

Cultural background: ERITREA

(Eritrean refugee students)

Languages

Tigrinya, Tigre, Saho, Kunama, Rashaida, Bilen, Afar, Beni, Amir, Nera, and some Arabic.

Teaching in the Classroom

In Eritrea, most schools are government run and free-of-charge. There are a few private schools, but only at the primary education level. Students are taught in their native language in grades 1-5, and then, in theory, transition to English in sixth grade. In reality, Tigrinya is more dominant in school. Primary education is compulsory for children age 7-14. Secondary school is grades 6-12.

At the end of 6th grade, students take the Seventh Grade National Examination at the National Examination Center. At the end of 12th grade, students take the Eritrean School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESLCE).

An ongoing challenge in Eritrea is providing equal and equitable educational opportunities for all children - 27% of school-aged children are still out of school. Students in rural and remote communities suffer the most since they have very limited access to education. More than 31% of nomadic children are out of school. In addition to access to education, the quality of education is also problematic.

Traditionally, parental attitudes towards women's education have been an obstacle to educating girls. School fees discourage many families from investing in women's education. For low-income families that are dependent on child labor, enrolling girls in school means loss of extra income, child care, and domestic chores.

Family/School Engagement

Greeting somebody with a handshake and the word "Salam" is common. Lengthy, elaborate greetings are normal, especially on special occasions. Women greet each other by ululating and kissing each other on each cheek three times. It is customary and polite to ask how things are, about one's spouse,





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children, and other family members. Each greeting is accompanied by a great deal of genuine laughter and joyousness.

Questions have different endings depending on whether you are addressing a single male, a single female, or several persons. Eye contact during the first encounter with someone is usually seen as a sign of disrespect, however; eye contact becomes more acceptable as people become more acquainted and develop a relationship. Eritreans are very hospitable and great care is taken to make guests feel welcome and included. Eritreans are also pleased when non-Eritreans show an interest in their customs.

Many Eritreans have a strong sense of national pride and fear losing their culture, which sometimes slows down the process of acculturation in the USA. Lack of English proficiency has also been a barrier for Eritrean immigrants who wish to fully engage in American culture. In particular, this is a struggle for many Eritrean women. Many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge even if parents want to be involved.

The Tigrinya are the dominant ethnic group in Eritrea. Traditionally, the highland and lowland groups have had antagonistic relationships. These groups distrust each and live in segregation. It is good to be aware of these community divisions as they may carry over to Eritreans in your school community.

Culture, Gender, and Family

Eritreans pride themselves on being hard workers and resilient individuals. They demonstrate great social responsibility. Respect for elders and authority is the norm. Eritrean families are close-knit. Typical households consist of nuclear families with familial networks close by. Generally, men are the primary providers and decision-makers whereas women are homemakers. In many communities, women are inferior to men. Children assist with household chores from an early age, girls in particular play a more active role than boys. Boys act as herders of the family's livestock while girls assist with domestic duties.

Eritreans celebrate major events with members of their community. For instance, birthdays, marriages, graduations, and other events. Traditional foods and music always play an important role. All traditional foods are eaten using the right hand only and without the use of silverware. The left hand is considered impure.

The majority of Eritreans are circumcised. Female circumcision (female genital mutilation) is carried out by Christians and Muslims. The Kunama people practice traditional medicine, including slashing eyelids to treat an irritated eye, burning cheeks to treat chronic headaches, and cutting the epiglottis



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in both males and females. The Kunama also have a coming of age ritual for young men where their heads are shaved and they are sent into the wilderness to slaughter an animal, but the group has necessarily become flexible about this coming-of-age ceremony in the USA. Other cultural traditions may clash with cultural practices and laws in the USA.