

Kevin Wamalwa

Doctoral Candidate

Anthropology and African Cultural Studies

## **IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award 2019 Research Report**

### **Embodied Memories: Rethinking Victimhood and Villainy in the Aftermath of the Sabaot Land Defense Forces' Violence in Mt. Elgon, Kenya**

I am immensely grateful to the Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for funding my dissertation research. With the IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award, I was able to start my yearlong fieldwork in the Mt. Elgon region of Kenya in August 2019. By the time of this report, I had completed two and a half months of my twelve-month fieldwork experience. Therefore, I highlight what I did in that short period in the field, but first, a brief description of my project.

In this research, I examine the various ways in which residents of the Mt. Elgon region of Kenya convey the memories of ethnic-land-related violence that occurred between 2005 and 2007. The conflict involved an insurgent group that called itself the Sabaot Land Defense Forces (SLDF). The group agitated for the land right for a section of Sabaot groups (known as the Soy) who live on the lower side of Mt. Elgon. The “Phase III” land of the Chepyuk Resettlement program by the Kenyan Government in Chepyuk sublocation in Mt. Elgon sparked the violence in which over a thousand people died and more than fifty thousand displaced. Thousands of others still live with scars of the violence in their bodies. Through ethnographic study, I interrogate how the memories of these horrendous experiences variously affect the social relations of the day today and how people in Mt. Elgon view their future. I pay attention to semiotic and material manifestations of memory—as represented in tangible objects, spaces, names, bodies, and the conversations of the day today. I also seek to understand how cultural perceptions and conceptions of victimhood and villainy have shaped and constructed ways in which communities in the area interact and relate to each other. I highlight the social and linguacultural situatedness of the labels assigned to individuals and groups that were involved in the conflict.

The IRIS Award facilitated my stay at Kopsiro in Mt. Elgon, enabling me to interact with the residents through informal conversations, structured interviews, and participate in their day-to-day. These conversations revealed nuances of the conflict that are missing in many media and official records of governmental and nongovernmental organizations. For instance, while the SLDF's members were from the Soy group (which constitutes the Bok, Kony, and Bongomek clans) who directed their assault against the Ndorobo, both sides of the ethnic divide suffered casualties in varying degrees. My conversation with individuals that experienced the horror of the conflict, including two known former members of the SLDF, revealed that "victimhood" is a fluid concept in Mt. Elgon. Many individuals and families among the Soy also received the brunt of the conflict especially in the heat of the violence of 2007 and 2008 when the SLDF intensified its activities and when the military intervened. Besides many Ndorobo victims, those among the Sabaot of the Soy bloc fall into two categories.

First, many young men were forcefully recruited into the SLDF group and trained to Kill. A good example is my interview with a young man (whom I would call Daniel) who joined the group against his will. He was abducted from school by his uncle, a former Israeli trained army officer, who threatened to kill him if he does not agree to train. At the tender age of just 16, Daniel had no choice but to join SLDF. Many residents in Mt. Elgon claim that some form of magic was used in controlling the minds of new recruits (I will need more data on this). Daniel sought the help of the Church and clan elders who performed a ritual to break the spell. I was able to see the scars he received his back from lashes and thorns during training. Although he did not kill anyone or arrested by the police, Daniel categorically claimed to be a victim of the violence because he was forced to join, and the memories of that experience still haunt him. Other young people were pressured by their families to join SLDF for security.

Secondly, my interlocutors attested that the military rounded up, beat, and even killed people indiscriminately regardless of whether they were part of the militia. One Sabaot young man, Cheruiyot\* stated, "we feared the military, and we feared the SLDF. All my cousins who were teenagers then were recruited into SLDF, but because we were still too young, the militia did not take us." Instead, the militia took all the cattle and forced Cheruiyot's family out of their home and pulled down their houses. Later the military arrested and beat his father, leaving him with an injury that crippled one of his legs.

My research also focuses on aspects of naming and the names of both the groups that carried out the atrocities and children born during the time of the conflict. Various names have emerged in reference to the insurgent group besides the "SLDF" label, including *Janjaweed* and *Guerillas of Darfur*, among others. While it appears that some of these names might have referred to factions within SLDF, some residents claim that the labels described the insurgent group before it solidified into SLDF. It will become apparent to me as the study goes on, and after talking to more people, including area leaders and individuals in the community who actively took part in the reconciliation process and provision of humanitarian aid.

I should also note that I arrived in the field during the heavy rain season, which makes the roads impassable. However, I plan to make the trip to Chepkitale, which is located high up in the mountain beyond Mt. Elgon forest where the majority Ndorobo people live. Recent demonstrations by the Ndorobo agitating against the government's plan to evict them from the forest necessitates the need to visit the area sooner than later for two reasons. First, the emerging tension has the potential to evoke memories of the SLDF conflict, and people would discuss these issues more. To a researcher on memory, such spontaneous discussions and references to the previous conflicts that emerge in such contexts would provide useful data on semiolinguistic aspects of remembering. Secondly, the tension would continue to rise and make it hard to research in the area safely as time goes by, thus the need to visit the area promptly despite the difficulties of traveling during the rainy season.

In the remaining months of my research, I plan to do more structured interviews both with the perceived victims and with perpetrators of the violence. I have scheduled interviews with five more reformed combatants, who have also promised to connect me to their former comrades and their victims. I have also been working with my key informants to meet with the Sabaot *Loibons*, who are the spiritual leaders, counselors, and custodians of cultural knowledge in the community. Many interlocutors cited the central role that the *Loibons* played and the power they yielded in controlling the conflict. I will also move to Cheptais, 30 miles from Kopsiro, and stay there for one month since many atrocities were committed there too. The cost and road conditions do not allow daily commute from my primary site at Kopsiro.

Lastly, I should note that the IRIS Award also helped to cover part of other essential expenses. I was also able to acquire the equipment that I needed for my fieldwork. The fund also covered part of my

travel expenses within Nairobi and Mt. Elgon in western Kenya besides meals. During my stay in Nairobi, I was able to do an archival study on the conflicts in Mt. Elgon and the sociocultural aspects of communities living in the region. I have gotten a better picture of the political and cultural dynamics that have contributed to land conflicts in the area for the past several years. I am thankful for the much that the IRIS Graduate Student Summer Fieldwork Award has enabled me to accomplish. I am excited at the prospects of successful research and the contribution it will make to the scholarship of memory and violence. Thank you so much.