

Do Indigenous Sign Languages Matter in Africa's Education and Society?

In this article, we look at the origin of formal, western-style deaf education in Africa and the effect it has had on indigenous sign languages across the region. We shall further look at the language rights of deaf communities and the fact that indigenous sign languages hold the key to generations of knowledge for both deaf and hearing communities.

Deaf Education and Indigenous Sign Languages in Africa

The formal, western-style education of deaf people across Africa South of the Sahara can be traced back to the 19th-century activities of European missionaries who emphasized the homeland's oral-only practices. That exercise made education available only to a tiny fraction of the deaf population on the continent. In more recent history, however, it was the Reverend Andrew Foster who widely introduced western-style sign languages through formal education across much of sub-Saharan Africa. Between 1956 and 1986, Reverend Foster's phenomenal work established national sign languages in the form of, for instance, Ghanaian Sign Language, Nigerian Sign Language, etc., most of which are adaptations of the American Sign Language, with slight variations to reflect local realities. Nevertheless, the importance of Reverend Foster's work can never be overstated. What was lacking at that time, however, was both the agency and system for the preservation of indigenous sign languages across Africa. This, as we have seen in the case of the Adamorobe Sign Language spoken in eastern Ghana, which is currently being threatened with extinction, has consigned indigenous sign languages to the periphery and on the brink of extinction. The Adamorobe Sign Language is only one of the many endangered indigenous African

sign languages.

A range of factors determines if (and the degree to which) a language is endangered, including the number of children born into the language community or in the diaspora who learn the language as their first language, the community's perception of its own language, a community's population size and the number of speakers of that language within the community. In the case of the Adamorobe Sign Language, for instance, recent research indicates that the current population of deaf people who crucially depend on the language has whittled down to only 35 persons since many deaf and hearing people in Adamorobe have adopted the Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL). As a matter of fact, most Adamorobe deaf people who attend the boarding school at Mampong-Akwapim have adopted the GSL as their primary language. The only resort to the exclusive use of Adamorobe Sign Language is when they must interact with persons having no command of GSL. Adamorobe Sign Language is beginning to lose child speakers and can, therefore, be considered a potentially endangered language.

Indigenous Sign Language and Language Rights

The extinction of Africa's indigenous sign languages across the continent contravenes the language rights of deaf communities. According to the United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO), language rights are an integral part of human rights: "the language rights of minorities are an integral part of well established, basic human rights widely recognized in international law, just as are the rights of women and children." Deaf communities have the right to "maintain and use their own language," the right to be educated in their indigenous sign languages, and the right to have indigenous sign languages "recognized in constitutions and laws." Deaf communities have the "right to live free from discrimination on the grounds of language," as well as "the right to establish and have access to media" in the indigenous sign languages. These language rights, however,

are routinely breached and barely recognized across many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. If indigenous spoken languages are often subjected to non-recognition in national policy and legislation, then indigenous sign languages are completely ignored and considered inconsequential in such spaces. Indigenous sign languages are often outright suppressed in favour of the more harmonized national sign languages of western origin.

In Defense of Indigenous Sign Languages

Outside of the crucial question of rights to languages, there are many other reasons why the protection of indigenous sign languages is important in Africa. Beyond being a means of communication for both deaf and hearing members of the community, Africa's indigenous sign languages are also reservoirs and channels of expression and transfer of knowledge about life; knowledge covering medicine, law, geography, history, social psychology, family relationships, philosophy, religion, food and nutrition, to mention but a few.

Indigenous sign languages hold the key to generations of knowledge for both deaf and hearing communities. Indigenous sign languages hold stories, songs, dances, customs, conventions, family histories and connections of their host communities. When any indigenous sign language goes extinct, huge insights into an entire culture are lost, which is usually irreplaceable and irreparable. But if such sign language is preserved, then communities can preserve the wide-ranging knowledge generated over the years, which is vital for their sustenance, as it connects to the native land. Medicinal, biological, linguistic, and cultural diversities are indivisible, and the loss of Africa's indigenous sign languages means the loss of indigenous medicinal and biological knowledge for the preservation of biological species as well as the loss of cultural knowledge that sustains social regeneration.

The fundamental differences in signage and gesture in indigenous sign languages can also hold the key to the understanding of distinct aspects of life, not just for the indigenous communities in question but for the entire humanity. For instance, a village sign language used by the Bura people of Biu in northern Nigeria, who are known to have a high degree of congenital deafness, comes with distinct lax hand shapes and also utilizes expansive sign space, which is known to be characteristic of indigenous West African sign languages. This language is also unique in its use of metaphors such as using sweat to signify work and sleep to signify "the next day."

The erosion of Africa's indigenous sign languages began well before the prevailing tide against the continent's indigenous spoken languages. However, while many scholars and organizations such as UNESCO are committed to the preservation of indigenous spoken languages in Africa, there appears to be little enthusiasm around the revitalization and/or strengthening of indigenous sign languages across the region. Across Africa, there seems to be an undeclared unanimity that deaf communities should congregate around commonly utilized sign languages, often of Western origin, to be availed of whatever national and international support might be available, among other reasons. I argue against that stance in this piece by essentially insisting that saving indigenous sign languages should be an issue of top priority, as it is pivotal in the protection of the cultural identity and the dignity of communities across sub-Saharan Africa.

It has been said that a "different language is a different vision of life." Today the world is in desperate need of a new vision of life and living. Across fields and sectors, our understanding of life and how it should be lived is constantly being questioned by emerging challenges that defy immediate solutions. The world is in search of what normal now means, or should mean, as things continue to evolve. There is an urgent

need for an expansion of the horizons of thought for all of humanity. Protecting and promoting indigenous sign languages across Africa will be just one important way of increasing rather than decreasing the knowledge stock from which humankind can search around for answers to the numerous questions that continue to arise globally.

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