

**Migration Review Tribunal  
AUSTRALIA**

**MRT RESEARCH RESPONSE**

**Research Response Number:** SOM35661  
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**Questions**

1. **Do older men marry younger women in Somalia?**
2. **Is it customary for a man's mother to arrange the marriage for her son?**
3. **Is it customary for the man to speak to his intended wife's brother and father to seek permission to marry her?**
4. **Is it customary for a Somali couple to have a short meeting (15 minutes) and then marry each other and therefore know very little about their spouse's prior life?**
5. **Is it customary for both spouses to be very keen to have children?**
6. **Is it customary that at the wedding the male and female and their guests hold separate celebrations?**
7. **Is it significant if the bride is dressed in an evening gown and the groom in white traditional garb?**

**RESPONSE**

**1. Do older men marry younger women in Somalia?**

An article dated 29 October by *The Associated Press* reports that “Somali adolescent girls are often married off to older men.” The article continues:

A Somali man who claims to be a centenarian has married a 17-year old girl. Ahmed Mohamed Dhore celebrated his marriage to Safiya Abdulle late Tuesday in central Somalia before hundreds of guests. Somali adolescent girls are often married off to older men. But it is rare for a man as old as Dhore to marry a girl of Abdulle's age ('Somali who claims to be centenarian marries teen' 2009, *Associated Press*, 29 October, Google News website <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5j0HMn1B8X3S8vOB4-VjULfiVUVdQD9BKCAP81> – Accessed 29 October 2009 – Attachment 1).

According to information posted on the Somalia Business Portal, “Arranged marriages are common in Somalia. In the case of arranged marriages, the bride is usually much younger than the groom” ('Culture of Somalia' (undated), Somalia Business Portal website <http://www.somaliaweb.biz/culture.htm> – Accessed 29 October 2009 – Attachment 2).

According to information posted on the Every Culture website, “Until very recently, most Somali marriages were arranged, usually between an older man with some wealth and the father of a young woman he wished to wed. These customs still hold true in many rural areas in the twenty-first century” ('Somalia' (undated), Every Culture website <http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Somalia.html> – Accessed 29 October 2009 – Attachment 3).

2. **Is it customary for a man's mother to arrange the marriage for her son?**
3. **Is it customary for the man to speak to his intended wife's brother and father to seek permission to marry her?**

According to a 2004 book entitled *International Perspectives on Family Violence and Abuse – A Cognitive Ecological Approach*, “it is the prospective husband's family (father and/or other senior agnates) that initiates contact with the girl's family to ask for her hand in marriage” (Malley-Morrison, Kathleen (ed.) 2004, *International Perspectives on Family Violence and Abuse – A Cognitive Ecological Approach*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, London, p.231 – Attachment 4).

A joint Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and British fact-finding mission on Somalia visited Kenya in January 2004. Dr. Hassan Isak, a lawyer from Baidoa in south-central Somalia, said that there are two ways by which a couple may be married in Somalia. The first way is an arranged marriage and the “father of the son goes to the girl's father and asks permission for his son to marry the girl.” Dr Hassan Isak continues:

Firstly where the couple get together with the full knowledge of their parents who arrange for them to marry. The father of the son goes to the girl's father and asks permission for his son to marry the girl. They then arrange a time for the marriage to take place. The two sides also make an agreement on the costs of the wedding; the gifts, the bride's dowry, jewellery and house where they will live. It is frequently the case that parents arrange a couple's wedding without their knowledge. It was suggested that around 20% of marriages take place in this way. It was also noted that such marriages might be arranged for persons who are not in the same region or country (Danish Immigration Service 2004, *Human rights and security in central and southern Somalia*, Joint Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and British fact-finding mission to Nairobi, Kenya 7-21 January 2004, March, p.53 – Attachment 5).

An article dated 1 October 2008 in *The Bridgeland News* of Minneapolis reports that the male elders ask for the hand of the bride during the marriage contract or in a preliminary meeting:

Marriage is one of the few social institutions that are hard to die and constantly develop despite the chaotic situation of the Somali society. The roles of the different members of society are clear. The elders are responsible for ensuring the welfare of the youth. They make sure the family of the chosen bride or groom is one that is worthy of marriage to their son or daughter. The men elders are the ones who ask for the hand of the bride during the Nikah, marriage contract, or sometimes in a preliminary meeting, dadabgal, for negotiation between the intermarrying families.

...Something common for all Somali weddings is the set of cultural and Islamic rituals performed including the Nikah, tying the knot, and the asking for the hand of the pride by the elders of the bridegroom's family or sub-clan. Usually this happens during and after the lunch feast. Speeches are interchanged by the representatives of the two families. The family of the groom asks — sometimes in fact begs — for the hand of bride to be married to their son. The Nikah stands for the actual marriage after the consent of the guardian of the pride. Ululations from the womenfolk follow the pronouncement of the words of the clergyman or the sheikh that the pride and groom are man and wife (Mohammed, Said 2008, ‘Somali wedding ceremonies — an “unnecessary extravaganza?”’, *Bridgeland News*, 1 October <http://www.bridgelandnews.org/7426> – Accessed 29 October 2009 – Attachment 6).

**4. Is it customary for a Somali couple to have a short meeting (15 minutes) and then marry each other and therefore know very little about their spouse's prior life?**

According to a 2004 book entitled *International Perspectives on Family Violence and Abuse – A Cognitive Ecological Approach*, “Historically, [Somali] couples did very little direct courting” before marriage (Malley-Morrison, Kathleen (ed.) 2004, *International Perspectives on Family Violence and Abuse – A Cognitive Ecological Approach*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, London, p.231 – Attachment 4).

**5. Is it customary for both spouses to be very keen to have children?**

[Stratis Health](http://www.stratishealth.org) is a non-profit organisation based in Minnesota “that leads collaboration and innovation in health care quality and safety, and serves as a trusted expert in facilitating improvement for people and communities.” According to Stratis Health, “Traditionally, Somali women marry early and childbearing usually commences shortly thereafter. It is not unusual for a Somali family to have seven or eight children” (Stratis Health 2007, ‘Culture Focus: Spotlight on the Somali Population’, May [http://www.stratishealth.org/documents/CC\\_Somali\\_121907.pdf](http://www.stratishealth.org/documents/CC_Somali_121907.pdf) – Accessed 29 October 2009 – Attachment 7).

According to a Somali cultural profile located on the EthnoMed website, “Childbearing usually commences shortly after marriage. A woman’s status is enhanced the more children she bears. Thus is not unusual for a Somali family to have seven or eight children. The concept of planning when to have or not to have children has little cultural relevance for Somalis” (‘Somali Cultural Profile’ 1996, EthnoMed website, August – Attachment 8).

**6. Is it customary that at the wedding the male and female and their guests hold separate celebrations?**

A 2004 book entitled *International Perspectives on Family Violence and Abuse – A Cognitive Ecological Approach* reports that there are various events held during a Somali wedding with “some strictly for the groom and the other men, and some for the bride and other women” (Malley-Morrison, Kathleen (ed.) 2004, *International Perspectives on Family Violence and Abuse – A Cognitive Ecological Approach*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, London, p.231 – Attachment 4).

According to a 2006 journal article in *The Australia e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, “Traditional Somali weddings would have included separate men’s and women’s events” (Guerin, Pauline, Hussein Elmi, Fatuma & Guerin, Bernard 2006, ‘Weddings and parties: Cultural healing in one community of Somali women’, *Australia e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health website, p.2 <http://www.auseinet.com/journal/vol5iss2/guerin.pdf> – Accessed 29 October 2009 – Attachment 9).

An article dated 1 October 2008 in *Bridgeland News* reports that there are two types of weddings held by Somalis, one in the mosque and the other in a hall/ballroom. In the mosque, men and women are separated by a curtain:

Nowadays two types of wedding ceremonies are held. We can call them the mosque versus the hall or ballroom. In the mosque no music is allowed and it is favored by the religious conservatives, while the hall is more of an extravagant affair where music, dancing and food are intermingled. In the Mosque women and men are separated by a curtain, but both can follow the proceedings conducted by the men folk during the *Nikah*. In the dancing and music hall, usually a rented hall in a hotel, men and women participate together (Mohammed, Said 2008, 'Somali wedding ceremonies — an "unnecessary extravaganza?"', *Bridgeland News*, 1 October <http://www.bridgelandnews.org/7426> – Accessed 29 October 2009 – Attachment 6).

## **7. Is it significant if the bride is dressed in an evening gown and the groom in white traditional garb?**

According to a 2006 journal article in *The Australia e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, "*Dirah (direh, dirac)* are another form of Somali women's celebration clothing which are dresses of fine fabric (e.g., polyester voile), including a long slip and a long dress over the top with a matching head scarf" (Guerin, Pauline, Hussein Elmi, Fatuma & Guerin, Bernard 2006, 'Weddings and parties: Cultural healing in one community of Somali women', *Australia e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health website, p.2 <http://www.auseinet.com/journal/vol5iss2/guerin.pdf> – Accessed 29 October 2009 – Attachment 9).

The website, [LovetoKnow Weddings](#) "is the best place to find everything you want to know about weddings." LovetoKnow Weddings provides the following information on clothes worn at a Somalia wedding:

Somali is group of peoples whose dress today includes both traditional Islamic wear and western apparel. Although some Somali dress is western in style, women dress very modestly, in accordance with Islamic cultural mandates.

Common apparel for men includes:

- Ma'awis, or plaid kilts
- Khameez – Long, dress-like male garment.
- Shawls
- Turban
- Koofiyad, or embroidered cap
- Trousers or western pants
- Western shirts
- Suits and ties

Common garments for women include:

- Direh or Dirac – A flowing, lightweight dress usually worn over a slip or petticoats.
- Coantino – A large piece of cloth draped over the head and shoulder and tied at the waist.
- Hijab – Head scarf that covers hair
- Masar – Simple headwrap
- Burqa or Jalabeeb – A long garment that cloaks the entire body.
- Guntiino – A full-length, brightly colored dress resembling a Sari.
- Blouses
- Skirts
- Trousers/slacks

## Somali Wedding Dress

Somali wedding attire varies due to the couple's location, personal preferences, and familial traditions. Heather Akou, an expert in the subject of Somali dress, reveals that rather than adhering to a specific type of dress, contemporary Somali apparel is a conglomeration of different influences rooted in Somali culture. The type of wedding attire worn, then, depends largely on the current location and beliefs of the couple.

Traditionally Somali dress for women includes a beautiful dirac or Guntiino, a garbasaar head covering, and a googaro slip for under the dress. Makeup and gold jewelry may be worn, and traditionally hair and fingernails may be stained with henna. Men may dress in traditional garments or western suits or dress clothes ('Somali Wedding Dress' (undated), LovetoKnow Weddings website [http://weddings.lovetoknow.com/wiki/LoveToKnow\\_Weddings>About](http://weddings.lovetoknow.com/wiki/LoveToKnow_Weddings>About) – Accessed 29 October 2009 – Attachment 10).

## List of Sources Consulted

### Internet Sources:

Google <http://www.google.com.au/>  
Google Books <http://books.google.com/books>  
Google News <http://news.google.com.au/>  
Google Scholar <http://scholar.google.com.au/>

### Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)  
BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)  
REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)  
ISYS (RRT Research & Information database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)  
RRT Library Catalogue

## List of Attachments

1. 'Somali who claims to be centenarian marries teen' 2009, *Associated Press*, 29 October, Google News website  
<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5j0HMn1B8X3S8vOB4-VjULfiVUVdQD9BKCAP81> – Accessed 29 October 2009.
2. 'Culture of Somalia' (undated), Somalia Business Portal website  
<http://www.somaliaweb.biz/culture.htm> – Accessed 29 October 2009.
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5. Danish Immigration Service 2004, *Human rights and security in central and southern Somalia*, Joint Danish, Finnish, Norwegian and British fact-finding mission to Nairobi, Kenya 7-21 January 2004, March.

6. Mohammed, Said 2008, 'Somali wedding ceremonies — an “unnecessary extravaganza?”', *Bridgeland News*, 1 October <http://www.bridgelandnews.org/7426> – Accessed 29 October 2009.
7. Stratis Health 2007, 'Culture Focus: Spotlight on the Somali Population', May [http://www.stratishealth.org/documents/CC\\_Somali\\_121907.pdf](http://www.stratishealth.org/documents/CC_Somali_121907.pdf) – Accessed 29 October 2009.
8. 'Somali Cultural Profile' 1996, EthnoMed website, August. (CISNET Somalia CX211642)
9. Guerin, Pauline, Hussein Elmi, Fatuma & Guerin, Bernard 2006, 'Weddings and parties: Cultural healing in one community of Somali women', *Australia e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health website <http://www.auseinet.com/journal/vol5iss2/guerin.pdf> – Accessed 29 October 2009.
10. 'Somali Wedding Dress' (undated), LovetoKnow Weddings website [http://weddings.lovetoknow.com/wiki/LoveToKnow\\_Weddings>About](http://weddings.lovetoknow.com/wiki/LoveToKnow_Weddings>About) – Accessed 29 October 2009.