

*African sign languages are not American product:
Indigenous African Deaf People and indigenous African
Sign Languages*

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As an African sign linguist, I have been bombarded with comments such as, “*Oh if you research on sign languages in Ghana, then you must know ASL*”; “*I guess all Deaf people in Africa know ASL because of Andrew Forster*” etc. These comments come from people who genuinely have not taken time to study the dynamics of African sign languages. I must comment that American Sign Language (ASL) has strongly influenced sign languages on the African continent and most urban sign languages used in Africa (with connections to ASL) are believed to be *mutually intelligible* (of some sort) to ASL. In other words, there are lexical and grammatical similarities in some of these urban sign languages (which I term foreign-based African sign languages). This paper is intended to highlight the indigenous African Deaf people and their sign languages.

The scramble for Africa which took place between 1881 and 1914 led to the partition of Africa into different geographical zones headed by the European colonial powers. As part of the *package* of foreign rule, most African nations came under European authorities and the transmission of languages and cultures were imminent in this colonial era. However, many indigenous languages of African survived colonial rule because they became the channel of communication between the colonial lords and the indigenous African people. It is worth to mention that some African languages had their grammars developed during these times by foreigners. However, not much information is documented on the state of indigenous African sign languages and Deaf people of indigenous communities in Africa. From all indications, the Europeans did not show much interest in Deaf education or sign languages in Africa during the colonial era. On the other hand, one man’s journey to the continent of Africa has changed

the narrative and after 60 years, he is still celebrated as a hero in the *liberating* of Deaf Africans and introducing sign language as the language of Deaf education across the length and breadth of Africa.

Andrew Forster (1927–1987), a pioneering deaf African American missionary, is believed to have provided the single and the most important contributions to the education of deaf Africans in the colonial and postcolonial periods [1,2]. However, this heroic act of Andrew Foster has also led to the assumption that all African sign languages are *American product* and can be judged on the same level as ASL. From the detailed research of Miles [3] we have come to know that indigenous Africans had a vibrant *Deaf culture* with the use of the visual-spatial modality for communication. These indigenous *Deaf communities* were not influenced by the Americanization of African sign languages and although most stand at the brink of endangerment [4] their unique features that distinguish them from the foreign-based African sign languages cannot be overemphasized.

Deaf cultures in Africa are defined by shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and shared institutions of communities that are influenced by deafness and which use sign languages as the main means of communication. Indigenous Deaf communities in Africa represent a diverse meeting of individuals who come together for many purposes. The priorities of such Deaf communities include Deaf identity, Deaf customs, dissemination of information (politics to religion) and more recently the advocate for Deaf-centred education in an accessible language (i.e., signed language) and the campaign for the inclusion of signed languages as part of the national languages. Although religion has played a major role in the evangelization of Deaf communities and the gradual introduction of foreign sign languages in most Sub-Saharan African communities [1, 5], most indigenous African sign languages have escaped the infiltration of foreign sign languages and have survived with little or no exposure to foreign sign systems. On the other hand, the internal battles with urban (foreign-based) African sign languages continue and Edward [5] comments on the gradual but forceful baptism of Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL) signers into Ghanaian Sign Language.

Indigenous Deaf people in Africa have faced several challenges in recent times that have been identified as a potential trigger for a *linguistic genocide* [4]. For example, societal policies have led to the gradual reduction of the number of individuals in indigenous African Deaf communities. The *marriage law* in Adamorobe (Ghana) is one of such societal policies that is believed to cause devastating consequences in the numbers of Deaf individuals in Adamorobe. The marriage law banned Deaf-Deaf marriages in Adamorobe in an attempt to *curb* the high rate of hereditary deafness. Edward [6] presents some of the effects of this law as the reduction in the number of Deaf individuals in Adamorobe, lack of financial support, teenage pregnancy and these *unwittingly perpetuate the circle of poverty in Adamorobe*.

The recent interest in the linguistics of indigenous African sign languages (Adamorobe Sign Language, Hausa Sign Language, Magagingari Sign Language etc.) is worth commenting. However, there is still the need to study indigenous African Deaf people and their sign languages because there is evidence to show that their sign languages are at risk [4,7]. Furthermore, from history, we have evidence to show that indigenous Deaf Africans did occupy social spaces and took roles across the full spectrum of life [3] but many of their experiences have involved severe economic poverty and adversity [6], stigmatizing attitudes [6,4] and exclusionary practices [4,3]. We also have evidence of great resilience, perseverance, humour and ingenuity in their dealings and communications with the non-deaf world [3].

Societies contribute to the wellbeing and growth of its people. Societal discrimination and stigmatization of Deaf people only make matters worse. Governmental agencies and opinion leaders are needed to bring changes to societies that will ensure equal opportunities for all [8]. While the linguistic research momentum seems to have been kept up largely by expatriates and by Europeans resident in Africa, there have been useful contributions by black Africans on the practical outcomes and applications [3]. Indigenous African sign languages are unique and not product of America because most of these sign languages have histories that are believed to be older than the history of American Sign Language.

References

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