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Traditional Beliefs about Trauma and Trauma Intervention Methods among Sabaot People of Mount Elgon Region, Kenya

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Abstract:

Atrocities committed during violent armed conflicts leave both victims and perpetrators of violence with traumatic experiences which affects their daily lives and routine. To resume normal lives, the victims of trauma need to be supported in their healing process through various trauma intervention methods. The lives of the Sabaot people of Mt. Elgon region in Western Kenya were shattered by violent conflicts that took place from between 2006-2008 and are in need of trauma healing. However, for effective trauma healing especially among indigenous people whose life style is guided by their cultures and traditions, such intervention has to conform to their traditional beliefs and customs. This is important because, the way people embody and give meaning to their conditions of health and sickness, such as trauma, is significantly influenced by their particular cultural context. The cultural context definitely affects how people identify and deal with matters of sickness including trauma. This paper analyses how Sabaot people's traditional beliefs about trauma, its cause and symptoms influences their choice of trauma intervention and healing methods. Methodologically, the study utilized secondary sources with major emphasis on primary data collection.

Keywords: Trauma, traditional beliefs, influence, intervention methods, healing, violence

1. Introduction

For the past three decades, most regions in Kenya have experienced armed conflicts which traumatized the respective communities. The root causes of these conflicts include land, poverty, identity, politics, and marginalization (Waki Report, 2008). Mt Elgon is one such region that has suffered armed conflicts since multi-party politics was re-introduced in Kenya in 1991 (Assefa and Wachira, 1996). The recent armed conflict in Mt Elgon was between the Soy and the Ndorobo clans of the Sabaot communities from 2006 to 2008 because of the land allocation dispute in the Chepyuk settlement scheme, (Muluka et al, 2008).

From this conflict, a militia group known as Sabaot Land Defense Force (SLDF) emerged in 2006 to fight for land rights of the community that felt aggrieved by the perceived impartial allocation. According to the Human Rights Watch Report (2008) and International Rescue Committee's Report (2008), approximately 600 people were killed and about 45,000 displaced by the SLDF. Several people were maimed, while others were physically tortured and in other cases women were raped. The militia also burnt houses and vandalized some schools, (Muluka *et al*, 2008). In response to the activities of the SLDF, in March 2008, the Kenyan Army initiated an operation dubbed "Operation Okoa Maisha" (Operation Save Lives), to counter the violent activities of the SLDF.

The impact of the violent conflicts by the militia activities and the military operation on Mt. Elgon region and the communities living there was huge leading to immense needs. The needs range from social, relational, economic, physical, and environmental. Social needs are related to issues of lost identity, defilement of cultural norms and traditions, strained relationships among warring communities, negative attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. Such needs resulted from the manner in which the youths violently attacked their own ethnic community members and neighboring communities (Kenya Red Cross Report, 2007). More importantly and often not visible hence neglected at the end of many violent conflicts, are the psychological trauma needs caused by traumatic events. According to Weston, (2001:5):

Traumatic reactions occur when an action is of no avail. When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized.

The Sabaot people living in Mt. Elgon Region are, therefore, in need of intervention to heal from the wounds of trauma caused by the violent armed conflicts. Trauma intervention will assist them gain control of their lives shuttered by the experiences of violent conflicts. However, for transformative trauma intervention among indigenous communities such as the Sabaot people in this study, the approaches employed have to conform to their culture and traditional beliefs and practices. This is important because having worked with traumatized children in Mozambique, Gibbs (1997) noted that:

How people embody and give meaning to their distress is significantly influenced by their particular cultural context, which indeed also affects how they identify and deal with it.

This paper analyses how the Sabaot people's traditional beliefs about trauma, its causes symptoms and meaning attached to symptoms of trauma influences their choice of trauma intervention and healing methods. This is important because the strategies employed by the trauma interveners should be responsive to people's culture and life style.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research design used in this research was a case study that was conducted within the study period of 2011-2013. The study is concerned with finding out how traditional beliefs affects the choice of Trauma intervention and healing methods among the indigenous communities in Kenya with a specific case of the Sabaot people of Mt. Elgon Region, Kenya. According to Kombo and Tromp (2005), such issues are best investigated through a case study design. The design enabled the researchers to carry out an in-depth analysis and discussion of the understanding of trauma, its causes, symptoms and meaning attached to symptoms among indigenous people and their preferred methods of intervention and healing.

2.2. The Area of Study

This study focuses on Mt. Elgon region of Western Kenya. The region borders the Republic of Uganda to the North and West, Trans Nzoia district to the East with a population of approximately 135,033 people. The Region occupies an area of 936.75 Square Km with Mt. Elgon Forest covering 609.6 Square Km, constituting 69% of the district. The region has one sub county with six wards- Kaptama, Cheptais, Kopsiro, Kapkateny, Chepyuk and Chesikaki (Ministry of Finance and Planning, 2002). Kopsiro and parts of Cheptais wards were the epicenter of the 2006-2008 land clashes.

The region predominantly comprises the Sabaot community, although there is also a significant population of the Bukusu, Teso, and Kikuyu ethnic groups. The Sabaots, who are the focus of this study, are very traditional and cultural people. They have maintained their traditional lifestyle such as the rites of passage, dressing, religion, transport, and food among others. Agriculture is the main economic activity with about eighty percent (80%) of the population being engaged in some form of agriculture. The region has very poor infrastructure with people relying on donkeys as the main means of transport.

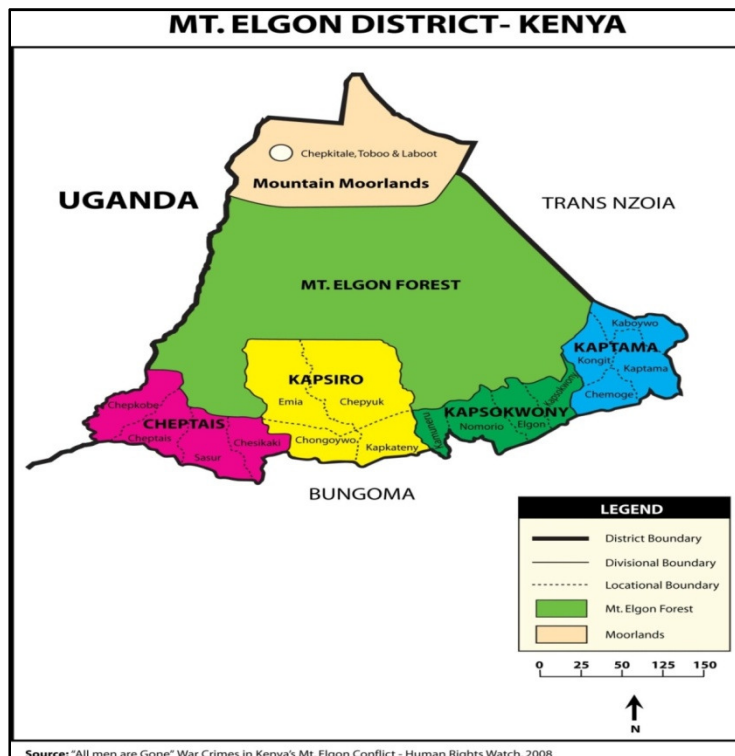


Figure 1

2.3. Target Population of the Study

In this research, the target population was 3,368. The study specifically targeted the following population that was greatly affected by the armed conflict and most likely suffered from trauma. They included 1,800 former Sabaot Land Defence Force (SLDF), 850 Widows, and 600 Ex-convicts. Apart from the direct victims of armed conflict, the research also sought information from relevant categories of people who are knowledgeable on the subject matter. In this category, general Opinion Leaders and other special groups, Local Administrators 63, NGOs 55, Elders and Traditional Healers were targeted.

2.4. Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

This research drew a sample following the recommendation of Kombo and Tromp (2006) of 10% to 30% to be a representative for a study population. Kalin (2006) recommended a 20% to 30% as ideal to represent a target population under study. This study employed various sampling techniques accordingly as follows:

2.4.1. Former SLDF Members

There is an estimated number of 1,800 former Sabaot Land Defence Force (SLDF) members (Records of Operation Okoa Maisha, 2009). These include the former SLDF members who were recruited into the militia forcefully. SLDF was an illegal militia group whose members dispersed after most of their leaders were hunted down and killed by the military operation commonly known as 'Operation Okoa Maisha'. Other militia members went into hiding while others surrendered to the military officers. Most of them are considered as social misfits and rejected by their community members because of the atrocities they meted on the people. It was, therefore, not easy for SLDF members to readily come forward and participate in the study publicly. From the estimate indicated above, the researchers used snowballing technique to reach 137 former SLDF members. This method afforded the researchers an opportunity to reach the SLDF members through the network of one member linking them up with another for the interviews. It would otherwise have been difficult for the researchers to trace them on their own without the aid of their acquaintances within the community.

2.4.2. Widows

A list from Kapsokwony district offices that was used to provide relief food to widows in Mt. Elgon region during the conflict shows an approximate number of 850 widows, (Records Ministry of Gender, Culture and Social Services, 2011). In this category, the researchers used random sampling to arrive at 114 widows. The simple random technique was used for this category to select a random (representative) sample, thus ensuring that each widow had an equal and independent chance of being included in the sample.

2.4.3. Ex-Convicts

Based on the information provided by the Officer Commanding the Police Division (OCPD), the then Mt. Elgon District, there were about 600 ex-convicts in the Mt. Elgon region (Records of Operation Okoa Maisha, 2009). This category of respondents was sampled using the snowballing technique due to the stigma associated with ex-convicts in the community. Once one of them was traced by the research team, he could be used to link up with another one using their own network. A total of 83 ex-convicts were used for this study.

2.4.4. Opinion Leaders

The researcher used purposive sampling technique for this category of participants because this technique targets a group of people believed to hold the crucial information for the study (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). The people selected in this category included teachers, farmers, retired civil servants, religious leaders and women leaders. This is because it allowed for deliberate selection of the participants being perceived by the researcher to have crucial information on the subject matter. In this study, the researchers used their common sense and judgement in choosing the right number of the correct people for the purpose of providing the required information. A total of 133 respondents from the general population were selected for this category of respondents.

2.4.5. Government of Kenya (GOK) Officials

Out of the 63 local administrators are 41 Sub-chiefs, 16 Chiefs, four District Officers and two District Commissioners, (Records of the District Commissioner's Office, 2011). The study employed various sampling techniques to get respondents in this category. Census procedure was used on District Commissioners and District Officers while purposive and simple random samplings were used on Chiefs and Sub-Chiefs. Since the District Commissioners were two and District Officers four in the entire Mt. Elgon region, census procedure was the most appropriate technique as the number and location of respondents are clearly known and, therefore, easy to identify and access. With Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs, the researcher used simple random sampling technique because the method selects a sample without bias from the target population. This method was preferred here as it ensures that each member of the target population has an equal and independent chance of being included in the sample (Oso & Onen, 2009). A total of 28 local administrators were used.

2.4.6. Elders

Since the researcher sought out people with the right information on the subject matter of the study, purposive sampling technique was used to get respondents in this category. Community elders were identified as community members above fifty five (55) years old, and who command respect among community members. Purposive sampling saves time and money as it collects focused information from a cluster of respondents based on their typicality (Oso & Onen, 2009). A total of 81 elders were used.

2.4.7. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) Workers

NGOs workers were largely civil society organizations, social workers, faith-based organizations (FBOs) staff, medical personnel, relief agents and human rights defenders. A majority of the humanitarian workers interviewed were drawn from the KRC, MSF and the local human rights and social welfare organizations. The researcher used purposive sampling technique on this category because this technique selects typical and useful cases only. A total of 22 humanitarian workers were used.

2.4.8. Traditional Healers

Traditional healers mainly comprised of laibons and other intermediaries who mediate between the community and the living dead. Snowballing and purposive sampling techniques were used to get respondents in this category because the researcher relied on social networks of the target respondents based on the fact that friends tend to know how to link up with one another and friends tend to possess similar characteristics. One respondent could be used to locate other individuals in the same group who may be difficult for the researchers to trace. A total of 2 traditional healers were used.

2.5. Data Collection

In this study, triangulation method which is the use of different methods to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic was more appropriate. Data for the study were collected using questionnaires, focused group discussions (FGDs), observation and in-depth interviews with key informants. Secondary data was collected through document and content analysis guide to establish an in-depth analysis on conceptualization of trauma and trauma healing among Sabaot people. The combination of data collection tools was selected to enable researchers have an in-depth understanding of the nature and extent of the problem. Quantitative data collected in the field were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data from FGDs and in-depth interviews were analysed using qualitative methods.

2.6. Validity and Reliability of Data Instruments

In this research, a pilot study was conducted prior to going to the field. Participants from different communities in Mt. Elgon, who were not part of this study, were used in the pre-test. The outcome of the pre-test helped the researchers revise the tools accordingly hence discarding some of the questions that were ambiguous or had less meaning and relation to the study. To determine the validity, the instruments for this study were given to the research supervisors for review and advice. This was essential as it enabled the researchers to check on the face and content validity of the instruments for optimal data collection.

3. Results and Discussion

Data collected was gleaned, coded and analysed using *Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS)* version 11.5 and Microsoft Excel statistical packages and the results were as follows:-

3.1. How Trauma is Defined by the Sabaot People

Asked to define the word trauma according to their understanding, the word trauma translates to *musmusheet* or *muyeetel* in the Sabaot language meaning having great fear towards something. It is also a state of being in a shock and a helpless state that one is unable to do anything about. It is a state of being in dilemma and being unable to go forward or backward. *Kosoteywek* is another term in Sabaot that is an equivalent of the term trauma, which translates into *mawazo mazito* in Kiswahili language meaning stressful thoughts. It is the pain caused in the mind, due to a problem that affects one's thinking or mental functioning.

3.2. Causes of Trauma

From the interviews and FGD responses, the study generally summarized the causes of trauma into four broad categories. Causes of trauma were associated with the peoples' beliefs, violent conflict, family/community life and other causes as shown in Table 1.

Traditional Beliefs	Violent Conflicts	Family/ Community	Other Causes
Witchcraft	Witnessing murder	Divorce	Land
Annoying the living	Sexual violence (rape)	Separation/divorce	Poverty
dead/spirits	Torture	Death of loved ones	Drought
Curses	Castration	Impotence	Hunger
Misfortunes	Displacement	Domestic violence	Accidents
Shedding of blood	Disappearances	Rejection/ disowned	Chronic diseases
Killing a person	Imprisonment	Born out of wedlock	(HIV/AIDs)
Having committed a crime	Forceful recruitment into SLDF		
Provoking spirits	Loss of property/livestock		
	Revenge		

Table 1: Categories of the Causes of Trauma in General

Source: (Field Data, December, 201)

The findings indicate that traditionally, the Sabaot people believe that trauma is caused by witchcraft, annoying the living dead, provoking spirits, curses, misfortunes, shedding of innocent blood or killing a person. In the second category of the causes of trauma are atrocities committed during violent conflicts. The third category of the causes of trauma is related to social life affecting family members and the community as a whole while last category concerns people's livelihood and health status.

3.3. Symptoms of Trauma

An inquiry on the symptoms of trauma was done. The respondents were asked what signs people looked for to know that a person was traumatized. The first four (4) highly ranked symptoms included the following as shown in the two figures (1 and 2) below:

3.3.1. Experiences of Nightmare

The highest ranked symptom is the experience of nightmares or bad dreams at night which was ranked first among six out of the eight categories with the following percentages: Ex-convicts 38%, Both (those who were SLDF as well as ex-convicts) 23%, None(those who were neither SLDF nor ex-convicts) 23%, NGOs 38%, Widows 23% and Elders 25%. The remaining two categories, Former SLDF and GOK (Government of Kenya officials such as local administrators)ranked experiences of Nightmares second with each of them indicating it 26%.

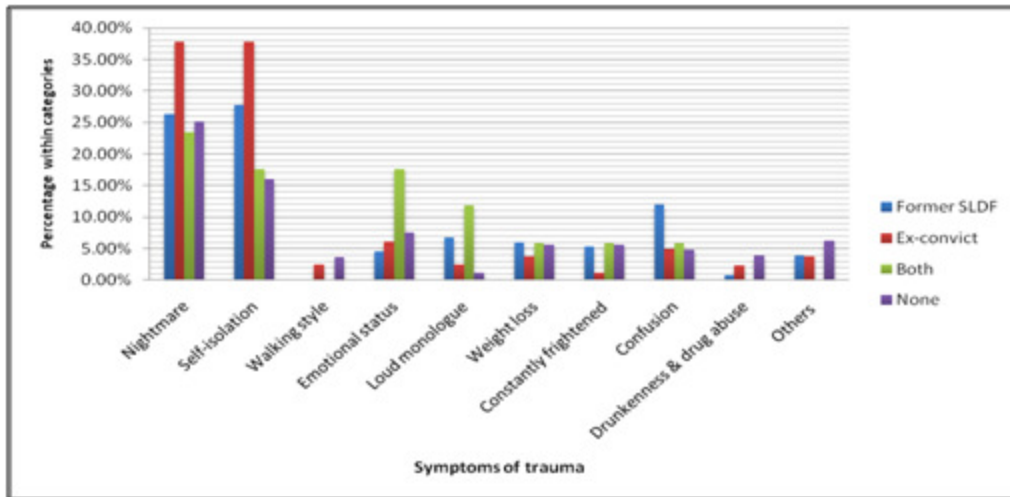


Figure 1: Symptoms of Trauma
Source: (Field Data, December 2011)

3.3.2. Self-Isolation

According to the study, when a person preferred to stay in isolation and did not relate well with others then that person was definitely suffering from trauma. Self-isolation was ranked first among Former SLDF 28%, and GOK 28%. It was placed second by Ex-convicts 23%, None 16%, NGOs 23%, and Elders 16%. Widows and Both ranked self-isolation third with each indicating 17%.

3.3.3. Confusion

Another sign that the Sabaoth people look for is when a person shows confusion that results in doing things haphazardly, it is a sign of trauma. It was ranked third by Formers SLDF 6%, NGOs 10%, and Elders 9%. Ex-convicts and Widows ranked it fourth with 10% and 6% respectively. GOK ranked fifth with 6% and None seventh with 4%.

3.3.4. Emotional status

Emotional instability or unpredictability was observed keenly for some time and could imply trauma, if prolonged, according to this study. It was ranked second among Widows and Both each giving it 18%, third among Ex-convicts (6%) and None (8%) while NGOs ranked it fourth with 6%. However, emotional status was lowly ranked by GOK eighth with 4%, sixth by Former SLDF and Elders receiving 5% and 7% respectively.

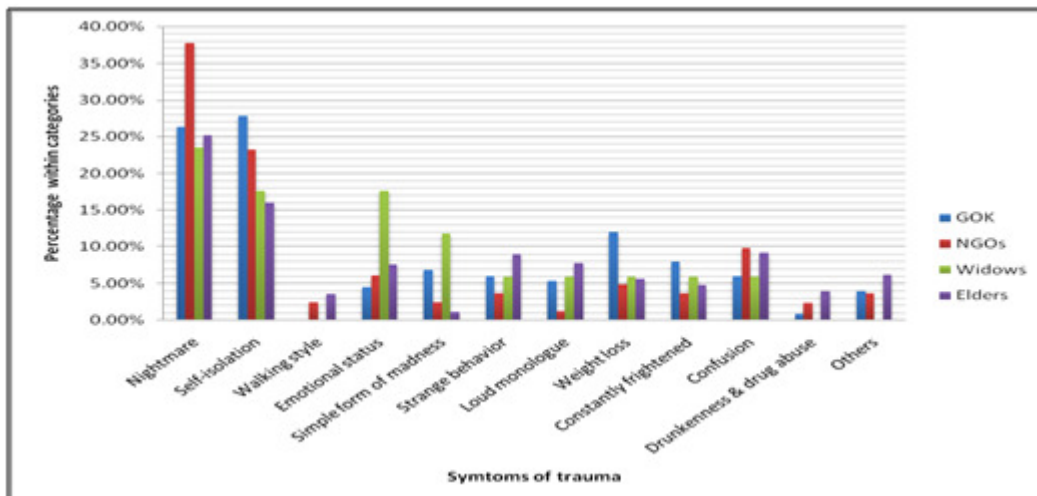


Figure 2: Symptoms of Trauma
Source: (Field Data, December, 2011)

3.4. Meaning Attached to the Symptoms of Trauma

The respondents were asked what meaning was attached to the symptoms of trauma. This guided the study in having a picture of how the community understands and interprets the signs of trauma, especially according to their own culture and traditions which in turn dictates trauma intervention and healing methods employed. Results are shown in Figures 3 and 4 below:

3.4.1. Annoyance of the Spiritual World

Annoyance of the spiritual world was ranked first by five of the eight categories with the following percentages, Ex-convicts 23%, GOK 29%, NGOs 38%, Widows 26%, and Elders 32%. It was ranked second by None (23%) and third by Formers SLDF as well as Both with 15% and 23% respectively.

3.4.2. Curses

Second to annoyance of the spiritual world is a curse which was ranked first by Formers SLDF (47%) and None (31%), second by Ex-convicts (23%), Both (25%), Windows, (20%) and Elders (15%). NGOs ranked it third with 14%.

3.4.3. Punishment from the Ancestors

Those who were in the category of both former SLDF and Ex-convicts, and GOK ranked punishment from the ancestors as first with 38% and 29% respectively. Former SLDF, NGOs, and Elders ranked it second with 19%, 24%, and 15% in that order. The remaining categories ranked third punishment from ancestors as follows, Ex-convicts 13%, None 18%, and Widows 19%.

3.4.4. Lack of Protection from the Living Dead (ancestors)

The Sabaot people attributed trauma to lack of protection from the living dead or ancestors. The GOK and Widows ranked it third with 8% and 11% respectively. This meaning was ranked fourth with four categories of respondents as follows, Former SLDF 5%, Ex-convicts 11%, Both 6% and None 7%. It was ranked fifth by both NGO (5%) and Elders (8%).

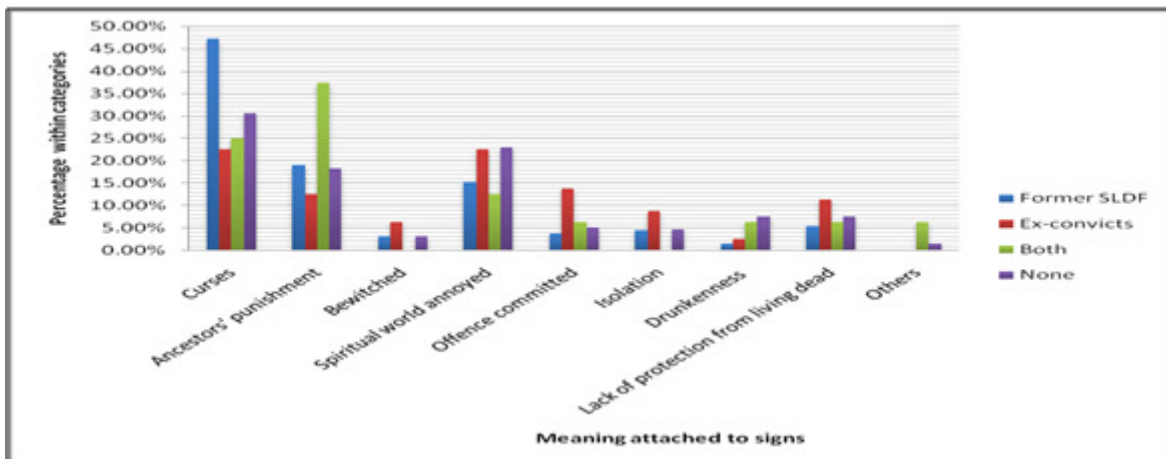


Figure 3: Meaning Attached to Signs of Trauma
Source: (Field Data December, 2011)

Meaning		GOK	NGOs	Widows	Elders
Curses	Frequencies	6	3	22	11
	% within groups	25.0%	14.3%	20.2%	14.7%
Ancestors' punishment	Frequencies	7	5	21	11
	% within groups	29.2%	23.8%	19.3%	14.7%
Bewitched	Frequencies	0	0	0	5
	% within groups	.0%	.0%	.0%	6.7%
Annoyance of spiritual world	Frequencies	7	8	28	24
	% within groups	29.2%	38.1%	25.7%	32.0%
Offence committed	Frequencies	0	1	10	10
	% within groups	.0%	4.8%	9.2%	13.3%
Isolation	Frequencies	1	1	5	3
	% within groups	4.2%	4.8%	4.6%	4.0%
Drunkenness	Frequencies	1	2	8	6
	% within groups	4.2%	9.5%	7.3%	8.0%
Lack of protection from the living dead	Frequencies	2	1	12	4
	% within groups	8.3%	4.8%	11%	5.3%
Others	Frequencies	0	0	3	1
	% within groups	0	0	2.7%	1.3%
TOTAL	Frequencies	24	21	109	75
	% within groups	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2: 1 Meaning Attached to Signs of trauma
Source: (Field Data December 2011)

From these findings, it is clear that the meaning attached to signs/symptoms of trauma is captured through curses, punishment from ancestors, and lack of protection from the ancestors as well as annoyance of the spiritual world.

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	807.522(a)	150	.000
Likelihood Ratio	525.336	150	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.612	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	600		

Table 3: Chi-Square Tests on Symptoms of Trauma and Meaning Attached to the Signs of Trauma
Source: (Field Data December 2011)

Key

P<0.05 – Significant

P>0.05 – Not Significant

From Table 3, it was established that $P = 0.000$. This means that there is a significant relationship between symptoms of trauma and meaning attached to each of the symptoms. This confirms the earlier findings that for the Sabaot people, each symptoms of trauma had a meaning. The symptoms of trauma were interpreted in accordance to the Sabaot people's culture and traditional beliefs. The study found that such meanings were related to the Sabaot people's beliefs about the causes of trauma.

3.5. Importance of Various Methods of Trauma Intervention and Healing

Participants were further asked to rate the importance of the role played by following methods in intervening and healing trauma experienced in their community: Mourning and grieving, use of laibon/traditional healers, revenge, guiding and counseling, debriefing, ritual and sacrifice. The results are as shown in Table 4 below:

Methods	Very Important	Important	Not Important	Total
Mourning and Grieving	284 (47%)	166 (28%)	150 (25%)	600 (100%)
Laibons/traditional healers	326 (54%)	171(29%)	101 (17%)	600 (100%)
Revenge	328 (55%)	100 (17%)	172 (29%)	600(100%)
Guiding & Counseling	214 (36%)	194 (32%)	192 (32%)	600 (100%)
Debriefing	73 (12%)	72 (12%)	455 (76%)	600(100%)
Ritual	460 (77%)	76 (13%)	64 (10%)	600(100%)
Sacrifices	322 (54%)	149 (25%)	129 (21%)	600(100%)

Table 4: Importance of Various Methods of Trauma Intervention and Healing Methods
Source: Field Data

About 536 (90%) of the respondents indicated that ritual played a very important role in trauma intervention and healing, while 450 (75%) cited mourning and grieving, 479 (83%) *laibons/* traditional healers, 408 (68%) guidance and counseling. Quite a significant number of respondents 471 (79%) indicated sacrifices as an important method in trauma intervention and healing.

The study revealed that ritual is very central to the life of the Sabaot people and is performed for various reasons as an intervention in trauma healing and reconciliation. Ritual is performed to appease the angry ancestors in order to offer protection to the individual who is traumatised. Ritual also gave the traumatised person healing assurance by stopping the trauma symptoms and preventing future trauma. Ritual is also believed to drive away curses from the victim. It is performed too, to cement reconciliation and relationship in the community. It was found out that traditional methods of trauma intervention and healing such as ritual involved consulting the *laibon* and the sacrifice of an animal was a key feature. The sacrifice of an animal was very important because the Sabaot people believed that an animal blood could cleanse people's blood.

It is important also to note that majority of the respondents 455 (76%) indicated that debriefing was not important in trauma intervention and healing in the Sabaot community. This could be attributed to the fact that the issues that traumatized the community were very sensitive. Since most of the participants were men and men are culturally not supposed to be seen complaining publicly but 'die like men', this explains why debriefing was very unpopular. Debriefing also tends to address the individual psychological difficulties at the exclusion of the family, community, the Supreme Being and the spiritual world, which is against the beliefs and cultural orientation of the Sabaot people who address their problems communally.

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	157.211(a)	56	.000
Likelihood Ratio	148.638	56	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.712	1	.191
N of Valid Cases	600		

Table 5: Chi-Square Tests on the Causes of Trauma and Methods of Trauma Intervention
Source: (Field Data December 2011)

From Table 5 above, it was established that $P = 0.000$. This means that there is a significant relationship between the causes of trauma and methods of trauma intervention. These findings confirm what was discussed elsewhere in this study. The type of methods employed whether traditional or non-traditional depend on the Sabaot people believes about causes of trauma.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings show that trauma among the Sabaot people stems from the atrocities people committed and suffered during the violent conflicts from 2006 to 2008. The Sabaot people believe that the transgressions committed during such violent conflicts especially shedding of innocent did not just affect the victims of violence but also disturbed the temporal and spiritual order. The crimes disrupted the harmony which should exist in the community. This left the whole community living in fear due to the fact that the spirit world is annoyed and may unleash punishment to the whole community at any time if no remedial actions are taken.

According to the findings, the Sabaot people relate symptoms of trauma to their traditional beliefs and culture. The signs of trauma are associated with factors beyond the world they live in to the unseen world of ancestors and spirits. A majority associated trauma with curses and punishment from the spiritual world. This is largely attributed to wrongs committed by the living that draw the wrath of the ancestors. The choice of trauma intervention methods should, therefore, include those that allows the intervention to transcend the physical world to the spiritual world hence their preference of cleansing rituals, sacrifices, and use of laibon.

In light of these findings, we recommend that for effective and transformative trauma healing, methods employed have to consider people's traditional beliefs especially when dealing with indigenous communities such as the Sabaot. This is important because, among indigenous people, causes of trauma, symptoms of trauma and meaning attached to symptoms of trauma are connected and related to the people's beliefs in the spiritual world and in life after dead.

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