

# **ENDING MINGI: THE QUEST TO SAVE THE INNOCENT**





In Ethiopia's remote Omo Valley, the tribes adhere to traditions. Some rules are based on powerful superstition. The word of the Elders is never questioned. One such belief is that a village must kill any child known as "mingi" or cursed.

A child can be Mingi for many reasons:

- Teeth Mingi: if the first tooth appears in the upper jaw, instead of the lower, the kid becomes Mingi, and this applies to the baby teeth and the adult teeth.

- Girl Mingi: babies born out of wedlock

- Woman Mingi: when couples are married but do not have their marriage or pregnancy approved by the elders, their babies could be Mingi.

- Twin Mingi

- Deformed Mingi: children born with abnormalities.

Being declared Mingi almost always means death to the child. The tribe will leave the child alone in the bush without food and water or will throw the child in the middle of the river full of crocodiles or leave it out for hyenas.

*Hamer kids in a school of Turmi.*



Babies born out of wedlock are labeled Mingi by elders. Many couples are unable to afford marriage because it costs a lot of money (20 to 30 bulls). Once their babies are born, they may be declared Mingi.

*Bana tribe woman with her baby*



After the harvests, the cattle-leaping ceremonies take place. These rites are a way for male teens to officially pass into adulthood. It grants them the right to marry, own cattle, and have kids. For the "Ukuli", or jumper, to fall during the ceremony he is considered shameful and bad luck. Any boy who fails to complete a minimum of four runs (two back and forth), however, will be publicly humiliated: he will be whipped by his female relatives, teased, insulted, and beaten.



Twins from the Hamar tribe. The birth of twins is perceived as a curse and both babies may be declared Mingi. Those pictured were lucky enough to stay alive...



If the first tooth appears in the upper jaw, instead of the lower, the child becomes Mingi. This applies to both baby teeth and permanent teeth. This means that both babies children of 5 or 6 can also be sentenced to death. The emotional strain on the parents is unimaginable.

*This Mingi Karo girl has been rescued by Omo Child*



Buko Balguda lives in Duss, a Karo tribe village. She had 15 babies (7 boys and 8 girls) that were all deemed Mingi and subsequently killed. Since her husband did not undergo the Bull Jumping ceremony, a necessary step to becoming a man, he could not “legally” marry her. According to this cruel tradition, all their children were considered illegitimate and killed. *“Our tribe’s traditions were very harsh. I didn’t respect them, so they killed my children... I didn’t kill my babies, it was other people from my village. At that time, I had no choice... Nowadays when I see the women giving birth or breastfeeding, I feel sad and lonely. No one is on my side.”*



Married couples must get permission from the elders of the village to have a baby. Contraception is mostly unknown or rejected by the men as they say they “suffocate” with the condoms on. There are often accidental pregnancies, making the babies are Mingi and sentencing them to very short lives.

*Mother and baby in Karo tribe, Kolcho village*





The tribe will leave the child alone in the bush without food and water. In those cases, hunger, thirst, or wild animals like hyenas will claim its life. Other times they drown the child in the river or throw it off a cliff.

*Karo tribes boats on Omo River*



No one knows the origin of this cruel tradition, but some believe that it began when the tribes suffered a series of bad harvests long ago. The elders associated this curse with certain characteristics shared by children born at this time and blamed them for bringing famine upon the village.

*Hamar and Karo tribe elders.*



The practice of declaring Mingi children was ended in the Karo tribe in July 2012. This was due in large part to the efforts of Omo Child, cofounded by National Geographic Emerging Explorer Lale Labuko and American photographer John Rowe. Mingi is still practiced by the Hamar and Bana tribes.

*Hamar elders*



Lale Labuko is part of the Karo tribe. He grew up in a hut in Duss overlooking the Omo River. He was one of the first of his tribe to go to school. At the age of 15, Lale learned that he had two older Mingi sisters who were killed before he ever got the chance to know them. He is now living in the United States, studying at Hampshire College



*Karo woman in Korcho village.*

Some women who know they are pregnant with a Mingi child agree to give their baby to the Omo Child organization instead of facing the dire alternative. Even them, some are pressured by the elders to change their minds and let the baby be killed.



If parents of Mingi children don't cooperate with the elders' decisions, they themselves will be cursed and banished from the village.

*Karo kids*



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Education and religion have also begun to sway public opinion in the tribe against the Mingi belief, but the elders are set in their ancestral ways and still have the last word.

*Hamer girl in Turmi school*



Nurse at Omo child center holding Shoma Bulko, a 4 years old Mingi child. Shoma's mother did not have approval for her pregnancy, so the tribal elders condemned her child as Mingi. Shoma's mother was required to leave her newborn baby alone in a hut, with no food or water. Shoma's father gave his baby to a policeman in order to save him.





Omo Child currently has 37 rescued Mingi children from the Karo and Hamar tribes. They live together in Jinka, Ethiopia.



Living in a clean, safe place, with easy access to food and medical care, they are being educated and cared for by a top-notch team of nannies. They live a better life than the kids from the remote villages they left behind.



Now three and half years old, Lale Chicha, was born in Duss village to a mother who experienced "Girl Mingi". She was either unwed or unable to pay an expensive dowry in order to have her child. Lale was rescued by the Omo Child staff. After his mother gave birth, she was forced by the Karo elders to leave her baby alone in a hut with no water or milk. Omo Child ordered a car to take the abandoned child to a hospital in Addis Ababa.



Karo tribe child and Bana tribe child



Over 300 children may be killed annually due to the Mingi belief. Though it's disappeared in the Karo tribe, the Bana and Hamar still carry it on. The practice is illegal but the murders are carried out in secret by the elders. Since the villages are so remote, no one has ever been arrested. Until recently, it was widely believed that the Mingi infanticide was obsolete. Unfortunately that is not the case.

A Hamer woman i interviewed told me, *"I want 10 children. But if i have a Mingi baby, i'll throw him away. I have no choice."*

*Hamer tribe mother and child*



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