# Luqa site-specific topic: the HTP of Mingi

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Ethnic/customary leaders who fought the harmful traditional practices

*Mingi* is one of the harmful traditional practices that have been carried on for a long time in Benna Tsemay wereda. No one in the community including the ethnic leaders knows when exactly *mingi* started and it is difficult to say much about the background. There were different types of *mingi* that were exercised among the Benna Tsemay community. This people are found in Benna Tsemay wereda, south Omo zone of SNNPR.

The harmful traditional practices are different in nature which makes some of the social practices taboo and ends in the death of small children and sometimes the cattle.

The first type of *mingi* is the one called Ouousa related to delivery of a child before the completion of a ritual ceremony that is related to menstruation. The ritual is carried out during the menstruation period. It has to be carried out three times before the woman is expected to deliver a child. At the end of each ritual that is carried out during the menstruation period of the women the old lady who runs the ritual prepares a *shorka* (half circle of *kil)* and fills it with water and at the end of the ritual the women is expected to step on it and break the kil in the centre of the house. This ceremony is carried out three times before the woman conceives. If the woman gets pregnant before the third ritual is completed, the baby will be killed by his own mother immediately after birth. If the mother is afraid to kill the newly born child, the community will handle the killing. This is because the community believes that if the mingi child is left alive bad lack could happen to the family as well as the community and action has to be taken before a disaster occurs in the community because of not killing the mingi child. Each neighbour follows the ritual process and if it is not properly completed the neighbours have a collective responsibility to kill the mingi before the catastrophe happens.

The other type of *mingi* is having a boy as a first child. The first born baby boy is categorised as mingi and he is killed by elders from the neighbourhood by throwing him over a cliff, if the mother is not strong enough to kill the baby boy.

The third type of mingi is if the mother gets pregnant while she is lactating/ breast feeding. In this case both the sucking child and the newly born are considered to bring bad lack to their family and the community and are killed. The killing ceremony of these *mingi* children is carried out by community elders and the children are thrown from a cliff.

The other *mingi* is related to milk teeth. If a child by chance has his first tooth from the upper side it is *mingi,* and the child is considered to be a sign of disaster to the parents and the community and it has to be got rid of.

Another type of tooth-related *mingi* is if the tooth of a child is broken naturally or while playing before it is pulled out by a member of the community at the age of six or seven, it is *mingi* and the child has to be eliminated.

There is also cattle-related *mingi.* If a calf jumps over its mother from behind it is *mingi* and both are slaughtered. If the tail of a cattle is caught by wood while grazing it is *mingi* and the case is reported to the owner and the cattle is immediately slaughtered and eaten on the spot. If a calf jumps over the legs of a woman sitting with her legs stretched in her compound it is *mingi* and the calf will be killed immediately.

There are old men among the Benna ethnic groups who try to justify the *mingi* as a means of family planning. They say that it is not obligatory to see menstruation three times. The woman can conceive after the first menstruation but she has to give space between the children and if she gives birth to the next child before the first one gets strong, then the second child is considered to be unwanted and *mingi* takes place. But many elders don’t agree with the above-mentioned justification and stand in favour of the ritual-related cause of killing the child.

## Ethnic/Customary leaders in favour of the practice

According to the respected ethnic leaders the mingi practice is officially denounced and is never practised. But there are elders who are in favour of the practice and who oppose Adnew, the Benna ethnic leader who came up with the banning of the practice and who succeeded, with the support of the government. These elders, who I talked to, are still in favour of the *mingi* practice and they say that different epidemics (malaria, water-borne diseases) affect the community because of the reproof on the customary ritual activities. They say that the community stopped the *mingi* ritual because it came from the leaders of the ethnic groups. According to my informants the ritual has to be practiced as long as the people believe in it. They say that this age-old ritual had saved the people from different catastrophes and has to be carried on. According to my observation these elders are not bold enough to come out and say that, *mingi* ritual has kept our communities from different disasters and should be carried on. They just talk in favour behind the curtain and are afraid to oppose their leaders like H. One especially said that after H’s death his successor will embrace again the *mingi* traditional practice as he is not as strong as his father and is sympathetic to the activities. But most people say that *mingi* among the Benna Tsemay communities is a past history never to come back again.

## Wereda women’s affairs and administration

According to the wereda women’s affairs, mingi harmful traditional practice has gone never to resurface in the wereda. The government has dealt with the leaders of the ethnic groups before it took the agenda of *mingi* practice to the community. It is the good will of the leaders and then the parents who have lost their dear children, and the young couples who are afraid this harmful traditional practice will knock at their doors, who supported the idea of the elimination of the practice. With this support from the leaders and the dynamic sector of the communities our office and the office of the wereda culture, tourism and communication office had played a pivotal role in community conversation over the issue and we had won the battle over this harmful traditional practice. The community traditional laws, and the government follow up have stopped the people from practicing the activities. Of course, there was suspicion among the communities that disasters could happen to the people. The first year after declaration of the banning of the harmful practices of *mingi*, people used to wait for some negative signs, to raise their voices against the banning. There were even some internal movements by the group who were in favour of the *mingi* practices. But they have failed and stopping the practice has no negative consequences. When *mingi* practice was banned, parents who were to lose their children were even afraid to keep their children supposed to be sacrificed at their homes, because of fear that the generations-old belief would happen and they might get into trouble. But with the passing of time and the appearance of no extraordinary phenomena in the area, they began to settle down and accept their leaders for their wise decision. We appreciate those bold society members who were willing to bring up the mingi children when their parents abandoned them for fear of unusual disaster that might fall upon the people. Today, when their biological parents see the children grown up and going to school, they condemn themselves for not taking the risk and losing them. On the other hand, the bold and determined households who embraced those children supposed to be sacrificed feel very happy for taking the children under their wings and say that ‘seeing those children grown up gives them happiness’. According to the wereda administrator, the community members who were determined at the time to take any risk that could have come to them for taking the *mingi* children into their family circle are highly appreciated by the government. He said that, it is these kinds of vanguards, that the government needs to effect its development projects and interventions.

## Kale Hiwot leaders

According to the Kale Hiwot church leaders, *mingi*  is a devilish measure that a parent takes over his child, due to the lack of faith in God. They have informed me that they have been teaching their community about the wrong traditional practice of killing one’s own child in fear that something odd could happen to them if this ritual of child elimination which has got no substantial reason [is not carried out]. The religious leaders appreciated the bold decisions taken by the ethnic leaders and the government in cooperation. One church leader said ‘no one has got the right to destroy a soul created in the image of Jesus Christ’. All the church leaders agree on the abolition of child killing ritual, and praise God that their work has become fruitful and the society is transformed.

## Knowledgeable people who know about the mingi practices

According to elders who are knowledgeable about *mingi*, the exact time when it started and why the people started it is not clearly known. But all agreed in that the belief among the community was that with tolerance of mingi children and not carrying out the ritual, bad things would happen to the community. These knowledgeable men gave me no justification for the deeds, nor cited any social incident that happened as a result of measures taken by the ethnic leaders. The knowledgeable people I talked to believe that the thought about *mingi* has shadowed the thinking ability of the community and they don’t want to criticize the tradition or challenge the individuals who used to carry out the rituals

## Parents who lost their loved ones because of mingi

The atmosphere around us was so tense while I was taking with the three parents who lost their children to *mingi* harmful traditional practices. The two fathers were so sad that I had to take some time to console them and to drag out of them those sorrowful incidents. Both have lost their baby boys because they were their first born children. Both said that the pressure at that time was so strong that they were left with no choice. They said that it was a long-established norm that if they preferred not to let the mingi ritual take away their children, it was a well-known reality that they would be driven away from the area as they would be considered a curse to the community. So, they said that they “exchanged their children for land”. The third person affected by the harmful traditional practice that I talked to is a young fellow whose brother left the community in order to save his boy from death. According to my informant his brother left his land and left the area as he was not able to live in the community opposing the *mingi* ritual. He preferred his child over the land holding and left the area and is at present living in south Ari. He has no land but has a good life and the child saved from the *mingi* killing is now a college student in Arbaminch.

## People who adopted mingi

According to the three farmer pastoralist men who have adopted *mingi* children, at first when they decided to adopt the children who were saved from the killing, their relatives, friends and neighbours were against the idea, fearing that the curse would befall them. There was opposition even from their immediate family members. They recall that the first year of the adoption was terrible, and frustrating. Gradually but surely the opposition began to cool down. The informants said that had the idea come from the government or other people who are against the *mingi* the fight against this harmful tradition could have failed

## Person fined for continuing with the practice (if found)

I didn’t meet persons fined for continuing with the *mingi* practice as people are doing it in secret if they carried on the practice and wouldn’t come openly to give information. The government takes serious measures against those who are still in favour of the *mingi* harmful traditional practice.

## Research Officer additions and comments

H is the person who came up with the idea of abolishing the harmful traditional practice of *Mingi*. The rationale behind the harmful traditional practice is that people think that, if the ritual practice is not carried out, catastrophes like drought, disease etc. will befall the community. An epidemic could happen and the family as well as the lineage of the household who didn’t carry out the practice will die. The bold ethnic leaders decided to stand against the age-old harmful traditional practice. It is said that it was the ethnic leader of the Benna ethnic group, who denounced the practice. The main problem for those who attempted to oppose the practice was to lose their land rights and go far away where they could not even get land. Besides the lineage and clan pressure on the family against the harmful traditional practice was so high that they were afraid that they could be victims of the above-mentioned catastrophes. Peoples’ attitude towards this tradition is mixed. There are very few who stand in favour of the harmful traditional practices while the majority of the people I talked to were against the practice.