



Gesso (Geessa): Purification Ritual among the Gamo in Southern Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ritual of Gesso, a purification practice within the Gamo culture. It is used to exorcise curses and malevolent forces caused by the transgression of gome, or social norms. The purpose of the ritual is the purification of individuals who have violated these norms, particularly in relation to the contamination of land and bodies. It also examines the social consequences of extramarital relationships between mala (the pure) and t'somma (the impure), and the important role women play in these narratives. The study employed various ethnographic techniques, including extended case studies, life stories, in-depth and key informant interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. The study argues that the Gesso ritual not only restores social cohesion, but also reinforces the stratified social structure of the Gamo, integrating complex dynamics of gender, occupation, and socio-economic status. This study sheds light on how purification rituals are instrumental in the maintenance of social order and the negotiation of communal values within Gamo society.

Keywords: - Gesso, gome, mala, social stratification, t'somma

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, human groups have competed for social power, prestige, and resources. The resulting complex institutional differences in society define the value and allocation of goods and generate unequal control over these resources (Grusky, 2001). The term 'social stratification' is used to denote and explain such structures of inequality and how they have survived and evolved over time. Research on stratification seeks to explore 'who gets what and attempts to explain why' (Crompton, 1993, 1). The nature of the strictness of a stratification system can be inferred from its permanency and rigidity. For instance, if an individual's parents' position or occupation accurately determines their resources, power, or prestige, then the stratification system is considered very strict. If social divisions and processes of stratification are mostly accretive, an individual's social status and future destiny can be significantly influenced by birth

characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, family, and health (Grusky, 2001).

According to Sorensen in Grusky (2001), three variables are particularly important in social stratification research: class, status, and power. In line with this, Weber in Grusky (2001) assured that class and status determine one's position and power in society. Further, Payne stated that "social divisions are similarly related to social stratification, but stratification is a term better reserved for specialist discussions of class, status and power" (Payne, 2006, 5). Hence, conceptually, stratification encompasses more complex and broader aspects of inequalities in a society than do social divisions.

The Gamo are an Omotic speaking people in Southern Ethiopia. They profoundly categorize a hierarchy

between the privileged group called the *mala* and all the others fated to be ruled, the *t'somma*. The generic name *t'somma* comprises the *mana*, *dägäla* and *wogač'è*, which are caste-like groups mainly restricted to working in pottery, metallurgy, tannery, or similar crafts. Among the Gamo, social mobility from one stratified group to another is a challenging and uphill task (Arthur, 2013; Bosha, 2013; Freeman, 2002, 2003; Freeman & Pankhurst, 2001; Getaneh, 2014). Indeed, this occupation-based stratification has persisted for centuries and people continue to be classified not only by their current occupation but also by their notional, or hereditary, occupation. The notional occupation places individuals in a certain position based on their parents' occupational status. Being a *mala* or *t'somma* is ascribed at birth and members of a community seldom marry outside their group, meaning that the social boundary is "closed" (Bosha, 2013; Epple, 2018; Freeman, 2002, 2017; Getaneh, 2014).

The social structure of Gamo is significantly influenced by group differences, which are evident in customary administration, authority, politics, religion, and economy. The *mala* enjoys advantages in elections, administration, and inheritance rights, while the *t'somma* is disempowered and does not share any of these rights or privileges. Based on divine rule since creation, the Gamo believe that the *t'somma* are created inferior to the *mala* and that their social status is predetermined. This paper examines the *Gesso* (purification) ritual, an important cultural action closely linked to Gamo social structure and beliefs. The *Gesso* ritual is not only a spiritual cleansing device, but also an important instrument for the maintenance of social hierarchy and the reinforcement of indigenous values within society.

The *Gesso* (purification) ritual is essential for reintegrating those who have failed to comply with social norms and regulations. They are able to resume their normal lives once their previous status has been restored through this procedure. The *Gesso* is used to free those who have been convicted of "crimes" or to make amends to those who have been ostracised for *gome* (impurity). It serves as a means of cleansing impurity and protecting families, clans or the environment from any harm caused in the past or present by those who are considered 'sinners'.

Essentially, *Gesso* is atonement or expiation for transgressions of social norms and rules committed by individuals, such as intentionally or unintentionally handling forbidden objects or performing forbidden activities. It is also used to cleanse areas of land that are believed to be contaminated by *t'somma*, or the unclean ones. The main aims of land cleansing rituals are the maintenance of the general health and well-being of the land and the protection of the community from potentially dangerous harvest, as these rituals are usually associated with ideas of purity and impurity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of purity and purification

The notions of purity, pollution and purification have been important themes in anthropological literature, illustrating how different societies interpret and regulate the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. These concepts have been the subject of particularly in-depth study in the works of Mary Douglas, Émile Durkheim, and Victor Turner. However, in the Ethiopian context in general and the Gamo context in particular, a thorough examination of pollution, purity and purification remains unexplored. Some research (Bosha, 2013; Freeman, 2003, 2004; Getaneh, 2014; Pankhurst, 1999) has examined how stratified and segregated communities in Ethiopia, particularly in southern Ethiopia, describe the low scribe or the lowest strata or marginalised people as being unclean and profane. Such studies often stress the uncleanliness of the lower strata, such as the *t'somma*. Studies of the purification of slaves or their descendants, in southern Ethiopia, have also been undertaken by authors such as Bosha and Pankhurst. However, neither the research on the impurity of the *t'somma* nor that on the purification of slaves has adequately examined the many features of the purification rites in the wider Ethiopian environment, let alone in Gamo. Furthermore, slave purification rituals differ in form and orientation from the purification rituals under investigation in this study. Thus, this paper's purpose is to fill a vacuum in literature, that a thorough investigation of these issues would have significant implications for the study of social stratification. Such an examination is necessary because it plays a significant role in the processes of the construction and the reformation of purity, as well as in the delimitation of impurity.

In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas argues that dirt and pollution are cultural constructs rather than universal concepts, crucial to maintaining social institutions. She emphasizes that what one culture considers impure may be acceptable in another, highlighting that purity rules reflect societal ideals and govern acceptable behavior. Douglas introduces the concept of “matter out of place,” where dirt is defined by cultural norms rather than hygiene, and is symbolic of social disorder. Purity and pollution, therefore, are about creating order in the universe and reinforcing group identity. This idea parallels the Gamo society’s *gome* creeds, which distinguish between purity and impurity through various prohibitions. Douglas underscores the role of rituals in restoring purity, arguing that they are not merely physical cleansing acts but symbolic activities that reinstate social order. These rituals, such as washing and anointing, help reintegrate individuals into the community, maintaining boundaries and social norms. Douglas’s insights have had a lasting impact on anthropology, particularly regarding the cultural significance of purity, contamination, and social structure. Similarly, Émile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) explores how distinctions between the sacred and profane underpin social cohesion. He asserts that religion’s primary function is to maintain social order, with purification rituals being essential for preserving the sacred and reinforcing community solidarity. Durkheim’s analysis complements Douglas’s work by demonstrating how rituals and purity rules are vital to the social fabric and cohesion across cultures. These rituals return contaminated individuals or objects to a state of purity, thereby establishing the boundaries that support the social order (Durkheim, 1912, 1995).

In addition, Victor Turner’s work on rites of passage and liminality, and particularly his book *The Ritual Process* (1969), provides a thorough examination of the ways in which rituals of purification function during social transitions. Turner extended the earlier findings of Arnold van Gennep, which identified three stages in rites of passage: separating, liminality (or transitioning), and including. Turner elaborated on the liminal period, emphasising its transformative power and the function of ritual in regulating it. Purifying rituals are important in this setting because they help to cleanse those involved of their old identities and statuses, symbolically preparing them to

metamorphose. Turner’s work shows how these rituals help individuals and communities cope with changes in social status and reintegration into society. For example, people are often physically and symbolically removed from their previous social responsibilities during the separation phase. Rites of purification may include bathing, anointing, or other forms of cleansing to eliminate the former identity (Turner, 1969). These activities represent a break with the past and a preparation for the new identity that will emerge at the end of the liminal period.

Purification rituals are essential for the reintegration of the individual into society under a new identity or a new social position. Turner (1969) points out: “These rituals, which involve community participation, strengthen social bonds and collective identity. Often using elements such as water for cleansing and oils for sanctification, they symbolise the transition from impurity to purity. Ikenga-Metuh (1985), in a study of the Igbo concept of ritual defilement, shows that purification is crucial for spiritual harmony and community order. The Igbo view ritual defilement as a religious phenomenon, with cleansing rites aimed at restoring balance by addressing violations of sacred prohibitions associated with deities and ancestors. The concept of fertility is also closely linked to *gesso* in a number of different contexts. *Gesso* not only restores an individual’s social status and reintegration into society, but also promotes personal fertility through the promotion of social and psychological well-being. By purifying those who have transgressed social norms, it makes it possible for them to lead a normal life once again. In addition, the fertility of families, clans and communities is linked to the *Gesso*. The ritual helps to secure and strengthen social units, mend relationships and purify places that are considered unclean. By restoring social ties, it ensures the continued growth and cohesion of the group.

RESEARCH METHODS AND TOOLS

The study employed various ethnographic techniques, including extended case studies, life stories, in-depth and key informant interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. The input of key informants, administrators, religious and indigenous leaders, field assistants, and community elders proved invaluable in assisting me in the selection of interlocutors and additional data sources, which enhanced the quality of

my dataset. I was consistently furnished with suggestions regarding the most appropriate individuals to contact with regard to specific queries or concerns during our discussions, even in an informal context. These suggestions proved invaluable in ensuring that my research encompassed a wide variety of viewpoints and thoughts. I have had the honour of taking part in many activities and rites of passage, which has given me a close observation of the dynamics inside communities. To commence a successful participant observation process, I concentrated on establishing rapport and trust with the research locations I planned to visit. This involved spending time getting to know people and exhibiting sincere interest in their lives including regular attendance, participation in community events, and obtaining the consent of key individuals or community leaders. To foster reciprocity and mutual support, it was necessary to invest time and effort in building meaningful relationships with community members. This process was referred to as the accumulation of social capital. My prolonged engagement in the field, my prior experience, my sociability, my capacity for learning, and my enthusiasm for hearing about other

people's lives have afforded me numerous opportunities to develop social capital. I endeavour to create an atmosphere of comfort and confidence by demonstrating my willingness to listen attentively to their concerns and suggestions.

As can be seen from the case studies that follow, an extended case study technique is one of the key strategies that are used. Max Gluckman pioneered the Manchester School of Social Anthropology, which developed the ethnographic extended case method, also known as situational analysis. Evens & Handelman, (2006) argue that this approach is still relevant and promising ethnographic method. It serves as a fundamental pillar for this paper, with many two of the case studies presented in an extended format to capture and understand the threads that connect or underpin the cases. Through in-depth ethnographic investigation of individual experiences, this method analyses and illustrates larger social dynamics. The extended case technique examines specific events to understand the interaction between human behaviour and social systems, as opposed to standard ethnographic methods that focus on broad observations. The case technique involves the in-depth study of instances of social interaction in deducing underlying norms and assumptions. According to

Velsen's detailed case studies, each case was carefully constructed, and the relevant actors were carefully involved in the data analysis process. One of the notable contributions of the paper is the meticulous attention to detail I took to include every important actor in each scenario. By carefully examining the specifics of the cases and presenting them from different perspectives, this paper seeks to identify the reasons that led to their development. To carry out this comprehensive research, data from secondary sources, focus group discussions, interviews, and other sources have been integrated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the purification ritual is to protect individuals and communities from the malevolent influence of supernatural forces that may have been unleashed as a result of transgressions of *gome* norms. The concept of *gome* is fundamental to Gamo culture and is the basis for understanding how rules are disregarded or unpleasant behaviour takes on its physical form. The practice of *Gesso* is used in order to deal with violations that have been identified by the community. It is primarily concerned with the

distinction between the *mala* (the pure) and the *t'somma* (the impure). Those involved in the process experience a symbolic rebirth, allowing them to be reintegrated into the community and reunited with their clan and family.

Violation of any of the *gome* prohibitions will have specific consequences. However, it is for the most serious violations of the prohibitions, especially those relating to the contamination of land and bodies, that most ritual cleansing ceremonies are performed. The purpose of these ceremonies is the maintenance of the *mala's* social status and sense of self-respect. By damaging the reputation of the family and clan to which the perpetrator is related by blood and social ties, such acts have far-reaching consequences. For instance it is forbidden for the *mala* and the *t'somma* to have sexual relations or to marry, as this is considered to be *gomé*, that the breaking of these rules will bring bad luck to the community as a whole. Those who break these restrictions may be subject to a curse that has the effect of permanent estrangement from their family and clan members. It is believed that children born of these forbidden unions will bring misfortune and curses to the community and are not considered to be 'authentic' *mala* descendants. Although it is possible for a *mala* woman to interact with a *t'somma* man, as the cases examined in this

paper will demonstrate, there is no documented evidence of a marriage or relationship between a *mala* man and a *t'somma* woman. A variety of techniques are employed by family and clan members to terminate relationships with the *t'somma*. These techniques include attempting to persuade the girl to end the relationship, exerting pressure on her to do so, forcing her to return to social norms through *Gesso* purification, and, in the event that all other attempts fail, treating the girl as though she has broken off all ties to the family – that is, as though she were dead.

In the course of my research, I had the opportunity to witness a situation that illustrates the complex concerns about ‘inappropriate’ marital and sexual relationships between the *mala* and the *t'somma*. The following is an example of how a family, the clan and other members of the clan work together to maintain their dignity and the purity of their ancestry. When a clan member encounters a circumstance that threatens the family’s reputation, such as an altercation or an accusation of wrongdoing, the extended family and clan members come together in support of the individual and to resolve the matter collectively. In order to protect the family name and ensure the purity of their genealogical heritage, they may engage in rituals, negotiations and joint decision-making processes. Although these particular cases are rarely studied, it illustrates the complex issues that arise when such interactions occur in Gamo. One of the family’s eldest daughters, Alganesh¹, decided to go to Kamba to marry her *t'somma* boyfriend. Her family were horrified at the news of the union and begged her to call off the engagement and return to her home village. Despite their pleas, Alganesh was unwavering in her determination to go ahead with the relationship. Her younger siblings were deeply affected by this decision, particularly regarding their marriage prospects and family relationships, as Gamo tradition forbids younger siblings from entering family partnerships or marrying unless the firstborn or eldest child marries. The family took drastic measures when they realised that the consequences for Alganeshi’s younger brothers and sisters would be profound. Unable to convince their daughter otherwise, they openly mourned her “loss” and alerted the neighbourhood to her death. The family was able to

circumvent the restrictions through this elaborate strategy, allowing their other children to marry. This case illustrates the extreme measures that family members will take to break bad and ‘cursed’ relationships. It also serves to highlight the precautionary nature of the relationship between *mala* and *t'somma*, which is a strict ‘red line’ in Gamo.

The process of purification

A variety of ceremonial instruments are used in the *Gesso* purification rite. These include *mažžo* shrub branches, silver *kawo* rings, sheep's cud (*toche*) and sheep’s blood. Choosing which item to use depends on the severity of the transgression and the nature of the *gome*, as these ritual components can be used singly or combined. Among the ceremonial objects used in *Gesso* purification, the *mažžo* branch is particularly important. It is usually carried by the *maka*, the person in charge of carrying out the purification ceremony, as he moves from one place to the next. Purification rites are performed by members of the *maka* clan. Although not held in high esteem, the *makas* are very important in performing powerful cleansing ceremonies. These rites are traditionally performed by men, often of lower social status. The *makas* are said to have the ability to recognise and deal with perceived faults and impurities. It is assumed that these impurities and spiritual defilements come from their own moral and spiritual manifestations and those of their household. A *maka* is entrusted with the responsibility of carrying out the cleansing tasks once selected and approved by the community. The power to perform the ritual of purification of the *Gesso* is inherited within the family, in particular from the father to the son. In the case of a *maka* who has only daughters and no sons, the obligation to perform the ritual is passed on to the brothers of the *maka*. In the absence of any brothers, the role is assumed by an alternative individual. It is therefore the expectation that those who have been selected for this role do so of their own free will. Any resistance or complaints about the duty are perceived to have an impact not only on the individuals themselves, but also on their families.

Apia Geessa bolla: Purifying the body

The purification rites not only bring relief to the person undergoing purification, but also relieve the grief and

¹ The names of interlocutors appearing in this paper are pseudonyms used to mask actual identities and protect privacy.

burden on their family and clan. The fact that only women are involved in purification rituals, and that there are no *Gesso* rituals for men, confirms that *Gesso*

You are the one who has degraded the dignity of your clan and paved the way for trouble and suffering to come upon you and them [the clan]

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is a gender-specific ritual that focuses primarily on the purification of women. There are two basic ways of understanding how *Gesso* gets associated with women. Firstly, it is in line with the long-standing Gamu belief that *mala* men should not have sex with *t'somma* women. As a result, women are often at the forefront of crossing this 'red line'. This is particularly true when it comes to forming relationships with *t'somma* men. This gender dynamic highlights the critical role women play in maintaining boundaries and defending traditional values, as well as cultural norms and social expectations around impurity and purity. Secondly, because of their reproductive responsibilities, in particular the possibilities of pregnancy, women who engage in sexual activity are seen as biologically endangering not only their own bodies, but also those of their families and clans.

The woman, who has been separated from her family and whose body is unclean, goes to the house of the *maka* for a ceremony of purification. After the sun has set, she travels to *maka's* house, where she spends the night before leaving the next morning, having completed the ritual of purification. The cleansing of the woman seen as a way of solving the family and clan problems caused by her impurities, in addition to the cleansing of her body. The *maka* notices the woman as she approaches to get cleansed and speaks something like the following:

Itta miishsha gochchada ne soo aasa bolla ehidare
 You are the one who has brought this unfortunate matter upon your family
Itta oosonne itta yoho gaththi gelada ne soo aasa kawushidare
 You are the one in an unpleasant situation, and you have brought humiliation to your family
Itta miishsha bochchada ne zerethi yeellasadare
 You are the one who has humiliated your clan by coming into contact with something impure
loo7o gidontta gakketethi gakketada ne soo aasa guuthidare
 You are the one who has gone through a troubled relationship and brought humiliation to your clan
ne qommo bonchcho guuthada mottonne waye ne qommo bolla yana mala ooge doйдare

nessi besont a aasara pee7ada, nenna misatonta aasara gakketeda , nenna misatonta aasara daabbotada ne bolla tunissadare

You are the one who has been in a relationship with someone you do not understand, you have been in a relationship with someone you are not alike, you have been in a relationship with someone you do not deserve, and hence you have defiled your body by associating with someone who is polluted

ne aasatethi kaadadda hanontta yoocho athi geellada ne bollannene ayana tunissidare

You are the one who has defiled your spirit and your body by entering a state of impure affiliation

nemayizi nema7ey oothontayissa, ne aawi ne aaya paaccontayissa , ne ishi ne miichcha keehippe ixizayssa gakketethi doomada ne zare sa7a xeellisidare

You are the one who started doing things that your grandparents did not do, things that your fathers and mothers did not try to do, things that your siblings did not do, and hence you have embarrassed your relatives

ne huphes tunada ne zarenne ne daabbo ayana sheemppo diigidar

You are the one who is in a risky situation and you have disturbed the spirit of your relatives

ne hanonta miishshe guuttanehadada issidae

You are the one who polluted the environment by bringing something that is not yours

ne munme gelidaysa

You are the one who entered the house of the 'deaf'

ne tuna gelidaysa

You are the one who ate an impure meal

There are four main ideas that need to be emphasised in relation to the above cleansing procedure. First, the command 'ne' or you (referring to 'she' or 'her') is filled with benedictions and concepts which are specifically directed at women. As a result, each of the stories mentioned above has to do with unfavourable connections and associations with female characters. Secondly, her family, clan and neighbourhood are all part of the background and framework, even though the woman is the main character in the purification ceremony. Anyone who has had to endure social pressure, suffering, harassment and fear as a result of the activities of the woman can find freedom in this system. Elders often point out that inappropriate relationships involving women are often the first

suspicion when problems arise and people are in distress.

Thirdly, the deceased relatives and acquaintances are tormented and distressed through

illicit relations. The statement, “You are the one who is tormenting the souls of your deceased relatives through your illicit and unworthy relations”, draws attention to the plight of the dead. This disturbance of the dead shows that, in addition to the sins and misdeeds they may have committed in life, they may also have been influenced by the terrible behaviour of their living relatives and clan members. In this way, individuals on earth do not just strive for their own personal well-being, but also for the protection of their deceased loved ones from any kind of disturbance in the afterlife. Fourthly, it is clear that the impure union or sexual activity of the *mala* woman with a *t'somma* man will have an effect on both her spirit and her body. This suggests that the consequences will go beyond her seclusion from society on earth; she will also experience punishment and judgement, which will cause the Creator to feel regret, as the effects of what she has done will continue to reverberate. In general the description of the signs and causes of her impurity is part of the rite. She, her family and other members of the clan have all experienced a great deal of distress and a sense of inadequacy during this process. The theme of this story is that she needs to take full responsibility for destroying and polluting the environment she is living in.

In the midst of the early symphony, when the birds announce the arrival of a new day and new hope, the *maka* awakens the woman. He appears to alleviate the woman's suffering from the misery and pollution of this season of the rebirth of nature by giving her some uplifting news. He tells her that her body has been purified and that she is now back to the way she used to be. He characterises her situation as one of affliction and curse, bringing misfortune to her family, clan and surroundings like a sporadic, contagious disease to all those who are in any way connected with her. He then blesses her, which means removing negative energy from her and those around her. This is an attempt to give her a fresh start and to purify the atmosphere around her. The latter steps of the purification and the

blessing are described by him as follows: *hayissi wuri ne bollappe haakko!*

Erase all the impurities that have adhered to your body
Ne bolla diiza itta ayanay aponinne duumman wullo!

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May the spiritual unrest and anxiety that have been upon you dissipate into the abyss and darkness

Ne gaason ne soo aasa bolla, ne qommo, ne daabboninne ne guuttan geelida ittay wuri dhayo!

May all the distressing things that have affected your family, lineage, clan, and the environment due to your actions be cleansed away.

Ne bolla uttidi ne aasatethi kuumethi qitidisiday neppe haakko!

May you distance yourself from the dreadful things that have polluted your body

Itta gaththan nenra daabbotay kuumethi neppe duuxxo!

May you distance yourself from the dreadful things that have polluted your body

Ne gaason yida itta miishshas kuumethas wuroy haachi giddo!

May all the dreadful things that have happened to you come to an end today

There are three main aspects to this benediction. First, there is recognition of the state of the woman's body, which has been the subject of impurity. Second, it encompasses the wider consequences for the many beings who are associated with her and who have been affected by what she has done. Thirdly, it signifies the end of this difficult period of time and the beginning of a new one. Focusing on the woman's body emphasises the torment caused by her defilement, while emphasising the value of remaining healthy and pure. The social and family implications of these relationships are highlighted in the context of illegitimate offspring. One of the aspects that is emphasised in the *Gesso* rite is the formation of a new identity. A new identity after a period of dirt and impurity is a blessing, an indication that the woman has been freed from her past sorrows, has a new body and is ready for a new positive purpose and existence.

In the following paragraphs, two case studies² of women who participated in the *Gesso* cleansing rites by the *makas* are examined in detail. These *mala* women had been separated from their families as a

² These cases were collected between 2018 and 2021, as part of a larger PhD project.

result of their association with *t'somma* men. By exploring the complex social, cultural and personal factors at play in each case study, a deeper understanding of the importance of the *Gesso* ritual in resolving issues of purity, family honour and social stratification within the Gamo is provided. The intricate workings and significant effects of the *Gesso* ritual are revealed through these in-depth analyses; highlighting the vital role it plays in the community's attempts to heal rifts between family members and to restore harmony.

Case 1: A case of Beletech Woyro

Beletech was born and raised on Balta. She had a secret boyfriend who had come to Balta to work, but who was originally from Bonke. After three years of dating, she became pregnant and they hid in Bonke. Fearing that their relationship and pregnancy would be discovered by her family, she and her partner immediately disappeared to Bonke. They wanted to keep their relationship a secret, believing that any premarital sex would damage the family's reputation. But when she arrived in Bonke, she also found out that her boyfriend's family were potters. She was shocked to learn this, but was prepared to deal with the consequences as she was pregnant and had nowhere to turn to support her. It was in the midst of this unstable scenario that she gave birth to a baby boy. She and her boyfriend didn't send any elders to her family to discuss the matter, because they were from different social strata. Moreover, the elders' interpretation of Beletech's departure from Balta was a conspiratorial abduction, which is common among the Gamo. The abduction of a girl is a common occurrence in the Gamo region, and this type of abduction can also be referred to as a consensual abduction.

Such consensual abductions have been resolved and formalised through the intervention of elders and discussions with the family of the allegedly abducted daughter. However, if there is a relationship between *mala* and *t'somma* members, the elders will only visit the girl's home (*mala* family) if they are convinced that she will end her relationship with the *t'somma*, willingly undergo the *Gesso* purification ceremony, and agree to leave her child with the *t'somma's* family if she has one. Beletech fell into a deep depression as a result of the separation from her family and the damage to their reputation caused by her actions. With pressures and challenges coming from different directions, she and her boyfriend struggled to cope. Living away from her relatives and clan, and the birth of a child with a *t'somma* exacerbated the situation, leaving her feeling even more isolated and stressed. Realising that she could not continue to live like this,

she turned to her family and asked them to forgive her. However, the response from her family was one of anger and rejection. She asked the elders to help and agreed to go through the *Gesso* cleansing ceremony, end her relationship and leave her child with her boyfriend's *t'somma* family. The elders agreed with her decision and promised to consider mediation once the *Gesso* ritual had been completed.

Beletech left her child and went to *maka* to undergo the purification ritual. The elders visited her family and apologised on her behalf, saying that she had realised her mistakes, repented for what she had done. There was a sense of sadness among the members of her family, especially among her father, Woyro. They told the elders that they needed time to talk to other relatives and clan members before deciding how to respond. For three weeks, Beletech was separated from her family and went to stay with a friend of hers. She knew she would be considered defiled again if she returned to her former boyfriend's home. However, the situation she was in made it difficult for her to find a host among her relatives or within her clan. People who were willing to host her were deterred by the separation of her family and the on-going mediation process. Through a series of three mediation sessions, the elders were finally able to come to a consensus with her family. As a result, Beletech was finally able to be welcomed back into her home. Woyro Kama, Beletech's father, narrated the situation in the following way:

When I learned that my daughter had initiated a relationship with someone from such a different family background and status, I was stunned and disheartened. The situation became even more distressing when I discovered that she had given birth. It was as though a part of me had died, and I was overwhelmed with sorrow. My heart shattered, and I felt a deep sense of humiliation and degradation. While many children are lauded and blessed for taking care of their parents, my daughter brought public shame upon me, tarnishing the honour of the place where I was born and held in esteem.

Woyro's depiction of his daughter's life as returning to a state of normal and healthy identity has many implications.

What is more, this situation means that Beletech's predicament is not an isolated one, but one that extends to her entire family and clan. The fact that she has given birth in the context of such a polluted relationship shows that the effects of this situation have not only affected her, but also those who are connected to her through kinship. The susceptibility of

about the restoration of the individual to their original state of health; it is also a means of alleviating the fears and problems of their family and clan members, and ultimately restoring their collective strength and unity. On the other hand, it is forbidden for a woman who has been purified to have any kind of contact with her child under any circumstances.

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family and clan members to contamination increases significantly as such relationships intensify and new challenges arise, especially when children are involved. This makes cleansing increasingly complicated.

The person who performed Beletech's Gesso rite, Bakole Sinsay, explained the circumstances as follows:

A child born from the t'somma members cannot join the mala in under any circumstances. If a mother wants to purify herself and return to her former self and reunite with her relatives, she must leave her child to the child's father t'somma parents and consider the child dead. If she does not believe this and there is any doubt in her mind, then I will not perform the purification ritual. So, my main task and focus is to cleanse those who are discarded by the society and who have been ostracized and disgraced their family and clan members because of their evil deeds, and to reintegrate them into society and regain the dignity of their pure identity. When I do the Gesso ritual, my mind gets into the gist of Gamo: Ase asaso mala iza upaissiza miišši baa! (There is nothing that pleases man as much as sorting somebody out of trouble!)

The core essence of *ase asaso mala iza upaissiza miišši baa!* encompasses a broader perspective of virtuous actions, including the restoration of individuals to their previous state of well-being and the opportunity to purify their impurities. It is not just

Case 2: The case of Sinknesh Tufa

Sinknesh grew up in Arba Minch. She started working at Martha-Garda after graduating from the University of Bahir Dar with a bachelor's degree in agricultural science. She has faithfully carried out her leadership and professional duties. She is well known and respected by the farmers and agro-pastoralists in the area as a dedicated public servant. Her esteemed reputation has been shaped by her command of the local language, awareness of local situation and ability to deal with the difficulties of serious livestock diseases. It was during this time that she fell in love with Amza, who was a teacher at a primary school. Amza had recently moved to Marha-Garda from Dorze area. As the bond between them grew stronger, the community began to talk about it. Friends and neighbours began to ask detailed questions about Amza and his past. Sinknesh was asked a lot of questions, including "Who is he? Does his family have any knowledge of the relationship? Did his family have a good background? Does he have any descendants of slaves in his family?" It is a fundamental cultural ritual where parents and clan members question potential partners about their family heritage and status. In cafes and bars, open conversations often take place about people's romantic relationships. A lot of information is exchanged about who is in a relationship with whom and what the status of the relationship has been. People like Sinknesh are magnets for attention and interest, having forged close professional and social ties with members of the community.

When her family became aware of Sinknesh's connection to Amza, her father, Tufa, became interested in finding out more about Amza's background. Tufa contacted members of the family in Arba Minch to ask for their help. Investigation

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revealed that Amza's parents were business owners and residents of the town of Chench. However, it was discovered that Amza's grandparents had been blacksmiths, which caused a great deal of distress to the Sinknesh family and Tufa in particular. Tufa was furious and decided to take matters into his own hands after the discovery of Amza's ancestry. He travelled to Martha-Garda with the intention of harming Amza, armed himself and spent a number of days looking for him. When the local police were alerted to the situation, they took action and arrested Tufa, averting bloodshed. Amza left the village in astonishment and confusion when he learned of Tufa's actions. Sinknesh, also deeply affected by the events, went to a friend's house in Arba Minch. After it was established that Sinknesh and Amza had left the town, Tufa was released from police custody. Tufa's sense of fear and anger did not diminish after he was released. He told his family that he was determined to kill Amza, in the belief that it was the only way he could restore the integrity of their clan and family ties. Following this, Amza and Sinknesh stopped seeing each other. Given the difficulties and risks involved, many felt that Amza would not risk continuing to date Sinknesh. Many of the *mala* with whom I had interviews mentioned the sense of vulnerability and the importance of keeping their social strata pure. This is mainly related to the notion of genealogical stigma and notional occupation as it illustrates how people can experience prejudice and vulnerability because of their family history. The fear stemmed from the fact that Amza's deceased ancestors had been blacksmiths, even though neither he nor his parents had ever worked as blacksmiths.

To find out more about the circumstances and get a better understanding of the scenario, I spoke to Tufa. He made it clear that the incident had disgusted the entire *mala* community and brought shame on his family. He acknowledged that Amza's execution would serve as a warning to others and a means of upholding the family's honour and integrity. In addition, the fact that the members of the clan are seen as brothers and sisters became clear in many ways. An attack on one member is seen as an attack on the group, and the clan's response goes beyond the resolution of personal grievances to include them as a group problem. This feeling is particularly strong in the case of serious crimes such as rape, murder, arson and burglary. Traditionally, the victim's clan retaliates by focusing on the perpetrator's immediate relatives or other clan members when a member of one clan

commits such a crime against another. However, members of the *mala* clan will refrain from harming other members of the clan if the victims are *t'somma*. This is an indication that common social strata are more important than clan ties. In this situation, a *t'somma* from the same clan will not be as respected as a *mala* from a different clan; the latter is more likely to be perceived as a brother or a relative. As a result, although the attempted murder of Tufa was a serious incident, my research showed that it remained a family-specific issue and did not develop into a larger clan-based revenge.

Social stratification thus undermines sibling relationships between members of the clans, and everything is determined by specific boundaries that are drawn along the lines of the *mala* and the *t'somma*. The two groups are currently operating under a restrictive set of norms and rules that contribute to the dynamics and divisions that result from these perspectives. The people I spoke to told me poetic stories that perfectly captured the differences between the *mala* and the *t'somma* when I asked them about the differences between the two. Here are some of these narratives:

Barizafe toketin barizafey doles

Planting Eucalyptus globulus seeds will result in the growth of Eucalyptus globulus trees
Moqoththe toketin moqoththe doles

If Cordia Abyssinica seed is planted, Cordia Abyssinica tree will grow

Deyshiya dorse yelabeyku

The goat never gave birth to a sheep

Miziya para yelabeyku

The cow never gave birth to a horse

The interlocutors tried to explain the matter with eloquence, basing their peculiarities on the nature of plants and animals. This is used to illustrate the relationship between seeds and trees, and the birth of goats and sheep, both of which are as natural as the connection between *mala* and *t'somma*.

As well as the disruption and severance of Sinknesh and Amza's bond, the situation has also been a threat to both parties, leaving them in a delicate position. Sinknesh took refuge in her friend's house for three months, and was finally reunited with her family after she had undergone the ritual of purification. In the midst of these events, Sinknesh, now estranged from her family and clan, underwent a cleansing ritual ordered by the elders. However, she chose to take a low-paying job in Kamba when faced with the

challenge of returning to Martha-Garda to rebuild her reputation. Sinknesh's story and purification ritual is a cautionary tale repeated throughout the community, warning young girls of the consequences of defying social norms and breaking rules. Her story embodies the concept of apostasy, of defiance of the Creator's will, which results in her punishment of isolation from her family, clan and community. This period of loneliness functions as a form of atonement. However, there is also a sense of mercy and redemption in the culture of the Gamo. Sinknesh's body is rejuvenated and she is restored to her former self through the purification ritual. It is a powerful message that even when faced with wrongdoing, there is an opportunity for remorse and renewal. The case acts as a teaching tool for children, advising them to steer clear of such transgressions against the values of the Gamo society. It shows that such acts are not only disgusting. They are also punishable. It also highlights the Gamo tradition of forgiveness and the need for repentance. Eventually, the *mala* accept Sinknesh and treat her with the same respect as before because of her sincere willingness to purify herself and her heartfelt apology.

CONCLUSION

The purification rituals of the Gamo embody several important sociocultural elements, such as safeguarding existing stratification, cautioning against perceived transgressions, evoking a sense of repentance among transgressors, securing pathways to forgiveness, redemption and reintegration, and imposing voluntary and involuntary permanent separation from previous relationships and ties disapproved by society. Reflecting the growing concern and seriousness of their offences, which have far-reaching consequences for society, the ceremonies place a strong emphasis on women's issues. The paradoxical role of the *maka*, defined by his risky but vital duty, contrasted with the community's rejection and disgust, highlights the severe and far-reaching stratification of Gamo society. This research examined the precarious situation of women and the *maka* comprehensively, linking gender and occupational stratification. In addition, the research reveals the multi-layered stratification that is evident in the violations of norms and regulations perpetrated by members of the community. The amount of purification procedures that are recommended is determined by the severity of the transgression, thus revealing subtle levels of wrongdoing and atonement. This stratification extends to socio-economic considerations, which clearly have an impact on how breaches of social norms are viewed and corrected. The broad stratification includes not only individuals, but families, clans, religious activities and even the environment, including land and animals. This

comprehensive approach emphasises the far-reaching effects of social hierarchies, which are intertwined with many facets of Gamo society. Within the larger framework of the *maka*'s function and circumstances, this paper highlights the presence of paradoxes. One such contradiction is the sharp contrast between the *maka*'s lack of respect and importance and the critical importance of their cleansing ceremony.

Adopting a variety of interpretive frameworks, such as gender and occupational stratification, socio-economic impact, and the relationship between voluntary commitment and communal coercion, the interpretation and analysis of this paper goes beyond basic description. It examines the ways in which the *Gesso* purification ritual prioritises the situation of women, highlighting the seriousness of their violations of community norms, the severe consequences they face, and the gendered nature of social control and purification practices. It also examines the paradoxical role of the *maka* who perform the purification rituals, showing how they are necessary but often disrespected and marginalised. This highlights the deep occupational stratification of Gamo society, in which essential but dangerous tasks are assigned to a specific group that is treated with contempt rather than honour. The paper also examines how socio-economic status influences the perception and correction of transgressions. It shows that the extent of purification rituals prescribed varies with the severity of the transgression, revealing nuanced hierarchies of transgression and atonement influenced by socio-economic factors, and demonstrating how transgressions of social norms are inextricably linked to economic realities.

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