

Collective Memory, Inter-ethnic interactions: the Politics of Becoming and Being ‘Sabaot’ in Kenya

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Abstract

This study sheds light on the role of collective memory in underpinning ‘Sabaot’ politics of identity in three recent time periods. Although much of the groundwork was laid in the years 1500-1943, my focus is mainly on three distinct periods in post-war history. The first is the period 1944-1963, when the elite politics became invested in the formation of what has been called Sabaot identity. The second period is 1964 to March 2008, which has been termed the period of ‘the politics of being Sabaot’, when Sabaot identity came to be contested. The third period is April 2008 to 2018, when there was a sense of crisis around ‘Sabaot’ ethnicity. Each of these three periods is examined from a constructivist perspective, in order to acquire better understanding of who the Sabaot are. Other questions addressed include: why has the Sabaot community had violent conflicts with its neighbours? Why has the community become embroiled in bloody intra-ethnic violence in recent years? As a text on collective memory around Sabaot history, the study goes back as far as 1500, drawing on oral narratives of elderly, and other knowledgeable Sabaot on matters biographies, in order to reconstruct the pre-colonial period. Archival texts and secondary sources are also used in order to inform this reconstruction process, in what is one of the first scholarly studies on identity politics among the Sabaot. In much grounded constructivist research, the main reference is to cross-sectional data, and studies are often confined to one set period - one temporality. This study breaks with such restrictions by viewing the context in a broader, trans-temporal sense. Using biographical data collection methods, a substantive theory has been constructed in this study, which centres on ethnic elite resistance for socio-economic and political space. This theory had two important analytical elements: firstly, the feeling that one’s identity group was ‘victimised’, and secondly, resistance towards the use of ethnonyms and underlying collective representation. From the findings, it appears that, in liminal conditions, negotiation of ethnonyms involves performative acts of resistance to imposed ethnic identity labels. These acts of resistance have produced both unity and fracturing of identities among and within Sabaot communities.