

Eritrean Refugees in Buffalo



Please note that this is a rough-and-ready guide, and that these facts will not be applicable to all Eritrean refugees that you meet.

Background

Eritrea was once part of Ethiopia but began a struggle for independence in the 1960s and finally became established as a separate country in 1993.² The civil war that preceded the separation lasted for approximately 30 years, beginning while Eritrea was still considered part of Ethiopia and continued until 2000, even after independence was granted.³

Three waves of migration from Eritrea to the US occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, as refugees escaped the violent civil war, finding safety in refugee camps in surrounding countries, and then more recently as individuals (mostly men) sought to escape the mandatory national service.⁴ Despite the peace treaty with Ethiopia signed in 2000, there has been escalating tension along the border, along with discrimination against evangelical Christians and ethnic minority groups.⁵ The most common ethnic group in Eritrea is Tigrean.⁶

Cultural Attributes

Belief Systems and Values

The two major religions practiced in Eritrea are Christianity and Islam⁷:

- 55% Catholic
- 16% Protestant
- 16% Muslim (almost all Sunni)

In Buffalo, the Debre Selam Medhane Alem Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church is attended by both Ethiopians and Eritreans. Additionally, there are a number of mosques and Islamic centers in the area, although they are not necessarily aimed at the East African community.

Some religions that are practiced in Eritrea require strict dietary restrictions.⁸ In the Orthodox (Coptic) Christian church, fasts restrict eating animal products.⁹ This group will fast every Wednesday and Friday, on special religious holidays, and for about 50 days before Easter. In total these fasting days add up to over half the year.

Additionally, the majority of Eritrean Muslims abstain from drinking alcohol. Eritrean Muslims fast during Ramadan. During this time, those who observe the religion refrain from eating or drinking from dawn until sunset. Youth will begin participating in this tradition when they begin puberty.

Social and Familial Values

Social structures within Eritrean culture typically follow patriarchal gender roles. In a typical Tigrinya community men are the providers while women stay home in order to take care of their families.¹⁰ In previous generations, women were given less of an opportunity to complete their education, but this has changed in recent years. Elders, in particular elder women, are given great respect and tend to have much authority over familial decisions.

Marriage within the community is very important; many Eritreans frown on interracial and intercultural dating and marriage.¹¹ Women are frequently pressured into marriage once they reach a certain age.

The communal nature of the Eritrean culture is evident through a number of cultural traditions. When eating, food is usually shared from a large tray in the middle of the table. Injera (a large, spongy bread that is common in Eritrean dishes) is spread on the tray with stews on top. Diners tear off pieces of the bread and dip them into the stew.

The Five Pillars of Islam

Shahadah: profession of faith in God

Salah: prayer towards Makkah, Islam's holiest city

Zakat: almsgiving, service to God

Sawm: fasting during the holy month of Ramadan

Hajj: the pilgrimage to Makkah

Communication, Language and Education

Languages most commonly spoken include Tigrinya, Tigre, Dahlik (newly recognized), Beja, Blin, Saho. Kunama and Nara are spoken by minority groups in the north and northwest parts of the country.¹² Most Tigrinya have had some education and are literate in their own language. Many are taught English as a second language beginning in second grade, and it should become the language of instruction beginning at 6th grade, although this may not always occur. Many have completed 10th grade and some have studied at the university level.¹³ In many refugee camps, education is available up until grade 10. Some are allowed to attend local high schools after the 10th grade in nearby cities.¹⁴ It is estimated that about 25% of Eritrean refugees speak some English upon arrival.¹⁵

Economy and Work

In Eritrea, agriculture employs about 80% of the population.¹⁶ The remaining 20% are employed in industry and services. Industries include food processing, beverages, clothing and textiles, salt, cement, and commercial ship repair. Many have served in the military, run small businesses, or farmed back in their native regions. Many Tigrinya in particular have been exposed to certain skilled training before coming into the US through refugee camps.¹⁷ Small businesses that are commonly owned or worked in by those resettling in the United States include restaurants, salons, grocery stores, and retail shops.¹⁸

Skills learned in refugee camps include carpet making, electrical installation, dyeing and silk printing, tailoring, knitting, embroidery, and leather craftwork.

The transition to America comes with various levels of adjustment depending on where in Eritrea individuals formerly lived. It is important not to make assumptions about an individual's level of competency with Western amenities, but rather to assess them individually. Many Eritreans are fairly familiar with Western amenities, depending on their lives back in Eritrea.

Those from the capital city of Asmara tend to be familiar with public transportation. Those from more rural areas may not be as familiar with systems of transportation common in the U.S. Additionally, those from rural areas may not be as familiar with household appliances, including Western toilets. Those from refugee camps may have been exposed to Western resources, facilities, and technology.¹⁹

Medical Information²⁰

In general, Eritreans are familiar with Western medicine, but may still use natural remedies too.²¹ There may be an expectation that medicine be prescribed for every illness.

Physical and medical conditions are a private matter in Eritrean culture. In most cases, individuals will likely prefer same-gender doctors and medical providers.²² It is recommended that doctors inform a relative or next-of-kin to share news of pending death or chronic illness.²³

Mental health has a stigma in the Eritrean culture.²⁴ As with most refugee groups, PTSD is a common concern, due to the violence experienced in the homeland (especially if the individual served in the army).²⁵ Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for women to have experienced sexual violence in the refugee camps.

Natural childbirth, without the use of painkillers and other interventions, is highly valued.²⁶ Births are rarely attended by men.²⁷ Following a birth, the mother typically rests for a period of forty days.²⁸ Breastfeeding is very important in Eritrean culture.²⁹ Children will usually breastfeed for one year. The use of contraceptives is not uncommon.

In working with refugees, it is important to bear in mind that symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) are common, due to past experiences such as torture, imprisonment, violence and interrogation. In addition, the loss or separation of families may add to the difficulties in adjusting to the new culture.

Local Resources

Eritrean Community of St. George

2 Nottingham Terrace, Buffalo, NY 14216

“The Eritrean Community of St. George meets on a monthly basis on the First Sunday of every month at 3:00 pm in the St. George Orthodox Catholic Church Parish Fellowship Hall.”

Lucy Ethiopian Cuisine

388 Amherst Ave, Buffalo, NY 14207

A small restaurant in Black Rock, serving Ethiopian and Eritrean dishes.

Gatur’s Ethiopian Cuisine

69 Allen Street, Buffalo, NY 14202

A restaurant in Allentown, Buffalo featuring both Ethiopian and Eritrean dishes.

Eritrean Association for Justice in Buffalo

A Buffalo-based association working to achieve constitutional government in Eritrea.

Debre Selam Medhane Alem Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

700 Tonawanda St., Buffalo, NY

A church in which “Ethiopians, Eritreans and Americans all practice our religion and worship in spiritual harmony and solidarity. We welcome all who wish to worship and learn the teachings of Orthodox Christianity.”

WNY Muslim Association

4011 Bailey Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14226

WNYMuslims serves the Western New York community by creating awareness, encouraging diversity, and providing service. We empower Muslims and non-Muslims with the means to voice, connect, and contribute through creative media.

International Institute of Buffalo (IIB)

864 Delaware Ave, Buffalo, NY 14209

www.iibuff.org (716)883-1900

“The IIB seeks to strengthen Western New York by assisting refugees and immigrants to become independent, informed and contributing members of the community, and by promoting and supporting cultural competence, multiculturalism and global connectedness throughout the region.” The IIB offers translation and interpretation services.

Catholic Charities (CC)

20 Herkimer St. Buffalo, NY 14213

www.ccwny.org (716) 842-0270

“Our Resettlement clients arrive in the United States through the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). Pre- and post-arrival services such as assistance with housing, food, clothing and employment are provided.”

Journey’s End Refugee Services, Inc. (JERS)

2495 Main St #317, Buffalo, NY 14214

www.jersbuffalo.org (716) 882-4963

JERS “provides refugees with the resources and support they need to become successful, active and contributing members of the Western New York Community.”

Jewish Family Services (JFS)

70 Barker St, Buffalo, NY 14209

www.jfsbuffalo.org (716) 883-1914

Jewish Family Service assists families new to the US during the difficult transition to the American way of life. JFS provides employment services, ESL training, assistance in acquiring health care and social support services as well as public school enrollment and mental health support.

Jericho Road Community Health Center

184 Barton St., Buffalo, NY 14213

www.jrm-buffalo.org (716)-348-3000

Jericho Road offers a variety of health services to low-income and refugee families. The services range from healthcare for new mothers, to general case management, support in filling out forms, ESL education or educational support for a range of ages.

Coordinated Refugee/Asylee Legal Services (The CRLS Project)

237 Main Street, Suite 1015, Buffalo, NY 14203

(716)853-3087

A collaboration of legal service providers to support immigrants and refugees with civil and immigration legal services.

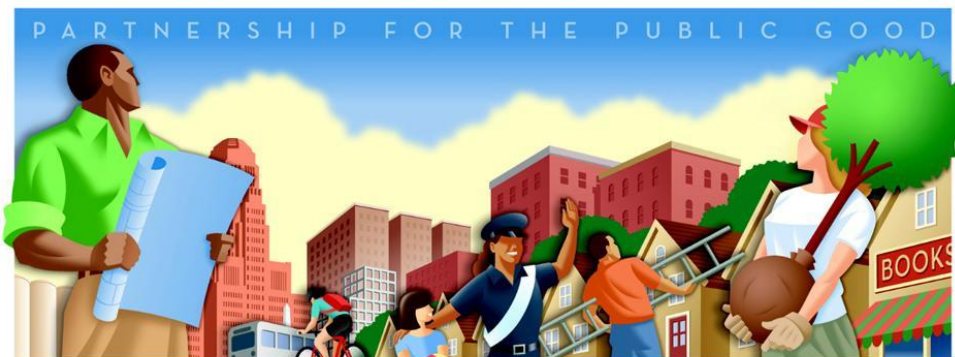
NOTES

- ¹ "Eritrea - Maps." Eritrea - Maps. Accessed February 26, 2015. <http://www.eritrea.be/old/eritrea-maps.htm>.
- ² Chapman, Shelby. "Tigrinya Speakers from Eritrea: A Brief Introduction for Health Care Workers." Colorado: The Official State Web Portal. January 1, 2011. Accessed February 5, 2015. https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/HPF_RH_Refugee-Eritrean-Refugees.pdf.
- ³ Cooper, Dorothy. "Eritrean Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. June 16, 2010. Accessed February 26, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/eritrean/eritrean-cultural-profile>.
- ⁴ Id.
- ⁵ Chapman, Shelby. "Tigrinya Speakers from Eritrea: A Brief Introduction for Health Care Workers." Colorado: The Official State Web Portal. January 1, 2011. Accessed February 5, 2015. https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/HPF_RH_Refugee-Eritrean-Refugees.pdf.
- ⁶ Id.
- ⁷ "Eritreans in Shimelba, Eritrea." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, 2010. Accessed February 25, 2015 www.culturalorientation.org
- ⁸ "Culture of Eritrea." Countries and Their Cultures. January 1, 2015. Accessed February 26, 2015. <http://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html>.
- ⁹ Id.
- ¹⁰ Id.
- ¹¹ Cooper, Dorothy. "Eritrean Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. June 16, 2010. Accessed February 26, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/eritrean/eritrean-cultural-profile>.
- ¹² Id.
- ¹³ Id.
- ¹⁴ Id.
- ¹⁵ "Eritreans in Shimelba, Eritrea." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, 2010. Accessed February 25, 2015 www.culturalorientation.org
- ¹⁶ "The World Factbook: Eritrea." Central Intelligence Agency. June 22, 2014. Accessed February 26, 2015. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/er.html>.
- ¹⁷ "Eritreans in Shimelba, Eritrea." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, 2010. Accessed February 25, 2015 www.culturalorientation.org
- ¹⁸ Id.
- ¹⁹ Id.
- ²⁰ Chapman, Shelby. "Tigrinya Speakers from Eritrea: A Brief Introduction for Health Care Workers." Colorado: The Official State Web Portal. January 1, 2011. Accessed February 5, 2015. https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/HPF_RH_Refugee-Eritrean-Refugees.pdf.
- ²¹ Id.
- ²² Id.
- ²³ Cooper, Dorothy. "Eritrean Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. June 16, 2010. Accessed February 26, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/eritrean/eritrean-cultural-profile>.
- ²⁴ Chapman, Shelby. "Tigrinya Speakers from Eritrea: A Brief Introduction for Health Care Workers." Colorado: The Official State Web Portal. January 1, 2011. Accessed February 5, 2015. https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/HPF_RH_Refugee-Eritrean-Refugees.pdf.
- ²⁵ Id.
- ²⁶ Id.
- ²⁷ Cooper, Dorothy. "Eritrean Cultural Profile." EthnoMed. June 16, 2010. Accessed February 26, 2015. <https://ethnomed.org/culture/eritrean/eritrean-cultural-profile>
- ²⁸ Id.
- ²⁹ Id.

This fact sheet is one in a series of “snap shots” of Buffalo’s immigrant and refugee populations, made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. They are free of charge at www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications.

The fact sheets in the series are:

- **Nepali Bhutanese Refugees in Buffalo**
- **Burman, Karen, and Chin Refugees: From Burma to Buffalo**
- **Eritrean Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Puerto Rico to Buffalo**
- **Refugees from Sudan in Buffalo**
- **Yemeni Immigrants in Western New York**
- **Refugees from Somalia in Buffalo**
- **Refugees from Iraq in Buffalo**
- **Afghan Refugees in Buffalo**
- **From Central Africa to Buffalo: Refugees from Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and Burundi**



Partnership for the Public Good
www.ppgbuffalo.org
237 Main St., Suite 1200, Buffalo NY 14203