15. Combatting infanticide in Bashada and Hamar
The complexities behind a 'harmful traditional practice' in southern Ethiopia

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Introduction

The Bashada and Hamar people are agro-pastoralists who live in a rather isolated part of southwestern Ethiopia where, until recently, the intrusion of the state was rather limited. Infanticide of allegedly impure children has been common and continues to exist today, despite the efforts by the government and NGOs to eliminate the practice. Abandoning the practice, as this paper argues, is so difficult because infanticide is linked to complex cultural explanations and beliefs that must be addressed in order to enable the people to lose their fears that change will affect their lives in an uncontrollable way.

Infanticide or infant homicide has existed in many societies on all continents, and continues to be practised in many of them. It is banned in most constitutions and has been the subject of debate at national and international levels as it contradicts universal human rights.[1] Legal prosecution, however, has not helped to lessen the occurrence of infanticide: while certain forms of infanticide that are deeply rooted in local culture have been driven underground, others, such as female foeticide, have been transformed into selective abortion and are, due to the availability of pre-birth sex-determination technologies, on the rise.

From the perspective of human rights, a child is a human being as soon as it is born. However, this is not a universally accepted understanding. Different societies or cultural contexts have differing ideas about the beginning of human life: its could be at the moment of conception, after certain months of pregnancy, after birth, or even several months after birth. Also, what makes a human being a social person and accepted member of a society varies, as humans are not merely

1 See the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, especially article 6, which grants 'life, survival and development of every child', as well as Article 24(3), demanding that State Parties 'take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2013).

biological, but also social bodies who are culturally constructed throughout their lives (La Fontaine 1985, Carrithers *et al.* 1985). In many societies, it is name-giving that marks the recognition of a baby as a social person (Lancy 2014), and this can be days, months or even years after birth. Once a child has been given a name, it is an acknowledged member of society, and infanticide – where it exists – is usually no longer a possibility (Feitosa *et al.* 2010:860).

Worldwide, the known reasons for infanticide (and/or abortion) also vary. They include a child's illegitimacy (concealing the pregnancy to avoid shame for the mother), poverty, preferences for a particular sex (usually for males), physical deformity of the child, unusual circumstances during the birth (breech births, foot-first births, vertex births, twin births), lack of time between two births (less than 2 years), and accusations of witchcraft. The decision to eliminate a child may lie with the community (if the child is believed to be abnormal or dangerous), or the mother (who might feel she cannot care for a baby born shortly after the birth of a sibling, for a handicapped child or for more than one child born at a time). Children are either actively killed by the parents or by members of the community, or indirectly killed through abandonment, neglect or harsh treatment. Often, infanticide is the result of a failed abortion (Encyclopedia of Population 2018:np).

Infanticide was common in Ancient Greece and Rome. Today, it is rather uncommonly done for cultural reasons in European and other Western countries.[2] Instead, factors such as poverty and parental mental illness play a greater role (Friedman and Resnick 2007). In many societies, such as in India and China and certain countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the preference for the male sex is a reason for infanticide (also called 'femicide' or 'gendercide') (Warren 1985, http://www.gendercide.org/case_infanticide.html). The increased availability of prenatal sex-determination techniques has reduced the occurrence of infanticide in the last decades (Bashir 2011:48), but sex selective abortion (mostly female foeticide) seems to be on the increase (Working Group on the Girl-Child 2007:7, UN News 2003). Recently, 'reproductive tourism', e.g. when parents travel to countries such as Thailand where sex selective abortion is legal, seems to contribute to worsening ratios of female to male children, especially in China, India and Eastern Europe (ACHR 2016:5, 34–36). [3]

2 Infanticide was forbidden in Judaism and Christianity and strictly prohibited and severely punished in the Middle Ages. Possibilities to anonymously abandon an unwanted child and the legalization of abortion have greatly contributed to diminishing infanticide (Moseley 1985–86)

3 Liechtenstein has the highest differential between boys and girls with 126 boys to 100 girls. In Asia, the highest rate of male births is in China, with 115 boys to 100 girls. In Africa, the ratio between male and female births is relatively even, with Tunisia having highest differential: 107 boys to100 girls (ACHR 2016:3).

Infanticide is also still common in some indigenous communities, and poses major political and legal challenges to the governments concerned. In Brazil, for example, infanticide is practiced among certain groups in Amazonia. Their case has given rise to academic as well as political and legal debate on how to handle the issue. Some scholars, acknowledging cultural difference, argue that 'there is no moral difference between abortion, broadly legalized in most of the world, and the death of new-borns' (Singer 1993 in Scotti 2017:394, see also Feitosa *et al.*2010). Others emphasize that universal human rights should be given priority, stating that 'culture is not the greater good to be preserved, but the human being is' (Barreto 2006 in Scotti 2017:394). Feitosa *et al.* (2010) propose a middle way, suggesting that external agents (individual or institutional) should only intervene in indigenous societies in a way that allows and persuades the people to deliberate on certain cultural practices. External agents should stay out of the issue except to offer information and raise awareness, thereby providing the conditions for discussion.[4] Legal prosecution and the criminalization of indigenous people practicing infanticide, it is argued, would eventually worsen their social marginalization and might lead to the transformation of practices like infanticide into 'symbols of cultural identity' by the most conservative members of minority groups, and thus to their reinforcement (Scotti 2017:403).

In Africa, illegitimacy and the belief in witchcraft and curses appear to be important factors contributing to infanticide, while sex preference and poverty play a lesser role. Churches, especially those belonging to the Pentecostal and prophetic movements (charismatic, revivalist, etc.), are also contributing to the 'diffusion and legitimization of fears related to witchcraft, and in particular, child witches' in Africa (Cimpric 2010:15). Very little has been written on cultural explanations for infanticide in Ethiopia. Milner (2000:464) briefly mentions that twin births among the Amhara people are seen as abnormal. Without going into detail, Asmarom (1973) stated that among the Borana-Oromo, children who did not fit the rules of the *gada* generation system experienced various forms of infanticide or were put up for adoption. In the last decade, however, several groups living in South Omo Zone have become 'infamously famous' for the infanticide of children considered as 'impure' or 'cursed' (http://www.refworld.org/docid/559bd56b3b.html). National and international media have reported on such cases and the Ethiopian government and NGOs have been trying to address the issue.[5]

4 For more details on the legal debate on infanticide among Amazonian groups see Schramm (2010) and Scotti (2017).

5 http://omochildethiopia.org, https://ethiopia.savethechildren.net/news/hamer-community-says-we-no-longer-tolerate-violence-against-children, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/ethiopia/9189136/Saving-the-condemned-children-of-Ethiopia.html, https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/peculiar-case-mingi, https://www christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/august/ethiopiariverdeath.html

'Impure children' in Bashada and Hamar

Among the Hamar, Bashada, Banna and Kara people,[6] certain pregnancies and children are perceived as ritually impure and dangerous to their families and/or the whole community. Among the children perceived as such are those conceived by unmarried girls, by betrothed girls who have not moved in with their husbands, and by married women who have not performed the necessary preconception rites. Once born, they are said to afflict their families, causing drought, disease, failed harvests, bird and pest plagues and the like.[7] People believe that aborting the foetus or eliminating the child after birth, followed by the performance of certain purification rituals, can avert such calamities.

When I began my research in Bashada in 1994/95,[8] I had already heard and read about the prohibition on girls conceiving or giving birth before moving in with their husbands. I had also heard about the '*mingi* children', allegedly impure children who were identified by the growth of their upper incisors before the lower ones. I knew girls and women who underwent abortions and sometimes heard rumours about infanticide, though mostly people talked about it as if it was history.

While most of the time the topic was avoided, the case of a girl who had grown her second teeth on the upper jaw first proved impossible to conceal, even though the mother tried to protect her daughter by hiding her. Initially, the community seemed to have tolerated her presence. However, whenever a harvest failed or rain shortage occurred, rumours surfaced that it was due to the *mingi* girl. The rumours were further reinforced, and allegedly confirmed, whenever the diviner consulted

6 The Bashada people speak the same language as the Hamar and Banna people and have an almost identical culture. Together with the Kara, these three groups form a cultural unit (Lydall 1976:393), within which intermarriage is allowed and common, and warfare prohibited. Officially labelled as a subgroup of the Hamar ethnic group, the Bashada people have their own history and origin, their own territory and their own ritual leader (*bitta*). In the past, they claim to have had cultural proximity to the Kara, with whom they reportedly share a common origin (see Epple 2010). In recent times, innovations and cultural change seem to occur first in Banna, which is geographically closer to Jinka, the zonal capital. Conversely, the southern parts of Hamar and Bashada, which are located far from urban influence, appear to be more conservative and resistant to interventions from outside.

7 The concept of human impurity exists also among other groups in South Omo, though with different implications. In the past, the concept of *mingi*, as well as the practice of infanticide, existed also among the Aari and Arbore people, though in a slightly different form from that of the above-mentioned groups.

8 I began research in Bashada in 1994 for my MA thesis and continued in 1998 for my PhD. Since my first stay I have visited Bashada regularly. The research for this chapter was done in the context of a project on legal pluralism in Ethiopia financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG) between 2016 and 2019 while I was hosted at the Frobenius Institute at Frankfurt University and an associate researcher at the South Omo Research Center (SORC) in Jinka, Ethiopia.

the sandal oracle about the reasons for the disasters.[9] This went on for several seasons until, in 1998, the community decided that the girl had to die or leave the area. While the mother had considered taking her child to the *bitta* Adeno (the ritual leader of the neighbouring Banna people who was said to be able to ritually cleanse *mingi* children), there was no guarantee that the community in Bashada would acknowledge the ritual cleansing. The family's second option was to convert to Christianity and move to town. In the end, the mother settled for a third option and gave her daughter to the Catholic Mission in nearby Dimeka town.[10] From there, the girl was later adopted by a foreign family living in Addis Ababa. Though many people in Bashada were convinced that she had caused the repeated calamities, all seemed relieved to see her leave the village alive.[11]

While the lives of this girl and others could be saved, efforts by the government, NGOs and individuals to convince the local population of the harmlessness of children labelled as *mingi* have been only partially successful. In Kara, for example, infanticide is said to have been widely given up, and some *mingi* children are now being raised in their villages. The same is true in a few settlement areas in Banna, Hamar and Bashada, but in most other places, premarital pregnancies are still ended through aborted, and *mingi* children are either given away for adoption outside the community, or secretly eliminated.

This paper aims to understand the local practice of infanticide, its underlying ideas and beliefs, and the reasons why these beliefs have been abandoned in some areas and not in others. Specifically it will focus on:

1) the local views, values, meanings and explanations pertaining to the practices of abortion and ritual infanticide within the context of harmful traditional practices (HTPs);
2) the strategies employed by government officials, NGOs and local private citizens to combat these practices;
3) the local reactions, forms of open and hidden resistance and consequent setbacks experienced;
4) the creativity, flexibility and patience of various actors that have led to partial changes and success stories.

9 Diviners (*moara*) in Bashada and Hamar claim to have the ability to find out the causes of disease and other individual or community level misfortunes by tossing a pair of ritual leather sandals (locally called *dunguri*) and interpreting the way they land on the ground.

10 A nearby small market town and seat of the district administration.

11 Anthropologist Nicole Poissonnier was doing research at that time in the same village. She was a close friend to the family and not only followed the case closely, but also helped to save the girl by communicating with the mission and finding an adoptive family.

Though the research focuses mainly on Bashada and Hamar, connections will be drawn with Kara and Banna, where local dynamics have led to a different handling of infanticide and abortion.

Human rights and local values: The contradictions

The relationship and contradictions between universal human rights standards and customary laws and values, as well as the problems arising during their implementation in local contexts, have stimulated scholarly debate in anthropology for a while.[12] The implementation of women's and children's rights into local contexts appears especially problematic, as the idea of gender equality and the emphasis on the rights of the individual often contradict and collide with local norms and values (Merry 2006, Hodgson 2011). Thus, while many officers argue for the strict employment of international standards worldwide at the international level,[13] at the grassroots level, local officials are struggling with the obvious contradictions, ethical dilemmas and local resistance, and finding that legal enforcement and the criminalization of culture do not necessarily lead to sustainable success, but often lead instead to conflict and resistance.

Local practices inconsistent with human rights have been labelled as 'harmful traditional/cultural practices'. While activists seem to have no doubts that certain practices deserve to be eradicated, some scholars have raised doubts about whether the labelling of certain practices as harmful is a viable or useful way of categorizing discriminatory practices across cultural contexts (Longman and Bradley 2015b).[14] Some went so far as arguing that emphasizing the harmfulness of certain cultural

12 See for example An-Na'im 1992, F. von Benda-Beckmann 2009, Eriksen 2001, Preis 1996. For case studies see Cowan *et al.* 2001, Foblet and Yassari 2013, Langfield *et al.* 2010.

13 For example, the 'Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women' (CEDAW), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 aims to eliminate all practices that discriminate against women, even if it means changing cultural values, and even if women belonging to the culture concerned do not perceive them as harmful (www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw).

14 The term 'harmful cultural practices' was first coined in the 1950s in UN circles when calls were made to abolish 'customs, ancient laws and practices related to marriage and the family inconsistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (Longman and Bradley 2015b:11). See also Longman and Bradley (2015b) for the emergence of the term. Critiques of the term have said that the voices of the people concerned are often over-heard, thus labelling certain practices as harmful is yet another expression of Western dominance, as the definition of what is actually harmful, lies in the hands of the powerful. Besides, similar practices in the West are ignored in such debates and never labelled as culturally based and harmful (Grünbaum 2015, see Jeffreys 2005 on 'Harmful cultural practices in the West'.

practices is a way of distracting public attention from more severe problems affecting women and children, such as poverty.

Harmful traditional practices (HTPs) in Africa and Ethiopia: The policy contexts

The fight against 'harmful traditional practices' (HTPs) is mentioned as part of the 'Millennium Goals' and 'Sustainable Development Goals' of the African Union, which places a strong focus on women's and children's rights, and particularly on addressing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), removal of choice in marriage, sexual initiation, female genital cutting (FGC), opportunity marginalization (social and economic), and land and inheritance exclusion (African Union Commission 2012).

The African Union Commission (2012:2) has defined harmful traditional practices as 'forms of physical or psychological violence that prejudice the bodily integrity or mental well-being of women or girls on the basis of their inferior position in the social grouping that are considered to be long-established and community accepted practices deserving tolerance and respect.' Due to the continent's cultural diversity, there is no standardized list of harmful traditional practices in Africa. However, female genital cutting, sex and gender-based violence, violence related to bride price, forced and child marriage, wife inheritance and nutritional taboos, among others, exist in many African societies.

Ethiopia adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and related conventions and treaties, and included laws protecting human rights of the individual into its 1995 Constitution and into numerous government and NGO programmes. The combatting of HTPs and the empowerment of women and children is among the country's top priorities as it endeavours to develop and modernize. In 2013, the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs prepared the 'National Strategy on Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs) against Women and Children in Ethiopia' in collaboration with development partners. The document defined HTPs as 'traditional practices, which violate and negatively affect the physical, sexual, psychological well-being, human rights and socio-economic participation of women and children' (UNICEF 2015). According to UNICEF (2015:vi), there are about 140 HTPs that affect mothers and children in Ethiopia, and at least some of them exist in almost all ethnic groups. As they are part of local customs, they are defined as 'resistant to change', and UNICEF recommends the design of appropriate strategies for affecting change. However, as in other parts of the world, efforts to raise awareness and legal intervention have led to only partial successes and a variety of responses.

According to Jones *et al.* (2018b), over the last couple of decades legislation and policy concerning girls' and women's well-being and empowerment in Ethiopia has

improved significantly, and a strong commitment to eradicating HTPs can be observed. Nevertheless, practical progress has been slow, and gender norms are proving particularly difficult to overcome. As Jones *et al.* (2018a) showed in a recent study in Amhara regional state, despite efforts by the government and NGOs to support girls' education and gender equality, many adolescent girls continue to face gendered discrimination. The authors also mention a kind of cultural backlash arising from the intensity of the government's discourse on women and children's rights. This backlash is reportedly evidenced by attempts to cover up weddings of underaged girls and boys by pretending that they are baptisms or other religious events (Jones *et al.* 2018:58). Other studies on southern Ethiopia have also reported on local resistance and clashes between government authorities and local population.[15]

Infanticide, abortion, and physical injury in Ethiopia: The legal contexts

The Ethiopian law deals with harmful traditional practices in various legal codes. Under the socialist Derg regime (1974–1991), efforts were made to unify all Ethiopian societies under a modernized umbrella, and many local practices were condemned. Since the EPRDF took over government, cultural difference has been celebrated and supported, albeit with limitations (see Epple/Thubauville 2012).

Any practices that contradict international human rights standards are labelled as HTPs and legally sanctioned. Articles 561 to 570 of the Criminal Code deal with 'Crimes committed against life, person and health through harmful traditional practices', especially those 'endangering the lives of and causing bodily injury to pregnant women and children' (Articles 561 and 562).[16] Such practices are punishable with 'fines or simple imprisonment from three months to one year'. Article 563 (Discretion of the Court) grants some flexibility in the application of the law, stating that the court may take a perpetrator's age, education, experience or social status into account and choose to give only a warning.

Article 544 specifically deals with 'infanticide', stating that it is punishable with simple imprisonment if committed by the mother while in labour (544(1)), and treated as homicide if the child is killed intentionally or by negligence (544(2)). The same laws apply to any instigators or accomplices to infanticide.

15 See for example LaTosky (2012, 2014) on the lip plates of Mursi women, Thubauville (2012) on bridal seclusion among the Maale, Epple (2012a) on girls' education in Bashada and Yohannes (this volume) on a major conflict between the Hamar and government authorities related to clashing values.

16 These include abortion, excision of the uvula of a child, removal of milk teeth, and preventing a child from being vaccinated as well as other practices considered as harmful by the medical profession.

Abortion is only allowed for medical reasons, for example, if either the health of the child or the mother is affected, or if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest (Art 551).[17]

HTPs in South Omo Zone and Hamar Woreda

The South Omo Zone in SNNPR is home to sixteen officially recognized ethnic groups and known for its cultural diversity. The level of education among the mostly agro-pastoral or agrarian population is generally still low and, due to the relatively late penetration of the state in the area, knowledge about the national law is rather limited and scattered. The handling of HTPs in South Omo is particularly challenging because its cultures are quite diverse, and the people react differently to interventions from the outside.[18]

The zone and districts cooperate to identify HTPs. The Women and Children's Affairs offices in the various districts regularly visit the villages and, together with the local population, identify practices that could be considered as harmful. They then prepare and update the list of HTPs for their own district and submit it to the zonal authorities, where the lists are compiled and progress and setbacks evaluated. As the Head of the zonal Women and Children's Affairs Office, explained, these lists are updated annually to show which practices have been abandoned, continue to exist, or have been revived. The lists are then sent to the regional office in Hawassa. From there, further instructions on how to continue the work are sent back to the zone and from there to the districts. In addressing HTPs, the government gives the highest priority to those that threaten human life or cause physical injury.

At the zonal level, seventy-seven HTPs were listed as existing in six pastoral districts of South Omo in 2016 (South Omo Zone Women, Children and Youth's Affairs Department 2016). While some of them are unique to one or two of the respective ethnic groups (such as female circumcision in Arbore and Dassanetch,

17 Otherwise, abortion is punishable (Article 545,1) and leads to the imprisonment of the woman (and possible assistants) (Article 546). If the abortion was done against the will of the pregnant woman, it leads to rigorous imprisonment from three years to ten years of the 'aborter' (Article 547). If the abortion is done for financial gain, the 'aborter' also has to pay a fine, and if it was done by a professional – such as a doctor or nurse – he or she can be prohibited from practicing medicine for a limited period or even for life if they have undertaken numerous abortions (Article 548, 1, 2, 3).

18 See for example the baseline study on Hamar, Dassanech and Nyangatom districts by Save the Children Norway-Ethiopia (2011). See also LaTosky (2012, 2013, 2015) on Mursi women's lip-plates, Thubauville (2012) on bridal seclusion in Maale, and Epple (2012b) on whipping and physical punishment.

infanticide in Hamar, Banna-Tsamay and Maale, or the wearing of lip-plates in Mursi), there are practices that exist almost everywhere (for example, bride wealth, polygamy, reluctance to send girls to school).

HTPs in Hamar Woreda

Hamar Woreda has twelve listed HTPs. As the Head of the Women and Children's Affairs Office at the district level told me,[19] after years of awareness raising and information campaigns, certain practices have been abandoned, some are being practised less severely, and others have continued as before. The fight against HTPs related to the modification of the body for aesthetic reasons has been most successful, since these practices are voluntary and bear few ritual and social implications, serving rather as signs of strength, courage and social recognition.[20] HTPs related to marriage, including early marriage (below the age of 18), arranged marriage, abduction, polygamy, bride wealth, ghost marriage (marriage to a deceased person) and wife inheritance have proved to be more difficult to suppress, probably because giving them up has further implications for age and gender relations.[21]

The ritual whipping of girls and women during male initiations and the whipping of wrongdoers by their age-mates are likewise considered as cultural assets and have not been abandoned, although the severity of them has been reduced. The top priority, and the most difficult HTP to address, has been abortion and ritual infanticide.[22] While infanticide has reportedly been abandoned in Kara, it continues – along with abortion – in Hamar and Bashada for various reasons that will be explored in this paper.

19 Interview 24 March 2017 in Jinka.

20 In Bashada and Hamar these practices include the wearing of heavy iron rings around the arms and legs (*zau*) and the neck (*isante*), the breaking out of the lower incisors, and the cutting of decorative scars (*paala*). Decorative scars are commonly applied to the shoulders and chests of men who have killed an enemy. As homicide is prosecuted, such scarring of the chest is now only done is secret. The skin is sometimes still cut for medical purposes – such as to cure rheumatic pain – mostly by women.

21 In the 2016 report by the South Omo Women, Children and Youth Affairs Office (2016) ghost marriage (that is 'marriage to a dead man') and 'marriage through abduction' are said to have been eradicated. However, in conversations with the Women and Children's Affairs Office, it was said that abduction is still a problem, though on the decrease. During my stays in Bashada in 2016 and 2017 it was also clear that forced marriage and abduction is still prevalent, which shows how difficult it is not only to change certain practices, but also to follow up on practices that are illegal.

22 Another major priority is female circumcision in Arbore. The Arbore speak a different language and are also culturally quite different from the Hamar, Bashada and Kara, yet they share the same district. Over the last few years, female circumcision has been reduced in severity, although there is also resistance to change among the communities.

Abortion and infanticide

Abortion and infanticide based on the belief that a child is ritually impure is common in Hamar, Bashada, Banna and Kara.[23] The origin of the belief and exact beginning of the practice of infanticide is not known. When asked, people mostly explained that it has always been part of their culture.[24] Local explanations for the tradition emphasize the 'non-human' status and ritual pollution of such children. *Mingi* children – e.g. children born without the proper performance of preconception rites or whose teeth grow first on the upper jaw – are believed to harm their family. It is said that such children bring disease and misfortune, causing the deaths of their father, mother, and all their siblings, until they remain the sole survivor in the family and keep the family property to themselves. They are also believed to cause disasters that affect the whole community. When there is a severe drought or an invasion of pests in the fields, usually an oracle is consulted to identify the cause. If there is a child who has been suspected of being *mingi*, diviners may read in the oracle that they are responsible. In this way, the child becomes the scapegoat for a calamity (Lydall 2005).[25]

When members of the community come to forcefully take a *mingi* child away from their family, the parents usually try to protect their child vehemently. Families with many male members can resist more vigorously, so that those who came for the child may have to stay several days, trying to convince the family to voluntarily give up the child. The child is then taken to the bush and abandoned.

The alleged impurity of *mingi* children is strongly connected to the performance of the bridal and the preconception rituals that a woman has to undergo with her mother-in-law every time she wants to get pregnant. As Brüderlin (2012:100) has

23 Variations of the concept exist also in Maale and Ari. As one elderly Ari woman explained during a workshop at the South Omo Research Center (Epple/Brüderlin 2002:97–98), a child may only be conceived once the so-called 'feeding ritual' of its elder sibling has been performed (five months after birth), otherwise it will be *mingi*. The women from Ari, Hamar, Bashada and Banna who participated in the workshop all agreed that pregnancies conceived before the mother has had her first period after giving birth are especially dangerous or, as they expressed it, 'very, very *mingi*!' One of them called the concept of *mingi* a unifying cultural element of their cultures, which are also historically connected (Epple/Brüderlin 2002:99).

24 According to Lale Labuko the Kara speak of a child born several hundreds of years ago whose top teeth came first. The community suspected it might be a curse and when there was a drought some years later, the elders of the village related this to the child. The ritual leaders of Kara, Hamar and Banna then came together and decided that such children were impure and needed to be killed in order to prevent future calamities (https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/peculiar-case-mingi). The documentary film *The River and the bush* (http://omochildmovie.com) highlights the impressive effort and success of Lale Labuko in combatting infanticide in Kara.

25 In a way, the elimination of the child provides the community with a feeling of control over natural disasters and is, as such, comparable to witch-hunts.

explained, the prohibition on premarital pregnancies and the belief in the impurity of children conceived without the performance of the preconception rites serve as an indirect means of social control over married couples and their procreation, and gives a lot of power to mothers-in-law (see also Lydall 2005:163).

As local contraceptives do not exist and people have limited knowledge of fertile and non-fertile days, the only really effective method of avoiding an unwanted pregnancy is celibacy.[26] However, as virginity is not a precondition for marriage, premarital pregnancies occur from time to time. Sometimes, a betrothed girl may be impregnated by her prospective husband, who abducts her after getting tired waiting for his wife's father's consent to let her move in with him. During such abductions sexual intercourse is common, so that even girls who do not have a secret boyfriend may get pregnant and have to undergo an abortion.[27] A child conceived by a girl who has not moved in with her husband is referred to as *anzamo-nas* (lit.: 'girlhood child'). No matter who their biological father is, the parenthood of an *anzamo-nas* is neither socially nor ritually acknowledged, so the child is illegitimate and not considered as a fully human being (*edi*).

Within wedlock, the ideal time between pregnancies is considered to be two to three years. Once a child is strong enough to be weaned, its mother will perform the *gungulo* ritual with her mother-in-law, after which she is allowed to get pregnant again. If she gets pregnant before that, her child will be *mingi*. Husbands are advised to avoid sexual intercourse before the *gungulo* ritual has been performed, but as wives cannot easily reject a pushy husband, unwanted pregnancies within wedlock do occur. While still in the mother's womb, such children are called *wuta* ('unclean pregnancy'). If abortion fails and such a child is born, it will be *mingi* ('ritually impure').[28]

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26 The performance of this ritual can be considered as a traditional kind of birth control that lies in the hands of the mother-in-law. It guarantees that the age gap between two siblings is not too short.

27 I was told during a conversation with two young Bashada women that if a girl refuses to have intercourse during abduction by her husband, he would suspect that she has a secret boyfriend (31 January 2017).

28 The concept of *mingi* appears also in other contexts of Hamar/Bashada culture, in the classification of animals, nature, and the temporal status of humans. Humans can be irreversibly *mingi* by birth (if the necessary rites were not performed before conception), by accident (if the genitalia or breasts of a man or woman are injured), or by impure behaviour (having sexual intercourse with a cow). Members of some ethnic groups or status groups are also called *mingi*, for example, the Tsamay (Tsamako), who have a reputation for being magicians, and blacksmiths, who are considered ritually impure. The ritual or magical abilities of these people is nevertheless venerated and used. The *bajje* people, a marginalized subgroup with great ritual responsibilities, are also sometimes called *mingi*, mainly because they do not kill children whose teeth grow on the upper jaw first, which means that in theory all of them could

The abortion or infanticide of a child of a premarital pregnancy is handled secretly to ensure that the prospective husband does not hear about it – unless he caused the pregnancy.[29] In cases where a married woman is known to have repeatedly carried and aborted a *wuta* ('unclean pregnancy'), her husband will be made responsible and accused of impregnating her with 'non-humans'. His agemates will warn him to avoid sexual intercourse until his wife has performed the necessary rites, so that she can bear an *edi* ('real human being').[30] If after this, the woman gets pregnant with a *wuta* again, the husband will be sanctioned and severely whipped by his agemates.

Both, *anzamo-nas* and *mingi* children are believed to bring misfortune such as drought, disease and plagues of pests or birds that eat the harvest. The only remedy is to remove them from the community. In Hamar and Bashada, the first choice is usually to terminate such pregnancies in the fifth or sixth month of pregnancy.[31] When abortion fails, the pregnant girl is kept hidden, perhaps in the fields, until the birth, and then the child is abandoned in the bush.[32] If the child of a married woman grows its first teeth in the upper jaw rather than the lower jaw,[33] this is interpreted as an indication that the mother has laid with the father before being ritually prepared, and the child therefore became *mingi*. In rare cases, children grow their adult teeth, rather than their milk teeth, in the upper gums first. This means they are identified as *mingi* only at the age of 7 or 8, but their fate is the same as that of younger children. The belief that if a *mingi* child is left alive all of its younger siblings will also become *mingi* puts extra pressure on the parents.

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be children of *mingi* parents. See Brüderlin (2012:95ff) for a detailed summary of the existing literature.

29 According to Dal'o, a young married Bashada man, husbands are scared that their wife might die during an abortion, which is another reason why they get angry and threaten their wives' lovers. See also Brüderlin (2012) on different cases of premarital pregnancy in Hamar.

30 Girls and women who mourn the death of their children are comforted with the words: 'Don't cry, this was not a human. You will give birth to a human in the future!'

31 Premarital pregnancies and abortions are kept secret from the girl's father, elder brothers and prospective husband, as these would try to get hold of her secret boyfriend and beat or even kill him. For the same reason, girls try to hide the name of their lovers. To end a pregnancy, a local female expert will exert pressure on the girl's abdomen, though there is a belief that if a girl does not disclose her boyfriend's name, the abortion will fail.

32 During my research, I heard of several unwanted pregnancies. My impression was that the girls had internalized the idea that premarital pregnancies should be ended and therefore usually consented to an abortion. It is common for their secret boyfriends to contribute to the cost of the abortion, and young men assist each other in finding the necessary resources. Such pregnancies are usually an open secret among the youth and the female relatives of the pregnant girl.

33 See Brüderlin (2012) for a detailed description of marriage and bridal rituals, as well as the concepts of *wuta*, *mingi* and *dakka* used to refer to unclean conceptions and ritually impure children.

A woman carrying a *wuta* and mothers of *mingi* children are likewise considered unclean, and their pollution extends to their families and fields. Such women cannot fetch water, as this would allegedly pollute and dry out the waterholes. Their fields and crops are also considered *mulimidi* (polluted),[34] so that they can only be eaten but not be used as seeds or in exchange for goats or cattle. Their husbands cannot go hunting, as it would put them at risk to die, and none of the woman's close family members can go to initiations, as the cattle over which an initiate is supposed to leap would go wild. While a mingi child must be killed, its mother and her family and homestead can be ritually cleansed and reintegrated into community life. The procedure involves the slaughtering of a goat on a central path (*zarsi goiti*) by a ritual expert who then blesses and cleanses her homestead by spilling some of the goat's stomach contents in every corner. The slaughtering and cleansing is done in public so that everyone knows that after an unclean conception has been removed or a *mingi* child eliminated the appropriate cleansing rituals have been performed. The same rituals are done when a woman had a spontaneous miscarriage.[35]

Meeting the challenges in combatting abortion and infanticide

The settlement areas in Hamar and Bashada are relatively remote and scattered, making it difficult for the government to reach out and employ control mechanisms over their inhabitants. Besides which, abortion and infanticide take place in secret, so enforcing the law in this context is almost impossible unless people report such incidents to the police. Therefore, the government's emphasis has been on raising awareness in the region in the hope that this will slowly change the minds and beliefs of the people. Although, it has also taken action to exert legal pressure as well.

In the past two decades, the infrastructure in Hamar and Bashada has been improved, and all-weather roads have been built to most settlement areas. Health centres, schools, agricultural extension offices have been built in all *kebeles*, and local committees have been formed to address major issues in collaboration with the *likamamber* (lit. Amharic: 'chairperson'), who acts as an intermediary between the local community and the government.

However, the strong belief that children conceived and born without the proper ritual preparation bring disease and misfortune to the whole community is puting

34 The term *mulimidi* is, unlike the term *mingi*, also used in ordinary contexts to mean 'dirty', especially for water that has become muddy.

35 The cleansing is done by the *bajje*-man (ritual expert from a special subgroup living among the Hamar and Banne).

a lot of pressure on individual community members. Most government officials are well aware of the force of these beliefs, as they are native to the area themselves. Therefore, their work lies in both raising awareness raising and supporting individuals, while warning the community of the legal consequences of anyone caught committing infanticide. Delegations from the Women and Children's Affairs Offices, the Cultural Office, the Educational Office, the Justice Office and the Health Office regularly visit the villages to educate them about the harmfulness and illegality of certain practices, and to follow up on the changes people have promised to make.

In an effort to gain more control over childbirths and with the hope that this will help prevent abortion and infanticide, pregnancies are nowadays documented and followed up. In cooperation with the district Women and Children's Affairs Office, NGOs, the local health centres, and local health committees, pregnant women are identified and visited regularly and encouraged to go to the health centres in Dimeka or Turmi (small towns in Hamar district) when near to delivery. There, every pregnant woman is given free accommodation and health care until her baby is born and both are strong enough to return home. Through vaccination campaigns, the names of children are registered and their growth monitored. In the near future, the zonal administration is planning to issue birth certificates for all children, even those born in remote lowland areas. In collaboration with international NGOs, such as Save the Children, and with funds from UNICEF and the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF), financial support is being provided to individuals willing to raise *anzamo-nas* or *mingi* children. Omo Child – a local NGO – is helping raise awareness and providing shelter for such children in their orphanage in Jinka. The police and court are also involved through prosecutions and by raising awareness of the laws around infanticide. However, as mentioned above it is extremely difficult for them to locate cases of abortion or infanticide, and there have been very few convictions so far.[36]

In the following, some of the measures taken to reduce infanticide and abortion, as well as the local reactions towards them, are discussed in more detail.

36 Any major criminal issues and all cases of homicide are sent to the zone, so that cases of abortion and infanticide are sent to and handled at the Jinka court, e.g. the zonal capital. The former head of the prosecutors' office in Jinka, explained why the court has to show flexibility in handling cases of HTPs, "(…) The law says that one should keep law and order by prevention, e.g. teaching the people, and if after that the law is broken we have to prosecute them. But one cannot arrest all who violate the law here. If we do that, one would have to arrest almost all people. So, if for example someone's lower incisors are broken out by force here in Jinka, we have to act. But if it is done it Hamar (e.g. in the lowland villages), we leave it." (24 March 2017)

Saving lives through adoption

Encouraged by the government, some parents decide to give their children away for adoption, as *mingi* children raised outside the community by non-Hamar are no longer considered dangerous. The former representative of the Hamar people in the national parliament recalled how adoption was introduced under pressure from the socialist Derg regime (1974–1991),

> Already under the Derg it was said that people should not kill the *mingi* children. They said, 'It is a crime, it will be prosecuted. If you really believe that these children are impure, give them to the town's people, let them grow up there!' (…) People say that the rain would stop falling and there would be disease. But since the Derg, there have been many *mingi* children growing up in town, and today there still are. People have seen that there is disease in town and in the villages; rain is falling equally in towns and villages, there is no difference. It is a question of *barjo* (here: 'good fortune'), not of *mingi* children. (1 June 2017)

Many of these children grew up in Dimeka and Turmi, small towns in Hamar, or in Jinka, the zonal capital. Their relatives could see them – though not visit them – when they went to the weekly markets. Some of the children adopted during the Derg regime are among the first educated Hamar and have achieved high positions as officials in the local administration or as legal experts. As adults, they do not pose any risk when they visit the villages and eat and drink with the people and are treated like any guest from outside Hamar.[37]

While in the past only non-Hamar were willing to adopt and raise *mingi* children, today there is an increasing number of educated Hamar people living in the towns who believe that there is no danger in bringing up *mingi* children.[38] The NGO Omo Child has saved the lives of around fifty children who were given to them by parents or found abadonded in the bush.[39] However, while the orphanage s open to all children labelled as *mingi* or *anzamo-nas*, people in Bashada have said that

37 One of them, for example, became a lawyer and worked as head judge of the Zonal Court in Jinka. Another one was chief administrator in Hamar Woreda for some years. He underwent a purifying ritual as a young adult, was allowed to undergo initiation and married a local wife. As far as I could observe, the local reactions to this diverged: while some say that he was 'reborn' and is a full Hamar now, others say that he is not fully *charangi* ('ritually pure'). Both have become active also in attempting to fight infanticide with the help of international NGOs and churches (see http://gtliconnect.blogspot.de/2011/11/creating-mingi-friendly-communities.html, and http://galataministries.org).

38 The mother of the current Women and Children's Affairs Officer of Hamar Woreda, for example, is bringing up two *mingi* children in Dimeka. She found one of them abandoned in the bush, while the other one was brought to her by its father.

39 The NGO recently changed its name to Omo Hope (see https://www.omohope.org). Besides the orphanage, the organization is very active in raising awareness and has significantly con-

parents who do not know any of the NGO's staff personally are still hesitant to approach the organization.

Enforced and supported upbringing of impure children

Nowadays, the government is making increased efforts to convince families and communities to keep their *mingi* children. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there were no *mingi* children growing up in the villages, but during my research in 2016 and 2017, I heard of several cases.

During meetings organized in Turmi and Dimeka, government officials had discussed the issue with the *likamambers* from the various *kebeles*, asking them to convince their communities. An elder from Bashada remembered these meetings as follows:

> The government said to us (about *mingi* children), 'You are giving them to the *gal* (non-Hamar). And then, when they study, grow up and come back, they eat and drink in your houses. Why are you eating with them? You used to kill them! You used to throw them down crevices! You said the sun would get hot, and the rain would stop falling. But now that is not the case. Now (as they were saved and grew up in town), the rain never stopped falling. You were wrong!'
> (After they talked like that we said), 'Eeeh, we have accepted that.'
> Now, the government is saying that we should raise them in the villages. Over there in Dalmi (settlement area in Bashada), there are two children. There is also one in Argude (settlement area in Bashada), it is raised here. (Interview, 19 November 2016)

While this elder gives the impression that many people are now convinced that *mingi* children are harmless, others said that acceptance is limited to a few places in Hamar. Both, local people as well as government workers told me that they knew that infanticide had not been given up. Many local people also expressed their doubts that *mingi* children were really equal to other children. Although leaving them alive was seen as generally good, it was suggested that they should go to school and live a town life rather than be locally initiated and married.

The former Women and Children's Affairs Officer of Hamar Woreda recounted the case of an *anzamo* child who, at the time of the interview in 2016, was 4 or 5 years old and living around Turmi town. She had become involved in the case when she took the child to the hospital after birth and fed it until she could convince the mother to keep it. To protect both child and mother from the enraged husband, she had also had to involve the police. Later, she convinced the community elders

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tributed to the abandonment of infanticide in Kara, the birthplace of Omo Child's founder, Lale Labuko.

to let the mother and child return. Finally, the husband accepted the child and, after some years, the wife gave birth to more children with him.[40]

While there are more and more individual cases of surviving *mingi* children and *anzamo* children, there seems to be a growing and more outspoken resistance to the acceptance of *anzamo-nas* in the communities. During my fieldstay in 2016, the case of two Hamar girls who had refused to abort their premarital pregnancies was discussed widely in Bashada. The girls were taken to the clinic in Turmi, where they were given health care, protection from their families and support during delivery. The Head of the Women and Children's Affairs Office in Hamar district explained the strategy behind giving them shelter and financial support in town for a couple of years:

> The mothers should start loving their children. Once they got used to their children, we will send them back to the village. That is the psychology (she used the English word here) we want to use. The girls' husbands, hopefully, will later also accept the children as theirs. (Interview, 27 March 2017)[41]

After returning to the villages, I was assured, the mothers and their children will to be regularly visited by government officials and receive financial support to ensure their wellbeing. In addition, the families will have to sign a document saying that they would do no harm to them, in the knowledge that they will be sent to prison if anything did happen to the children.[42]

The case of these two girls stirred discussions in Bashada, and some people openly opposed bringing up an *anzamo-nas*. A Bashada elder summarized people's feelings:

> The people here say, 'Why should we accept such a child? The family of the man who impregnated her has to raise the child! (…) We do not agree with the government!' When we said so the government people responded, 'So, advise your

40 Summary of an interview held on 25 January 2017.

41 She added that people in Kara were now raising *mingi* children in the villages without problem, and that such families received some financial support. According to her, in 2017 there were fifteen *mingi* children being raised in Dus village (the biggest settlement area in Kara).

42 The former Women and Children's Affairs Officer of Hamar Woreda recounted the case of an *anzamo-nas*, then aged around 4 or 5, living around Turmi town with the support of Save the Children and the Women and Children's Affairs Office. The husband has accepted it and the couple subsequently had more children together. She explained: 'For that case, the elders had called me (to take the child to town). After the child was born, I took it to the hospital for 18 days. I fed the baby and finally convinced the mother, and later the community elders, to keep it, so that eventually the mother and child could return. In the beginning, I worked on this alone. But then I had to also involve the police, because the husband of the girl was bad at first and threatened to kill the baby, so the police had to stop him.' (Interview, 25 January 2017).

> daughters (not to get pregnant)!' (Then we said), 'Eh, so we will better hand over our daughters to their husbands at early age, before they grow up and start playing around with boys!' We have accepted the *mingi* talk, but we did not accept the talk about the *wuta* and *anzamo* children. (Interview, 19 November 2016)

As is indicated here, the unclear social status of an *anzamo* child creates a problem, as by local definition social descent is only determined once a wife has moved in with her husband and performed all necessary rituals, no matter who the biological father of a child is. Therefore, children born before that cannot become members of the husband's lineage. On the other hand, any child born after the necessary rites have been performed will be fully accepted and considered as the child of their social father, even when it is known that someone else fathered the child.[43]

In the above account, the elder suggested that to prevent premarital pregnancies girls could be given to their husbands at an early age, knowing that underage marriage is another target of the government. In the past, Hamar girls moved over to their husbands' homes at a young age, and grew up under the supervision of their in-laws until they were physical maturity enough to be given to their husbands. While Hamar girls often still get married (i.e. the marriage is sealed) at an early age, they now grow up in their parents' house until the age of 18 and older. This has made it difficult to prevent premarital relationships, and the risk of premarital pregnancy has increased immensely. With his remark, the government's demand to let girls get betrothed and married at adult age was indirectly challenged: it was shown that from a local perspective it is contradictory to control the girls and avoid premarital pregnancies, and at the same time forbid abortions and infanticide.[44] Without saying it directly, it was indicated that abortion and infanticide of *anzamo* children would continue if the problem of premarital pregnancies is not be addressed otherwise.

43 There are cases in which a husband was absent for several years (in prison) and later thanked the man who slept with his wife while he was away, thereby enabling him to return to a fully-grown family. In other cases, where husbands are not happy that their wives have given birth to children from a secret lover, their anger should only be addressed towards the lover, and not toward the children.

44 Efforts to inform the youth about contraception, as well as awareness raising on HIV, free distribution of hormone injections or condoms seem not to reach everywhere and are not always effective. During a conversation with a young Bashada women, I learned that many fear that they would not be able to get pregnant for some time after receiving a hormone injection or that condoms might get lost inside the body of a woman. Therefore, they claimed, many females did not use them.

Expanding control mechanisms, awareness raising and legal prosecution

As indicated earlier, both abortion and infanticide are done secretly and hardly ever reported to the police and the court. Consequently, government institutions depend on the cooperation of the community to prosecute such cases. Efforts to register pregnant women and newborn children have given some control over newly born children.

According to a prosecutor at Hamar Woreda Court, very few parents have sought legal support after their child was labelled *mingi* and killed. He suspected that social pressure played a major role in preventing parents from coming forward. As many people continue to be convinced that these children are dangerous, parents fear being ostracized by the community if they refuse to hand over their child. Therefore, even individuals who do not believe in *mingi* tend to give their child away for adoption.

Equally rare are reported cases of abortion. The majority of girls who get pregnant before marriage comply with an abortion, as they have internalized that it is a cultural prerequisite to live with their husband and bear socially accepted children. Besides, as shown above, bringing up an *anzamo-nas* means having to withstand the whole community, live in town for a while – if not forever if the government officials' negotiations are not successful – and risk the marriage. A judge at the Hamar Woreda Court remembered only one case of a reported abortion. Here, an elderly woman had forced her daughter-in-law to interrupt her pregnancy:

> When her daughter-in-law moved in with her son, she was already pregnant [by someone else]. The mother-in-law said, 'This child is not my son's child. We have not finished the (bridal preconception) rituals!' and aborted the child by force. Later, she was accused of murder here in town. Her daughter-in-law had submitted a letter [to the police]. 'My child was killed! This old woman killed my child! I am not going to live in that place anymore! I will go to school now!' she said, and then the police arrested the mother-in-law. The young woman is in school now. (Interview, 29 March 2017)

This case of forced abortion was especially delicate. Though I did not have the chance to talk to her in person, reporting her mother-in-law to the police must have been a drastic step for the young woman. As custom dictates that cases should first be discussed with the elders and reported to the police only through the militia or the *likamamber*, circumventing the elders is strongly disapproved. Anyone doing so is locally perceived as *d'abbi* (wrongdoer) and has to pay a fine to the elders or is otherwise sanctioned. In this case, the woman had to sever relations with all her-in-laws and move to town.

Government collaboration with ritual leaders

Despite years of awareness raising and legal pressure, abortions and infanticide have still not been abandoned. Therefore, the government recently decided to involve the ritual leaders (*bitta*) to ban these practices through local custom.

The ritual leaders in Hamar, Bashada and Banna [45] are said to be descendants of brothers who once left Aari and migrated south and there is a strong connection between the ritual leaders of the three groups. Until today, the *bittas* are venerated for their ritual power, though some of the former prohibitions surrounding their hereditary office have been weakened: while in the past the *bittas* were not allowed to leave their own territory and meet other *bittas* face-to-face, today, they often meet during meetings organized by the government in Dimeka and Turmi, in Jinka (the zonal capital) and even in Hawassa (the regional capital).

One of the Banna *bittas*, Adeno Garsho, was already known in the 1990s to have developed a ritual that could cleanse *mingi* children: through a kind of symbolic rebirth he could turn them into 'real human beings'.[46] However, when during my fieldstay in 1998–99 people in Bashada mentioned him to me, many also expressed their doubts on the effectiveness of his ritual. Those who believed he coud really turn a *mingi* child into a 'real human' feared that the transformation would not be accepted in Bashada and their children remain outcasts.

When harmful traditional practices began to be addressed under the EPRDF regime, *bitta* Adeno offered to be of help. During a Banna-Tsamay Woreda council meeting in 2005, his son, Kotsa Adeno, declared that they would do all they could to stop certain HTPs. During the course of numerous field visits and talks, seventy-two practices were identified as HTPs, of which forty-eight were considered as being most critically affecting human life. The highest priority was given to the practice of killing *mingi* children. A young educated man[47] from Banna recounted:

> *Bitta* Adeno Garsho called the representatives from the Women and Children's Affairs Office, and also the *kogos* and *parkos*[48] from their respective areas in Bannaland. He also invited the Banna representatives in the national parliament, the zonal administrators and regional government bodies to his own home. Here, he slaughtered a pure female sheep that had never given birth before (*yati sebani*)

45 There are two *bittas* in Banna, two in Hamar and one in Bashada.

46 *Bitta* Adeno's grandmother originally came up with the idea of abandoning the killing of *mingi* children (Gele Bani, 30 May 2018).

47 He is the son of a *kogo* (ritual expert and fire-maker), has a university degree and has been working for the local government in Banna and Jinka.

48 *Kogo* and *parko* are ritual experts. While the *kogo* is a ritual fire maker who performs protective rites for the cattle, the *parko* is the counterpart to the *bitta* and performs rituals for the cattle and the bees. The *parko* is also said to be able to move the stars when they have left their usual paths, and thereby prevent drought and disaster.

> at his ritual gateway (*kerri*) and addressed his ancestors [asking them to allow him to abandon infanticide]. Next, he took parts of the sheep's heart, tongue and stomach and put them onto the gateway [for the ancestors]. He ate some of it himself and then shared it among the elders and the people, saying: 'From this day on I have abandoned this practice! Let my children grow up in peace and freely!' About one year later, around forty-eight HTPs, including *mingi*, were registered as being abandoned in Banna land. [49] (Interview, 30 May 2018)

Other *bittas* followed Adeno's example and began denouncing the killing of *mingi* children. The former Hamar representative in the national parliament recounted:

> First *bitta* Adeno stopped it, maybe 5 or 6 years back. He also stopped the killing of the first-born child [of the Gatta clan].[50] (…) Then *bitta* Muga [the other Banna *bitta*] followed. In Lala, the Hamar *bitta* Bankimaro said during a public meeting, 'These are children of humans! If their teeth grow first on the upper jaw, to call them *mingi* is the talk of the past. Let it be gone!' (…). There is also, Elto [the other Hamar *bitta*]. But his talk is moving back and forth. He accepts some things and rejects and resists to others. (Interview, 1 June 2017)

However, despite the *bittas*' efforts, infanticide has not been easily given up and continues in many places.

Local reactions to external interventions

Generally, there appears to be no linear progression in combatting HTPs in Hamar and Bashada: the changes are scattered and not sustainable everywhere. This be-

49 According to him, today most of the Banna people go to Adeno's house if one of their children appears to be *mingi* (i.e. their first teeth in the upper jaw), especially since 2006. Nowadays, there are many children in Banna who have been ritually cleansed and have grown up with their families. Some live in Jinka, in the Omo Child orphanage. Most of these former *mingi* children are still underage and have not yet married. He expects that the *mingi* children who were cleansed can participate in any ritual and marry anyone from Banna. To understand whether such children have been totally accepted locally one would have to observe the marriage choices of individual families.

50 The different clans have their own prohibitions, abilities and rules. In the past, the Gatta clan used to kill all women's first-born children. In Bashada, I was told that it was their *parko* (ritual expert) Nakwa, my host father, who first abolished the killing of first-born girls and later also of first-born boys. Being Gatta himself, when his wife she finally gave birth – after 8 years of trying – he decided that the child should not be killed. Later, when his own son's wife gave birth to a boy, he also decided that the child should not be killed as his daughter-in-law had lost twins before. Though he abandoned the practice for Gatta children, this abandonment did not automatically oblige others to follow and I heard of a subsequent case of Gatta infanticide in a different family.

came sadly obvious in 2014 and 2015 when, in an act of resistance against the government, infanticide was revived in an area in Hamar where some parents had been raising their *mingi* children in the village.

Revitalization of infanticide as resistance

According to informants from the area, in the past they had been pressurized to send the *mingi* children to school. Some of those who received an education in Dimeka and Jinka made a career and came back as government officials. They were locally accepted, though again not without some pressure from the government side. The fact that they were able to support their families and communities financially also gave them some local leverage. [51] More recently, children were also educated in the newly built schools in the villages.

In 2014 a violent conflict erupted between some *kebeles* in Hamar and the government. Though the causes of the conflict and its triggers are complex, the main underlying reasons were related to continuous pressure from the government to send more children (especially girls) to school, to stop hunting in the national parks, and to end certain cultural practices (see Yohannes, this volume, for details). When the situation escalated at the end of 2014, the Hamar physically attacked the district administrator, police and other government representatives, destroyed government institutions, such as schools and health posts, and decided to return to their own ways. As part of their resistance, they revived certain practices in order to strengthen their own identity and as a sign that they rejected the new culture imposed on them. Among those practices was infanticide.

The former chief administrator of South Omo Zone and by then representative of the Hamar in the national parliament was called to help resolve the conflict. He recounted how the elders of the area emphasized their autonomy when they revitalized the practice of infanticide:

> With this conflict they have started it again. They said, 'In the past, this was our custom. This government told us to stop, but now we will do it again! We will turn back to our old practices!' (…).
>
> It was mainly the *zarsi* [community of males]. 'We are the ones who make the *bitta* a *bitta*, we are the ones who select the *ayo* (spokesman)! When we, the *zarsi*, say so, it will be given up! But if we say that there exist *mingi* children, there will be!'
>
> So, now they are killing them again. By then, there were four or five children killed, even big children who were attending school. (…). (Interview, 1 June 2017)

51 Oral information from Yohannes Yitbarek, who has been doing research in the conflict areas since 2016.

During the time of the conflict, some parents moved to town or gave their children to friends in town in order to save their lives. The discord between government and local popluation only really calmed down in 2017, partly because some of the government officials who had contributed to the escalation were taken to prison. The killing of *mingi* children who had been living in the community can be seen as a drastic way of restastance against the government when the pressure got too high.

Faking rituals

When the conflict became less severe, the government organized more meetings in an attempt to pick up its own efforts and reinforce the *bittas*' efforts to end the most prioritized HTPs.

In June 2016, for example, representatives from the local and regional government, with support from Save the Children, organized a meeting in Turmi involving men and women from Hamar and Bashada. The three ritual leaders (two from Hamar and one from Bashada) were invited to ritually abandon several harmful traditional practices, including the ritual infanticide of *mingi* children, early marriage, the exclusion of girls from education and the ritual whipping of girls and women during male initiation.[52]

The abandonment ritual was held again in Bashada, with only the Bashada *bitta*. However, it later came out that the rituals had not been done properly, neither in Hamar nor in Bashada. In both cases, certain ritual elements – invisible to outsiders – were changed, which rendered the whole event ineffective and non-binding. As a young Bashada man, who had participated in the ritual in Bashada, explained, no one felt obliged to abide by the ritual until it was repeated in the proper way:

> The first time the branches they used were from the wrong tree, a kind we don't use for rituals. 'These are *gal* [highland Ethiopians] coming to the ritual. What is the problem [with using the wrong tree]?' people had said [*laughs*]. 'They are like small children, they don't know!' The people tricked the government simply to appease them.
>
> But the administrator of Hamar Woreda was also there. He is Hamar and he had understood what the elders had done. So, he called them back! 'These were wrong trees that you used! Erect *baraza* [tree used for rituals]! Slaughter a sheep,

52 Save the Children has been involved in raising awareness on harmful traditional practices in Hamar, Dassanech and Nyangatom since 2010. It cooperates with the Women and Children's Affairs Offices and some other relevant stakeholders. As part of a revised strategy, and with funding from Save the Children Italy, in collaboration with the regional government, it organized the above-mentioned ritual (https://ethiopia.savethechildren.net/news/hamer-community-says-we-no-longer-tolerate-violence-against-children).

> go down to the river! I know all about it!' And then they did it all again, this time in the right way. (Interview, 27 March 2017)

The involvement of the *bittas* was not without pressure from the government side. As the *bittas* need the support of their communities to change cultural practices, they could not force their people to abandon the belief that *mingi* children were dangerous and give up infanticide. Instead, they pretended to cooperate with the officials, but actually altered the ritual.[53] Currently, new efforts are being made by the government to discuss with the communities, especially in those *kebeles* where resistance has been strong and violence has erupted.

Summary and conclusion

The practice of infanticide and abortion in Bashada and Hamar (as well as in Banna and Kara) is closely linked to the idea of personhood. Children conceived before marriage (*anzamo*-children) are considered as illegitimate and can never achieve the status of an accepted social person (*edi*). Such pregnancies, therefore, are usually ended through abortion. If the abortion fails, the children are eliminated after their birth. Accepting these children as persons seems most difficult in Bashada and Hamar, where people have resisted accepting them despite pressure from the government and many attempts to raise awareness of its undesirability. The status of children considered as ritually impure (*mingi* children) is only visible several months after birth: when their first teeth grow on the upper instead of the lower jaw, this indicates that preconception rites were not performed properly. Their status allegedly makes them – similar to child-witches in other countries – dangerous for their families and the whole community. They are believed to be equipped with supernatural powers who can afflict and kill their parents and siblings and bring disease and drought to all. Explanations for the status of such children differ: while an *anzamo* child cannot be a social person because it lacks a social father and therefore identity, a *mingi* child has been born outside the ritual order, which is believed to make them hazardous and a carrier of imbalance and disaster. The elimination of *mingi* children provides the local population with a feeling of control over uncontrollable events (like any other ritual or magic), and restores the social and ritual order. Defining births as legitimate only after marriage (until recently common also in the western world) and the performance of bridal rituals grants

53 Also, in Kara, where the practice of infanticide is said to have been abandoned completely, there are still few individuals who are not following the decision of the majority and ritual performance of their ritual leader, so that the awareness raising efforts of NGOs and government are continuing there, too (oral information by the managing director of the NGO OMO child).

a clear social status to all legitimately conceived children, even if their biological father is different from the social one.

The belief in *mingi* children also serves as an identity marker, especially in opposition or confrontation with the cultural other. During an intercultural workshop in which many women from different ethnic groups in South Omo participated, several women from Banna, Bashada, Kara and Ari explicitly drew a boundary between their groups and others from Arbore and Dassanech, emphasizing that they had certain rites necessary for a child to become human and that they practised infanticide on impure children (see Epple/Brüderlin 2004:chapter 7.14). Although I do not know how common the view is that infanticide creates a feeling of unity, the revitalization of the killing of *mingi* children that emerged from the armed conflict between the Hamar and the government in 2014 showed that infanticide can easily be evoked as an identity marker. As several informants from those rebellious *kebeles* confirmed, the reinvigoration of infanticide was not only a return to past traditions that were only reluctantly given up under government pressure, it was also an act of revenge, demonstrating distance and resistance to the pressure to change. It emphasized the Hamar people's otherness and independence, as Scotti (2017:403) predicted.

Efforts to combat abortion and infanticide must take all these cultural meanings and beliefs into account, and acknowledge that too much pressure and the criminalization of culture can have adverse effects. At the official level, it appears that this has been accepted, and is reflected in the emphasis on awareness raising over strict law enforcement. Practically, however, it seems that too many meetings and one-sided discussions have led to fatigue and frustration among the local population, who – feeling pressurized – pretend to agree and fake rituals to please the government.

So, what can be done? The results of the combination of efforts (awareness raising, support for individual families, offers to adopt children, pressure from the government) made in Kara, where infanticide of *mingi* and *anzamo* children has almost stopped, is encouraging, and interventions should continue, with a focus on providing information on issues related to infanticide. To avoid frustration in the communities, which might lead to more resistance, rather than placing too much stress on values and laws, continued education on the real causes of natural disasters and disease would help reduce the fear of *mingi* children. Better explanations about birth control and provision of contraceptives could help avoid unwanted pregnancies from the beginning. Debates on values, and possibly on the outside image of the groups, might help them question their identity markers and lead to changes in attitude. As one Kara man said after years of awareness raising and discussions with the government, NGOs and educated Kara men: 'We do not

want to be known for killing our children anymore!'[54] Yet, as Feitosa *et al.* (2010) have suggested, such discussions should probably be done in a more participatory way, and not provide all the answers from the beginning.

Despite the many drawbacks and problems, as the Head of the Women and Children's Affairs Office in Hamar Woreda (herself from Hamar) positively and realistically remarked:

> What is called *dambi* (tradition, custom) will not disappear in one day! It is something that needs a lot of time! (Interview, 27 March 2017)

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54 This statement was made by a Kara man during the time when strong efforts were being made in Kara to overcome infanticide. He can be seen in John Rowe's documentary film *The River and the Bush* (Rowe 2015).

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