Somali (vs. Somali Bantu)

Disclaimer:

While information about a specific culture can aid understanding of a patient, it is important to understand that a patient from a particular culture will not necessarily have the same beliefs or traditions associated with that culture. Each patient is unique, and there are many factors that alter a person’s cultural identity, including socioeconomic status, education, age, religion, gender, and lifestyle.

– Cultural Competency for Healthcare Providers, Champlain Valley AHEC, 2011

Country of Origin/Migration: The Somali come from the eastern African nation of Somalia and have usually left due to its (as of 2012) ongoing civil war; many arrive from the Kenyan town of Dadaab and its associated massive and massively overcrowded refugee camps.

Language: Major languages include Somali, Arabic, English, and Italian. The Somali language has three different dialects and until recently was unwritten. Children have their paternal grandfather's first name as their last name and their father’s name as their middle name. Women keep their name when they marry, so all members of the family do not share the same last name.

Education/Literacy: Somali have often had some education before arriving in the U.S., but literacy is more common among men.

Religion: Most Somalians are Sunni Muslim. A small number are Christian.

Medical Practices and Beliefs: Though not commonly practiced in the U.S., Somali traditional medicine is usually practiced by older men of the community who have learned their skills from older family members. In particular, fire-burning is a procedure, similar to moxibustion, where a stick is heated till it glows and then applied to the skin in order to cure an illness. Somalis have a concept of spirits residing within each individual, and will sometimes attribute an illness to angry spirits. Additionally, prayer is commonly used. Circumcision is routinely used for both boys and girls. Perceived decision-making authority for medical care may not rest with the patient as is typical in the US.

Special Considerations:
For a list of medical conditions endemic to Somalia please see http://www.who.int/countries/som/en/.

** The best source of information about the patient's experiences and culture is the patient him or herself.

References:
http://ethnomed.org/culture/somali/somali-cultural-profile