

Communication, Culture, and the Vanishing Grandfathers of Elgon: A Qualitative Study of the Erosion of Sabaot Cultural Identity in Luhya–Sabaot Marital Interactions

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how communicative practices within intermarriages between Sabaot and Luhya spouses in Mount Elgon shape, challenge, and in many cases erode Sabaot cultural identity. While intermarriage is often framed as a vehicle for integration, this study demonstrates that it also becomes a subtle site of cultural hegemony, where minority traditions are gradually muted and displaced. The research interrogates four core domains of cultural negotiation; naming practices, initiation rites, household discourse, and ritual observances, each of which has increasingly been mediated through Luhya norms that overshadow and marginalize Sabaot heritage.

The study employed an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative design, drawing insights from twenty purposively selected participants: ten Sabaot men married to Luhya women and ten Luhya women married into Sabaot households across Cheptais, Kopsiro, Kaptega, and Kapsokwony divisions. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions, with triangulation enhancing trustworthiness.

Findings reveal four interrelated patterns: (1) identity dilution, as children are often given Luhya names recognized by state institutions while Sabaot names are relegated to private use; (2) ritual displacement, where initiation ceremonies and domestic rituals increasingly employ Luhya or Swahili, reducing the linguistic vitality of Sabaot; (3) elder marginalization, with Kap-Kugo (custodial grandfathers) excluded from key household decisions, reducing intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge; and (4) generational ambivalence, particularly among youth who oscillate between assimilation and creative hybridity. Yet, the study also documents resilience; families quietly maintaining Sabaot names, hybrid initiation practices, and symbolic acknowledgment of elders, suggesting that cultural erosion is accompanied by acts of subtle resistance.

The analysis is framed by Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and Muted Group Theory, which illuminate how dominant cultural codes infiltrate everyday communication while muted groups innovate adaptive strategies to sustain fragments of identity.

The study recommends community-driven cultural education programs, school and media collaborations to digitize and broadcast Sabaot oral traditions, intercultural dialogue forums, and the promotion of cultural tourism as tools for preservation. Without such deliberate interventions, Sabaot heritage risks becoming a symbolic memory remembered rather than lived, reducing the Kap-Kugo, the once-vibrant grandfathers of Elgon, into fading echoes of tradition.

Keywords: Sabaot, intermarriage, cultural identity, communication, Mount Elgon, resilience, cultural hegemony

INTRODUCTION

The Sabaot people of Mount Elgon are custodians of a rich cultural legacy within the Kalenjin community, marked by initiation rituals, naming practices, oral traditions, and the authority of elders known as *Kap-Kugo*. Yet in recent decades, these traditions have come under threat not through colonial suppression or globalization alone, but through subtle, everyday practices within intermarriage and domestic life.

Mount Elgon's ethnolinguistic diversity has made intermarriage between the Sabaot and Luhya common, producing households where cultural practices compete, blend, or disappear. Reports suggest that naming often follows Luhya conventions, initiation rites are mediated in Swahili or Luhya languages, and household rituals increasingly exclude Sabaot elders. The erosion of elder authority undermines the transmission of tradition to younger generations, leaving the Sabaot at risk of cultural invisibility.

This study seeks to answer: In what ways do intermarriages between Sabaot and Luhya spouses influence cultural practices? How do naming conventions and initiation rites reflect assimilation? How do elders perceive their changing authority? And what communicative and cultural strategies can safeguard Sabaot heritage?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly debates on culture and intermarriage highlight both assimilation risks and adaptive resilience. Globally, intermarriage often accelerates minority cultural erosion (Huntington, 1996; Berry, 2005), especially when institutional power favors the dominant group. In Kenya, intermarriage has shaped shifting cultural boundaries. Kioko and Bollig (2015) show how Maasai–Kikuyu intermarriages redefined land use and kinship ties. Orera (2023) illustrates how Gusii marriage systems were transformed by colonial legacies, altering gendered authority.

Language plays a central role in cultural survival. Kamau and Motanya (2024) argue that minority groups in Kenya, such as the Shona, depend on language maintenance for identity preservation. Similarly, Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor's (1977) ethnolinguistic vitality theory explains how dominant language use in families accelerates assimilation.

Closer to Mount Elgon, Waluke and Nyandoro (2024) highlight culture's role in mitigating conflict between the Sabaot and neighboring Luhya, showing that dialogue is necessary for peaceful coexistence. Yet, few studies address the everyday communicative mechanisms of cultural change in mixed marriages.

Theoretically, Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony (1971/1999) explains how dominant norms reproduce themselves through consent, not coercion. Muted Group Theory (Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981) shows how minority voices are sidelined when discourse structures privilege dominant groups. Applied here, these theories illuminate how Sabaot practices are muted in intermarital households where Luhya norms dominate naming, language, and rituals.

This study contributes by situating intermarriage within communication studies, showing how discourse choices—naming, ritual speech, initiation language—become sites of cultural negotiation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and relativist ontology, emphasizing lived experiences and the constructed nature of culture. A qualitative design enabled in-depth exploration of communicative interactions in mixed marriages.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select 20 participants: 10 Sabaot men married to Luhya women and 10 Luhya women married into Sabaot households. Participants were drawn systematically from Cheptais, Kopsiro, Kaptega, and Kapsokwony divisions to ensure geographical representation. Elders and young couples were included to capture generational perspectives.

Data Generation

Semi-structured interviews; captured narratives about naming, rituals, language use, and elder authority.

Participant observation; at ceremonies (birth naming, initiation, weddings) documented communicative practices.

Focus group discussions; with elders (Kap-Kugo) and younger couples enabled comparison of perspectives.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

Informed consent was obtained orally and in writing. Participants were assured confidentiality and the right to withdraw. Reflexivity was practiced, acknowledging the researcher's insider-outsider positionality. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation (interviews, observations, FGDs), member-checking, and peer debriefing.

FINDINGS

Four major themes emerged:

Names as Identity Frontlines

Birth certificates often bear Luhya names, symbolizing institutional dominance. An elder lamented: "When I see Wanyonyi on the certificate, I know my blood is Sabaot, but the state erases me." Yet resistance exists; many families privately maintain Sabaot names.

Ritual Displacement and Hybridization

Initiation rites increasingly occur in Swahili or Luhya. An elder noted, "Our language is disappearing from the knife." Yet some fathers insisted on at least one elder speaking Sabaot during rites, creating hybrid rituals.

Elder Marginalization

Kap-Kugo reported reduced authority: "I am consulted only when there is death, not when there is birth." Still, younger couples saw symbolic value: "Even if we don't follow everything, we want them to bless our homes."

Generational Ambivalence

Younger participants embodied hybrid identities. A woman said: "I dance to Luhya songs at weddings, but when I cook millet bread, I feel Sabaot." Such ambivalence reflects both erosion and adaptation.

DISCUSSION

These findings show that assimilation is neither total nor uncontested. Naming practices illustrate Gramsci's hegemony: institutional power privileges Luhya names, yet private resistance persists. Muted Group Theory explains how Sabaot voices are sidelined in initiation discourse, yet acts of hybridization show muted groups adapting to preserve fragments.

Elders' diminished authority reflects structural muting, but their symbolic importance persists, offering entry points for cultural revival. Youth ambivalence reveals creativity rather than passivity—hybrid identities allow selective cultural survival. Thus, the Sabaot experience is not only one of loss but of negotiation.

The challenge is to amplify resilience: the private names, hybrid rituals, and symbolic elder roles must be supported to shift from fragile practices into visible, sustainable traditions.

CONCLUSION

The Sabaot community faces a cultural identity crisis, but it is not a story of disappearance alone. Rather, it is a contested landscape where cultural erosion and resilience coexist in tension. Inter marriage has moved the locus of cultural continuity from communal to domestic spheres, leaving practices vulnerable to dominance by Luhya norms. Yet, resistance surfaces in private naming, symbolic elder roles, and hybrid rituals.

The study shows that communication is the central arena of this negotiation. Names on birth certificates, language choices in initiation, and who speaks during rituals all determine which cultural identity survives. Elders feel muted, yet their blessing remains valued; youth express guilt, yet creatively mix practices; women navigate between two cultural codes daily.

If current trends continue, the Sabaot risk their culture being reduced to symbolic memory—songs recorded but not sung, stories remembered but not retold, rituals recalled but not practiced. However, by recognizing resilience as well as erosion, strategies for preservation can be more effective. Heritage is not static; it adapts, negotiates, and survives when communities actively revalue it.

This study calls for urgent but balanced interventions: not to “freeze” Sabaot culture in the past, but to re-anchor it within modern realities of intermarriage, schooling, and media. Culture must live in everyday speech, family practices, and youth creativity. Otherwise, the Kap-Kugo—the vanishing grandfathers of Elgon—may be remembered only as echoes in oral history, rather than as living guides.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings reveal assimilation but also resilience, requiring multi-pronged preservation strategies.

First, the Sabaot Cultural Council of Elders must shift from ritual custodianship to active intergenerational facilitators. Cultural camps, initiation workshops, and storytelling festivals can re-engage youth. As one youth remarked, “We like hearing the old stories, but they must come in ways that speak to us today.”

Second, schools and local media should partner in preservation. Extracurricular clubs, drama festivals, and music competitions can integrate Sabaot folklore. Community radio and digital archives should broadcast proverbs and songs, ensuring accessibility. Digitization would transform technology from a threat into a preservation tool.

Third, the community should embrace cultural tourism and intercultural dialogue. Heritage festivals and cultural centers could showcase Sabaot music, rituals, and crafts, generating income and pride. Forums with Luhya counterparts would transform intermarriage from a site of loss into negotiation.

Together, these strategies blend elder authority, youth creativity, education, media, and tourism. In doing so, they provide a roadmap for sustaining the Sabaot legacy with resilience and dignity.

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