Deaf Culture: the problems of recognition within contemporary Kenyan politics

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Abstract

Within Kenyan politics deafness as a socio-cultural phenomena is non-existent, deafness is considered a disability on par with other groups of disabled. This means that the educational system pays no special regards towards the specific linguistic needs of the deaf. This practice seems to be determined by a national ideology aiming at unification of the Kenyan nation. An ideology that on the educational level states the purpose of the school as being the production of Kenyan citizens as opposed to differing ethnic affiliations. In practice this ideology overrules the claims to linguistic and cultural rights extended from within the deaf community. The deaf themselves claim that it is a question of conscious disregard and suppression. However, it is a matter of discussion as to whether the concept of a deaf cultural identity is comprehensible within the reality of Kenyan politics today, where the quest is the unification of a country, which so far has suffered under a plethora of diverse cultural and ethnic affiliations. The argument to be made is that the state ideology of unity rhetorically repressing diversities creates an educational deadlock for the deaf, which creates a situation in which the deaf is preserved as politically and socially incompetent beings. This situation might well, to a lesser degree, apply to the situation of other ethnic and tribal groups, creating in practice an implicit but highly potent ethnic discrimination.

Key words: Deaf Culture, Kenyan Politics, national ideology

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Political Quest for Unity and Equality

A curious paradox characterizes contemporary Kenyan politics: on the one hand there is, among politicians and to a certain extend among lay-people, a frequent heard argument for a single civic citizenship and the unification of the Kenyan nation through the eradication of ethnic and tribal affiliations. On the other hand Kenya is famous - or rather, infamous - for what Fox refers to as a 'continuing game of tribal politics' (Fox 1996:603), where ethnic belonging is celebrated to the detriment of nationhood based on the principle of equal rights and dignity for all as individuals. During colonialism and in the time around independence, the Kenyan population was differentiated politically and economically along ethnic lines (Thorup and Hornsby 1998:7), creating or consolidating the modern ethnicities of contemporary Kenya. This process of ethnic construction had internal and external dimensions, which John Lonsdale (1994) have respectively characterized as 'moral ethnicity' and 'political tribalism'. While the internal dimension – 'moral ethnicity' – was the discursive arena within which ethnic identities emerged, with claims for land and reciprocal obligations, the external dimension – 'political tribalism' – emerged out of the consequences of colonialism, first as a collective force against the alien powers of the colonial state and then, increasingly, against the competing rival ethnicities for access to the state and its resources (Berman 1998:324).

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Within the educational system, this process of differentiation was compounded by the desire to create a stratified society to serve the interests of colonialism. In the time around independence, new ideals for educational practice were formulated, stressing equal opportunities and social justice, the restoration of an African personality, and the preparation of the Kenyan society for its place in the modern international community (Eshiwani 1993:15-40). This ideology emphasised the need to call into question previous and existing identities and solidarities, in effect making ethnicity an issue (Berman 1998: 325). The process of political development in post-colonial Kenya has been severely tainted by 'ethnicised' politics of independence (Kanyinga 1998: 43-4), state rhetoric of equality of citizenship and nation building notwithstanding. In the run-up to independence, popular forces, defined as elite nationalism, although divided along lines of ethnicity, took centre stage (Kanyinga 1998: 47-8). This process further enforced the necessity of clear ethnic identities, as these now were increasingly intertwined with the mandate to negotiate property rights and the relations of obligations and reciprocity of the moral economy (Berman 1998: 325). This in turn created a situation in which ethnic identities were stratified and only those with recognized ties of kinship and ethnicity could legitimately partake in this negotiation process. Consequently, contrary to the promulgated ideology of equality and political alliances, practice has offered a perpetuation of ethnic antagonism, maintaining an ethnic and tribal pattern of voting and rewards in politics, which in turn has been a means of preserving the political powers of the existing regime (Cowen and Kanyinga 2002: 130).

On the one hand, therefore, the ideology of equality based on a common civic citizenship can be understood as a rhetorical device for the legitimating of existing hierarchies and forms of political power. On the other hand – and this will be the argument pursued in the present chapter – the ideology of equality in dignity and rights, when articulated only or mostly at the level of rhetoric, provides a practical tool for the suppression of identities not following the existing subject categories in contemporary Kenyan politics. The Kenyan deaf population, whose best interests lie in forging cosmopolitan identities that challenge conventional assumptions on belonging, serve as an example of a group that is stigmatized and politically marginalised. Reductionists, and frozen ideas of identity, would rather force them into traditional identity markers for purposes of political expediency than afford the deaf the right and dignity to forge a new community and identity based on interests not identifiable with those pertaining to the existing ethnic categories. In this way, the predicaments of the deaf of Kenya are an example of the consequences of overly myopic, stubborn and insensitive articulation of primodial identities, even when official rhetoric is suggesting otherwise.

Perceiving Deafness[1]

In the international arena the issue of

[1]The material presented in this chapter is based on a one-year fieldwork carried out within the national deaf community in Nairobi and in St. Mary's School for the Deaf in Nyang'oma, Western Kenya. The fieldwork is based on participant observation within the deaf community, locally and nationally. Besides interviews has been conducted with locals and professionals. The fieldwork was a part of the Kenyan Danish Health Research Project, Danish Bilharzias Laboratory. The objective of the study was to investigate the conditions of deaf identity construction. The more specific aim was to uncover how their identification related to the familiar-local context and to the institutional context of the school. It is also sought to establish the influence of the deaf within the school community and the larger society in Kenya. In the present context I will focus on the discursive production of a distinct deaf identity in relation to the political project of national unification.

deafness has been problematized in a number of different ways throughout history. The two main models that impel the discourse, historically as well as at present, are the 'biomedical' as opposed to the 'socio-cultural' construction of deafness. One line of thought understood deafness as a condition that had to be "normalised", through educational compensation. This trend of thought later established itself as the biomedical model that attempted compensation through operative intervention and/or preventive measurements. The alternative construction describes deafness as a socio-cultural phenomenon. This construction, in Kenya as in most parts of the world, is focussed on the fight for the recognition of linguistic status as well as cultural identity.

A Kenyan deaf person, however, does not grow up aware of these contradictions, or of the possibility of a deaf identity. The process of realising deafness as a possible marker of identity does not start till a deaf person enters school; that is, *if* a deaf person enters school[2]. The school is the place where a Kenyan deaf person meets other deaf people, usually for the first time - and consequently, comes to realise deafness as a condition shared with others. The process of deaf-awareness begins with language acquisition and eventually progresses through narratives and stories told among the deaf, about deafness and its terms of distinction in relation to society in general.

In Kenya deafness is produced within different contexts: the local, the political and within the deaf community itself. Locally deafness has traditionally been understood as the work of witchcraft and this as a bad omen bestowed on the deaf individual as well as his or her entire family. This perception is however changing in favour of a more "modernized" outlook, which explains the occurrence of deafness as due to biomedical processes internal to the body. This change in perception has to a majority of the local Kenyan population, destigmatized the condition so that the shame earlier connected to having a deaf in the family has largely been removed:

> In the olden times people thought that deafness was some kind of madness brought about through the evil powers of some witch. Then the missionaries came and build the school for the deaf [...] Now, many years after, we have learnt that the deaf are like normal people, it is just their ears that cannot hear. Now they go to school and sit for exams just like the normal children. (elderly Luo man)

The merit of a changed perception of the deaf is here accorded the advent of deaf schooling and the ability of the school to mould the deaf according to a conceptualisation of what constitutes the "normal". What eventually will be evident in the course of this article are the kinds of influences and consequences created by a national ideology of equality: On the one hand deafness is, as among the Local Luo population, reconstructed as something approaching normality; on the other hand, this quest for normalization within the educational system becomes the dominant force in a remarginalization of the deaf as incompetent beings.

[2]Kenya has around forty-one schools for the deaf, with an average of a hundred students each. Nyang'oma School for the Deaf is presently the largest in Kenya and boards 170 pupils. The exact size of the Kenyan deaf population is unknown. In 1985 Ndurumo made an estimation for Kenya, using the 10 per cent of the general population provided by the United Nations as the minimum estimate of the disabled in any given country. The outcome was 1,835,550 people, of whom the hearing-impaired numbered 110,370 (0,6 per cent) in total (Ndurumo 1993: 11). Taking into consideration the increase in population since 1984/1985 roughly doubles these numbers. The Kenyan National Association of the Deaf (KNAD), however, claims that these numbers are gross underestimates and propose 1 million as a more realistic figure (personal communication with the KNAD secretary, November 1998).

The ideology of unification in the context of Formal Education

In Kenya a proclaimed precondition for attaining the objective of unification has been, and is, the ability of the educational setting to create a common unification of a population divided by religious and ethnic affiliations. In 1964 the first commission on education in Kenya introduced this as a key element: "A urgent objective of education is to subserve the needs of national development [...] Education must promote social equality and remove divisions of race, tribe and religion (Republic of Kenya 1964:25). Similarly in the middle of the 1970s a National Committee on "Educational Objectives and Policies" stated as one of its main concerns: "... the need to promote national unity and culture. The promotion of cultural practices that are of value in educational and scientific development and in national unity will need to be promoted and supported" (quoted in Närman 1995:182). In line with this the 'official' goal of the present 8-4-4 system[3], as formulated by the Ministry of Education in 1994, goes as follows: "Kenya has one fundamental goal for her education: to prepare and equip the youth to be happy and useful members of Kenyan Society. To be happy they must learn and accept the national values and to be useful they must actively work towards the maintenance and development of the Society" (Kenya Institute of Education 1994: xi, quoted in Dahl 1999: 34).

In practice this goal is continually stressed, especially in connection with Swahili language classes, where textbooks as an introduction will state that the learning of Kiswahili by all Kenyans is essential for the unification of the nation, and to becoming a member of the society. In similar terms the teachers stress the importance of learning Kiswahili:

> In order to become a citizen of the Kenyan nation it is important to learn Kiswahili. This is our national language and the future of our nation. If the pupils do not acquire an ability to communicate in this language how will they survive, how will they be able to feed themselves. (teacher at Nyang'oma School for the Deaf)

Special institutions do not have a distinct position in this structure. The content and aim of the curriculum is the same as that of mainstream education, teachers have the same training and the system of appointment is the same[4]. Despite the existence of the Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE), only approximately 5% of teachers have special educational training, others will be offered a three-month 'in-service training'. In practice this means that very few teachers have any prior knowledge of deafness at the time of assignment and consequently do not have any skills in relation to communicating with the deaf pupils. Until the late 1980s, and early 1990s, this non-discriminatory attitude was not an ideological problem, as the method of instruction then was based on the ideology of "Oralism". The Oral method, as the name implies, prescribes the use of verbal language exclusively as the method of instruction in schools. In 1988 the use of Sign Language was legalised and initially introduced as an experiment in a couple of schools. Although this did have the positive result of allowing communication in signs, there were a few obstacles to an unreserved celebration of the initiative: first of all because the education of the teachers did not allow for anywhere near optimal communication and secondly because the sign lan-

[3]The 8-4-4 refer to a system of education containing 8 years of primary school, 4 years secondary and 4 years to obtain a university degree.

[4]Teachers are appointed in schools according to a centralized administrative system. Teachers can make a wish for a particular placement but there is no guarantee what so ever that the wish will come true.

guage format suggested consisted of "Signed Exact English" (SEE). Basically, SEE consists of the replication of spoken English in signs. As many spoken words like *a, an, the, to* do not exist as separate terms in sign language, fitting signs were invented and the rest were adopted from American sign language. The result was that the language produced was more or less incomprehensible to deaf Kenyans. The structure and the actual signs were different from what were already spoken. However, the experiment did show positive results due to the simple fact that the pupils were now allowed to use their hands and gestures. Yet communication between teachers and pupils remained minimised and therefore the evident effects of the initiative remained marginal.

At the beginning of the 1990s most schools adopted a combined method, where signing functioned as a supportive element to the oral approach. This method named "Simultaneous Communication" (SINCOM), was practised as either Signed Exact English (SEE) where every single word in the English sentence construction is equalled with a sign, often invented for the very purpose, or practised under the philosophy of Total Communication (TC), using all available means: visual, gestural and spoken language. With this change in educational policy the issue of teachers' education became a serious problem. However, the problem remained confined to the level of the school and was never discussed in relation to educational policy. Overshadowed by other problems, defined top-down, a resolution was never attained. Therefore, today, the education of the deaf is an area of much confusion with schools formulating their own objectives and strategies. The schools apply the languages as to their abilities and likings. St. Mary's School for the Deaf in Nyang'oma practised Total Communication. Nevertheless there was not much consistency in the way different teachers applied the method. Some teachers would speak while adding a few signs, others would write on the blackboard and finally a few would use signs combined with visual material. Basically the method of total communication boils down to another "oral" method complemented with gestures and signs.

> Using the method of total communication we speak and use signs at the same time. This will enable the deaf to watch our mouth movements and with time they will learn to li- read and speak. (teacher at Nyang'oma School for the Deaf)

However some teachers hold that this practice is undermining the goal of the deaf education and continue to speak in favour of the oral method:

> During the time of the oral method the Deaf could really speak and understand what you said to them, but now nobody understands anything, at that time they were just like normal people, this signing is not good. (teacher at Nyang'oma School for the Deaf).

Basically, the ideology of normalcy is maintained in the method of Total Communication. The sign-supported language employed here is just another means to achieve the goal of normalisation. The use of true sign language, the sign language spoken by the deaf themselves, has, due to the quest for normalization, never been realized. This is partly due to political obstacles, and partly due to problems concerning the practical organisation of teachers' education and appointment procedures.

This educational field has great importance for the deaf in Kenya, first and foremost because the physical setting of the school is the very point of departure for the creation of individual awareness of his or her deafness. The almost incomprehensible fact is that many deaf children live the first six to seven years – and considerably more if they are not send to school - of their lives among hearing family members, some not knowing what is the matter with their children, let alone how to communicate with them. Second, the school represents the possibility of a

Deaf identity and creation of a language. And third, the educational policy of the school - the methods of instruction applied in the school - are of political concern to the Deaf, as these exert considerable power over deaf children's possibility to acquire knowledge and education.

This school practice reflects a political inability to recognise and provide for representation of Deafness as a socio-cultural phenomenon. According to the educational system, the purpose is normalisation of the deaf. The practices employed, however, produce a situation in which the deaf are continuously reconstructed as incompetent, as they fail their exams and in general fail to live op to the demands posed by the educational system. Instead of providing for the difference and richness that Deafness brings, efforts has been made to mainstream them through a pedagogy of oppression or subjection, and by the insensitivity that being defined as normal brings about. This in turn underpins the difficulty entailed in assimilating a principle of equality with that of universalism (Taylor 1992:39), here taking the form of a nationally mainstreamed education.

These conditions, provided the deaf within the conventional educational system, serve to present deaf students as academically incompetent. As will be explained in the following section, this in turn legitimises a discourse that describes them as mentally underdeveloped and following provides the justification for the normalization quest.

Remaking the Incompetent

Deafness is something caused by sickness or this hereditary thing that was introduced recently; something in the blood. For example it is hereditary if the child has blue eyes or has some white patches of hair on it's head like mine. Or it can be caused by the mothers excessive use of drugs during pregnancy, especially the first three months, if for example the Doctor prescribes some very strong drugs. (Teacher at Nyang'oma).

Teachers and professionals generally support the biomedical definition of deafness as a physical impairment caused by illnesses such as malaria, measles, mumps and mothers use and misuse of drugs during pregnancy. Teachers always discard the possibility that deafness can be caused by witchcraft or by intervention from God. Their descriptions do not, however, coincide with the description given by biomedicine. Teachers claim that deafness is due to damage of a specific centre in the brain that controls speech and language. A majority of the teachers at the school gave me information on deafness that explained it as a condition related to mental disability:

> The problem with the deaf is that they forget very easy, you tell them one thing one day and the next day they have forgotten (...) this is because they have elements of mental retardation. (Teacher at Nyang'oma School for the Deaf)

> The centre for hearing is located in the brain and when a sickness hits this part of the brain it affects other parts as well, therefore, you see, many deaf have other handicaps as well. (Teacher at Nyang'oma School for the Deaf)

> With the deaf you must be very patient because they might not understand what you are telling them and you might have to repeat again and again and stress your questions so that they are very clear. You see the deaf are very narrow minded they know only the world through their eyes. (Teacher at Nyang'oma School for the Deaf)

> And once during a teachers meeting aimed at writing a recommendation for an educational evaluation team, teachers agreed on the following: "Deaf students need special programmes due to their mental inability" (Teacher, during teachers staff meeting).

These excerpts, selected from numerous similar statements made by teachers and other representatives of the educational system, illustrate some general misconceptions among the school professionals. Most prominent is the perception that the deaf are inferior mentally due to some damage done to a specific centre in the brain controlling speech, hearing and language. These views are possibly a product of the discourse on deafness that exists on the level of teacher's education. I obtained the following notes from a teacher that had recently attended an 'in-service' educational course on deafness:

Deafness: Lack of audition leads to loss of language and considerably elimination of sound threatens our well being. Processing of what we hear depends on the fidelity of the sensory organ of hearing. Therefore its total elimination will result in distorted pattern of auditory information.

Deafness affects: Mental Development, because it prevents language development, which is an important aspect of mental development. The Intelligence of a person [...] Deafness affects relation and recall facilities [...] The deaf are poor in tasks calling for a deduction of a principle [...] Deafness affects social maturity of an individual. Affecting early life, self help, [...] socialisation and occupation.

The most striking feature in these notes is the understanding of deafness as inhibiting mental and intellectual development as well as social maturation of a person. The main reason being: "lack of language". It is possible to distinguish between two explanations for the mental disablement of the deaf. Some explain it as caused by the social condition of not being able to communicate with people while others claim that it is a physical affection of the brain that occurred simultaneously with the illness that caused the deafness. I expected that the social versus biological determination of causes would represent a corresponding divergence in the ideas of how deaf education was to be effected and to what extent it would be possible. However, most would not stick to one or the other but often incorporate both so that a particular deaf would have biological as well as social factors that determined his or her mental inability.

As evident here the "ideology of normalcy" (Hacking 1990: 168, Davis 1995: 27) is a forceful factor among the professionals within the educational system. This quest for normalcy or 'equality' is an essential part of the national project of Kenya. It is a modernization project, which, in principle, the Kenyan policy makers expect to have implemented through educational policies aimed at eradicating ethnic and tribal affiliations, and consequently any identification, which does not fit the objective of unity and equality of citizenship. In the educational policy this ideology is presented in the form of objectives that impel the school to aim at educating the pupils to be useful members of the Kenyan state. Paradoxically this principle of equality in education serves to represent the deaf as incompetent beings, in turn prompting the deaf community to opt for a discourse on difference.

Deafness as a socio-cultural phenomenon

The political discourse going on within the deaf community is a product of the way deafness is perceived in the public and especially within the educational and other governmental institutions. This highlights the need to take a closer look at how deafness is defined and articulated by the deaf themselves.

There was no doubt right from the beginning of my fieldwork that the concept of 'deafness' carried enormous importance. The first thing I noticed was the way the sign DEAF was made significant as an opposition to the sign HEARING[5]. Later on in my

[5]Words directly translated from signs will throughout the text be written in small capital letters as: DEAF. Translating sign language into verbal and written language is a complex task. In the course of this paper I will at times present

observations, I realised that the term "deaf" implied still further complexities. There was a distinction not just in the way the term was applied differently by the deaf and the hearing respectively, but also in the way distinctions were defined internally within the deaf group. The concept of deafness constructed within the distinction between DEAF and HEARING is a notion created as a reaction on the way deafness has been simplified in the history written of it by hearing people. It is a notion that rejects, builds upon or supersedes deafness as a biomedical condition and recreates it as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Within Deaf communities, the reaction against the "hearing notion of deafness" (Wrigley 1996) is exemplified in a preoccupation with the distinction between 'Deaf', in uppercase, and 'deaf' as a lowercase term. The latter refers to the simple fact of audiological impairment, and describes the way deafness is conceptualised by the hearing. 'Deaf' in uppercase, on the other hand, is used to refer to the cultural category of self-identification. A KNAD information leaflet describes it as follows:

> Deaf people all over the world view themselves as belonging to a linguistic minority with its own culture. This Deaf community has its own language (Sign Language) and specifically for the Kenyan Deaf Culture - Kenyan Sign Language (KSL). Deaf Culture has its own history, shared values, social norms, customs and technology which are transferred from generation to generation. The term "Deaf" is written with a capital "D" - in the same way as one refers to "Black people" using a capital "B". (KNAD document/leaflet 1998)

Evidently the distinction between upper- and lowercase D/deaf carries a range of political implications. A second feature of the Deaf/deaf distinction is the way it is applied internal to the Deaf community. According to Wrigley the "d/D" distinction is now used primarily to exclude those who have failed to select the politically correct coping strategy (Wrigley 1996:107-108). Applied as an internal differentiation, the lower- and upper-case usage of the term distinguishes between "Hearing-identified deaf" and "Deaf-identified Deaf" (Wrigley 1996:108), that is, it becomes an opposition defining a bad versus a good positioning within the Deaf community. In Kenya, this distinction is drawn in the light of the communicative system that one applies. Using Signed Exact English (SEE) and - even worse - attempting to articulate words verbally, implies that the person in question subscribes to the educational policy of mainstreaming, the implication being that the deaf must learn to get by in society on the conditions outlined by the hearing population. In Kenya a deaf person inhabiting these viewpoints will, by other Deaf people, be spoken of as FAKE DEAF, CHEATING DEAF, or the equally derogatory, HARD OF HEARING, the reasoning being that this person is SUPPRESSIVE and that s/he "follow the way of the hearing". From a Deaf point of view this conformity to hearing ideals is considered trespassing of a very serious nature. "True Deafness", on the other hand, is, according to the Deaf, achieved by using

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statements given by deaf in the sign order of the sign language. This is however, contrary to the immediate impression of exactness, not an exhaustive interpretation of the statement. A large part of the meaning conveyed through sign language is passed on around the factual signs and the translation is simplified without these. For example: there will be nothing in the actual signs and structure of signs indicating the difference between a statement and a question; this is, in practice, made clear through facial expressions - in this particular instance, eyebrows will be, respectively, lowered or raised. In the above example the expressive means (the eyebrows) are readily identifiable. In other situations, however, the means are much less obvious and might have to be interpreted in relation to the general context of a conversation. It is important for the reader to keep these points in mind when reading the material presented in what follows.

what is, in Deaf discourse, termed the "true sign language" - that is, the Kenyan Sign Language, and preferably signed without any movements of the mouth[6].

The Deaf as a linguistic minority, as a cultural group as well as a community, are conceptualisations that one continually encounters when going through the literature dealing with the issue of deafness. The perception of the Deaf as a linguistic minority is based on a history in which sign language, and the formation of a constructive Deaf identity, have been subject to discrimination and oppression. Within the Kenyan Deaf population the sign for 'linguistic minority' does not exist, at the time of writing, although the concept does exist in the elite rhetoric in written form. I posits, however, that this self-understanding finds expression in the way the Deaf speak about themselves as "suppressed by the hearing" and the lack of understanding that some point to in order to account for the trouble concerning the communicative system applied as means of instruction in schools.

In the literature on deafness the concept of community is often used to describe the deaf as a group. The concept is to be understood partly as a relational idea partly as an essential idea. The relational aspect defines community in terms of boundary (see Barth 1969, Cohen 1985), as "a group of people that have something in common with each other, which distinguishes them in significant ways from members of other putative groups" (Cohen 1985:12). Among the Deaf there are markers confirming the external difference and the internal similarity. The most obvious physical, as well as symbolic, marker is the sign language. According to Cohen (1985) the necessity of the boundary marker is "that it encapsulates the identity of the community and, like the identity of the individual, is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction" (Cohen 1985:12). A marker that seems often to identify a community is that of locality. In the instance of the Deaf this is also the case, although in a less obvious sense. Deafness appears indiscriminate of locality[7] and many deaf people do grow up without ever coming into contact with other deaf people. However, among the deaf people who enter school, the locality of the school will function as a reference point. Furthermore, once a deaf person has been through school and acquired a sense of identification with and of belonging to this group, this person will usually maintain a maximum of physical contact with the group.

[6]I did not initially realise the meaning connected to not using mouth movements when signing. My complete ignorance of other sign languages did not prompt me to consider the relevance or irrelevance of mouth movements. Sign language was in my mind characterised by a minimum of facial expressions and never entailed movements of the mouth. However, as I later understood, movements of the mouth constitute an intrinsic part of American as well as Danish sign language. My initial explanation for the phenomenon of the missing mouth articulation in Kenyan sign language was that the deaf did not know the translation of a majority of the signs. This might be one of the explanations; however, when posing the question directly to Deaf pupils, many would be consciously opposed to using mouth movements, and were able to explain this opposition with reference to the method of Oralism as being suppressive (Signed: ORAL FOLLOW SUPPRESSION BAD or just ORAL BAD/SUPPRESSIVE), that it is disliked (signed: LIKE NOT FINISH) or stating that it is shameful and embarrassing (Signed: SHAME FINISH).

[7]It is necessary to make a reservation with regard to this statement. Groce's record of the situation in Marthas Vineyard, in the middle of this century, is one known exception to this rule. Amongst the Vineyard dwellers there was an exceptionally high percentage of deaf people. According to Groce (1985), the reason was the presence of two interrelated factors: 1) a considerable part of the population carried the gene for hereditary deafness, and 2) a high level of inbreeding on the island. Another exception (with I am only vaguely familiar) is the Deaf village just north of Accra in Ghana.

For the Deaf the issue of identity and difference is of high significance both socially and politically. Sign language claims a very central position in the construction and maintenance of the cultural unit. The issue of distinctiveness stressed by the deaf is brought up constantly in the deaf political discourse continually created and re-created in what they themselves call storytelling[8].

The Political story

The political story is aimed at debating the condition that deaf people in Kenya are subjected to. An illustrative example is the following abstract from a story told by Austin, a deaf secondary school leaver. Before he begins his story these words are written on the blackboard: "Traditional and social understanding of the deaf". The story goes:

'Traditional refers to the past; social refers to the present understanding of deafness. Traditionally deaf people were thought to be mad. In the past a deaf born child would not be allowed to stay alive, because people believed that this child was bad, they thought that maybe this was the result of witchcraft and that the deaf child was the reincarnation of the devil - later it was believed to be the work of God if somebody was born deaf, but traditionally if you were born deaf, that was the end of your life. If a deaf were not killed there would be no happiness in his/her life. The child would live locked up with the family separated from the outside society. It is the same now - a pregnant mother gives birth to a deaf child. Traditionally people would see that it was a deaf child and throw it in the bush for the wild animals, because people thought that the child was crazy - How could God give us a crazy child? - The same continues. It is true that traditionally people did not understand much. We see the continuation in the present time. Nowadays it is different from the traditional understanding; there has been a move forward. Maybe back in 1969 when the school in Nyang'oma was build, people started to understand a little about deafness'.

What is central in this story as well as other stories told by the deaf about traditional and present ways of perceiving and cooping with deafness is as self-constructed image portraying the deaf as victims of ignorance. Traditionally, supposedly this victimization resulted in death today the deaf are victims of intellectual marginalization:

> It is certain that all the people in our local village thought that I was mad, they could not believe that I was going to school - then later when I got a job in the KNAD office in Nairobi they were so surprised - only then they could believe that I was not mad. (Charles, 26 years).

This issue is often debated in pupil's stories especially in relation to the school and the educational system:

> Deaf schooling is a big problem. The problem in this school is that the teachers do not know sign language, therefore, when they are teaching they speak, use a little signs and write on the blackboard. The deaf do not understand, and when we ask them questions they do not understand us. Therefore they think that we are stupid, and often they say that we are stupid, but the truth is that if someone explains in proper sign language we understand very well and then we remember just like other people. (Vitalis, 17 years).

> It is hard to understand the teachers but it is OK with the other deaf. The teachers' sign language is different. Teachers do not understand me, that is a problem. With peers the understanding is good. Teachers become angry because they

[8]Different kinds of stories exist, all to do with the construction of identity. The life story narrative constructs identity on a personal and interpersonal level. The so-called 'funny story' is a rituralistic staging of that identity, and the political story positions deafness as an identity within the political arena. All story forms are essential elements in the deaf construction of identity, hereby illustrated by the political story.

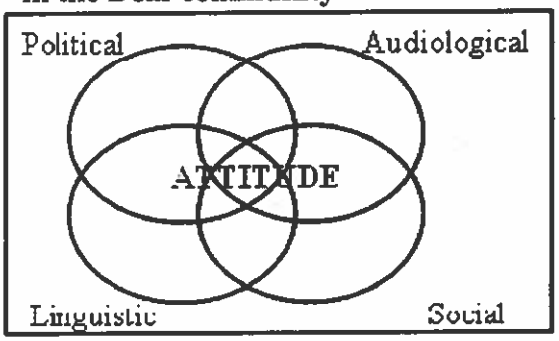
> think I am rude. Education is useless and teachers do not know how to care for deaf children, some teachers call us foolish (Gertrude, 14 years).
>
> The teachers think that we are stupid - which is not true. How can we learn when they do not know our language? They say that it is hard, but do you think it is hard? Some have been here for more than 10 years and how much sign language do they know? That is because they do not want to learn. It is surely suppression (Simon, 12 years).

As evident the political story is an explicit discourse on Deafness and the conditions that deaf people face in relation to especially the educational system. The focus for the political story is the oppressive elements inherent in educational policy and attitudes held by the hearing population in general. Another element, which is given much stress, is the distinctiveness of deafness and its terms of difference in relation to the surrounding society.

The politicization of deafness

The stories referred to above are eventually constructed as an explicit political discourse, as an instance of oppositional construction. The politics of opposition and belonging that are nurtured in relation to surrounding communities and institutions play a very important role in the construction of Deafness as an identity. As evident from the foregoing, there is a high degree of awareness among deaf pupils of deafness as a differing sociality within a larger domineering society. Furthermore they exhibit a consciousness about this sociality as inhabiting values and norms that differ from that of the hearing majority. On the national level these values are made very explicit. The Kenyan National Association of the Deaf (KNAD) has, besides the explicit application of terms like minority, culture and community in their definition of deafness, applied the following model in order to outline the content and evaluations that are specific to this community:

Figure 2: The four avenues to membership in the Deaf community



Audiological refers to actual loss of hearing ability. Political refers to the potential ability to exert influence on matters which directly affect the Deaf community on a Local, Provincial and National levels. Linguistic refers to the ability to understand and use Sign Language fluently. Social refers to the ability to participate in social events of the Deaf community. Hearing people, e.g. parents, relatives, professionals or friends, can be accepted as members of the deaf community only if they have an appropriate attitude towards the Deaf community. This means that they can enter into the Deaf community via three avenues: political, linguistic and social. (KNAD document/leaflet, 1998)[9]

What stands out in this definition is the stressing of Deafness as something that is related to an "appropriate attitude". This attitude concerns the "recognition of Deaf people as a cultural minority, that is, acceptance of the sign language as the natural language of the Deaf people, an acceptance that again include the acknowledgement of the community as being a sub-cultural group of the wider world" (KNAD 1997:2). In factual life it seems that this attitude is closely related to actual language use. This point might be evident from the following field-

[9]An identical figure was produced by Lawson 1980 (in Brien 1981: 49).

note abstract: on visiting Karen Technical School for the Deaf, I was introduced by a teacher to a class of girls doing home science. I explain a little about what I am doing. A girl standing nearby signs to another girl ENGLISH DEAF SIGN SAME (meaning: "the English (a general term used for all white people) speaks the same sign language as the Deaf) and she asks, although it had been clarified, DEAF TRUE (meaning: are you sure you are not Deaf). When asked why she thinks so, she explains DEAF HEARING SIGN DIFFERENT, i.e. that the Sign Language of the hearing differ from that of the Deaf. The point made here is that a deaf person on the basis of the sign language used by a speaker knows whether s/he is deaf or not. Hearing people with knowledge of signs are rare and usually they will be teachers of the deaf. The sign language used by teachers is limited first of all because they are restricted in relation to using the language in the ordinary conversational form and mainly use it in teaching situations, and secondly because the policy of many schools is that the language used by teachers must be Signed Exact English (signing according to English word order), which is far removed from the reality of signing among deaf.

The kind of sign language used, being an important element in the differentiation between members and outsiders, is likewise employed as a device for making internal distinctions within the community. During my fieldwork period in Nairobi I met two Deaf adults who insisted on using Signed Exact English (SEE), claiming to be completely Deaf, and formal members of the Deaf Association (KNAD). However, within the community they were spoken of as FAKE DEAF, indicating that they in fact are hearing, pretending to be deaf, and covering up some subversive interest. Alternatively, the slightly less pejorative term "Hard-of-Hearing" was used to describe a person who is trying to pass as hearing. To other deaf, this means somebody who is invested in denying their Deafness and simultaneously engaged in subverting the Deaf political agenda. Another person who was fully accepted as a member of the deaf community and always presented himself as Deaf, was in fact only partially deaf. He never used his speech or hearing when there were other deaf people around, and he never told me this until one day when we were alone. A subsequent inquiry showed that in fact most of the deaf knew, and acknowledged, the advantage of his hearing ability. He knew his role well, acted like a Deaf, and therefore nobody questioned his identity as Deaf. Seemingly in Kenya, actual language use has great importance, and a story told will simply be classified as bad or boring if it is signed in SEE. The reaction on a bad story is either to ignore it and leave the narrator without spectators or to tell the person that the use of SEE is a bad act. The standpoint forwarded in these situations is that "true sign language KSL is the natural language of the deaf in Kenya - using SEE is equivalent to suppressing deafness". Language use is not just a question of linguistics but also simultaneously a question of a person's ideological position in relation to deafness.

Paradoxes of equality

It is hard to imagine a more complete clash of positions than the one represented by the Kenyan state and by the Kenyan Deaf community respectively. The Kenyan national project of unification is based on a politics of equality while the deaf community speak in favour of equal dignity and rights in practice, which would guarantee the pursuit and fulfilment of their interests and aspirations as a community united by a common predicament: deafness. In other words, the deaf are just as interested in the politics of recognition and representation, only not from the ethnic platform familiar to the Kenyan government and state. Both of these liberal political strategies stress the prospect of an integrated nation in which all have equal possibilities, rights and dignity. On the surface, it is a rhetorical dispute discussing the

way to achieve equality and dignity (see Taylor 1994). While the discussion led by Taylor is highly relevant, it fails to pay attention to underlying and highly compelling political issues. In the present case, one of these issues is about the contradiction in contemporary Kenyan politics, and the confusion this creates in relation to the real goals of the government and state. Another issue is epistemological, and deals with the extent to which the Kenyan government and state, which function largely in the world of the so-called 'normal', can genuinely comprehend deafness as a warranted identification that calls for an alternative system of education. Yet another highlights how deafness, as a predicament that is largely ignored or greeted with prejudice and stereotypes, has contributed in exposing the contradictions of Kenyan state politics: taking equality in citizenship and rights, while turning a deaf ear to individuals and groups clamouring for the translation into practice of such official rhetoric. When and if there is such translation, it is often done from the insensitive position of comfort, privilege and power enjoyed by bureaucrats and the ruling elite, so that powerless minorities of various kinds end up the losers.

Language and education are examples of areas where the state seems much more eager to translate into practice its rhetoric of equal citizenship and national unity. But in the case of the deaf, as is the situation with other linguistic minorities, the question of language is taking centre stage. According to the deaf, this ideology of equality, when applied to language, education and the problem of deaf schooling, has the highly unfavourable effect of making 'incompetent' individuals of the deaf. This is the case regarding simple knowledge acquisition and the pupil's ability to pass examinations that would grant access to secondary and tertiary education and eventually place some deaf in a position from where they might be able to exert real influence. Therefore, the conclusion must be that the politics of unification and equal rights, when pursued in the form of common language and common educational system for all, has the paradoxical result of promoting an educational practice that disables the deaf in relation to gaining the very knowledge and skills with which to engage in society on an equal footing.

The epistemological predicament here is that the government operates according to a hierarchy of knowledge that defines the deaf according to a 'normality' ideal. The deaf divergence from this ideal state handicaps their political project; it is an ideological obstacle added to the practical. Although the practical is very influential in terms of language barriers and a severe lack of interpreters, the ideological is a great deal more extensive, and deals with the way deafness is categorized and recognised socially. The problem for the deaf in Kenya is that people question their ability to *have* a standpoint. According to the deaf themselves, the ability of the government to acknowledge their claim to a distinct identity and culture is a matter of outright oppression. It is, however, possible to discuss this postulate. On the one hand, the political resistance towards recognising the deaf as a cultural group could be related to a potential undermining of the overall national project. On the other hand, there is much reason to believe that the deaf proposal is simply incomprehensible due to the fact that this is a condition known to be inhibiting and undesirable, and as such, entirely unknown as a medium of positive identification. That is to say that the claim to a deaf identity promulgated by the deaf community is hard, if not impossible, to comprehend within contemporary Kenyan politics.

While the rhetoric of unity formulated by the Kenyan government is aimed at the establishment of a nation-state populated by Kenyans as opposed to tribal groupings, this rhetoric has provided a cover for a political practice that encourages political factions along ethnic lines. In turn, this provides the power for the Kenyan government to main-

tain its political power (Cowen and Kanyinga 2002:130). This created considerable confusion as to the sincerity of the governmental project. The deaf claim to a distinct cultural identity is, besides questioning government's sincerity about its rhetoric on equality of citizenship and rights, a request for the recognition of an unconventional subject category. Instead of defining themselves through existing categories derived from ethnic affiliation, they promulgate a new way of thinking the political categories along the lines of common predicaments and dynamic social relations. The categorisation proposed by the deaf is based on a translation into reality on the state rhetoric of the needs for positions moulded and formed by the idea of a nation-state populated by citizens, as socio-politically defined individuals, rather than by ethnic groupings. The deaf do identify along ethnic lines when it suits them, but politically, they challenge the centrality of ethnicity in contemporary Kenya. All deaf stress that deafness is primary, as an emotional category as well as a political project. Deafness is a socially shaped problem and deafness as identification is, to a considerable extent, a product hereof. In other words, deafness as a socially constituted emotional category, without the existing recognised kinship ties legitimating political requests, threatens to lessen the importance of existing ethnic subject categories in favour of positions derived from equality of citizenship and rights. To the deaf, outgrowing the existing ethnic categorisation in favour of a politics organised on the basis of socio-political interests is a promising condition on which deafness can exist. This could encourage a different jind of populism in politics, targeting different groups of disadvantaged or other alternative sub-cultural groupings. Ultimately, if this trend developed,. it could, it could pose a threat to the way in which political power is presently articulated in Kenya. As such, this argument proposes that the attempt to mainstream the deaf may well be a conscious political strategy in favour of power and real indicators of legitimacy in Kenya.

Conclusion

The foregoing represents an attempt to sketch the conditions surrounding the claim of the Kenyan Deaf community to be recognized as a cultural and linguistic minority. Today the position on the question remains one of agreement of goal but disagreement as concerns means for attaining this goal. From the standpoint of the deaf community distinctiveness and positive discrimination are the means in reality, while the government has largely remained at the official rhetoric on nation building and equal citizenship. Among the deaf, it has been suggested that the motives underlying the ideology of equality is really one of power and control, not just with regards to the national project, but also with regards to the creative thinking of the population. One may question, however, these postulates on the basis of the way deafness traditionally has been and, to a certain extent, is constructed and realised today. These unfavourable representations might blunt the possibility of deafness ever being really harnessed or perceived as an asset by the wider society.

The standstill in the situation of the deaf in Kenya has lasted for more than ten years, as there has been no major breakthrough since the formal legitimisation of the sign language as a method of instruction in schools. The vicious circle of the non-discriminatory educational policy continues to produce individuals, who despite awareness of own plight, are formally re-produced as being incompetent. The situation of the deaf in Kenya has numerous parallel examples in other African, Asian and some European countries. As illustrated in the foregoing, the cry for normalcy does not, as the political argument goes, offer the individual equality and dignity. Rather, the ideology of normalcy has proven to be a process of oppression, where individual access to

knowledge and political participation is drastically limited.

In a number of ways, the marginalisation of the deaf equals that experienced by the politically marginalised ethnic populations in Kenya and elsewhere. The paradox in Kenyan politics has disfavoured ethnic groups partly in terms of their access to knowledge, downgrading the diffusion of knowledge in local languages. Furthermore, the contingences of political practice have promulgated the importance of ethnic identities, making these central idioms of access to jobs and educational possibilities. The deaf are disadvantaged on yet another front: that of deafness, a marker to which contemporary Kenyan politics remains, more or less selectively, deaf as well as blind. Opting for a more cosmopolitan identity offers the deaf an opportunity to develop a new community that draws attention to and articulates the predicaments of its individual members. The categorisation chosen, however, does not have any legitimate basis in Kenyan politics of primordial, localised and geographically frozen cultural identities, and might even serve to expose the failure of the post-colonial state to live up to its rhetoric of national unity, nation building and a single politico-judicial citizenship for all and sundry, regardless of differences – natural or induced.

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