

## Children and the Mingi Curse among the Kara Community

Binayew Tamrat and Haimanot Alemayehu<sup>406</sup>

### Abstract

There is a dominant discourse emphasizing the values of traditional practices in enhancing social cohesion, unity and cooperation in Ethiopia. Though this is an undisputed truth, there are untold accounts about the demerits of traditional practices negatively affecting societal groups specially women and children in different societies. Mingi curse is one such cultural practices that severely affects children, girls and women in the South Omo Zone. Though its severity ranges from infanticide and death of those individuals identified as cursed, to affecting the number of the Kara community, this practice did not catch the attention of scholars and policy makers. Apart from the anecdotal notes about the practise, there is no comprehensive research done on the theme. By taking the Kara community of Hamer *woreda* as a case, this article examines the socio-cultural grounds of the practise, its commonality among the Kara community and consequences of Mingi as a traditional practice. Regardless of prior initiatives in countering Mingi curse tradition, the practice is still prevalent among the Kara community. This paper thus discusses the various factors that contributed to sustain the practice despite the various efforts made by different stakeholders. By drawing on the ethnographic study and lived experience of the study participants, the article elucidates how the Mingi practice violates human rights in the form of structural violence.

**Keywords:** *mingi curse, child abuse and violence, South Omo, structural violence*

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<sup>406</sup> Binayew Tamirat is a Lecturer in School of Social Science and Humanities, Adama Science and Technology University and a PhD candidate in peace and Security studies at IPSS, Addis Ababa University. The author can be reached at [binayew.tamrat@astu.edu.et](mailto:binayew.tamrat@astu.edu.et) . Haimanot is a Lecturer in the Department of History, Jinka University. The author can be reached at [getahaimanot2007@gmail.com](mailto:getahaimanot2007@gmail.com)

## Introduction

The Hamer *woreda* (district) of South Omo zone is well known for the 'exotic' traditions that highly attract cultural tourism in the area. South Omo zone in Southern Ethiopia is often praised for cultural diversity and being home to over fifteen ethnic groups. Some of the cultural practises widely known as tourist attraction acts include Evnagadi among the Hamer, Bull jumping ritual, *kael* ceremony among the Bodi ethnic group in South Omo etc. Among these traditions are practices that have been shared and are part of the identity of the group beholding and practicing them, of which some are deemed as 'harmful practices'. Health workers and the educated members of the Kara community and the young generation in general consider Mangi as irrelevant and harmful practice. As cited in Ermias and Azmach (2016:70), the Hamer *woreda* Health center identified seven harmful traditional practices (HTPs) widely practiced in the district. These include female genital mutilation, teeth extraction, forced abortion, Mingi, polygamy, inheritance marriage, and whipping;(beating) from among which Mingi is described as being the most prevalent practice in Kara Communities residing in Hamer *woreda* (Ermias and Azmach 2016).

Mingi is a practice where infants, considered as cursed, are either abandoned and thrown away or killed. It refers to children born out of wedlock and/or those born with physical disabilities (Anele 2016; Gorebo 2020). The term Mingi also translates into a social outcast and cursed person (Belaynesh 2012). All these definitions point to the core principle of the practice, which is denying "a cursed child" the right to live. There is a societal consensus that raising such children will call for group affliction causing misfortunes to the community. Because the curse deprives an infant or a child the right to life and the right of the mother to raise her child, there have been reports by the local government and non-governmental organizations, both local and international, working in South Omo zone referring to the practice as HTP and calling for its abolition (USAID 2021). Mclean (2021) pointed that the practice has come to an end since 2012 "due to the efforts of educated members of the Kara community such as Lale Labuko, who is the founder of Omo Child."<sup>407</sup> Hack (2012) also

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<sup>407</sup> Omo Child is a name of Charity organization working on relieving cursed, Mingi, and Children. Together with film maker John Rowe, Lale founded the Omo Child Shelter. Lale is a young and first educated member of a Kara community. See [Lale Labuko - National Geographic Society](#) for more details.

stated that the Kara community stopped Mingi for demographic reasons; the mingi practice has affected the Kara community by highly reducing the community's population and therefore there was a need to end the practice. Regardless of these claims, though the efforts of the educated and some community members who strived to stop the practice cannot be denied, Mingi is still prevalent (Wharton 2018). There are community members who are ardent supporters of the practice as part of the culture that is more than a harmful practice. In light of this, this article attempts to examine the cause, practice and consequence of Mingi among the Kara community of the South Omo with a focus on the rights perspective.

The study leading to this publication drew on qualitative research design based on both primary and secondary sources. Data was collected in 2021 through focus group discussions (FGD) and structured personal interviews with community members, government officials and health professionals.

### **Conceptual framework: Violation of Rights in Cultural Practices: Reflection on Structural Violence**

The United National General Assembly adopted in November 1989 the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* (United Nations). This was one of the conventions that was signed and ratified by most countries around the globe. There are some cultural practises violating rights of children around the globe often framed along cultural rights. socio-cultural constraints are often raised as factors that put children at risk of abuse and impeding the implementation of international, regional and national laws (Al-Saadoon 2021). The social acceptance of these abuses often transforming into social norms put children in a fragile position in communities that consider children as a mere parental possession denying their agency and their being an independent fully-fledged rights-holders (Bouah and Sloth-Nielsen, 2021). Johan Galtung (1969) coined the term 'structural violence' and classified violence into three typologies: physical/direct violence, indirect/structural violence, and cultural violence (Galtung 1969, 1990). Direct violence is when one personal(individual) actor inflicts physical and psychological harm against another or a group of persons and prohibits them from meeting their basic needs or other life goals by preventing from acting into their full potential

(Galtung 1969). When the harm that impedes the individuals and/or societal groups is embedded in the social structures, norms, systems and institutions, it is called structural violence; unlike physical violence, structural violence is a process (Galtung 1990). Meanwhile, cultural violence is when some aspects of culture are used to justify the wrong act as righteous (Galtung 1990).

By revising the earlier conception given by Galtung, other scholars gave structural violence their own operational meanings. The American Medical Anthropologist, Paul Farmer, further publicized the notion of structural violence describing it as a “social arrangement that puts individuals and population in harm” (Farmer et al. 2006:1687). Besides recognizing direct and structural violence, Bourgois introduced symbolic violence, which is used in reference to misrecognition of one’s reality for the sake of internalized humiliation and legitimization of inequality and in a hierarchical social structure on the basis of gender and race (Bourgois 2001).

Structural/indirect violence occurs in four different ways. Structural violence occurs by omission when a responsible authority or anybody who have the capacity to protect a victim failed from averting the harm or injury due to negligence (Galtung, 1990; Salmi, 2000). It can also be by mediation when a certain activity or interaction with the natural and or social environment for any intended purpose harms an individual or a societal group indirectly (Salmi 2000). Third, structural violence by repression is when human rights violations occur such as civil rights violations, the right to equality before the law, and violation of political rights (Keenth 2007). Fourth and last, structural violence by alienation, takes place when higher rights such as the right to psychological, emotional, cultural or intellectual integrity, are deprived. Racism and prejudicial practice against a particular group, social ostracism, and cultural repression can be taken as cases in point to structural violence by alienation (Galtung 1990; Salmi 2000).

According to UNICEF 2018, discrimination of children grounded and based on notions of purity and pollution, is at the core of how society based structural violence operates. The religious underpinnings of the socio-cultural system are central to how such discrimination operates. Often such cultural segregation is understood as an ideological framework to

identify children into groups, cultural framings are hence one ground of structural violence (UNICEF 2018).

### **Setting the Scene**

Hamer *woreda* is one of the eleven districts of South Omo zone in Southern Nations, Nationalities and peoples Regional State (SNNPR) Ethiopia, occupied by different ethnic groups including the Hamar, Erbore and Kara (USAID 2021:10). The district covers a total area of 5,742km<sup>2</sup> and is divided into 35 *kebeles* (neighborhood) with Dimeka as its administrative center. (Samuel & KANEKO, 2020). Like other parts of South Omo zone, Hamer district is sparsely populated practicing pastoralism or livestock production (USAID 2021:9). Hamer is the largest ethnic group residing in the area with a population of 54,583 (81.4%) followed by Arborie with a population of 10,333 (15.4%) and Kara, which has a population of 2,129 (3.2%) (Haile and Mengistu 2011:25). linguistically the language of the Kara can be considered as part of the Hamar-Banna-Bashada cluster

The Kara, the smallest ethnic groups of the *woreda* in terms of population size, lives in three *kebeles* known as Kara Luboq; Kara Dus and Kara Korcho. The economy of Kara community highly depends on flood retreat or recession farm on the side of Omo River, producing sorghum, corn, sugarcane and beans. They also engage in pastoralist life such as rearing cattle and goats. Since their villages are located on the side of Omo River, their livelihood is heavily dependent upon the river for cultivation and for drinking water (McLean 2021). According to the oral tradition, they came to the present territory from a region south of the Sudan where a segment detached itself and came to the Omo Delta day, the Kara people reside in three main villages: Labuk, Dus, and Korch. Kara speaks Kara-appo, a South Omotic language that is a dialect of Hamar and Banna. They refer to themselves and their region by the name “Kara. The Ukuli (bull jumping) boys’ age-rite ceremony is the biggest and most important ritual in the karo’s lives, signifying the boys’ transit to adulthood. Furthermore, the Kara are known for body paint using the white color, obtained from the plaster, the yellow, coming from a local mineral, and the red, obtained from the earth rich in iron.

## Mingi of Kara Community: Cause, Practice and its Consequence

Local informants noted that the tradition surrounding Mingi curse is old and hence there is no time frame inferring to the origin of the practise. However, some Kara elders narrated that the beginning of the practise dates back to the era when the Kara community suffered a series of bad harvests.<sup>408</sup> These were days when the community's agricultural production was affected by bad weather and locust. The elders narrate the widely held belief that the afflictions of bad harvest resulting in starvation were part of the multifaceted curse whereby the time is also said to be marked by the birth of children with some sort of physical deformities.

Since then, there have been different ways in identifying and labelling Mingi. Gorebo (2020:5) identified eleven ways of identifying and declaring people as Mingi seven of which are linked with children while the other four were associated with women and girls. Informants further mentioned the term Mingi can refer to animals that behave 'abnormally'; therefore, the Kara community consider Mingi as related both to people and cattle.<sup>409</sup>

For girls, pregnancy before marriage is considered as a taboo and thus a child born out of wedlock is considered to be cursed, which makes the girl a Mingi. Unlike most rural communities in Ethiopia whereby virginity is associated with suppressing women's sexuality and preventing divorce and unfaithfulness, among the Kara, virginity is discouraged among girls. However, conceiving and bearing a child before marriage is strictly forbidden. One of the key informants described a girl Mingi as:

*The first Mingi (curse) occurs on girls. According to the community's tradition, when a girl conceives and bears a child out of wedlock, she is declared as a Mingi and the fetus/infant born out of the informal union is considered as cursed and hence should not be allowed to grow.<sup>410</sup>*

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<sup>408</sup> Interview with a community elder, Kara Dus *kebele*, November 2021

<sup>409</sup> Interview with, Health Officer, Karamus Health center, November 2021

<sup>410</sup> Interview with a community elder, Kara Dus *kebele*, November 2021

A girl who kept her virginity by abstaining from sexual intercourse before marriage is also considered as Mingi. As pointed out in Gorebo (2020:4), pre-marital abstinence from sex makes a Kara girl or woman Mingi. In order to get a good or wealthy husband, a girl or woman is required to have sexual intercourse and conceive and abort three or four times as a guarantee to fertility. A woman that passed through such experience before marriage is believed to have good fertility and can become a good wife. On the other hand, a Kara girl who bears or conceived a child before marriage and refuses to abort as per the cultural norms is labelled as Mingi and is marginalized by her own community.

The other instance leading to the labelling of women as Mingi relates to consequent child bearing; a woman who gives birth to a second child while breast feeding another infant is considered as a Mingi. In this regard, Kara elders insist that a woman who bears her first child has to breastfeed until the child is fully grown up (Belaynesh 2012). However, if the mother conceives her second child while breastfeeding the first one, both the mother and the new fetus is also identified as Mingi. It is forbidden among the Kara to have a second child before an initiation ritual undertakes for the first born. An informant explained the process as follows:

*There is a Kara tradition that prescribes community members to bear the second child after the first one starts walking properly and moving independently. There is a local rite of passage ritual, the initiation of the first born, marking his/her readiness for life. On this occasion, the local community is gathered to celebrate the occasion with feast. Food is prepared, neighbours and relatives are invited and fossae is made and eaten with milk. Then the guests anoint themselves with butter and give recognition to the child. This ceremony marks the rite of passage that the couple are free to have their next child.<sup>411</sup>*

Another scenario where a girl is considered Mingi is when she disobeys her parents and local elders and marries a man who failed to jump bulls, as required in the customs. Similar to the Hamer, the Kara community has cattle jumping ceremony where a man who failed this test

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<sup>411</sup> Interview with a community elder, December 2021

is chided as weak and “not being better than a woman”. Thus, marrying such a weak man makes the bride Mingi along with the child born within this relationship (Gorebo 2020).

The other instance leading to the labelling and identification of a child as a Mingi is associated with birth deformities. Normally, infants’ lower milk teeth are the first to grow. In those rare occasions when the upper milk teeth grow first, an ‘abnormality’ according to the Kara community, the child is locally identified as Mingi (Ermias and Azmach 2018).

*When the milk teeth of a child grow, they should grow from the bottom. However, if it grows from the top, the Kara community leaders believe that this is a manifestation of abnormality and a curse as the child’s development is not following the natural course of events. Such children are considered as having some spiritual affection and cursed by God. Keeping such children with birth deformities is considered to call affliction on the local community such as causing drought, marital disputes and other challenges.<sup>412</sup>*

Twin birth (bearing two infants at once) is also considered as a curse and an ‘abnormality’ and hence both babies are considered as Mingi and condemned to death (Ermias and Azmach 2018).

From the brief discussion on the attributes of Mingi, it is suffice to say children and women of the Kara Community have been affected the most. Though its sources, as explained by elders, is not predetermined and considered as God-given, the cause of some types of Mingi such as for girls is caused by a “greedy or irresponsible husband”, as noted in the quote below.

*Even though the husbands know the consequences of conceiving while breast feeding, they force their wives to have sexual intercourse. When unwanted pregnancy happens, she and her infant can be classified as Mingi for violating the Community’s norm. If pregnancy occurs, the family agrees on abortion. Until then, the society ostracizes the wife.<sup>413</sup>*

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<sup>412</sup> Interview with a community elder, November 2021

<sup>413</sup> Interview with a community elder, November 2021

### *Afflictions associated with Mingi*

For the Kara community, Mingi is beyond a traditional practice; it is strongly associated with the culture and belief system. The community leaders believe that their community should be guided by norms and rules, which they inherited from their fathers and forefathers. Thus, Mingi as traditional practice persistently continued among the Kara community where every child declared as Mingi by the community elders is condemned to death (Belaynesh 2012). Once a Kara child is declared cursed, the parents should abandon the infant, leaving her/him to be eaten by hyenas or crocodiles (Ermias and Azmach 2018).

The afflictions associated with Mingi are guided by the rule that “the word of elders is not to be questioned”. It is elders who make decisions for the society, either on their own or as councils of elders. Much has not been written about cultural explanation as to why Mingi and other infanticide practices are committed (Epple 2020:30). But strong belief in curse and the existence of the community is one of the main reasons for the practice to persist (Epple 2020). In relation to this point, there are three major justifications given for the death of a Mingi child; (1) a belief that unless a Mingi child is eliminated, the family and/or the whole community would suffer from a disaster, (2) if the cursed child is left or rescued, there is a strong belief that this would call for drought or famine, and (3) a belief that there will be no good harvest. Community elders also believe that allowing Mingi child to survive invites evil spirits to come to their land. Therefore, aborting the illegitimately conceived foetus or eliminating the cursed child after performing a purification ceremony is believed to be a solution for averting the calamities (Epple 2020).

Though there is no documented data, some scholars such as Gorebo (2020:2) confirmed that about 300 children die each year from the Kara community as Mingi. To avoid this practice, some members of the Kara community leave their home and community. An indication to this, informants recounted, is the presence of the Karamajong cluster, the former Kara

community who have left Ethiopia for Uganda; Karamajong means (old Kara) referring to those who fled against this act.<sup>414</sup>

### **Mingi as Violence against Kara Infants, Girls and Women**

The effect of this traditional harmful practice is multifaceted. It is an act against humanity and human rights including children's right to life (Epple 2020). As stipulated in the FDRE Constitution, Article 36, a child has the right to life, to be free from harmful and hazardous acts and to be free from inhuman treatment. Article 36(4) states that children born out of wedlock shall have the same rights as children born in wedlock. In such manner, Mingi is a crime that violates constitutionally granted rights. It is also a criminal act that goes against the rights of parents and mothers in particular. The impact of Mingi, however, goes beyond human rights violations and affects the whole community that practice it.

Furthermore, Mingi as a traditional harmful practice is violence that occurs in different forms. As provided in the FDRE constitution Article 35(1)(2), women and girls have equal rights with men in getting protection. Women also have equal rights with men in marriage affairs. However, the community custom encourages Kara men to force their women and girls, among others, to commit sexual intercourse. Informants confirmed that marital conflict is very common in Kara village sometimes leading up to shooting. However, no one intervenes knowing the fact that the husband is forcing the wife to commit sex that can end up in unwanted pregnancy and therefore Mingi. This harm is not only a human rights violation and physical violence, but it is also structural violence.

To explain how this human rights violation becomes structural violence, it is pertinent to borrow Galtung's explanation that states, "When one husband beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in

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<sup>414</sup> Interview with Kara Community member, Jinka, November 2021

ignorance there is structural violence” (Galtung 1969:171). Violence against Kara women and girls is not an individual case. It is custom-based violence that is mainly committed by men.

As stated in the FDRE Constitution, Article 35(9), similar to other women of the country, Kara women have the right to access family planning education and information. However, the women in this community do not have the right to conceive and bear an infant outside the ‘rightful’ way; they also do not have the right to decide on their own affairs. Implicitly family planning is a community affair left to the husband and the decision of community elders. All the practice mentioned is structural or norm-based violence that resulted in physical, psychological, and emotional violence against Kara women and girls. It also involves psychological violence against the child declared as Mingi and his/her family such as the mother, sister, father, and other relatives.

As a solution, the government has recently started to intervene through different mechanisms including awareness creation and training for elders and community leaders. Government offices and NGOs who work in the health sector had devised their own strategies to address the Mingi curse. To that end, about three major intervention strategies are devised for implementation through family planning promotion and access to family planning information and method. The first was to avoid all possible ways of giving birth before marriage and to increase the intervals between the first and second birth. The second strategy was to encourage elders and community leaders to give up children categorized as Mingi to be supported by NGOs and government organizations. The third was to make community elders and community members reach a common agreement and express their commitment to stop the practice through a public declaration (Ermias and Azmach 2018:37). However, since the larger part of the Hamer *woreda* is overwhelmingly remote with little or no infrastructure, the effort was not as effective as intended (Haile and Mengistu 2011).

It was, however, after the establishment of Omo Child, a humanitarian local organization led by Lale Labuko and his wife Gido Sura in 2009 that meaningful measures began to be undertaken in minimizing Mingi killings. Besides awareness creation about the harmful practice and its effect, the organization has rescued several children who were to be thrown. In addition, Omo Child provides basic necessities such as food, housing, clothing, healthcare,

and most importantly education to the rescued children. In 2012, Lale and his colleagues convinced Kara elders to end the harmful traditional practice. The decision and agreement to end the practice were not however conclusive or binding but contributed to minimize the practice in Kara. Though this is the case in Kara, in other communities such as Hamar and Bana, Mingi remained intact and undiminished (Wharton 2018). Explaining how OMO Child contributed to the decrease of the harmful practice, one informant stated the following;

*After OMO Child was established, children identified as Mingi in Kara community started attending school. They saw that rescued children were properly learning and did not get sick after wearing a blanket and after drinking coffee. So, a new group of Kara community began to resist Mingi as harmful traditional practice. They started to argue that what their community had considered a curse and that the story that regarded the children as cursed was wrong. The new group also began to resist the tradition saying that 'what our elders told us about the curse is a verbal threat and not valid'. We know that one Nyangatom who was a Mingi is now a Doctor working with us. Some of them even began to regret saying that 'if we had already given and supported our children like Lale, our children would have become doctors'. The Kara people believe in action than to be told what needs to be done. [...] Lale Labuko practically showed them what he believed.*<sup>415</sup>

Another argument that convinced the Kara community to minimize the Mingi practice is related to population size. The numerical inferiority of the Kara in the woreda and thus their vulnerability to threat from other dominant groups has led for many to begin condemning the practice, which affected their size. As an informant argues;

*Now they (Kara) see what other communities were doing; they were continuously breeding without having such harmful traditions like Mingi. A family belonging to those communities can have up to 12 children. Now the surrounding community with greater population size puts pressure on them (Kara), especially during conflict.*<sup>416</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Interview with member of the community and active participant in the community affairs, Jinka,

<sup>416</sup> Interview with an expert at Women and Children Affairs office, Demika

A prior study conducted states that though it shows a decrease, Mingi is still practiced underground in the towns and widely practiced in remote areas (Belayenesh 2012). Women and Children Affairs bureau also confirmed that Mingi is still prevalent in Hamar woreda both among the Hamar and Kara Communities.

*We proved that one woman participated in the killing of her child due to Mingi and she was accused and imprisoned for 4 years. After the law was passed to prevent children from being killed as Mingi and they started to grow up, there is an indirect coercion on the children. For instance, 3 children who were raised by their grandparents passed away from starvation. This happens because when a girl marries another husband, she cannot take a child she had from her previous relationship. In such circumstances, the child is usually given to his grandparents. Since the grandparents support the practice, they did not feed the children or take care of them just because they think that the children are born illegally and hence cursed. And as a result, the children die due to lack of food.<sup>417</sup>*

Informants also recounted that the new generation of young girls embrace their ascribed Mingi identity. They prefer to live as Mingi, saying “I am now altogether with my Minginess”.<sup>418</sup> This is one of the reasons that the Hamer and Kara girls are not allowed to attend formal education, which the community blames for the development of such attitude among girls (Yohannes 2020:379).

## **Conclusion**

Socio-cultural practises undermining the rights of children often enhance the vulnerability and fragile status they have in a society. The cultural underpinnings of some practises like Mingi can be considered as one of the possible reasons why children’s rights are nowadays widely violated in different settings around the globe. Mingi as a traditional harmful practice

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<sup>417</sup> Interview with Kara Dus Health Center Nurse

<sup>418</sup> Interview with Kara Dus Health Center Nurse

is one of the prevalent practices in South Omo Zone, especially among the Hamar, Bena and Kara. Mingi as a traditional practice has various sources and causes, mainly related to the idea of curse. Though Kara women and girls are the main victims of the HTP, the community has also been highly affected. Elders' word, among the Kara community, is unquestionable and enabled the practice to prevail into the 21st century. Regardless of the existence of progress among the community, Mingi has still strong supporters who consider it as part of a "useful" culture. In the face of this divided instances of the community, several scholars and experts working at different levels should make exerted and well-coordinated efforts to fight the practice. Unless an attempt is made to address the structural foundation engrained in the societal culture by working along with members of the community as agents of change, it is not possible to bring meaningful change among the Kara people. The cultural grounding of the Mingi practise and the lived experience of children among the Kara clearly exhibits that despite the acknowledgement of the value of safeguarding children's rights and despite the progress achieved, too many childhoods are cut short.

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