimilation to Minnesota

For the past twenty years, Somalians have been seeking refuge from a country in turmoil. In 1991 the Somali government was overthrown, leaving the country in the hands of battling warlords. While attempts have been made to reestablish a recognized government, these attempts have thus far been unsuccessful. Civil war and famine drove much of the Somalian population out. Many refugees found safety in surrounding countries such as Kenya or Ethiopia, while others found a more unlikely safe haven: Minnesota.

Known for its long, cold winters, Minnesota would not seem like the ideal location for African immigrants. But when examined closer, the land of 10,000 lakes is prime for the influx of immigrants. Ripe with unskilled jobs, the refugees flocked to Minnesota to take advantage of the many opportunities available. When they arrived, they were aided by several immigrant support groups, who aimed to help them settle in their new home. With the rising Somali influence on the Minnesota economy, it is becoming increasingly more important to make attempts at understanding this group's culture and how the influx has affected existing communities, as well as address the issue of assimilation.

The majority of the Somali population is Sunni Muslim. According to this religion, the Qur'an is the law, and ideally the government forms its policies around the document. The document addresses topics ranging from marriage to banking procedures, and everything in between. Sunni are required to pray 5 times a day (sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and before bed) facing Mecca. They are expected to make charitable contributions, when able, to reduce the inequality among the people. The major Muslim holiday is Ramadan, a month long observance which

requires fasting from sunrise to sunset. Also required is the full covering adorned by the women, known as a burka. It is traditional that Sunni women produce several children, resulting in large families.

The influx of Somalians to Minnesota has had many affects, some positive, some not so positive. While the refugees have taken many of the undesirable, unskilled jobs that many native Minnesotans refused to take, many of them were skilled employees, such as doctors or lawyers, in their home country. Because of licensing discrepancies, they cannot land similar jobs in the United States. This means that not only can these skilled professionals practice and enjoy the same benefits of their school as they had in Somalia, but Minnesota cannot benefit from their knowledge either. This causes both parties to be mutually stifled. The majority of the Somalian work force has taken manual labor jobs, or restaurant jobs that require little to no knowledge of the English language. A common job taken by those that do have at least minimal English skills is cab driving. In the past, cab drivers have been known for their extensive knowledge of the area they drive in. With the increasing popularity of GPS systems, it seems that just about anyone can drive a cab. There has been a bit of an upset at the idea of those who have been in the area for the least amount of time being the ones that fill these positions, however, similar to entry level positions in other industries, the positions needed filling, and native Minnesotans were not taking the jobs (Smith21).

In the education systems, schools who have received a large number of Somalian immigrant children and first generation children (mainly urban schools, but more recently suburban districts as well), have seen an increase in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, coupled with a decrease in their average proficiencies in math

and reading. Struggling to reverse these declining scores, many of the affected schools have launched “magnet” programs to attract middle class white students, who tend to have higher proficiency scores. The same schools are also under pressure to provide accommodation to the Sunni students for their necessary prayer time, as well understanding regarding the observance of Ramadan through daytime fasting, and schools (and workplaces) with uniform policies are given the ultimatum of allowing Burkas to be worn or to risk losing employees. While these demands are not huge, they have sparked a debate on the legality of the matter. For years officials deliberated on whether or not requiring the pledge in school with the words “under God” in it violated the separation of church and state. Public prayer by other religions, predominantly denominations of Christianity, has been discouraged over the past decade to minimize offense to other religions present (Pytel). Brad Dacus, the president of the Pacific Justice Institute spoke on the matter and made a request for Christian prayer rooms, stating "The school policy presumes that Christians are less religious and less inspired to worship and praise the Lord and come together," (Pytel). The accommodation of these religious needs in schools especially, but also in the workplace, has undoubtedly cause an uproar in the predominantly Christian society that Minneapolis and it's suburbs have remained.

The influx of Somalian refugees, in addition to the increasing amount of Hmong and Latino immigrants has divided Minnesota to some extent. Because so little knowledge of the English language was taught in Somalia, the majority of the immigrants do not speak or understand it. To alleviate some of the pressures of being thrust into a completely foreign society, Somalians have formed communities where

their language is still spoken, their religion is openly observed, and their culture is celebrated. These pockets of “New Somalia” are not just located in the metro area, however. Cities such as Rochester, several hours past the city limits, have sprouted their own Somalian communities. While these communities provide a great circle of support for incoming refugees, they don’t really foster an atmosphere of adjustment to living in an American society. This leads me to the ever pressing question of assimilation: how much of it is *actually* necessary to become an integral part of our country?

There are many ideas about how immigrants should behave upon arrival to the United States, regardless of where they are from and where they have relocated to. But the real question, one that doesn’t have a clear answer, is how much assimilation is too much? Opinions on the matter range from anti-assimilation view points, to those who expect immigrants to immediately strive to be the Anglo American stereotype.

It is clear that knowledge of the English language is necessary anywhere in this country, and Minnesota is no exception. This doesn’t mean this knowledge is a pre-requisite to entering the country, however if the intent is to stay in the country, one will need to learn some. This does not, and nor should it, require abandonment of the language of their native country. The responsibility to increase understanding of a new language and culture doesn’t fall solely on the shoulders of the immigrants, however. As a country with open borders to those from other countries, we have an obligation to educate ourselves on those entering our homeland.

Often assimilation is seen as a problem between immigrants and natives to the land they relocate to. But with the Somalians, as with many other immigrant groups,

there is a high presence of intergenerational tension on the matter. Undoubtedly, first generation Somalians desire their children to follow Somalian traditions and Sunni beliefs. Within these guidelines, however, are instructions that conflict with the adolescent need to just be accepted. For example, many Sunni Muslims are minimalists on the subject of “modern” hygiene, and while they value cleanliness and wash frequently, they do not believe in washing with more than plain soap and water. Cologne or perfume is suggested instead of an actual deodorant (Ahmadiyya). When school requires students to participate in physical activity, this can create a situation that would leave the adolescent vulnerable to ridicule from their peers and inhibit them from satisfying their need to fit in. The traditional burka can be a touchy subject as well, as it inhibits girls’ abilities to express themselves. Of course, there are those second generation adolescents that are unaffected by their peers, or do not have especially judgmental peers. A benefit to the second generation is that because Somalians tend to live in communities together, they are seldom the only one, or one of a few in their school. And there are, in fact, girls that really do like wearing the burka, whether it’s required or not. A 6th grade Minneapolis student wrote about her experiences as a Somalian American girl, sharing her parents sorrow for the state of their home country, but rejoicing in who she is a Somalian simultaneously (Fatima, “I Am Somalia”).

Some assimilation is required in order to survive in America. For example, the Qur’an discourages the borrowing of money and paying of interest. This simply cannot be adhered to in a society where cars and housing are necessary. Unlike larger cities, Minneapolis is severely lacking in public transportation. The buses are somewhat inefficient, and only recently was a minor train system developed (the light rail system).

While it isn't impossible, it is generally rather difficult to attain a vehicle without borrowing funds, especially when the car is needed to make money. Also, Somalian families are traditionally large, and with three or four children, it can be hard to find an apartment or other rentable space suitable for such a family. Attaining a loan is definitely necessary when buying a house. Despite these requirements that go against their beliefs, many Somalians have understood that this is how society in Minnesota, and all over America, works.

It is important to address that Somalians do not hate America. While this seems like an odd statement, many people opposed to their immigration believe that they don't want to be in America, and dislike residing here. While they were forced here, in a way, the majority of Somalian immigrants have no plans to return to their home country, and have become an integral part of our society. Adjustment may be difficult, and they may miss their life in Somalia, but they too are fed up with the anarchy in their home country. A website, [Aminarts.com](http://Aminarts.com), displays many political cartoons regarding issues in Somalia. While they are written in Somalian, the pictures show enough to understand the frustration displayed.

Somalians have become an integral part of Minnesota, just as other African immigrants have become integral to other states in varying regions. The chaos occurring in Somalia will not soon be over, and when it is, the refugees in America will have nothing left to go back to. To put it bluntly, they will never "go away." Because of this, it is important to gain an understanding of their culture, and how they fit into our society. Overall, the Somalians have made changes to fit into our "American" culture. Now it's time for native born Americans to assimilate to the multicultural society this

country has become.

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