



The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia

Deaf History: Middle Africa

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Much of the available history of deaf Africa focuses on Sub-Saharan Africa, which geographically is the area of the African continent that lies south of the Sahara. Middle Africa is a portion of the Sub-Saharan region. According to the United Nations, Middle Africa is composed of Angola, with a population of 20.82 million; Cameroon (21.7 million); Central African Republic (4.52 million); Chad (12.45 million); Democratic Republic of the Congo (65.71 million); Republic of the Congo (4.67 million); Equatorial Guinea (736,296); and Gabon (1.63 million). The combined deaf population is estimated at more than one million for the entire region, but accurate data are difficult to obtain for myriad reasons. More often than not, deaf individuals end up disappearing from school systems, workplaces, and society in general simply because they cannot hear.

One missionary organization that attempts to collect data on the number of deaf people in Africa and around the world is PeopleGroups.org. One specific affinity group they recognize is “Deaf Peoples.” PeopleGroups.org provides an overview of the Deaf Peoples affinity group and provides insight into who is included in the numbers. The Deaf Peoples affinity group includes those individuals typically classified as culturally Deaf—those who are deaf from birth or who became so early in life.

Historical Evidence

M. Miles compiled a significant number of resources that provide a glimpse into the history of deaf people across 42 African nations, some of which are Middle African countries. A significant focus of this work is the move from historical accounts of how hearing people provided services and educational tools to deaf people to documented accounts of how deaf people lived day to day. A second salient point of this work is the idea of deaf people having a voice of their own and being giving the public space to express it. A third significant point is the quality of the historical record and biases. It is important to evaluate the historical record with a critical eye, as a Eurocentric, male-centered bias can leave Deaf Black Africans, male and female, anonymous, subordinate, and voiceless in their own histories.

The compilation covers one thousand years of African history, from the 960s to the 1960s. Miles focused on this time period, as the historical data are not accessible to most deaf people in Africa. By reviewing sourced travelers’ accounts, legal and genealogical records, government reports, institutional and missionary archives, academic theses, linguistic studies, folklore, ethnography, novels, religious narrative, mime, and dance, Miles has taken a creative approach to organizing and giving access to the history of deaf Africans. These historical accounts provide examples of the lived experiences of deaf Africans of various ages and ethnicities before and during periods of total European domination.

Miles presents this work as an introduction to deaf people in Africa and suggests that a way to gather more historical evidence to substantiate the lived experiences of deaf people in Africa would be to complete oral histories.

Missionary Movement

Colonization and imperialism of Middle Africa by Europeans over several centuries has resulted in systemic inequalities for the indigenous people of Black/African ancestry. Poverty, disease, malnutrition, unemployment, poor education, and illiteracy are major concerns. With these challenges, persons with disabilities—specifically, deaf citizens—go unnoticed or receive minimal support. Most of the Middle African countries have insufficient resources to

educate their deaf populations adequately. The lives and history of deaf people in this region have not been documented sufficiently, and what does exist is not readily available, as it is limited and scattered. Some of the historical record of deaf people in this region, specifically, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, more generally, comes from the archives of missionaries.

The education of deaf children in Sub-Saharan Africa and, hence, Middle Africa began in the 19th century. Nassozi B. Kiyaga and Donald F. Moores discuss the role of Roman Catholics and Protestant denominations in creating schools for the deaf as a tool to convert Africans to Christianity. The resulting schools had limited access and did not reach those most in need because the majority of deaf Africans lived in poor rural areas. For those who did have access, they received an oral-only education and were not taught to use any manual or visual signs. This is mainly a result of the Milan Congress of 1880, which concluded that oral education was superior to hand gesturing or visual signing.

The missionary movement was the impetus for many schools for the deaf being established in Africa. The Republic of South Africa was the major beneficiary of such efforts, even to this day. Middle Africa did not fare as well as South Africa in terms of deaf education and the establishment of schools, but some missionary presence is evident. For example, the first Deaf school founded by French missionaries was established in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 1972. By comparison, the first Deaf school for White South Africans was established in 1863; and for Black South Africans, in 1933.

Andrew Foster (1927–1987), who is considered the father of deaf education in Africa, established 31 schools for the Deaf in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 20th century. Foster, a deaf African American missionary and Gallaudet University's first African American graduate, has left a lasting legacy of deaf education in Africa. Included in this legacy are the deaf individuals he encouraged to pursue higher education: Peter Okore Mba, Ezekiel Sambo, James Agazie, Theophilus Nwakpa, Victor Vodounou, Mackenzie Mbewe, Florence Serwaa Oteng, and others. In addition to establishing the schools, training teachers, and supporting further education, Foster introduced his total communication philosophy, which is a method that embraces both American signs and indigenous signs for communication.

The following is a brief timeline of the various Middle African countries where Andrew Foster's organization, Christian Mission for the Deaf (CMD), opened schools, Sunday schools, camps, and ministry centers to serve the Deaf.

1976	Moundou, Chad
1977	Kumba, Cameroon
1977	Bangui, Central African Republic
1979	Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)
1982	Libreville, Gabon
1982	Bunia-Nyankunde, DRC
1983	Lubumbashi, DRC
1983	Kalemie, DRC
1984	Bukavu, DRC
1985	Likasi, DRC
1985	Goma, DRC
1985	Kolwezi, DRC
1985	Kamina, DRC
1985	Mbuji-Mayi, DRC
1986	Matadi, DRC
1986	N'Djamena, Chad
1987	Kisangani, DRC
1987	Sarh, Chad
1987	Gemena, DRC
1996	Center in N'djamena, Chad
2002	Uvira, DRC

Although some of the schools are still supported by CMD, some have been turned over for others to operate, such as the national government or local groups; yet others may no longer be in operation due to civil war and tribal unrest. In the case of the Bangui school for the Deaf

in the Central African Republic, it was reported that the school remained in operation without funding for many years. Students showed up, and the remaining dedicated teachers taught without pay for many years. Without government stability and financial and human resources, deaf education in Middle Africa will be a slow and inconsistent process.

Middle African Deaf Schools and Organizations

Schools for the Deaf and organizations currently working to provide educational and other services to deaf individuals are not extensive or readily accessible. The Cameroon Deaf Empowerment Organization and the Buea School for the Deaf, also in Cameroon, are among some of the few schools and organizations assisting deaf people in the region.

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See also Africa, Eastern: Deaf Community; Deaf History: Southern Africa; Deaf International Development; Missionaries; Sign Language: Africa

Further Readings

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