

AFRICAN SIGN LANGUAGES: CONTINENTAL TREASURES FOR AFRICA DAY

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This Africa Day provides us with a new opportunity to reflect on what it means to be African and refresh our pride in our African identity. While great strides have been made in terms of recognising South African Sign Language, the sign languages of Africa, SASL inclusive, are not being given enough recognition as “essentially African”. There are several reasons why they deserve more celebration as part of our African identity.

In their 2021 *World Report on Hearing*, the World Health Organisation noted that 5% of the world’s population (430 million people) are currently affected by moderate to high hearing loss. This percentage jumps to 25%, a quarter of the world’s population, when you include those who experience mild hearing loss. While Africa fares better than their Global North and Asian counterparts, the numbers are still significant: 3.6% (39.9 million) of the African population experience moderate to high hearing loss. Yet, recognition of, resources for, and information on sign languages in Africa is limited, despite the prevalence and growing awareness of the Deaf community. This suggests that a large number of Africans remain marginalised, reliant on others, and silenced simply because they communicate differently. Even more worryingly, a reliance on other Western sign language resources erodes locally produced sign languages which resonate strongly with our African values and deserve consideration and protection.

African sign languages are longstanding communal legacies. A quick Google search will reveal that Africa

has at least 25 sign languages, but this number has probably grown as the most accessible formal research was last published by Nobutaka Kamei over 10 years ago. While some of these sign languages have been derived from American Sign Language or have French or British origins, many of these sign languages are created locally. These locally produced sign languages represent several authentically African traits that I wish to highlight.

Firstly, these locally created sign languages predominantly develop among members of families that experience Deafness over multiple generations or among residents of areas with high levels of hereditary Deafness. Examples of this have been noted by Victoria Nyst such as Ghanaian languages Adamorobe Sign Language (which is a sign language created in Adamorobe, a village with a high rate of genetic Deafness) and Nanabin Sign Language (a home sign system developed by a family in Ekumfi with a high rate of genetic Deafness). These examples are important to know about as Disability Info SA explains:

A common misconception is that sign languages are somehow dependent on spoken languages: that they are spoken language expressed in signs, or that they were invented by hearing people. Sign languages, like all natural languages, are developed by the people who use them, in this case, deaf people, who may have little or no knowledge of any spoken language.

This fact alone highlights how African these languages are. Firstly, these languages are completely unique, completely produced by Africans, largely without influence from the West. Thus Emmanuel Asonye, Mary Edward, and Ezinne Emma-Asonye argue that “Both village sign languages and home sign systems are products of local communities and are therefore indigenous legacies”. They should be celebrated and protected as untainted African-ness. Secondly, these languages do not represent the legacy of a single individual but the legacy of communities and families – no one person can claim ownership of them or importance in the production, maintenance, and spread of these languages. What adds to this is the long histories of these languages: many are not recently developed but have existed since the 18th century and are, in fact, older than other popular foreign sign languages. African is therefore the mother of many things, including sign language, which has a rich and long history.

The idea that stories and proverbs are authentically African needs no justification. Stories in Africa are how we educate our children, share our ideas with others, and express our understanding of the world. As shown, sign languages are languages too and they can allow members of various communities to tell their stories in a

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way that allows them to express themselves fully and authentically. To fail to recognise African sign languages and lose them means one less way for us to share our true selves as Africans. Unfortunately, like English tends to dominate as a language in South Africa, Western sign languages, particularly American Sign Language, have come to dominate African sign languages. This is largely because, like with English in South Africa, there is constant contact between indigenous languages and powerful Western languages and the dearth of educational and business resources in indigenous languages means a reliance on resources in more powerful “global” languages. Indigenous sign languages are becoming endangered through this contact, and we face losing the histories, legacies, and authentically African values these African sign languages contain.

At a time when we might particularly be reflective on ideas of Ubuntu, community, legacy, and the strength of stories and proverbs, the origin of these languages is something to pride ourselves on and promote. It is time now to work to recognise and celebrate the addition these African sign languages make to our African identities, and urge those with the necessary political power to fund and support the development of what is a unique and valuable continental treasure.