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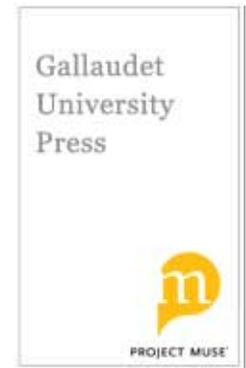
DEAFNESS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

D eaf education in sub-Saharan Africa originated in the 19th century, primarily through efforts by hearing European missionaries who typically followed their homelands' oral-only practices. But education became available to only a fraction of the deaf population. In the 20th century, Andrew Foster, a deaf African American missionary and Gallaudet University's first African American graduate, had unparalleled impact on deaf education in the region, establishing 31 schools for the Deaf, training a generation of deaf leaders, and introducing his concept of Total Communication, which embraced both American and indigenous signs. Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa have provided leadership in deaf education, but throughout the region there is growing acceptance of sign language use in school, and secondary and postsecondary education for the Deaf is increasingly available. Some national constitutions safeguard the rights of citizens with disabilities and even recognize indigenous sign languages. International disability organizations, particularly the World Federation of the Deaf, have helped change attitudes and train leaders. Despite some grim present realities, prospects for continued progress are good.

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Sub-Saharan Africa is an enormous area geographically, with rich human and material resources. It occupies the bulk of the African continent and consists of 54 countries. The populations of the area represent wide ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity. Despite unlimited potential, progress has been uneven in the region; indeed, sub-Saharan Africa includes some of the poorest counties in the world. Violence, disease, and hunger are endemic in many areas. The current plight of the continent is too complex and too great to treat in detail in the present article, but some comments are in order to provide background on the condition of deaf individuals in the region.

In common with many other parts of the world, such as the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, North Africa, and China, sub-Saharan Africa came under the influence of European imperialism for a period of several centuries. Local traditions and cultures were repressed and colonial systems were established for the benefit of the imperial countries at the expense of indigenous peoples. In the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, the major colonial powers agreed on the partition of Africa. With a few notable exceptions such as Liberia and Ethiopia (the latter of which was invaded and annexed by Italy prior to World War II), all of sub-Saharan Africa came under colonial rule. Great Britain and France were the major powers, but Germany, Portugal, and Belgium also had significant colonies. After World War I Germany lost its colonial empire, mostly to British interests.

The colonial powers, with limited knowledge of the lands they had taken and without the consent of the Africans, carved sub-Saharan Africa into administrative units

that served the colonizers' economic purposes but without regard to boundaries between different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. In some cases rival kingdoms with historical hostilities were included within the same administrative units, leading to outbreaks of civil unrest following the dissolution of colonial rule that in some nations continue to the present. Europeans administered the area, and education for Africans was limited to a select few Africans who became civil servants under the control of European administrators and who constituted a small, elite middle class.

The impetus for the breakup of the colonial systems in sub-Saharan Africa was supplied by India's struggle for independence from Great Britain, which finally came to fruition in 1947 under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. In 1956 Sudan became the first sub-Saharan African country to achieve independence, beginning a process that extended over two generations and eventually led to the independence of all former colonies in the region. But the transition from colonization to independence was not easy. The states that emerged were based on political systems that had been established by the former colonial powers, with the understanding that the new nations would maintain the borders drawn up in the 1880s. As in other parts of the world, such as the Balkans, this decision, while arguably logical, set the stage for continuing ethnic and civil strife.

Although the new nations were nominally independent, they continued to be influenced by their former colonizers. For example, France retained a military presence in much of Francophone Africa, as it does to this day. Much of the industry that had been developed by the Europeans was extractive—involving commodities such as gold, diamonds, and oil—and continued to be controlled by outside forces. The elements of self-sufficiency were lacking. There was no infrastructure to run a modern state. The European powers had never trained African administrators

to manage a democracy and had never provided universal education.

Progress toward the creation of a sustainable state has been significant in some nations: for example, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. On the whole, however, the situation is dire. A chief reason is the poor state of public health. For instance, an acute lack of access to safe drinking water, which is vital to the eradication of poverty, is both the direct and the indirect cause of water-related diseases and innumerable deaths. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is devastating parts of the region, and the response of the various nations has been uneven. At issue here is the difficulty of access to affordable generic drugs and the resistance of major American and European pharmaceutical companies to the provision of such drugs. Drought, hunger, and even starvation are constant presences in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Unsustainable debt tied to unrealistic demands by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have compounded the problem. Finally, political corruption and violence have condemned large parts of the area to underdevelopment.

Although civil war, religious conflict, ethnic strife, drought, and poverty persist, there is some reason for hope. For instance, the newly organized African Union is designed to play a role in ensuring that African nations themselves will take control of their destinies by strengthening inter-African cooperation, overcoming the prevalence of poverty, promoting peace, and combating the scourge of HIV/AIDS. Accommodations are being made to provide medicine to those in need and to improve water supplies and sanitation. Education is becoming available to growing numbers of the population, and there is a commitment to universal primary education throughout the region.

Education of Deaf Students in Colonial Times

Education of deaf children in sub-Saharan Africa began as a component

of the European missionary movement in the 19th century. Roman Catholics and members of various Protestant denominations established schools for the Deaf as part of conversion efforts in many countries. In other countries, royalty, wealthy philanthropists, charitable institutions, and teachers of the Deaf established schools. As a whole, these schools reached only a small proportion of the deaf population of the region. They tended to serve children from relatively affluent African families in urban areas, while most deaf Africans lived in poor rural environments. The majority of schools, following the examples of schools for the Deaf in Great Britain and France, were strictly oral/aural and did not allow the use of any kind of manual communication, either signed or fingerspelled. There were some exceptions. Fay (1999) notes that missionaries from the United States and Scandinavia started schools for deaf children in Ethiopia. These missionaries taught using the sign languages and manual alphabets of their own countries, even though the primary language of Ethiopia, Amharic, has a different alphabet. Burton (2002) also comments on how foreign sign languages were introduced without regard to indigenous signs. He claims that European and American educators left the African education system like a shattered playground, and that the enforced use of foreign sign languages was disrespectful.

The linguistic diversity of sub-Saharan Africa was a reality that many American and European missionaries, coming from monolingual or bilingual backgrounds, did not grasp (Fay, 1999). Heine and Nurse (2000) cite Grimes as estimating that more than 2,000 languages are indigenous to the region. Most countries are multilingual, with additional creole or pidgin languages to facilitate communication across tribal groups. In order to establish standard educational, commercial, and business communications, countries of the region employ a common indigenous language, such as Swahili in East Africa,

or the ex-colonial language (or both), while many different languages may be used by separate tribal and ethnic groups. For example, Gabon has 44 spoken languages in addition to French, Uganda has 41 languages in addition to English and Ugandan Sign Language, Angola has 42 languages in addition to Portuguese, and Chad has 132 languages in addition to French and Arabic (SIL International, 2003).

Typically, hearing children in sub-Saharan Africa learn the mother tongue, that is, the family language, and perhaps one or more other regional languages. They then enter school to learn the national language. Day-to-day communication often is conducted in the indigenous language.

Those deaf children fortunate enough to attend school are taught in the national language. Problems of communication between deaf child and hearing parent impede or prevent acquisition of the family language, thus closing off enculturation and the benefits of incidental learning enjoyed by hearing siblings. It is commonly agreed that there are numerous sign languages, but there is no accurate measure. Discussing his efforts to develop a comprehensive South African sign dictionary, Alan Jones (1994) wrote, "When you realize that this dictionary will have to encompass no less than seven completely different languages, you will know why I refer to the task as gigantic" (p. 699).

Andrew Foster (1927–1987), a pioneering deaf African American missionary, provided the single most important contribution to the education of deaf Africans in the colonial and postcolonial periods. Widely acclaimed as the father of deaf education in Africa, Foster was the first African American to graduate from Gallaudet College, now Gallaudet University. A deeply religious and charismatic individual, Foster established the Christian Mission for Deaf Africans in the United States in 1956. He traveled to Accra, Ghana, in 1957, the year Ghana gained its independence. He found that in all

of Africa there were only 12 schools serving deaf children and that "unknown numbers of deaf children were illiterate, languageless, and isolated (Moore & Panara, 1996, p. 216). Ghana itself had no programs, no schools, and no teachers for deaf people. Foster established a school for the Deaf in Ghana that was the first in the region to use any form of manual communication. He introduced American Sign Language (ASL) and English-based signs. Functioning as a teacher, evangelist, administrator, and public-relations specialist, he established an amazing total of 31 schools (9 in Ghana alone) for deaf children in 17 different African countries (Carroll & Mather, 1997). In addition to Ghana, he established training centers in Nigeria and Kenya by 1975. Throughout his travels, he expanded deaf education by identifying deaf individuals to be sent to his school in Ghana for training and completion of a certificate course (Ojile, 1994). Foster has been compared to Laurent Clerc, a deaf man who was the first teacher of the Deaf in the United States and who trained teachers of the Deaf to return to their own states and set up schools (Moores, 2001).

Adepoju is quoted by Moore and Panara (1996) as comparing Foster to Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, the first superintendent of a school for the Deaf in the United States. In reality, however, Foster surpassed both of these leaders. In the sheer numbers of schools he established by himself, Foster is unrivaled by anyone, hearing or deaf, in the history of education of the Deaf. Not only did he leave behind educated deaf Africans trained to teach their own people, he also demonstrated to thousands of hearing Africans that deaf people had unlimited potential (Carroll & Mather, 1997).

Foster (1975) stressed that deaf children should be served immediately, even when adequate resources and trained personnel are not available. He argued that while schools are expensive to build, schools and classes could start in rented houses and storefronts,

as well as under thatched roofs. Personnel could tutor untrained teachers in rural areas. Governments could be shown the benefits that educated deaf individuals contribute to the national welfare through taxes and social activities. He also argued that only a few children could succeed through the predominant oral method. African languages are highly tonal, as Foster pointed out. If its tone is altered, one utterance can have three or four different meanings, which cannot be detected by speechreading.

Foster's greatest influence was in Nigeria, where the federal government has established schools for the Deaf throughout the country. These follow Foster's Total Communication philosophy, which embraces the use of natural sign languages (Foster, 1975). This is not the case in most sub-Saharan countries. For example, the lead author of the present article, a Ugandan citizen, visited the only school for the Deaf in Rwanda in 1997, le Centre des Jeunes Sourds-Muets (Center for Young Deaf-Mutes), an institution established by a congregation of French and Belgian Catholic priests. There, attempts to communicate manually with the students were discouraged by the instructors. The children were totally forbidden to sign despite their apparent desire to do so. The condition of these children, however, was far superior to that of the large majority of deaf children in sub-Saharan Africa, who have no access to any kind of education at all.

Present-Day Education

The challenges facing educators of deaf children in sub-Saharan Africa are similar to those identified by Mazurek and Winzer (1994) in all developing countries trying to establish appropriate services for children identified as disabled. In the face of widespread poverty, a scarcity of funding and other resources, and a lack of trained professional personnel, most societies give priority to general education, which serves the large majority of children.

The emphasis, by necessity, is on basic education for these children; consequently, children classified as disabled are often neglected. Major challenges to the provision of services to children with disabilities include problems of identification and early intervention, a lack of enabling legislation, and limited teacher training.

Abang (1994) reported that preventable diseases accounted for significant proportions of African disabled populations. For example, poliomyelitis is a major cause of physical disability. Trachoma, malnutrition, and onchocerciasis can lead to blindness. Onchocerciasis is caused by the nematode worm and is sometimes treated by herbalists by applying drops to the eye, a treatment that can cause blindness. Abang reported that there were 20 million cases worldwide, 95% of them in Africa. She cited a survey in Mali, Ghana, and Burkina Faso in which 498,000 persons in a population slightly greater than 4 million were reported to be infected with onchocerciasis, of whom 21,860 were blind. Abang also reported that otitis media was a major cause of hearing loss in Nigeria.

There are neither reliable data nor reliable estimates of the number of school-age deaf children in sub-Saharan Africa. No country in the region has ever counted its deaf population in a census. Deaf people tend to live in isolation, making it difficult to build viable Deaf communities. Wilson (2001) has commented on the lack of documentation of education in developing countries and calls for research to establish procedures for reaching and serving children and adults in rural areas who are deaf.

We assume that, because of higher rates of malnutrition, chronic otitis media, meningitis, and other diseases that may affect hearing, along with limited access to medical treatment and hearing aids, the incidence of deafness is higher in the region than in the United States and Europe. It is clear that the majority of deaf children in sub-Saharan Africa lack access to

education. The situation is especially serious in the rural areas of most countries, where poverty is widespread and services are limited or nonexistent.

An additional complicating factor is the fact that there are many hard of hearing children who would be able to process speech with the help of a hearing aid, children who would not be enrolled in programs for deaf children in more affluent countries. However, the cost of hearing aids is prohibitively high for the great majority of families, most of whom are poor. According to Ashoka (2001), the average cost of a hearing aid is US$971. In many countries of the region family income may be less than US$2 a day, and food is a much higher priority than hearing aids.

In general, teachers of the Deaf in Africa, most of whom are hearing, lack appropriate training and certification to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively with children who are deaf. Expectations are low and standards are inferior. Textbooks and other materials are in short supply. In most countries this meager education ends at the primary level, with no incentive or opportunity to continue into secondary or higher education, except for a fortunate few.

With the exception of a few nations, in particular Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya, most sub-Saharan African countries have left the education of deaf children to private missionary, charitable, or other nongovernmental organizations, most of which work independently, with no government support, oversight, or regulation. This laissez-faire attitude has resulted in inconsistent standards and a tendency to provide instruction only at the elementary level. Instead of secondary or higher education, the only opportunities most deaf children who complete primary school have are in a small number of trades such as carpentry, masonry, and brick making. The situation in Uganda provides an example of this. The country has only two primary schools for deaf children and no secondary school. Some may go to

Kenya for vocational training, but only if they have the financial resources. Most do not have such resources.

Cultural Attitudes

Given the diversity of sub-Saharan Africa, there are exceptions to any generalizations. Beliefs about deafness in African societies range from acceptance and protection to rejection, including considerations of infanticide. Some beliefs common to most nations in the region have the unfortunate effect of increasing the likelihood of isolation and marginalization of people who are deaf. Many traditional beliefs characterize deafness as a manifestation of a mysterious fate, perhaps God's will. Some societies pity children who are deaf and see them as burdens, dependent on their families and lacking the ability to be independent. This type of belief in the lack of capability of deaf children may by itself impede access to education. In other cases, cultural practices may result in the deaf child being hidden from public view because of familial shame over having a "handicapped" child who may bring misfortune upon the family. Such beliefs can lead to abuse, neglect, and abandonment, and deaf children's potential to contribute to the development of African nations is dismissed.

In the absence of government programs to foster knowledge of deafness and the capabilities of deaf citizens, there is the threat and reality of social, political, economic, and educational discrimination. Federal legislation is needed to mitigate the prejudice and discrimination that exists in many countries.

One example of the impact of discrimination occurs in Gitarama, a small town in Rwanda familiar to the lead author of the present article. There, the Deaf live in abject poverty; deaf adults cannot find gainful employment and deaf children have no access to schooling. When the children venture outside their community, they always do so in groups, for self-protection. Stones are

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thrown at them when they sign to each other and they are labeled *ibiragi,* a derogatory Kinyarwanda word for deaf people meaning "foolishness." In Uganda, the lead author's native country, the word used in one indigenous language to identify the Deaf is *kasiru,* a term that connotes stupidity. In Ethiopia a common identifier is *denkoro,* which means "those who cannot be enlightened." Some people in Ethiopia believe that deaf people are possessed by the devil and must be cured by witchcraft or purifying waters. The application of derogatory labels to the Deaf is, of course, not limited to African languages; the implications of English terms such as *deaf mute* and *deaf and dumb* are similarly offensive.

In some African societies, it is common for families to replace a deaf child's given name and replace it with a generic name, "the deaf one." Naniwe (1994) reported that in Burundi harmful stereotypes portray deaf individuals as dependent, sick, or tragic victims often subjected to family exclusion and social isolation, with the result that they generally are described by family members as quick tempered and aggressive. Naniwe quoted from an interview with a mother of the deaf child:

> When people see a deaf person on the street they have the impression that he is a well person, someone like everyone else. But...he is a brainless person, because you have to feed him, nourish him, dress him. In fact, you have to do everything for him. (p. 575)

Quality of Life

Although there is great diversity across nations, the quality of life for a large segment of the sub-Saharan African population is depressed; conditions common to developing nations in other parts of the world such as poverty, malnutrition, lack of access to education, and inadequate medical care are wide-

spread. Generally, the situation is worse in rural areas, where services are substandard and access to medical care often is not possible. A paradoxical situation exists: Although most of sub-Saharan Africa is rural, organizations of and for the Deaf are concentrated in large cities, leaving most deaf individuals marginalized and isolated from society. Although no data are available, it is probable that rural deaf Africans suffer even more from disease and malnutrition than the general population. For example, because of a lack of access to even the relatively limited mass communication that is available to hearing people and the absence of communication within family units, deaf individuals in sub-Saharan Africa may have no knowledge about the existence of HIV/AIDS or its cause, prevention, and treatment.

Gender Considerations

We stress that deaf women in the region often face triple discrimination because of deafness, gender, and poverty; this situation increases their vulnerability and exclusion and often results in physical and sexual abuse. Gender disparities are a critical issue in the education of African girls in general because of patriarchal, male-dominated societies, most of which still define women solely as wives and mothers and relegate them to inferior status. Boys get first priority in access to education, and it is common, especially in rural areas, for girls to remain home and tend to household chores. This has resulted in a widening educational gap between boys and girls. On the basis of a finding that 24 million African girls were not receiving a primary education, the United Nations Children's Fund (2001) launched the Girls' Education Movement, noting that in countries besieged by HIV/AIDS a lack of schooling can be life threatening. Deafness compounds the situation. Deaf girls are also exposed to relatively greater exploitation, violence, and abuse. Many deaf women, their freedom curtailed, are denied the

right to marry or to lead independent and fulfilling lives. Naniwe (1994) quoted the mother of a 33-year-old deaf woman:

> Do you think I consider my daughter to be like other children? Other daughters of her age already have three, four, or even five children. And her, what is she? Always dragging next to me, she never married: She will never be able to. (p. 88)

Naniwe learned from another source that this mother had forced her daughter to have an abortion.

Positive Developments

Despite the grim realities that hamper the lives of deaf individuals in sub-Saharan Africa, positive developments are occurring. Zimbabwe, Botswana, Uganda, and South Africa have prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities, and Uganda is one of the few countries in the world to recognize a national sign language (in this case, Ugandan Sign language) as an official language in its constitution (Yeo, 1999). Togo, Burkina Faso, and Benin have followed the lead of Uganda (Michailakis, 1997). The Ghanaian constitution commits Ghana to promote the welfare of its citizens with disabilities, foster equality of opportunity, and create environments that lead to social integration of these individuals. In Ethiopia, there is a weekly television news program for the Deaf that is presented in Ethiopian Sign Language.

The World Federation of the Deaf recently established the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Secretariat, which is concentrating on human rights, interpreting issues, and promotion of African sign languages. At Deaf Way II, an international festival held in July 2002 in Washington, DC, that was hosted by Gallaudet University, deaf representatives from 24 African countries participated.

In Nigeria, several of Andrew Foster's students have carried on his work, and

Total Communication has become the dominant mode of instruction in schools for the Deaf (Adepoju, 1999). Along with Kenya and South Africa, Nigeria is one of the leading countries in sub-Saharan Africa in the provision of high school educational opportunities to large numbers of deaf students. Nigeria's Ibadan University was the first institution of higher education in Africa to establish a department of special education. A highly regarded teacher training program for teachers of the Deaf has been established at Jos University, another Nigerian postsecondary institution. The Nigerian Educational Research Council has been working on Ibo, Hausa, and Yoruba sign language vocabularies. The progress of education of the Deaf in Nigeria is illustrated by the fact that Nigeria trails only Canada and China in the number of deaf students enrolled at Gallaudet University.

A recent development has been the creation of the *African Annals of the Deaf,* whose first issue is scheduled to go to press in the near future. This journal is projected to be a mechanism for development and dissemination of information of benefit to people who are deaf or hard of hearing throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and will follow the *African Journal of Special Education* as only the second scholarly journal on the continent focusing on people with disabilities.

Summary

Sub-Saharan Africa is an enormous region of more than 50 nations with a rich mosaic of peoples displaying complex racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. It is continuing to struggle to throw off the effects of colonial rule and the attendant plagues of poverty, disease, civil strife, and illiteracy. The condition of deaf members of sub-Saharan societies varies widely from area to area, with some nations having exemplary educational and social programs and others almost totally neglecting the needs of their deaf citizens. Deaf individuals living in poverty is rural areas tend to receive no services and are especially at risk. Those individuals who are deaf, poor, and female suffer from a triple handicap.

While even a primary education is not available to many deaf children, Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria are notable for providing access to secondary education, college and vocational alternatives, and teacher training programs, thus setting the stage for the appearance of highly educated deaf leaders. Issues such as the relative importance of indigenous sign languages and the use of ASL as the lingua franca have not been resolved. Multilingual countries, the most obvious example being South Africa, which not only have several spoken languages but several signed languages, provide intriguing challenges and opportunities. Clearly, there is an overall critical need for specialized programs to train a wide range of professional personnel to work with people in the region who are deaf.

Although detailed treatment of the subject is beyond the scope of the present article, the special situation in South Africa as it moves toward a multiracial democracy from the vestiges of apartheid deserves mention.* Apartheid imposed a system of rigid segregation. Whites, who made up about 13% of the population, controlled the economy and most of the land. Nine separate homelands were established for the major Black groups, each with its own language. Race registration laws were in effect and all non-Whites were required to carry passports at all times. It was not until the early 1990s that the apartheid laws were rescinded; free elections did not occur until 1994, when Nelson Mandela, who had spent 27 years in prison, was elected to head the government. In its present form, the country is less than 10 years old. It has 11 languages, including Afrikaans and English, and segregation is outlawed, although change occurs slowly. Until recently, education for children who are deaf was limited mostly to Whites, with some children of Indian heritage and some children classified as "colored" or mixed-race attending racially segregated schools. The situation has changed dramatically in a short period, with educational opportunities from elementary to postsecondary schools becoming available for all deaf students.

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