University of Bayreuth – Bayreuth International School of African Studies

DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT.
ambiguities of being deaf in Benin

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to Karl and Paule

to Claudia

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1 DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT

> "FATIGUÉE SOURD[1]" Claire signs and sighs after Luc, a deaf apprentice from the tailor workshop next door, did not get her orders right; again. "SOURDS-DURS", it's tough with the deaf. I ask her if Luc also has "head problems" as she had said about some other born-deaf people before. No, she answers, the problem is understanding. If it were the three of us now and she and I talked, Luc would not understand well. So afterwards he would tell people whatever, Carsten said this, Claire said that. "C'est pour ça que je fais toujours attention avec les sourds", that's why I'm always careful with the deaf, she says – now in spoken French. (fieldnotes 18/07/2018)

Claire[2] deafened in 1986, aged ten, when she was already in elementary school. She transferred to the Ecole Béninoise pour les Sourds (EBS), the public school for the deaf in Cotonou. She had learned Goun and French at home and in the regular school, then learned sign language in the school for the deaf. After an apprenticeship as a painter, she eventually married Joachim, post-lingually deafened like her. Joachim was the director of a deaf center in Agla, a rather poor but dynamic neighborhood of Cotonou, and Claire ran the center's small shop and school canteen. Luc was an apprentice at the tailor workshop that is also housed within the deaf center. The deaf apprentices often do small services for her, for Joachim, the director, or Joseph, the tailor.

The conversation quoted above describes a slice of what I call deaf diversity or DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENCE in this book. Being deaf in Benin means a broad spectrum of ways of being deaf, depending on the occurrence of deafness in one's life course, the degree of deafness, the geographic, socio-economic, linguistic and biographic contexts one deafens into, one's gender and religion, and one's access to education, labor, and deaf sociality. Deaf Studies literature often refers to deaf similitude, or "DEAF-DEAF-SAME" (Friedner and Kusters 2014), a feeling of shared experience that connects deaf people across social strata, belongings, and identities (van Gilder 2015), and

[1] Sign languages are typically transcribed sign-for-sign by means of a gloss written in the respective oral language in all capitals. Many sign language elements like deictic, reference, facial expression, etc. cannot easily be transcribed into the written form. The transfer from sign language to oral and written language is a translation already; I therefore use both English and French for the glosses. Linguistic models for the formal and comprehensive notation of signs are complex and not helpful to non-linguistic readers, see Brentari (1998). See more on questions of sign language and research in sections 1.3 and 2.3.

[2] All names are pseudonyms except for historical figures like Andrew Foster or deaf Beninese who have published a book (Victor Vodounou) or a dictionary (Pasteur Serge Tamomo) under their name and appear(ed) as people of public interest in Benin and/or beyond.

even transnationally (Bahan 2008; Friedner 2015:4; Kusters 2015a:91–92). Although shared deafness and similitude matter to different extents and with different stakes for deaf Beninese, I learned that diversity, conflict and disharmony are way more dominant in deaf social lives in Benin. This complexity and intricacy of deaf sociality is often commented on by deaf Beninese with the phrase "SOURDS-DURS", DEAF-DIFFICULT. As an analytic lens, and as a contribution to making perspectives on deaf socialities messier and more diverse, I will use the perspectives of DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT and DEAF-DEAF-DIFFICULT (SOURDS-DURS) that evolved during my research to highlight complexities and ambiguities of being deaf in Benin[3]. I will present the web of social, medical, cultural, and religious explanatory models, geographic conditions, and social entanglements that shape deaf being and belonging. Acknowledging the complexities and ambiguities means that rather than making a comprehensive claim to say what being deaf in Benin *is*, the book will illustrate the diversity of ways of individual being and becoming deaf in Benin, what being deaf in Benin *can be.* I will not attempt to simplify the empirical messiness but present being deaf in Benin just as DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT and as DEAF-DIFFICULT as it is to deaf Beninese, suggesting a complementary position to a Deaf mainstream discourse of deaf similitude, an imagination of a unitary group, and transnational deaf identity politics. Inner dynamics and local cultural and social entanglements matter more for what it means to be deaf in a local deaf world than an assumed similitude, supracultural belonging, or a collective identity.

My research project attempted follow deaf perspectives. I was reminded of the importance of this anthropological truism when I talked with a French development worker over a beer about what I was doing in Benin. After I gave him a short overview of my project, he asked "Et par rapport au développement? Parce que c'est ça le sujet de l'Afrique."[4] Is it, though?, I was asking myself. Sure, people want to progress, make a living, and sometimes also use the term DEVELOPMENT, as the deaf research participants Michele Friedner worked with in Bangalore (Friedner 2015). But is that *the issue* for them? In this book I will quote a lot of talk about money, a lot of complaints about social and economic inertia, and a lot of expressions of disappointment in politics. But instead of getting in line with perspectives that see the whole

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[3] Erin Moriarty Harrelson quotes her Cambodian research participants as describing Deaf tourists as "SAME-SAME but Different" (2015:210). Her work discusses ambivalences in deaf global exchange and international encounters while my DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT also refers to an experience of difference and diversity among peers.

[4] "And what about development? Because that is always the issue in Africa." Non-English text is translated by the author, unless indicated differently.

of Africa merely as a place in need, a place behind, not to mention the derogatory epithets that some American presidents come up with, I prefer another vantage point. I will rather go for describing being deaf in Benin as ways of being in the world in their own right – ways of living, ways of practicing culture – while neither presupposing *being deaf* as a state of lack or in need of repair, nor presuming *in Benin* as a challenge that needs to be responded to with development. In this book, I rather understand "the deaf way" (Erting et al. 1994) to be inherently multiple, displaying a range of deaf ways and worlds worth exploring (Friedner 2017; Monaghan et al. 2003). Acknowledging diversity and individual experience as a corrective glance at the "strategic essentialism" of some Deaf mainstream (Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:10) also means "tearing holes into dominant discourses" (Biehl 2010:216) and allows for a more phenomenological and experience-near perspective. By expanding explanatory models, concepts, and theories, people's ways of being in the world contribute to broadening our understanding of ways of being[5]. I suggest taking away the focus from d/Deaf culture, (under)development, or (dis)ability to enable an impartial appreciation and discussion of the *Beninese deaf ways*.

That is not to say that what you are about to read is how everything is fine and dandy among the deaf in Benin – quite the contrary. An anthropological inquiry should, though, with all information, prestudies and presuppositions at hand, be open to appreciating the group in question in its own right before putting on normative glasses. In a politicized field like the one around deaf studies (Vollhaber 2018), this is not always easy (Nakamura 2006:184). Being deaf is ambiguous. While ideas of multilocal deaf worlds still assume a shared deafness, I want to turn the attention to the diversity of deafnesses and what this means for deaf lives, deaf communities, and deaf sociality in Benin.

1.1 theoretical orientations

> Alone, in the middle of the beach, Bartleboom observed. Barefoot, his trousers rolled up to prevent their getting wet, a large notebook under his arm and a woolen cap on his head. Leaning slightly forward, he observed the ground. He was studying the exact point at which the wave, after it had broken about ten yards farther back, stretched out, became a lake, then a mirror and an oily patch, climbed back up the slight slope of the beach, and then finally stopped – its outermost edge trimmed with a

---

[5] This idea is also reflected in Arseli Dokumaci's "micro-activist affordances" that point out the subversive creativity of disabled people who question the status quo by their being in the world, see Dokumaci (2019).

> delicate *perlage* – where it hesitated a moment and finally, defeated, attempted an elegant withdrawal, letting itself slip back along the line of what seemed an easy retreat, but instead fell, prey to the spongy greed of that sand, which, until then unwarlike, suddenly awoke and, the brief rush of water thus routed, evaporated into nothingness.
>
> Bartleboom observed.
>
> Within the imperfect circle of his optical universe, the perfection of that oscillatory motion formulated promises doomed to be broken by the uniqueness of each individual wave. There was no way of stopping that continual alternation of creation and destruction. His eyes sought the ordered and describable truth of a certain and complete image, but instead they wound up chasing after the mobile indeterminacy of the coming and going that deceived and derided scientific inquiry.
>
> *Ocean Sea*, Alessandro Baricco*,* 2013:30–31

In Alessandro Baricco's 1993 novel *Ocean Sea*, Professor Bartleboom is working on *An Encyclopeda of the Limits to be found in Nature with a Supplement devoted to the Limits of the Human Faculties* and stopped in a remote seaside hotel to identify the limits of the sea. He learns, though, that the closer he looks and the more data he gathers, the less he can define, the less he feels he has to say. We can assume that his *Supplement* will face similar challenges eventually. Pierre Bourdieu had similar revelations in working on *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Bourdieu 1984), describing in an interview that the more he zoomed into the social spaces he worked on, the more universes he found (Bourdieu 2005a:40). "C'est de loin que la montagne semble uniforme", as a Beninese proverb says, it's from afar, the [shape of the] mountain seems even. When writing this book, I regularly felt akin to Bartleboom, finding myself looking down on my data like a fool, trying to make order, feeling my back start to ache. Baricco's figurative reflection of science is mirrored in Deleuze's not much less figurative account of society that he describes as "something that is constantly escaping in every direction[, something that] is really made of lines of flight" (Deleuze 2005:267)[6]. Many of the concepts, terminologies, and definitions from Deaf Studies, deaf and disability anthropology and disability studies apply to being deaf in Benin – until the next wave comes and rearranges the playing field, until you look past the similitude to find difference, that only covers another similitude. I agree with Allison Kafer that questions are a lot more interesting than answers (Kafer 2013:18), taking into account that the lives, ways, and experiences that I will present in

[6] Discussion with Paul Rabinow and Keith Gandal, translation following Biehl and Locke (2010:321f).

this book are not stable but variable and ever changing. This book will not attempt to create order where there is none but to display being deaf in Benin in its complexities and ambiguities, in its fluidities and contradictions. I follow John Law who writes that

> simple clear descriptions don't work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent. The very attempt to be clear increases the mess.
>
> (Law 2007:2)

Aude de Saint-Loup called deafness a strange disability and an "ambiguous abnormality" (1996:3). With ambiguity and strangeness she means that it is invisible, unrecognizable at first glance and creates epistemological challenges in deaf-hearing encounters. It is not only that understanding of ambiguity as something elusive and opaque for the outsider that I want to follow here. Instead, it is the experience of deaf persons themselves that I understood to be ambiguous as well. An entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy says that

> the word "ambiguous", at least according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is ambiguous between two main types of meaning: uncertainty or dubiousness on the one hand and a sign bearing multiple meanings on the other.
>
> (Sennet 2016)

I would put those two dimensions together: It is the multiple meanings, therefor the multiple belongings of a person, a thing, a sign that creates uncertainty and dubiousness. Bartleboom is confused because he cannot tell whether the interstices between the waves are land or sea. Regarding the deaf this is true for people who encounter the deaf, "especially on the part of the person who can hear" (Saint-Loup 1996:3), as well as for the deaf person themselves: For Simone de Beauvoir, ambiguity "signals the tension between seemingly opposing experiences of the self as both a free subject and an object for others" (Keltner 2006:201).

Michele Friedner and Annelies Kusters state that despite all cultural, political and geographical variation, any deaf person may feel that DEAF-SAME connection when meeting another deaf person from anywhere else in the world (2014:2). For decades, though, Deaf Studies has focused on similitude with mere linguistic diversity from region to region. This is not surprising, for the majority of the non-medical research on deaf people has for quite some time been coming from the linguistic disciplines (Marschark and Spencer 2003; Brentari 2010).

In the field, I quickly noticed that Deaf culture as well as DEAF-DEAF-SAME as a cohesive logic was not helpful to understand deaf sociality in Benin. Instead, I saw a wide range of difference and variation. People become deaf in various ways that shape how individuals experience and live their deaf lives. Picking up on an idea by Mara Mills (2015:45) I will thus speak of "deafnesses" or a "deaf spectrum" rather than the singular "deafness" to discuss the various physiological dimensions and foundations of being deaf. Sociocultural models of both deafness and disability have underestimated the fact that the body matters – both in its physiology as in its social construction (Shakespeare 2010; Siebers 2001). The social dimension of being deaf, however, depends on as wide a range of social factors, as with any social being: Family networks, access to education, care, support, belonging – and, as hard as that is to grasp scientifically, the deaf individual's character and personality.

DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT then means deaf persons have different deafnesses: They may have different degrees of hearing[7], they deafened at different times in their lives, their deafnesses are socially constructed through different explanatory models. Furthermore, what being deaf can be about depends on a myriad of social itineraries and navigations, on a myriad of social factors the individual faces from family, neighborhood, and society. This DEAF-DEAF-DIVERSITY has not received the appropriate attention in Deaf Studies and other research on being deaf. While there has been some discussion of diversity and intersectionality (Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:13), this reflection has not been taken far enough to cover the dynamics of deaf sociality in Benin – and likely many other regions in the world. The mere word deaf or Deaf is taken for granted to surprising extents. I will not go into depth of the problematics of calling deaf people outside the USA or the UK Deaf because the historical inaccuracies (Ginsburg and Rapp 2013:59–60) and the ethnocentric assumptions (Myers and Fernandes 2010) have been excellently discussed elsewhere (Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:13–15). I want to focus on the word deaf that is understood to be more inclusive – meaning that people identifying and/or being identified as Deaf, as deaf, as hard of hearing, or as experiencing 'hearing loss' are included in deaf (Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:15). So far so good, but what does

[7] Deaf Studies scholars happen to struggle with the implications of the word hearing loss as it is so negatively connotated. Bauman and Murray (2014) have introduced the concept of Deaf Gain in contrast to hearing loss which makes a lot of sense in certain cultural contexts and is also a useful rhetoric for political claims, see also Harmon (2010). In my book, I will use the terms deafening or becoming deaf to refer to the acquisition of deafness. On the one hand, this is how Beninese deaf frame it ("DEVENIR SOURD"), but also because I understand this way to be more descriptive and less normative than either hearing loss or d/Deaf gain.

deaf then mean as a designation? Kusters, de Meulder and O'Brien point out that all contributors of their collection on *Innovations in Deaf Studies: The Role of Deaf Scholars* (2017b) are deaf and many contributors discuss how being "deaf" influenced the way they conducted research with deaf people. But what does this "deaf" tell us about the authors, researchers, and interlocutors? Did they deafen before or after having learned a spoken language that fundamentally changes a deaf person's access to both hearing majority society and deaf sociality? Did they grow up with a sign language as first language or did they adapt to visual communication at a later point in life? Did they experience a deaf or a hearing socialization, or both? Do they have any hearing? Do they use hearing aids or implants? While many aspects of diversity and intersectionality of deaf people are discussed (Blumenthal Kelly 2008; McCaskill 2011), this somewhat fundamental diversity that derives from the individual physiological deaf history has been widely ignored. With this book, I want to explore this DEAF-DEAF-DIVERSITY in Benin and argue for its importance in understanding deaf lives.

Many ways to be deaf have been discussed in social, cultural, and transnational comparisons that often discussed national, regional, and local particularities of deaf socialities (Friedner and Kusters 2015; Monaghan et al. 2003). I want to show that there is diversity within these socialities, within groups and communities, in the interstices, and how it is negotiated and navigated among deaf Beninese. Anthropological and sociological literature on d/Deaf cultures, lives, and communities has been focusing on culturally Deaf persons who were mostly born deaf or acquired deafness at an early age when they had not been socialized as a hearing person. In my research, I worked with anyone who was considered deaf by deaf peers, including those deaf people who deafened after having learned to speak and consider themselves deaf. Considering themselves deaf rarely means a commitment to Deaf culture as it has been discussed elsewhere (Maxwell-McCaw and Zea 2011), but rather that they accepted and admitted their deafness and stopped pretending to be a hearing person, a member of the hearing majority society. Just as those different deafnesses – social and physiological – the modes of communication vary a lot more than the notion that deaf people use sign language implies. In this book I will introduce the Beninese arenas of deaf sociality where difference, diversity and difficulties are negotiated in practice, discourse, and conflict. Being deaf is always located in both body *and* society.

In trying to understand what being deaf in Benin is about I will use a range of conceptual vocabulary from the fields of anthropology, disability studies and Deaf Studies that I want to introduce in this section. I use those

terms and concepts as I use English and French words to explain the topic, the field, and the people that make up my research. Besides conceptual discussions, however, this book will heavily rely on description and narration of ethnographic material in order to let deaf life stories tell what being deaf in Benin can be, using data to tell a story (O'Reilly 2012:176). John Berger writes:

> If every event which occurred could be given a name, there would be no need for stories. As things are here, life outstrips our vocabulary.
>
> *Once in Europa*, 1992

These stories are characterized by ambivalence and ambiguity, as is deaf being, becoming, and belonging in Benin and beyond.

deaf being and belonging

Before introducing terminologies from d/Deaf studies, however, I want to reflect on some more general words that I use to name my research interest. I write about being deaf instead of deafness as I understand deafness to be just one part that constitutes being deaf or deaf being in the world. An ethnographic project to understand what it means to be deaf in Benin requires a concept for this *being*. I understand being deaf as socially constructed and politico-relationally (Kafer 2013:7) entangled: a "lifelong journey of a deaf person through his or her identity narratives" (McIlroy and Storbeck 2011:498). Thus,

> identities are narratives, stories that people tell about themselves and each other. These narratives are contested, fluid and constantly changing but are clustered around some hegemonic constructions of boundaries between "self" and "other" and between "us" and "them" and are closely related to political processes. (Yuval-Davis, Kannabirān, and Vieten 2006:2)[8]

The term identity is quite controversial these days (Friedner 2015:6; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011; Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:13). The critique often focuses on the assumption that identity was understood as something static, and that terminologies for identity must express more processuality and fluidity. I would argue, and many findings of my research support my point, that it is always both static and in process. Identity is a fixed position that people strive for, a status they want to reach, a person they want to become; they want to know who and where in society they *are*. Yet striving is by definition processual. I find the craze for processuality in terminology takes a wrong

[8] see also Martin (1995).

direction if it disregards the themes and goals that people actually follow in their lives. Identity and belonging are always both static and fluid, and the imprecision in between is what people face, what challenges people, creating the friction that is the nature of the processes of identity and belonging.

Another of the (many) reasons the concept of identity is being criticized is because it is too imprecise due to its "sheer ambiguity" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:1). With exactly this argument I see identity as an interesting vantage point as it expresses the ambiguity that people experience in their search of identity and belonging, understanding that identities and belongings are always multiple (Gammeltoft 2018). This is also apparent in the problematic aspect of identity that it implies that people of the same identity are somewhat identical, or same. This is not only not true in regard to deafnesses and deaf diversity, but also because communities that offer identification are hierarchical and diverse in rank and authority, belonging and socialization. Identity, a feeling of being same, is only achieved in exchange for subordination and hierarchy, that is, not being same. Writing about deaf identity in South Africa, Guy McIlroy and Claudine Storbeck state that

> identity is a socially constructed process, which is expanded upon by relating past and present experiences into one's identity, thus being shaped by the narratives or stories that we tell others (McIlroy and Storbeck 2011:494).

Deaf identity and belonging in Benin are ambiguous not only because they can mean many things and degrees, but also because they are not exclusive. Being deaf means various deaf experiences.

Being deaf is usually a problem in that it constitutes a challenge for the deaf individual and for the hearing community and society around. It is only in a few particular settings in the world where hereditary deafness has so high a prevalence that it might be considered normality (Zeshan and Vos 2012). Locally specific indigenous sign languages evolved and were transmitted over generations through general usage of the sign language in society so that exclusion was limited. The most famous example is Martha's Vineyard, where Nora Ellen Groce (1985) retrospectively studied the island communities where sign language (Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, MVSL) was used in daily communication among both hearing and deaf Vineyarders[9]. Further examples are Adamorobe in Ghana (Kusters 2015a; Nyst 2007), Bengkala on

[9] Deaf signers from Martha's Vineyard and other shared signing communities in New England were central in the creation of American Sign Language when they attended the American School for the Deaf (ASD) which was established in 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut, see Bahan (1996:6); Lane, Pillard, and French (2000:17).

Bali (Marsaja 2015; Branson et al. 2002) or the shared signing communities of the Al-Sayyid Bedouin (Kisch 2008, 2012)[10]. In her work on Adamorobe, Annelies Kusters deconstructed the myth of the deaf paradise, of the "utopias" (Kusters 2009) by showing that communities where communication is not a problem, are not without problems.

In Benin – as in many other places – the transmission of sign language and deaf culture/sociality does not happen in this *natural* way. I met no deaf people born to deaf parents in Benin. Given the absence of sign language and culture transmission within deaf families in Benin, one cannot overestimate the importance of institutions like schools, churches and associations in my field of research.

Being and belonging can not be disentangled; you have to be to belong – and you have to belong to be, to paraphrase Tabea Häberlein (2020). Telling deaf people's stories means saying something about being deaf in Benin in general – and *vice versa*.

cultures, spaces and socialities

Regarding Benin, there is no scholarly literature on being deaf – nor on being disabled more generally – besides a few remarks in linguistic works on sign languages in West Africa. In her reference article, Victoria Nyst shows a map of West Africa that she indexed with different sign languages. Quite tellingly, Benin is on that map but not mentioned by name or given a sign language indication (Nyst 2010:407). In the field of anthropology of/on deafness and deaf anthropology[11], there is a growing body of anthropological work on deafness and being deaf in Nepal (Graif 2018; Green 2014b), Cambodia (Moriarty Harrelson 2017, 2015), Vietnam (Cooper 2017; Marie 2020), India (Friedner 2015), Uganda (Beckmann forthcoming), and Ghana (Kusters 2015a), as well as a number of collections dedicated to comparative and anthropological studies of being deaf (Friedner and Kusters 2015; Kusters et al. 2020), also with a focus on research done by deaf scholars (Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017a) in contrast to somewhat controversial research guides for hearing scholars of deafness (Young and Temple 2014).

[10] There might be another indigenous sign language in the area around Kukurpu in northeast Nigeria where a higher rate of congenital deafness has been observed and some first descriptions are provided by Blench and Nyst (2003). Further research is still pending.

[11] Cassandra Hartblay (2019) contrasts an anthropology of disability from a disability anthropology focusing on the question who does the research and whether it is driven by the interest to understand disability in its own terms or through external, societal lenses. The same can be thought through for research with deaf folk, see Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien (2017b); Friedner and Kusters (2020).

To approach being deaf in Benin I was thus relying on literature that was near- and far-fetched without having a body of work that I could refer to specifically regarding deaf lives in Benin. The recent years have shown an increase of research projects on being deaf outside the USA or the UK – the two regions where not only most Deaf Studies happen, but also where deaf education has the most established presence (Kusters and Meulder 2013). Research in other parts of the world has shown that many Deaf Studies concepts do not blend well with other local deaf worlds (Myers and Fernandes 2010; Moges 2015; Friedner 2017). Many authors therefore call for more decentralized perspectives on being deaf, and a consciousness of understanding deaf cultures and communities, worlds and ways, always in plural (Young and Temple 2014:6; Monaghan et al. 2003), and look into deaf identities as processes (Friedner 2010a; McIlroy and Storbeck 2011), if the term is to be maintained at all.

Being deaf has been discussed in various ways that intentionally and unintentionally revealed a lot about those who were discussed as well as about those who were discussing. As a sensory dysfunction, deafness is historically and currently often seen as impairment and disability in a sense of lack and inability. Social models of disability turned the focus from the individual impairment to the social exclusion that produces disability as a social experience and construct. Yet being discussed in terms of disability, integration and rehabilitation did not reflect the experience and self-image many deaf people had so that – with a growing confidence that came with the establishment of sign languages starting in the 1960s (Gropper 2020) – deaf people created a socio-cultural model of Deafness that sees Deaf people as a linguistic group or minority – therefore the capital D, as in French, Fon, or Franconian (Woodward and Horejes 2016). Subsequent concepts and ideologies like Deaf culture, Deaf community, Deaf world, and Deaf identity were productive in reflecting cultural and linguistic identity as well as in claiming rights, establishing the academic discourse around Deaf Studies, and calling out discrimination and exclusion with a rhetoric that mirrored that of identity politics around gender, race, and sexuality; particularly in the US American context. These "collective life courses" (Ladd 2019:39) of deaf groups and communities justify a cultural perspective as individual/medical or social models of disability and deafness often disregard the shared experience (Bahan 2008). But if collective life courses are assumed too consequently, these discourses of global Deaf culture obscure "the everyday creation of (Deaf) space by Deaf people as they circulate through the landscapes of their lives" (Friedner 2010b:63).

The criticism of identity politics, however, has been directed at Deaf culture as well. In claiming Deaf pride, rights and global community, the idea, or rather the complex of ideas that can be referred to as "Deaf culture/community/world" (see Kusters 2015a:20 for a critical discussion), Deaf Studies created an essentialist, simplistic and somewhat patronizing epistemology that does not reflect the diversity of global deaf experience and being in the world (Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:13–15). Another problem of Deaf culture/community/world that it shares with the term community as such is its implication of inner harmony (see section 4.1 for a discussion of *community*). Deaf similitude has been celebrated since the late 19th century – even if Deaf culture/community/world was not yet the part of the vocabulary. International deaf events have created a feeling of similitude (Haualand 2002), identity (Breivik 2005), homecoming and kinship (Gulliver and Kitzel 2015:10; Gulliver 2015).

Although I would not agree that either home or kin necessarily mean peace and harmony, the community or even deaf kin and family imply just this. It is not harmony that I found among the deaf in Benin. Quite the contrary: Deaf sociality in Benin is characterized by competition and jealousy, by conflict and gossip, by constant navigation and negotiation. In discussing kinship and witchcraft, Peter Geschiere reminds us that "intimacy is not just a haven of peace but also a lethal source of threat and conflict" (2013:23), relating to the Freudian insight that the family was a "hotbed of aggression" (Geschiere 2013:26). DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT thus also refers to the idea that the deaf in Benin do not always have the same mind, do not share a common vision for collective advancement, they are not together, they are not always SAME. Frequently during my research, a long complaint about the disunity of the deaf in Benin would end with a sigh and the signed comment "SOURD-DUR", the deaf are hard, DEAF-DEAF-DIFFICULT. The identification that would fit a DEAF-DEAF-SAME logic was made from the outside: the hearing identified the deaf as a group, "these are your people" (see chapter 4). From within the group, however, many processes of inner distinction and conflict were at stake.

That is not to say that there is no deaf culture in Benin. German anthropologist Karl-Heinz Kohl argued: "Kultur ist […] ein Potential, das zum Menschen gehört" (Kohl 1993:131) – culture is a potential that is an integral part of being human. Deaf culture is practiced in Benin, but not in discourse or as explicit and measurable as some would like to have it (Bat-Chava 2000; Maxwell-McCaw and Zea 2011; Mugeere et al. 2015:6) – which is a case in

the discussion of d/Deaf culture in general (Humphries 2008). As such it is necessarily ambiguous, diverse, not easy to pin down. As is Culture.

In the anthropology of disability, Susan Reynolds Whyte argued early on that while bodily variation or impairment may be a universal part of the human condition, the social experience – the disability dimension – cannot be understood in a "culture-free way" (Whyte 1990:197, see also Young and Temple 2014:22). The individual experience of deafness can thus not be seen cut loose from the respective cultural, social and societal contexts. Understanding that the body is a physiological fact that cannot be disentangled from the social and the political (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), disability studies and Deaf Studies cannot assume that they are looking at the same thing cross-culturally:

> Through looking at how these spaces - both the local and the global - are produced through everyday interactions, we can therefore avoid trafficking in sameness and homogenous identities; there is analytical room for examining difference. (Friedner 2010b:49)

The way deaf lives, education and cultures play out reflects the historical and local context (see Simmons 1994; Saint-Loup 1996; Nakamura 2006; Friedner 2015). The discussions of what d/Deaf culture is or what universal characteristics of deaf communities may be, if there is "The Deaf Way" (Erting et al. 1994) are relatively uninteresting. Rather, cultures and communities – with all the complications the terminologies imply – have to be understood in plural (Friedner 2017:131; Nakamura 2006:189). Towards the end of my field research in 2018, I asked Joachim about deaf culture. He had heard of it, he said, and that yes of course, they had deaf culture, but only since the deaf school came to Benin. To him, deaf culture meant sociality, relationships, community, networks, and language. Culture starts with communication, communication came with school and church, thus, the deaf in Benin have their collective history as well. But, following Humphries' reflection of "Talking Culture and Culture Talking", Beninese deaf culture talks rather than it is being talked (Humphries 2008).

Deaf studies also employs discourses of colonization to reflect the experience of deaf persons within deaf communities they perceive as under threat (Ladd 2019). Therefore, Deaf culture as a political undertaking has also been criticized as reactive and reactionary (Kusters and Meulder 2013:429; Myers and Fernandes 2010:41; Bechter 2008:66). Deaf studies – as other X studies like race, gender, or disability studies – claim a praxis-oriented focus, a critical perspective on societal discourse and coercion, and a general critique on binary constructions like black/white, abled/disabled, male/female or

deaf/hearing (Vollhaber 2018:395). While generally agreeing with Horst Ebbinghaus who tagged Deaf Studies as an ideology (Ebbinghaus 2013:395), Vollhaber hopes for Deaf Studies to become a "third space" beyond the binaries, where difference is explored. With this book I want to add some thoughts to this third space of plurality and ambiguity.

1.2 deaf geographies of Benin

In this section I introduce the regional, historical and institutional background of my research that is also the arena where Beninese deaf sociality happens. I will be referring to vocabulary of deaf social geography as introduced by Gulliver and Kitzel to

> describe how society and social knowledge are built up as embodied humans encounter their environment and each other, produce interactive spaces through which they socialise and create/share knowledge, and then begin to shape those spaces into their environment. (Gulliver and Kitzel 2015:1)

Deaf spaces and geographies become the condition and the results of deaf sociality. It is in deaf spaces where networks, contacts, friendships, possibly kinships, and communities are formed, and these social practices, in turn, shape the spaces where they happen. These can be a deaf meeting point in the street, a family home, or more permanent institutions. With institutions I mean rather formal spaces of deaf sociality that are implemented for and/or by deaf people like the public deaf school, the deaf church, or state services. These structures are created with clear intentions and objectives – or *strategies* if you wish to follow Michel de Certeau's view. Within these, deaf people become

> poets in their own affairs, trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality [...] They trace "indeterminate trajectories" that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written, and prefabricated space through which they move. (Certeau 2011:34).

Before looking at their daily "poetry", I will give a short introduction to the Beninese setting and the deaf geographies that my research took place in.

mapping Benin

illustration 1: The sign BENIN indicates the geographic contours of the country (see illustration 2), using the hand signing the letter B, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

Benin[12] is a small country of about 115 square kilometers on the Gulf of Guinea between Togo to the west and Nigeria to the east, sharing borders with Burkina Faso and Niger in the north. From the sandy coastal plain, the southern part of the country is covered with tropical forest savanna. The center is marked with rocky hills, while north of Nikki and Save, the regions Atakora and Alibori are marked by low mountain ranges that reach up to around 600 meters. The further north, the harsher the difference between dry and rainy seasons becomes. The geographic diversity is reflected in the agricultural and socio-economic activities of the country's diverse population.

Central and northern Benin are rather rural with a few regional, semi-urban centers like Djougou, Bohicon, or Natitingou, the country's second biggest city Parakou in the east, and a huge agglomeration around its biggest city Cotonou in the south. Similar to other West African urban centers like Lomé in Togo or Accra in Ghana, Cotonou and its environments are on their way to becoming one huge settled area, connecting closely to Ouidah, some 35 kilometers to the west, Calavi right north of the city's limits, and the formal capital Porto Novo, some 35 kilometers to the north-east. Almost all infrastructures of government, administration, and higher education are centralized in Cotonou and Porto Novo. While this region is predominantly populated with Fon, Mina, and Goun speaking people, the urban space is shared by all shades of Beninese cultural diversity, expatriates, and visitors from neighboring West African countries as well as employees from mostly

[12] My references to 'Benin' as the cultural background are necessarily somewhat generalizing. As I will argue in chapter 4, there is a vague understanding of a Beninese deaf community, educated deaf people in Benin acknowledge responsibility for their Beninese deaf brothers and sisters. This notion disguises the cultural and linguistic, the social and historic diversity of the country's population. The scope of the research project and this book does not allow me to give an exhaustive account of cultural variation in explanatory models of deafness across the country, although I will address the issue in section 2.1. Neither does this book explore the various historical backgrounds that inform the different social dynamics in different geographical and cultural regions.

European and international organizations. Although not representative of the rural lifestyles, people from all over Benin create their spaces in Cotonou (Alber 2016). The city is culturally and historically embedded in the southern history of Fon kingdoms and slave trade (Elwert 1973; Fage and Oliver 2002:132), Vodoun beliefs and practices (Rush 2013; Landry 2018)[13], French colonization, the post-colonial socialist era and the political and economic liberalization. As a pragmatic choice, I do generalize from the Cotonou setting to give an overview of *being deaf in Benin*, while being careful to mention the problems of these generalizations. The Cotonou-bias is a shared phenomenon of Benin's centralized political organization (Tchomakou 2020), the economic, medical and social development (Okanla 2013), as well as of Beninese deaf sociality, as I will discuss in more detail in chapter 4[14].

More than 50 mother tongue languages (Capo 2009:57) are spoken among the population of about 12.4 million people in 2021 (World Bank 2022). Ethnicity, however, is a foreign concept imposed on the Beninese society by Western colonial discourses (Alber 2000:20–21). Many Beninese integrated this construct into their understanding of identity, saying "I am Fon", or "I am Dendi". In pre-colonial times, however, collective identities in Benin would be arranged around ethno-linguistic aspects with a clear focus on language. Early on I learned that if I wanted to ask someone for their ethno-linguistic belonging, the question would not be "Which ethnic group do you belong to?" or "What is your ethnicity?", but "Which language do your parents speak?" This might often conflate with conceptualizations of ethnicity that center around shared language, culture and history (Barth 1969:12–13; Alber 2000:233), it does, however, have different implications. While recent concepts of ethnicity focus on the fluidity of belonging (Albiez 2011), the notion in Benin has a somewhat primordial, hereditary connotation: Whichever language you may speak or whichever linguistic region you may live in, you still *are* what your parents *speak*, your ethno-linguistic identity is historically and genealogically grounded and thereby not fluid or changeable, at least not in this dimension. Intermarriage, migration, and socialization

[13] Vodoun is a cultural and religious practice that has travelled across the Atlantic aboard the slave ships and spread across the Americas, from Candomblé in Brazil (Capone (2010)) to Voodoo in Haiti (Métraux (1958)) and Louisiana (Hall (1992)). It is written in various ways, Voodoo and Vodun being among the most prominent. In recognizing the diversity of the different forms it took on the voyages across the Atlantic, I spell it the way it is usually spelled in Benin.

[14] An "urban bias" has also been identified in disability studies, see Chaudhry (2015); Whyte (2019); a tendency that I wish to contrast with an explicitly rural perspective in chapter 6.

into another language community may change the ethno-linguistic identity of one's children but not one's own.

The country's history has consolidated some of those ethno-linguistic boundaries. The Kingdom of Dahomey that reigned around its center in Abomey from the early 17th century until its defeat by the French in 1894 was an active partner to the European slave traders who set up their posts and forts in the coastal area that subsequently was referred to as the slave coast. In slave raids and wars, the Fon from Abomey who led the kingdom captured

illustration 2: Political map of Benin (2007), free map obtained from mapcruzin.com.

people of other ethno-linguistic backgrounds in the area and sold them to the European traders (Elwert 1973). The ambiguous memory of this history – a strong and proud kingdom on the one hand and its involvement in horrendous crimes on the other – is continuously present in museums and memorials as well as in everyday interaction between the different ethno-linguistic groups. The *Fon from Abomey* have a reputation of still being feudal and traitors, as I heard even from other Fon in the South. The fission and suspicion between people from the North and the South can also not be disentangled from the historic experience of Southern domination before, during and after the colonial period (Alber 2000:23). Following Kolawolé Sikirou Adam (2009:22), changing the country's name from Dahomey to Benin in 1975 was meant to take down the symbolic dominance of the South. Not surprisingly, it was Marxist-Leninist leader Jérémy Kérékou from the North who put the change of name into effect (Fage and Oliver 2002:308). Since its shift from communism to democratic republic in 1990, the country has experienced a time of relative peace and calm. Despite having been a donor darling, Benin constantly ranks among the poorest thirty countries in comparative development indices; for example 163 of 189 in the human development index (hdi) 2019 (UNDP 2019:302).

Benin also ranks low on the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index, listed on rank 148 out of 162 in 2018 (UNDP 2019:318). Powerful positions in politics and economy are usually filled with men (ibid.), an inequality that can be found across the social strata and contexts. While polygyny was outlawed in 2004 (OECD 2014), the 2012 health survey reveals that in 2006 43% and in 2011/2012 37% of women between the age of 15 and 49 stated being part of a marriage arrangement with at least one co-wife (INSAE 2013:62).

Family and neighborhood spaces like courtyards, corner shops, or just the public space in the street outside people's homes are where much of Beninese social life takes place. Friends or family come over to visit people at home or at work in workshops that are often attached to someone's home. Regular customers pass by just as well as mobile traders of cloth, food, or medicines of all kinds walk the same routes from one regular client's home to the next. Mobile tailors, shoemakers, pedicurists, and fruit vendors offer their services along regular itineraries. Even when living in a city with millions of inhabitants, people know many of those who they see on a daily basis. Lines between private and public lives are blurry. On the open street and in the neighborhoods, one can find stability and reliability, networks and exchange.

The social geography of Benin composes the graticule on which deaf sociality emerges. Many dynamics of Beninese society characterize deaf sociality, while others are shifted, blurred, and altered through the deaf experience. Being deaf in Benin is ambivalent in that it is and is also not profoundly Beninese.

centers of Beninese deaf sociality

The deaf geography shares many characteristics with the social geography of Benin in that it is somewhat centralized in the south, reflects the linguistic and social diversity, and is entangled in regional history that goes beyond the country's borders. I will introduce the main institutions and environments that the deaf find today, understanding that these social structures are not static but constantly change shape. By referring to de Certeau once more, I emphasize that *tactics* are not a subset of strategies, but the way that deaf people live in those (strategic) spaces. It is their "democratic response" (Certeau 2011:37–38) what makes being deaf and what this book is about. In this unmapped deaf territory, deaf people are geographers and explorers, and deaf sociality is in process, in a state of becoming. Beyond the two main pillars of deaf sociality – schools and churches – there are many more, smaller and less permanent, less formal spaces, that I will discuss in chapter 4.

schools

At the time of my research between 2016 and 2019, there were ten deaf schools in Benin, the *Ecole Béninoise pour les Sourds* (EBS) being the oldest. The African American deaf missionary Andrew Foster and his Beninese student Victor Vodounou had started missionary and educational activities in 1977 in rooms of the *Catholic Family and Home Economics Center for Girls* in the Scoa Gbeto neighborhood in downtown Cotonou. In creating schools for the deaf, Victor, Foster and their Christian Mission for the Deaf (CMD) always worked with the government and administration as Victor told me in 2019. Another reason was that there were no private or religious schools at the time as the military government had nationalized all private and religious primary and secondary schools in the early 1970s. Many hearing parents of deaf children told me that they first learned about deaf schools through radio advertisements (see also Vodounou 2008:87), more recently the weekly news report delivered in sign language on national television ORTB has raised awareness as well. The first classes started on March 14, 1977 – the advent of deaf education in Benin, whose 40th anniversary was celebrated in September 2017 on

the occasion of the international day of the deaf[15]. Growing class by class, year by year, the *École Béninoise pour les Sourds* (EBS) is the oldest school for the deaf and remains a cradle of deaf sociality. It is not only the place where a majority of schooled deaf adults had their education and introduction to deaf sociality, but also today, community meetings are held here as it constitutes a somewhat neutral space between associations, churches, homes, and other spaces that are determined by their respective hierarchies. Even those who did not attend EBS feel an interest and collective responsibility for the whereabouts of the school as it is the most important place where the origin of Beninese deaf sociality can be located.

Besides EBS, the second public school is a *collège* (secondary school) that since 2018 also provides a boarding school option. Run by the state, these two schools have no official affiliation to any religious denominations unlike the schools in Sénadé, Glo, Bohicon and Parakou that are all rooted in the Baptist church of Benin, although Glo and Bohicon separated themselves organizationally from the church due to conflicts over property, funding, and personal animosities. There are two private schools that are not affiliated to any religious denomination. One is Claire and Joachim's school in Agla; the other is the *Centre d'Acceuil, d'Education et d'Intégration des Sourds* in Louho, a neighborhood of the administrative capitol Porto Novo. The latter is the only school for the deaf in Benin where students can get the university admission certificate BAC *(baccalauréat)*.[16] As this school is also the most expensive, former students of Louho initiated the creation of the public *collège*/CEG for the deaf in Akogbato. Although this is only a *collège* and not a *lycée*, at least deaf primary school graduates have another option to continue school. This effort, however, is not beyond criticism. Tanya, the director of the private, Baptist church-run school in Tibona/Parakou, told me that she tried to fend off demands of creating a *collège* in her school as well. She saw that deaf youth who left school with a secondary degree in Louho or Akogbato took on vocational training to work in manual labor anyway. She concluded that there was no point in opening more opportunities for education if they did not lead to further qualification or job opportunities, as you could just as well start vocational training straight after primary school.

All private schools that are run by NGOs or churches demand school fees; while the tuition at the two public schools is very little and affordable

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[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMIi93Ga_24, last access 16/05/2022.

[16] A few deaf persons graduated with *baccalauréat* from schools for the hearing. These are usually people who deafened late and always felt part of the hearing world but simply do not hear. I never met any of these people in deaf church, deaf schools or other events and gatherings of the deaf.

for almost any parent. The notion that some reader might have of an NGO-run school as a welfare and non-profit undertaking does not exactly reflect the reality of private schools for the deaf in Benin. This is, however, not a deaf-specific issue, as the Beninese education sector is dominated by private schools to a remarkable degree – in this sense, Sarah Fichtner speaks of an "NGOisation of education" (Fichtner 2012). This phenomenon precedes the modern state of Benin, as already in the colonial era, Benin (then Dahomey) was recognized for its high level of formal school education among the French West African colonies thanks to its long history of missionary activities (Adam 2009:22).

In a country with limited career opportunities like Benin, creating one's own NGO is a feasible way of making a living for many people. Having an association makes you eligible to receive financial support to create welfare projects, create jobs for yourself and others, but also to divert some money for yourself and your family. As critically as one might see this, it sometimes is the only way to make use of your resources, particularly as a deaf (for deafness as a valued resource in India see Friedner 2015), disabled, or otherwise marginalized person. The detouring of private donations and public funds is furthermore not a specific phenomenon of the private NGO sector, but a common practice particularly in lower level state agencies (Chêne 2014), not to mention the top level (Alia 2019). Deaf and disability rights activists confirm these observations with numerous accounts from experience with state funding bodies[17].

International partnerships cater for the bigger share of the schools' budgets – and the private profit of those who run the schools. In line with Fichtner's observations on the NGO-dependent education system in general (Fichtner 2012), the private schools for the deaf are plastered with logos and names of governmental and nongovernmental partners from other countries like the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland or Italy. All schools face similar challenges, so they all seek to cooperate with national and international partners that get involved in administration and education to different degrees.

The state does, however, hold authority over the centralized curriculum. Every school in every village has to follow the same schedule with the same

[17] Karimou, a former president of Handisport Benin, an association for sports for the disabled, complained to me about the troubles in working with public support. If you are allocated 200.000 franc CFA funding, he told me, you only receive 160.000 franc CFA – if you are lucky – while you have to issue a receipt for the payment of 200.000 franc CFA. Due to the repeating experience, Karimou preferred not to work with public funding anymore. Joachim, who stood by, agreed (conversation 09/01/2016).

schoolbooks, exams, and calendar. A colonial heritage from the French education system, this strategy is also a reaction to the varying competence of teachers across the country and reflects an equal opportunities approach: The centralized curriculum suggests that every child receives the same education. In section 3.5, I will have a closer look at how centralism is problematic for deaf education.

The first deaf people who went to school had high expectations. In almost every life story I gathered with thirty to fifty-year-old deaf persons appeared the moment of elementary school graduation: "I wanted to continue, but there was no *collège* for the deaf!" In schools for the deaf, they were at the right place, they were not disabled, as they could communicate and had no generalized feeling of exclusion or incompetence. Even if their success in school was unsatisfactory, they wanted to stay longer – simply because it was their space and they would not have to face exclusion in the hearing majority world, job market, education system again. In the life stories, this was always an instant of indignation, accompanied by a complaint about social injustice: Why did the hearing have access to secondary education and we, the deaf, did not?

Florence Serwaa Oteng, who entered one of the first of Foster's deaf schools in Ghana in 1957, remembered meeting her peers in her fictionalized autobiography on a deafened woman's journey:

> At the deaf school at Yareyeya was a congregation of the deaf, both young and old. The[re] was a common link - disability of one type or the other binding them together. There were those who were deaf, those who were deaf and dumb; and there were some few who besides being deaf and dumb were crippled. For the first time, Benewaa conceded that she was better off than some people. (Oteng 1997:32)

While the current situations of deaf communities in Ghana and Benin cannot be compared, they were both initiated by Foster and CMD's missionary input. Beyond the disability perspective on deafness that the quote reveals, it is remarkable how Oteng categorizes the deaf; as the deaf (who speak) on the one hand and the "deaf and dumb" (who do not speak) on the other. This differentiation is reflected in Benin even though the specification comes in only on second thought. There is a quite general idea that they are all deaf at a first glance, and quite different at the second (see chapter 2). It is in deaf schools where the deaf learn, experience, and shape deaf differences and similitudes.

church(es)

The other core space of deaf sociality is deaf church, the first of which was co-founded with the first deaf school in Cotonou in 1977. Since 2014, the deaf church has split up so that two churches now functioned as deaf community centers. Deaf churches are, however, not the only churches that deaf people visit. In some churches hearing signers translate the sermon into sign language. A deaf person might also be lucky to pair up with someone who will jot down notes during the sermon. Some American missionaries from Evangelical churches or Jehovah's Witnesses knew some ASL prior to their mission in Benin (JW 2012) – this was the background for a strikingly high rate of Jehovah's Witnesses among the deaf population in the northern town of Natitingou. Furthermore, deaf people might just go along with their hearing families to hearing church services without any interpretation of or access to what is going on. Deaf Muslims would do so in mosques as well. The simultaneous translation or the written notes only really helped literate deafened people who already knew about the bible and what would be going on during a sermon. Church visits without translation or transcription were reduced to a social habit without access to content or understanding. Both ways of attending church do barely facilitate membership in a congregation or community like deaf church does, not to mention an actual understanding of the gospel that is quite central for the many Protestant denominations in Benin, including the deaf church. However, as the only deaf churches are located in Cotonou, deaf Christians around the country have no other option if they want to participate in church. Each Sunday, however, deaf church does send out two priests in training to preach to groups of deaf people in Porto Novo and Glo; also located in the south. I will discuss deaf church in more detail in sections 4.3 and 5.3.

religious plurality and deaf sociality

When doing exploratory research in Uganda in 2015 I was intrigued by the inclusive sociality of deaf church. Deaf Muslims and Christians prayed together at Sunday church services, stating that "GOD ONE. CHRISTIAN GOD, MUSLIM GOD, SAME" (Mildner 2020b:140). Deaf priests welcomed deaf Muslims without any obvious attempts to convert them. The shared experience of being deaf trumped religious difference. It was this similitude of being deaf that transcended religious and ethnic boundaries that got me interested in this research project. The situation of deaf and disabled people in Uganda, where

disability rights and activism are very progressive (Lord and Stein 2015:208)[18], is particular and need not be discussed in great detail here (see instead Kiyaga 2009; Mugeere et al. 2015; Wallin et al. 2006; Rickli 2012; Beckmann forthcoming). Let this side remark only underline the obvious: There is no "African way" of being deaf, nor a uniform Ugandan (Mildner 2020b), Ghanaian (Kusters 2015a:151ff) or Beninese deaf way. While deaf similitude expressed in religious inclusivity seems to be part of Ugandan deaf sociality, it surely is not part of the Beninese way. The National Association of the Deaf in Benin (*Association Nationale des Sourds du Bénin*, ANSB) chose EBS instead of church for their meetings particularly because deaf church so clearly was a space of deaf *Christian* sociality.

The religiousness of Benin is almost proverbial (Amouzouvi 2005:16) and in itself is filled with ambiguity. On the beach near Ouidah, you can see two huge monuments: One is commemorating the arrival of the first missionaries and the word of God and the landing of two missionaries in what was then Dahomey in 1861. Just a stone's throw to the west, you will find the country's most famous landmark, the *Porte de Non-Retour*, that marks the spot where millions of enslaved people were forcefully embarked to be shipped to the Americas. White Europeans started both the spread of the gospel and one of the biggest crimes in human history – and both are commemorated just a few meters apart. A few kilometers inland, walking up the *Route des Esclaves*, passing the former slave market on *Place Cha Cha*, you will arrive at the Catholic basilica of Ouidah – the country's first cathedral. Just across the street sits the *Dangbé Temple des Pythons* that serves as both a veritable center for Vodoun religious practices and a tourist trap. The data on religious affinity vary considerably. As an overview one can assume that a good half of the population follows Christian beliefs of various denominations, a good quarter identifies as Muslim while the rest adhere to others that are described as traditional African religions, the most important being Vodoun (United Nations 2019:33). Being atheist or just not being religious are barely an option and are scrutinized when heard about. There might be some truth as well to the exaggerated and imprecise platitude spread in tourist guides that the Beninese are 70% Christian, 30% Muslim, and 100% Vodoun. Rituals of Vodoun, ancestor worship and fetishism are ubiquitous and not seen as indicators of religious denomination but as cultural practice.

[18] On the same page, the article on deaf identity and rights in Africa by Janet Lord and Michael Ashley Stein lists Benin as one of those African countries that recognize sign language in their constitution, which was neither true at the time of publication nor accurate in the reference to the Beninese constitution they quote in the endnote (2015:216).

Christian denominations include Catholicism, Lutheranism, *Assemblées de Dieu* (Pentecostal churches), *Église du Christianisme Céleste* (an African initiated Christian church founded in Porto Novo, see Pobee and Ositelu 1998; Surgy 2001), Baptist and Evangelical churches of various kinds as well as Jehovah's Witnesses. Most of these churches do not require formal education from their priests and preachers. Many congregations are following the interpretations of their clerics that sometimes differ greatly from others. Churches compete for members, distinguish themselves as better or truer than others, and conversions are very common (Amouzouvi 2005). To be clear, however, the competition between the religious groups has remained largely peaceful.

In this environment, deaf church is not inclusive but somewhat particularistic. The tenor in sermons and religious discourse is not a community of the deaf or a competition to the hearing, but the distinction of *us* – the (deaf) church – from *them* – the other churches or religions. In weekly sermons it is mostly a generalized other or the Catholic church in particular that the deaf Pasteur Homère distinguishes the congregation from. On one of my Sundays at church in 2016, the youth from church practiced a play to be performed at the international day of the deaf. I want to introduce this enactment of morals as an expression of where the church and the deaf position themselves in the thicket of Beninese religiosity:

> On occasion of the International Deaf Day in 2016, ANSB staged a play that Yves and Homère [the singer and the priest of the deaf church] came up with and was performed by deaf teenage boys from deaf church. One of them was stuck to a chair and could not get off. A friend passed by and went for help after he could not pull the chair off his friend's rear. He came back with a Vodoun priest who performed some exalted dances and rituals around the young man. When he was done, the young man still could not get off the chair. So his friend left again, coming back with a Muslim. He started to pray in a caricatural Muslim style – which did not help either. Then the friend came back with a Christian. He talked to the young man, listened to his conduct, prayed and took his confession. After this, the young man could get up without any problem. Together they prayed thanks and the young man, his friend, and the Christian left together. (fieldnotes 03/07/2016)

It might not be so surprising that a mission church would perform such a scene. The portrayal of Vodoun and Muslim practices were quite offensive; the dovish devoutness of the Christian quite a contrast and in line with Homère's taste in Christian performance. As in the sermons, the portrayal of the Others was most entertaining to the audience. This was, however, not a church event but a play at an ANSB function. There was no mentioning of

being deaf in the play but a clear moral imperative to what the right path in life is. This overlap of representation, community and church has its roots in the beginning of deaf education and community in Benin. The fact that ANSB is dominated by the two deaf churches renders their divisive, intolerant, and exclusionary character problematic. It has been the source of deaf education and community in Benin but is now more divisive than unifying (see chapter 5).

In many aspects like religiosity, economic insecurity, humor and zeal, local pride in a global world, the deaf communities in Benin are just as Beninese as the hearing Beninese. Beninese deaf worlds, as I want to show with this book, are not homogenous bubbles within a hearing world but multiply entangled.

1.3 researching being deaf in Benin

> Understanding [in anthropological fieldwork] is a product less of your methodology than your mastery of basic social skills. And this demands time and perseverance. (Jackson 1995:21)

> Participant observation is primarily an "advanced" exercise in forming and maintaining intimate relationships for professional purposes. (Hume and Mulcock 2004:xii)

My research explored arenas of deaf sociality, often through the stories and narratives that deaf people shared with me. John Kotre argues that life stories and stories are good tools because of their power to illuminate processes of change and individual being and becoming within society (1984:25–26). The individual story therefore always tells a story about the whole as well – which is precondition for my claim to be able to say anything on being deaf in Benin in general. In this chapter I will give an overview of methodological approaches and challenges of my research that focused on participant observation, conversations, and interviews. Being a white, hearing, European man studying being deaf in West Africa implies methodological, ethical, and possibly political challenges that I will address as well as more practical questions of access. The chapter will also trace my *ethnographic journey* and show how my research changed over time.

To study and live among a group of people one needs to know their language. Before language competence, though, it is just as important to show the willingness to learn the language. I always felt it to be of advantage to do research in a language that was not my mother tongue as I would automatically become a learner. It helps to balance the power structures within the communication. It demonstrates sincerity and commitment if I make an

effort in the field to be able to speak with research participants in their language. With regards to the deaf community, language is even more an aspect of belonging and identity. Whenever I met new deaf people and started signing, they asked me whether I was deaf, too. When I abnegated, they were often flattered that I made the effort – after a short initial disappointment that I was not deaf, though. But what is the language of deaf Benin?

linguistic access

Deaf people in Benin master different modes and ways of signing and speaking. They differentiate not by kind but by quality: What they call *les signes* ranges from *village sign* or *home sign* that would often not be considered a language for its lack of established grammatical structure and consistent meaning-symbol relationship (Frishberg 1987), to signed French that employs local and ASL signs for a visual and manual modality of French. Those who are capable of several modes shift between them given the purpose, setting, and participants of the given conversation. I will explore the complexity, history, and social implications of this variety in section 2.3. The entire spectrum of sign language in Benin is referred to as *les signes*, which is why I will call it Signs with a capital S as the language of the deaf in Benin, keeping in mind the varieties at stake. I will use the terms sign language and Signs interchangeably and point out linguistic particularity where deemed necessary.

When I arrived in Benin in June 2016, I had some basic competence in German Sign Language (DGS) and Ugandan Sign Language (UgSL). I had also received a sign name from my sign language teacher in Bayreuth some years ago. This rendered me maybe a bit more sensitive to visual communication than I would have been had I not had any experience. Most signs, however, were completely different.

The different modes of signing meant an interesting challenge, one that I did not always overcome. As everyone told me that signed French was the proper sign language, I could not find anyone to teach me Signs. Even prelingually deaf people who did not master signed French told me that they could not teach me their way of signing and that signed French was the right thing to learn. I decided – and had no other choice but – to *be taught* signed French and to *learn* Signs through meeting and chatting with deaf people.

I took classes in signed French with André, the hearing son of Homère, the deaf priest. This was a good entry as I knew French and made quick progress so that I could start basic communication within days of my arrival. From André I learned sign vocabulary and methodological signs of signed French. This enabled me to, step by step, gain access to the deaf by starting

to be capable of communication. During our meetings, of which we had three to four per week in the first months of my research, André gave me a first descriptive introduction to the deaf community. As he had not learned to teach or explain sign language, he could not, though, answer my more inquisitive questions on the language. I learned dynamic, expression, deictic, incorporation of space, volume, facial grammar etc. by doing, by signing with deaf signers: I met deaf people all around Cotonou and chatted, signed, watched, and learned; I eventually learned Signs, the sign language that no-one wanted to teach me. The so-called *village sign* however was not accessible to me as I stayed in Cotonou for most of the time as it was here where central institutions of the deaf communities – the deaf churches, four schools, the representatives of ANSB, and professional sign language interpreters – were based. Village sign was more present in villages and Northern towns. I would also have liked to conduct research among smaller groups in more remote places to learn their ways of signing and being deaf; but I decided that staying within the major communities most of the time and taking trips to various other sites around the country was a more feasible way to acquire a broad understanding of what it means to be deaf in Benin. This meant, however, that direct communication with deaf people who did not master the "proper" or colloquialized modes of Signs was challenging, both in expressing myself and understanding their respondence.

finding the field

In their textbook on participant observation, Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock state that by analyzing the difficulties of access, the anthropologist can already learn about the society they study (2004:xiv). Through describing the start of field research, I will thus also introduce a number of characteristics of the field.

When I decided that my field research would take place in Benin, I talked with my supervisor and colleagues who did research in Benin, but despite the fact that they had been living and/or working in Benin for years or decades, no-one could tell me anything about the deaf. Nobody knew deaf individuals or associations or institutions for or of the deaf. Instead, my access was through the website of Gallaudet University, Washington DC, where I found the mobile phone number of the president of the *Association Nationale des Sourds du Bénin* (National Association of the Deaf in Benin, ANSB). Interestingly, the contacts provided by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) were incomplete phone numbers and the email addresses listed were those of two different NGOs, but not of ANSB. I had also found a Facebook page

from a French association called *Solidarité Sourds Bénin* (SSB) that supported a private boarding school in Agla, Cotonou, which did not answer my messages until much later. Furthermore, I found the website of a private school in Louho, Porto Novo, that seemed to be the biggest structure for deaf education in Benin. One week into my field trip, I was already on the group taxi from Cotonou to Louho to visit the school when I saw that the president of ANSB wrote me that he was ready to meet. I jumped out of the taxi, upsetting the taxi driver, onto a *zemidjan*, the dread- and useful moto-taxis that swirl around Beninese towns like angry drones, to hurry back home. I called the school in Louho on the *zemidjan* to tell the vice director that I would unfortunately not be able to make it to Louho that day. Instead, I met Homère, both president of ANSB and priest of the deaf church on the terrace of the place where I was staying at the time. He had come with his hearing daughter Féline to interpret and I introduced myself and my project. I told him I wanted to learn what it means to be deaf in Benin, that I wanted to learn sign language and get in touch with deaf people. He invited me to come to the church service on Sunday where I would meet everyone.

Why am I telling this in so much detail? Because he did. I went to church the following Sunday and after the service, Homère introduced me to the congregation by telling them how I jumped off the taxi because I preferred to talk with him, the deaf president, rather than with some hearing school director in Porto Novo. Thus, I was introduced through a story that seemed to flatter, if not the deaf community, then at least Homère personally. When the formal part was over, he introduced me to Joachim, the secretary general of ANSB, who would become my friend and one of my main research partners in the months and years to come. I met André, Homère's hearing son, who would become my sign language teacher, and Homère's wife Maurine who became a friend and welcoming door opener to parts of the deaf community in Cotonou. Even though I had zero contacts when I boarded the plane, it took me less than a week to organize a language teacher and to meet the important people at the heart of the deaf community, which says a lot about the closely knit web of deaf sociality in Cotonou.

Annelies Kusters, working on deaf spaces in a shared signing community in a village in Southern Ghana, argued that the access for a deaf anthropologist was quite privileged and natural to the deaf villagers (Kusters 2015a: 14ff), while the same people were very reluctant and dismissive towards hearing researchers and visitors (ibid.: 201ff). For Benin, I cannot say that I faced any general reluctance.

Homère and Joachim were two central figures in the Beninese deaf community and through them, I got in touch with many other deaf people. The choice of research participants was mostly snowballing from here. While I made many valuable contacts and acquaintances through recommendations and through being taken along to friends, family and funerals, I also learned which contacts they would not easily take me to: The rivaling deaf church, schools for the deaf that they did not like, and deaf individuals that had fallen from grace in the moralistic view of Homère or the clientelist perspective of Joachim. When I asked for those people, though, they were always eager to give me phone numbers or establish contact. I spoke with various people who were in deep conflict with my friends and people I worked or stayed with, but this never seemed to keep anyone from talking to me. They might tell me a lot of bad stories about their foes, but they would not break or avoid contact with me.

sample and gaps

For an anthropological inquiry of being deaf I considered it crucial to follow a deaf perspective, to learn about being deaf from deaf people. In a contribution to Lennard Davis' *Disability Studies Reader*, Carol Padden and Tom Humphries recount how their friends asked them who they would write about: "the average Deaf person", who they considered to be kind of poor and uneducated, or "exceptional" Deaf persons? Should their book set a "good example" to the "hearing world" and rather show "the intelligent Deaf" than the uneducated ones?

> Some of the labels we came across are not used to establish commonality but are used to label certain people as having lesser status - to marginalize them. To ignore the ways that Deaf people use a variety of labels, those which mock and tease as well as those which praise and respect, not only would paint an overly romantic picture but would make our description less rich. Each label, however petty or harsh some might seem, in its own way helps us to understand the group's deep beliefs and fears. (Padden and Humphries 2010:395)

Guided by this understanding, I wanted to explore the deaf in Benin from the inside. Therefore, I started at ANSB and deaf church, made my first deaf acquaintances and asked them to tell and show me who was deaf. The result is the discussion of a variety of deafnesses and ways to be deaf that I discuss in chapter 2. This snowballing generated the sample I ended up working with (see index of persons in the appendix), apart from some deaf I specifically looked for like deaf Muslims, who were less a part of the circles around ANSB

and deaf church, and deaf people in the villages that were beyond the reach of deaf communities (see chapter 6). There are some people experiencing deafness or hearing impairments, however, that I did not or only barely work with because they were not part of or considered deaf by the deaf networks. There are some deaf people that are barely ever mentioned when the deaf talk about the deaf and who are hence not considered part of deaf community. One could say that these deaf people are those who are not part of deaf sociality, which is true and yet bears some imprecision. They are older people who lose their hearing at a later stage in life, who are usually part of kin networks that help maintain their social status and position as respected elders despite their hearing impairments. Furthermore, there are younger people who deafened in late childhood or early teenage but stayed within the school system for the hearing. A number of those deaf studying at the national university as well, but they are only known to few deaf jacks-of-all-trades like Joachim, mostly because they do not visit deaf church or seek to participate in deaf sociality. Both groups are usually not considered at all by the deaf – neither as deaf nor as *malentendants*: They just do not appear in deaf conversations. They are not part of deaf sociality; they are not perceived as peers as the deaf in the villages would be. Beninese deaf consider them to be as isolated as Deaf Studies often assumes (Delaporte 2014:354ff; Kiyaga and Moores 2003:21; Scheer and Groce 1988:26; Simmons 1994:78; Winzer 1993). These non-hearing individuals are participants in hearing society to a degree that does not make them outcasts like Jean-Louis (see section 2.2).

Deaf and disability studies as well as science and technology studies inquire how technologies like hearing aids and cochlea implants are appropriated in India (Friedner et al. 2019; Friedner 2022) or Uganda (Beckmann forthcoming). In Benin, hearing aids are rare and required maintenance is not available (see also Nyst 2010:408; Rickli 2012; Devlieger 1994:90), just as cochlea implants are no issue but rather science fiction for those Beninese deaf who know about them from the internet. There are no users of hearing technologies among my research participants. Apart from that, my research sample included people from various spots on the deaf spectrum, yet all were deaf. What, then, was my position as a hearing researcher among them?

ethics and positioning

Deaf and hearing researchers notice different things. Deaf researchers may take a lot for granted while hearing researchers have an epistemological distance, or so claims hearing sociologist Per Solvang in his report on the 2001 Deaflympics in Rome (Solvang 2002). I believe this to be true even though

Solvang's paper rather seems like a collection of misunderstandings and misjudgments of deaf sociality. To avoid that, I was careful to always reflect and discuss my interpretations, thoughts and understandings of deaf sociality in Benin with deaf Beninese friends, while at the same time trying to avoid being drawn too deep into Beninese deaf sociality's gossiping and talking behind people's backs.

I do not talk *about* but *with* the deaf, as anthropology should, and as also disability rights movements have demanded – "nothing about us without us" (Charlton 2004). Bringing together this double bind – north-south power relations and hearing-deaf colonization[19] – also means that I am not talking about Beninese deaf in the vocabulary of Deaf culture debates from the UK or the USA (for a critical account of the epistemological limits of Deaf culture perspectives see also Myers and Fernandes 2010; Nakamura 2006:22), but I am talking with the deaf at a specific place and time (Friedner 2017) and have endeavored to invite my research participants into the production of anthropological knowledge and terminology.

in the field

My position during fieldwork must be discussed in at least three aspects: *who* I was and *with whom* I was in *which* field. Anthropological literature should not involve too much navel-gazing on the part of the anthropological author; yet the *I* is a substantial part of participatory research and analysis. Reflexivity is not just self-indulging introspection but helps to create an understanding of how meaning and knowledge are made, seen, and narrated (Plows 2018:xvii). Ethnographic data and "[p]ersonal narratives are products of complex interactive social processes" (Steffen 1997:110). Nowhere is this as clear as in the positions I took or was assigned when moving around the social networks in the field. My personality and positionality explain the ways in which access was easy, difficult, or not possible at all. I see anthropological research as a communicative process between people; and I am always one of those people, part of the social process (Hume and Mulcock 2004:xviii). I do not see this only as an epistemological challenge as much as I understand it as the precondition for ethnography: "The social not only defines the field of anthropology; it is the ground of its very possibility" (Jackson 1995:119).

When I entered the field in 2016, I was a 31-year-old, hearing, unmarried, white, German male with rather minor competence in German and Ugandan Sign Language and a university background. Regarding the context I would

[19] See Myers and Fernandes (2010) and Kusters and Meulder (2013:429) for a critical reflection of (post-)colonial perspective and reactionary critique in Deaf Studies.

be working in, this description includes a range of attributes that mattered in interacting with my research participants and other people in the field. Being in the beginning of my thirties made it possible to assume more mature roles than I could on my previous research trips in African contexts. Among village representatives, public administration officials, journalists, teachers, and the like, I was old enough to be taken seriously. As I was neither married nor a father, it seemed that I was also able to blend in with youth between the age of 16 and 25 who had not yet achieved higher social status either. This also made it possible to assume the role of a learner, a student of being deaf. I wanted them to teach and tell me what being deaf and signing meant in Benin; I saw my deaf research participants as the experts (Spradley 1980: 465) and followed their perspective.

At the time of my research, I was working for the office for disabled and chronically ill students at the University of Bayreuth. This often helped to give people an impression of what I was doing at home, and they appreciated that my work in Germany promoted people with disabilities to access higher education. They saw me as someone who had professional knowledge in the field of disability. My professional background also made it seem quite logical for people in the field that I would be interested in what being deaf is like in other places. A challenge, however, was that I was often categorized into the group of persons wanting to *help* disabled people and it was assumed that this was also the purpose of my stay in Benin. Every time I met new people, I told them that I was interested in what being deaf in Benin is and that I will write a book about what I learn. Being white and interested seemed to imply to many people that I was doing this for the sake of development aid and support for the deaf. This sometimes became problematic when I asked people to interpret for me. More than once, the ones interpreting told people against my will that I was heading a school and looking for deaf children, that I was looking for a place to build a school, or that I had some other *projects* to help the deaf, the needy, the vulnerable. For some people it was hard to understand that I was simply interested to learn about being deaf without having an agenda for change or "development".

Given the cultural model of being Deaf, many deaf people might disagree with calling them a vulnerable group. There are, however, "people who are individually, uniquely and innately vulnerable and those who are vulnerable because of their circumstances, because of the environment or as a result of the structural factors or influences" as Jo Aldridge quotes Mary Larkin (2009). Aldridge continues that these

> are important distinctions because they also point to the reasons why some individuals can be susceptible to multiple vulnerabilities – innately, circumstantially and also potentially by research processes themselves. (Aldridge 2014:113)

Both Aldridge and Larkin refer mostly to social and medical research in medical settings. In order to avoid misrepresentation and harm, Aldridge advocates for including the people researched in participatory research methods (Aldridge 2014:114), which is a precondition for the use of anthropological research methodology. The relative vulnerability of the deaf in Benin manifests itself not so much, however, in the risks of harm towards them, but in the expectations towards and the relations with the European researcher. Whether or not they are vulnerable, charity and development aid discourses have made many deaf and hearing Beninese perform vulnerability in order to get access to resources. Disability – and in this logic their being deaf is clearly a disability – means an additional asset on the charity market (Kusters 2017; Groce, Loeb, and Murray 2014)[20].

On a more immediate personal level, people often expected me to give them things, money, and gifts. As a matter of fact, these were more often hearing than deaf people. It was also not the poorest who asked me for things or money but those who had a meager income, possibly those who were in touch with Europeans before. Kristín Loftsdóttir tells of her research positioning in Niger where

> [t]he category anasara carries a clear association with power, and as such I carry, to many WoDaaBe [a Fulani group also known as Bororo], hopes of development projects or minor assistance. Even though many have exaggerated views of these possibilities (believing in my case that I could easily buy a car for my household in the bush or finance the building of a well for them) it should be kept in mind that these conceptions are based upon WoDaaBe previous encounters with anasara in Niger, many [of whom] work in positions of authorities in development institutions or are tourists enjoying their leisure time. (Loftsdóttir 2002:310)

When I spent two weeks in a sign language course for teachers at the private school in Louho in August 2016, I was frequently asked by the teachers to give them my shoes, my phone, or bring them a phone the next time I would come. Besides the fact that asking for favors and expecting gifts seems to be a quite ubiquitous practice in Benin, the teachers in Louho – as many teachers in the private schools for the deaf – were used to meeting white people. Those

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[20] There is actually often scrutiny from policemen and other Beninese as to whether a person is really deaf. I learned that the suspicion comes from the experience that people use deafness as a way to evade police control or that hearing people pretend to be deaf while begging.

would be volunteers and agents of funding bodies or donors. On my first visit in July 2016, the vice director told me that he would always welcome me as a German, because it was the wife of Horst Köhler, the then president of the Federal Republic of Germany, who paid for the water tower. With an emotionally thankful voice, he told me how they visited the school in the early 2000s. When the first lady learned that there was no running water and how cheap – from her perspective – the solution would be, she opened her purse and gave the director a bundle of Euro bills that covered the installation. The narration of this rather paternalistic (sic!) move seemed disturbing to me, but for the vice director it was an expression of pure kindness and love for the deaf that he will always give the Germans credit for. Likewise, the volunteers that often visit the different schools bring presents and things, things, things for the children that are celebratorily handed over and documented through photos for their Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, and fundraising campaigns in Europe. This experience shaped the expectations people directed towards me. However, only superficial acquaintances were highly disappointed when I did not fulfill their expectations.

I was often categorized as *le blanc* (French for the white guy), or *yovo-yovo* in the Fon language of southern Benin. Many people, however, did differentiate between the various whites, having varying degrees of knowledge about Americans and Europeans. Due to the history of Benin but also to popular culture, it was relevant that I was not French and not American, but a kind of German mediocrity. Americans were at the same time admired and criticized for their cultural hegemony, whereas the French were mostly viewed negatively due to the colonial memory and, as many Beninese told me, to the arrogant attitudes that many French portray in their former colony today. It seemed that connotations of a fierce history of national football, tough work ethos and the refreshingly undistinguished image of Angela Merkel served me well to be considered neither too great nor too threatening.

I was always clear about my motives and intentions for coming to Benin and talking to people. My usual explanation was that I was interested in what it means to be deaf in Benin, and that I would write a book about that. In case people asked what their profit or the profit for Benin would be, I told them that there was nothing to be gained directly in being part of my research. The research, the book and the conversations might teach people a thing or two or might make people consider doing something about deafness in Benin, but there was no direct impact to be hoped for. I asked people to teach me, make me understand, share their stories if they wished to, and if they did not wish to, that would be fine as well. I chose not to remunerate any of my

informants apart from interpreters and assistants whom I needed mostly during a four-week-stay in the rural North. Instead, I brought small presents like food, kola nuts, tobacco, cigarettes, the local booze from palm wine called *sodabi*, or invited people for beer and pork skins. This was more reciprocity than remuneration as I often ate, drank, slept, or smoked with my research participants as well.

Many of my research participants were women although there might be a slight gender bias towards male deaf as they were more likely to hold formal offices and speak up in and for the community. I had two close female friends and several women with whom I often interacted in church, in their corner shops, or their family homes. Those relations had to be established over a bit of a longer period of time than was needed to get in touch with men because deaf women were usually somewhat less present in the public space than men. But it seemed that just by hanging out with women, joking, gossiping, helping with cooking or restocking the shop, going to the market together, I was easily accepted among those deaf women. As I will discuss further below, the blurring of social boundaries is a characteristic of many deaf communities in Benin.

As a hearing and a white (and a male…) researcher, I expected to be in a kind of double (or triple…) bind that would be problematic regarding the power dynamics and histories of injustices between both deaf/hearing (or disabled/non-disabled) and black/white people. I had read in deaf anthropologists' accounts of their research (for example Kusters 2015a:15) that despite ethnic differences, deaf similitude created a shared social space that enabled deep and trustful interaction. Yet, deafness did not always trump economic and cultural difference (see Kusters 2015a:212–14; Friedner and Kusters 2014:10). As a matter of fact, I experienced that my doubled distance was an opportunity as well. I was neither a hearing Other like the hearing Beninese, nor was I part of Deaf communities in Europe or the USA that often came to Benin with certain d/Deaf values that the Beninese deaf did not necessarily share. I did not come with a project, religious mission, or funding so I did not square with white folks who would come with values and expectations. I was also neither Christian nor Muslim, and to women I was of the other gender – it seems that I incorporated so much difference that I could not be put into any familiar category. As such, I was readily integrated as a quite different but intimate guest into the deaf communities. Some deaf would often jokingly tell hearing folks that I was Beninese or that I was deaf. The whole idea of having me there seemed to be so absurd to many of

my interlocutors that my presence and inquiries were not perceived as penetrative or threatening.

in the discourse

In the rich introduction to their volume on *Innovations in Deaf Studies*, Annelies Kusters, Maartje de Meulder and Dai O'Brien write that they "believe that hearing researchers do not need to defend their doing Deaf Studies work per se, but it's vital that they think and write about their positionalities" (Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:23). "Doing Deaf Studies" is clearly not just doing research but also talking and publishing research findings, thereby giving words and meaning to social phenomena, eventually practicing some definitory power that comes with scientific publications. Besides the positioning in the field there is thus also my intricate position in talking about the field as hearing *and* European *and* white *and* male *and* ethnographer. In his book on Deaf culture and deafhood, Paddy Ladd states that there

> have been very few descriptions written by Deaf people themselves, and so this one can be used as a useful contrast to those assembled by outside "experts" (2003:10, see also O'Brien and Emery 2014:28)

Ladd's sarcasm towards the "outside 'experts'" is grounded in understanding deaf people as oppressed and colonized (Ladd 2003:5; Ladd and Lane 2014) by the hearing. Similarly, (hearing) anthropologist Yves Delaporte argues that variety within the deaf community is often overstated by "l'obsession classificatoire des experts", the experts' obsession with classification, while deaf people themselves feel more unified than diverse (2014:6). In my research I did discover, however, an inner variety, a deaf diversity that is central to this book. The empirical material from my research suggests a dissolution of the simplistic binary of deaf and hearing (see chapter 2); I will be careful to avoid that description of variety becomes an etic classification and objectification.

Postcolonial studies have rightfully scrutinized the authority claimed by white/western anthropologists to be the experts in African studies (Haraway 1991:156, 175; Abrahamsen 2003; Mbembe 2001). In deaf studies (Ladd 2019:38; Kusters and Meulder 2013:431–32) and disability studies (Devlieger 1999:297), a similar criticism is justifiably at stake; why should able or hearing people be the ones with definitory power over the disabled or deaf – have they not been long enough (Ladd and Lane 2014:48, 51; Humphries 2008)? The slogan of the disability rights movement – "nothing about us without us" – is as appropriate for the postcolonial as for the ableist power asymmetries (Grünberger 2020). So what about a white and hearing man telling you what being deaf in Benin is all about?

To Michael Jackson, anthropology starts with what is shared and not with difference (Jackson 1989). Sharing should, however, not imply homogeneity but diversity. In this sense, Alys Young and Bogusia Temple, both hearing researchers of being deaf, state that "being deaf is one of several latitudes from which others will differ from ourselves" (Young and Temple 2014:4), making a point of diversity and plurality in contrast to a simple deaf/hearing dualism. My book will pay attention to the ways that deaf Beninese's own struggles and visions of themselves create holes in dominant theories, discourses and policies, in order to follow ethnography's effort to give form to people's own painstaking arts of living and the unexpected potentials they create (Biehl 2010:216).

The position I sought in the field was the same that I am seeking in the discourse beyond it: I am interested in what being deaf is about. I want to become a decent learner. I will tell the stories that I learned during my research through an iterative-inductive process (O'Reilly 2012:179–80). I will set these all together to share what I learned about being deaf in Benin. I understand this book as my contribution to the discussion of being deaf; it is necessarily subjective and positioned, but it is reflective and meant as an invitation for comments, questions, and contradiction.

methods and data

Sign language is a crucial aspect of deaf sociality; not only is being able to sign indispensable to getting involved with the community but also the process of learning is a slow process of introduction and immersion. From there on, I engaged in classical ethnographic methodology to explore being deaf in Benin. Although there is a temptation to take the data and shape them into a coherent narrative without gaps and contradictions, I attempt not to write a "sanitized" end result but rather lay open the "messy social dynamics" (Plows 2018:xiii) of field and fieldwork and display the ambiguities of research, data generation, and interaction in the field.

participant observation

As a social anthropologist, the core methodology to generate this experience was participant observation. As a hearing researcher in deaf communities it was even more obvious than in other settings that a total immersion was illusionary. "Going native" is a false claim; rather anthropologists can do their best to attempt to get glimpses of "the native's point of view" (Malinowski 2002[1922]:25). The key characteristic of social experience of being deaf in a hearing world is not being unable to hear but being unable to engage in

mutual communication with the hearing majority. Oliver Sacks phrased this quite catchily, writing that "[d]eafness as such is not the affliction; affliction enters with the breakdown of communication and language" (1989:24). As any traveler, I did experience that breakdown of communication more than once; another advantage of my double bind being both hearing *and* a stranger to the region. I often discussed this with deaf friends. They asked me to translate what someone was saying, and I said I had no idea as it was spoken in Fon. The difference is of course that I could potentially overcome this breakdown by learning another language. But these reoccurring communication breakdowns served as entries to exchange, insight, and reflection in spontaneous conversation with deaf people. I would for example learn that some born-deaf people had not imagined that there were different spoken languages, or that they would assume that any hearing person can communicate with any other hearing person.

It is these spontaneous conversations that Gerd Spittler singles out as one of the major virtues of participant observation (2001); observation through presence and participation enables you to find the right questions (Bernard 2018:355). The conversations and interviews, though, are also better mirrored in participant observation again, as Spittler states that what is said is different from what is done; observing and asking are not alternative but complementary methods (Spittler 2001:16). He furthermore insists that the benefits of participation do not come from total immersion into the group or a 24/7 participation in their daily chores, but that the insights that emerge through presence and participation in people's everyday lives. "Understanding is a product less of your methodology than your mastery of basic social skills," Michael Jackson suggests. "And this demands time and perseverance." (Jackson 1995:21)

My ethnographic research started with learning the language. I simply visited the deaf people I had met in church. They knew I was interested in learning sign language and getting to know their lives and communities. Even though I could not communicate well in the beginning, I was welcomed to stay around. I spent a lot of time in deaf spaces, mostly in Cotonou but also in Porto Novo, Parakou and Natitingou. I helped in shops, sang in deaf church, sat in classes, went to the market, went out for food and drinks with the deaf friends, observed learning processes between masters and apprentices, teachers, and schoolchildren. Later, deaf friends sometimes asked me to interpret in sensitization workshops, at embassy receptions, consultations with local politicians, interactions with police, or when hearing parents approached the deaf staff in schools. I mostly tried to avoid these interpretation

tasks to observe how communication and the bridging of communication gaps were being done. Interpretation was mostly asked for in formal situations when there was little time or tolerance for having to make an extra effort for understanding. Sometimes deaf people also employed and exaggerated not or mis-understanding as a tool to navigate difficult situations with the police – an intentional breakdown of communication to avoid detrimental communication (see section 4.5). My presence as either a useful and active or useless, unable interpreter both gave me an interesting role as a (non)participant observer of social navigation between deaf and hearing people.

Being deaf in Benin happens in and around deaf spaces that are numerous and diverse, so my research was an ethnography of circulation (Friedner 2015:24) and somewhat multi-sited (Coleman and Hellermann 2013) in moving between different spaces of deaf sociality within Cotonou, within Benin, but also in Rome[21] and online on social media. Spending a lot of time with deaf people and having respectful friendships with many of them created an atmosphere of mutual trust where conversations and interviews could happen in mostly relaxed settings.

interviews and conversations

Quite quickly, I established a good level in sign language that enabled me to have conversations, informal interviews and also ask precise questions, follow elaborate answers and stories. Only when people were telling jokes, I mostly understood everything but the punchline, which put me in a doltish position and made me a slight nuisance when I asked people to explain the joke to me again. That is never a cool thing.

I was well equipped for conversations and interviews, but when I tried to follow conversations between two, three or more deaf people, I started having problems. Sometimes these group discussions would evolve after I put a question; then people started pondering and arguing about it. This was obviously the most exciting qualitative data, but following deaf people talk if they did not talk to me was very hard. They did not face me and in the heat of the discussion, I would never know who would jump in next. I was always on the lookout who would be talking next; sometimes people would sign at the same time. My eyes were constantly jumping from person to person, from

[21] Isaïe was a deaf teacher at the deaf school in Natitingou, run by the Suore Salesiane dei Sacri Cuori (ASSC). In September 2017, we met in Rome where he attended a conference of the Catholic order's schools from around the world. I was not allowed to join their meetings, but chatted with some nuns, teachers, and employees from around the world in the order's center in the Prenestino neighborhood.

one style of signing to another. The atmosphere was filled with laughter and the uttered, inarticulate sounds many deaf people made while signing. They joked, insulted, fought, changed topics: It was great! – and extremely tiring. As a neophyte to visual communication in general – I only started to learn a sign language in my late 20s – and in Beninese Signs in particular, following and understanding conversations in sign language was hard work, especially when I was thinking in parallel, which question I could throw in to steer the talk back into a direction I was more interested in. Looking down to take notes was of course totally out of question; I would have been completely lost.

As soon as I had a moment to myself, I would jot down "scratch notes" before the next situation evolved; in the evenings, I typed my notes into "fieldnotes proper" (Sanjek 1993:101) on a computer. I could not note down what people said straight away, though. As mentioned above, colloquial sign language naturally deviates from any presumably correct structure. It also follows a sign language logic that uses fewer signs than spoken language would use words. Those signs are accompanied by facial expression, dynamics, deictic, body language and sometimes sounds that together create the meaning of the statement. Taking notes in written form thus always meant translation which made the process of quickly jotting down notes more demanding (see also Temple and Young 2004:175). I took long hours in the evenings to reconstruct the situations and conversations in written language and find words for the information I got and the observations I made. I came to a point where I understood and myself expressed parts of communication in Signs that I could not even translate into a clear, verbalized thought. I used some signs, gestures, or body movements that I knew exactly when and how and why I would use them, but I could not *say* what I meant, just like you often have words in a spoken language for which you just do not find the right equivalent in another spoken language. Temple and Young argue that keeping data in the original language helps to maintain the various levels of meaning that might get lost in translation. Research in sign language, especially when not permanently documented by video recording, is problematic as documentation already means translation (Temple and Young 2004:174). Thus, also writing down fieldnotes proper became more complex and interpretative than it might have been in spoken language. Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson point out that fieldnotes proper are already part of the analytic process (2007:158), thus, given the demand for translation and reconstruction, my notes are already a certain step off the observation and experience of the moment.

The question of documentation was also at stake in doing interviews. I had brought a video camera to film the interviews in Signs. Often, sign language interviews would be filmed with two cameras so that both the interviewer and the interviewee can be followed. This would have demanded a very formal setup with some technical preparation. I figured that this would render the interview situation even more artificial and unwonted for both interviewee and anthropologist than those arranged situations are anyway. This kind of documentation demanded some discipline of both the interviewee and me. Sometimes the interviews turned into talks, conversations, even group discussions, and we got more comfortable. I often had to remind myself or ask the others to resume a position in better view of the camera. Most of the interviewees, however, were very easy about the camera and also enjoyed watching themselves afterwards.

At the beginning of each videotaping, I explained the purpose of the interview and its documentation to the participants. I told them that it was mostly for me and that I might just take parts of it for presentations or the like if they were ok with that. All interviewees agreed and thus I have documented informed consent in their language on the filmed material. I have about 21 hours of digital videos from interviews with 14 deaf men and 5 deaf women (see also the index of persons in the appendix). Some of them were interviewed more than once.

A tape recorder was used in interviews with hearing people. Although my focus was on working *with* and not *about* deaf people, there are many hearing people around the deaf communities whose specific experience, knowledge, opinions, and ideas I wanted to gather. These included family members – hearing parents, children, aunts, uncles, and siblings of deaf people who shape, enable, and/or complicate deaf lives at home, possibly function as wise persons (Goffman 1986:29–30). I also spoke with professionals who apply different kinds of knowledge to create and shape institutions of care, education, and employment for deaf and disabled people (see also the index of persons in the appendix). Those include hearing teachers, disability rights activists, sign language interpreters, medical doctors, an otorhinolaryngologist, speech therapists, but also hearing craftspeople who train deaf apprentices. Priests, healers, and *féticheurs* also take part in the production of hearing knowledge about being deaf and sometimes get involved in the medical and social interaction with deaf people. These interviews were mostly informal interviews with guideline questions I prepared for the respective appointments, recorded on audio tape if the soundscape of the interview location allowed me to, or documented with scratch notes during and after the

session. Another job the tape recorder did was capturing a range of folktales that the professional actor and storyteller Tino shared with me.

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Eventually, most of my research adapted to the field's ambiguities and happened on the margins between the different methods. I hung out with the deaf research participants, joined them during their daily chores, went to events and meetings, visited them at home and at work, and had the conversations that would pop up around things that happened or around my questions. Apart from some of the rather formal scheduled interviews, my research was rather messy (Plows 2018; Law 2007) and based on the reflected experience in the field. Through reflection with and feedback from my deaf friends and research participants, I assembled data and terminology that this book discusses in light of concepts from Deaf Studies and anthropology to understand being deaf in Benin. Given the challenges of sign language and visual communication to classical documentation techniques, the research was somewhat different from research projects I had undertaken before. Beyond that, I followed a holistic and phenomenological approach to understand a certain way of being in the world that many an anthropological project would – so different, so same.

1.4 structure of the book

The simultaneity of similitude and difference and the ambiguities of being deaf are a guiding theme of this book. I will introduce my understanding of deaf diversity as the basis of the experience of being deaf in Benin in chapter 2. Deaf diversity is propelled by social variation in class, family background, language, region, and religion as much as by the individual deafnesses people are born with or acquire at different moments during their life course. Being deaf is never only a question of impairment or (in)ability but is always intrinsically linked with language, socialization, and communication. I will argue how deaf communication in Benin is diverse and extends – due to the multiple ways of being deaf – far beyond sign language.

Deaf lives and life stories, though, are never simply an individual issue nor limited to deaf-deaf interaction but embedded in multiple social contexts. I follow the conviction that narratives are always socially embedded, and as such intrinsically "multi-authored" (Mattingly 2010:123); in Michael Jackson's words: "Our lives belong to others as well as to ourselves" (2010:137). Therefore, while I attempt to understand being deaf from a deaf perspective, the

hearing contexts that deaf lives play out in need to be addressed as well. Chapter 3 thus deals with the hearing construction of the deaf in discursive and narrative ways as well as regarding interaction between individuals and between individuals and the state. Although the deaf are somewhat constructed as the Others, the way this happens is more subtle and more interactive than a simplistic, categorical exclusion.

The deaf also construct themselves and their others; a fluid and ambiguous process of belonging and distinction that I will discuss in chapter 4. In following the question whether there is something that can be called a Beninese deaf community, I explore the different similitudes and differences at hand as well as inner dynamics of social control. Beninese deaf distinguish themselves from other countries' deaf as well as from the hearing and the disabled Beninese. While there are several ways of making community or even kin among deaf Beninese, community is also always an arena where difference and diversity are being negotiated. This is particularly so with respect to leadership positions - so much so that I dedicate chapter 5 solely to conflicts around leadership, or *être chef*, within the deaf church as well as within deaf representation. Stories of these conflicts are of common interest in chat and gossip in the deaf spaces; a portrait of deaf sociality in Benin would be irresponsibly incomplete without a discussion of this aspect.

An aspect of being deaf that is neglected in Deaf Studies as well as deaf anthropology is being deaf beyond the reach of deaf communities, networks, and sociality. Given the fact that only a minority of deaf people in the world have access to education and communities one can justifiably assume that the majority find themselves living among hearing people without access to deaf sociality (Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba 2012:251). To shed light on this gap, chapter 6 will introduce Moukwari, a deaf man in a village in Benin's northern Atacora region. Although the account of one person cannot sufficiently represent the diversity of deaf lives *off deaf sociality*, his persona can add some more shades to the perspective of my book that is otherwise dominated by deaf folks who take part in deaf sociality.

In the concluding chapter I will pick up the threads of ethnography and interpretation and discuss how deaf diversity, multiple belongings, and various social, moral, and political implications shape and create the ambiguities of being deaf in Benin. To keep my analysis open for alternative interpretations, I included a number of narrative intermezzos throughout the book that portray some outsiders whose stories contradict or reconfigure whatever conclusion I will have tried to reach at that given point.

The book will show how being deaf in Benin oscillates between similitude and difference; how community sometimes is a blessing, and sometimes SOURD-DUR, as Claire had said.

2 deaf diversity

> One of the first times that I visited the Beninese School for the Deaf (EBS) in September 2016, I was surrounded by a bunch of children who asked for my name, asked if I was deaf, and told me their sign names – obviously too many to remember. When I said that I was hearing, some of them were disappointed for a second, but then again exhilarated by the fact that I was signing. They pointed out a boy to me, telling me that he was hearing, too. They made him turn around, waited a second, and then clapped so he would turn around. He was slightly insecure and smiled shyly. The others found it so funny that they made him turn his back to them again, clapped and laughed when he turned around. A girl in her early teens touched my arm and spoke to me with a surprisingly mature tone: "The boy is hard of hearing," she explained. "He hears a little bit, but he does not speak." "Oh, but you speak?" I remarked. "Yes, but I don't hear a thing", she said with some insecurity, looking around as if to make sure the others did not notice her talking to me. She went back to another schoolgirl who continued practicing the finger alphabet with her. (fieldnotes 28/09/2016)

Being deaf evolves from diverse deafnesses, deaf experiences and biographies. Deaf Beninese learn about this as soon as they meet deaf peers. Similitude and difference, unity and diversity go hand in hand. In this chapter, I will explain deaf Beninese approaches to categorizing different ways to be deaf and how this diversity is reflected in different deaf ways of communication:

> [T]he world of deafness has always been heterogeneous; both the forms and degrees of deafness are variable, as are their effects. There can therefore be no single clear-cut perspective[. T]he way in which each individual adapts to his or her deafness introduces another variable, as does the environment in which the deaf person lives. (Saint-Loup 1996:6)

Explanatory models, causes, and emic categorizations are far from consistent, yet they matter for the making of deaf lives in Benin. By emic terminology I mean those signs, words, and concepts that deaf people in Benin use to talk about being deaf. Those differentiations are not necessarily meaningful for hearing Beninese, nor are they necessarily common sense among all the deaf. The emic/etic dualism is always constructed, simplifying and somewhat misleading. I am not suggesting that deaf people have homogenous views and understandings of being deaf, nor am I suggesting that hearing people have homogenous views and understandings of being deaf. Instead, I show that there are a range of views and understandings of being deaf among deaf and

hearing people in Benin. Further, I argue that these understandings of being deaf create the frames and conditions in which deaf lives unfold.

The emic perspectives are mostly taken from the discourses in the Cotonou deaf community that claims to speak for the deaf Beninese in general. The community is made up of people of various deafnesses that organize around the National Association of the Deaf in Benin (ANSB), the deaf church(es), and the oldest schools for the deaf in Cotonou. Chapter 4 will discuss in more detail the problematic claim for representation in the various deaf communities in Benin. What is, however, emic about this approach is that I rely on deaf Beninese categorizations of the deaf instead of on hearing Beninese approaches (see chapter 3) or on transnational perspectives that are often rooted in their respective political, social, cultural, historical, and theoretical backgrounds and are not necessarily applicable to local deaf worlds and identities (Friedner and Kusters 2014; Kurz and Cuculick 2015; Moriarty Harrelson 2015; Moges 2015; Nakamura 2006; Friedner 2017).

Another term I wish to clarify is *diversity*, a term that I use here as descriptive and analytic, not as a normative claim. Diversity, sometimes with different vocabulary, has been discussed as: a challenge to social organization (Simmel 1890:101f; Bourdieu 2007); an intervention in social justice discourses and identity politics (Michaels 2006); and a social (Salzbrunn 2014:8, 53), creative (Fink 2020), moral (Lorde 2018; Haraway 1991) and even economic (Frost and Alidina 2019) asset. These normative claims about diversity have been confronted with a reactionary backlash in European and US American political movements (Böllinger, Fink, and Mildner 2020:10–11; Heitmeyer 2018). With deaf diversity, I neither want to praise the cultural wealth that it may mean to society, nor lament the threat that diversity may mean to deaf similitude and political voice.

Instead, I highlight the plurality and differences that is often omitted when talking about *the deaf* in general, for example in Hilde Haualand's chapter on deaf belonging, which reveals a certain Deaf cultural ethnocentrism, oversimplifying and homogenizing both *the* hearing and *the* deaf experience (2008). In their book *The People of the Eye* (2011), Harlan Lane, Richard Pillard and Ulf Hedberg use the term deaf diversity to encounter a suggestion by Lennard Davis (Davis 2008) to "sweep all these divisive categories away" and create a unifying umbrella term for "anyone who doesn't hear well enough to communicate orally" (Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011:56). Lane et al. politically argue for a certain strategic essentialism (for a critical reflection see also Kusters and Meulder 2013) to overcome the challenge of deaf diversity. My interest is not to advance deaf identity politics in Benin but to understand the

dynamics of difference that structure deaf social lives and experience. Yael Bat-Chava discussed the “diversity of deaf identities” in an article in the American Annals of the Deaf (2000) but focused on the question of whether one orients towards a culturally deaf, a culturally hearing, or a bi-cultural identity. The article does not confront the question of diversity and difference among the deaf, or among several deaf identities for that matter. In focusing on differences, I do not understand them as essential or primordial but as dimensions of social interaction and negotiation. The different deafnesses as physiological experiences are part of people’s biographies and becoming. Tomas Vollhaber demands not to ignore or exclude the significance of the physiological deafness (2018:403f) but to explore all aspects and dimensions of the deaf experience.

In the first section of this chapter, I will introduce the axes of deaf difference in Benin regarding moment, cause, and degree of deafness, the immediate biographical contexts and the broader societal values that shape deaf experience, in particular around age, generation, and gender. In the second section, I will introduce the vocabulary that deaf Beninese use to categorize diverse ways of being deaf in Benin. In the third section, I will present how this diversity is reflected in communication as well. Given the diversity and variation, the closing section will discuss being deaf as interstitial and constantly challenging to both deaf and hearing Beninese.

2.1 axes of deaf difference

The most common local term for a deaf person is the Fon word *tokounon*, the one with dead ears, or the bearer of dead ears. The use of *dead* instead of a term that implies malfunction, impairment or other terms that dominate medical discourses of deafness fits the rather drastic imagery that is prevalent in southern Beninese cultural practice and language. It does also fit, however, the explanatory models of deafening that often involve the narrative of almost having died: Many of the illnesses that can cause deafness are potentially lethal, just as witchcraft and sorcery attempt to kill people but sometimes just leave them deaf instead of dead, *sourd·e·s plutôt que mort·e·s*,[22] as I learned from Beninese deafening stories.

[22] I use (trans)gender inclusive terminology by employing the median period; a method that is controversial in France, see Timsit (2017). I use this form when *I* talk with French terminology about people whose gender I do not know. When I quote my research participants directly or indirectly, I will not use trans and gender inclusive language, because they were not. The use of both French terminologies may look a bit confusing throughout my book. I still follow this approach, however, to emphasize that even though the majority of Beninese

The term deafness is often neglected by Deaf culture proponents as its medical implications suggest seeing the deaf person solely through a medical lense. The body and its functions can, however, not be detached from a person's experience (Siebers 2001; Hacking 1999; Kafer 2013; Waldschmidt 2005). On a physiological level, deafness plays out differently for each deaf person; rather than speaking of "deafness" in the singular, Mara Mills suggests speaking of "deafnesses" or a "deaf spectrum" (Mills 2015). Mills discusses the historicity of deafness and also reminds that prior to medicalization, normalization, and identity politics, deafness was conceptualized in terms of "a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind" (Mills 2015:47). While the categorization of deafnesses historically led to a pathologizing in the way that the inquiry into sexualities outside of heterosexual marriage lead to their repression (Foucault 1976), the idea of thinking in degree rather than kind can also put forth the understanding of a shared humanity rather than focusing on essential difference[23].

In the following I will recapitulate medical explanatory models of deafening in Benin including the little statistical data that is available. I will then elaborate on explanatory models of deafening involving medical approaches, jealousy and sorcery, ancestor relations, as well as divine determination. I will argue that categories of explanatory models are not mutually exclusive but inform and employ each other.

explaining deafnesses

This section is dedicated to narratives and explanatory models that set the cultural background that the social interaction engages with. I follow Bernard Helander's suggestion in an early collection of anthropological articles on disability that explanatory models

> build upon beliefs, gain coherence from the attitudes of the people confronting a disabled person, and are fixated th[r]ough a process of calculation of social and political factors. The resulting explanatory model acts as a tag on a person which legitimates some forms of behaviour [sic!] and excludes other forms. (Helander 1990:44)

Causes for deafness in Benin are explained in various ways including medical models, fate and destiny, and witchcraft and jealousy. Jean-Louis, a late

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may not know about or not recognize non-binary gender identities, it does not mean that they do not exist.

[23] While acknowledging this critique on Deaf Studies and its central topoi, Paddy Ladd yet suggests to follow a "strategic essentialism" (2003) as a means for activist ends. For broader discussion on strategic essentialism in identity politics see Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011:215).

deafened man who moved to Djougou to educate deaf adults in the Donga region, laid out these causes to me in terms of three illnesses. Although I only recorded this account explicitly in one interview (interview 07/24/2019), I think most of my interlocutors would generally agree with his perspective (see also Janzen 1982:67–75 on diseases "of God" and diseases "of Man"). Explanatory models are furthermore always equivocal, ambiguous, and subject to change. The same family may hold all these explanations in parallel or consecutively over time.

1 – Natural illnesses arrive *just like that* and need to be treated by medical professionals – meaning both medical doctors as well as traditional practitioners trained in herbal medicine.

2 – Illnesses caused by witchcraft are the consequence of social conflicts that are acted out through sorcery, witchcraft, or by asking a *féticheur* to practice malicious craft against the victim. Jean-Louis, as a committed reborn Christian, said that these illnesses can only be treated by praying to God. Another person might have said that one needs to see a *féticheur* or *guérisseur*, a traditional healer working with herbal medicine as well as spells and contact to the spiritual world, to defend the victim against the malicious attack.

3 – Illnesses that are given by God can only be taken away by God. Following Jean-Louis, this is one of God's ways to communicate with humans, to show the way or to teach a lesson. It is, therefore, only through His hands that the illness can be taken back, only when His plans are fulfilled. Jean-Louis, but also Paul (interview 09/19/2016), know that their deafness was meant to tell them to teach Signs and the word of God to the deaf. The categorical difference between an illness caused by God and an illness caused by witchcraft is that with the former, there is no functional explanation to the ailment other than God's intentions, which one may or may not be able to understand. The cause and treatment do not involve individual activity like the second model and can also not be explained by "natural" causes like the first.

Jean-Louis's categories refer to several models of illness – medical, social and magico-religious. A structuralist dualism of natural and supernatural explanations cannot be upheld regarding the complexity of illness categories in West Africa (Klein 2009:161; Olivier de Sardan 1998) that some have termed intrinsically holistic (Mvone Ndong 2014:15; Lux 1991:123; Gbodossou 1999:74–75).[24] Rather, they are incorporated in an understanding that

[24] Simon-Pierre E. Mvone-Ndong (2014) writes about rationalities of traditional African medicine based on his research and experience in Gabon. Such generalizations on "African traditions" should be viewed with suspicion. The magico-religious practices like divination, Vodoun and ancestor worship in West Africa have, however, seen centuries of exchange and

perceives "l'homme dans son intégralité" (Mvone Ndong 2014:15). In Benin, the respective discourses do not exclude but inform each other: A magical narrative might explain the meaning behind a medically discussed ailment and a medical analysis might reveal the ways that magic attacked the individual.

The medical perspective gives any narrative a certain authority through its implications of modernity. In this sense I should have been less surprised when I heard from many people involved in disability activism in Benin that one should rather refer to blind people as vision impaired, deaf people as audiologically impaired, and in general as *personnes souffrantes d'une déficience sensuelle*[25], as was part of the title of a conference organized by Beninese disability associations at the Institut Français in Cotonou. These terms are opposed by many core convictions of d/Deaf (Lane 2010:86) and disability (Oliver 1990) rights and justice movements in the global north, but in Benin, they imply a more professional, science-based approach to those who use them.

counting dead ears

To talk about deafness in Benin, it is of interest to look at the prevalence and medical background in order to see the phenomenon in comparison with other regions. Thus, for a moment, I will retreat to an impairment logic to provide the few available statistics and medical background on deafness in Benin before going into detail of other Beninese explanatory models of deafening and deafness, where this dualism will be somewhat dissolved again.

In 1997, a ministerial publication with the support of Peace Corps and Beninese disabled person's organizations (DPOs) calculated the number of disabled persons in Benin with the average values provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Singleton et al. 1997:9)[26]. Since then, disability has been part of two national censuses conducted in 2002 (INSAE 2003) and 2013 (UNFPA 2016), but both are not trusted by Cicéron, the president of the *Fédération des Associations des Personnes Handicapées au Bénin* (FAPHB, Federation of Disabled Persons' Organizations in Benin), the umbrella organization of DPOs in Benin, whom I interviewed in November 2016. Cicéron

mutual inspiration especially along the coast, see for example Hounwanou (1984:13). As the distinction of different magico-religious, medical, and cultural practices is not the issue of this book, I will refer to some general trends in West Africa.

[25] "people suffering from a sensual deficiency" – a wording that is quite contrary to current discussions of crip theory, disability aesthetics or Deaf Gain, see for example Fox (2020); Bauman and Murray (2014); Kafer (2013); Hamraie and Fritsch (2019).

[26] For an exciting critical discussion of disability statistics see Matthew Kohrman (2005). In the chapter "Why Ma zhun doesn't count", Kohrman traces how generalized WHO statistics influenced the way Chinese social scientists generated data for a national disability census in the 1980s.

criticized the data acquisition regarding persons with disabilities for not being systematic. Instead of asking the interviewees about their disabilities, he told me, the insufficiently trained agents collecting the data only noted the disabilities they observed during the interviews. The listing of disabilities thus not only reflected ableist structures but were also blurred by the agents' individual presuppositions about what constitutes a disability. Furthermore, the numbers in both censuses differ quite remarkably. The details from the 2013 census list 0.92% of the population as disabled, while the 2002 census details add up to 2.55%. In the latter, 7.2% of the disabled population were listed as deaf and another 2.3% as mute (INSAE 2003:37), whatever the category *mute* means[27], adding up to about 0.24% deaf and mute Beninese, 16,248 in total. The 2013 census lists three categories – hearing impaired, deaf, and mute – adding up to 0.16% of the total population, or 16,645 hearing impaired individuals (see also United Nations 2019:25). The total number of hearing impaired individuals remained almost the same while the population of Benin went from 6.8 to more than 10 million between 2002 and 2013 (UNFPA 2016). The censuses do not reveal what conditions they counted as deaf and mute or which degrees of hearing impairment were subsumed under these labels. This was also not clarified in a strategy paper by the board for disability affairs that worked with the data (Zodehougan Agbota, Aplogan, and Agbogbe 2011)[28]. In summary, the official numbers have to be interpreted with great caution.

Victoria Nyst expects the percentage of profound deafness in West Africa to be three to four times higher than in industrialized nations (Nyst 2010:408). Many people in sub-Saharan Africa acquire deafness through illness or poor medical treatment (McPherson and Swart 1997), which is not so much the case in countries where economic and hence sanitary development have led to a decrease in the incidence of deafness (Saint-Loup 1996:6). The rate of hereditary deafness is very low in relation to acquired deafness. Congenital deafness can be caused by illness, questionable medication taken by the mother during pregnancy, or complications at birth. Infants and children are also more vulnerable to overdoses of vaccination, antibiotics, or other

[27] Deaf Studies criticizes the terms deaf-mute as d/Deaf people do usually have language. The historical connections of deafmutes and the deaf-and-dumb (see Sacks (1989:8–9)) rendered mute and deafmute to be derogatory terminology for many d/Deaf people. In Benin, it seems that mute (French: *muet·te*) is often used descriptively. The description can, however, also include hearing people who do not speak due to mental health issues or learning disabilities.

[28] For neighboring Togo, Komlan Agoliki stated in his presentation at the congress of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) in 2019 that there were about 300.000 deaf in Togo (Agoliki 2019), which equals around 3.75% of the population.

medications. Anne, a deafened interviewee we will meet again in later chapters, remembered being treated in the 1960s with the antibiotic dihydrostreptomycin, which had been found to cause deafness a decade earlier (Harrison 1954) and was subsequently no longer used in human patients in Europe (Müsebeck and Schätzle 1962). Complications of different diseases like malaria, otitis media, sickle cell disease (Desai, Dejoie-Brewer, and Ballas 2015), kernicterus (Fisch and Norman 1961) and the apparently most common cause in West Africa, meningitis (Ette-Akre 2012:32; Vodounou 2008:62) also impair the sensory apparatus. Among the illnesses leading to deafness, meningitis is considered to be dominant in the Sahel region, which tropical medicine calls the "African meningitis belt" (Greenwood 2006; Molesworth et al. 2002). This is reflected in the Benin census data which show a slightly higher rate of deafness in the dryer northern regions than in the south (INSAE 2003:37).

When deaf people recounted their deafening, they usually told me about an illness, sometimes about fever[29], about dust and wind. They told me about symptoms and memories but would not give a name to the illness. Often, they remember their hearing to have disappeared from one moment to another, sometimes involving a short episode of unconsciousness or coma, or after a short time of seeking treatment. Gradual deafening over several months or years was a very rare experience. Those memories – besides the cultural implications discussed in the next section – square with the medical explanatory models. Dust and wind go well with otitis media or meningitis; fever and loss of consciousness happen with malaria and other illnesses; short unconsciousness and time spent in hospitals may refer to problematic treatment.

The fact that statistical data is scarce and unreliable is not a particular detriment to my research as I did and will continue to argue that being deaf is social and diverse. Michel de Certeau wrote that statistics "can tell us virtually nothing about the currents in this sea theoretically governed by the institutional frameworks that it in fact gradually erodes and displaces" (Certeau 2011:34) and I agree: Most of what would be measured in quantitative census data would say little about the dynamics of what being deaf is like and about. Yet, while medical explanatory models are one of many ways that Beninese deaf look at the causes of their deafness, they usually are never discounted completely. In the following I will discuss how deafening is explained within

[29] Fever, although a major sign of many illness like malaria or meningitis, appeared relatively rarely in the deafening stories. Possibly this is due to the individual perspective in which the heaviest fevers were during unconsciousness or other prevailing pains.

the discourse of Vodoun, witchcraft, and ancestor worship – and how those discourses neither replace nor contradict medical models.

witchcraft

> "Au Bénin, le vodoun, c'est une realité" Joachim tells me over a beer, In Benin, Vodoun is real. "There are societies of witches, men and women, secret societies. In those groups, each member has to give a member of their family to the secret society, a sacrifice." So they kill members of their families for the secret societies, I ask. "Yes," he says. And why do they render people deaf, blind, and disabled? "That's not what they do. It's because the witchcraft was not strong enough. Or because the defense, the talismans, the *gris-gris*, were too strong. The witch does not manage to kill them: Ils sont sourds plutôt que morts – they are deaf instead of dead." (fieldnotes 25/11/2016)

Sourd·e plutôt que mort·e, deaf instead of dead, implies that a spell or a spiritual assassination attempt was not strong enough. Instead of killing the person, it just took their hearing – an explanation that rhymes well with medical explanatory models where the course of an ailment or illness was not fatal enough to be lethal. Joachim said, after telling me his deafening story, that "in Africa, nothing happens naturally. There is always something occult at play" (interview 18/11/2016).

Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1937:8–9) learned that the Azande differentiated between witchcraft as an inherent ability to harm others,

illustration 3: SORCIÈRE, SORCELLERIE, FÉTICHE, witch, witchcraft, fetish, often used to sign VODOUN as well, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

illustration 4: VODOUN, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

sometimes even without awareness and consciousness of the witches themselves, and sorcery as a learnable craft to manipulate matter and substance to cause harm on others. As I conducted my research in French and in Signs, this distinction was rarely made. In French, both phenomena are referred to as *sorcellerie* (see also Geschiere 1995) and so did my French-speaking interlocutors, even though local languages offer more precision (see also Klein 2009:179). In Signs, while there are different signs for Vodoun and witchcraft/*fétiche* (see illustration 3 and 4), the deaf would often use the sign SORCIÈRE for all occult practices, beings, and practitioners – witchcraft and witches, Vodoun, evil spirits, or for *féticheurs* who would ritually engage with the spiritual world. In the stories that deaf people shared with me, Vodoun, witchcraft, sorcery, and fetishism all blend into one; a "conflation of the African occult into one sinister phenomenon" that Terence Ranger criticizes regarding British discourse of African [sic!] spiritual practices (2007:274). Ranger laments the ongoing stereotypical perception of African [sic!] spiritual and religious practices in the UK. Simplifications and generalizations, though, happen in Africa as well as can be seen among the deaf in Benin and in Pentecostal crusades against "witchcraft" as Ruth Marshall (2009) studies in Nigeria. Peter Geschiere (1995) and others argue against the understanding of African witchcraft as dark and primitive and instead see it as an integral part of 21st century sociality in Africa – and beyond (see Geschiere 2013). The main differentiations deaf Beninese make – in case they make them at all – are between malicious/aggressive, benevolent/defensive, and healing practices.

My deaf research participants cannot, however, be considered specialists in practices of witchcraft and sorcery. In most narratives they are merely passive victims. I have never heard any story or rumor about a deaf person practicing witchcraft – even though deaf Beninese love spreading rumors about each other. Instead, they avoid the traditional spiritual realm. This is not surprising, because for many, it was the origin of their deafness. When I asked Joachim, whose deafening story I will recount in a moment, where I could learn more about witches and practices related to them, he told me he would find someone. However, he said, he would surely not come along. "Are you afraid?" I asked. He evasively said he was not, but he really did not like all that.

A commonplace expression among my research participants was "En Afrique, les morts ne sont pas morts" – in Africa, the dead are not dead – another instance of generalizations of "Africa" in Africa. For most of the Beninese I talked to, Vodoun and fetishism, ancestor worship and witchcraft

are not part of a religious realm. Vodoun does not necessarily compete or interfere with religions like Christianity or Islam – but were considered as *culture*. This is also why being a Christian or a Muslim does not necessarily conflict with practicing any of the above. Occult practices play a big role in many narrative explanations of why people became deaf – or of other ailments for that matter. In guideline interviews I always directed the interviewees to tell me how they deafened and how they and others interpreted that. Those who were born deaf did not reflect so much about it, and neither did their parents, at least those that I had the chance to talk to. Deafness at birth was often understood – by hearing parents and deaf people themselves – as an unfortunate but common occurrence that just happens, a natural illness as Jean-Louis would say. Those who deafened later, however, often had complex knowledge and opinions about how their deafness came to be.

The study of disability/impairment or other afflictions in African contexts has shown how health and illness (Lux 1991; Klein 2009), disability (Devlieger 1994:87–89; Gbodossou 1999; Scheer and Groce 1988:28) and deafness (Kara and Harvey 2016:73; Kusters 2015a:46) are connected with activities of and entanglements with the spiritual world. The cultural or spiritual explanations of affliction are another layer of understanding, a question of *why* something happened, and not just *how*. A medical perspective would understand that an ear infection, a tympanum trauma, or a meningitis contagion has caused a person to lose their hearing. This answers the question *how*, and Beninese deaf know this well, even though they might just refer to the illness, MALADIE, instead of a more specific description. The more interesting question that medicine cannot answer, however, is *why*.

In his 1937 *Magic, Witchcraft and Oracles among the Azande*, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard analyses the way the Azande make sense of misfortunes like the collapse of a granary injuring a person. A lot of discussion, oracles and analysis is devoted to figuring out why this happened. Evans-Pritchard states that of course the Azande would know that it was termites in the canopy's wood that caused the structure to fall. This *how*, though, did not explain *why* the mishap happened at that exact moment that this particular person was seeking shadow underneath this particular roof (1937:22). Natural and supernatural explanations of misfortune and affliction do not necessarily exclude one another but their coexistence may offer deeper and more meaningful understanding than each alone. A cross-cultural psychological study on people making sense of the origin of species, of illness and of death found that

> there is considerable evidence that the same individuals use both natural and supernatural explanations to interpret the very same events and that

> there are multiple ways in which both kinds of explanations coexist in individual minds. (Legare et al. 2012)

The same can be found in many deafening stories which I collected in Benin. Supernatural and witchcraft related narratives are furthermore often entangled in broader family affairs. Magico-religious practices and accusations are often expressions of social conflicts, and *vice versa* (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:24; Mullings 1984); as Peter Geschiere puts it, "witchcraft is situated on a precarious interface of an intimate inner circle and an uncertain outside" (2013:17). The local explanations of deafness refer to social constellations and conflicts that do not replace but enhance medical explanations.

jealousy and greed

In 2016, Paul, a deafened educator of the deaf, took me on a tour around Womey, a remote, almost rural suburb of Cotonou, to introduce me to deaf people in his neighborhood. We met deaf people in their homes or their workshops and visited deaf children playing in their families' yards. At a very fancy house, the parents did not want to let us in. Paul got very angry and made a scene in his loud, uncontrolled voice, much to the amusement of passers-by, and scolded the hearing siblings and parents for hiding their deaf daughter and not sending her to school. Paul told me that it was particularly wealthier families that hid their deaf children because people would assume that they employed occult practices to achieve their wealth. Failing to harm an economic opponent, their witchcraft may have proved too weak, or their opponents too strong, so that it backfired and hurt their own children. Sometimes, Paul told me, ancestors also punish parents with a sick, deaf, or dead child for engaging in heathen practices. Thus, the deaf children's existence implies that the family's wealth was gathered through immoral means, that they engaged in conflicts that were, to some, fought in immoral ways. On the one hand, they acted out of greed and jealousy, on the other their wealth is an object of jealousy for others. This setup, in a world of witchcraft, is toxic.

Joachim, whose thoughts on witchcraft I quoted above, told me how occult practices and jealousy were involved in his deafening. It was not economic opponents who caused his deafness but a member of his kin, his father's first wife. She was jealous after his father divorced her and took a new wife who gave birth to Joachim, his father's first-born son. To attack the second wife, the first came after Joachim. When he was seven years old, he felt sick at school and the teacher sent him home. He did not see the sandspout he was walking into. He remembered that the last spoken word he ever heard was his classmates shouting his name. He was unconscious for some time

and was treated in hospital. He had meningitis; he says. When he woke up, he did not hear anymore. He says that his father's first wife practiced witchcraft to make him feel sick so he would leave school, so that evil spirits could attack him in the bush outside school. Apparently, however, they were not strong enough, so he did not die. He did not entirely recover, though, and remained deaf.

Joachim's account mixes many dimensions here and does not care much for differentiations. Witchcraft and sorcery, jealousy and kin conflicts, disease and infections, spirits and Vodoun all play a part in the story. It therefore illustrates well how many of the witchcraft accusations in Benin are entangled with multiple aspects of physical, social, and spiritual life. The origin of this kind of deafening stories lays, however, in people's jealousy. Joachim's father's ex-wife's jealousy of her successor made her resort to witchcraft.

Stories of deafening often involve jealous individuals. These may be competitors and strangers who envy a person's success, or kin, co-wives, or ex-wives like in Joachim's story, thus, close members of the immediate kin. Peter Geschiere dedicated his entire book *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust* to the "deep fear of kin with whom one must collaborate but who have at the same time a most dangerous hold over one" (2013:25). The ubiquitous presence of jealousy and suspicion may furthermore be rooted in Beninese pre-colonial and colonial history of slavery and conquest where different groups organized raids against others to expand their territory, but also to increase their wealth and power (Elwert 1973). The extent of these practices increased dramatically with the arrival of European slave traders. The fact that in the south as well as in the north people enslaved members of their own group (Alber 1994:18) can be understood to have contributed to a sense of suspicion, fear and distrust among members of the same group. Explanatory models of deafening in Benin are then also entangled with national traumata and historical experience – not that distrust in intimate others required a historical argument. Kin conflicts are already embedded in the interwoven thickets of relations and belongings, as Erdmute Alber has often discussed in conflicts around care responsibilities within the closer and broader kin and care networks in Benin (Alber 2014, 2016, 2013, see also Alber, Häberlein, and Martin 2010). Historical experience may add just another layer of controversy.

Disease, affliction, and witchcraft are thus drastic ways of negotiating social relations of inequality; and deafness as a collateral damage of those ways sits at the heart of this competitive sociality. Deafness appears as a tangible manifestation of otherwise unfathomable, oblique, and elusive dynamics of witchcraft and kin conflicts.

imagery of witchcraft narratives

Besides jealousy and kinship, Joachim's story invokes the imagery of the wild. His father's ex-wife practices witchcraft so he feels sick at school. In his narrative, though, this is not yet the attack that lead to his deafness. He is lured out of the confines of school, of civilization, to walk through the bush, where the spirits can attack him. It is shortly before walking into a sandspout that he hears for the last time, before the unpredictable and dirty realm of the wild takes hold of him. I gathered several stories invoking similar images, for example that of Ruben, a deaf carpenter in Parakou, that also involves an active role of spirits in the bush.

I met Ruben at his small workshop that was little more than a shaky shed by the road where he kept some tools and material. He had visited the deaf school in Tibona/Parakou and since lived with his sister Audrey and her husband. He worked in the open, where we sat and chatted in October 2016. Audrey sometimes jumped in and helped our mutual understanding[30]. She had never actively learned sign language, but they had figured out ways to communicate between his speech, her mouthing, and their own signs.

Ruben was born in Niger in 1992 and came to Parakou as a child with his parents. He was in CE1 when he became deaf, in the school vacation of the year 2000 when he was in his father's village. One night he laid down under a tree to sleep. However, at the crack of dawn, he felt "turbulences", as he says. The wind entered his ears, and he was deaf. I asked if he was not sick at all. Audrey said no, no pain, no fever, nothing. She exclaimed: "C'est l'Afrique ici!" Toussaint, the other deaf carpenter, laughed nervously. "Il y a des esprits, des choses spirituelles ici en Afrique," she explained. I asked her if it were the spirits who caused the deafness. She laughed again, "On ne sait pas, c'est Dieu seul qui sait." She touched the small cross she wore around her neck. "Il n'était pas malade, après on est couru là et ici et là, mais personne ne savait pourquoi. Il a dit c'est les turbulences, le vent qui est entré dans ses oreilles."[31]

The story reveals the magico-religious ambiguity in everyday life. Spiritual beings caused the affliction and yet it is God – the Catholic one in this case – who knows the answers in the end. They did not share a social

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[30] Every school teaches sign language a bit differently. It would thus always take me some time to acquaint myself with a person and their signing before being able to understand more easily. I will get back to these variations in the section on deaf communication, section 2.3.

[31] "We're in Africa here!" / "There are spirits, spiritual things here in Africa" / "One can't know, God only knows." / "He was not sick, [after he lost his hearing] we went here and there, but nobody could tell us why. He says it was the turbulences, the wind that entered his ears."

interpretation as to which person or witch may have caused the affliction. Even though Audrey invoked the notion of God who knew what was going on, she was convinced that it must have been some spiritual or magical cause. Only that they could not find out what it was.

Two themes appear in the narratives of both Joachim and Ruben: the bush and the wild on the one hand and the dust and wind on the other. Ruben lays down under a tree to sleep instead of staying in a yard or room. His narrative also includes the comment that he comes home to the village from school for vacation, temporarily leaving the institution, possibly civilization. Joachim is lured out of the school grounds into the open and caught off guard on his way home. The notion of the bush being the realm of spiritual beings, beyond the control of man, is a common trope in many West African mythologies.[32]

The dust and wind add to the imaginary of the wild as uncivilized and dangerous. The notion of dust does, however, not square with the explanations of deafness that Annelies Kusters found in southern Ghana, where deafness was connected to water (2015b). In Adamorobe, Kusters studied a group of people experiencing a high rate of hereditary deafness, a limited geographical area. It is not surprising that some explanatory models she found referred to local landmarks; in this case a river in the forest and the spirits that lived in one of its ponds (2015a:109–16). Regarding the Beninese stories quoted above, though, one is from the tropical south while the other is from the arid north. Mere geography cannot account for the difference to the imagery that Kusters found in the tropic south of Ghana. I see the mythological difference rather in the kind of deafness at play. In Benin, I encountered no cases of hereditary deafness[33] and there was no such geographical cluster of deafness – at least none has been documented yet. Instead, as

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[32] See for example Elisabeth Boesen (1999) on the delineation of a Fulbe camp towards the surrounding bush. She discusses the structured inside of the house and the camp as an antipode to the uncontrollable and dangerous wild beyond the limits of the camps. I encountered similar suspicion towards the "uncivilized" in an earlier research project on *folie* and insanity among the kel Adrar Tuareg in northern Mali. I learned that *kel assouf*, people of solitude, live in the deserts, far from settlements and camps, and possess those who go "out" into the desert without proper protection through veils or talismans, see Mildner (2009).

[33] Only towards the end of my second research stay in Benin, I learned that Michel, Odile, and Béni – three deaf adults beyond the age of 45 that I chatted with every once in a while – were three deaf children of the same hard-of-hearing mother who had each of them with a different hearing man. To deaf Beninese, this was a curiosity, but they did not attribute them with particular roles in the community. As a matter of fact, the three of them not only not formed close ties but they had nothing to do with each other. While Odile and Béni were members of deaf church and Odile also worked in the canteen of the public school for the deaf (EBS), Michel was kind of a rogue and a loner who worked as a tailor in the center in Agla without ever engaging much with the other deaf around.

discussed above, deafness is caused by a range of diseases and medical problems of which meningitis is one of the most prominent. The imagery of dust and wind is as much part of medical explanations around meningitis in the Sahel (Thomson, Jeanne, and Djingarey 2009) as of the non-medical narratives of deafening. Both bush and dust create a narrative contrast to housing, civilization, cleanliness and development - the promises of modernity (see Comaroff 1996:21). The notion of dust and wind causing disease and disability is widespread across the arid regions of Africa, as for example Bernard Helander shows for Somalia (1990:34). A medical view of deafness in Benin would speak of poor medical conditions that need to be ameliorated. Rationalist and spiritual explanations and solutions are remarkably congruent and yet each have their separate relevance in the experience of deafening.

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Witchcraft narratives as explanatory models are central to deafening stories in Benin, but they are not levitating without reference to other realms of experience. They employ medical models as means and strategies of attack and they are expressions and negotiations of kin conflicts and social networks. Deafness – at least when it is acquired after birth – is, therefore, intrinsically social in its genesis. After deafening, growing into being deaf continues to be a social, biographical process that is entangled in the thickets of sociality.

biography

The actual degree of hearing loss and the physiological and discursive details of deafening do not determine what deaf lives are like. Instead, deafnesses are merely the starting point of deaf biographies. It is the social and cultural context of a deaf individual as well as the space and time that they are born into that is crucial for making their life. Where a deaf person finds themselves in relation to rural or urban settings, proximity to suitable schools and relevant public services is of high relevance in a place like Benin where private and public health and education infrastructure is almost entirely centered in the south of the country. The ways that deafnesses play out furthermore depends on the moment of deafening. I will sketch some of the biographic dimensions that shape deaf becomings.

moment of deafening

Whether a person is born deaf, deafens before or after acquiring speech, or loses their hearing late in life influences how that person takes part in deaf

and/or hearing sociality. For decades, Deaf Studies as well as hearing studies of the deaf have criticized the popular distinction between pre- and post-lingual deafnesses. Not only does this dualism emphasize the physiological deafness and the deficit model of disability, it has also been criticized as an audist presupposition about the experience of deafness. The pre- and post-lingual distinction puts a hearing-centered focus on spoken language while people who learned sign *language* are also *lingual* (Padden and Humphries 2010:398). This critique makes sense in contexts where deaf people can have a sign language as first language and there is no delay in becoming "lingual". In Benin, however, deaf people are born into or deafen into hearing families, into a spoken language setting where they usually do not have immediate access to sign language instruction from teachers or kin. Language is rather a question of access and socialization. In Benin, the distinction thus remains meaningful but in a social sense and in more shades than just pre- or post-lingual, as I will explain below.

geography and access

Even before deafening, the lottery of where in Benin (or on earth) one is born generates a higher or lower probability to catch an infection or another condition that may cause deafness. A deaf life that starts in a rural area opens very different opportunities than a deaf life that starts in a city. In urban centers, the probability that deaf people meet and practice sociality is a lot higher than in rural areas where they are often the only deaf people in their vicinity. In turn, deaf villagers might find a "grass roots solidarity" among their hearing kin and neighbors (Saint-Loup 1996:13) that does not exclude them as much as a more diversified urban sociality. Yet, deaf spaces like schools or churches are often beyond the reach and knowledge of the village communities, and so deaf villagers often do not socialize with other deaf people (see chapter 6).

family[34]

The family one is born into is crucial in shaping deaf experiences as families are usually the most important support networks for individuals in Benin, deaf or not (Adam 2009:24). I use the term *family* in a broad sense, acknowledging that it may be parents, siblings, aunts, uncles or other kin, whether biologically related or not, who take over care responsibilities for the child (Martin 2015; Alber 2014). It is crucial for a deaf child's life whether the

[34] More on hearing families and parents of deaf children in section 3.4.

family is willing and able to seek treatment or education for the child. Many mothers I talked to decided to leave their homes to seek treatment for their deaf children in the urban centers. As treatment did not cure the deafness[35], many mothers looked for opportunities of education in the south or neighboring countries, sometimes hundreds of kilometers from their homes. Not every parent has the individual will, the financial disposition, or the knowledge of opportunities to seek support like this.

Many families communicate with their deaf children on the basis of gestures and simple signs that usually do not go beyond monodirectional instruction like “scrub the floor”, “do the laundry”, “come here”, “go away”, and the like. Not every family with a deaf family member has the willingness and ability to create their own home signs that enable more complex exchange and communications (see section 2.3 for the complexities of sign languages and visual communication). Often enough I have encountered families that do not make any effort to learn signs with or from their deaf children.

Some families enable access to deaf education by looking for schools, raising the necessary, sometimes substantial funds for a boarding school, possibly even moving to another part of the country to be closer to education centers. In doing so, the families open opportunities for orientations towards deaf sociality in these deaf spaces that might otherwise not be within reach of the deaf children.

If the deaf or deafened child remains with the family, other questions emerge: Are family members willing and able to accommodate to the different communication that the child will likely require? Will they make the effort to include the somewhat different child into the hearing family? The decisions, actions, and commitments – or lack thereof – of the deaf child’s hearing family are thus formative to many opportunities a deaf child will or will not have.

hearing communities

Beyond the family, there is also the question of whether the hearing community in a village or the neighborhood is willing to integrate and to accommodate to the deaf person or not. As being deaf is social, it is always entangled in interaction with individuals. Some neighbors learn some signs, some street vendors are very attentive to nonverbal communication and negotiation. Hearing children of deaf adults learn and practice speaking in the households

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[35] There may be cases where (an assumed) deafness was cured, for example by removing a blockade of the external auditory canal. Those cases did, however, not enter my sample as these children did not grow up to be deaf.

next door where neighbors take over certain parent roles (Goody 1982; Alber 2014:60–65). Other neighbors are totally indifferent to the deaf, while again others avoid and disrespect them – for example for the fear that deafness is contagious and signing might ruin their own children's ability to speak (see more on hearing perspectives and deaf-hearing interaction in chapter 3).

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Deaf biographies are neither written in an empty space nor only in a deaf person's immediate surrounding, but they are part of larger scale societal values. The ways in which Beninese values are part of being deaf in Benin will surface throughout this book. Two central axes of difference, however, seem particularly constitutive of personhood – deaf or hearing – in Benin so that I will introduce them as part of the deaf diversity. Those axes are along age and generation and along gender roles and expectations.

age and generation

Age matters not only regarding the life phase one was in when deafening but also regarding one's position in the age structure of deaf sociality and one's belonging to a generation. The short history of deaf education and sociality in Benin also means that intergenerational differences of life worlds might be even more dynamic among the deaf than they already are among the hearing (Le Meur 2008): While the oldest deaf I met, like Michel, had no access to education whatsoever, those who were in their forties and fifties learned language from deaf teachers and experienced similitude in the nascent community around deaf church and deaf school in the 1970s and 1980s. The young adults of today, again, had hearing teachers, sometimes hearing classmates, and connect with other countries' deaf through social media. Frames of reference for similitude, difference, and sociality have been shifting dynamically and continue to do so.

The concept of generation appeared only rarely in conversations but seemed to matter a lot in interaction. Some deaf interviewees categorized deaf Beninese in general and Cotonou in particular in different generations. Although not everyone used the term, it made sense to most of my interlocutors when I asked them about it. To them, there is a *first generation of the deaf*, which does not mean that those were the first deaf Beninese in the sense of not-hearing, but of those deaf who learned sign language, the first in the sense of deaf sociality. To deaf Beninese, deaf history only starts with Andrew Foster and the onset of deaf education.

The lines between deaf generations are blurred – as it is usually the case with generations (Whyte, Alber, and van der Geest 2008:20). They do correlate to some extent with age, but not every deaf pupil entered school at the same age, which adds to blurring the lines. Yet, everyone I discussed the term generation with identified four generations:

- The first generation were those who learned to sign from Andrew Foster and his disciples in Nigeria. They were also the ones who taught in EBS or in church groups. They were therefore considered the ancestors of the deaf community, while Foster himself was appropriated as the father of the deaf in Africa and in Benin. Victor Vodounou was referred to as *notre père*, our father, as well, while female deaf teachers like Anne (see section 5.2) were usually not referred to in terms of parenthood. Some of the first generation have emigrated, many have passed away, and some were still living in southern Benin, while none of the latter occupied a formal position of responsibility anymore. During my research, they were in their sixties and seventies.
- The second generation were the first deaf pupils, the first to receive a somewhat formal education. At different ages they entered primary school in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Joachim and Homère, Maurine and Claire belong here, and so do many others who occupy positions of responsibility and authority. It was also the members of this generation that spoke up and were listened to when broader issues and conflicts in ANSB or deaf church were discussed.
- Deaf people between the age of 20 and 30 made up the third generation. They had finished school primary or *collège*. These deaf found some decent work, two of them even studied at the country's main university in Calavi. They often took a very critical stand towards the second generation but appeared not to be let into the discussion of where deaf sociality shall go. They were referred to as *les jeunes*, the youth, with all the implications of hope and disappointment that the discourse of youth often entails (Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein 2016; Honwana and Boeck 2005; Mildner 2020a).
- The fourth and youngest generation were the pupils who currently went to school. They played no active role yet in deaf discussions but were the subject when the second and third generation discussed the future of deaf Beninese.

Part of the authority that the second generation claims was based on ancestry and achievement (see also chapter 5). Not only did they create most of the

illustration 5: A WhatsApp message from Homère that Isaïe shared with me. It reads: "Read your WhatsApp and see that I am really angry. Which authority did you receive to talk badly of ANSB, against me??? Have you even been born when ANSD [sic!] was created? Why all those posts on the Facebook? If you want to be president of ANSB, just come and I will give it to you. Guillaume [anonymized] created ARTSB and handed it over to you, and what have you been able to do with it? Praise be to the Lord!" screenshot from Isaïe's cell phone, July 2017.

offers and opportunities open to the following generations: They could also tell stories of the deaf ancestprs, some preened themselves on having met Andrew Foster in person.

Given the short history of deaf education and (reported) deaf sociality in Benin, generations differ quite a lot in which opportunities and pathways were available to them. Every deaf generation has lived in very different deaf geographies that enabled very different life courses. However, it was not only education that gave status and social capital, but also achievements and pioneering. The older generations, and particularly those individuals who engaged in the national association of the deaf (ANSB) and in the establishment of deaf education earned respect through their achievements. This value is ambiguous. While the young have better education, better access to international discourses and partnerships, the old have achievements and experience to show. This seems like a normal dynamic as "conflicts over dependence and autonomy are built into intergenerational relationships" (Whyte, Alber, and van der Geest 2008:13), but among the deaf Beninese, the short and dynamic history raises the amplitudes of difference.

The *old* claim authority due to their age, their knowledge of Beninese deaf history and their acquaintance to the ancestry of the deaf family. In an angry discussion, carried out on Facebook and WhatsApp in April 2017, Isaïe had heavily criticized Homère's activities as the president of ANSB. Isaïe sent me screenshots of Homère's reactions (illustration 5). In his text message, Homère asks: "Who authorized you to talk badly about ANSB, about me? Were you even born when ANSB was created?" He connects the question of

authority with past achievements, experience, and age. In chapter 5, I will zoom into these intergenerational conflicts that spark tension in the deaf community of Cotonou. These power dynamics in reference to age and generation are far from being specific to deaf people. Instead, they are part of the Beninese social structure that deaf diversity builds on in Benin.

gender

Another important axis of difference in being deaf in Benin is gender. As I mentioned above, Benin is, generally speaking, a patriarchal society where political, economic, and religious power lies in the hands of men. The history of male leadership in the deaf communities that I will discuss in chapter 5 indicates that deaf sociality mirrors much of the gender dynamics of Benin. These dynamics are also reflected in the everyday interaction where deaf men are more independent both when grown up and when boys. Deaf girls and women tend to be socially located more in the domestic realm; on the one hand because women in Benin are generally more integrated into household economies, but allegedly also to protect them from harm, teenage pregnancy, and threat of sexual abuse and rape in the street. While this is limiting their freedom on the one hand, it also opens up more doors in a way, as deaf girls are potentially better integrated into hearing family and neighborhood networks. While boys and men are more integrated into deaf spaces, sociality, and similitudes, deaf girls and women learn to establish and appropriate deaf-hearing relations as well.

In Benin, women and mothers can leave their marriage and come back to their families, that is her mother or her matrilineal kin, who will usually take care of them and the children – a practice that is complicated by the high cost of living in the cities. Deaf men that are left by their wives lose their status and face harder negotiations for kin support, as it is usually expected from the men to support the broader family network and not the other way around. While having a limited deaf social and geographic mobility, the (involuntary) domestic orientation of deaf girls increases their social security significantly. There are a few deaf people I know who were abandoned as infants – like Elie in the next section – and some more stories that I have been told of abandoned infants in the past. These were, though, exclusively boys. The gender notions of strong and independent men and domestic and frail women means that disability and deafness impair a girl less than they do a boy.

Deaf spaces are gendered in that sense as well, as can be seen in the deaf school in Agla. Claire wants to teach the girls how to cook as she is frustrated

to see how little they learn at home. She believed, she told me, that the girls' parents did not let them take part in the household and did not teach the girls the necessary competences a wife-to-be needed. That would be quite surprising to me as I witnessed in many families – in town or in the villages – that deaf children were recruited for household chores just as any hearing child; sometimes even more so as they might socialize less with the (hearing) neighborhood children and were thus more focused. After class in deaf school in Agla, the girls helped in the canteen while the boys usually played, chatted, or napped. The practice of gender relations in the school spaces reproduces the expectations of an assumed Beninese normality.

Similitude sometimes also trumps gender differences – at least to some extent. Deaf women and men hang out together a lot more than is usually perceivable among hearing Beninese. You will always find groups of people sitting in front of shops and houses, street corners and football pitches, but usually those groups are *either* men *or* women. For the deaf in urban Mali, it has been documented that this separation even led to a sign language that is only used by male deaf in Bamako (Nyst 2015). The deaf in Benin, however, mingle more: Moïse, a core member of deaf church, is a close acquaintance of Maurine, Pasteur Homère's wife, and spends almost all his free time around her shop in Vêdoko or her house. Fabian and Claire are good pals and she receives just as many male deaf visitors as female ones in her shop in Agla.

These connections between deaf peers are quite strong. "We went to school together!" was a frequent answer I got when I asked someone why they were meeting a deaf person of the opposite gender, knowing that people would talk behind their backs. Having been to school together signifies a strong tie as it was here where they first experienced deaf sociality together; a connection that was often described in terms of siblinghood. These ties often trumped gender divisions.

At the same time, however, gender roles are reproduced in deaf spaces. In the tailor workshop, Elie was told to sew buttons on a girl's dress that a customer had brought for repair. He refused, emphasizing that male tailors work on men's clothes, female tailors on women's clothes. When I would sit down with women to help chopping vegetables, both men and women would mock my womanish demeanor. A lot more straightforward is the church where men and women were sitting separately and the sermon was quite openly against gender equality and women's independence.

As among the hearing majority society, polygyny is practiced among the deaf but apparently a lot less frequent than among the hearing. While in

2011/2012, more than a third of the Beninese women between 15 and 49 declared to be part of polygynous relationships (INSAE 2013:62), I only know of one such arrangement during my research; though I know of some that have fallen apart. As the husband is expected to be the provider of the family, polygynous marriages are quite a financial challenge, given that many deaf people cannot properly provide for one family or even themselves. Much more widespread is – following the chitchat at the deaf spaces – promiscuity and the deaf priest's calls for conjugal fidelity are usually ignored. Instead, the amorous adventurers of deaf husbands are sources of gossip and entertainment that never really become judgmental or reprimanding. Not so for women. Ségolène, who was married to a man in deaf church, was spotted cooking for and staying with another man while she had told everyone she had gone to the bible camp for the deaf in Togo in July 2019. I found it quite charming and empowering that finally a deaf woman behaved as most of the deaf men did, but none of my deaf friends, neither men nor women, agreed with my amusement but were honestly offended. Wherever I went in the days after, everyone was shocked how she could be so disrespectful and morally wrong – while no-one knew if any of the rumors were true.

*

Different deafnesses, social narratives around deafening, and the individual biographical context shape the way one is deaf. In the following section I will introduce labels that the deaf in Cotonou use to categorize these different ways.

2.2 many ways to be deaf

Backgrounds of deafnesses, physiological becoming and biographies of deafening translate into various ways of being deaf. The idea of categories of deaf people based on moments and contexts of deafening, socialization and education is not new (Padden and Humphries 2010:397). In *A Deaf Adult Speaks Out*, Leo Jacobs (1989) creates nine different categories that are very specific for the context of American Deaf culture. I will suggest some approximations that I draw from my research with 'Beninese deaf adults speaking out'. These labels are in use among the deaf in Cotonou and beyond, although the terminologies might differ around the country – not at least because they are somewhat misleading: The *devenu·e·s sourd·e·s* (the deafened) and the *malentendant·e·s* (the hard of hearing) may well be profoundly deaf, whereas some *né·e·s sourd·e·s* (born deaf) and *sourd·e·s profond·e·s* (profoundly deaf) may have some

hearing ability. Beninese deaf categorize different ways to be deaf only partially based on hearing ability but also on questions of education, access, social integration into deaf communities and the potential to live a "normal life". The deafnesses I am describing here should not be misunderstood as essentially different nor as inherent attributes of the people who may find themselves in these categories. The categorizations that deaf people construct when talking about deaf diversity are sometimes paradox amalgams of physiological and social categorizations.

les vrais sourds

> Si tu veux connaître les vrais sourds, il faut aller au village.[36] (conversation with Fabian, fieldnotes 29/10/2016)

When referring to *les vrais sourds* – the real deaf – deaf Beninese do not imply a positive value as in other d/Deaf cultures but intend to describe those persons' experience as the *real suffering*. While in many contexts of deaf and Deaf culture the "real deaf", those born deaf, ideally into deaf families, are considered to be the core of the cultural group (see Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011 for the USA, Nakamura 2006 for Japan), the "elite of the Deaf world" (Davis 2008:320), this is not the case in Benin. As deaf people only recently started to engage in deaf-deaf relationships and family reproduction amongst each other, recessive hereditary deafness was less likely to be passed on than in settings where deaf-deaf relationships have been a common practice over generations (Groce 1985; Kusters 2009, 2015a; Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011; Lane 1999).

The focus in this categorization is not that of physiological 'hearing loss' or a essentialist cultural notion of being a "pure deaf" (Nakamura 2006:1–2) but on the experiences of exclusion that members of deaf communities expect to be the experience of deaf people outside the communities – hence the quote above from Fabian, a young man from Cotonou who deafened as a child, saying that I would find the real deaf in the villages. By calling deaf people outside communities *the real(ly suffering) deaf*, they imply that just being deaf among hearing people does not square with the understanding of deaf social life Although people use the category to describe a (lack of) access to deaf sociality, they apply it mostly to people who deafened pre-lingually, who have little access to communication with their hearing peers.

Many of the urban, schooled deaf people in Cotonou assumed that without sign language, there can be no communication, and therefore the deaf

[36] "If you want to get to know the real deaf, you have to go to the village."

villagers were considered these real deaf. That is not to say that they do not communicate, but the urban, educated deaf assumption is that without sign language, there is no communication. A description that came up time and again was the assumption that "they just sit there", inactive, excluded, and bored. Deaf educator Jean-Louis told me that "those deaf who did not go to school, they just sit around, they have no friends, they just sit or stand, and they are always tense, never part of anything. It's hard." (interview 13/07/2019). Kiva, a deaf Togolese woman living in Cotonou, remembered going to Catholic church as a born deaf child in a similar way: "I only sat there, deaf, not understanding. What could I do? I did not understand. They sang, then they talked, then they sang – I was just sitting" (interview 11/06/2018). As I will show in my discussion of deaf lives *off deaf sociality* in chapter 6, these assumptions say more about the implicit importance of Signs to deaf Beninese in deaf sociality than about the actual lives of those whom they call the *real deaf*. Beninese deaf diversity does go so far that the urban, social deaf have almost as little understanding of and for the rural deaf as hearing people would have.

Sometimes *les vrais sourds* is used to refer to deaf people in urban spaces when they are understood to have encountered real hardship. These people might be pre-lingually or born-deaf and have either had late and poor access to deaf sociality, or they have been hit with other challenges that make their lives difficult and their deaf community personae less integrated. I want to introduce Elie, a young deaf man with whom I spent a lot of time at the deaf center in Agla. He was often considered *un vrai sourd* – even though he was living in one of the hearts of Cotonou's deaf sociality.

Elie

Elie was born deaf in the late 1990s in northern Benin where his parents had moved from Niger. They abandoned him at the age of two because of his deafness. He spent the following years at a Catholic school that transferred him to the Baptist school for the deaf in Parakou when he was six years old. When Elie was twelve years old, Joachim, the speaking deaf director of a deaf school, was visiting Parakou with a deaf football team and took Elie with him to Cotonou where he continued school at the deaf center in Agla. During the school year, he stayed at the boarding school with other deaf children. During holidays or the three-and-a-half months summer vacation, he was the only pupil staying in school while the others went to their families. Instead, he stayed with the hearing children of Claire and Joachim. They were all younger than Elie but had more say as they were the actual children of the house.

Claire told me that Elie was her son now as well, whether she wanted it or not, as he did not have anyone else. She would not say that very affectionately; rather it was a *fait accompli* that she did not choose and somewhat lamented. Joachim would not label their relation as kinship; to him Elie was a young kid, *un jeune*, who ended up staying at the school. Without hesitation he claimed and treated Claire's first son from another father as his child, but Elie would not be called that.

When Elie had gone through the entire cycle of the primary school in Agla, he could not register for the centralized graduation exam CEP (*certificat d'études primaires*) because he did not have a birth certificate or an identity card. When I met him in 2016, he had told me that he wanted to become a teacher – but without CEP he could not enter the secondary school, so this dream was buried in 2017. Joachim decided that Elie would start a vocational training at the tailor's workshop at the deaf center in Agla, along with two other born-deaf apprentices, and that he would continue living in the center as well. Both, deciding about his career and providing a home for Elie, meant assuming major parenting roles (Alber 2014:60–65; Goody 1982). Yet, Joachim would not call him a son.

In school, in the workshop, and at the deaf space that the center in its entirety constituted, Elie was introduced to a community of deaf peers. These peers, however, were neither equal nor same. Various deafnesses were at play just as there were various modes of deaf communication. Elie was well versed and very expressive in Signs but did not master the more prestigious signed French. I often found him with a French teen novel in hand or one of the ubiquitous religious leaflets that Jehovah's Witnesses scattered all across the country. He told me, though, that he mostly looked at the pictures and only understood some words. He would often engage in chats and discussions with other deaf people but was shut out from conversation when the others moved to signing French. In a deaf space like the deaf center in Agla, deafnesses, communications, knowledges and competences collide and being deaf is negotiated in interaction and communication. Deaf spaces are arenas of deaf diversity where the *real deaf* find identification and similitude but also distinction and exclusion. Joachim would take responsibility for Elie, yet he did not make him part of the family. Joachim was also among those who most frequently mocked his expressive signing and the noises he produced, thus, regularly showing him the limits of similitude.

I met Elie for the first time on a short visit to the deaf center in 2016. He eagerly signed me his name, signed mine, and taught me the manual alphabet. The next time I came – only two days later – he already came running

towards me, giving me a hug. This spontaneous exaggeration of nearness grew into a proper friendship over the years to come. Often, we would sit on the porch of the deaf center, chat, or just look at people passing by. He would ask me how X was doing, or Y. I'd say I had no idea as I did not know them. He would say he knew X and Y, they were white folks who came as volunteers from France. He would also regularly ask how my mother, who visited me in Benin in November 2016, was doing and ask me to record him greeting her in sign language so that I would send the video to her. He asked for names and phone numbers of every foreigner who came by the deaf center and took time to chat with him – not everybody did as he was not introduced to important people. He wrote down the names and phone numbers on scraps of paper or a booklet; once he had written them, I never saw any of these notes again. Also, he did not have a telephone. It seems that collecting names and numbers and asking me or others how they were he created a virtual web of references that he could be a part of. Most of the other deaf people who frequented the deaf space had either started their own deaf families or had at least a potential refuge among their hearing families. Elie had neither of those and it seems that the lack of family and belonging is a core part of being a *vrai·e sourd·e*. Susan Reynolds Whyte (1998), Tabea Häberlein (2020) and others have discussed how a lack of belonging can lead to a lack of personhood; and this seems to be at the heart of the profoundness of Elie's *real deaf* experience.

When Claire, Joachim or Fabian would tell me about the different ways to be deaf, they would often refer to Elie as a *real deaf*, *un vrai sourd*, which was only partly due to his moment of deafening or his degree of deafness, but to the fact that he – at least in their view – was signing poorly and had little access to either deaf or hearing sociality. It is this vein that deaf people in Cotonou assume that all the deaf in the villages experience being *real deaf* because they have no access to other deaf, so they must be isolated and desperate. I will discuss the chapter 6 in how far these assumptions match with deaf lives in the villages.

NÉS SOURDS / SOURDS PROFONDS

Those born deaf who, in contrast to the real deaf, did have access to deaf education, deaf communities or both are generally labeled as *born-deaf* but also the *profoundly deaf*. The sign PROFOND is iconic for deep in that you hold the left hand in a closed five shape while the index finger of the right hand is moving downwards *deep into* what lies beneath (illustration 6). When signing SOURD PROFOND, this evokes an image of something deeply penetrating the

illustration 6: PROFOND, deep, profound, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

illustration 7: DÉVELOPPEMENT, development, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

ear – which seems somewhat appropriate to the explanatory models discussed above, descriptive and non-normative. Interestingly, the sign is the iconic opposite of DÉVELOPPEMENT, which is the right index finger moving up past the left hand's sphere (illustration 7). Although this might be an arbitrary connection, it does reflect the presumptions of both hearing and deafened people that born-deaf people are less intelligent, less developed. They are sometimes referred to as "SOURD-MUET", *deaf-mute*, as they do not *speak*[37].

Deafened people in Benin often look at the born-deaf with pity or amusement, but also with a somewhat patronizing feeling of responsibility. Many born-deaf I met adhered to a deafened person in a position of some authority like Elie to Joachim, Kiva in deaf church to Maurine, the priest apprentice Donald to Pasteur Homère – or Yann to Isaïe, both of whom I will introduce in the narrative below. If they do not attach themselves to either a deafened person or a community like church, ANSB, or an NGO, they are often considered weird, like Michel, an old deaf tailor in Agla who keeps a certain distance to all deaf communities and constantly expresses his discontent with how the deaf space is run. Even though his age could give him some

[37] The term *deaf-mute* is considered derogatory (Moore and Levitan (2003) as it reproduces an audist notion that the deaf would not speak only because they do not use an oral language. The term *sourd·e-muet·te*, however, was not considered or intentionally meant derogatory in Benin; rather it was used quite frequently to distinguish between the signing and the speaking deaf. Given the heavy stigma that the terms deaf-mute in English, *sourd·e·s-muet·te·s* in French and *taubstumm* in German bear, I decided not to include them as analytic terms. Although the term was frequently used for both the *vrai·e·s sourd·e·s* and the *sourd·e·s profond·e·s* I do not need it as the two latter terms are more precise.

authority, his low education, lack of speech and "born-deafness" make it easy for others, even youth, to mock him and discard his comments as irrelevant. Similarly, the born-deaf Muslim Zeïd, who we will meet again in chapter 5, was considered a bit of an outcast while his speaking deaf friend Richard, who also refrained from many community activities, seemed to be less on the edge of deaf sociality than Zeïd. I will not attempt to state generalizable explanation here, but I often observed that the *sourd·e·s-profond·e·s* had it harder to socialize when they were not affiliated with deafened folks. Below, I will introduce a *sourd-profond* who navigates deaf and hearing socialities with and without the support of deafened friends and patrons.

Yann

Yann was born deaf in 1985 in Attogon, a village in south central Benin. It was his father's friends who had heard about a deaf school in the Akpakpa neighborhood of Cotonou and convinced him to send his son to the south. With the financial support of his father's family, Yann visited the deaf school in Akpakpa from 1990 until he graduated with the CEP in 1999. He made a lot of friends and also met the older deaf like Joachim who was living in the same neighborhood with his first wife Katrine. After graduation, Yann went back to the village in Attogon. He worked the fields with the family but there was little money to be made, so he convinced his father to pay him an apprenticeship to become a tailor. They found a hearing tailor who would teach him. They did not communicate in signing, speaking, or writign, Yann said. He just watched, and after only two years, he received his diploma. He tried working in the village, but the people had little money to spend on tailoring. He was also not satisfied with living in the village after he had tasted city life in Cotonou, especially the social life he had with deaf classmates and friends. In 2004, he got back in touch with Joachim and had the chance to start working at the tailor workshop in the deaf center in Agla where he was also allowed to sleep. He was working a lot to be able to afford his own workshop and enjoyed the company and friendship among his deaf peers. But love affairs, alcohol, and children he produced out of wedlock drained his savings, and he often relied on Joachim to bail him out. In summer 2016, he finally left the complicated city life behind and went with Isaïe and Nadège to Natitingou where life was cheaper and offered fewer temptations. He joined the workshop of Marie, the hearing mother of a deaf pupil in the deaf school in Cotonou. He was still working at her place in 2019. By then, she had learned some signs and was also very supportive of his complicated relationship with a young hearing woman.

Yann was born deaf in a village but unlike Elie was lucky to have parents that were supportive and pro-active in locating a school. Through the deaf school in Cotonou, he was introduced to deaf communities and deaf sociality that gave him access not only to networks across the country but also to financial and social support. He is well known for his good craftsmanship as a tailor, and similarly respected for his "success" with women. With surprised acknowledgement, Isaïe once mentioned that "Yann est très fort avec les filles", he was very strong in dating, "même plus que moi", even stronger than me, with a clear implication that usually, the speaking, educated, and smart Isaïe should be more "successful". It is these biographic and social attributes that seem to distinguish the *real deaf* from the *born-deaf*. Both Yann and Elie started off with a similar deafness and both their linguistic competences are limited to Signs. Differences in their social contexts, opportunities, belonging, and possibly their individual persistence, however, gave shape to different deaf lives where one is understood to be characterized by exclusion and inferiority, while the other is accredited with achievement in normalcy.

Yet, communication is challenging and Yann – or others who have not learned to read and write well – are considered hard to talk with by deafened people. Unschooled[38] deaf people may be *sourd·e·s profond·e·s*, whatever the degree of hearing may be.

DEVENUS SOURDS

A quite different way to be deaf is being deafened, or DEVENU SOURD. The Beninese sign DEVENIR/DEVENU (illustration 8) is identical with the ASL sign BECOME – the planes of the hands press against each other and twist so the one hand takes the position of the other. The movement is also involved in the sign CHANGER that is using a different handshape. The sign thus also implies becoming something different or changing from one to another. Running the risk of overinterpretation one could also read in it that the position of the hand changes, yet it stays the same hand and both hands are still

[38] The schooled deaf in Benin would describe these deaf as uneducated or poorly educated. I do not want to share this assumption of school as the only meaningful education that goes back to French colonial time, see Kelly (2000), especially regarding people like Yann, who was an excellent tailor. Instead, I use the less normative and more descriptive unschooled to express that these individuals did not attend school.

together, at the same place, just that things got turned upside down – a fitting description of what being deaf*ened* in Benin is like.

Those deaf who are considered *devenus sourds* – by born-deaf as well as by deafened and hearing people – are those who deafened post-lingually. They were born hearing, grew up participating in hearing sociality, learned their parents' language(s). They went to school, learned some French, and had quite good a grasp of hearing society before deafening. Many of them continue to speak although they often lose command over pronunciation or volume when they speak which makes their deafness perceivable to different degrees in deaf-hearing interactions.

They usually have better access to "the hearing world", as some deafened people called it, by being more easily able to read lips than people who have not acquired speech, by knowing the codes and norms of hearing society, and being able to move about within the hearing world. This is crucial regarding education as there are barely any attempts to adapt instruction to the needs of deaf pupils. Instead, also in the deaf schools, the teachers usually drone out the centralized curricula without reflecting on how to appropriately communicate the contents to the deaf pupils. This failure to take deaf particularities into account is not only my observation but was deplored by Victor Vodounou, Isaïe and many other deaf(ened) Beninese who complained to me about the flaws of the educational system. Those pupils who deafened after having been to a hearing school more easily able to follow the classes in deaf school than those who did not get any chance to familiarize with hearing communication and instruction.

illustration 8: DEVENIR, become, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

This also means that the deafened have better access to information and knowledge as barely any governmental or non-governmental organization, news outlet, or church bothers to actively communicate to the (born) deaf. Social media had already started to change this before the onset of my research, but before the spread of Facebook and WhatsApp, the deafened were the central channels through which the deaf would be supplied with news and knowledge from outside the deaf communities. It is the deafened who usually achieve the highest recognition within the deaf

communities as they can get closer to living a normal, successful life that is characterized by having better access to education, a better chance to get a decent job, access to resources, providing for one's family, and gaining a certain amount of recognition in society. This makes them the authorities within the deaf communities.

From a normative Deaf Studies perspective, valuing this "hearing world competence" is problematic. In quite different settings, Tanya Titchkosky (2003) and Vandana Chaudhry (2015) speak of "able-disabled" people as those disabled individuals whose abilities feed into an ableist inclusion narrative that constructs the "able-disabled" as the better disabled people; they are more capable of normalcy, do not deviate too much and do not challenge ableist society. Appreciation of those who are less disabled means that those who are deemed too disabled are subject to further exclusion, a dynamic that was discussed as an "exclusionary form of inclusion" (Fritsch 2013). The often privileged position of the deafened Beninese fits this narrative.

The power dynamics of this became clear in practice in Claire's complaint about Luc's lack of understanding that I shared in the very beginning of this book. Claire's post-lingual deafening allowed her to learn different signed and spoken languages whereas Luc knows no other language but Signs. Her utterance in spoken French excluded Luc from being able to follow our exchange. That exclusion is a practice of difference and power that bases on her ability and his inability to use different ways of communication – a difference that is grounded in their different deafnesses, and a difference that expresses the different ways to be deaf.

Most of the deafened Beninese speak. As a matter of fact, many deafened research participants said that people could not really tell if they were deaf or not because they spoke so well. For some of those that might have been true at some point. But by the time I met Joachim, Claire, Luc, Paul, or Fabian, their ways of talking had altered into being intelligible but surely not to a degree that hearing people would not notice that their pronunciation was very different. There are also those deafened who barely speak, like Ruben in Parakou. Some have deafened so early that they lost touch with their voices, as Yves described it. Others may feel uncomfortable knowing that their speech sounds weird – like Maurine – so they only use it rarely to make it easier for a hearing anthropologist who just started to learn Signs. Some, like Pasteur Homère, have decided to switch to Signs and signed French as an expression of acceptance and commitment. Yet, he would proudly show off his knowledge of French grammar and orthography when signing French,

thereby demonstrating his competence that he understands to be superior to those of born-deaf Beninese.

Many of the most verbal and visible deaf Beninese understand themselves to be *devenus sourds*, and I already mentioned some of them: Joachim, Claire, and Paul, but also Homère, Victor, and Guillaume. As Andrew Foster, the founder of deaf education in West Africa, himself deafened, employed mostly deafened people to teach in his schools and churches, it is not surprising that many of the prominent figures in Beninese deaf history are deafened people who generally speak – just like Foster himself spoke. Furthermore, deaf history in Benin has been dominated by men. The organizations were run by men and the deaf mostly remember *male* deaf teachers and priests although there have been influential women all along. That is why I want to present my deafened friend Claire, who I already quoted in the very beginning of the book. She is one of the many strong deaf women who have shaped Beninese deaf sociality.

Claire

Claire was born in 1976 in Cotonou, but her mother moved back to her family's village some hundred kilometers up the Ouémé river when she was a child. She learned Goun in the village and French in school. She was ten when she deafened. She cannot remember having been sick, her hearing just diminished over a few weeks. She went to a school for the hearing but in CM1, she had more and more problems understanding what the teacher was saying. Her parents took her to the hospital, they did a lot of analyses, put a lot of syringes into her, as she remembered with an expression of disgust, but nothing helped: She did not hear. "C'est pas sourd profond", she told me in an interview in 2016. "Je parles, mais j'entends pas." I'm not profoundly deaf, I speak, I just don't hear. She repeated CM1 but she could not follow anymore, so her mother inquired what to do and eventually they returned to Cotonou to visit the public school for the deaf. When I asked her what language she learned in deaf school she started finger spelling: "L….. S…. – I don't know, ask the French". She was probably heading for LSAF – *Langue des Signes en Afrique Francophone* (Kamei 2006, see section 2.3) which is also what some of the French volunteers claim they talk. For Claire, however, it was just, well, Signs.

When she was in CM2, shortly before CEP, her father decided to take her out of school before the graduation and started training her as a painter at home. For nine years she learned the craft and worked with her father in Cotonou before he finally gave her the apprenticeship diploma. She did not

find work as a painter afterwards, so she decided to sell fruits, jewelry, and clothes on the market, walking around town with a huge basket on her head. As Goun and Fon are quite close, she learned to speak and lipread Fon and got by quite easily in public. Eventually she heard about the deaf center in Agla and went there to find support. She joined Joachim, Paul, and the others, helped out in the training and sold ice from the freezer. At that time, she was seeing a deaf Nigerian who lived in Cotonou who then fathered her first child. When the birth was near, she went back to her father's place. While usually, women would go to their mother's or aunt's place for the birth of their first child, the family decided it was safer to stay in the city instead of going to the village. After she gave birth, and while the baby was still an infant, she went out to sell oranges in the street. She was trying to get a job in the deaf school in Zé that was funded by Victor and American donors. When she told Joachim about this plan, he "took me and put me here", as she said. In addition to his first marriage, Joachim had taken Claire as his second wife and they had two children together. Even though they never formally married, it was clear to them and others that they were *homme et femme*, with Joachim treating and considering her first child as one of his own. The polygamous arrangement caused trouble between the two wives[39]. During my entire research, both of them would complain to me about how the other was treated better, how the other wife was only drenching money out of Joachim. As far as I can tell, they were both not very successful in getting money from him, for his pockets were mostly empty anyway.

Claire worked in the canteen of the deaf school, supervised the schoolgirls, and rebooted her trading career by opening the corner shop that would continuously grow during the time of my research. As the *Maman* of the school, she was a prominent figure of the Cotonou deaf community. In deaf church, however, she had a poor reputation for Joachim's first wife Katrine had more friends and allies in the congregation. Claire was often the subject of gossip and name-calling, and so she eventually stopped going to church altogether in 2016.

Her confidence, the support from her family, and her language abilities enabled her to make her own money on the market and in her corner shop. She was frustrated with Joachim for the complicated relationship and his failure to regularly pay her salary as employee of the deaf school, which is why

[39] A qualitative study in Ghana showed that women in polygynous marriages experience "unhappiness, loneliness, sense of competition and jealousy" (Tabi, Doster, and Cheney (2010:121), see also Ajibade (2011) on jealousy and violence in polygynous marriages in Nigeria) and are thus often a source of conflict.

she had already told me back in 2016 that she was about to leave as soon as she saved enough money to rent her own place with a shop.

At the deaf center, she is called *Maman* because she fulfills a parental role not only for Elie but also for the schoolgirls who sleep in the same room with her at night. She watches over their hygiene and teaches them kitchen skills. She was a role model to many of the deaf girls who found it hard to relate to their hearing families.

I went with her to the market to stock up her shop every once in a while, and she never had trouble communicating with the marketeers. She knew what she was going for and could expect what the traders would say. She could read their lips and understand from gestures. It got harder when people did not look at her when talking, but many marketeers knew her already and knew how to talk to her. She was always very confident and independent. "It's never really difficult", she told me in an interview, sitting in her shop in 2016. I asked her what would be different if she was hearing. First, she had a confused look on her face as if it was a stupid question (which it possibly was), then she said "Everything would be different. I would not be selling this stuff here, I would be working. I stay here because I don't hear. If I were hearing, I wouldn't be like that in here, it would be different." "Different how?" "I don't know. Different."

Taking care of children whilst running a household and a street shop is quite common an activity for mothers in Benin. It seemed like Claire was doing quite well, even though the salary from the deaf center came very unreliably. She was in a position of some authority over the household, she had a lot of helping hands at her disposal, and she was raising three healthy children. Yet, she was sure she could be better off if she had not been deaf. Knowing so many born-deaf people around – the schoolchildren, the apprentices, the tailors, the people from church – she was well aware of her being on another level, "un autre niveau" as she called it. For the others, this higher hearing world competence might look like an achievement, but for her – knowing that she was so close to being hearing – deafening was, in retrospective, a demotion.

Both deafened and born-deaf people consider themselves deaf in the first place and share a feeling of similitude and belonging, yet the distinction between them is almost always present. Born-deaf people envy and sometimes copy the hearing world competence of the deafened. They sometimes despise deafened people for their arrogance and at the same time appreciate them as they can provide access to the hearing world. Deafened people would often interpret for those born-deaf, they would write letters for them, or

supply them with information that was otherwise not so easily accessible. Once we were discussing Beninese politics outside the deaf center in Agla. Joachim and Fabian were talking about the first actions that Patrice Talon took after taking over the presidency in early 2016. Elie was watching, and later that day, when only the two of us were sitting outside, he repeated what had been signed before, but could not explain to me what that actually meant, or who he was actually talking about. This was not the only time that I observed a born-deaf aspiration to be like, or at least to be perceived like, the deafened. Fabian, a young, very outspoken deaf man, often surprised people when they learned that he had only CEP and had not been to *collège* and still was so intelligent. This "intelligence" was also the competence to confidently move outside deaf spaces as well.

MALENTENDANTS

Being *malentendant·e*, hard of hearing, says relatively little about one's degree of hearing. The deaf identify the hard of hearing as those who are deaf but have not yet accepted their deafness. They try to remain within the hearing society but often suffer a lot as they experience their deafness among the hearing as a grave impairment (see also Mildner 2020b:137). They are in touch with people who call themselves deaf[40] and yet refrain from committing to deaf sociality and identifying as deaf. This hesitation is often countered with malicious mockery and repudiation by deaf Beninese.

illustration 9: MALENTENDANT, hard-of-hearing, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

In December 2016, I was chatting with Rachelle, a teacher that had come to Agla to practice sign language and deaf education so she could start teaching at another deaf school. She slowly spelled her name to me and then wanted to sign that she was hard of hearing. The sign MALENTENDANT, inspired by the ASL sign, turns the the letter "h" (hard of hearing) into an "m" in Benin (illustration 9). Instead of signing this, she wanted to sign MAL (bad) and ENTENDANT (hearing). Instead of MAL, however, she signed MIEL, honey,

[40] There are many hard of hearing Beninese who are not at all in touch with the deaf communities, but those also did not make it into the sample of my research.

which caused a lot of laughter in Joachim and Fabian who stood near. Joachim then mocked her saying that sure, she was honey-hearing, just as he was honey-deaf, asking me if I was honey-Carsten. Rachelle was really intimidated and, when Joachim and Fabian were gone, shyly asked if she could borrow my ASL dictionary so she could learn more signs.

Rachelle would not admit that she was deaf; she wanted to maintain a foot in the door of the hearing society by saying that she was merely hard of hearing. Joachim understood that she had a feeling of inferiority that he perceived as an insult to his deaf way of being: Why would she not just admit and commit to her deafness? He told her she was not hearing and at the same time was mocking her for her inability to sign properly; making her feel like both an impaired hearing person and an incompetent deaf person. A term suggested by Hilde Haualand describes their way of being deaf from a deaf perspective; instead of hard of hearing, they are actually "hard of signing" (Haualand 2002:26).

For the *malentendant·e* individual themselves, being both hard of hearing and hard of signing means a twofold exclusion, an experience of interstitiality that I will demonstrate with the story of Jean-Louis, a deafened man whose life course seems to be fractured by this multiple lack of belonging.

Jean-Louis

I had heard of Jean-Louis already in 2016 when I interviewed Paul on his deaf activist history. Paul had been teaching Signs and the gospel in a rather rural suburb of Cotonou, with Jean-Louis until their project, according to Paul, was discredited because Jean-Louis had had sex with a teenaged learner. Trying to ruin the reputation of a former colleague-turned-opponent is a common trope among the deaf in Benin. I gave up attempting to figure out if those stories were actually true – the social reality of gossip quickly outpaced the facts anyway. Years after I first heard of him, I encountered Jean-Louis in person by coincidence when he was on a short visit to Cotonou in 2019. Joachim introduced me to him as a friend who had "finally accepted that he was deaf". Also, Joachim remarked in an amused tone, "il a Dieu à son côté", he has God on his side. I then met Jean-Louis a few times and he was very eager to tell me his version of his story. He spoke and signed French simultaneously, dropping the signs when he got very dramatic and excited, which happened a lot during our conversations.

He had deafened in his early twenties in the last months of his vocational training as an electrician. His deafening struck him hard as he felt his social integration vanish. He told me that without hearing, he could no longer

operate machines. Yet, he also felt he was too qualified and too smart to take on "whatever kind of job" as the other deaf did. He had tasted opportunities of the hearing world that now seemed out of reach. It was at this point – and with the help of God, he assured me – that he met Paul who taught him Signs and encouraged him to become a born-again Christian. Jean-Louis studied the bible and became a religious savant through self-study and by receiving instructions directly from God. When Paul divorced and took a second wife, Jean-Louis told me that he could not support this immoral behavior and left the project. Later, Jean-Louis's own wife left him because he taught her too much about the bible. "It was too much wisdom for her", he told me, so she left with their children. Among the deaf in Cotonou, he found no support. Instead, he saw nothing but selfishness, fraud, and treachery because everybody wanted to be the boss, not for the sake of doing good onto others, but for personal profit. In deaf church he saw nothing but corruption. So he left the south for the predominantly Muslim town of Djougou in the north to teach the "deprived" deaf, *les vrais sourds*, who had no access to sign language whatsoever. He told me that he kept his Christianity to himself so he could access the deaf in Djougou without offending their Muslim families. But God had chosen him, his deafening was a sign for his mission. God can heal people through him, God gave him spiritual powers to look into the hearts of people where he sees all the good and bad sides. Through these abilities, he understood how corrupt the deaf communities and their leaders were, so he chose to follow his vocation on his own.

I could not help but see the fanatic in Jean-Louis when he told me about his story and his abilities, with a wild gaze and a shaking lip. When I mentioned to other deaf people that I had met him, they mocked him for being a crazy person. Some, like Joachim, also said that he only recently accepted the fact that he was deaf. Deafened people who refuse to call themselves deaf are always a source of ridicule for those in deaf communities. I had the impression that deaf people perceived it as offensive that some would not want to admit their deafness. It seems that this restraint reproduces the negative, audist images of being deaf. Coming from a deaf peer, this negative image is probably even more hurtful. In the eyes of some, Jean-Louis had visited a "real school" and had kind of an unfair head start in comparison to others. For Jean-Louis, however, his deafness deprived him of his social status and his aspirations. It is not so surprising that he had a hard time coming to terms with his deafness. As he deafened after his education, he had no chance to participate in the making of deaf community and belonging that Joachim, Paul, Claire and the others experienced in deaf school. He seemed to have

deafened too late to *naturally* grow into the deaf community, and too early to have arrived at a social status that he could maintain as a non-hearing member of hearing society. Maybe he had to become the outcast on his lonely mission in the Muslim north, only with God by his side. It would not necessarily be surprising if I were right with my impression of him as a fanatic, or other deaf with diagnosing him with *folie* – insanity. Feeling excluded from both deaf and the hearing people, betwixt and between, being and belonging to neither one nor the other – losing your mind is not the most unthinkable option.

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Deafnesses and ways to be deaf are numerous. They are not exhaustively covered by the categorizations I reproduced, but a lot of being deaf happens in the interstices; also depending on the social context. What also varies is the way deaf people communicate. The variation was often considered a challenge or a problem – not only by unaware hearing people who frequently wondered why there was more than one sign language, but also by deaf Beninese who complained about the different ways of signing across Benin. Besides different languages and variants there are also various ways and modes of deaf communication. Instead of presenting this only as a problem, however, I want to describe that diversity and highlight the value that deaf people find when navigating and tactically acting within this diversity.

2.3 deaf communication

Just as there is no one way to be deaf in Benin, there is also no one way of deaf communication. With this section I will also counter the idea that deaf communication is merely a field of bridging communication deficits as past and contemporary ableist and audist discourses would have it (Bell 1898; Ladd 2019). The diversity of communication does not only produce challenges and misunderstanding but also opens fields of language appropriation, instrumentalization, and creativity.

In their book on doing social research with deaf people, Alys Young and Bogusia Temple argue for a “holistic” view of deaf people and therefore not only focus on sign language users – tacitly assuming that all deaf sign-language-users consider themselves to be culturally Deaf – but also those who converse in other languages (Young and Temple 2014:5). They refer mostly to those prelingually deaf people who received oralist education or those who deafened when they were already socialized into the hearing world. It becomes clear why doing research in deaf communities beyond Europe and

North America opens new perspectives. The assumption that any deaf person who uses sign language considers themselves to be culturally Deaf is not transferable to contexts where Deaf culture is not a common discourse. More importantly, a holistic view on being deaf in Benin, West Africa, or much of the global South for that matter cannot be accomplished by focusing only on signing and speaking deaf people.

Ever since I started working on ways of being deaf, hearing people asked me with surprise if there was more than one sign language – a misconception that was shared among non-academic, monolingual people as well as cosmopolitan professors of the social sciences. The answer is yes, there is more than one sign language. This statement is not too surprising, given the fact that sign languages have only relatively recently been accepted as languages at all (Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006), become a field of study in linguistics (Klima and Bellugi 2010; Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg 1965; Stokoe 2005[1960]) and sometimes recognized as national languages by state governments (Lule and Wallin 2010; Timmermans 2005). Furthermore, the everyday deaf discourse does not necessarily label their language as American Sign Language (ASL), German Sign Language (DGS) or other, but they usually refer to them as Signs or of sign language – a generalization that contributes to the misconception of a universal sign language.

Sign languages are not signed spoken languages that are often used in deaf education (Sacks 1989:30; Supalla 1991) but natural languages in their own right. Sometimes people incorrectly assume that sign languages are translations or transformations of spoken languages, but "signs are not simply codes for English [or any other spoken language] words" (Padden and Humphries 2010:394). The incorrect assumption is reinforced when the name of the sign language indexes both a nation/region and the language that is spoken there – for example, German Sign Language (DGS), French Sign Language (LSF), Japanese Sign Language (JSL). These refer to the sign languages that are used in the three nations/regions – Germany, France, Japan – but do not have a direct relationship with the spoken languages German, French, and Japanese. The distinction is best illustrated in contexts when the name of the sign language indexes a particular nation/region but *not* the language spoken there. For example, American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) are the languages signed in the USA and Great Britain, but they are not English, the major language spoken there. Similarly, Ugandan Sign Language (UgSL) is not the signed version of either of the nation's two official languages, English and Swahili.

That is also not to say that sign languages are nationally monolithic; all have various regional dialects (see for example Nakamura 2006:28 or Asonye and Emma-Asonye 2019; Evouna 2019). The degree of connection between spoken and signed languages varies from region to region; mostly in the way the finger alphabet is involved into turning words from spoken language into signs or how mouthings of spoken words are included. Some other sign languages use signs that are entirely independent from the spoken word. Furthermore, sign languages have a grammar that is often fundamentally different from spoken languages as visual communication builds on different ways of perception that structure the logic of the language. Grammatical structure is often based on the notion that sign language draws a picture of the content to be communicated (Wilcox 2004). Thereby, the structure of a sentence is a spatial one, going from grand to detail and from immobile to mobile. The spoken sentence "The monkey sits on the tree" would be translated into "TREE MONKEY ON" as this follows the way one visually builds a scenery. Furthermore, the grammar often relies on topicalization which means that the statement begins with a topic that is then more specified, for example "CAR NEW I WANT" as a translation of "I want a new car" (see also Fant, Fant, and Miller 2008:55 for sentence structure in ASL or Hillenmeyer and Kleyboldt 2013:86 for sentence structure in DGS). Sign languages are complex and diverse.

In this section, I will also argue that besides Signs, signed language and spoken language, forms of non-lingual communication play a part in deaf lives and socialization. Sometimes people have no shared language to start from and yet interact and communicate through action, sharing, and caring. Yann, whom I introduced above, had been dating a hearing woman who did not, according to him, know any Signs at all. "So how do you communicate?" I asked him. "LANGUE AMOUR" was his answer, the language of love (fieldnotes 09/30/2016). By 2019, they were living together and had a baby boy. One could mock the use of the "language of love" cliché or interpret it to mean he and his partner had a purely sexual relationship. But relationships – romantic or not – are of course not expressed solely in verbal or visual communication but in sharing time, lives, food (Appadurai 1981), – and beds, as well.

ASL and signed French

Due to the missionary history of deaf education in West Africa, the way many West African deaf sign is inspired by American Sign Language (Nyst 2010). There are places in West Africa where local sign languages have developed in

settings where the rate of deafness was relatively high (Nyst 2007; Kusters 2014a; Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba 2012:270) or in larger cities where deaf peers could gather and develop a language outside the context of school (for Bamako see Nyst 2015). Most of the other sign languages evolved out of ASL and were conceptualized as languages in their own right, as with Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL, see Kusters 2015a:173), or were simply considered sign languages without a national, regional or linguistic identifier, as is the case in Côte d'Ivoire where the language is simply called *langue des signes* (Sanogo 2012). In the early 2000s, linguist Nobutaka Kamei set out to study sign languages across francophone West Africa. He conceived of them as a variant of American Sign Language with local particularities and termed that variant *Langue des Signes en Afrique Francophone* (LSAF, Kamei 2006; Nyst 2010:413). The similarities among the West African sign languages are indeed striking. Beninese deaf told me they communicated without great difficulty with deaf from Togo, Burkina Faso, Niger or Nigeria – and so did I when I had learned the language. The entries in the dictionary from Côte d'Ivoire and an old Beninese sign dictionary (Tamomo, Salouma, and Djogbe 1993) I found in the deaf church in Cotonou are almost identical. There is, however, no consensus – in fact not even a discussion – of grammar and language structure in Beninese sign language. The deaf in Benin do not seem to care much to label the sign language they use; to them it is just sign language or *les signes* – Signs.

In fact, there are several sign languages in Benin. The language I was told was the *correct* way of signing combined French grammar signed with signs from ASL[41] along with a load of methodological signs[42] for all the minuscule words used in spoken French. Different hypotheses may explain this:

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[41] In an exchange with an editor of a German journal on language and culture of the deaf she, a linguist, told me that this was very common for "deaf cultures" that have *not yet developed that far* and that they do *not yet* value and recognize their language as such (see also Branson and Miller (2010:235)). In my book, I prefer to phenomenologically explore the culture, communities, and sociality in Benin without sorting it in a comparative "not yet" logic that leaves a foul taste of evolutionism in the mouth of an anthropologist.

[42] When Abbé de l'Epée in 18th century France created a formalized manual code to instruct a deaf child, he produced signs for each and every word and particle of the spoken French language Delaporte (2014:128–30); Sacks (1989:17). These "methodological signs", that are understood to be one of the cradles of formalized sign languages, are obsolete in sign language grammar where many of the meaning of words and particles in spoken and written language are expressed through elements of sign language like movement, deictic, facial expression, etc. Many signed or manually coded spoken languages that continue to be used for instruction in deaf schools today rely on similar signs that are unnatural and unsuitable for actual sign languages, see also Nyst (2010:413).

- There are no strong activist movements or proponents of Deaf culture that would claim the cultural significance of sign language as a language in its own right as they are in other regions of the world (see Padden 1980; Friedner 2019). As such, deaf people in Benin might not see a natural sign language as equal to spoken languages or even ponder the question – it was just the way they talked.
- Sign language came to West Africa as a means to teach the gospel, and the gospel was *written* in the spoken languages French or English. Also in Kampala, where UgSL seems to be more of a genuine and systematized sign language that is acknowledged and more appreciated by deaf Ugandans (Lule and Wallin 2010; Nyst 2010) than Signs in Benin, prayers and lectures from the bible were recited in signed English. When not developing locally, sign languages were almost always introduced through the channels of Christian missions. The *words* of the bible may have served as the benchmark of good communication. Almost all schools for the deaf in Benin are run or were founded by Christian movements. ANSB's history is also tightly connected to Christianity, thus there are ongoing ties and references to the (written) bible.
- Educators of the deaf are aware of the ASL background of Beninese signs. Especially after internet access became more widely available, they refer to online resources on ASL to develop teaching. Every time they do, they face the challenge of translating ASL and its materials from its Anglo-American context into the francophone West African variant. They usually updated single signs but were not aware of the grammar as I could experience when taking part in a sign language class for teachers in Louho/Porto Novo.
- Most of all, though, the first teachers of the deaf who were taught by Andrew Foster and his disciples in Nigeria all deafened post-lingually – just as Foster himself and many of the deaf in positions of responsibility today. Deaf education started with spoken language education as the benchmark – it was also therefore that Andrew Foster only hired deafened teachers who had been educated when they were not yet deaf. Their first language was a spoken language and therefore, access to purely visual communication may have been difficult for them. To them, "total communication" (Foster 1975) that combined speech and signs, was sign language, even though it was basically signed spoken language. Furthermore, in the 1970s, when the first

Beninese teachers learned to sign, sign language had not yet established a strong standing as a natural language anywhere in the world. This amalgam variant of ASL is the "proper way" to sign in Benin; or so say most of the literate, post-lingually deaf people, hearing children of deaf parents and the hearing professionals working with in deaf education. The obvious challenge is that signers have to know French to be proficient in this way of signing. Many deaf people did not go to school or did not go long enough for this to be the case. Also, the schools and teachers barely manage to teach French to the pre-lingually deaf children who have not learned to understand or speak French before deafening. While those deaf learners might be able to grasp the context of written French to different extents, they are mostly not able to express themselves the "proper way", nor can they easily follow presentations or conversations in signed French: "Il ne connait pas le français, il ne peut pas te comprendre"[43] I was told by a speaking deaf person while trying to make a born deaf person understand my question in Signs.

village sign

Deaf people who learned to sign French in school often look down on what they call *signes du village* or *village signs*. It is a way of signing that is negotiated in smaller groups outside the formal institutions of deaf education like school and church. Nancy Frishberg distinguishes home sign from (sign) languages through the lack of generational transmission, lesser consistency of meaning-symbol relationship, and the limited reach (1987). Villages signs use non-ASL signs in unsystematized visual grammar, involving a lot of deictics, iconic signs and referential communication. There are no known communities around hereditary deafness or shared signing communities in Benin where sign language is transmitted across generations of signers. Village signs are established between deaf and hearing individuals. These signs usually share the limits of their spread with the limits of the deaf person's social world. The signs are often different from ASL signs but show a surprising similarity all across the country. When I attended the inaugural meeting of an association of the deaf in Porto Novo in 2016, Léon, a post-lingually deafened man, read out a statement in signed French, while a deaf friend of his simultaneously translated this into a sign language that was intelligible to the unschooled majority of the deaf audience. I am no linguist and was, particularly at the time, still struggling with learning to sign in any way, but it was remarkable that the interpreter's signs were a lot more dynamic and spatially expansive. There

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[43] "He does not know French; he cannot understand you."

were no "methodological signs" and the use of facial expression and space was a lot more intense than the "proper way" of signing.

learning and appropriating signs

Most of the signing in Benin happens between the two poles of signed French and village sign, in a colloquialized version of signed French that includes signs from ASL and follows an abbreviated French sentence structure, while also applying the grammatical structures of visual communication I mentioned above. Deaf people would take any signed language that is structured by sequential grammatical relations of spoken language and "naturally" apply spatial grammatical relations, as is the logic in most "natural signed languages" (Supalla 1991). It seems that this is what happens among deaf signers in Benin as well. Further differentiations remain to be undertaken by linguists or the deaf communities themselves if they feel a need to standardize or categorize their language[44]. All three ways of signing are potentially enriched with signs from other sign languages. Schools and churches are in touch and exchange with deaf acitivsts and hearing professionals working with the deaf from different countries and cultures, so that Belgian[45], German, Brazilian, Italian and current American signs may find their way into the Beninese sign repertoire (for Mali see also Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba 2012:256).

Deaf signers are usually able to bridge those differences and communicate with each other, at least after some time of adjustment. This is generally quite common in the realm of sign language encounters (Green 2014a; Breivik, Haualand, and Solvang 2002), to the extent that early deaf activists actually did claim that their language was universal (Gulliver 2015:8). As language always depends on the context, not all information might be communicable in every mode of signing. Scientific but also activist discourse may not be intelligible to deaf people who are not acquainted with more abstract ways of signing. There is, however, no principal communication barrier between deaf people who have had the opportunity to learn one or another mode of signing in school or in community.

[44] In the end of November 2018, representatives of deaf schools met in Zakpota, Benin, to discuss a "harmonization" and standardization of sign language in order to realize a more consistent language education across the schools. This conference was organized and financed by ministry for social affairs and microfinances and the United Nation Population Fund (UNFPA). (Facebook-communication with Joachim, director of a deaf school in Agla, Cotonou, November 2018).

[45] ASUNOES (2009), *Association Universelle d'Œuvres pour l'Épanouissement des Sourds*, the structure running the private school for the deaf in Louho, Porto Novo, published sign language booklets in cooperation with COCOF Belgique (*Commission communautaire française*).

spoken language

Sign language is often considered the "language of the deaf", their own language in the literature (Vollhaber 2020), or their Signs in Benin. But many deaf people – the deafened and the hard of hearing – also use spoken language. There are many people who deafened as children or in their teenage years after they had learned to speak. They do speak French, or Fon, or Mina, or other local languages and they use this in a particular way. They can assimilate to some degree, but they can also use spoken language strategically. They can talk to hearing people and gain authority over the communicative setting as Joachim, the deafened director of the center in Agla, often does: With a lot of confidence he puts himself in a position of control because it is he who talks, and the hearing have no way to answer, so his statement, his opinion, is the only one, he decides what is being said. There is not really a way that hearing people can disagree or contradict, because they cannot make themselves be understood. He uses both his speech and his deafness as assets to navigate situations of asymmetric communication. This was for example the case when he would negotiate the price of a ride or a product, but also when he did not agree with an argument. He would speak his mind and pretend he could not read his interlocutor's lips; so the hearing interlocutor could not correct what Joachim had said, and he would confidently act out that situation as having won the argument.

I argue that spoken language should not be understood as something that is only for hearing people, or that is purely assimilative and normative, but also as a tool that can be used by deaf people. Different levels of access to communication are also the basis for discrimination and distinction among the deaf as the vignette I quoted in the very beginning of the book illustrates. Recall when Claire discussed the problems of deaf-deaf communication with me signing "FATIGUÉ SOURDS" and closing the conversation in spoken French. At first, we signed as that was the usual way she and I would communicate. When discussing the complicated interaction with people who are born deaf, she switched to spoken language – probably both to distinguish herself from the born deaf and so that other deaf will not understand what we are talking about. The broad range of communication is not an asset that all deaf can mobilize. Especially in the sense of assimilation and integration into hearing society, these deaf can be seen as the above mentioned "able-disabled" (Chaudhry 2015) in an exclusionary context where likeness to mainstream society is the benchmark. Yet, spoken language is a dimension in Beninese deaf sociality – even if it is not heard or even spoken.

written language

Another way of deaf communication is written language. This is mostly used to bridge gaps in communication with the hearing. Deaf people might write on paper, with fingers in the sand, with chalk or charcoal on doors and walls, with fingernails on the skin of their forearms, in Facebook-, WhatsApp- and other mobile phone text message services. Written language is thereby no language in its own right but merely written down spoken language. The extent to which a deaf person employs written language communication depends on their formal education and/or their acquaintance with spoken language. Its use is very diverse according to the available media, the recipient, and the content that is supposed to be transmitted. Furthermore, hearing people would sometimes resort to written notes for communication. Also for the hearing and speaking, however, written communication is limited by the levels of literacy[46].

Usually, deaf-hearing communication would start with gestures and references to immediate objects or topics. A deaf person at the market would point at the produce and products they would want and then indicate the amount with their fingers or show with a descriptive hand movement. The vendor would show how many hundreds of francs CFA the customer had to pay. I often accompanied deaf friends to the market and was amazed how smoothly this communication worked[47]. This immediate referencing became insufficient, however, when the topics became more complicated. In the tailor workshop in Agla, people would bring clothes they wanted to have fixed or copied. A lot of showing and gesturing usually happened. When this did not suffice, the customers might resort to written communication, like writing on paper or with chalk on the wooden straight edge that the tailors used for sketches. In other situations, people would type some words into their mobile phones and hand it over to another person who would type in a comment or an answer. When I did not understand a sign or a signed number, some deaf would scratch numbers, letters, or words with a fingernail on the dry skin on their forearms which would leave a whitish line on their dark skin; or do the same with a bit of charcoal. Chalk or charcoal were also used to write on steel doors or walls.

These modes of written language were only used in deaf-hearing interaction and communication. Direct interaction between the deaf people would

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[46] World Fact Book notes a literacy rate of 54% among male and 31.1% for female Beninese aged 15 and older in 2018 (CIA n.d.)

[47] See also the documentary on gestures and signs in deaf-hearing interaction in Mumbai by Kusters and Sahasrabudhe (2016).

always employ Signs. An important medium, though, that relies on written language is instant messaging that is also used in deaf-deaf communication. The World Fact Book reports that in 2019, there are almost 9 mobile phone subscriptions for every 10 Beninese (CIA n.d.). Some people may, however, have several phones and not every owner of a phone has access to the internet. Regarding the deaf, well more than half of those I worked with had a smartphone with internet access. While data packages were not cheap at all, instant messaging used relatively little data. As text messaging through GSM standards was more expensive, most people used the internet-based messaging applications WhatsApp and Facebook messenger.

Besides having to know basic written French[48], access to these channels of communication required the resources to afford a basic smartphone which were not too expensive thanks to a flourishing secondhand trade and the import of quite affordable Chinese brands. The use of smartphones demanded regular recharge of the battery – not every household in either rural or urban Benin is connected to electricity – and buying data packages. The latter could be avoided by logging into public or private Wi-Fis. A common sight of Cotonou at night is a handful of people standing each by themselves behind hotels, bars, and offices, faces lit up from staring down at their cell phones.

Once somebody did have access to messaging services, written communication opened doors to virtual exchange with distant (deaf) people in town, in the region, in the country, and even internationally. The more tech savvy, the better equipped, and the more eloquent one was, the more potential these channels had. Some deaf internauts wrote elaborate polemic pamphlets on Facebook, whereas others kept sending me cryptic messages in broken French that I cannot decipher for the life of me. Others again wrote in incorrect spelling and grammar but were yet quite intelligible, like Homère's message in illustration 5. Many deaf also shared pictures or memes with prayers and life advice. The use of social media and the difference this makes will be part of the discussions in chapters 4 and 5.

Apart from the interactions and interventions in public Facebook posts, however, written language is mostly makeshift in case visual communication either breaks down due to lack of understanding, or because text messaging allows to bridge distances that visual communication cannot – yet, one might say. Phone to phone video calls via internet started to become popular during my research, but usually the connections were so bad that while one enjoyed

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[48] Although there are standards and conventions for writing local languages in Latin letters, most written communication that I came across, both among hearing and deaf people, happened in French.

seeing the other, signing was rarely intelligible. Use of written language is thus another dimension of difference reflecting the access to resources and education.

no language

It is difficult to make the claim that someone is entirely languageless (Moriarty Harrelson 2017), particularly because in research projects that do not dedicate a lot of time to an assumed languageless individual, the researcher has little access to what the individual considers or practices as language. Would Kangobai, the only deaf on Rennell Island, have been considered languageless by Rolf Kuschel had he not approached him with attentiveness, time, perseverance, and respect (Kuschel 1973)? What I am looking at in this subsection is the communication between people who do not have any established, routinized, or recognized system or language for communication. The possibly provocative subsection title is meant to illustrate another shade of the diversity of deaf communication. Instead of belittling this way of communication by denying it the status of language, I wish to do the opposite; to point out the ingenuity of communicative practices and sensitivities – be they called language or not. Arguing that communication does not necessarily require language, Tyler Zoanni (2018) criticized a "linguistic bias" of Western and Ugandan thought. Regarding the speechless research participants in Zoanni's fieldwork in a home for people with cognitive disabilities in Uganda, he suggests describing the "signature" of a person in order to appreciate them as possibly non-linguistic but yet human beings. The signature works as a metaphor for something unique in their interactions and their way of relating to others that is not necessarily intelligible or readable but yet characteristic and recognizable of the person's personhood and personality (Zoanni 2018:72). I am not equaling being cognitively disabled and being deaf without language; but I agree with questioning the linguist bias that assumes that human life is not possible without language; a presupposition that is weaved through the otherwise captivating book *Seeing Voices* by Oliver (Sacks 1989) and is a core argument of deaf education activism[49].

The majority of deaf people in Benin have no chance to go to school or connect with other deaf people. They do not learn a somewhat standardized sign language but develop home sign with their families and villages to different degrees – depending on their drive and ingenuity, but also on their

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[49] The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) start their statement on human rights of the deaf with sections on sign language rights, linguistic identity, and bilingual education while equal employment and equal participation are last in line, see WFD (2016).

family's willingness to engage in creative communication. A lot of communication, however, happens entirely languageless: people share food or time, copy each other's actions, work together, they smile and laugh together, they express agreement or discontent. The statement that some deaf in Benin use no signs or language at all is a complicated one. Deciding whether sign language, Signs, or merely gesture is a language or not is politically delicate and beyond the scope of an anthropologist who has no specialization in linguistics whatsoever. In chapter 6, however, I will scrutinize the central importance that is put on language by psychologists like Sacks and many Deaf Studies scholars (Johnson and Erting 1989:41–42; Baker and Battison 1980; Bauman and Murray 2014).

Questions of language ideology are complex and I would rather avoid engaging with them here (see Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b). Eventually, the question of whether a form of communication is or is not a language is not particularly relevant here but should be fought out in other arenas. If a form of communication, be it spontaneous or established, *serves* to connect people, if it *serves* to communicate between people, it does not matter for the scope of this book whether it *is* a language or not.

Signs

All of the sign languages used in Benin were usually subsumed by the deaf under the term *les signes* which is why I use the capitalized Signs as a local name for their language. Signs, then, include all of the modes of signing described above. There are certain regional differences from school to school that are possibly due to different international partnerships of those schools – at least that is a common understanding among deaf Beninese. Other variations are likely to be due to local appropriations and styles that develop among deaf peers in deaf communities and spaces. Furthermore, each individual usually signs sometimes lightly and sometimes very differently due to the absence of clear standards. While some deaf – speaking or not – mouth words to the phrases they are signing, others do not at all. Some employ facial grammar, while others sign with completely motion- and expressionless faces. Some are silent signers, while others speak or produce a range of noises. Some sign within a small space in front of their chest and face, while others expressively expand that signing space to wherever their hands can reach. Deaf people shift between the different ways, registers, and modes, depending on their competence, the situation, the people they are talking with, and the purpose that they see in that communication – why they are communicating at all.

One characteristic that surprised me was the use of focus and attention that I already mentioned for the use of spoken language. Also in sign language communication, focus, and viewing direction are commonly used in ways that I have not experienced elsewhere. While it is a convention in many other sign language cultures to keep eye contact with the person you are talking to (see Padden 1980; Green 2014b, but also basically all sign language manuals that give hints as to how to behave when communicating with d/Deaf people), Beninese deaf signers often do not look at the listener's face when telling a story. I suggest that they use this as technique to *take the word*; to gain authority in the moment: *Now I am talking, and I will not see whether you comment or interrupt*. At the same time, they can be very attentive to facial expression, mime, and gestures when trying to understand speaking people or people who sign differently.

A social aspect of deaf communication is that in the mixed-mode communication settings, the more multimodal signers dominate the conversation while those deaf who feel like they do not sign well, do not know many words, as for example Yann and Nadège would say about themselves, stay rather quiet. Their involvement in conversation and discourse always depends on the comfort they feel in any given social space to reveal their level of (sign) language competence.

The diversity of deaf communication is grounded in the various deafnesses and the various ways deaf biographies unfold. At the same time, the diverse deaf communication contributes to deaf diversity as they mean different opportunities for access to deaf sociality, status, and achievement.

2.4 deaf interstitiality

Deaf diversity and the various ways deaf Beninese are deaf will emerge time and again in this book. Deaf Beninese experience themselves and are experienced by others as being in between abled and disabled. They appear "normal" and able while the challenges in communication create distance and "disability". They do not easily fit into categories and preconceptions, thus constitute ambiguous provocations to hearing others and deaf others alike.

I have adopted the loose ways deaf Beninese categorize und discuss being deaf and thereby have paid particular attention to experiential degrees and (medical) histories of deafnesses. This is not to be misunderstood as adhering to a medical approach towards being deaf. Instead, I follow Vollhaber who demands not to ignore or exclude the meaning of the physiological deafness (2018:403f) but to explore all aspects and dimensions of the deaf experience. The background on the different ways that people become deaf makes clear

that shared deaf experience does not mean that deaf people have identical experiences. Instead, as Young and Temple point out, "to be deaf is to stand at multiple intersections of language, culture, disability, society, politics, ethics, and the body" (2014:2). Young and Temple have been criticized for their deaf research manual for the hearing (Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:26), as have many other hearing scholars for putting "l'accent sur ce qui sépare plutôt que sur ce qui unit"[50] (Delaporte 2014:6). My research, however, showed that there is a manifest social diversity among the deaf in Benin that does create ambivalent challenges for deaf experience, sociality, and socialization. Being deaf in Benin implies neither a clear being nor belonging, as deaf diversity makes experience and practice of similitude complicated.

The same is true for hearing-deaf interactions where the hearing person cannot easily grasp the characteristics of the deaf counterpart. Therefore, they often avoid the challenges of interaction and thus exclude deaf people from participation in social interaction. I argue that it is the particular ambivalence that deaf diversity presents to hearing people that creates this othering. They do not appear normal to hearing people who therefore see them as others. Neither are they disabled people in a common Beninese sense as they are able to work, to have a family, to navigate the city independently. Patrick Devlieger has described disability as an interstitial phenomenon, being or falling in between and thereby challenging the societal categories (Devlieger 1999:299). In Beninese society, though, particularly in urban settings, there is a broad visibility of disabled persons in public life. Governmental and non-governmental organizations run sensitization workshops and campaigns to raise awareness of disability. I would argue that disability is somewhat established as a category, an absolute Other – as loose and heterogenous it may be – into which deaf people do not fit.

Deaf people are rather perceived of as in the interstices between able and disabled. There seem to exist clear images of limited abilities of disabled people – they cannot walk or see or have mental disabilities that render them "retarded" and unable in the eyes of non-disabled hearing Beninese[51]. When hearing Beninese encounter deaf people, however, they see mostly normal abled bodies that just do not speak. They see their hands converse and assume that it is just another language; "la langage des sourds", the deaf's language. Contrary to Peter Graif's observations in Nepal, hearing Beninese do not consider sign language "monkey talk" or gibberish (Graif 2018:180). When witnessing deaf communication, hearing people are rather confused because

[50] "emphasis on what divides instead of what unifies"

[51] Interview with Gaspard, the secretary general of FAPHB, 19/11/2016.

they do not know how to categorize what they are seeing. Living in a multilingual setting, the experience of meeting people whose language one does not understand occurs daily. Even remote villages are rarely monolingual. There is thus no assumption, like in Graif's ethnography, that deaf people do not know what they say or write. It is rather accepted that they have their language of their own. This makes it hard to sort them into a category like *normal* – because they are not hearing – or *disabled* – because they are not unable as the common picture of disability would imply. This interstitiality, the neither-nor, makes the phenomenon somewhat uncanny. I argue that it is due to this dynamic that animal comparisons or leaf insults (see section 3.3) are used to produce a distance that is experientially not as apparent[52].

Deaf diversity makes it hard to find a clear description, category, or identity for deaf people, both from within and from without. This insecurity and ambivalence around identity has often been discussed as liminal in disability studies (Murphy 1995; Devlieger 1999, 1994), drawing on the liminal period in rites of passage as elaborated by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1967). Robert Murphy concludes that because of their liminality, disabled people are constructed as "the Other" (Murphy 1995:143). I find this slightly contradictory as through the making of the Other, the disabled person is no longer liminal, "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967:93), but is assigned a fixed spot as an outsider. I see that disabled people in Benin are often the Others, and like that, non-disabled people know how to deal with them, where to put them, how to think them, to avoid them, as Murphy himself writes. For the deaf in Benin, the challenge is that they are neither the One nor the Other. They do belong to families, villages, neighborhoods, but anywhere they belong there is a tension; there is liminality and ambiguity, or, in Develieger's words, interstitiality. Michael Jackson used the image of the limitrophe, a metaphor of destabilized and transgressive borderlands (Jackson 2015) as a sphere of constant navigation, of process and becoming (see also Vigh 2006). Deaf Beninese not only experience this chronic state of social dislocation but also display their interstitiality to the hearing society, a sometimes hidden and sometimes apparent stigma they have to manage (Goffman 1986).

This can also be seen in Guy McIlroy and Claudine Storbeck's attempt to find an identity concept for being deaf in South Africa. They suggest a bi- and cross-cultural DeaF identity to emphasize that deaf people are assuming

[52] Robert Murphy discussed a situation where Indian children mocked a blind man and assumes that they did so in order to create a distance between them and the abnormal (Murphy (1995:144)).

different *fluid* – therefor the capital F – identities in Deaf and hearing contexts (McIlroy and Storbeck 2011; McIlroy 2010, see also Bat-Chava 2000). As a consequence, it seems that both deaf and hearing people are constantly engaging in borderwork when confronted with deaf ambiguity. Deaf people regularly have to reassess their various deafnesses, their ways of being deaf, and means of communication given the social context they want to navigate.

*

"SOURDS DURS", Claire had said. Being deaf in Benin is deaf-deaf-difficult and poses the question of how to deal with it, how to navigate, or – picking up on Goffman's interactionist notion – how to manage that (interstitial) identity (1986; Hacking 2011). This challenges not only the deaf individuals themselves who strive to belong and to make their deaf lives individually and among deaf peers, but also hearing people who encounter deaf others in everyday interaction. This interstitiality, this unpredictability, means that hearing people have to reassess every hearing-deaf encounter anew. In the next chapter, I suggest taking this assumption as a basis to reflect on how deaf Beninese are being socially constructed by the hearing.

Deaf people do not strike the hearing as profoundly different because their differentness is not visible. They differ mostly in a mode of communication, their difference is more in degree than in kind, to come back to Mara Mills. Yet, this one thing, this one lack, provokes "normal" people to react, to evaluate each situation anew. A schizophrenic in the streets of Cotonou, a *fou*, might be scary or annoying to some, but they know to ignore them. Beggars using crutches or wheelchairs have clear symbols of their differentness, but the deaf are more confusing. In her book *Venus on Wheels* (Frank 2000), Gelya Frank uses mirroring as an access of seeing a shared humanity between her and the disabled protagonist of her cultural biography. For hearing people encountering deaf people in Benin, it seems that they do look into a mirror that is just slightly distorting – it is same and different, *heimlich* (homely) and *unheimlich* (uncanny) (Freud 2020[1919]). They understand that they are looking at an image that expresses their sameness, while something physically small but socially huge – communication – does not square, which makes the encounter ambiguous and uncanny[53].

[53] The related idea of the "uncanny valley" has been proposed by Japanese robotics professor Masahiro Mori in the 1970s in reference to the feeling of unease or fear that people experience when a machine becomes very but not completely similar to a human being, see Mori, MacDorman, and Kageki (2012).

The following two chapters discuss how *the deaf* as a group are being constructed from without and within. Before I discuss the makings of deaf community, I will present how the construction of deaf people is happening through the hearing. This does not precede the community chapter because it is more or less important but because it sets the frame and arena of the hearing majority society in and through which the deaf make themselves.

3 hearing constructions of the deaf

As the previous chapter has shown, there is no clear line between being deaf and being hearing. The closer you look, the more ambivalent the dualisms become. Yet, both deaf and hearing people talk and think with this artificial dualism. How does it come into being?

The deaf as a category of people and the deaf community as a coherent collectivity are constructed way more clearly externally by hearing than internally by deaf people themselves. This external making of community and kin was well expressed in summer 2018 when hearing parents brought their deaf son, Omolayo, to stay in the deaf school in Agla during the summer holidays. At the time I was living there as well. They wanted him to stay with *his brothers and sisters* – that is, with his deaf kin.

Omolayo's hearing Nigerian parents complained that they could not handle him at home anymore: He would not listen, always roam around the neighborhood, get aggressive, insult people in the street, and cause trouble. They brought Omolayo, who usually attended the public school for the deaf in Vêdoko, to Agla and asked Claire and Joachim to have him stay, agreeing to contribute to the living cost. I was translating a bit and Omolayo's father told us that they were exhausted and that they did not want their son to become a criminal. Also, it would be better for him to stay with *his* people, with *his* brothers and sisters, where they could speak *their* language together. Omolayo's parents felt unable to deal with their deaf child at home and unable to communicate and educate him properly. To them, understanding seemed to mean belonging, and as the deaf space in Agla seemed to be more understandable and understanding towards their son than they could be, they expressed that he belonged there, to *his* people.

Besides discourses of belonging and long-term crises of communication, however, deaf interstitiality creates spontaneous uncertainty and ambiguity in interaction and communication that challenges hearing people to reassess every deaf-hearing encounter anew. While there is a reservoir of discourses and routines, common knowledge in the form of folktales and proverbs, and ableist/audist socio-cultural standards. New encounters require negotiation, navigation, and improvisation. In this chapter, I want to present the hearing discourses about deaf Beninese as well as the inter-individual interactions on the basis of and beyond those discourses.

I do not want to imply that the deaf person in Benin was merely a docile subject to hearing social construction and discourse (cf. Foucault 1975), but that the hearing imagery of the deaf person defines some of the shores that

deaf sociality navigates along. In her book on the body as a subject of public health imperatives, Deborah Lupton argued that "subjects are neither wholly governed by discourses nor fully capable of stepping out of discourse" (Lupton 1995:137). This internal-external dialectic (see also Jenkins 1996) means that neither discursive construction nor productive interaction can be entirely disentangled from the other (Hacking 2011).

The explanatory models introduced in the previous chapter are part of this social construction. What I want to focus on here is not a medical or cultural concept but the social interactions between hearing and deaf people that result in conceptualizing the deaf person as a particular member of society. I argue that it is not a stable or fixed Other (Murphy 1995:143) that is being made of the deaf person, even though some of the interactions like animal insults may imply so. Instead, the lack of a manifest difference and the wide ambiguous similarity between deaf and hearing people challenge the latter to categorize the deaf person when they meet. Subsequently, the construction of the deaf person by the hearing sways between identification and othering. I will look at how hearing people encounter deaf people and deaf diversity. How do their reactions, explanations, and interactions create frames of reference that both hearing and deaf people relate to in reading and responding to deaf-hearing encounters?

Postmodernist thoughts of social construction have been broadly criticized (Hacking 1999) and in disability studies in particular, the *return of the body* has been part of a critique on purely constructionist notions of the social model of disability (Shakespeare 2010; Siebers 2001; Livingston 2005). My understanding of the social model of disability includes what Allison Kafer called a "political/relational" dimension (Kafer 2013:7). Many authors before her have issued similar criticism on the social model and its strict separation of disability and impairment (Shakespeare 2010; Shakespeare and Watson 2001). I believe, however, that this criticism is not of the social model as such but of its poor application. Upholding the epistemological differentiation between impairment as bodily and disability as social experience makes sense if we do not absolutize the dualism. Of course, all bodily experience is also social, "profoundly moral and historical" (Livingston 2005:2) and social suffering can cause and manifest itself in physical, somatic, and bodily harm. I maintain the social model which in my understanding goes beyond the sociology of impairment (Hughes and Paterson 1997) and refers to "the social" (Friedner 2018) in a broad sense that includes construction and coercion, relationality and belonging, politics and resistance. This understanding

acknowledges the individual *and* the social experience of bodies and subjectivity.

I will start the chapter with stating that the phenomenon of being deaf is not exotic to most hearing Beninese. This is expressed in a general awareness of *the language of the deaf* (section 3.1) as well as in folktales and proverbs that use this knowledge and experience for the purpose of education and storytelling (section 3.2). Deaf research participants, however, mostly remembered the derogatory narratives the hearing express in form of animal insults, a phenomenon that is far from being uniquely Beninese, as I will show in section 3.3. In section 3.4, I will discuss hearing parents' reactions to deaf children and how they cope with them within the discursive contexts presented beforehand. The state, section 3.5, plays another ambiguous role in its perceived and much bewailed absence on the one hand and its consequential framing of deaf lives on the other. In the closing section I will argue how the interstitial experience of similitude and difference creates a both othering and normalizing response by the hearing.

3.1 language, likeness, and difference

Most hearing people that I met knew of the existence of *la langage des sourds*, the language of the deaf, whether they were in regular contact with deaf people or not at all. In breakfast bars in Porto Novo, on the *tchoukoutou* market in Natitingou, or on the cross-country bus – all across the county and social strata I heard hearing people acknowledge that this "talking with their hands" is *their* language. They might still think that the deaf were stupider than hearing people, but they would not disregard the existence of *their* language per se.

There are two rash – and false – conclusions that can be drawn from the fact that most hearing people acknowledge the existence of deaf language and deaf community. First: Hearing people acknowledging the existence of deaf language and community means that hearing people do not consider deafness a detriment. As I have shown above, deafness is often understood as a damage done by witchcraft. The widely used Fon term for a deaf person, *tokounon*, the bearer of dead ears, also clearly expresses an implication of impairment, threat, deficit, and disaster. One deaf person told me that hearing people often thought deafness was contagious (see also Kusters 2015a:116), another narrative that blends into the ambivalent complex of nearness and distance. As I will discuss below, hearing parents of deaf persons fear having deaf grandchildren as well. Acknowledgement of language, therefore, clearly does not make the deaf be perceived (or valued) as a sign language people or a

linguistic group among the others. The second false conclusion could be that because hearing people recognize *les signes* as language, they learn it in order to communicate with deaf people, especially their kin. Very few parents learn the language from their children and only a handful of them visit the sign language classes that some deaf schools offer to parents even though they often speak two to several languages themselves already. Only very few hearing people learn to sign with their deaf kin – apart from the hearing children of deaf adults – and it is mostly their siblings. Apparently there is a family and age hierarchy at play here that makes it hard for the elder to learn from the young.

The acknowledgement of sign language and language barrier is at the heart of deaf-hearing encounters where hearing people do not necessarily perceive deaf people as non-*hearing* people but as non-*understanding* people. Challenges in understanding are a part of daily life in a context like Benin where more than fifty languages are spoken. From the bustling economic center Cotonou to small villages in the remote north of the country, there are always interactions that demand improvisation and willingness on the part of the participants to make each understand the other. I often encountered such improvisations in different parts of Benin and will give just two of many examples.

In Natitingou, I went to the market with Isaïe, a deaf friend, to buy *fromage peulh*, the cow milk cheese produced by the Fulbe. The Fulbe follow a pastoralist lifestyle in transhumance in the savannas of the Sahel. In northern Benin, the women often only come to town on market days to sell their cheese. Isaïe started negotiating the price of cheese – with a finger spelled number system that had nothing to do with the sign language numbers we usually used. One finger would indicate 100 franc CFA; half a finger would be another 50 franc CFA. The Fulbe woman negotiated with him with no hesitation, surprise, or communication barrier. Many of the rural Fulbe in Benin speak only their own Pulaar language so communication with other Beninese is often based on a gesture system. The marketeer might not have noticed at all that Isaïe was deaf; she definitely did not care.

In neighboring Nigeria, Constanze Schmaling remarked that there might be a lower threshold for social exchange between the hearing and the deaf as "[t]he fact that people are used to a multilingual environment may also contribute to the readiness for improvisation." (Schmaling 2003:303). This openness to overcome communication barriers does not mean, however, that many people actually learned sign language. As said, hearing signers remain exceptional. But there is a certain disposition to engage in visual

communication – unlike in traditionally monolingual settings in European contexts where surprise and discomfort overwhelm when communication is not easily possible (Saint-Loup 1996:3). In Agla, on another occasion, new neighbors moved into the building across the street from the deaf school. They came from Nigeria and spoke Yoruba and English. When they realized that their neighbors were deaf, I overheard them simply saying: "Oh look how funny, the deaf speak with their hands!" in a tone of only minor interest and surprise. As Claire's shop was just outside their gate, they often got their charcoal, soap, *gari*, ice or sugar at her place and learned a few signs to get around. Elie would also flirt and chat with the neighbors' daughters who would be responsive to his signing and join in the conversation. The newl immigrated Nigerians would learn some Fon and some French in their new home, so why not Signs as well? Hence, although deafness catches hearing people's attention, it is not necessarily a manifest or significant differentness in a society that is generally characterized by diversity and particularly by variance in languages. The common awareness of deafness and sign language makes deafness a theme in folktales and proverbs.

3.2 folktales and proverbs

As diversity and misunderstanding are often seen as a challenge to social life in Benin, these are often themes of proverbs and folk tales that serve entertaining but also educational purposes in rural and urban life. Sometimes, deafness functions as a rhetoric tool.

One proverb that a Beninese sociologist shared with me goes as follows: "Si tu veux que le sourd comprenne ce que tu dis, il faut le dire auprès de son enfant."[54] On the one hand, this sounds like pragmatic advice on how to communicate with the deaf. However, it is rarely used in actual reference to deaf people. The proverb indicates that if you want to make a person understand, you have to adjust to the person's ways or "channels" (Kockelman 2017:55) of understanding. It is somewhat similar to Karl Popper's derivative of the "golden rule" ("do unto others as you would have others do unto you") as "doing unto others, wherever possible, as *they* would be done by..." (Popper 2008 [1945]:386). This is often dubbed "the platinum rule", and applied to communicative interactions, it implies that one should talk to people the way *they* want to be talked to (see for example Hall 2017). The Beninese proverb includes a notion of respect towards the autonomy of the person as it does not say "tell it to the child so the child translates", but one should speak

[54] If you want the deaf person to understand what you are saying, you have to say it near his child.

near the child so that they can translate while you still address the deaf person. These implications make sense for communication with both deaf and hearing people. What matters here as well is that a proverb like this only makes sense if the audience understands the imagery. There seems to be widespread awareness that deaf people are not unintelligent but do understand, only in different ways, and that some people are better capable to communicate with them than others – generally their kin.

Folktales refer to oral traditions, mythology and social theory in southern Benin (Elwert 1973:96) and play a major part in Beninese leisure activity and education. Many tales have been published on- and offline (see, among countless others, Bénin Langues 2019; Mensah 2005), though I did not find a single one involving deaf people. I asked Tino, a professional storyteller and actor, to think about folktales and adages that deal with deaf protagonists. He let me record a number of folktales that he learned from other professional storytellers and older family members. He explained that the folktales that he collects when traveling across the country are often amalgams and collages of different cultural groups and values.

A characteristic folktale involving a deaf person that Tino shared with me was called *Zissou et Zizerbo* after the names of its twin protagonists. Zissou was deaf while Zizerbo was hearing. Zizerbo was condescending towards his deaf brother and thought of himself as the better son. Zissou was calm, hardworking, and respectful to their blacksmith father, while Zizerbo was living it up and enjoying himself, mocking and exploiting his deaf brother. After a lot of turmoil, cheating and mockery, Zissou was eventually appointed the royal blacksmith and married the king's daughter. Zizerbo and many others understood that Zissou, the deaf person, was not as incapable as they had thought. This tale has a message similar to the idiom "don't judge a book by its cover". It teaches the audience to question their initial assumptions about people, and that what matters eventually is being a good person: a hard worker, a respectful son, an obedient subject, and a modest person. Like the proverb discussed above, the folktale plays with the hearing audience's presumptions about the deaf[55]. Folktales are narrating the confusion of deaf interstitiality and expose, in a tongue-in-cheek way, the ignorance of the hearing who underestimate the deaf.

The representation of deaf people in those folktales fits well into a social model of disability. Deaf people experience an impairment, a lack of hearing,

[55] The folktale also reproduces the age and gender values of society in that it presents the wisdom of the king, the patriarch, who is wise and stands above the struggle and jealousies of the young.

but the actual challenges lay in the misconceptions of others who believe that they are incapable or mentally unfit for "normal" conduct. The problems they face are social, not physiological. As folktales are meant to teach the listeners, the deaf protagonists serve as material to surprise the audience and make them rethink their assumptions[56]. The folktales that Tino shared with me put forth a shared humanity between deaf and hearing people. The tales aim to make people reassess their premature conclusions and judgements as deficient. A song by Clément Mêlomê and the notorious *Tout Puissant Orchestre Poly-Rythmo de Cotonou* expresses a similar notion. In *Zoun Mi Bo*[57], they criticize people for mocking and insulting the blind, the disabled, and the poor and demand from them to judge others by their deeds and not by the assumed deficiencies that are not their fault.

Beninese folktales, storytelling, and proverbs thus portray deafness as an arena of misunderstanding and misjudgment. Normative claims, though, do not translate easily into the practice of norms in interaction. As the next section will show, hearing insults and mockery of the deaf are very common. Yet, the fact that the imagery of deafness as a complex of misunderstanding in tales and proverbs works as a rhetoric tool shows how wide-spread deeper knowledge of the complexities of deafnesses is in hearing Benin.

3.3 animal insults

> I was sitting with an old, gay artist in his beach house in Togbin, who had a history of mental illness. I am only mentioning this to make clear that he surely had experienced his share of discrimination, incomprehension and exclusion. That is why I was surprised when he told me that "the deaf are like dogs, you can teach them to understand a bit, but it's not like they would really communicate, it is more that we believe they understand us." (fieldnotes October 2016)

> "This is monkey talk, I said." [A hearing father in Nepal about his deaf daughter's sign language] (Graif 2018:180)

Comparing deaf people to animals is a quite common practice across different cultures. Kangobai, the only deaf on Rennell Island, "does behave like a monkey" said his hearing peers (Kuschel 1973:7). In Adamorobe, one

[56] This could be judged as an exploitation of the deaf as mere metaphors in the stories of the hearing; one might even interpret these stories as examples of "inspiration porn", a term used in Europe and USA to describe the use of portrayals of disabled people for the purpose of inspiration that is partially or solely based on one-sided, disabling notions of disability and thereby reinforces ableism (Young 2012; Fox 2020:29). Inspiration is, however, not just a common motive of educational tales and proverbs, but also seems to meet a desire for role models in African disability rights movements, see Mackinzeph (2020); Sackey (2020).

[57] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5QppBQf-4A, last access: 16.12.2020.

explanatory model for the high rate of deafness says that the deaf were wild animals who helped the hearing in fighting against Danish and British perpetrators and against other ethnic groups. According to this model, this was how the deaf joined the Adamorobe community, which was also the explanation of their purported strength (Kusters 2015a:106). Some deaf Adamorobeans pride themselves with this background stories and do not think that they denigrate the deaf. "Leaf insults", however, explicitly do (2015a:72). Deaf villagers told Kusters that hearing people would often insult them by chewing on a leaf and stare at the deaf, implying the deaf were goats or sheep. In a life story interview in 2016, Homère told me about exactly the same insults that he faced after he became deaf as a child:

> There were only schools for the hearing, so my parents sent me there as well. But it didn't really work. I copied text from the others, I was looking and following, but I didn't hear, I could not learn. I tried. But the other kids, they put leaves in their mouths and mocked me, that got me angry and there were a lot of problems. So, I left school and got back to the village, we went to Adjagbo, that's the village of my grandmother. There I stayed for a long time. (interview 10/30/2016)

For many deaf and deafened children, these confrontations were formative experiences for their relationship to the hearing majority. These experiences are likely to be the background of ubiquitous accounts presenting deaf people as aggressive (Kara and Harvey 2016:80; Kiyaga and Moores 2003:22; Kusters 2015a:98, 154), suggesting that deaf people are more likely to have "emotional, behavioral, and social difficulties" (Friedner 2015:31). The constant experience of being misunderstood and excluded not only leads to a higher risk of mental health problems among the deaf (Kvam, Loeb, and Tambs 2007) but also causes conflicts and aggressive behavior that further the individual's exclusion. Homère's remark that he got angry and that there were a lot of problems at school implies that he got into a lot of fights with his peers.

Edmund Leach argues that "animal abuse", that is, calling people animals, happens in culturally specific spheres of meaning, asking why

> expressions like "you son of a bitch" or "you swine" [should] carry the connotations that they do, when "you son of a kangaroo" or "you polar bear" have no meaning whatever? (2000:325)

He goes on to argue that animal abuse is an expression of "suppressing our recognition of the non-things which fill the interstices" (Leach 2000:330). Animal insults have a history in southern Benin as Georg Elwert remarks on the Fon saying that among the Fon, animal comparisons were a severe insult: "Jemandem mit einem Tier zu vergleichen, ist bei ihnen ein schwerer

Schimpf' (Elwert 1973:34). They had been used time and again in folktales and proverbs to describe and criticize hierarchies and authority (Elwert 1973:96–97). Hence, deaf people do understand the insults and hearing people know what they are doing when they make these comparisons.

Even though nobody I spoke to mentioned recent experience of having been insulted in that vein, the animal comparisons seemed to be a common motif when the deaf describe hearing-deaf interaction. They are representative examples of how deaf people are constructed as others and they are the foundation of deaf suspicion towards the hearing. Some would rather not sign in public spaces and even discourage deaf children from doing so for fear of being mocked, of being stared at while chewing on leaves. The ambivalences expressed in folktales and insults are also experienced among hearing people who find themselves having deaf children.

3.4 hearing parents

Some deaf children were lucky to be born to parents who care and invest themselves in their children's lives. Others, like Elie, were abandoned because their hearing parents felt not able or willing to raise a deaf child. There is no general tendency as to how hearing parents see their deaf children. Instead, the ambivalent relationships always oscillate between care and fear, nearness and misunderstanding, affection and neglect. As far as I could find out, stories of total repudiation like the case of Elie were rather exceptional. Many deaf people have ambivalent affections for their parents and families. I interviewed a number of young and old hearing mothers of deaf children who shared a commitment to take care of their children – like a mother who left her hometown of Djougou to move to the south only so that her deaf son could go to deaf school (fieldnotes 08/18/2016). Many had struggled to get therapy for their children, therapies that usually failed to make them hear again. Often parents would get frustrated with the breakdown of communication and the feeling of estrangement from their own child. The children thus sensed both the love and frustration.

Yet, feeling unwanted was the most common experience for deaf people as I learned from many conversations – but also at a workshop with deaf teenagers and Lorenzo, the then head of the *direction pour la readaptation et intégration des personnes handicapées* and the highest public servant in charge of disability in Benin. After Lorenzo's talk, the students had the chance to ask him questions about rights of deaf people. Instead of referring to his presentation, the students' first question was: "Why do parents not love the deaf?" (fieldnotes 20/08/2016). Others wondered why mothers loved their deaf

children more than their fathers did. Even the more benevolent mothers I talked to remembered being frustrated and disappointed at the failure of their quest for therapy, the loss of means that were spent, and the ongoing crises of communication with the deaf child. Sometimes relationships broke over the question of how to proceed with the deaf child. This frustration was felt and remembered by the deaf children; particularly when they witnessed how communication between their parents and hearing siblings was less arduous.

In conceptualizing deaf turns as an orientation away from hearing families towards deaf sociality in Bangalore, Michele Friedner quotes deaf Indians who feel rejected and bored by the absence of communication and "love" among their hearing families and parents (2015:28–30). Many young deaf in Benin feel a similar rejection and lack of affection at home, as I have argued above. Other deaf people, mostly those who would not be considered youth anymore, think of their hearing families rather fondly, like Jérémy:

> I was talking with Jérémy, age 45, a devout member of deaf church about his family. He tells me that they write and visit each other a lot, they invite him over. He signs: "FAMILLE VOIR SOURD HANDICAPE POUVOIR LAISSER? NON!! NON!! AMOUR!" His family saw that he was "DEAF-DISABLED", but abandon him? No, they loved him. I know that his family is not Christian, so I ask him how his family's Vodoun relates to him being deaf. "No," he answers, "my family knows Vodoun. They do Vodoun. When I was deaf, they went to the diviner, then took me to CNHU (Centre National Hospitalier Universitaire), MICROSCOPE, HEARING TEST, but no use: SOURD PROFOND, TOUT, FINI. They took some machines, looked into my ears, but until today, I hear nothing, OREILLE FERMÉE, the ear is closed. Well. that's it. MAIS FAMILLE, SOURD HANDICAPÉ AMOUR, my family loves the deaf." (interview 21/11/2016)

Deaf women around Jérémy's age, like Claire and Maurine, often visited their mothers or received financial support for their economic activities. These relationships were described to me as very loving, even though contact and communication were scarce.

When looking at how parents raise their deaf children one has to keep in mind the cultural and metaphorical contexts that the parents come from. They barely ever have experience with deaf people themselves, instead their initial approaches to deafness are nurtured by medical narratives, witchcraft explanations, folktales, metaphors and proverbs that highlight challenges, and animal imagery that creates a genealogical distance between hearing parents and their deaf offspring. Many of these discourses are reflected in their treatment and understanding of the deaf individual. The deaf child is, however, not an isolated individual but kin and a multiply entangled and dependent

member of family, as Simon Pierre Mvone-Ndong suggests is the case for everyone in Benin:

> [L]a famille tant que premier et petit noyau de toute société et communauté humaines, reste la première et indispensable école de formation[.] C'est dans la famille que l'on s'initie aux rites initiatiques où l'on apprend le sens d'appartenance et d'identité, de solidarité et d'hospitalité, mais aussi de respect des interdits et des codes de la vie […][58] (Mvone Ndong 2014:22)[59]

It is in the family – however wide it may be defined in the respective situations – that deaf children are introduced to norms, values, and "codes de la vie". While regarding the deaf child as an irregularity, hearing parents impose their "normal" and sometimes normalizing expectations. Here, I differentiate two phases of hearing parents dealing with a deaf child. First, there is the hearing parents' reactions to learning about their child's deafness, in other words, the measures they take in response to the child's deafness. Second, after having accepted the deafness, parents manage the deaf life of their child in order to open pathways and opportunities, to normalize their lives, or to take care that the affliction does not reappear in the next generation.

quests for therapy

Most of the deafening narratives I collected include a quest for therapy (cf. Janzen 1982) that did not lead to success[60]. Therapeutic quests, similar to Talcott Parson's sick role (Parsons 1975), construct the deaf child as a medical case to be repaired or to rehabilitate and reintegrate into the community (Lux 1991; Hounwanou 1984; Klein 2009). Deafness, or in this understanding the hearing loss, however, will not be repaired and the deaf thus face a dilemma similar to what Helle Ploug Hansen and Tine Tjørnhøj-Thomsen (2008) describe for cancer survivors in Denmark: The quest of healing cannot be

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[58] "The family as the first and smallest core of every human society and community remains the primary and indispensable school of education[.] It is in the family where on is initiated into rites of initiation or where one learns the meaning of belonging and identity, of solidarity and hospitality, but also to respect prohibitions and codes of life." Note that the "petit noyau", the small core, should not be understood as the nuclear family but encompasses larger kin structures that, following Mvone-Ndong, yet form the basis of society.

[59] see also Whyte 1998:155, 1990:203; Adam 2009:24

[60] This assessment says nothing about possible successful quests for therapy of deafened children. As I focused my work on deaf people, I did not cross paths with "healed" formerly deaf people. A few deaf Beninese do have, however, a hope in modern medicine or cochlear implants (CI) that they have read about on the internet, to eventually heal them. So far, there is no Beninese that hears with the help of a CI, unlike in other regions of the world where this development stirs up a lot of hope and controversy between the Deaf and the medical communities, see Ladd (2019:39); Friedner et al. (2019); Friedner (2022).

finished, the sick role does not lead to a satisfactory conclusion, for either patient or healer.

Parents do take their born deaf or deafened children to hospitals, medical specialists, healers, and diviners. When they seek advice from traditional healers or *féticheurs*, they do not necessarily ask for treatment right away. Instead, in accordance with the three-illness-model (see chapter 2), they consult the *féticheur* to understand what kind of illness is at hand:

> qu'est-ce qui, en cet individu, aurait le pouvoir de lui permettre de se comporter de telle ou telle manière, qui puisse se déterminer comme maladie?[61] (Mvone Ndong 2014:5)

They ask what in that individual causes them to be and behave in this particular way, and what the illness may be. Some parents seek treatment at great expense of money, time, and travel. In case of actual deafness – and not only temporary infections or blockage of the ear canal – the medical specialists can do nothing to reinstate the hearing of the child. Dr. Futé, an otorhinolaryngologist I interviewed, had a cooperation with French donors who would supply deaf children with hearing aids that could usually not be properly maintained or provided with batteries (interview 01/06/2018, see also Rickli 2012; Nyst 2010:408). Instead of supplying children with hearing aids, most medical specialists refer the parents to a deaf school or to the interpreter on the national public television station ORTB, who will then refer them to a deaf school. Other hearing parents heard about deaf schools on the radio.

As neither public nor private education is ever free unless the school finds a sponsor. Many people cannot afford to send their deaf children to school. Others, however, decide not to for different reasons.

As the occurrence of a deaf child is often explained through either conflicts or immoral behavior in the family, some parents hide their deaf children. Their mere existence may imply that the parents did something wrong (see section 2.1). Most deaf people as well as state and NGO agents, though, demand that deaf children do get access to school. School in Benin means – for the deaf as for the hearing – a project of normalization and homogenization which I will discuss in 4.5. There are, however, also other practices of normalization that parents follow with their deaf children.

[61] "What, within this person, had the power to make them behave in such or such a way, what can be determined as disease?"

normalization and the quest for hearing offspring

Although hereditary deafness is rare in Benin – despite looking and asking for deaf parents with deaf children during all of my research I never met any – the hearing people's imagination contrasts the reality. Many hearing people are surprised to learn that deaf couples' children actually hear and speak. Many parents insist that their deaf children marry hearing spouses as to avoid deaf offspring.

As is custom in Benin (and elsewhere), marriage is an inherently social project (Alber 2014:124) that involves way more people than the couple. Parents try to find partners for their children, whether their children are hearing or deaf. Finding a hearing person willing to marry a deaf child, however, is often arduous. The parental preference for a hearing partner often conflicts with the preferences of young deaf people who socialize and mingle and fall in love with other deaf youth in the deaf spaces of the schools. As parents often have their own interests and agendas regarding their grandchildren (Alber, Martin, and Notermans 2013; Whyte, Alber, and van der Geest 2008; Alber 2014), the management of marriage also means management of grandchildren.

It is usually only after great efforts of persuasion by Pasteur Homère that hearing parents agree to a deaf-deaf wedding. And even if deaf couples end up marrying, they sometimes retain a certain suspicion towards their parents, as was the case with Kiva and Yves, a couple from the deaf church in Vêdoko. I had been visiting and chatting with Yves' mother a few times about her experience as a mother of an early deafened son. She would always complain that she was barely allowed to see her grandsons. The couple's suspicion towards Yves' mother might be grounded in the fact that it is not uncommon in Benin for mothers to take their children's child to live with them, often causing complex family conflicts (Alber, Martin, and Notermans 2013; Alber 2014; Martin 2015). Kiva experienced long-time "isolation" – as she called it now - in her hearing family, school and church, and so she wanted to avoid giving up her children to their (paternal) grandparents at any costs. Yet, hearing children of deaf adults often spend a year or two at their grandparents' house to learn to speak properly. Deaf parentsthus adhere to social norms of normality and accept the notion that they are not able to raise their hearing children independently. But, as mentioned above, child-care and family are rarely limited to the nuclear family in Benin.

Deaf people themselves also prefer hearing children because they are so useful. The hearing children of deaf adults (often abbreviated as CODAs, see Preston 1994) play an important part in deaf parents' social lives. When

Maurine's two hearing children went to university, it dawned on her that they might eventually move out and be less available to her. Every time we met; she would worry what it meant for her if they were no longer at her disposal as interpreters.

By finding a hearing spouse for their deaf child, hearing parents try to avert a further occurrence of deafness in their families, a clear expression of the prevalent deficiency model that parents of deaf children adhere to. Even though they might accept and love their deaf children, as Jérémy says in the quote above, they yet work to make the occurrence of deafness a genealogical episode that shall not be repeated. The parallelism of being an exceptional individual but also an interdependent, reproductively responsible member of kin thus creates tension and ambivalence in the thicket of belonging.

As deaf people are generally accepted as part of family and intergenerational responsibility – exceptions like Elie prove the rule – many inherit property and money just like their hearing siblings. They are also expected to step up to their obligations and responsibilities towards their parents and siblings in case of need and capability – which mostly means the redistribution of wealth along kinship ties (Alber, van der Geest, and Whyte 2008:7f).

As deaf communities in Benin appear to be relatively new, it is only recently that deaf-deaf couples have married and had children. The oldest son of a deaf-deaf couple I know was born in the late 1990s. Until the late 1970s, also deaf people themselves, following today's collective memory, did not learn to sign. Deafness was an individual harm, a 'hearing loss', an impairment. Parents did not want their deaf children to marry other deaf people, and there was no space or community where they could meet. The increasing number of deaf-deaf couples and more deaf parents having children might eventually lead to a higher incidence of hereditary deafness – another argument for seeing the social and the physiological as intrinsically entangled. So far, however, their fears have not been realized, but that might change with the development of the deaf community.

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It is rare that deaf Beninese talk badly about their hearing families; they seem to take the relative ignorance of their language and the disinterest in communicating with the deaf as a given. Even Jérémy, who is very critical about hearing signers and activists *for* the deaf was very affectionate and had only positive things to say about his family, even though they practiced Vodoun. Yet he was surprised when I asked him whether his family knew Signs. As

almost everyone I conducted those life story interviews with he answered with confusion: "They are hearing", thus implying that of course they did not sign. For most of the deaf I talked to it was self-evident that their parents and siblings would not learn to sign: Why should they – they can hear and talk.

Hearing parents and hearing families have an ambiguous relation to their deaf childred. They were generally friendly and supportive, even though the opposite could be experienced by deaf children as well. While parents in Benin were not as ignorant about deafness and sign language as some parents elsewhere – like in Nepal where Peter Graif reports that hearing parents doubt that their deaf children have or make any sense at all (Graif 2018:37) – they often denied or did not care much about their deaf ways of being. They let them go on the one hand, seeing deaf school and deaf church as the deaf's own space, then, on the other, claimed their reproductive lives and roles as strictly integrated into the hearing family's value system. Their lack of interest in what their deaf children do beyond that value system creates a temporary atmosphere of passivity and *laissez-faire*. The pressure to abide by the hearing family's expectations comes with a delay. A stark confrontation only comes at the moment of marriage and reproduction, after the deaf had had a chance to orient towards deaf sociality.

3.5 the state

The state in Benin is a historically complex issue that has received a lot of scholarly attention (Alber 2000; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2007; Bierschenk 2008; Elwert 1983), but in people's every-day lives, it is rather present in its absence. While urban deaf people express high demands and disappointments towards the state, it is fairly imperceptible in their everyday lives as it runs only few institutions that address deaf interests; and poorly so, following deaf evaluations. If government support is an option at all it comes through the hearing world competences and connections of certain deaf individuals who spend a lot of time courting mayors, directors, and other public servants to keep their name on their minds in case they need support for projects or the community in general. The state, therefore, is an abstract (or "imagined", see Gupta 1995) other, an "ethereal place" as Didier Fassin says (2015:5), that is mediated and interacted with through its public servants and agents like social service administrators, teachers in the centralized education system, or the police (Fassin 2015:4; Fassin and Kobelinsky 2012:463; Thelen, Thiemann, and Roth 2014:112). I include hearing teachers of private schools in this list of state agents because they face similar structural challenges like their colleagues in public schools and because they are part of a centralized,

state-controlled education system, thereby taking part in the production of the state as such and transmit the, in this case, ableist and audist "values and affects underlying [state] policies and practices" (Fassin 2015:2). Sarah Fichtner argues that boundaries between state and non-state actors often get blurred (see also Gupta 1995), especially in the particular setup of NGO-ised education in Benin (Fichtner 2012:21–22).

What the state did provide in the last decades was plots of land for private initiatives. The deaf church in Vêdoko, the center in Agla, as well as CBR centers and other private social and public health initiatives received a plot of land where the organizations constructed their premises or used the existing structures. While all investment usually needed to be found elsewhere, the allocation of land property by the state freed the organizations from considerable fixed costs for rent and gave them a certain independence and stability.

Despite the fact that the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) assigns the state a central role in promoting deaf people (United Nations 2006: arts. 5, 12, 27, 30), the state's presence in the everyday lives and struggles of the deaf was marginal. Stories of corruption – teachers and staff sacking teaching materials, stationery, and food donations for consumption or resale – deepened the deaf distrust and disappointment in the administration so that barely anybody counted on change or development coming from the state. My deaf research participants complained about the lack of support through the state, much like Michele Friedner's interlocutors in Bangalore:

> My deaf friends often mentioned the government's failure to provide support, although they never specified which part of the government, which office, or which official. This abstract discussion of the state often served as a form of critique; in invoking the state, my deaf friends were inevitably bemoaning its absence. (Friedner 2015:21)

In a post-socialist state like Benin that has also been a "donor darling" for several years after the democratization in 1990, the expectations towards the state are high. The patriarchal image of the president (see also section 5.2) nurtures the expectation that the *pater societatis* will take care of his subordinates. In fact, the state is quite inefficient and provides little social security and support; an experience that the deaf bewail. The retreat of the state from welfare and social infrastructure (Fichtner 2012; Alber 2001) may be a consequence of the blossoming neoliberalism that relays welfare and social security responsibilities to kin and community (see Chaudhry 2015; Friedner 2010a), especially under the businessman-turned-politician president Patrice Talon who took office in 2016.

I will introduce social services and the education system, the two institutions through which the state structurally engages with deaf citizens – even if rudimentarily so. I will furthermore discuss the structural challenges around hearing teachers and deaf interaction with police to include the two main state agents through which the deaf get in touch with the state.

social services

In social services, deaf people are conceptualized as disabled. It is through disability rights that they can theoretically claim title to support and assistance. Formally, the Beninese government acknowledged its responsibility for the situation of its disabled citizens by ratifying the CRPD in 2012. The report that any ratifying state party is obliged to submit to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities presents statistical data and legislative measures as well as an overview of projects aimed at fulfilling the requirements of the CRPD. In 2016, I interviewed Lorenzo, the then *directeur d'intégration et réadaptation des personnes handicapées*, an agency within the ministry for social affairs[62]. I learned that with the newly elected government, questions of disability, accessibility and integration would no longer be managed in one agency but be practiced in every government and administration body in a decentralized manner. Lorenzo himself and many disability rights activists told me, however, that they were not very enthusiastic about this process not only because they did not believe it would work, but also because they felt they were losing the contact persons and gatekeepers that they had built relations with for years.

The government report lists schools and projects that are entirely private as its own achievements – like schools for the deaf and for the blind, training centers for persons with mobility impairments, centers of community-based rehabilitation, etc. – below the few public initiatives committed to persons with disabilities (United Nations 2019:21). The term "NGOisation" that Sarah Fichtner coined for the educational sector in Benin (Fichtner 2012) also applies to initiatives for persons with disabilities. An overview of projects and initiatives, addressed to people with disabilities and their families, is likewise not provided by the state but by the international NGO Handicap International in cooperation with FAPHB, the umbrella organization of DPOs in Benin (Handicap International Togo Benin 2016). In the CRPD report, it is

[62] Back then, the government administration was in transition to the new presidency after the 2016 elections. The ministry in charge was still called *Ministère de la Famille, des Affaires Sociales, de la Solidarité Nationale, des Handicapés et des Personnes de Troisième Age*, to be changed to *Ministère des Affaires Sociales et de la Microfinance*.

even noted that it is FAPHB that sensitized judges, police officers and other state agents to the rights of persons with disabilities (United Nations 2019:14)[63].

Whereas the state is a rather passive actor regarding rights and promotion of persons with disabilities, it is individual agents of the state who enable certain projects, make funds accessible or reach out to the different stakeholders. I met Lorenzo on a few occasions when he took part in the funeral of an educator of the deaf or when he held sensitization workshops for deaf youth about the CRPD. In the latter case, however, the Belgian woman who arranged the workshop had to pay Lorenzo a considerable amount for *deplacement*, transportation costs, so he would take part in the event. From conversations I had with other disability rights activists, educators, and organizers of disabled sports and the like, I learned that the way to access public funding is always through personal relations to state agents, individuals that would support you. For their support they would usually expect to receive a ten to twenty percent share of the funding. Similar rumors, stories and experience circulate regarding the regional *centres promotion sociale*, the "local manifestations of the state" (Thelen, Vetters, and Benda-Beckmann 2018:13) in terms of welfare, where people in difficult situations can seek small-scale support. Many deaf tailors would get a sewing machine, mobility impaired people might find a tricycle, and the like. As these services usually do not come without long and complicated application processes that include paying bribes to state agents, people would rather try to find support from their families or international donors and NGOs.

education

A field where the state does act on the deaf is education policy, while the state engages or invests barely in schools directly. In the following I will introduce the school system and its inherent productive structures before focusing on the hearing teachers who play a major role in the hearing Beninese construction of being deaf. The government has no particular strategy regarding the education of the deaf, rather they are subsumed in what seems like a category of problematic subjects: A ministerial publication from 1997, for example, differentiates between disabled persons who can be schooled in an integrative way – together with "les personnes *valides*" (Singleton et al. 1997:16) – and

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[63] I had encountered these "neoliberal disorientations", as Vandana Chaudhry (2015) calls them, also in a research project in Uganda in 2014/2015 where NGOs took over the responsibility to educate and empower disabled people to vote and create the necessary, accessible information Mildner (2020b).

the ones who need special education. Those are the deaf, the blind, and "les déficients mentaux", the mentally deficient (1997:16). This external grouping reflects the assessment by de Saint-Loup that the deaf and the blind are often conflated, because both groups deviate from the norms regarding the acquisition of knowledge (1996:7) – even if those deviations are very different in character.

Two public schools for the deaf – the *école primaire* in Vêdoko and the *collège* in Akogbato/Guinkomey – were formally run by the state[64], which means that it should hire and pay the teachers and invest in the infrastructure and equipment. Whenever I visited the school, however, I was asked for financial and in-kind donations by the school's director. Instead of the five required teachers, only two had an official public service contract. The other educators were paid by parents of deaf schoolchildren. The public deaf schools in Benin are an illustration of neoliberal disorientations that Vandana Chaudhry describes in India where the retreat of the state pushes civil society to take over (2015). Regarding deaf education infrastructure, one cannot even speak of a state "withdrawal" as both public deaf schools had been created through private initiatives in the first place: EBS had been founded by the Victor, Andrew Foster, and the Christian Mission for the Deaf, and the collège had been created by the only three deaf *lycée* graduates Isaïe, Gustave, and Léon and was incorporated into the public domain afterwards. Given the lack of funding and commitment the state allocates to the public deaf schools, the blossoming of private schools comes as no surprise.

Even though most of the deaf schools in Benin are private, the curricula and syllabi are provided by the state and enforced and controlled by agents of one of the ministries of education. Education in Benin is characterized by a high degree of centralization and subdivision, inspired by the educational system in France. The ministries of education authorize standardized schoolbooks that are used in all schools, public or private, north or south, and have to be purchased by parents or other sponsors. The examinations are centralized, and schools and instruction are supervised by regular visits of state agents. The state has or attempts to have a hold on how school education works and which subjects are being formed. Nowhere is this more obvious

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[64] There are two ministries in charge of schooling, the primary schools are under the supervision of the *Ministère des Enseignements Maternel et Primaire*, the secondary schools are under the supervision of the *Ministère de l'Enseignement Secondaire de la Formation Technique et Professionelle*. A third ministry of education, the *Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique*, is in charge of higher education and scientific study. I will be ignore this administrative complexity and simply talk of "the state", also because the experiences I heard are quite similar with the administrations of both the primary and secondary education.

than in the subject called *morales* that teaches the schoolchildren how to behave towards teachers, peers, parents, and prepares them to become obeisant citizens (see also Fichtner 2012:38 on the political and moral programs of education in Benin)[65].

The deaf schools are not different. They work with the same textbooks, follow the same calendar and syllabus, and hold the same exams. They also follow a similar symbolic praxis like honoring the flag on Monday mornings while singing and signing the national anthem. The classrooms are structured in a similar way: The schoolchildren are sitting in rows of benches facing the blackboard where their attention is on the teacher. Usually, the teacher would write contents from their teachers' textbook on the blackboard for the children to copy. If they are lucky, the teacher will explain what they wrote. Some schools provide speech training or other (normalizing) special education offers.

Isaïe, one of the few deafened who graduated with a *baccalauréat*, works as an educator in deaf school and regularly complains that the strict schedule keeps the teachers from responding to the pedagogic and didactic needs of the deaf children. The teachers need more time to explain background knowledge that hearing children acquire casually when being around and listening to people. The abstract concepts and categorical knowledge that hearing children have heard about before can be built on in school. Whereas hearing children might learn about abstract concepts like *countries* from listening to adults in conversations, the deaf learn about them for the first time in school.

Similarly critical of the schedule is Sœur Greta, the Brazilian principal of the Catholic school in Pèporiyakou, who would like to invest more time into speech training and the oralist agenda of their order's founding father Filippo Smaldone (interview 05/23/2018, see also Cavallera 2016; Giorgi 2016; Laurita 1995). Victor, too, complained about the recitation-based teaching style in public schools and expressed his hope for innovation in the private school, but they were bound to the centralized schedule and subject to public supervision (fieldnotes 06/07/2019).

The state thus does not explicitly construct the deaf as a group but practices the same logic that is practiced confronting the social, cultural and geographic diversity in Benin: The state strives for supplying all children with the same education – as hard or impractical as that may be. Deaf education in

[65] This training is continued in private and state universities where students not only learn specific professional competences but also how to treat their superiors respectfully. Both children and youth are constantly admonished to respect authority and hierarchy.

Benin focuses on assimilation and normalization, regarding deafness as a disability that needs to be slightly accommodated in order for deaf students to be integrated. The *special* schools, thus, generally have a *standard* program.

One example of the inadequacy of the centralized curriculum is the practice of a midterm exam, which I observed while I was visiting an integrated school. The pupils were supposed to write down a story that their grandmother would tell them in the evening. For the hearing children that might be a simple, experience-near task, taken from their everyday life and therefore accessible and an opportunity to integrate their specific cultural backgrounds into a celebrated narrative of Beninese-ness in the sense of "we Beninese cherish the tales and stories our elders tell us". Deaf pupils, however, could not fulfill that task: They might never have heard their grandmother tell them a story.

The state's strategies for providing centralized education impose expectations and normative frameworks on deaf children that shape their views of the world and the arenas where their socialization takes place. The ableist and audist expectations of normality and structural ignorance towards deaf particularities are, however, also reproduced among the hearing actors involved, most importantly, the hearing teachers.

hearing teachers

Teachers should be the greatest asset of the school, as Victor Vodounou argues in his autobiography[66]. It should be the teacher who opens up a new world to the schoolchildren, educates them socially and academically, and might stay a role model for the rest of their lives as Victor experienced with Andrew Foster (Vodounou 2008:64f) and as many other deaf in Benin described when telling me about their schooling days. They often invoked the terms "FATHER" or "MOTHER" to refer to their most favored teachers. However, the teachers and their structural situation are the central problem of the deaf schools. Not every teacher is role model material. In this section, I include hearing teachers from private schools. Although they are not public service agents as their colleagues in the two public schools, they yet implement the state in that they are agents of the centralized and state-controlled education system.

[66] A similar first hand experience can be found in *Deaf Adwoa Benewaa* by Florence Serwaa Oteng (1997). In a fictionalized autobiography, she describes how she deafened during her vocational training, how she got in touch with Andrew Foster in 1957 and became one of the first deaf teachers for the deaf in Ghana.

The majority of teachers are hearing. Sign language competence varies greatly at every school (for similar situations in other deaf schools in Africa see Kiyaga and Moores 2003:21; Schmaling 2003:306f). Instructors rarely teach out of conviction or passion for the deaf (or out of love, as many deaf persons and committed teachers call it in Benin, see also Friedner 2015:22 for India), but because they did not find a job at a school for the hearing. Teachers would always try to find employment at a public school (for the hearing) because the salaries were higher and payment was more reliable than at the privately funded schools – if they managed to score one of these rare jobs, as the vacant public positions are often not filled. Therefore, they often lack motivation to engage with the particular needs of deaf pupils or to develop their own sign language competence (see also Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba 2012:255). This is also due to the lack of financial incentives. Particularly the private, donor-based schools point to their tight budget to justify the fact that teachers barely ever make more than the monthly minimum wage of 40,000 franc CFA, about 65 USD, if they receive the salary at all. Some schools pay their teachers on fee basis instead of a long-term agreement and thereby avoid paying even the minimum wage. In short, being a teacher for the deaf is not paying well in Benin.

The very first teachers at deaf schools were themselves deafened. They were selected by Andrew Foster to learn sign language and total communication in Ibadan, Nigeria, in the late 1970s. Among them were the ones I could still meet during my research; Victor and Anne[67]. They had school experience among the hearing before deafening. Both of them would prefer talking to me instead of signing, while I would be answering in signed French or sometimes signed English, if Victor would so address me. As he expounds in his book, Victor and Foster chose those deaf people to be educated in Ibadan who had already graduated from secondary or at least primary school by the time they became deaf (Vodounou 2008:109). Like Andrew Foster himself, the first generation of deaf teachers in Benin had no first-hand experience what it was like to have been born and grown up deaf. They all had experienced a socialization into the hearing world before losing their ability to hear.

Later, hearing teachers were schooled by the deaf pioneers of dead education or traveled to other West African countries to learn. With an increasing degree of formality in the schools, the recruitment process became more

[67] During a short trip to Lomé, Togo, in July 2019, I had the chance to meet Jumeau. Like Victor, he was among the first Togolese to learn sign language. He played a similar role for the deaf in Togo and only retired from being the principal of church run *École Ephphatha des Sourds* in Djidjole, Lomé, in 2015.

formalized as well. Deaf pupils, however, usually had no chance to achieve secondary school education and were therefor no longer qualified to teach (Vodounou 2008:108). This development does not seem to be Benin specific, as this consequence of formalization has been recorded already for the first school for the deaf in Paris in the early 19th century (Saint-Loup 1996:18). It seems that in an initial phase of a school, the formal qualification of the teachers is not as important as their commitment and their informal abilities. In the course of establishing, formal demands that deaf could not (yet) fulfill increased. I would also argue, however, that the shift to hearing personnel was already grounded in the inception of deaf schools in West Africa. The focus on late deafened teachers already exposed an audist skepticism towards the capabilities of those who were born deaf; an inner division that persists.

Subsequently, apart from the earliest years of EBS, the majority of teachers at the ten schools for the deaf were hearing. In Benin, a law additionally banned disabled persons from entering public service so that, absurdly, deaf persons could not teach at public schools for the deaf. The regulation was only revoked in 2017 (loi n° 2017-06[68]). As I could witness during numerous visits in schools and during a sign language class for teachers at CAEIS in Louho in August 2016, the hearing teachers had mostly very poor competence in signed French, not to mention Signs. There are of course exceptional teachers who commit to learning sign in order to better teach their pupils, a qualification that the deaf view as "having love for the deaf". The majority of teachers, however, perceives sign language and sign language training as a nuisance and an additional workload that they are not remunerated for. Many teachers are constantly on the lookout for better jobs. Stories of teachers quitting during the school year can be heard at almost every school for the deaf in Benin.

The structural problems of teacher education, recruitment, and renumeration leads to a frustration among many hearing teachers of the deaf. This "lack of love" for the deaf, as the deaf perceive it, also means that the teachers often do not really understand the situation of and the variation among the deaf students. I visited many schools and classes during my research. While the students were copying from the blackboard, the teachers would give me an overview of the class and report which students were good and intelligent, and which were not. Without exception, the students they pointed out as the intelligent ones were late deafened, had some speech and hearing world experience. Those who were not so intelligent, or problematic, were those born

[68] Available at: https://sgg.gouv.bj/view/documentheque/Loi-N%C2%B0-2017-06/, see also United Nations (2019:11).

deaf or prelingually deafened[69]. Being unaware of the structural problems and their own exclusionary contribution, the teachers had no appreciation for the idea that it was not how intelligent or not the children *were* but how they *were educated*. The deaf usually dread this and nostalgically bemoan the past when teachers were deaf(ened). During a short visit in Lomé in 2019, I learned that current pupils, alumni of deaf schools and deaf activists in Togo deplore the decreasing number of deaf teachers and principals as well.

At all schools, there are also hearing teachers who teach with conviction or "love" for the deaf. Some are passionate about sign language and teaching. Yet, the lack of training and awareness as well as financial security makes it hard to keep that passion going. I am far from being able or willing to evaluate their didactics and pedagogy; the negative bias in this section rather reflects the general opinion and experience deaf pupils and alumni shared with me.

*

The literature on deaf communities documents well how crucial the teachers, particularly deaf teachers, can be for the development of individual deaf identity. The structural situation of teachers of the deaf in Benin, however, barely fulfills these hopes – mostly because hearing teachers cannot serve as deaf role models. The normalizing projects in school recall the discourses of the "abled-disabled" (Chaudhry 2015), those disabled people who are functioning relatively well in abled societies and create an exclusionary kind of inclusion. The hearing teachers often confirm this logic as they consider the later deafened children who learned to speak and therefore have an easier access to spoken and written language – the key channels of school education in Benin – as more intelligent than their prelingually deafened peers. In reinforcing these audist discourses, hearing teachers and deaf education guidelines reproduce DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENCE and ambiguity among the deaf pupils. In this institutional setting, the processes of social construction are of a certain permanence (Fassin 2015:8). There are, however, also contexts and contacts were state construction of the deaf is less institutionalized but built on improvised and spontaneous interaction.

ambiguity in practice: interacting with the police

Most deaf have little immediate exchange with public service and administration as they rarely seek direct contact. When they experience interaction with

[69] For a discussion of hearing teachers' ignorance and "oral failures" in the global north see Padden and Humphries (2010:400).

state agents, it is often in police controls that happen in traffic or as crime prevention at night, especially in the night life districts. These incidents are turned into funny stories shared among the deaf. In everyday deaf-hearing interactions with marketeers or neighbors, there are always improvisational ways of communicating, particularly because the frame of reference is often clear, if you point your finger at the tomatoes, you will surely not want to discuss politics. In situations where less tangible matters, roles, and power relations are at play – and police controls are a good example here – the breakdown of verbal communication and the ambiguous moment of not understanding, the moment when the connection is cut, the confrontation with a deaf person is more problematic.

> In March 2018, I met with members of the congregation at deaf church in Vêdoko to get on a rented bus to Glo to attend the funeral of Abelle, the late wife of Pasteur Serge. Instead of a bus, however, we saw a shaky 504 charging up – way too small for the dozen or so of us. Eventually we squeezed in – three people in the back, four in the middle, and two on the front seat next to the driver, the others went by moped. The driver got angry; the police had recently started enforcing the law that forbid two people sharing the front seat. But there was no more space in the back, so Maurine rushed out of the car, into her shop and came back with a scribbled note: "Mission Evangelique pour les Sourds" and taped it to the windshield. The police would not bother the deaf, she communicated to the driver.
>
> And as a matter of fact: Later that day, while we stopped on the street so that Maurine could buy the better and cheaper *gari* in the Allada region, a policeman wanted us to move. The driver was gone with the key, though, and we could not do anything. After repeated reference to the paper note on the car, the policeman stopped bothering us and we waited for the driver and Maurine to return. Was this the deaf gain that I had read about?
>
> A few minutes later, another policeman came and asked for the driver. He was back in the meantime and explained the situation. The deaf women also showed the policeman the invitation to the funeral as proof. He asked the driver whether they were "really deaf? All of them?", yes, the driver said – and the policeman walked away. (fieldnotes 28/03/2018)

I was involved in some of those encounters myself when moving about with deaf friends and research participants. All those encounters are characterized by a breakdown of communication and the policemen's confusion when faced with deaf people. This confusion is also what makes the stories fun to share among the deaf; the way the people involved solve the bizarre situation often make an entertaining story to share in deaf spaces and supports the construction of *us*, the deaf, and *them*, the hearing.

In Parakou, Ruben, a deaf carpenter, told me how he and a few deaf friends were once held up after crossing a red traffic light with their scooters. The police held them for several hours, he told me, because the police did not believe they were really deaf. Only when a neighbor passed by and confirmed that they were deaf, the police let them go. In Vêdoko, the deaf were very entertained by how Erneste and Moïse got out of a traffic accident without any punishment even though it was obvious that they were to blame for running over a seriously injured cart-boy with Erneste's fat motorcycle. In Jonquet, Cotonou, I was stopped by the police a few times when I was moving around the infamous red light, party and drug district at night with Fabian as this was where he spent his nights drinking and smoking. They often tried to verify whether he was really deaf or not, before letting us go after exhausting negotiations about what we presumably had done wrong. I usually played a very poorly qualified interpreter to observe how they would deal with Fabian directly. Obviously, my presence made this situation different from what it had been had it only involved Fabian. He somewhat enjoyed these interactions, playing the one who does not understand anything. Eventually, the police would leave us alone when they understood that there was no bribe to get from us – at least that was Fabian's interpretation. Pasteur Homère shared stories in church of Nigerian or Togolese priests crossing the borders with expired passports or no documents at all. They would underperform their ability to communicate to get through border control and make big fun of the policemen afterwards.

In all those stories, there might be misunderstanding involved from the deaf perspective, but there is a certain tendency in all of them. The unexpected confrontation with deaf people seems to be unsettling for policemen. Normally, they would be the ones in charge of the situation, dictate the rules of interaction, negotiate the "dual dimension of order and benevolence" (Fassin 2015:2), but with the deaf, they seem like they ran into a glass door. They no longer know either how to practice the law or follow the poetics of bribery. So instead, they try to figure out whether they are being mucked around with, if their counterparts really were deaf. If they were, they often let them go. By *showing pity* like this, *turning a blind eye*, they can pretend to remain the masters of the situation, to save face, instead of having to admit that they do not know how to navigate the interaction. This was particularly remarkable in situations where I was involved as interpreter when policemen wanted to remain in charge but needed my help to exercise control. Ruben told me that the police in Parakou were so suspicious because some people just pretended to be deaf to avoid confrontation. He was very angry about hearing

people pretending to be deaf because that made his life more complicated. Many of the deaf people do, however, enjoy this confusion. While they disapprove of using their deafness to beg, they do make use of it as deaf value to navigate themselves out of difficult situations with the hearing.

*

I did not intend an in-depth analysis of the state in Benin here but hint at some formative and productive patterns that state and state agents practice on the deaf. These patterns shape or co-construct but do not determine being deaf in Benin. Remembering Deborah Lupton's assessment quoted above, it becomes clear that the deaf are neither fully governed by nor fully independent from discourse and external construction – particularly since this construction is so ambiguous.

3.6 othering and normalizing

Othering and normalizing of the deaf always go in hand. Particularly regarding the hearing perspective, Aude de Saint-Loupcalled deafness

> an ambiguous abnormality since it affects neither physical autonomy nor development. On the surface everything appears normal [to the hearing observer]. Yet as soon as a desire for exchange is expressed, discomfort begins. (1996:3)

Hearing people in Benin have the same discomfort and confusion. The first impression is that the deaf were just like them and reveal no apparent *differentness* at all, as Dieter Neubert and Günther Cloerkes conceptualized disability in an interculturally comparative study (1987, see also Neubert 2017). As soon as communication is desired, however, a fundamental differentness is experienced. Hearing people perceive of deaf people as both very same and very different. Hearing discourses of deafness are therefore ambiguous and heterogenous – and they are productive. On the one hand, *the deaf* are constructed as absolute Others, even non-human through animal insults and comparisons. On the other hand, folktales tell the hearing Beninese that deaf people are often underestimated. Neighbors and parents of deaf children, like Omolayo's parents, see the deaf people as a people apart, as *their* people, *their* kin, a community of their own. This group, however, is created from the outside. In interaction, the othering and the clear lines fade. Hearing families claim their stakes in their deaf children's reproduction, thereby including them into the kin webs of belonging and affiliation. The state's infrastructure is either inoperative regarding deaf people's demands or subsumes them in

disability categories. Regarding schooling, the state does not accommodate access but follows the general equalizing approach of its centralized education. Policemen served as an example of how hearing people and state agents are confronted with the ambiguity of deaf diversity. While *the deaf* are constructed as a group, this Other fails to provide generalizations that tell people how to deal with them.

Othering and including, accepting and correcting, appreciating and normalizing are reactions that happen in parallel and do not exclude each other. Faced with deaf interstitiality, hearing Beninese construct the deaf person as an Other, which also means creating a type, a label, a group identity – a dynamic that has been discussed in terms of "colonialism" towards deaf people (Ladd 2019:38; Kara and Harvey 2016:79; Davis 1995). Colonialism here has not a racist but an audist axiom, its civilizing project is oralist and normalizing. Shirley Shultz Myers and Jane K. Fernandes criticize this argumentation as reactionary for pragmatic reasons: While there are deaf experiences of (possibly colonizing) oppression and domination by the hearing, the colonialism comparison erects a divisive rhetoric that is hard to overcome and might not help any of the parties involved (Myers and Fernandes 2010:41). Whichever turn the political debate may take, historicity of categories is a fact. But deaf people – in Benin or elsewhere – have never fully succumbed to these alien strategies and constructions of personhood. DEAF-SAME in Benin seems to be more of an external description and categorization than an inner one. The ways that deaf similitude and deaf diversity are negotiated among deaf Beninese themselves will be explored in the next chapter.

When I was chatting once with Elie, I asked who Omolayo was to him, as his parents meant to leave him among his brothers and sisters, his people. Was he his friend? No, Elie said. Was he his brother? No!, he answered more emphatically. So who was he? He answered: "PROBLÈME", but in a manner implying that PROBLÈME was Omolayo's sign name. He expressed that the belonging and harmony that the external construction implied was not perceived as such from within. To some extent the deaf community was made, framed, constructed from the outside – but how do deaf Beninese make themselves as a collectivity? Do they at all?

4 a Beninese deaf community?

There are numerous communities in Benin that evolve around various spaces of deaf sociality. Churches and schools offer references of belonging for members, pupils, or graduates. And although nobody would call themselves a member of Patrice's workshop or Brigitte's clothes store, it is also those smaller deaf spaces that offer the most immediate belonging. Socially being deaf in Benin is often characterized by a multiplicity of belongings to different communities on different levels. The borderwork of these communities is a daily chore of social interaction.

Once being among the deaf, being deaf becomes less of a topic. It may be the very fact that one does not have to think or care about being deaf anymore that makes a deaf community a home, a place of belonging. It is in their peer groups where the deaf can be who they are and not be reduced to their presumed deaf otherness. Instead, they can be their (deaf) selves. "Heimat", as Johann Gottfried von Herder is frequently quoted, "ist da, wo man sich nicht erklären muss."[70]

In regard of literature on d/Deaf worlds, cultures, and community around the world, but also regarding this book's inquiry into *being deaf in Benin*, the title question of this chapter asks whether there is a Beninese deaf community above and beyond all those small communities, localizations, and belongings. Is there an imagined community between the small, immediate deaf spaces on the one hand, and the global similitude? And if so, how is this entity thought and made? In asking these questions, the chapter enters the ambivalent discussions and interactions, identifications and distinctions that take place in everyday discourse and practice among deaf Beninese. I will conclude that there is a point of reference that is the Beninese deaf community, but it is one of many in an ambiguous web of multiple belongings.

In Benin there is no physiological deaf generativity that produces *deaf families* or *pure deaf* as core groups of Deaf culture. Instead, the history of education and community establishment provides people with a deaf ancestry in a kind of social genealogy (see also sections 5.1 and 5.2). I will sketch various dynamics that construct a Beninese community which is, however, far from being clearly defined and its borders are far from precise.

The broader question of whether there is a Beninese deaf community raises three lines of inquiry:

- How would a *Beninese* deaf community relate to transnational communities? How does it understand itself as Beninese?

[70] "Home is where you do not have to explain yourself."

- How would a *deaf* community relate to deaf and hearing people? As deafness is often conceptualized as a disability, this begs the question how a deaf community relates to other (hearing) disabled people?
- How would a *community* be negotiated and shaped by its members?

The answers are neither obvious nor explicit. Individuals with different degrees of authority think, speak, and act upon the dynamics and in the following discussions I will make clear who acts where and why, and how these dynamics shape reveal a brittle image of the idea of a Beninese deaf community.

There are lively debates and negotiations around what deaf sociality and community shall be in Benin – without using that terminology as such – and who belongs, who shall behave in which way, and who decides what those ways might be (see also chapter 5). Those negotiations are, however, quite different in different regions and kinds of communities. Only a minority of the deaf have the chance to attend one of the nine primary schools for the deaf and hence learn a sign language and get access to formal community and networks. Most deaf people are likely to live as marginalized non-hearing participants in hearing majority communities as I will discuss in chapter 6.

The idea of a deaf community is quite ambiguous in discourse and everyday practice, both in Benin and beyond. The literature on Deaf culture(s) and d/Deaf activism have spoken of a global deaf community (Gulliver 2015; Monaghan 2003) implying that there was a certain sense of belonging and similitude of deaf people around the world (Friedner and Kusters 2014:2). Other works speak of national and regional communities (Monaghan et al. 2003), while those can be dissected into smaller local communities of people who actually interact on a regular basis (Padden 1980:91). I will argue that in Benin, all three of those levels play a role for deaf belonging and orientation – in different contexts, in different interactions, and to different extents and purposes.

After an introduction to terminology and concepts in the Beninese context, I will discuss how being deaf in Benin is entangled with transnational networks and discourses. Missionaries founded a deaf school and a deaf church in Benin in the 1970s and continue to invite them into "global", that is, American Evangelicalism. Through social media, the rise of international d/Deaf organizations, and foreign donors, deaf Beninese are also part of more secular global networks. After these global relations, I will introduce the Cotonou deaf community and its infrastructures that will deconstruct the notion of a uniform community. In a section on deaf distinction, I will address the questions mentioned above about how the Beninese deaf

community relates to other (imagined) communities. In a section on plurality and social control I will discuss how attempts for social cohesion produce cracks that they had meant to seal. I will introduce Fabian, who was fed up with community coercion so that he opted out, remaining a critical escort and observer. A closing section will reflect the faults in the communities and the multiple orientations of deaf people within and beyond the deaf communities.

4.1 communities

Before discussing the possibility of a Beninese deaf community, I want to explore the term *community*. Its use has been scrutinized as idealizing and implying an inner homogeneity, harmony and unity (Werbner 1991; Liebelt 2011:106), particularly in context of identity politics (Crenshaw 1991). Likewise, deaf anthropology and critical deaf studies avoid *community* as it appears to be too narrow and exclusionary (Kusters 2015a:20) and instead suggest *sociality* as a more fluid and inclusive approach to deaf belonging and relationality (Friedner 2014b:39). To me, the friction between presumed harmony and similitude on the one hand and inner distinction and conflict on the other makes it fruitful to stay with the term, but to use and understand it in a complex and ambiguous way.

community and communities

I do not assume communities to be free of conflict. Quite the contrary; this and the following chapter clearly show that they are not. Neither did Max Weber when he, in reference to Tönnies (1887), clarified that

> tatsächlich Vergewaltigung jeder Art innerhalb auch der intimsten Vergemeinschaftungen gegenüber dem seelisch Nachgiebigeren durchaus normal ist, und daß [sic!] die "Auslese" der Typen innerhalb der Gemeinschaften ganz ebenso stattfindet und zur Verschiedenheit der durch sie gestifteten Lebens- und Überlebenschancen führt wie irgendwo sonst.[71] (Weber 1984:70)

Weber states that competition and (structural) violence, hierarchies and differentiation take place within the communities, *innerhalb der Gemeinschaften*, just as they do anywhere else. By referring to community and communities I do not want to imply an egalitarian or liberating collectivity but a constructed

[71] "in fact, violence of any kind towards the emotionally more indulgent is absolutely normal within even the most intimate communities, and that the 'selection' of types within the communities takes place in exactly the same way as anywhere else and produces the difference in chances of life and survival."

and negotiated group of shared fate and experience. I use the term to designate the we-group (Weber 1984:69) in question and understand community and communities as arenas, in which and on the basis of which conflicts are played out and negotiated both internally and externally (Elwert 1989:34)[72].

From the very beginning, the dualism of a global community and local communities was an issue for d/Deaf activism and sociality. In his article on deaf spaces in 18th and 19th century France, Mike Gulliver quotes a deaf Austrian delegate to the world conference of the deaf in 1889 in Paris, reporting that he found himself

> in a foreign country, surrounded by foreigners, and yet I find myself surrounded by friends and acquaintances whom I imagine to have known for years and breathe the air of my homeland. (Gulliver 2015:10)

This feeling of having a home in the world (Jackson 1995), a feeling of belonging is tied to the deaf having sign language as their very own language, in reference to Harlan Lane et al. as Deaf culture's first "cohesive force" (Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011:3). The Austrian delegate refers to it as a global language of the deaf, while he will have learned at the latest at this very conference that sign languages vary across Europe and the world. We might assume that he first and foremost assumes visual communication as their language; taking into account that mutual understanding is possible to different degrees within a relatively short period of time (see also Green 2014a; Haualand 2002). The world conferences for the deaf are spaces that embody the ambiguity of unity and difference (see Breivik 2005 on the creation of the transnational deaf community), as the participants feel communion, a "common destiny" (Joan Ablon in Shuttleworth and Kasnitz 2004:149), while simultaneously learning about the various cultural differences. In an early sketch of an American Deaf culture, Carol Padden also recognizes that "[i]n addition to a national community of deaf people, in almost every city or town in the U.S. there are smaller deaf communities" (Padden 1980:91), pointing out that beyond the nationally distinctive deaf communities, there are numerous communities within a community. Her choice of words in seeing membership in different communities on different levels as cumulative rather than mutually exclusive will be of use for the situation in Benin as well.

[72] I refer to Georg Elwert for his conceptualization of we-groups, not the specific concept of ethnic groups. The term Deaf Ethnicity, as discussed by Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg (2011), is not applicable to Benin as the authors explicitly refer to hereditary deafness and therefore to generations of deaf people that do not exist as such in Benin. See also Davis (2008) for a critical comment on deaf ethnicity.

Deaf Beninese do not at all use the word or sign *community* (or the French *communauté*). It is rather institutions and deaf spaces that serve as points of reference and belonging. They may refer to church or to a school they went to and therefore created networks around. "XX is in our church" or "I went to school with XY" are expressions of relationality, of shared belonging that have precise references rather than invoking abstract concepts like deaf culture, community, or world. They do, however, make references to *les sourds*, or *nous les sourds*, we the deaf, in a very general sense that usually has a Beninese frame of reference in mind, a *we* one can turn to.

deaf turns and orientations

Among the hearing majority, deaf Beninese share the experience of a lack of understanding and communication. The subsequent social exclusion is what – possibly universally – makes deaf people in hearing majority communities more likely to experience depression (Kvam, Loeb, and Tambs 2007; Hindley and Kitson 2000), to show defensive or aggressive behavior, and be short-tempered (Friedner 2015:31–32; Kara and Harvey 2016:80; Kiyaga and Moores 2003:23; Kusters 2015a:98) – in short: dealing with feeling out of place and frustrated. Michele Friedner found these frustrations among her research participants in Bangalore who often expressed open aversion towards their hearing families, while they found understanding and support among the deaf. In turning their backs to their families, they orient themselves towards the deaf. These "deaf turns" (Friedner 2015:156) mean orientation to and identification with other deaf, and a turn away from hearing families. This is only possible, however, when there are opportunities for contacting other deaf. As there are no known deaf villages, indigenous shared signing communities or sign languages in Benin[73], deaf orientations became only really possible with the creation of deaf school and deaf church by Andrew Foster and Victor Vodounou in the late 1970s. With the spread of sign language, however, other, less formal spaces evolved that provided the necessary orientation for deaf turns.

Particularly the entry into school could be regarded as a "vital conjuncture" that Jennifer Johnson-Hanks conceptualized as a "zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life"

[73] As mentioned above, there is a widespread "village sign" in Benin that might predate the beginning of Foster's mission. It cannot be excluded that there were sign languages and deaf spaces before the arrival of Foster's disciples, but there is also no evidence to claim their existence. The analysis of what Beninese deaf call "village sign" is a future research task for linguistic approaches.

(2002:871). When coming to deaf school, deaf children and youth realize for the first time that they are not the only deaf in the world – an experience that was recounted in many conversations in Benin as well as in Victor Vodounou's autobiography (2008:89–90). This experience is emphasized even more when Padden and Humphries quote a friend saying "I never knew I was deaf until I went to school" (Padden and Humphries 2010:393). Their friend only understood who and what he was when he met his peers. During the time I spent at the school in Agla, I often witnessed newly arrived school-children getting more and more confident and relaxed among their deaf peers. I discussed this experience often in retrospective with deaf adults and teenagers. In Benin, however, this deaf turn toward the community does not mean that they turn their back on their family. Instead, deaf people refer to and rely on both family and deaf community. The families often provide financial support or other resources like houses or rooms where deaf people live or work. They provide space in their premises where deaf people can set up a workshop or a store. The families also demand support, assistance, and participation in family affairs like funerals and weddings, in moments of need and crisis and demand a say in reproduction (see section 3.4). Even if they are flexible, sometimes reversible, and often multidirectional, there are deaf turns in Benin and the deaf community offers a realm of exchange and belonging for the deaf person that hearing families often cannot. These deaf orientations are more ambiguous than a clear neglect of family background and family values as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter.

4.2 transnational origins and orientations

How does a *Beninese* community relate to transnational communities and how does it understand and constitute itself as Beninese? The cradle of deaf community and sociality in Benin is as international as can be. The African American deaf missionary Andrew Foster introduced sign language education[74], American Sign Language (ASL)[75], and deaf church to Benin. His first Beninese student, Victor Vodounou, helped him created schools and churches in more than a dozen countries in West and Central Africa, before opening the Beninese School for the Deaf (*Ecole Béninoise pour les Sourds*, EBS) in Cotonou in 1977. Beninese deaf education started as part of a West African deaf

[74] There is no trace, literature, or memory of a pre-Foster sign language in Benin as there has been in other parts of West Africa (Nyst (2007, 2008); Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba (2012); Nyst (2015)), which is not to say that there was none. He did, in any case, introduce a more or less formal sign language education that had not existed before.

[75] Remembering the linguistic roots of ASL in deaf education in 18th century France, see Woodward (1978), this origin become even more global.

education agenda. The first teachers were trained in Foster's school in Ibadan, Nigeria, that became a regional hub for deaf education and educators for some years. In 2019, on a trip to Togo, Joachim and I met Jumeau, an old deaf Togolese teacher of the deaf who told us about his experience in Ibadan. Joachim got somewhat emotional meeting one of his "FATHERS". There is a certain transnational ancestry that reminds of Jan-Kåre Breivik's notion that deaf people form their identity less on the basis of familial roots and origins than through the transnational and translocal routes and networks (Breivik 2005). Instead of acknowledging the replacement of roots with routes, though, the deaf in Benin make kin of kind, and turn routes into roots by calling and appreciating teachers like Foster, Victor, or Jumeau "PAPA", and calling their classmates in the formative time of schooling brothers and sisters.

In the following I will discuss how these transnational ties entered the deaf realities in Benin during my research. The transnational orientations were on stage already before my very first step into the field: The website of Gallaudet University supplied contact information to deaf associations around the world; and that is how I got in contact with Homère. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and its congresses reenact a United Nations model of exchange and conferences and organize its members in national belonging. On WFD events, nations of origin are stated, and flags displayed to express the diversity, variety, and transnationality of the union; so different, so same. A similar ambiguity is at stake at the annual bible camps for the deaf where American missionaries and their local partners assemble deaf youth from across West Africa for a few days of prayer and bible education.

bible camps and the Christian Mission for the Deaf

The development of deaf education, deaf church, and Christian deaf identity are closely linked to each other and their transatlantic origins. After Victor had come back from Ibadan and created the deaf school in Scoa Gbeto/Cotonou, it was only a few months before he started teaching the gospel in the classroom of the Catholic church as well. Once a month, he preached to the schoolchildren. Soon, the meetings became more regular and older deaf joined in – both with and without school experience. From the beginning, sign language was not only a means to achieve proselytization, but the church was also a space where unschooled deaf adults could learn to sign and possibly even to read. Michel for example, possibly the oldest signing deaf I met, had already been too old for school when Victor started. He was living near the school and learned some signs from interacting with teachers, pupils, and

members of church without ever being directly part of any of those institutions. During the time of my research, he was working as a tailor in the deaf center in Agla.

By 1980, the loose meetings had grown into a full church, as Victor remembers it (Vodounou 2008:109–10), while its members still used the school premises for their gatherings. In 1983, Victor took the first deaf youth to a bible camp in Nigeria. Those camps had been an integral part of the work of Foster's Christian Mission for the Deaf (CMD) since the mid-1970s (Foster 1976). During the school vacation, young people from the CMD's network of deaf schools across West Africa would gather in a boarding school for a few days, ostensibly to learn the gospel. Given the religious zeal of Foster and his disciples, the bible studies surely filled most of the days. Yet, those camps enabled the transnational exchange between deaf West Africans, ignited another sense of community and belonging, and were often great fun for the deaf who relished the time around the sermons, devotions, and indoctrinations. Like the international deaf conferences, events and camps of the late 19th (Gulliver 2015) and the early 21st century (Breivik 2005; Breivik, Haualand, and Solvang 2002; Green 2014a), the bible camps were constitutive and inspiring for a feeling of shared experience and identity – which is not to say that any of these events created a uniform transnational culture and community, sometimes quite the opposite (Friedner and Kusters 2014, 2015; Friedner 2010b:62). Yet, the camps bring deaf people from different regions and countries together and enable exchange and new options for belonging and identification.

Victor himself has organized the bible camps until after the time of my research. The camps should not be mistaken for youth camps in the WFD sense that promote deaf rights, activism, and education (Merricks 2015); they are meant to proselytize and teach the gospel. The simultaneousness of transnational and local belonging was literally pinned to the wall on a deaf camp in Aného, Togo, I visited in 2019: The shared community and Christian deaf identity was celebrated in song and praise, while small national flags representing American missionaries, German *weltwärts* volunteers and deaf youth from across West Africa expressed the diversity of the present group. The international ties set up through deaf camps vitalize deaf church through frequent visits of deaf priests from all around West Africa, mostly from neighboring Togo and Nigeria.

Bible camps for the deaf just as visiting deaf priests come with information about other parts of West Africa and the world. While the focus of these occasions is always on "saving souls", they do give deaf Beninese

opportunities to learn about activism in other countries or assistive technologies that are not available in Benin. In general, this often means a confrontation with Benin's inferiority. Especially American deaf visitors share their conviction that literally everything is better in the USA, whether it was rights, activism, technologies, or education. The only stronghold of African deaf churches is their moral supremacy. American and Beninese deaf people attending the bible camps perceived African deaf churches to be less tainted by secularism and demands for gender and LGBTQ rights. Input and inspiration, however, also come along more secular routes.

Volunteers, WFD, and international donors

Not only churches but also NGOs, schools and the representative body ANSB have ties to transnational deaf communities and partners. These ties are, however, even less equal than in the missionary interaction. ANSB is listed as a member of the WFD on the homepage of Gallaudet University, but ANSB struggles to pay the yearly reduced membership fee of 50 USD – in 2018 they had already been behind on payments for several years. The schools – whether public or private – get international donations through governmental and nongovernmental channels. The public and private partner organizations like German GIZ, different embassies, COCOF Belgique or smaller NGOs like Solidarité Sourd Bénin leave their logos and brandings on school walls, dormitories, or furniture, just as individuals like deaf Marko Istvan who donated here and there while traveling the world on his motorcycle between 2009 and 2019[76]. Many of these donations and investments reinforce a logic of charity demanding gratitude towards the benefactors that is expressed in the ubiquitous events where children are lined up to receive ball-pens, plastic toys, second-hand clothes, chalkboards, and the like, and to thankfully pose for photos next to white African-cloth-clad volunteers with braided hair. Most of the time, these donors and volunteers are hearing people, usually in their late teens and early twenties.

There are also deaf volunteers who engage in the deaf schools to different degrees. Some arrive individually like Marko Istvan; others arrive through deaf specific organizations like Solidarité Sourd Bénin or they come through national volunteering structures like the German *weltwärts* program. Erin Moriarty Harrelson wrote about how the Deaf Global Circuit clashes with local deaf worlds in Cambodia when Deaf tourists and volunteers engage in deaf development (Moriarty Harrelson 2015), a "Deaf cultural imperialism" that

[76] https://marko6601.de.tl/, last access April 15, 2020.

happens to be proudly rejected by the Cambodian side. Michele Friedner and Annelies Kusters have also critically discussed these cultural encounters between deaf people from the global north and the global south in Ghana (Kusters 2015a:208f) and India (Friedner 2017). In their discussion of power relations at play (Friedner and Kusters 2014:18) they overlook the fact that these hierarchies are not only in discourse and ideology but – at least in the case of Benin – also quite economic: The north comes with funding that is existential for many initiatives in Benin. In the presence of international partners, teachers and other staff often perform in ways that they believe the foreign (deaf) visitors expect while returning to their own ways the moment the guests have left. As much as deaf Beninese might disagree with the deaf development workers, they are not be always able to afford protesting and contradicting them.

The deaf school in Agla often hosted deaf volunteers from France who came through Solidarité Sourd Bénin. Other deaf volunteers came from Europe to share the knowledge, rights advocacy, and leadership skills they learned WFD trainings and workshops. Joachim, as the *secrétaire général* of ANSB, managed to direct many of those foreigners to his school in hope of finding financial support. That was also why he steered me to his place in the beginning of my research in 2016. While financial support and some advice were welcome, there were many cultural conflicts that caused ruptures between the school and the European volunteers. There was, on the part of the European volunteers, a constant distrust of people in charge in Benin. They assumed that school leaders were necessarily corrupt and would usurp money for their personal profit. Instead of respecting and incorporating the local hierarchies, volunteers talked directly with teachers and staff and made payments directly without consulting the director. This would often create frustration among the authorities but also among teachers and staff as they knew that they would have to deal directly with their superiors again when the volunteer was gone after a few weeks. This put both staff and director in a complicated place as the director could not accept being excluded while the staff is lead to work behind their director's back.

Moreover, disciplining children is different in different places and while beating schoolchildren in Europe is absolutely out of question, it is a common practice in Beninese schools, whether deaf or hearing. For the d/Deaf activists volunteering in the schools, however, the sight and thought of teachers – hearing teachers especially – beating deaf children is understandably horrendous. For Joachim, two volunteers from Belgium and the Czech Republic were "extremists" because they were furious after they had seen a

teacher slap a deaf child in his school. It seems noteworthy here that most Beninese deaf adults rather complain that the teachers nowadays are not disciplining the schoolchildren enough. There is thus a certain "clash of (deaf) cultures" that is not necessarily related to different d/Deaf values but different regional values, cultures and practices.

The ferocity that some d/Deaf activists show in criticizing Beninese practices, however, is clearly also nurtured in deaf people's collective experience of "130 years of oppression, audism and colonialism" (Ladd and Lane 2014:48–51) that is the basis of European and US American Deaf activism and similitude. Beninese practices may therefore manifestly offend their values. In an ambiguous twist, this leads to a new kind of deaf colonialism that is grounded in a Deaf universalism that sees *deaf* as *same* but those deaf in developing countries as "different because of their circumstances of poverty (material and social)" (Moriarty Harrelson 2015:210). The deaf partners from Europe seem to follow a similar patronizing logic (Friedner and Kusters 2014:11) that spoils many an effort in development cooperation in general (Easterly 2006). Stories of conflicts between young deaf activist travelers who left disappointed by the "barbarism" in Beninese deaf schools are numerous and reflect the limits of ethnocentric understandings of Deaf culture (Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:13–15).

These transnational connections to individuals with diverse d/Deaf backgrounds also shape the education and development of sign language by coming with various implicit and explicit language and education values. Andrew Foster used American Sign Language (ASL) as the basis for his application of "total communication" (Foster 1975), where ASL was amalgamated with local signs and gestures as well as the local *linguae francae*. There is no standard that deaf schools can refer to[77]. The result is a distinction of languages and schools that in my opinion is often exaggerated. Deaf people in Cotonou often told me they could not understand the deaf from Porto Novo, because their Belgian partners imported so many Belgian signs. At the same time, the headteachers in that school strive to follow the development that ASL takes in the USA. The Catholic school in Pèporiyakou has the reputation of introducing Brazilian and Italian signs for the head of the school is a nun from Brazil and they often have Italian volunteers. Without a linguistic background but having talked to many deaf across the country, my impression is

[77] In November 2018, representatives of deaf schools gathered in Zakpota, Benin, to discuss a "harmonization" and standardization of sign language in Benin. This was initiated and funded by the *Ministère des Affaires Sociales et de la Microfinance* and the United Nations Population Fund (Facebook-messenger communication with Joachim, November 2018). This exchange, however, has not had a palpable outcome by 2022.

that the linguistic differences are a lot less dramatic than they are often presented. The exaggeration is instead a means of distinction: While other schools are different, visiting the same school creates belonging, identity, and community (see also Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011:4).

With the much-needed money from abroad comes a certain homogenizing discourse of what being d/Deaf is all about. Instead of changing their ways, though, many institutions and actors in Benin rather put up a performance not to disgruntle the partners during their visits. They would, for example, temporarily adhere to foreign norms of good child-care or pretend to eagerly learn new signs before mocking them when they were gone. While there definitely is a patronizing logic in international deaf discourses of the north, that does not automatically mean that deaf people in the global south are easily patronized (see also Friedner 2010b:62). Rather, deaf people and institutions in Benin manage to navigate overlapping, ambiguous, and contradictory discourses given the respective context and interest.

Transnational connections are not just a question of space and routes, but of time and technology as well. While the early deaf community had to rely on missionaries and activists to have access to global discourses, the recent years have enabled new and faster ways of connecting.

sociality and social media

The changing communicative ecologies (Foth and Hearn 2007; Tacchi, Slater, and Hearn 2003) – in particular, the growth of social media – has circulated new ideas and international discourses into the deaf community, especially via the young who are more likely to access and master the mostly written language based exchange on Facebook or WhatsApp. Christopher Kurz and Jess Cuculick argue that social media extends deaf spaces beyond the actual place (Kurz and Cuculick 2015:228–29). People share videos of deaf activists from Côte d'Ivoire and other regional neighbors, receive signed messages from France and Belgium, they re-post claims and statements by activists from across the world. These media also include short clips of deaf people signing in different sign languages, learning from each other, or also short films and sketches produced in sign language in Ghana, Nigeria, or Côte d'Ivoire. While deaf people in Benin conceptualize their sign language simply as Signs, *les signes*, through social media they learn about the cultural and linguistic diversity of deaf people around the world. Information is usually filtered through the people they "are friends with" on Facebook or connected with through WhatsApp – people barely use browsers or Google to independently find information on the internet. Whether that is due to

convenience, idleness, or the fact that mobile networks like MTN offered using Facebook without charging for the data as a marketing strategy at the time when mobile internet was introduced on a larger scale, it eventually means that access to global knowledge is again mediated through the networks of people one "is friends with" in person or virtually. Before but also besides social media, belonging and community are intrinsically bound to actual spaces and the subsequent conditions, potentials, and restrictions (Yuval-Davis, Kannabirān, and Vieten 2006; Sarre 2022). Kurz and Cuculick emphasize that the transnational connections and the extension of deaf spaces reproduce boundaries and difference as they are often somewhat "elitist" (Kurz and Cuculick 2015:233) regarding access to knowledge, education and technology – resources of which mostly young and schooled deaf with some financial means dispose. As transnational connections often also mean access to further financial support through direct sponsoring, as in case of Isaïe for example, the differences in access tend to grow.

Like in the religious networks, transfer of knowledge and ideologies has its limits. While international Deaf discourse includes questions of inclusion of LGBTQ folks as well as gender equality, these ideas fall on dry soil in Beninese deaf geography[78]. Deaf Beninese might have their routes and ties around the globe – they yet remain Beninese deaf as well.

4.3 Beninese similitudes

Deaf Beninese lives are experienced in between differences and similitudes. Shared deafness is mobilized as a source of belonging and support. Beninese deaf do not sign DEAF-DEAF-SAME or any equivalent. They do, however, build a community of visual communication, just as shared sign language has shown to trump differences like ethnicity (Cline and Mahon 2010; Skelton and Valentine 2003). They do understand that different deaf individuals face similar though not same challenges. This similitude allows the formation of communities, deaf spaces and sociality, *nous les sourds* – sociality that is, however, characterized by conflict, distinction, and deaf-deaf-difference.

spaces of sociality, similitude – and difference

Deaf spaces are social and geographical locations where sociality is created, shaped and reproduced. They constitute opportunities for deaf people to

[78] Questions of transsexuality and other queer pathways that started being discussed in Deaf Studies recently, see Moges (2017); Schmitz (2020) and also Kafer (2013), are not debated at all in Benin and folks who might identify as such will have a rough stand, whether deaf or hearing.

communicate and exchange freely in sign language. They are spaces where knowledge and gossip are exchanged, where social ties are knit, where deaf people "share their embodiment, their first language, *their way of being*" (Kusters 2015a:20, italics in original). Gulliver and Kitzel (2015) argue that it is through the visual and spatial act of signing that deaf people literally occupy space and thereby create the deaf spaces. These can be

> small and temporary, like the signing space that exists between some Deaf friends who meet by chance in the street. They might be large but temporary, like a regular Deaf pub gathering. They might be small and more permanent, like the home of a Deaf family. Or as large and as permanent as a Deaf university (Gulliver and Kitzel 2015:2).

As the quote by Gulliver and Kitzel as well as the descriptions to come argue, deaf spaces are *social* geographies, and the physical places are merely auxiliary means that facilitate both deaf sociality as well as my description thereof. Deaf spaces may be grounded in physical places, but the spaces are ephemeral and waft along social lines that may take the sociality to other places; like a deaf church whose congregation meets at another place. The aim of this section is to use this perspective for thick descriptions of social interaction. Deaf spaces provide the arenas where deaf individuals meet and engage with the community as well as with each other. Collective identity and individual belonging are negotiated between engagement, confrontation and avoidance (Kusters 2017:173). Deaf spaces are arenas of ambiguity.

In Benin, these spaces can loosely be categorized by their degree of formalization (Mildner 2019). Schools are the classical and formal settings where deaf children meet other deaf people and are introduced to sign language for the first time (Johnson and Erting 1989; Simmons 1994). The deaf church can be considered the historical core of the Beninese deaf community (Aina 2015:139; Vodounou 2008). Workshops and stores run by deaf people attract others to drop by, chat and socialize (Mildner 2019:17). Parlors and yards of households and families with deaf members often turn into places where deaf people gather. Finally, there are those very elusive and informal spaces that come into existence in haphazard meetings in public space.

Those spaces are institutionalized to different degrees and are accessible, inclusive, or exclusionary to different degrees. This ordering of deaf spaces represents not only the decreasing degree of formality but also a decreasing number of people who frequent those deaf spaces. Whereas there is a school with more than six hundred (deaf and hearing) pupils in Louho, Porto Novo, the last kind of deaf space – unplanned meetings in public space – may consist

of only two or three individuals. The following is an example of a spontaneous and elusive production of deaf space in Benin:

> Elie and I went to *marché* Dantokpa, one of the biggest markets in West Africa, to find a straw mat that I would sleep on in the center in Agla. Quickly, we got lost in the narrow aisles. I wanted to see how Elie would navigate the market, so I did not ask any marketeers for guidance. While chatting – which is quite challenging in Signs on a crowded market – we got lost deeper and deeper. I was bumping into customers and marketeers, trying to focus on his signs, when Elie suddenly spotted a person he knew; about 20 meters and at a guess 200 people away from us. It was a young man who went to the *collège* in Akogbato who helped his father on the market during the vacation. We jostled our way through to him, greeted and chatted. He came with us and led us to a shed where women made and sold the straw mats we were looking for. Even though Elie is far from shy or feeling a need to hide his signing, the moment we were joined by the other deaf young man, he moved about even more confidently. I do not give our companion a name here, because I do not know it, and neither did Elie. They had seen each other only rarely and knew that they both were deaf and which school they went to. But the shared language and the act of living out their visual selves created a bond and a safe space in the confusing and stressful setting of a hearing majority market. This deaf space moved with us through the market and was dissolved after we had finished the bags of *bissap*, the ubiquitous Beninese hibiscus ice tea, I had gotten for the three of us and Elie and I had left. (fieldnotes 07/25/2016)

Deaf signers in Benin would always seek those transient spaces and enjoy the haphazard conquest. Instead of only hoping or looking for temporary deaf spaces and thus being dependent on serendipity, however, they seek to create permanent and reliable ones that are associated with tangible places.

Breaking down deaf spaces into categories makes sense to get an overview of the kinds of spaces constituting deaf worlds in Benin. These lines, however, are constantly blurring. While the school setting is very formal particularly in the classroom, socialization and learning effectively take place in the informality of school breaks, at night, and in the evenings in the deaf boarding schools; the deaf church is most social when the formal sermon is over (Mildner 2019:15, 16). The deaf priest's family's living room only gains importance in the deaf geography of Benin through the authority he and his wife acquire in the deaf space of the church. Workshops and stores as informal deaf spaces mostly build on relationships established in formal settings like school or church. They provide safe spaces where deaf people will not be mocked (see section 3.3), where they feel free and safe to be and to belong – to the extent the social control of the community allows. Deaf spaces as

places of community generation offer opportunities of empowerment and encouragement but also enable oppression through the collectivity, gossip and social control (see section 4.5).

The physical spaces also offer different sections, rooms, and corners where different people go at different times, different dynamics are at stake, different issues are discussed, different activities shared; one deaf space can contain many deaf spaces. While there is peace and pleasantries near the food stand after church, women might badmouth the cook a moment later when she is out of sight. During class, the deaf staff might be the stiff authority, in the evening the director might play and laugh with the deaf children just a few meters from the classroom. During the sermon, women might obediently follow the priest, while wholeheartedly mocking his rickety motorcycle after he stepped off the pulpit. It is within and between these spaces that hierarchies and relationships, meanings and norms are negotiated.

Where no formal institutions are available or within reach but a sufficient number of deaf people are around, other more informal deaf spaces emerge in barber shops, corner shops or tailor's shops. Any place run by or involving a deaf person potentially becomes a deaf space. These spaces offer opportunities for exchange, to experience belonging and learn from others about, mostly, the hearing world around them. Deaf people pass by, hang out, join in the work, chat, or nap. The deaf people who run or work at the place do not necessarily join in the social interaction; they mostly provide the space – voluntarily or not. In fact, some shop owners complained to me that they can never work in peace. Even if these deaf spaces are frequented by fewer people than church or schools, they are often their first point of reference. It is here where they come for advice, for a chat, for news, for discussion, or just to spend time. Nobody ever asks them what they want; they can just come and be.

Deaf craftspeople who ran workshops in tailoring, hairdressing, carpentry, shoemaking, and the like during the time of my research mostly learned from hearing instructors or *patron·ne·s*. Now they often train deaf apprentices themselves. Not only does this increase the number of deaf persons frequenting the deaf spaces, but apprenticeships also create new and sustainable relations of belonging, dependence, and responsibility between generations of deaf people.

In bigger cities, most of all in Cotonou, smaller deaf spaces and communities overlap with bigger ones like schools or church. In towns where this social infrastructure is not as elaborate, the small and smallest deaf spaces have greater importance. Natitingou and the Atacora region, for example, had

no deaf school until the Catholic school in the town's suburb Pèporiyakou opened in 2008. Prior to this date, there was no way that deaf people could learn, create, and experience sign language and develop a deaf community on an institutional level. Despite and because of this, the small deaf spaces had emerged all over. A mechanic was working outside his house, always surrounded by deaf acquaintances. Unemployed deaf youth met in front of a barber shop on the main street that employed a young deaf man. A deaf tailor was sharing the workspace of a hearing mother of a deaf son. The tailors were visited by deaf people on a daily basis. I visited similar spaces in Parakou where the deaf created their own, small-scale spaces that enabled socialization and production of community and belonging. Often one of the deaf regulars had visited a school, knew a certain amount of French, and had more insight into the hearing world. Like this, the unschooled deaf had the chance to access news and gossip that they might otherwise have been cut off from. They could learn some bits of French or more of the systematized sign language. But also without *proper* sign language the unschooled deaf used *village sign* and did not seem to have a lot of trouble communicating.

A remarkable difference between deaf spaces is that the deaf in less established spaces wished to marry hearing partners. They wanted their partners to interpret for them and thus enable them to participate more in the hearing world. Deaf people in more informal spaces in smaller towns often reported that notion to me while in churches and schools in Cotonou, it was rarely a shared preference. The size and degree of establishment strengthens deaf self-confidence – not to say deaf pride – of the community. Also, the more deaf people you have in your network, the less need you might see to communicate with the hearing folk. The more deaf people you have around you, the less your deafness is an issue of concern.

in deaf church, I understand

"Church is not for chit-chat!", said one deaf moderator during a church service in 2019 to calm the gabbling congregation, "church is for listening to the word of God!" I will argue in the following how right and wrong he was: While the spreading of the gospel was the initial aim in the creation of deaf church, its success is based on the social space it constitutes beyond the sermon. Missionary church has always been about more than just church but about "civilization" (Comaroff 1991) – for whatever that means in any given context. Even though Andrew Foster's children insist that his motivation was evangelistic in its core (Aina 2015:129), the Christian Mission for the Deaf (CMD) created more than just Christian converts. Rather, church encouraged

conversions to deaf sociality (Kusters 2014b; Friedner 2014b, 2019, see also Bechter 2008).

The church in Vêdoko[79] is the oldest institution for the deaf in Benin and has been the cradle of deaf sociality. On the one hand, the church hierarchies are clearly structured and so are sermon, Sunday school and bible studies, with a clear order in who belongs where. On the other hand, the production of community and sociality continues when the formal part is over and the lines blur. The space is broken down into several small spaces where different agendas, constellations and hierarchies are at stake – sometimes just for a moment.

The doctrines in deaf church were introduced by Foster and passed on by his disciples. Homère, Guillaume and Paul had been instructed by Pasteur Serge who himself learned Signs and the gospel in Nigeria. Homère also took courses at a German nondenominational correspondence bible school in the 1990s. To prepare his sermons and study the word of God, however, he uses material from *Mission Évangelique de la Foi International* in Benin that publishes booklets on different topics, annexed with a compilation of bible verses (MEF Int. 2015). Those booklets are meant for Sunday school, bible studies and "daily guide" but are also of great use and inspiration to priests without formal education or training in preaching. The sermons – like the booklets – often evolve around "proper" Christian conduct and dismisses other lifestyles as sinful. The most frequent issue is family life and mutual obligations: Children must obey their parents, fathers must watch out over their family and be a good role model, wives must obey their husband in any way, husbands must give their wife everything they ask for.

I cannot reliably say to what extent deaf church differs from or conforms to the wide range of other Christian denominations in Benin, but its doctrines seem familiarly Evangelical. There is no particular message for the deaf, nor do they seem to read any parts of the bible differently from their deaf perspective. The mission of deaf church is to make them good Christians (who happen to be deaf).

What made deaf church special and *right* was not a particular exegesis or dogma but that the sermons and lore were delivered in the *language of the deaf*. In November 2016, during a long conversation with Maurine, the well-

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[79] Since 2014, deaf church has split up into two rivalling churches, see section 5.3. I have visited both churches but spent most of my church time in Vêdoko. For the discussion of the meaning of church as a deaf space, both churches Vêdoko and Godomey serve similar functions in similar ways and Vêdoko can therefore stand for both.

informed and educated wife of Pasteur Homère, we talked about her family and other members' families' religious affiliations.

> "My family is Catholic," she avowed. "Before, I always went to Catholic church. I was baptized, had the communion there. Then I learned more about Jesus Christ, from Pasteur Serge, and I became Evangelical. Before that, I went to church with the deaf, and to Catholic church with my family. In 1984 I was Catholic. My communion was - I don't remember. But then I was baptized in deaf church."
>
> She then ranted about the Catholic church, how *wrong* they were, and how bad it was to be Catholic. To her it was clear that eventually, there was just one true church. I kept on asking her about the actual differences between churches' doctrines, values, and practices, but somehow her remarks always drifted off. Eventually I asked again directly if Catholic church was so different from deaf church. "Yes," she said peremptorily, "veeery different!" "Like how?" "In deaf church," she said, "I understand." (interview 21/11/2016)

Deaf church in Benin is built on similitude in communication and language, while its contents and moral orientation are not necessarily different from churches for the hearing. It is the shared access, quite pragmatically, that ties it together.

schools - deaf spaces despite themselves

Boarding schools are of particular importance for two main reasons (see also van Cleve and Crouch 1989, Evans and Falk 1986): First, the small number of deaf schools and the geographic distribution means that it is only through boarding schools that deaf children from remote areas or cities without a deaf school can receive education. Second, and way more important, boarding schools provide more space and time for the deaf children to interact and learn from each other. The shared time outside class is crucial for the development of community (Johnson and Erting 1989; Friedner 2015:55). This works even without formal education and language competence, as a short vignette shall show:

When I visited the deaf schools, I would often sit in on classes. In spring 2018, a teacher got a phone call and left me alone in CP (*cours préparatoire*), the first class the pupils visit. I asked some children for their names. In Signs, that was "TON NOM QUOI?" – quite a simple question, also given the fact that they were already in school for a few months. They all had a sign name already and my signing was good enough. But the majority of the children did not understand me and could hardly answer even with the help of the teacher upon his return. It was hard to start any conversation. As soon as they had

left the classroom, though, they met other schoolchildren in the yard, played, fought, talked, laughed, joked, mocked – in short: they communicated, they simultaneously shared and produced community, regardless of language competence. Among each other they developed mutual relations of belonging, hierarchy and responsibility that shape and maintain a community.

Beyond the interaction with their immediate peers the interaction with deaf staff gains another importance outside the classroom. In the breaks as well as before and after school, the deaf teacher often sat with the children to talk, joke or play, while the hearing teachers barely ever did. This socializing between teachers and schoolchildren is very uncommon in the Beninese school system that is mostly characterized by authority and hierarchy.

In talking with schoolchildren and adults who remembered their school time I learned that they did not differentiate regarding deafnesses or moment of deafening of the teacher. As long as teachers were deaf, they served as a role model, as a possible future self. Outside school or in hearing schools, deaf children mostly learned that they are different and problematic. Now they see a person *like them* who achieved something. The subtle physiological and social distinctions like age, kind of deafness, gender, generation, language competence, and hierarchy play a minor role at this moment[80]. The shared experience of being deaf prevails (Bahan 1994:243–44).

In the schools, it is often not only teachers and schoolchildren who use the deaf schools as deaf spaces. Deaf women work in the canteens, small vocational training programs are attached to the schools, and former pupils – mostly boys – spend their days at the schools. They watch over the children or take over auxiliary tasks in the maintenance of the building. The schoolchildren meet more possible role models, older peers, and people they can learn from, who share their experience. Relations evolve that are often expressed in kinship terms like "small/big brother/sister" or "parents and children". Tyler Zoanni discussed kinship vocabulary in institutional care of children with cognitive disabilities as asymmetrical (Zoanni 2018:68)[81]. The kinning vocabulary does surely reproduce family hierarchies within deaf sociality. Jeannett Martin (forthcoming) defines children's belonging

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[80] There are very few female deaf teachers, as there are few deaf teachers in general. I cannot reliably comment whether shared deafness trumps gender as well. I have a feeling, however, that it would be harder for deaf women to get on an equal level with the children without losing their authority.

[81] See also on how disability rewrites kinship in Rapp and Ginsburg (2011) and creates new kinship ties entirely in Rapp and Ginsburg (2001).

> as the process and practice by which children are intentionally brought into significant, mostly hierarchical social relationships with persons and we-groups, whereby they may also participate in this process.

Like this, schools become spaces of deaf sociality – more as a social space than an educational institution. Children not only become part of a community – they create and shape it through the interaction with each other and with their deaf teachers (Johnson and Erting 1989:55). The importance of these communities also goes beyond the deaf networks. For many deaf children, getting to know deaf community is almost the only way to get to know the hearing world beyond. They learn from each other, discuss and reflect on their experience, profit from the knowledge of older deaf peers. Schools fulfill this purpose *despite themselves* in a way. Evans and Falk studied language acquisition in a residential deaf school and identified the same tension between "official culture" of the planned life in the institution and "student culture" as what students are doing outside the confines of institutional regulation (Evans and Falk 1986). I would not describe this as a hidden curriculum but as a notion that mirrors de Certeau's differentiation between strategy and tactics (see above); it is a democratic response, as he would say, to the systematic effort of the institutions. As the actual educational infrastructure and pedagogy is rather unsatisfactory (see above and section 3.5), the schools' actual value is the opportunity they offer to the deaf children to interact and experience community, feel belonging and inclusion.

brothers and sisters?

In section 3.6 I mentioned that similitude and deaf kinship are constructed from the hearing outside that thinks the deaf as a group of Others. There is, however, also a limited notion of kin within the deaf community. Deaf people would refer to their teachers, priests, and ancestors of deaf community as "PAPA" (see section 5.2). Many deaf activists like Isaïe, Léon, and Joachim also spoke of the responsibilities they felt towards their "deaf brothers and sisters" in the village, those off deaf sociality. To many deaf people who were socialized into a community, life outside seemed like exclusion and isolation – an assumption that I want to counter in chapter 6. Although Isaïe and Léon, Joachim and Fabian had nothing to do with the *sourds du village*, they understood them as their kin – even if just rhetorically. Beyond the actual social networks in deaf spaces and the shared language, communication, and understanding, the deaf thus do understand that there is something that ties them together with the other deaf. By being paternalistic about the deaf in the village, being full of mockery about village signs, and by talking about but not

actually taking charge of their deaf *siblings*, they also continued the distinction along lines of deaf diversity. Reflecting their understanding of deaf diversity as a hierarchy of ability, those who claimed to speak for and care about the rural deaf were mostly deafened people who spoke, read, and wrote.

Identification and similitude that tie a we-group together, however, goes in hand with distinction from others. In the following, I discuss how deaf Beninese distinguish themselves from others.

4.4 distinction

The deaf community in Cotonou did not discuss much who was part of it as the concept of *community* was not in use as such. Yet, certain ways of acting and reflecting revealed processes of distinction. How does a *deaf* community relate to deaf and hearing people? As deafness is often conceptualized as a disability, this begs the question how a deaf community relates to other (hearing) disabled people. By othering and by drawing lines to what they were not, deaf people created negative counterparts that can tell us something about what they positively considered themselves to be. I will describe deaf relations towards the hearing in general and the hearing signers and the hearing people with disabilities in particular. I will furthermore discuss how they distinguish themselves from other countries' deaf people.

the hearing

In Indian Sign Language, as Michele Friedner learned in Bangalore, the sign "HEAR" or "HEARING" means normal (2015:15). In contrast to Friedner's translation, however, I suggest that deaf Beninese do mean "hearing" when signing HEARING/ENTENDANT and do not wish to say "normal" – also because there is a sign for NORMAL. Instead, this is a clear practice of distinction that goes beyond a description of a difference. Two examples from my fieldnotes:

> I hang out in the tailor workshop in Agla, watching Elie put some buttons on a *complét*, a shirt and pants combo made from colorful Indian prints in African patterns. I ask him who that *complét* is for. He signs "ENTENDANT", a hearing, with a discarding gesture and a shrug of shoulders. "And those pants, who are they for?" I ask. "AUTRE ENTENDANT", another hearing. Had they been for a deaf person, he would have signed the name or would have told me something about that person. But no, it was just another hearing person, so – shrug of shoulders – don't bother. (fieldnotes 11/06/2018)

> Erneste and Moïse show up late to bible studies with bandages on heads and arms. They had had an accident, Erneste's elbow is hurt and a bit lame. Moïse has bruises and so does the motorcycle. They drove into a cart-boy who was transporting goods from the market. They said it was a hearing person. They signed "ENTENDANT", that is somehow always the other. An "ENTENDANT" is not someone but just anyone, as if "DEAF" was another kind of "someone". But just anyone, not of interest. And so they talked about the damage on the motorcycle. No one was asking how "ENTENDANT" was doing after the accident. (fieldnotes 04/04/2018)

HEARING does not mean "normal" but "hearing". It implicates, though, "the other(s)". Carol Padden and Tom Humphries give an example of a similar logic when an American deaf football team called their opponent HEARING – even though they were also a deaf team. Apparently, HEARING had become a sign for any opposite of the deaf selves (Padden and Humphries 2010:394). In other d/Deaf cultures, the learning of sign languages by hearing persons has been criticized as cultural appropriation and theft of the deaf people's own language (Reid 2017). The idea that sign language is their own (Grünberger 2020; Vollhaber 2020), that it is only for deaf people, is not really present in Benin; partially due to the fact that signing is understood rather as a mode of communication than as a language as such (see section 2.3). What bothers deaf Beninese in this context is less the pride or possessiveness of the language than the suspicion that hearing people who engage in deaf affairs might "steal" funds that are intended to help the deaf. This "stealing" means for example running a school or being paid to teach, interpreting for money. This is a pragmatic fear of material disappropriation rather than cultural or ideological.

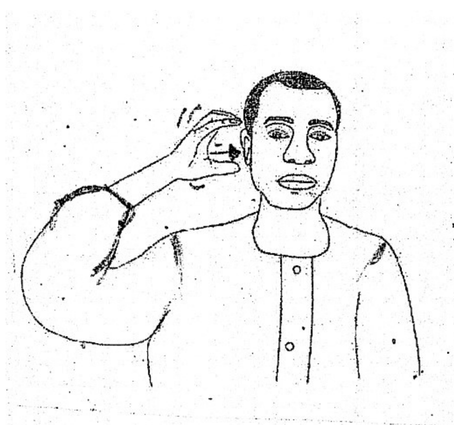

illustration 10: ENTENDANT, hearing, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

It seems that deaf Beninese just do not care so much about their hearing compatriots. While they work and live among hearing people, they have their chosen social life in deaf sociality. In this circle, a deaf person is barely ever referred to as DEAF but by name, belonging or affiliation, a someone, whereas the hearing are just HEARING, others, just anyone – unless they have a particular role for the deaf.

hearing signers

Hearing signers and children of deaf adults (CODAs) hold ambiguous positions here. Although there was neither formalized education in sign language nor major campaigns for sign language learning, there were a number of hearing people that learned to sign and engaged with the deaf. Their stories go back to personal contact with deaf individuals and a personal interest in signing: Sorel, who has been teaching at the deaf school in Agla for some years, has lived next to deaf Gustave and learned to sign as a child because he wanted to talk with the playmate next door. Ibrahim was a neighbor of the deaf center in Agla and used the sewing machines, so he became a friend and learned to sign. During my fieldwork, I met several deaf couples with hearing children mostly around the age of ten and younger. They all learn to sign as naturally as they learn the spoken languages of their neighbors, grandparents, or other people around. Many of them come to deaf Sunday school and learn about the bible in Signs; others go to hearing churches with hearing kin. Especially those who take part in deaf church activities grow into the community and will assume roles and identities that cannot yet be foreseen. Homère's hearing children have held special functions within community as musicians and readers in deaf church or interpreters on various occasions. CODAs in many deaf communities of the global south that do not have long histories of deaf ancestries are an exciting topic for further research. Part of that excitement will be to see how the often more dynamic processes of identity and belonging in multiethnic, -lingual and -cultural societies deal with this particular social position.

Abelle and Patrice, the two most prominent hearing signers, also had personal contacts and turned their sign language competence into a profession. Abelle was married to Pasteur Serge until his death. She was the first interpreter at the public television station ORTB and created programs like a weekly news journal or a health and hygiene sensitization in sign language. She eventually opened her own school in Glo and gave up her job at ORTB where Patrice took over as interpreter and news anchor. He had had a deaf nephew that he wanted to educate. Thus, while he was a public servant in the *Ministere de la Famille, des Affaires Sociales, de la Solidarité Nationale, des Handicapés et des Personnes de Troisième Age*, he went to Burkina Faso to be properly trained in sign language. Coming back, he dropped his public service position and worked as an interpreter on and off screen, also creating an association of interpreters that never really took off. Another hearing but fluent signer is Antoine who teaches at EBS who also got in touch with sign language via

personal contacts. Besides teaching, Antoine interprets for deaf visitors in his church and on different private and public events.

It is rare enough, however, that hearing people sign. If you would start signing instead of speaking, deaf people would assume at first that you were deaf, too. This reflects the variety of ways of signing in Benin, as in other deaf cultures, deaf people would claim to be able to tell very quickly whether a signer is deaf or not due to the complex habitus of deaf people (Bahan 2008:83; Muñoz Vilugrón and Sánchez Bravo 2017). It is also clear, however, that there was some sort of connection as the only access to the signing community is through the personal acquaintance of deaf people, also because until the emergence of integrated schools, there was no other way to learn to sign. With the start of integrated education, these personal acquaintances have tremendously increased in number in the last years. The school in Louho also cooperates with Belgian education programs for sign language interpretation that formally train a chosen handful of hearing graduates in Belgium.

The variation in ways of signing is also reflected – and produced – in the narratives that people have about the hearing signers. I mentioned above that many deaf are critical of other schools' sign language education. Likewise, some deaf claim that different interpreters do not sign well and refuse to work with them. While there is no explicit pride in sign language, deaf still claim the authority to decide who signs well and who does not. This is, however, not a proper assessment of language competence as such, but a judgment of the person, a statement that disqualifies the person in question on grounds of past conflicts, moral conduct, or a critique of the interpreter's affiliation with other deaf institutions and individuals. In an article on sign language ideologies in Hà Nội, Aron S. Marie worked out how Vietnamese deaf are not referring to the actual precision, competence, or quality of an interpreter's signing but on the relationship the interpreters practiced towards the Deaf (Marie 2020). Also without a concept of Deaf culture and a clear consciousness of the value of sign language, deaf people in Benin claim the right to judge engagements in their affairs. It is a statement of distinction: The hearing signers are not deaf, they are not us, and we have the last ~~word~~ sign.

The hearing signers play an ambivalent role in deaf sociality. On the one hand, deaf people need them as interfaces to the hearing majority, which is also why deaf couples usually want hearing children. They are crucial resources in deaf people's everyday lives. Also, the deaf appreciate the rare instances when hearing people, neighbors, kin, or anthropologists bother to learn sign language as that widens their world. In an environment of competition, jealousy, and suspicion, on the other hand, the hearing signers face

criticism for making a living on the basis of their sign language and deaf world competence. Having had better access to education than the majority of deaf people, those hearing signers are better qualified to apply for funding, negotiate with national and international partners, and implement somewhat successful projects for the deaf, as Abelle did. The resulting jealousy led Jérémy, for example, to react with conspicuous indifference to the passing away of Abelle: She stole their money, he was convinced, the money was meant for the deaf and the hearing lady took it (to build a school for the deaf). As many deaf schools were established and maintained within quasi nepotist kin structures, the fact that hearing people took over the deaf education sector is not totally absurd. Isaïe also invokes this fear and suspicion against the hearing when he suspects nothing good from the school in Louho and its hearing teachers.

Deaf Studies often claim that belonging to Deaf culture or sign language communities is not necessarily tied to being deaf or hard of hearing, but to sign language and cultural competence (Young and Temple 2014:14; Lane 2010:84)[82]. Seeing sign language as a decisive factor of belonging to a deaf community would imply that hearing signers could become members; at least to some extent; an implication that Beninese deaf do not follow. My doubled distance to the field was of use here again; though obviously not Beninese deaf, I was so outside of the common distinctions that I was not recognized as an Other but instead as an intimate visitor. Some deaf appreciate if hearing persons learn Signs or marry deaf people. In particular, hearing children of deaf adults are important communicators for more people than just their own parents. Others, however, scrutinize their motives and fear that the hearing majority might steal the language of the deaf, a notion that has played a role in discussions in the US (Humphries 2008) and Germany as well (Grünberger 2020; Vollhaber 2020). In both cases – welcoming the hearing to marry in or denying them entry into the community – logics of othering and distinction are in place. For the Beninese deaf, a hearing signer may be useful and welcome as a kind of "wise person" (Goffman 1986:29–30), but they are not seen as peers or members of the deaf community.

[82] Those notions are not globally accepted as often people who are born deaf, in particular those born deaf to deaf parents, are considered the purest deaf (Nakamura 2006:22). This purity is argued for by the fact that for those born into deaf culture, sign language is their first language and they think in sign language; an assessment that some deafened Beninese made about the born-deaf as well. As postlingually deafened persons, they would, though, not attach greater value to thinking in sign language.

people with disabilities

Most discourses, outside Deaf studies (Bauman and Murray 2014), consider deafness a disability. The relationship between deaf and disabled people in Benin is complicated both pragmatically and categorically. Disability similitude is constructed through and around hearing (see Haualand 2008) and the ability to talk and communicate "just like normal people" despite their physical differences. This notion was often communicated in several interviews with representatives of disability rights organizations I conducted in Cotonou and Parakou. The activists often described their work as striving for acceptance and normality: "I may have just one leg, but we [he and I] talk just like normal people" Cicéron, the president of the *Fédération des Associations des Personnes Handicapées au Bénin* (FAPHB) told me. "The deaf make things too complicated", Claudius, a disabled journalist, admitted to me once, and they were hence often excluded from activities of the disability organizations. But deaf Beninese also actively distinguish themselves from the disabled.

In formal, structured settings like rights advocacy or disability sports deaf and disabled Beninese happen to share space and interest, but these attachments do not matter for social interactions or dynamics of identity. Hearing people with disabilities are just as HEARING as hearing people without disabilities. Instead of identification or solidarity, disabled people seem to offer better options for distinction: Deaf people would mock other disability sports like blind football, or the ways mobility impaired persons moved or behaved. In turn, the disability communities do not care too much about deaf people.

In 2018, a group of mobility impaired persons including Claudius organized to publish *Sans Différence* (Gbaguidi 2018), an inclusive fashion catalogue with models with and without disabilities. Beninese designers and models worked with local photographers to produce a glossy magazine that was presented at a Bolloré venue in August 2018. Among the disabled models were amputees, wheelchair users with cerebral palsy, and blind people who wore tailormade fashion along with their canes, wheelchairs and crutches with pride on pictures in the magazine and on stage at the presentation. There was, however, not a single deaf person involved.

When I was talking with some of the initiators, I learned that it was too difficult to include the deaf because communication was so complicated. While they campaigned for more participation of disabled people in society, they did not even think, as one organizer told me quite openly, of how to cater for better accessibility and participation for deaf people.

Later on, I confronted Joachim with the project. It was quite telling that he, the one who served as president of RAPHAL, a network of disabled persons' organizations in southern Benin (*Réseau des Associations des Personnes Handicappées dans l'Atlantique et le Littoral*), was the only deaf who had heard about the magazine at all. He said that disabled people were jealous of "us deaf" because their disability was not visible, they were not malformed, they did not fall out of the classical current norms of beauty (Liebelt 2019); or as Joachim said: "Nous, on est plus beaux", we are just more beautiful. This might seem weird from a northern standpoint, and also from the standpoint of values of hearing cultures. In deaf, that is, visual cultures, however, outer appearance is laden with less taboo than in hearing cultures. In German Sign Language (DGS), common sign names might refer to a particularly big nose, bosom or belly, while such references would be totally inappropriate in German hearing culture. Notions of beauty and impairment have furthermore been documented for northern Mali where "ugliness" diminishes a woman's likelihood to be married and is therefore considered a disability (Halatine and Berge 1990:53–55).

In this sense, deafness differs from other physical disabilities phenomenologically in the "important advantage that the deaf person had over most of the other disabled was that he retained his physical autonomy" (Saint-Loup 1996:11). It is thus not too surprising that the deaf in Benin distance themselves from disabled identities (see Padden and Humphries 2010:396 for the complicated relationship of deaf identity and disability identity in the global north). "Seen in this way", Catherine Kudlick argues,

> disability should sit squarely at the center of historical inquiry […] Social hierarchies privilege those who are fit and attractive. But these qualities can only be appreciated in contrast to those who fail to measure up. The ugly, the deformed, and the helpless all serve as reminders of power's opposite. (2005:560)

While disability studies has inquired about questions of disability aesthetics for some time (Garland-Thomson 1997; Siebers 2010; Fraser 2018; Fox 2020), these ideas find little appreciation in Benin. Instead, deaf Beninese seem to see normate[83] attractiveness and beauty in line with other expectations of normality and personhood like work, family, and a certain position in society.

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[83] In discussing the transformation of feminist theory through integrating disability, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson notes that "[c]osmetic surgery, driven by gender ideology and market demand, now enforces feminine body ideals and standardizes female bodies toward what I have called the 'normate' – the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics" (2002:10), see also (1997:8).

As I have argued above, jealousy and suspicion are ubiquitous social forces in Benin so a certain repudiation of deaf people by people with disabilities is similarly unsurprising. This might also be based on deaf jealousy of the disabled NGOs that are seen as better organized and more established than the deaf associations and organization. Distinction does reinforce deaf similitude – to a limited extent. In the following, I will illustrate how Beninese deaf distinguish themselves from other countries' deaf.

other countries' deaf

Deaf Beninese sometimes deprecatingly refer to *les Béninois* when discussing the country's economic and political problems, or to *les sourds* or SOURDS-DURS when criticizing deaf sociality and community (see also chapter 5). Rarely, however, do they refer to *les sourds Béninois* as a group or unit. By distinguishing themselves from other countries' deaf, however, they implicitly characterize this unuttered group in contrast.

Europe and the USA

Deaf Beninese consider deaf people in Europe or north America far more developed, given all their access to technological gadgets and paraphernalia that apparently make deaf lives so much easier. When visiting from the USA in 2018, Victor gave a sermon in Vêdoko entitled "Keep going forward!" He told us about how the biblical Jews in Egyptian enslavement were told to "turn to the north" (Deut. 2:3) and to go to Israel. Victor then transferred this verse to deaf people in Benin and Africa, telling them to look north, to

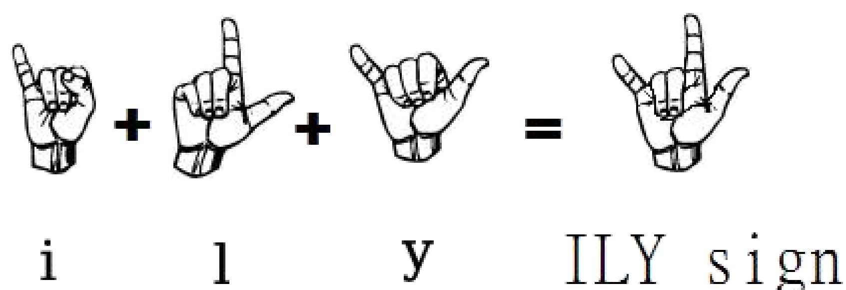

illustration 11: "ILY / I love you" sign as composed of the manual letters I, L, and Y from the international manual alphabet, graphic obtained from wikipedia.org.

the global north, the USA and Europe, and aspire to be like the deaf communities over there and not stay behind, "you have been wandering around this hill country long enough" (Deut. 2:3). He told us about smart watches, facetime, speech-to-text conversion apps, and a bunch of other blessings of the digital revolutions in the north, explicitly telling us that everything is better in the USA. Apart from, of course, feminism, gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and liberals in general, but in deaf church that went without saying.

illustration 12: ILY sign as a pendant on a bracelet that a French deaf volunteer brought as present for deaf schoolchildren (detail from a picture shared on Facebook by Solidarité Sourd Bénin).

In this sense, however, deaf North Americans and Europeans are less perceived as deaf fellows but as members of the somewhat superior developed world and identification does not come easy. Instead, deaf Beninese often point out the cultural differences. In church, this is clearly the frivolous and immoral lifestyle that contradicts the Christian values that Beninese deaf church holds up. In the summer of 2016 in deaf church, Homère told us to pray for Donald Trump so the USA could avoid the doomed fate of liberalism and a female president. The cultural differences between Benin and *les blancs* was considered way more significant than the deaf similitude. Also, the difference in development deaf Beninese witness on TV, social media, or through deaf visitors reminded them of their Beninese-ness as a certain behind-ness.

A kind of an international greeting among the d/Deaf (though rooted in American Sign Language) is the ILY-sign, signifying "I love you". All three letters from the international manual alphabet can be incorporated into one sign (see illustration 11). It is not exactly a declaration of love but an expression of deaf similitude and belonging on the one hand, or a hearing person's attempt to communicate their insight into and appreciation for d/Deaf culture. I only saw the sign a few times in Benin. It was depicted on walls in the integrated school for deaf and hearing students in Louho/Porto Novo, where it was often signed as well when European volunteers took photos with deaf and hearing students or staff. It was also shown on some farewell photos taken of me with deaf acquaintances. The ILY-sign was thus always displayed to an international audience but never among deaf Beninese, which to me is a soft reminder of how the symbols and discourses of Deaf culture and transnational community and similitude reach Benin, for example through gifts

from deaf volunteers from Europe (see illustration 12) but are not necessarily incorporated into local deaf worlds and cultures.

West African deaf associations

Deaf Beninese often meet deaf people from neighboring countries. As many West Africans, deaf people happen to travel for work or visit friends and family in other countries. Church functionaries, deaf football players, and community activists travel to events and meetings, deaf youths visit the bible camps for the deaf in other countries. Foreign deaf migrant workers travel to or through Benin and stop by the deaf church or a deaf school. The old still have foreign friends and teachers. Traveling is mostly limited to Ghana, Togo, and Nigeria while some deaf have been to Burkina Faso and Niger. Furthermore, they connect with other deaf West Africans through Facebook and WhatsApp. They learn about other countries' deaf associations, education, and integration. Almost always, they judge that these countries are better off. Deaf Beninese envy and admire the dynamism of deaf associations in Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, or Mali. They mock and enjoy the charismatic priests visiting from Ghana and Nigeria. Often, they would express that these other countries' deaf are so much more advanced, so much more dynamic, and that the other countries do a lot more for their deaf compatriots than does Benin. In contrast to the USA and Europe, it seems that there is more deaf similitude shared regionally than transcontinentally. Deaf Beninese feel more akin to their neighbors who share their ancestral routes-turned-roots and might be in a similar situation but deal with it better. In this sense, the deaf community in Benin experiences itself through the absence of structures and representation that they see in others.

deaf migrant beggars

Transnational deaf similitude does, however, have its downsides as well. DEAF-SAME expatriates could be mistaken for Beninese and spoil their reputation. One incident during my research in 2018 sticks out as particularly poignant. Deaf Nigerian beggars had appeared in Cotonou and ignited some discussion in the Cotonou deaf communities.

A 1990s handbook on disability services in Benin points out that the phenomenon of begging disabled persons was increasing in urban centers (see Singleton et al. 1997:17). As in many African cities, beggars who are disabled or pretend to be are a common sight at crossroads and traffic lights in Cotonou (see also Groce, Loeb, and Murray 2014). A common norm among deaf Beninese is that begging is to be avoided at any cost because it would

abase themselves and the entire community. The imperative among deaf Beninese is to claim their rights while at the same time live decent lives as hardworking (deaf) citizens. The presence of Nigerian deaf beggars incriminated the Beninese deaf community in front of the hearing populace, as the latter were not necessarily able to tell that those were not deaf Beninese beggars. Unable to convince the Nigerians to stop and leave, representatives of ANSB turned towards the police who detained the Nigerian beggars that were identified with the help of deaf Beninese. I discussed this issue with several deaf friends, particularly when I was following deaf friends in the institutional hurdle race from prison to police to Nigerian embassy to city hall and back and forth, to figure out how to "get rid" of the Nigerians in the most "humane" way. Eventually the police took them to the border and left them to the hands of the Nigerian police. We could not figure out what became of them. Although this was not the ideal solution the ANSB representatives were pursuing – they wanted them to be transferred back safely to their families and communities – they were relieved that the *Nigerian problem* was gone. In the discussions around this incident, only a few deaf youths felt that this course of action was unfair and treasonous to those who were "deaf just like us". In general, the deaf people of Cotonou seemed relieved that the Nigerian beggars no longer spoiled their identities as proper citizens. "It's disrespectful" said Yves, showing me his rough carpenter's hands, covered in blisters, "I work hard for my wife and children, and they just beg!" The whereabouts of the deaf Nigerians did not matter anymore.

It becomes clear that even though deaf people, deaf congregations, and deaf activists from Benin are in (sparse) contact with deaf people from neighboring countries through bible camps and social media, the Beninese deaf community exists as a group within the logics of a Beninese nation. They experience a deaf similitude in a negative mode by being afraid of being identified with those deaf who are not willing to adhere to Beninese deaf norms, not willing to work for their living. Padden and Humphries discussed the issue of peddling and begging in the US, quoting American Deaf associations stating that: "[e]ach Deaf person was individually responsible for maintaining an appropriate image to the public" (Padden and Humphries 2010:397). The deaf beggars from Nigeria gave a bad example of the deaf in general; and the community wants to avoid that the hearing will perceive of deaf Beninese them like that.

The old deaf people are anxious to defend the reputation and the deaf public image in Beninese society. They urge people – in church, in disability rights sensitization workshops, and in the deaf schools – to be good citizens,

good Christians. The notion of good includes humility and dignity. They do not want to be seen as beggars:

> In many preindustrial and some industrial societies, begging is a traditional role for the unemployed, widows, orphans, unmarried mothers, disabled, and sick who find themselves without the protection of kin and community social alliances. (Scheer and Groce 1988:29)

That is to say, although begging was socially acceptable to a certain degree, it associates the beggar with social outcasts that deaf Beninese do not want to be. They try (or imagine) to have control over how this group is regarded by and represented among the larger Beninese society.

*

In discussing and behaving towards a number of others, deaf Beninese constitute themselves as a group without framing this distinct group in concepts that go beyond the utterance *(nous) les sourds*. *The hearing* in general constitute an Other that is the potentially inaccessible world around them that also does not care much about deaf Beninese. Hearing signers breach barriers of access, they are met with respect and gratitude on the one hand and suspicion and neglect on the other. The hearing signers' position in deaf sociality is ambivalent in that they are neither deaf or DEAF-SAME nor do they disappear in the uniform Other of the hearing. Hearing disabled Beninese breach the clear distance because they share some of the social stigma and welfare interest of the deaf. The obstacles in cooperation, mutual integration and understanding, however, lead deaf people to making distinctions between themselves and the disabled others, and *vice versa*. Regarding other countries' deaf, deaf Beninese make moral assessments based on societal values in Europe or the USA (that they generally decline) and on deaf development and progress they see and envy in the USA, Europe, and other West African countries alike. Most clearly, these processes of distinction surface in the story of the Nigerian beggars where these moral assessments lead to the articulation of a distinct *we* that shall not be spoiled by other's deaf misdemeanor. The maintenance of *our* reputation is not just a task directed at outside others but towards members of the Beninese deaf we-group as well.

4.5 public image and social control

More important and consequential than disregarding the behavior of deaf foreigners to control the public image is the surveillance of the behavior of deaf Beninese themselves. It is how *community* is being negotiated and shaped

by its members. Gossip is thereby not just talking for the sake of spending time but a practice of reproducing the social order. Norms and values of collectively accepted, praised or rejected behavior are reiterated in "Schimpfklatsch" (Elias and Scotson 1990), malicious gossip, to manifest in- and exclusion; identification and distinction. Johanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011:205) calls those "calculations" of compliant behavior "regimes of belonging" where compliance to rules ordering social relations, loyalty, participation, acceptance of common goals and sufficient contribution of time and resources are negotiated and surveilled. Through providing opportunities for gossip and also allowing passers-by to passively take part in gossip, deaf spaces help to allow for less established members to learn about those values and their negotiations. Through rumors, gossip, and public denunciation the Cotonou deaf community practices social control over deaf people whom they consider to be part of "the Beninese deaf community". This became apparent in an incident that happened in late 2016.

I was taking part in the funeral of Claire's grandmother in Affamey, a tiny village on the Ouémé river. As is the done thing at funerals of persons who died in old age, the funeral is a huge and long party that involves a lot of food, music, some dancing, and loads of bottled beers, homebrewed *tchoukoutou*, and the local palm schnapps *sodabi*. Batiste, a deaf man in his forties, was believed to have had too much alcohol, so Fabian took the *sodabi* bottle from him. A little later, Fabian passed me the bottle and when Batiste saw this, he came charging up to me to punch me in the face, complaining that the white guy was stealing his booze. Nothing much happened and I was not bothered much. But in the weeks to follow, many deaf people in Cotonou whom I barely knew came up to me at different occasions to say sorry. They were ashamed that a deaf man, one of them, attacked me and they regretted that he shed such a miserable light on the deaf. Instead of letting bygones be bygones, the deaf who asked for my forgiveness worried that the behavior of one deaf individual might spoil the reputation of the entire community. When I met Batiste again in 2018, the first thing he did was to express his sincere repentance for that minor incident that happened almost two years earlier.

The control of the public image is not only expressed in sanctions but also in expectations: in 2019, a big international hotel in Cotonou wanted to hire a disabled person and decided to try with a deaf person. They had seen Joachim on national television in the weekly sign language news show and hence asked the moderator Patrice for support in finding suitable candidates. Patrice had picked three candidates of whom two would do an internship to see if it would work: Moïse, a member of the deaf church in Vêdoko, and

Théodore from the deaf church in Godomey. Joachim insisted on talking to both of them beforehand to make them understand the opportunity as well as their responsibility: They were "nos représentants", our representatives, and "il faut défendre notre réputation", our reputation has to be defended.

Again, he would not use any word like community, group, or kin, but refer to a *we* that was now clearly generalized for *the deaf*. Joachim was in favor of Moïse, as he considered Théodore a fanatic. He would always talk to God and tell people his revelations. Again, the identification remains ambiguous: *We the deaf* are considered as a group from the outside, but within, suspicions between the different fractions linger on – given that Théodore is a member of the opposing church that defies Homère, Joachim's friend (see section 5.3).

The positions Joachim and Homère are taking are in line with their ideas of being morally good – as a Beninese (deaf) person and as a Christian (deaf) person respectively. Joachim does not want the deaf to be seen as deviant from the assumed Beninese normality. Homère wants the image of the deaf to be in harmony with his of a devout, abstinent, hardworking Christian. In both perspectives, they seem to wish that the (deafness) was rather not recognized at all by the hearing. Michele Friedner observed a similar dynamic of social control and concerns about the public image of the deaf in Bangalore:

> [Church] attendees talked about the importance of not quitting jobs soon after been hired because doing so would make deaf people look bad in front of normals and bring shame on other deafs. Attendees also constantly commented on each other's sign language use and the appropriateness of their dress. After the service was finished, deaf attendees made it a point to greet each other and the normal attendees in the next room in order to exhibit polite behavior and to show that they were "equal to normals". (Friedner 2015:69–70)

The expectations and moral imperatives are most clear and least ironic in deaf church. Both Homère and Guillaume are criticized for their strict rules and strict piety. Obviously few people obey all their rules and often do get their share of criticism. Claire called this "prêcher contre la personne", preaching against the person, meaning calling out people – present or absent – by name and using them as bad examples for moral behavior. A lot of young and well-educated deaf people left church when Homère and Guillaume became too austere for their liking. As Joachim's second wife, Claire was always confronted and insulted and in 2016 had decided not to go to church anymore. She was also fed up with the churchgoers' hypocrisy. In an interview in 2016, she told me that Joachim "goes out and drinks with girls, and he talks too much, he puts his penis just anywhere. And in church, they talk about *my* sins,

pfft…" (interview 29/10/2016). In 2018, she had started to attend church again and even went with Homère and Maurine to a bible summer school in Nigeria in late 2019. "Preaching against the person" is not aimed at disparaging individuals but works to visualize morals and norms of the community. Despite the harsh moral code, Claire came back to church for the word of God, as she said, and surely also for the sake of community and belonging.

The poverty of deaf men, that is, their failure to work hard and achieve, was a disturbing source of fun and ridicule in their presence, a joking practice that seriously embarrassed and hurt the objects of mockery – so much so that it took me several months to convince Yves to invite me over to his place somewhere in the swamps of Agla. Moïse would constantly laugh about the house and ask Yves in front of others whether he had taken a swim again in the morning. He would sign that Yves' pockets were always empty and laugh; a humor that I did not really understand. Yves, thus, always asked me to wait and visit him when he had made some money and fancied the place up a little. He never made that money but eventually gave in and invited me. His wife Kiva and one of their two sons lived with him in one room of an old family estate that was literally in the swamp, impossible to access dry-shod, and surrounded by dense clouds of mosquitoes. On the wall behind the nice sofa that he had made himself was a poster featuring a photograph of a bourgeois parlor with carpets, wallpapers, and neo-baroque furniture. The setup of his apartment expressed his aspiration to provide a proper home for his family and contrasted sharply with the foul smell of wastewater surrounding the house and the never-ending buzz of myriads of mosquitoes. The mockery he constantly was the object of was a form of social control and inducement to be a better, that is, a financially more resourceful husband.

Others like Anne (see section 5.2) or Jean-Louis (see section 2.2) were tired of the coercive social control, the inner conflicts, gossips, and jealousies of the deaf communities and chose to position themselves more in the interstices, taking part in both the hearing and the deaf world, complaining about both, and neglect to commit to one. There are limits of distinction and alienation that create the ambiguous positionings individuals assume, as I want to illustrate with an intermezzo on Fabian.

intermezzo: Fabian opted out

In 1989, Fabian was born in Cotonou to Xwla and Goun speaking parents. He deafened at the age of six in the vacation after he had finished CI, the second class of primary school. After an odyssey from hospitals to *féticheurs* and back, his parents accepted his deafness and took him to EBS where Anne

was one of his teachers. He speaks Xwla, Mina, French, and some English that he learned from reading about Bob Marley and his lyrics. His speech is, however, very hard to understand; people who do not know him will not easily be able to talk with him. Yet, it helped me when my signing competence was still poor. He did not continue school after CEP but started a training at a restaurant to be a confectioner; a profession that he practiced for some years in a bakery in the fancy Haie Vive neighborhood, making cakes and pastries for Cotonou's expat community. By 2016, he had started working as a cleaner in an international NGO – a safe and decently paid job that most deaf persons hope for. While his educational and professional path went beyond the deaf networks after primary school, he and some of his deaf colleagues from EBS – namely Isaïe and Gustave – became disciples of Pasteur Homère in the deaf church in Vêdoko. They believed everything he said, Fabian remembered, and felt at home in church as well as in Homère's house and family. At some point, however, the three of them realized how they were being manipulated to spy and snitch on other deaf, as Fabian sees it now. They understood that Homère just sought his own profit, just like the activists in deaf associations and NGOs. Fabian filled our night-outs with stories, rumors, and complaints about the hypocrisy of the elder community members: Joachim stole the money that was meant for the pupils, the hearing staff of EBS purloined the food donations meant for the school, Paul created an association solely for his own profit, *tout le monde veut être chef,* everyone wants to be chief (see chapter 5), and in general the deaf just talked bad about the other deaf to cast a better light on themselves. However, he was most hurt by Homère and the congregation for their sanctimoniousness while actually populating a snake pit. His closest deaf friends, Isaïe and Gustave, left him alone in Cotonou – Isaïe went first to the Mono region and then up north to teach in Natitingou; Gustave left to live with his French wife in Paris. He was friends with Claire, but after having been too critical of her husband Joachim, he was no longer welcome in the center in Agla. Also, their hanging out together sparked rumors about adultery. Thus, after his stark turn towards deaf sociality in his youth, Fabian took another turn and showed his back to the Beninese deaf communities as they were. Instead, he met with friends and acquaintances in the red-light district Jonquet for shisha, weed, and booze after work – a pass-time that granted him frequent appearance as a bad example in Homère's church sermons against immoral behavior.

Through WhatsApp and Facebook, however, he was always connected and up to date with what was new in the deaf community. Also through social media he was connected to deaf activists in other West African countries and

beyond. He had an appreciation for values like deaf identity and mutual responsibility. Particularly the deaf-deaf responsibility, however, he experienced as repeatedly broken and betrayed in the Beninese deaf communities by self-interest and corruption by the ones in charge. Consequently, he was among those who condemned the way Joachim and Homère dealt with the deaf Nigerian beggars. While they wanted to get them out of the country and rid of the problem as fast as possible, Fabian, Isaïe and even Gustave in Paris were furious at the selfishness and lack of solidarity towards those whom they perceived of as their deaf peers – a notion that makes more sense from a global community and social media perspective than from the view of deaf activists in Cotonou fighting stigmatization. The leaders of Beninese deaf communities regarded them, in turn, as others who would spoil their public image with their use of drugs, openly promiscuous lifestyle, and skepticism of Evangelical morals.

The experience of social control and coercion of the communities, the hypocrisy of their leaders and the neglect of larger deaf solidarity made Fabian opt out of deaf community. Instead, he spends time with hearing peers who share his leisure interests and connects through social media with deaf peers who agree with his protest. His relations grew through shared experience in school and by becoming social outcasts through opposing the deaf collectivity together. They are thus somewhat hand-picked instead of the consequence of a collective belonging to Beninese communities. Turning away from these communities, however, also meant a kind of global orientation towards deaf values and identity.

Fabian's ambivalent relation with the deaf community reflects the more complex understanding of belonging offered by Tine Gammeltoft in her article on subjectivity in Vietnam. In discussing moral and emotional demands, she illustrates how contradicting and ambivalent expectations and implications shape belonging as oppressive experience that some people endure and live with (Gammeltoft 2018:92) while others like Fabian might choose to flee the moral obligations. His turn towards hearing peers, however, was only possible based on his way of being deaf as a deafened person. Because he had some hearing world competence, he could make himself understood and understood a lot about the values and dynamics among the hearing even when direct communication with his hearing friends and buddies was not possible. Although he deafened relatively early, he was very clever in getting around, as I illustrated in some encounters we had with the police in section 3.5. This access is not available to everyone, so not everyone would be able to make such independent choices and live that self-determined life.

4.6 communities and multiple orientations

Despite the fact that concepts or terminology like deaf community, world, or culture are not used among the deaf in Benin, I would describe their belonging and sociality in terms of community. It is more descriptive than discursive and might be just a conceptual grouping of people who have something in common, share a somewhat common destiny, for better or worse. The feeling of community, of belonging, of similitude is not grounded in a shared awareness of being culturally Deaf that transcends social barriers like religion, ethno-linguistic background, socio-economic status. The community-making aspects are more social, based on immediate interaction and experience. Maurine said that deaf church is the right church because "in deaf church, I understand." Deaf community and communities, deaf spaces, and deaf sociality do not come with a discursive or identity political program either, but: here, we understand. Those who choose to opt out, like Anne, Jean-Louis, and Fabian, can only do so because they have communicative access to other socialities.

Fabian's story illustrates how deaf communities work on various levels and various ways. He explicitly opted out of deaf community and sociality based on and around deaf church and formal deaf representation. At the same time, he was well connected in Beninese and beyond Beninese social media. Despite the fact that he was sick and tired of gossip and slander within the community, he is thirsty for those stories to be shared on WhatsApp and keeps me updated with the latest rumors. He is in and out of the community, and he is a deaf Beninese, after all.

In concluding this chapter, I want to focus on two ambiguous characteristics of the Beninese deaf community. On the one hand, I will reflect on the moral imperatives that are produced in institutions like church and deaf activism that speak to the deaf, but not about being deaf. On the other hand, I will sum up the deaf's consciousness of boundaries and distinction and make clear, that these are constantly breached.

(deaf) values

The deaf networks and communities are small and created in an interactionist, not a discursive mode. This becomes very clear to me regarding the deaf church congregation in Vêdoko. They are a group with a tight core and a rather lose periphery. They do bind through the shared language and the shared experience of not understanding and not being understood outside the group. Deaf culture or sign language per se are, however, no points of reference for this group. Their moral discourses center around the right faith

and the right devout behavior. One could say they seek to be good (deaf) Christians in a sense that yes, they are deaf, but that is not part of their identity politics or cultural self-assertion. Consequently, they take literally the bible quote from Matthew 11:4-5, that is also printed on the church's stationery: When the day comes, the deaf priest apprentice Donald told me, the good (deaf) Christians will be hearing and speaking, and they will never need sign language again.

A similar logic but with other morals is present at Joachim's deaf center in Agla. This deaf space is more open to hearing people and more part of the neighborhood than the very deaf deaf church. The education and empowerment approach that his center tries to follow has an idea of equality, expressed in what Joachim argued at several sensitization workshops I accompanied him to: "I have an NGO, I have a school, I am married, I have six children, I have achievements – I am normal just like you." It follows an approach of normalization that does not strive to repair or erase deafness as a condition or communicative way of being, but also does not argue for a fundamentally different way of being. They are Beninese, they are not an ethnic group of their own, no "People of the Eye" (Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011). They want to blend in as productive members of society (Foucault, Stastny, and Şengel 1995). The discourse of the center in Agla seems to be: How to be a good and proper (deaf) Beninese citizen.

There is, thus, an awareness of being different from the hearing majority that is not, though, articulated in positive terms. From a Deaf Studies perspective, one would say that they do not appreciate their own deaf cultural value. Deaf community and communities are realms of shared fate and experience destiny that are, however, not exclusive. They do not constitute a deaf world that is separated from a hearing world.

worlds apart?

This book follows the deaf perspective on being deaf in Benin, my research took place in deaf spaces, in the deaf worlds of Benin. The deaf do, however, live among a hearing majority that has been discussed in a dualism between deaf and hearing worlds (Bechter 2008). The deaf seem predisposed to choose and dwell in the deaf world, as it is "our world" (quoted in Padden and Humphries 2010:401), while emphasizing that it was not deaf people who initiated their own world to segregate themselves. Instead, they did so as a reaction to the "hearing world" to which, as deaf people, they had no access (Johnson and Erting 1989:51). Some scholars demand to go beyond this dualism (Vollhaber 2018), criticizing it for being an artificial and political

construction. Yet, the experience of living in different – not separated but entangled – worlds is a daily one for both deaf and hearing people experiencing challenges in communication (Saint-Loup 1996:3). One has to point out – which Aude de Saint-Loup does not explicitly do here – that that experience is more oppressive and painful for the deaf than for the hearing (Davis 1995). Nowhere are deaf and hearing worlds entirely disentangled, and nor are they in Benin. Some deaf are actively fulfilling turns towards deaf sociality and have little contact to hearing people. Yet they refer to resources and support from the hearing world.

Deaf people's orientations towards deaf sociality are ambivalent and flexible, crossing the blurry lines between deaf and hearing worlds and sociality. Joachim lived in a house that belonged to his entire family after his father's death. They sold the estate in fall 2019 and he used his share to get a new place, but also to pay the debts he had all over. As one of the older brothers, he is responsible for his younger siblings. Without the backing of his family estate, many of his projects would have been – and now will be – riskier.

Maurine, who is also a central figure of the deaf community as the wife of Homère, the deaf priest, always moves to her sister's place when she is sick to find some rest and support. Her mother from Abomey comes visiting her and their constant WhatsApp message exchange is a source of joy for both. Her mother also supports her corner shop at the church premises by buying products like a tray of sodas or cookies. Maurine never pays her back, so, it is not an investment but a gift. By giving it in the form of merchandise for the shop, her mother however supports her role as an active small businesswoman. The space of the shop itself is, in turn, provided by the church, hence the deaf community.

Mauril has his barbershop in his mother's house in the Akpakpa neighborhood of Cotonou. His brothers live in Italy and Côte d'Ivoire and used to support him financially. They stopped at some point and he does not want to ask for more support; instead he prefers to continue on his own. Yet, he is staying with his mother who is also doing care work with his wife and children.

Yann's spot in a tailor workshop in Natitingou is, again, provided through friendship with a hearing tailor. This friendship, however, can also be told as a constructed deaf kinship, as he used to work in the center in Agla where the hearing tailor's deaf son went to school. The mother's knowledge of and experience with deaf people did make her want to include Yann in her workshop. At the same time, she also just liked him.

A similar deaf-hearing kinship construction is at stake around Maman Vadim. She is not Vadim's mother but the mother of his ex-wife. While the daughter moved out to live with another man, Maman Vadim is still an important figure for the deaf neighborhood in Agla. She takes over a guardian role for Elie and is also a friend and acquaintance for many other deaf. She is one of the few *sodabi* retailers who can claim the trust of deaf consumers in Cotonou. On the occasion of the funeral of a mother of deaf friends in July 2019, she and I were the only hearing mourners sitting among the deaf guests[84].

Whereas Deaf Studies often differentiates the deaf world from the hearing world (Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011:9), it seems like the existence of a deaf world in Benin is more ambiguous, somewhat limited regarding both scope and intensity. It is a deaf world within and constructed as inferior to the majority hearing world. Even though the deaf follow practices of *distinction from the hearing*, there is not such a clear-cut *distancing from the hearing world*. Rather, they are practicing a deaf world within the hearing world that is largely interconnected and determined by values of the (hearing) Christian and Beninese world. By creating deaf spaces and deaf sociality *in* the hearing world, their deaf worlds may contribute to a more diversified (deaf/hearing) world than some exclusionary Deaf culture proponents[85] and their audist counterparts.

As such, it seems that deaf Beninese are not seeking to build and live their deaf world in Benin, but to find their place in the world. There are certain practices of creation of deaf spaces and distinction but also processes of assimilation, integration, and imitation. Consequently, deaf turns and orientations are not one-way-streets but ambivalent, ductile, and reversible processes. Deaf people in Benin orient themselves to more than one group, they seek more than one belonging. The surge into community is not as smooth as often argued in Western Deaf cultures where "all it takes is a taste…" (Padden and Humphries 2010:401). Instead, many deaf seem to strive for what Joseph Murray called "coequality":

> With coequality, the traditional binaries - of Deaf worlds and hearing worlds, of Deaf lives "segregated from" or "assimilated into" hearing societies - can be seen not in opposition to one another, but as mutually formative. Deaf people live simultaneously in hearing spaces and in Deaf spaces, are part of a Deaf community and active participants in non-Deaf

[84] Much to the chagrin of the deaf community around the center in Agla, Maman Vadim passed away in May 2020.

[85] see Myers and Fernandes 2010 for a critical account of divisive potentials in Deaf culture movements and Deaf Studies

> social settings. Coequality presumes a distinct group acculturated to, but not assimilated in, larger society. (Murray 2008:102)

To a certain extent, the inner conflicts subside when confronted with conflicts with other deaf communities or when the deaf group is set in opposition to an oppressive hearing other. In her research on deaf spaces on public trains in Mumbai, Annelies Kusters quotes a man stating that public deaf spaces are often somewhat harmonious because the deaf commuters share deaf similitude in distinction to the hearing folks around. It is when they are among themselves that the conflicts show: "'So where hearing people can oppress us, we are one front, but in the clubs, there's trouble and mutual oppression'" (quoted in Kusters 2017:182). Joachim once told me a similar, though less hopeful story that he had read about the "Indians" [sic!] in north America in one of his comic books. Groups of Native Americans were engaged in wars amongst each other when "the whites" came in. This made it very easy for them to fight the Native Americans. At one point, there were two tribes fighting one another, and "the whites" set the forests and grasses around them on fire – a ring of fire moving in. The Native Americans were still fighting and fighting while the ring grew closer and closer. When they realized their situation, they finally stopped fighting and they united when they saw the futility of their fight – but it was too late. So finally, they were united and, Joachim concluded with a sinister and weary smile, "c'était le premier signe de la fin" (fieldnotes 15/03/2018), when people stop fighting each other, it shows that their end is near.

Deaf Beninese share the experience of living their daily deaf lives in a hearing world and feel connected to and understood by other deaf. This shared experience, however, also depends on where they find themselves on the spectrum of deaf diversity discussed above and how inclusive and supportive or exclusive and oppressive their immediate surrounding is. Yet, above and beyond the rather small and limited communities, there is a collective that deaf Beninese feel part of and refer to when discussing their experience, they call it *les sourds*, the deaf, this ephemeral something we might call deaf community, or Ablon's common destiny. Even if people do not know each other personally, their physical likeness may suggest a shared experience that can be understood in terms of Rabinow's *biosociality* (Rabinow 1996:102, see also Friedner 2010: 342). This belonging remains vague and ambiguous and is not mobilized in every interaction; yet it matters.

Much of the argumentation in this chapter only holds true for people who have the chance to get in touch with other deaf people, with deaf

sociality and communities. In chapter 6, I will explore those ways of being deaf in Benin that do not have this access.

*

In April 2020, Hugo, a young, tall deaf man I knew from church, died after having heavy fever and diarrhea. Immediately, fears and rumors erupted on Facebook and WhatsApp that he had died of Covid-19 that had first been diagnosed in Benin in late March 2020. All my deaf friends were worried and discussed and judged Hugo's ways of socializing, where he ate, where he drank, which people he hung out with. It was clear to them that a first deaf coronavirus case would be a manifest threat to all of them. Eventually, it became clear that Hugo died of food poisoning and it seemed like a sigh of relief that at least until then, the global pandemic had not yet touched the deaf community. This occurred while I was writing the first draft of this chapter and it felt like the incident expressed the ambiguities of the deaf community: There is a feeling of belonging, a feeling of shared fate, that simultaneously leads to judging and monitoring each other's behavior. Deaf people constantly practice distinction work while at the same time knowing that they are all part of *the deaf*, and deaf sociality becomes quite physical when faced with an infectious disease. Similarly, some of them would share the social media messages from a deaf woman in France who caught the virus and reported how she was feeling and dealing with it.

Deaf community and communities represent the plurality and ambiguity of belonging of deaf Beninese. It is the young who look beyond these fractions in the Beninese deaf community, who feel a solidarity to other deaf people as well, those outside the networks, those without sign language, and those outside Benin. Inner conflicts and coercion might keep the deaf communities from focusing on broader issues, solidarity, and identity beyond the confines of their immediate peers. The next chapter focuses on how those questions are negotiated in connection with leadership among the deaf.

5 the desire to be chief

> "Joachim a détruit mon projet" Paul asserts when telling me his version of the story of the deaf center in Agla that they had founded together. "C'est devenu un crime économique." After profiting from Paul's expertise because "he himself did not have the brains for it", Joachim kicked him out of the project. He wanted it all for himself, Paul claims. Then Joachim found some funding, the deaf followed him and they did not support Paul anymore. "Tu connais la transhumance? S'il y a argent – les gens y vont. C'est comme ça au Bénin." (interview with Paul, 19/09/2016)

Paul and Joachim together created the Association pour la Promotion de l'Emploi aux Sourds (APES, Association for Advancement and Employment of the Deaf) and the deaf center in Agla (CPISB, Center for the Advancement of Initiatives of the Beninese Deaf), but they split paths soon after due to disagreements about how the center should be run. Joachim claimed that Paul wanted to profit personally, Paul claimed that Joachim only used him and his expertise but then kicked him out so he would not have to share the profit and the glory. The term *transhumance* that Paul used in the quotation is common in human geography and anthropology to describe different types of nomadic pastoralism (Blench 2001). In referring to this concept here, Paul implies that deaf Beninese follow the money just like pastoralists and their herds of cattle follow the rains, pastures, or other external factors that their profits, well-being, or even lives depend on. Using this analogy, Paul aimed at discrediting the Beninese deaf. Movements and shifts of authority, allegiance, and resources, however, are a characteristic of deaf hierarchies and community life:

> "SOURDS-DURS", Pasteur Homère tells me, deaf community life is hard because everyone wants to be chief. Joachim and Paul, Guillaume and Troyen, and now Isaïe. *Tout le monde veut être chef.*
>
> I ask about Homère, does he want to be chief as well?
>
> Pasteur Homère answers without a hint of irony or amusement: *Oui, bien sûr.* (fieldnotes 28/08/2016)

It is not literally every-one who wants to become chief. People who uttered this phrase – and many did – understand it as a kind of general critique of competition, rivalry, and jealousy among deaf Beninese while being able to name people who actually do want to be chief. Although a limited number of people constitute this *tout le monde*, it is understood to be characteristic of deaf sociality in Benin, which is why I am dedicating an entire chapter to this topic.

It is a very typical story for a deaf Beninese project but also for the work of associations in Benin more generally (Maboudou Alidou and Niehof 2012). As deaf sociality in Benin cradled in and often evolved around institutions like deaf church or the national representative body ANSB, conflicts within these institutions set dynamics into motion that went beyond the people directly involved. Taking a closer look at the phrasing of Homère's quote above reveals a subtle meaning of being chief in this context. In the quoted conversation, Homère used signed French. He does that often, but here he also did because I was still learning to sign, so signed French was more accessible to me. The French *chef* has similar meanings to the English *chief*, referring to both a leader in general and a head of a tribe. In Benin, the term also invokes notions of power and authority connected to the French colonial administration that established and promoted certain chefs as representatives and agents of colonial rule (Alber 1997:139, 1994:19)[86]. The sign CHEF is tapping the right shoulder with a slightly c-shaped right hand, possibly implying insignia of military rank (illustration 13). Homère and others say and sign "être chef" instead of "être *le* chef", "being chief" instead of "being *the* chief". Although this may partially be due to the fluidity between signed French and Signs (articles play no role in the latter) that characterized most of my interviews and conversations, it also points out that "être chef" is not necessarily a certain position, role, or function that one seeks to occupy but a status and an attribute one wants to achieve.

illustration 13: CHEF, chief, boss, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

In this chapter, I will have a look at the question of leadership in the communities. There is a limited number of formal leader positions available – most importantly the priest of deaf church and the president of the National Association of the Deaf in Benin (ANSB). Minor positions can be created through founding and heading an NGO or taking over an office in a broader disability rights structure. Other less formal chief positions can be achieved

[86] This rather uncommon attempt of the French colonial administration to install a kind of indirect rule did not produce the aspired efficiency but instead yielded manifest consequences and ruptures in local power structures, see Alber (1995:38, 1996).

in creating or sometimes just postulating a group of followers, like being the "leader of the (deaf) youth". Being chief comes with social status within and sometimes beyond the deaf community. It also entails, however, being increasingly exposed to demands and expectations, to criticism, and jealousy. In this chapter I argue that the desire to be chief is borne by the experience of interstitiality and lack of social status. The tactics that deaf chiefs-to-be employed to achieve status were, however, generating and reproducing difference, conflict, and, in turn, weakened the community and the political and activist potential of being deaf in Benin.

Politics of power that circle around very minor issues, fights that break out over questions of limited relevance to any of the involved people and a multiplicity of offices and titles are features of Beninese small and large scale politics in general, as Erdmute Alber worked out (Alber 1994, 2000). I will discuss how deaf Beninese, deaf men in particular, strive for leading positions in deaf church, deaf community, and ANSB. The tendency for male and Christian domination of the deaf community was laid out in deaf history around the world that established father figures like de l'Épée, Clerc, Gallaudet and Andrew Foster and continued in Benin with Victor Vodounou and Pasteur Serge Tamomo. The power struggles also involved upcoming deaf youth who want to take over responsibilities with the expressive complaint that it was only vanity and greed that motivated the older deaf patriarchs to hold leading positions.

The ways that deaf men strive to be chief recalls Marshall Sahlins' article on big-men in Melanesia (Sahlins 1963) and Jean-François Médard's application of the idea to the African "politicien entrepreneur" (Médard 1992). Through a close look at the dynamics and the motivations of these individuals, section 5.1 will discuss what is at stake for them individually and how the dynamics and discourses reflect deaf and hearing Beninese ideas of normalcy and achievement. Section 5.2 will introduce the tradition of male chiefs and social ancestors in the Beninese deaf community that seems to serve as a blueprint for being chief. As the central institutions of the deaf community – deaf church and ANSB – are located in Cotonou, this chapter is focusing on the Cotonou deaf community. Church and ANSB claim, however, to represent all Beninese deaf and so think some of the contestants who want to assume positions of power, even though they are not located in Cotonou. I will introduce leadership struggles in both these institutions. In section 5.3, I will lay out the conflict between two deaf priests that led to the division of what was previously the only deaf church into two antagonistic congregations. In section 5.4, I will follow the quest of a young deaf man who

challenges the authority of the older deaf and their attempts to ward him off – an ongoing conflict that nurtured gossip and rumors during most of my research. While the discursive concern of the people involved was thus the Beninese deaf community, the arena where the competition was played out was mostly the Cotonou deaf community. Both conflicts reflect deaf diversity in Benin but are also part of an ongoing negotiation of deaf values and sociality, as I will conclude in section 5.5.

Muslim deaf and deaf women had only minor roles to play in the game of chiefs and did not show up on the main stages of the central conflicts, which is not to say that they did not try or have no potential. In this regard, the deaf community rather mirrors the male and Christian dominated society of (southern)[87] Benin. To fill this gap, I will introduce two individuals – Zeïd and Anne – who might have but eventually did not become chief.

5.1 deaf big-men?

> "Hlà bìɔ xɔ mɛ ɔ, è ño̰ nú gbɔ nà hɔ!"
> When the hyena enters the house, the wether has to leave!
> (Fon proverb from Benin, quoted and translated in Elwert 1973:97)
>
> Ich mach's auf die Babo-Art
> Chabos wissen, wer der Babo ist
> Hafti Abi ist der, der im Lambo und Ferrari sitzt[88]
> (*Chabos wissen, wer der Babo ist*, Haftbefehl feat. Farid Bang, 2013)

Marshall Sahlins introduced the concept of the big-man from Melanesia and Polynesia to the vocabulary of political anthropology. Although taking a concept from the southern Pacific to Benin is literally far-fetched, looking at the negotiations and conflicts of power through the lens of big-men is not mere anthropological nostalgia. I suggest reading the person-centered history of deaf representation in Benin in terms of the big-men for there has always been a strong male leader in the community organizations – reflecting the male-dominated society in Benin in general – and they are referred to with praise and respect that many deaf men aspire to. They had and have a certain control over community affairs like marriages, moral orientations in church

[87] Islam prevails in the northern regions of Alibori, Donga, and Borgu while about a quarter of the country's population is Muslim, INSAE (2016:13). While Djougou is known as a Muslim religious and cultural center, northern towns like Natitingou and Parakou are dominated by churches and cathedrals, public celebrations of Christian holidays and distribution of material promoting various Christian denominations, suggesting that in general, Christianity prevails over Islam in public discourse.

[88] I do it the Babo way / Chabos know who the Babo is / The big brother is he who's driving Lambos and Ferraris.

(see section 4.3), and can use their function to engage with (hearing) state actors like the police (see sections 3.5 and 3.4). These powers of control are far from being uncontested and depend, in the classical Weberian sense, on the obedience of their subjects.

There are big-men among the deaf in Benin, but they do not perfectly fit Sahlins' model. He points out the big-men's interest is in siphoning off the production of their followers, while maintaining a system that profits all agents involved. In this sense, big-men are working within a certain capitalistic logic (Sahlins 1963:289; 292); they aim at substituting extraction for reciprocity to become rich. Jean-François Médard points out the central idea of being and staying a big man nicely when writing that

> [a]u cœur de la logique du "big man" se trouve ainsi un échange symbolique qui permet en premier lieu de convertir des ressources économiques […] en ressources relationnelles de loyauté, puis dans un deuxième temps, de convertir ces ressources relationnelles en ressource économique (Médard 1992:170).

Big-men, he writes, turn their economic resources into relational resources of loyalty and authority, which can, in a second step, be turned into – hopefully more valuable – economic resources. While this notion surely supported the wide usage of the big-man concept in discussing kleptocracies, nepotism and dictatorships around the world (Avirgan and Honey 1982; Behr 1991; Médard 1992), this direct gain in financial wealth is not necessarily the aim, or even a possibility, in the deaf community as deaf people in Benin usually have very little money. Leadership within the deaf community does not necessarily mean access to more financial or material resources. What, then, is the resource, the currency so to speak, deaf big-men strive to siphon? What is their interest in becoming big-men? What do they achieve?

Deaf big-men can gain in status, prestige, and "wealth in people" (Guyer 1995). Similar to Médard's fluid symbolic exchange, Jane Guyer considers wealth in people to be a process of varied components, valuations, and political mobilizations (1995:89) that "has been invoked as a guiding and persistent principle of African social life, even when shifts in shape and content over time are clearly envisaged" (Guyer 1995:86). In this sense, the resources that deaf big-men dispose of are more subtle than direct financial gain. They manifest as social capital that might be of use in the most unexpected situations:

> Joachim and I were on a trip to Togo to visit the bible camp for the deaf in Aného in July 2019. When we left the taxi at the border, Joachim realized that he had forgotten his ID. We walked up to the border post, and

> before we could fully explain the situation, the border policeman said: "You're Joachim, the director of the deaf school in Agla!" I translated although Joachim had already seen his name on the policeman's lips. He had been a security guard to the minister of education who had visited the school a year earlier. He led us through the customs and also talked us through the Togolese border. Joachim's position and public profile allowed him to travel without ID – the way back a few days later was a bit more challenging, though. (fieldnotes 07/14/19)

Joachim's function as school director and president of a southern Beninese network of disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) granted him access to politicians and media presence that happened to become a resource – even if he did not even intend it in this instance.

Many of the dynamics of converting resources can be mirrored in Pierre Bourdieu's reflection on forms of capital. Social and cultural capital are, however, not just means to be converted into economic capital (Bourdieu 1986:24) but are also of value in themselves and are useful to cope with challenges in everyday life. As this chapter will illustrate, the repeating conversions of capital or resources are not just means to increase the economic outcome as Sahlins and Médard would have it. Instead, titles and statuses are also goals in themselves – that can also be stored as resources to be converted into support or allegiance in times of need or uncertainty.

Following Sahlins, big-men are not powerful by office, inheritance, or appointment but by mobilizing followers that accept their authority, a notion which is not too far from Max Weber's intrinsically relational understanding of *Herrschaft*/authority as finding support and/or obedience among a group of subordinates (Weber 1922:38; Maurer 2004:43ff).

The chiefs-to-be do not seem to seek authority to realize their vision of a deaf community or to necessarily act out their position for the benefit of the community, nor even to change anything about it at all. They do not wish, at least not primarily, to access financial resources for personal or kin benefit – there are not too many of those resources among deaf Beninese anyway. Socio-economic achievement is not the result but the precondition to take over responsibility, to become a chief, and to find groups of followers – the transhumance that Paul describes in the opening quotation. Recognition does provide the chiefs with some social capital – as illustrated by the short vignette on Joachim crossing the border. Before all, however, it seems to be the position, status and title that are achievements in and of themselves, achievements that some individuals aspire to as part of their subject-formation.

Besides the resources for potential future profit – in whichever currency – it seems that deaf big-men seek to manage their spoiled identities. Erving Goffman (1986) discussed various ways in which stigmatized individuals react and reconstruct their social standing through, for example, hiding or repairing their stigmata or feeling a need to outperform and compensate the negative labels they receive. The deaf individuals in the conflicts I will introduce below had their stories and experience of discrimination and neglect but also experienced exclusion and a general lack of belonging. In chapter 3, I have shown how deafness is constructed as defective and ridiculous and that people have generally low expectations towards the deaf (see also chapter 6). The social construction of deafness and disability has often been discussed invoking Erving Goffman's stigma vocabulary (Shuttleworth and Kasnitz 2004), emphasizing that the social validations of disability (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999) or deafness (Davis 1995) are more debilitating than the impairments as such. It is thus not surprising that deaf Beninese would seek to manage their spoiled identities by achieving status, prestige, and social capital, and eventually a normate identity that they were denied. In a patriarchal society, deaf and defective men are also faced with a crisis in masculinity: With limited access to well-paying jobs, being faced with public ridicule, and with families of prospective spouses doubting their ability to responsibly care for a family, their maleness was put into question. The heteronormative and conservative teachings on men as heads, providers, and protectors of the family in Evangelical deaf church – as in Benin in general – further increased expectations towards deaf men. Faced with obstacles to achieve normate manhood, deaf men may also find prospects of self-esteem and identity in becoming a big-man.

As Sahlins points out, big-men can never be sure of their position but continuously have to defend their power through redistribution and rhetoric as their power and authority is always relational, socially dependent and not oppressive or achieved by physical force (Sahlins 1963:290–91). The discussion of the experience and management of spoiled identity by some of the protagonists of this chapter is also based on the reflections of being deaf as being liminal and interstitial discussed above (see section 2.4).

Sahlins mentions that big-men often step up from equals and are not predetermined by birth or class. Instead, they build a base of supporters through creating dependencies and arguing for support of others (see also Médard 1992:172). He identifies "haranguing" as a central means to spawn support by "public verbal suasion", thus, aspiring big-men have to trust the power of their word (Sahlins 1963:290–91). In the context of the Cotonou

deaf community, the power of the ~~word~~ sign is also controversial given power relations that can be practiced through the diversity in deaf communication. Haranguing and gossiping work both in public and behind people's backs. Big-men work on their authority and image by creating or spreading existing rumors about other big-man aspirants.

Whenever the deaf in Cotonou met, they would share gossip about others. Sometimes that was harmless, like mocking a deaf woman for having bad hair, sometimes it was serious, like accusing a deaf man of having raped minor deaf girls. I learned tons of deaf gossip, slander, and defamation about almost every deaf person I worked with. While there were some positive stories about deaf individuals, like "XY really works hard" or "XX is a great hairdresser", the good images became rarer the more known and higher up in the community hierarchy the deaf person in question was. Rarely did I hear good things about these deaf – unless about those who had already passed away. Gossip is daily social practice among the deaf and it is an important aspect of making the communities, practicing social control, creating networks and cohesion. Gossip about the leaders and rumors sown by one leader about another have a particular quality and are also an expression of the DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT and SOURDS-DURS characteristic of Beninese deaf sociality. Gossip, jealousy, and the never-ending competition around the desire to be chief may be one of the elements that make being deaf in Benin Beninese as it is a common phenomenon in cooperative work and associations in Benin[89].

Public performance and presentation of self (see also Goffman 1959) are ways to create and re-affirm the status of big-man. Deaf big-men belittled and disparaged not only competitors or challengers in public, but also younger deaf people to demonstrate who the big-man was – *Chabos wissen, wer der Babo ist.* They would spread gossip about absentees or tell embarrassing stories about those present to show their network competence, their potentially harmful knowledge, and perform and thereby claim superiority. That superiority is contested by other big-men and aspirants who also employ their networks, gossip, and haranguing.

While money and economic well-being are not the prospect of aspirations to authority – there is little to gain from the deaf peers[90] – resources are a qualifying charisma to achieve authority in the first place, a dynamic that Paul described quite picturesquely as transhumance. The acquisition of

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[89] See for example Rigobert Tossou (1993) on conflicts in peasants' associations in Benin.

[90] Unlike on the (hearing) "market of religions" in Benin, where Hippolyte Amouzouvi identifies founders and leaders of religious communities to be among the richest people of the country, see Amouzouvi (2005).

financial resources happens mostly outside the deaf communities and is the precondition instead of the aim of being chef, even though deafness and representation are mobilized as resource and value to obtain external funding and occasional self-enrichment (see Kusters, Meulder, and O'Brien 2017b:18 and Friedner 2015, 2013, 2014a for deafness as value and an ambiguous resource). Joachim's case seems to be the most illustrative of this dynamic. Through his various engagements in deaf and disability activism he had national and international connections that granted him access to certain sources of funding. Although he might siphon a certain share of these resources for his private, activist, and leisure expenses, he did not accumulate wealth in money or possession. Instead, distributing resources and opportunities granted him followers, respect, and status – wealth in people. This status, however, had to be renewed regularly as being chief comes with expectations.

He bursts out his achievements at any sensitization workshop he can get a hold of. He would usually present himself as a deaf and disabled person, only to lead the attention of members of local councils, social workers, parents, teachers or whoever was attending the sensitization event, to his achievements. He was deaf – but: He was director of his own school, he had his apprenticeship and small business as upholsterer, he had international partners, he had six children (claiming Claire's first son from another man as his child, a claim she did not make), he held the presidency of RAPHAL, a network of disabled people's organizations in southern Benin. The personal achievements serve to make the public person, the man, the big-man.

Before getting into the nitty-gritty of conflicts between big-man aspirants, I will introduce the historical background against which deaf leadership and kin vocabulary evolve.

5.2 deaf history in Benin: ancestry and masculinity

Not only are most of the protagonists of sign language and d/Deaf history men – like Abbé de l'Épée and Samuel Heinicke (Garnett 1968), Filippo Smaldone (Laurita 1995; Cavallera 2016) or Laurent Clerc and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (Padden 2011; Blumenthal Kelly 2008). Benin's history likewise mostly features grand kings who emphasized their masculinity and prowess with bellicose attitudes and dozens of wives (Adam 2009; Elwert 1973) and paternalistic presidents after independence. This cultural frame of

reference for chiefs is remarkably expressed in illustration 14 that I came across in a restaurant in Cotonou. In traditional style and symbolism, it illustrates the list of kings of Abomey (that is, the kingdom of Dahomey) starting

illustration 14: *Dynastie des Rois d'Abomey et l'Actualité du Bénin*, by Arts Kpota Louis, date unknown, Attogon, photographed in Cotonou, July 2019. The painting implies that Kerekou's reign was still ongoing ("26 Octobre 1972…"), so it was probably produced during one of his tenures either from 1972 to 1991 or from 1996 to 2006.

with Ganhehessou "around 1600" to the last kings Gbehanzin and Agoli-Agbo in the end of the 19th century, skipping decades of colonialism and independence[91] to include the long-term ruler Jérémy Kérékou who came to power in 1972. Kérékou is included in a list of kings, adorned with similar symbolism, as if the others were his royal predecessors – even though he was the Marxist-Leninist leader of the People's Republic of Dahomey (whose name he changed to People's Republic of Benin in 1975). Kérékou brought stability after the post-independence turmoil (Fage and Oliver 2002:308) and was also the one to introduce democracy and open markets between 1989 and 1991 hence gained respect and acclaim as an integrative figure (Decalo 1997). His versatility fits his description of himself as a chameleon (Boisbouvier 2015) which is referenced in the painting. He is also remembered as being a "bon père de famille"-type (Ahougnon 2020) and as Benin's "father of democracy" (Dia 2015). In the same vein, the current president is referred to as "notre papa le président Patrice Talon" in social media – also by the deaf. This not necessarily affectionate, though, as it is also used when the president is harshly criticized. Instead, the kin filiation seems to be evoked to remind him of his paternal responsibilities.

In Benin, deaf people often used kinship vocabulary to refer to others. Joachim would argue that Homère was his older brother, so he had to respect him even though he sometimes disapproved of him. Isaïe referred to the rural deaf as his "deaf brothers and sisters" that he felt responsible for. Maurine called the teachers Abou and Andrew Foster her fathers, just as Joachim would consider Foster, Victor, and even the founder of the deaf church in Togo that we visited in 2019 as fathers and ancestors. The pupils in the public deaf *collège* in Akogbato referred to Joachim as uncle in turn, and for Claire, the pupils in the deaf school in Agla were her children. Although few deaf people would use the terminology of generations that Joachim and I discussed a few times, the vocabulary, respect, and fondness in talking about the deaf founding fathers does imply a certain genealogy within the deaf community that goes back to the famous founder of the Christian Mission for the Deaf (CMD), Andrew Foster from Ensley, Alabama. People only refer to the fathers, though, so deaf social genealogy is patrilineal, remembering male ancestors with respect and with affection.

[91] In the artist's defense; post-independence politics in Benin saw numerous coups and changes of governments and presidents (Houngnikpo and Decalo (2013:33)) so that a comprehensive list would have gone beyond the scope of a painting like this.

illustration 15: Andrew Foster's portrait on a cloth printed in 2010 on occasion of the 50th anniversary of the uptake of his missionary work in Africa. The frame that the portrait is endowed with reads "Dr. Andrew Jackson Foster / 25th June 1925 - 3rd December 1987 / The Father of Deaf Education in Africa".

The emergence of deaf education and community in Benin is connected to the African American missionary Andrew Foster although it was his student and disciple Victor Vodounou who initiated the creation of both church and school. Both are considered ancestors of the deaf community and are rooted in international deaf networks. The occurrence of a deaf community in Benin is attributed to the arrival of deaf education in Benin in 1977. Before that, deaf Beninese commonly believe that there was no sign language, thus, they could not connect. Andrew Foster is referred to as an ancestral father figure not only by deaf Beninese who remember him nostalgically as "PAPA"[92] and proudly wear clothes made of prints praising him as "The Father of Deaf Education in Africa" (see illustration 15). The same honorary title is on the plate dedicating an auditorium to his name at the hub of international Deaf culture at Gallaudet University in Washington DC (Aina 2015:127).

The title "MAMAN" that is often, affectionately, attributed to mothers and women who take care of children (like neighbors, aunts, or the deaf women working in the canteens in deaf schools), has no place in genealogy. While "PAPA"/"PÈRE" is a status and a point of reference for the deaf that refers to belonging across generations, "MAMAN" is rather a mundane function or role. It is therefore not surprising that it was rarely the women who studied in Ibadan (see below) but their male peers who continued Foster's work.

Throughout d/Deaf history, the importance of (mostly male) role models, examples, and ancestors has been foregrounded (Ladd and Lane 2014; Delaporte 2014:128; Blumenthal Kelly 2008). Foster inspired deaf people to

[92] Interviews with Maurine, 06/04/2018; 22/07/2019.

follow his example (Vodounou 2008; Aina 2015; Oteng 1997). When Victor went to the USA, he and Foster chose Serge Tamomo, who was also educated in Ibadan, to take over both school and church. While Victor received a PhD in education in the USA and was subsequently referred to as Dr. Victor, Serge gained the title of Pasteur. In 1970, before extending his mission to Benin, Foster himself had received an honorary degree from Gallaudet University and was hitherto also often referred to with the respectful "Dr. Foster" (see illustration 15); Victor himself always calls him that in his book (Vodounou 2008) and did so as well in our conversations in Benin. Pasteur Serge took over this fatherly role of hovering over Beninese deaf affairs as a strict, paternalistic moral authority, created ANSB and became its first president. He incorporated the political representation through ANSB, the religious dimension as the priest of deaf church, and even questions of education and language by producing the first Signs handbook for Benin (Tamomo, Salouma, and Djogbe 1993). Many remember him fondly as loving but stern, authoritarian but supportive in all of his functions.

After his death in 1996, the responsibilities split up: Homère, whom Pasteur Serge had chosen before passing away – planting the seed for the schism of deaf church that features in the next section – became the priest of deaf church; Yunus, another early generation post-lingually deafened signer from Nikki in northern Benin, was elected president of ANSB. Yunus had been a student in Ibadan as well and a church member ever since but as a born Muslim with a rather lax approach to the morals of deaf church, he seemed, however, not to be priest material.

Based on literature[93] and my research in deaf churches and schools, it seems that Beninese deaf accept and respect the male domination of deaf sociality. So far there have been no deaf women who actively sought to enter the race for authority among the deaf community. Maurine, one of the very first schoolchildren at EBS, was running the deaf women's association that was a subfunction of ANSB. They had, however, very few activities and drew their members only from the Vêdoko deaf church congregation – not very surprisingly as Maurine was Pasteur Homère's wife and the meetings were held in the church that Godomey church members would not enter. The women's association in cooperation with Yves were also the ones who came

[93] In her fictionalized autobiography, Florence Serwaa Oteng (1997) recounts the life of Benewaa who learned sign language and the gospel from Foster in Ghana. Her female protagonist, however, does not strive for leadership or responsibility, instead follows her duty as a servant of the deaf Christian movement. The book is more a praise of Foster's work than an empowerment of the female deaf teacher; very unlike the book of Victor Vodounou (2008) that sometimes resembles an auto-hagiography.

up with the play that mocked and discredited Muslims and Vodoun adherers (see section 1.2). During the US presidential race in 2016, most of the deaf, male and female, strongly supported Donald Trump. Hillary Clinton as a female president was a ridiculous idea for most. Their chauvinist approach to politics, gender roles, and power reminded me of a friend from Northern Mali who, during my research in Kidal in 2009, commented on Nicolas Sarkozy, back then president of France: "How can he claim to be able to govern France if he cannot even keep his wife under control?!" The male bias is of course neither limited to Benin nor deaf Beninese sociality but is also a general phenomenon in Deaf Studies, as Arlene Blumenthal Kelly laid out in her article asking "Where Is Deaf HERstory?" (Blumenthal Kelly 2008).

There were and are influential women in Benin's deaf history that never made it and possibly never wanted to get to the top and be in charge of community issues. By operating deaf spaces like Maurine's or Claire's corner shops, by working in school canteens like Odile, by teaching in *école maternelle* like Christine, by volunteering for numerous tasks in church congregations like Kiva, they keep the deaf communities and spaces going. But some also stick out as historical figures; particularly Anne, whom I want to introduce in a longer vignette. In 2018, I interviewed Anne, one of the first deaf teachers of the deaf in Benin who learned to sign from Foster.

intermezzo: Anne – the matronne who opted out

Anne was among the first teachers of the deaf who learned to sign in Andrew Foster's center in Ibadan, Nigeria. She could have become an ancestral figure alongside Victor, Foster, the late Norbert and Tibor, and even Jumeau in neighboring Togo, the former director of the deaf school in Lomé. Those pedestals, however, seem to be reserved for men. They are remembered as ancestors and fathers, while she is more of a side note.

As was Foster's practice, Anne was chosen as a deaf person who had some hearing school experience. After her sign language instruction in Ibadan, she became a teacher at EBS in 1983 and stayed until 2012. Many of the second deaf generation to go to school in Benin remember her as a motherly figure of the deaf community – but keep in mind that this role of MAMAN does not purvey the same gravity and status as *notre papa*.

When I met her in June 2018, aged 62, she was living with her daughter, her son Joël and her daughter-in-law-to-be in a small house on the landward side of Togbin, a village to Cotonou's west that is slowly being incorporated into the larger Cotonou area. They lived in a house of her late hearing husband's family, with chickens, goats, a coconut palm tree, and a lush green

copse – quite different from the usual Cotonou houses that often display a prism of cement-gray and dust-beige. Situated on the Western side of Cotonou, she was closer to the deaf church in Godomey than to the one in Vêdoko; hence that is where she went for Sunday service. When I met her there, she was arguing with Troyen, the deaf priest, about how to properly interpret a certain bible verse – interrupting his sermon! Troyen had put a mixture of indignation, condescension, and abjection into his smile – and let her make her point. No way this could have happened during Homère's sermon in Vêdoko, and no way could anyone else but Anne get away with it. Given her age, her role in the history of the deaf community, and her proud stubbornness she had an authority that few deaf women held.

Many people told me about her before we actually met, and I was very eager to get to know her as one of the few living deaf Beninese of the first hour, of the first generation. Her hearing son Joël had picked me up and we went to their house together. I was happy he was there for I often had trouble understanding people's Signs when I did not have time to get used to their ways of signing. I particularly did not want to annoy the grand old lady of the deaf community that I expected by misunderstanding or to insult her potential deaf pride with my deficient command of sign language.

When we stepped into the house, however, Joël was calling out for his mother, and a clear "oui?" was audible from one of the rooms behind the parlor. Anne had some hearing left; she spoke flawlessly. Instead of setting up my video camera for the interview, I turned on my audio recorder with her agreement. She spoke, I signed. Her hearing might serve her to notice calls or signals, conversation was more difficult though, especially lipreading a French-speaking German that she had only just met. It also felt, however, more appropriate to me to sign to her, as the image of her as one of the ancestors of deaf community was still in my head.

When she was eleven years old, she became sick during the vacation after CM1, she tells me, and deafened due to treatment with "didromicine", an antibiotic containing dihydrostreptomycin. It was taken off the market in the 1950s for its ototoxicity. Harrison (1954:273) warned that the "[oto]toxic effect of dihydrostreptomycin is far more serious and disabling than streptomycin; it is delayed and, therefore, the physician may be unaware of it." Anne herself only learned about it during a sensitization training with European health educators in Akpakpa in 1998. The physician who treated her got away with it. While Joël burst out that he should go to jail for that, Anne said well, that would not change anything about her being deaf now, would it.

Her parents sought medical help but she did not regain her hearing. She learned to lipread and continued school with the help of a hearing friend. She passed CEP and went to *collège* as well but dropped out when her friend left. She had been discouraged before but gave up her education completely when she was on her own. She stayed with her family in Agoué in Grand Popo in the Mono region on the Beninese-Togolese border. It was only in 1983 when she was 26 that she got in touch with other deaf people. Tibor, a deafened Beninese who learned to sign with Victor, was friends with a friend of Anne's younger sister and came visiting their home village. When he met Anne, he took her to Victor. When she first met signing deaf people she was scared; she laughs when she remembers this. She remembered Victor saying "Ahhh!" – rubbing hands in excitement – "we'll take her to Ibadan!". She didn't want to go at first, but then stayed for two months in the school in Ibadan and learned to sign from Andrew Foster. She remembered how the days passed in Ibadan. All day they would learn "signs" and also English, she told me, because "Foster only spoke English". The education they received and brought to their schools across West Africa was mostly focused on signed English or transferred to signed French respectively by the teachers who returned to their francophone home countries like Anne and Victor (Nyst 2010). Every morning and every night, however, they would have sermons and devotions, learning about the gospel. That was not just about knowing the bible, but the pupils were to become *missionaires* themselves. She named a number of her coursemates who did become missionaries, so I asked her if she preached, too. She laughed, "ahhh - I never preached. But I know the word of God, I can explain", which she did sometimes in deaf church in Godomey. She would not tell me if she ever aspired to become a priest or a preacher herself, but in the current discourse in both churches, a female Pasteur was unimaginable.

It was in Ibadan where she converted from Catholicism to being an Evangelical Christian. When she returned, she started teaching at EBS and continued until 2012 when she reached the official retirement age of 55. In the meantime, she had also become the *secrétaire générale* of ANSB when Yunus was president.

Now, however, she does not have much to do with the deaf community. She is exhausted and bored with the conflicts between the churches. She only goes to deaf church, she says, because she can follow along better than in a church for the hearing. She wanted to go to the *Assemblée de Dieu* in Togbin but did not find someone to interpret for her. Going to Godomey, she says, is a purely pragmatic choice given that going to the church in Vêdoko was

twice the distance. I would assume that she also cherishes the way people respect her in deaf church by treating her as an honorary senior member. When I asked her if deaf church is not a bit like family, she said yes, "my children, my students, they are there, yes." Yet, she expresses quite clearly that she has "never been deaf". Quite emblematically, her hearing son Joël got his sign name from other teachers at school, not from her. He is also the only one of her children who learned to sign. Without me suggesting the wording she told me herself that she had lived "dans le monde entendant" – in the hearing world. When I asked her which languages she knew she said "I speak *my language*, [that is] Mina, and I speak French, and Fon". Sign language did not come to her mind to mention or identify with.

Her refusal to identify with the deaf community may also be grounded in disappointment. In the 1980s, they wanted to create sign language certificates and adjust the school exams to be equally accessible to deaf pupils. She remembered being politically active for the community. "Who fights for the deaf now?" she asked. "We are gone. Those of today, they do nothing." The community that she once may have identified with, is no more. This community, however, was that of deafened and more or less schooled peers. When I asked her about Michel, the old born-deaf tailor in Agla; she remembered him but did not consider him a fellow. He was born long before there were deaf schools and only happened to live next to the first deaf school and thus learned to sign a bit in his twenties. He was one of those *sourd·e·s-profond·e·s* that many deafened had trouble identifying with. Deaf belonging always held a dimension of difference.

As a deaf teacher for the deaf and secretary of ANSB, Anne was at the heart of deaf community development (Johnson and Erting 1989:55) and must have been a role model for many a deaf schoolchild (Vodounou 2008:64). The fact that she never really identified as a deaf person illustrates how difficult it was – and certainly continues to be for many – to feel deaf similitude. Instead of being DEAF-SAME, she felt responsible for the community's issues like education or representation. Her responsibility was, however, matronizing and so was her critique of the current situation. As a deafened person, she felt beyond and above *the born-deaf* and mostly withdrew from deaf sociality after her professional engagement had ended. Furthermore, the socially destructive habits and conflicts and the coercive preaching within the deaf community and deaf church made her seek distance from a group that she could have played a major role in. Consequently, she stayed mostly off stage when the church conflict became more divisive.

5.3 priest vs priest - breaking the cradle of deaf sociality

I have written about the crucial and contentious role that deaf church plays as a space of deaf sociality above (see section 4.3). Here I want to highlight another field of social dynamics of deaf church that shape the community while also reflecting its fault lines. After Pasteur Serge's death in 1996, deaf church became the arena for an ongoing conflict of deaf leadership that, in 2012, eventually lead to deaf church and congregation breaking up into two opposing factions that had little to do with each other during the time of my research from 2016 to 2019. The ways that this conflict was carried out through direct confrontation, mobilization of followers, and intensive engagement in libel and slander reveal the dynamics that characterize leadership competition and the production of difference within the deaf communities. To be clear, the two churches were practically the same in doctrines, rites, structures, and practices – the differences were solely made socially. The conflict of leadership was about nothing but leadership; the division was all about which community, which belonging, which section you chose. The small arena of deaf sociality in Cotonou had limited offers: If you wanted to be a deaf Christian, there was just team A or team B. You had to make a choice – and that meant reverberations on the communities and the deaf lives around.

The first priests of the deaf churches were picked and educated in the same manner as the first teachers. Post-lingually deafened Beninese came to Ibadan and were trained in sign language and the gospel. The control of deaf church always remained in the hands of post-lingually deafened men. Pasteur Serge had trained some of the deaf church members to preach and teach. Among those were Paul, Homère, and Guillaume who had all been to EBS together, as well as Guillaume's younger brother Troyen. Michele Friedner met similar structures in deaf churches in Bangalore and called them a "core group of church leaders" (Friedner 2014b:44). For deaf church in Benin, however, this notion implies too much equality in that group. The assistants and learners were not leaders (yet) but disciples to one leading priest, a model that aligns with Andrew Foster's model of leadership practiced in relation to his followers and students. The deaf priests insisted that there should be just one leader. Many deaf Beninese lamented that the times when authority over the deaf community affairs lay in the hands of one single, competent individual, were over.

In 1997, Homère became the priest after Pasteur Serge had appointed him as his successor. This was not uncontested, as Homère was one of a group of three friends who all aspired to become priests. The others were Paul and Guillaume. Paul was disqualified by the fact that he had taken a

second wife after he divorced his first wife who did not give birth to a second child. In the moral code of deaf church, the priest had to be a role model, so breaching the holy bond of [monogamous] matrimony was inexcusable. That verdict did not temper Paul's religious zeal; quite the contrary. Guillaume got defaulted because Pasteur Serge disapproved of him after he had heard "all those filthy stories," stories whose details I never learned. From my experience with gossip in the deaf community I assume that there is some truth and a lot of hoax in those stories – whatever they may be in detail. Pasteur Serge had chosen Homère as his heir and the congregation was likely to accept the decision of their cherished *pater communitatis*. The group of three friends fell apart – Homère remained the head of the deaf church in Vêdoko, Paul left the inner circle and only dropped by occasionally, while Guillaume left on a proselytizing mission to Gabon. However, the church congregation remained one while tensions were increasing under the surface.

Shortly after the opening of the new church in Vêdoko in 2008, the congregation celebrated the wedding of Elza and Donald. At the same time, it was one of the last occasions that the congregation gathered in such a unified manner. Pasteur Troyen, Donald's brother, later told me that during the wedding, a viper appeared in church. Now, one has to say that the area where EBS and deaf church are located in Vêdoko is very swampy and the appearance of a snake (and myriads of mosquitoes) is far from exceptional (another reason why the EBS is not exactly popular among parents of deaf schoolchildren). Thus, the incident is more important in its narration than in the actual occasion. The appearance of a venomous snake during the first event in the new school was read as a bad omen, especially by those who recount this story. Meaningful events of that kind would always be analyzed regarding the malicious intentions of those who caused them (see section 2.1), but as Troyen told me, they never found out who sent the snake. Consulting a *féticheur* to find out – the usual way to go about these kinds of affairs in Benin – was out of question for members of an Evangelical church that prides itself on being the *real Christians*. Instead, the incident was hushed up. Of course, it was Homère's foe Pasteur Troyen who mentioned it to me. Members of deaf church in Vêdoko only spoke about it after I had asked several times, eventually confirming Troyen's story. So to some, the opening of the present church building in Vêdoko under Homère's leadership was ill-fated from the beginning. Troyen and Guillaume used this narrative to challenge Homère's priesthood – while never clearly stating how their faith, their morals, or their agenda for church differed.

There was one last big event – the wedding of Kiva and Yves in 2012 – for which the entire deaf congregation gathered but no photos of the ceremony can be found as shortly after the ceremony, Troyen, Guillaume, and half of the congregation left Vêdoko to found their own church. Claus the photographer left with them to Godomey, while the married couple stayed in Vêdoko – and no photos were exchanged.

The long simmering conflict between Homère and Guillaume broke loose shortly after the wedding over an apparently minor disagreement of money issues. It seems, however, that this was not the first time that Guillaume felt treated unfairly by his former friend and by the congregation. Many deaf church members told me that there was no religious or dogmatic disagreement between them. Rather it seems that it all came down to the fact that *tout le monde veut être chef*. Guillaume and Troyen left to create a second deaf church in the backyard of Guillaume's family's estate in Godomey, one of the many suburbs of Cotonou that are slowly being swallowed by the metropolis. Yunus, who never held a function in deaf church, was drawn into the dispute. He had been renting a room from Pasteur Homère but now joined the church in Godomey, relocating to the same premises. Mutual accusations concur: Homère had exploited him, Godomey claimed. Guillaume coerced and blackmailed Yunus to leave, said Vêdoko. Both parties tried to use him to strengthen their position by mobilizing deaf genealogy, by having one of the last early ancestors of the deaf community by their side.

After Yunus' death in 2015, the conflict washed over ANSB. By then, Guillaume had spent most of the time establishing the deaf church in Gabon and his younger brother Troyen took over as priest in Godomey. The dispute was shifted to a competition between Troyen and Homère and eventually the general assembly of ANSB elected Homère as president and Troyen as his vice president – which practically meant a deadlock for any coordinated ANSB activities. This was the situation when I started my field research in June 2016.

So I was there on a Sunday in August 2016 when Guillaume came to visit Benin and caused outrage in deaf church in Vêdoko, claiming the right to give a testimony in front of the congregation led by Homère. He handed out and read a pamphlet to us that recounted his ailments and afflictions, allegedly inflicted on him by his heathen father through witchcraft. He had been practically blind, he said, but in a hospital in France, God gave him back his eyesight. He presented this as another sign that he was chosen by God

(fieldnotes 07/08/2016)[94]. When Guillaume showed up in the deaf church in Vêdoko to share his testimony, people engaged in public speech to attack or defend him. Troyen, as Guillaume's companion, spoke in Guillaume's favor, calmly, to gain the trust of the congregation. Joachim stepped in for Homère in a loud, indignant, funny, and entertaining rant against the behavior of the dissident congregation. The success his rhetoric and humor had among the present deaf tipped the mood so that Guillaume and his entourage eventually left like beat-up dogs. Meetings and assemblies were often characterized by these public confrontations aiming at winning over the audience with arguments as well as with humor and wit, with successfully haranguing and rallying support (cf Sahlins 1963:290–91).

The incident caused outrage and gave reason for month-long conversation and mockery alike. Some questioned whether it was really God who salvaged him or the French nurse who washed his eyes. Some claimed that he wanted to present himself as God's miracle to attract more people to Godomey deaf church. Eventually he passed away in July 2018, but even mourning could not mute the conflicts nor bring the parties back together. The funeral took place in Gabon, without any participation of the Vêdoko deaf church.

The conflict between Homère and Guillaume and the division of the churches were constant topics of complaint and recurring debate among the deaf. Despite the fact that both churches followed the same doctrines, preaching styles, and morals, members of one congregation said the other one was morally bad, had wrong teachings (without caring to specify what these were about), and was even dangerous. Some members of one church were seriously worried when I told them I would visit the other, claiming the Other church was dangerous. With serious concern, Yves tried to convince me not to go as if I had been getting ready to enter a shark tank. I have been to both churches and talked with members from both sides and could not identify any major differences either in content or course of the sermons, or in the social interaction around the services (see also section 4.3). Instead, it seems that the dynamics in the fight for church leadership were quite alike the general practices of conflict and striving to be chief among the deaf. In a somewhat Durkheimian way, church is a reflection of the structure of society and community (Durkheim and Willaime 2012[1912]:203), which made

[94] There had been a huge fight between Pasteur Homère and Guillaume once when Homère got glasses for his children and wife. Guillaume was furious because it revealed Homère's lack of faith and confidence in God. Following Guillaume, you should not trust doctors but let God handle everything.

Michele Friedner call the deaf church in Bangalore the "church of deaf sociality" (Friedner 2014b). The conflict of leadership seemed to be about nothing but leadership – *tout le monde veut être chef*. The striving to be chief mobilizes gossip and rumors, forces choices upon the members, and creates division and difference. The fact that the conflict continues between Homère and Troyen emphasizes that the desire to be chief disrupts the communities: It is an expression and reaction to DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENCE and the wish to become someone on the one hand, and in its dynamics, it produces DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENCE and laments like SOURDS-DURS on the other

5.4 challenging gerontocracy

Similar dynamics can be found in the conflicts around leadership in deaf representation: Gossip and rumors are mobilized to disqualify opponents. While the priests' rivalries were not circling around content or dogma, however, it seems that young deaf have some fundamental disagreements with the old as to what deaf representation should be about. Beninese society in general values the authority of the elderly (see Le Meur 2008) and the deaf community fits right in. Deaf youths have little access to actual chief positions and to break down the structures of "gerontocracy", as schooled deaf youth like Isaïe or Léon would tell me (see also Mildner 2020a)[95]. Thus, they use different pathways and resources to rally support and inflict discontent. In this section I want to focus on the fault-lines between young and old deaf leaders in the community.

After Pasteur Serge's death, who was a (DEAF-SAME) father figure even to deaf Muslims, Yunus took over the presidency of ANSB after a short interim presidency of young Guillaume. Yunus had been teaching at EBS for years and earned a lot of respect at school, while some think he was a weak and disorganized president to ANSB. Communication with the World Federation of the Deaf was not handled well, I was told; neither were assemblies or projects like sign language certificates, improvement of education followed up on. Many deaf people retrospectively remembered the time in brighter color, though. Many were frustrated with Homère occupying so many positions and yet not being able to make peace among the different factions, so they sugarcoated the memory of functions being more separated. From 1997 to 2015, ANSB and deaf church were theoretically independent institutions. With Yunus, however, ANSB maintained the direct link to Andrew Foster and deaf community ancestry. It is hence of little surprise that when deaf

[95] For discussions of the challenges of youth in other parts of West Africa and beyond see McLean (2020) and Martin, Ungruhe, and Häberlein (2016).

church split, both congregations tried to pull him on their side – ignoring the fact that Yunus rather loosely followed the moral codes of deaf church.

When Yunus died in November 2015 after a long illness, Pasteur Homère, who had been on the board before, became interim president and was eventually elected president. By that time, however, the church schism had already been at its deepest and eventually, Pasteur Homère became president and Pasteur Troyen was elected his vice. Zeïd, a deaf Muslim, ran as well but had no lobby in ANSB (see below). Finding its two major functions in two rivalling churches left ANSB in a deadlock, "asleep", as many deaf preferred to describe it. The few times Homère and Troyen talked to each between 2016 and 2019 remained either on the level of superficial acts of courtesy, each one presenting themselves as a sober-minded leader, for example on the funeral of a widely respected hearing teacher of the deaf in 2018, or led to nasty arguments that became fodder for week-long gossip in both churches.

Deaf representation was barely existent on a national or broader community level. In creating their own associations, some deaf men wanted to step up to the front row as well. In Porto Novo, Léon, one of the few deaf university students, started an association deaf youth. As an educated deafened person, he took over the leadership somewhat naturally: His eloquence, education, and access to hearing society – he used my presence at a few meetings to illustrate his capacity to mobilize hearing and even international support – gave him an expert authority that let him gather numerous deaf people around him to strengthen his voice. When private struggles kept him from pushing the association further, no-one else stepped in and the association *fell asleep*.

Far from asleep was Isaïe, another university student who had deafened at the age of twelve. One could say that in their education they possessed incorporated, inalienable cultural capital that they "cultivated" (Bourdieu 2005b:55) in a way that was not accessible to older deaf due to the absence of secondary schools at the time. While Léon chose to start an association – the common way to create a status and a voice for oneself – Isaïe turned to social media to make use of his resources and become someone in the community. Through his education and his eloquence, he was in touch with international volunteers and donors, with deaf activists from neighboring West African countries, France, Belgium, and others. He had created an audience that the less literate, less tech-savvy older deaf big-men did not have. He chose to publish his views and narratives of failures of the old: Homère was preaching wrong morals that did neither suit nor help the deaf community,

Joachim was stealing the deaf community's money, the hearing leaders of the integrated school for the deaf in Porto Novo were exploiting, abusing, and discriminating against the deaf schoolchildren. He also attacked those heading the deaf school in Haindé that was founded and supported by Victor. Instead of gossiping with two or three people, he shared these accusations publicly on Facebook to an audience of potentially hundreds of people. Those were mostly young deaf Beninese but also deaf folks and activists from across West Africa and Europe as well as donors and partners of various backgrounds. His slander thus had an enormous potential to harm the reputation of the individuals and institutions he slagged on social media. Among deaf youth in Benin but also across West Africa, he found quite some respect for his courage and outspokenness, even though only few of them would support him openly by liking or commenting his Facebook posts.

Confronting the old who distributed the rare funds and support coming from the outside was not without risk. Only Gustave, Isaïe's friend from school who had moved to France and thus somewhat beyond the reach of and dependence on Beninese deaf sociality, happened to join into Isaïe's rants. While he surely picked up on some burning issues and challenges of deaf sociality like the poor deaf education, lack of sign language training for hearing parents, teachers, interpreters, and staff of social services as well as the comatose state of ANSB, his arguments were often *ad hominem*, calling the old leaders incompetent, corrupt, and useless. That rhetoric blocked rather than fostered discussion and exchange. He signed his Facebook posts with his full name and a short bio – quite unlike many social media aesthetics I have seen among the deaf users but akin to young hearing Beninese activists who used Facebook to enter political discourse. Just like them, Isaïe wanted to brand his name and persona as a righteous and rebellious speaker of deaf youth in Benin. He achieved his goal by feeling support and admiration from the youth and harsh criticism and attack from the old. But they knew how to hit back through gossip and intimidation.

In 2015, Isaïe may or may not have had an affair with a teenaged deaf schoolgirl while he was teaching in Haindé. Whatever is true in this story eventually – since then Isaïe was easily depicted as someone who would have sex with children and all of his opponents whom he criticized so much relished this opportunity to spread rumors and discredit him.

More than once, Isaïe told me with a sigh of resignation that maybe the deaf just have to wait for change until Homère dies – like Serge and Yunus before. He was always quick to clarify that he did not wish him harm. He found that the vanity of the old just made things complicated, not considering

that he might be playing the same game as they were. Many other deaf Beninese, though, young and old, just shrugged their shoulders about all those conflicts that they saw as egotistic and greedy and sighed: *tout le monde veut être chef*. In a way, two kinds of Bourdieu's forms of capital clash between the young. While Léon and Isaïe used their incorporated cultural capital to establish their standing, Homère and Joachim could refer to social capital that was accumulated over years of efforts of institution (Bourdieu 1982) and sociability (Bourdieu 1986:22), which they were now throwing at each other in attempts to find following among the deaf.

The conflict remained open-ended. Through Facebook and WhatsApp I could continue following the alternating swells of conflict eruptions and reconciliations. Age and authority were invoked time and again. Another axis of difference that delineates the limits of participation seems to be so self-evident among the deaf that is not even discussed: being Muslim. To fill this gap, I will introduce Zeïd, the Muslim candidate I mentioned above.

intermezzo: Zeïd – the Muslim who felt kicked out

I discussed the hassles around deaf representation and the board of ANSB but did not discuss Zeïd's candidacy in the elections in 2015. One reason for this is that he barely appears in gossip and the ~~oral~~ manual making of deaf history in Benin.

I met Zeïd relatively late during my research in 2018 because he barely takes part in any deaf community activities. I had been nagging deaf friends to introduce me to deaf Muslims for a long time and finally Joachim took me to the *village des artisans*, a craft market in the heart of Cotonou. Zeïd had a small *bijouterie* and workshop where he produced, sold, and repaired silver jewelry, mostly for foreign NGO and embassy employees. He takes no deaf apprentices because they were thieves, he said, had no discipline, and did not respect him. He was born deaf and went to EBS with Joachim, who introduced Zeïd to me as "mon frère", his brother. He seemed a lot more enthusiastic about this proposed kinship than Zeïd, who welcomed us with a small, smug, sarcastic smile.

Afterwards, I visited him regularly at his workshop, at home, or met him at funerals and weddings. Zeïd's family was Muslim and came to Cotonou from the north before he was born. After finishing primary school in 1990, he wanted to continue at *collège*, but there was no secondary school for the deaf at the time. His family organized a vocational training with a hearing patron for him. Zeïd remembered the apprenticeship as unproblematic. He did not hear a thing and did not lipread, but he watched and learned and

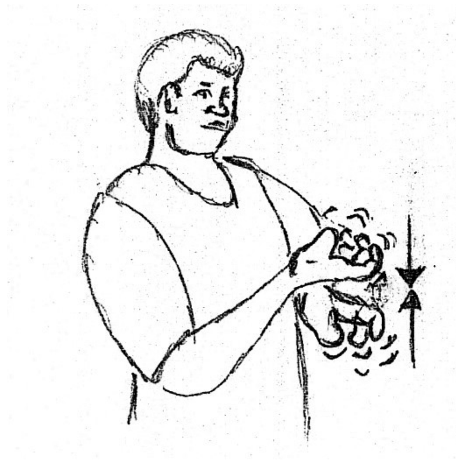

illustration 16: DUR, hard, difficult, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

copied. Eventually, his brother organized the workshop for him in 2003 which runs very well apparently. In 2018, he was the first deaf Beninese person I met who had his own car – and a quite undamaged, clean Mazda sedan at that. Most of his family lived in Senegal; only he and his brother stayed in Benin. He was married to Yasmine, a born-deaf Muslim woman, and lived with her in her family's house, a huge estate with about two dozen inhabitants. His father-in-law, whose funeral we visited in 2018, was a customs officer with the means to provide for a large family and a deaf son-in-law[96]. None of the hearing in Zeïd's place, though, knew more than a few basic signs. For detailed exchange they wrote, which he had learned to do quite well in school.

In 2015, he ran for the presidency of ANSB, but lost to Homère and Troyen. The Beninese deaf community – as blurry a group it might be – is dominated by its Christian origins. Only the churches have lasting networks to mobilize participation in the association's activities. Zeïd told me how frustrating that experience was. Joachim and others also told me that many deaf would not want someone like Zeïd to be in charge because he was born deaf. Joachim, Homère and Troyen as well as former leaders like Yunus, Paul, Serge, Victor or Andrew Foster himself were late deafened. Many deaf mock and dismiss the hearing signers (see section 4.4) and the late deafened who orient too much towards the hearing world (see section 2.2). Yet, they seemed to want late deafened or hearing CODAs as intermediaries to communicate their claims, thereby sustaining the able-disabled paradigm discussed in chapter 2.

As a consequence, Zeïd as a born-deaf Muslim was not welcome on the board of ANSB. His ways of talking about the deaf communities reflected the frustration that was not grounded in religious animosity from his side. As a child, he did take part in bible camps and he also remembered *the good ol' days* when Serge (as pastor) and Yunus (as president of ANSB) were in charge

[96] Being a customs officer in Benin is among the highest paid public service professions and the best opportunities to multiply the salary through informal payments and gifts.

of deaf community affairs. He sees the schism between the two deaf churches as an ill for the deaf in general while rejecting the close entanglement of church and ANSB. He repeatedly signs "SOURDS DURS", the deaf are hard/difficult – whether it is deaf apprentices, the gossipy community, or its rivaling leaders.

Joachim, Isaïe, Fabian, and many others were convinced that the community rejected Zeïd's candidacy because he was Muslim. *The deaf*, they claimed, insisted on the personal union of functions in church and association. As a born-deaf person was also *too deaf* for his claim to take over responsibility. As a consequence, Zeïd only stayed in touch with some deaf peers, while turning towards his family to make a life on his own. As such, for example, he celebrated Tabaski/Eid al-Adha with his Muslim in-laws but drove around town to leave pieces of meat with deaf friends. He stayed up to date with news, gossip, and conflict in the deaf community through WhatsApp, but distances himself explicitly from "those deaf in Benin" who gave him no chance to belong – "SOURDS DURS", he kept repeating.

*

Deaf representation in terms of politics, activism, and rights cannot be disentangled from the Christian male ancestry and the hierarchies within deaf diversity. While a born-deaf Muslim cannot enter the inner circle of chiefdom and representation, the division of the churches impedes the maintenance of a functioning representative body. This is not to imply that representation should be harmonious and peaceful. The conflicts within representation, however, do not seem to further a position or sharpen an argument, but instead to make any articulation impossible. So what dynamic is behind those struggles that characterize Beninese deaf sociality and community?

5.5 DEAF-DEAF-DIFFICULT

This chapter has continued the discussion of deaf communities as complex and battlesome arenas from chapter 4. Members of communities fight over their positions in hierarchies, they argue who is who and why and how smart and qualified another may be. Then again, sometimes it is age and ancestry that matters. Once I had been sitting with Joachim in Homère's office, listening to a long and not particularly interesting story that Homère shared. After we left, I asked Joachim what that situation was about. He shrugged his shoulders and said: "I have to listen to his stories, even though they are boring, but he's my older brother, I have to respect him."

Pasteur Homère, who so disarmingly admitted his desire to be chief, was already quoted when I wrote about the hearing constructions of the deaf. Homère had spent his childhood and youth being mocked and called a sheep in school, he spent years cycling around on his bike, trying to find small jobs as a photographer. It took him a long time to convince Maurine's parents to let him marry her. When they had children, he locked them in their house while he was at work for fear something might happen to them. I never witnessed him interact with hearing people. It seems that he became very suspicious towards hearing Beninese. His commitment to the deaf community serves to create spaces where the deaf need not fear discrimination or humiliation. He has been belittled and excluded based on his deafness for most of his life – and continues to be mocked at his current daytime job in the repository of an embassy where he had started in the cleaning services. Family life, work, and therefore a culturally accepted manly life have been withheld from him for a long time. His personal achievements and his positions as chief in church and ANSB earn him respect and recognition that he barely found outside the deaf community. Perhaps they serve his vanity in some kind of reconciliation for the traumatic experiences in his childhood, youth, and young adult life.

Isaïe considered himself to be one of the smartest people around, which he might well be, but he repeatedly experienced running into the obstacles of age, ableism, and authority. In the secondary school in Porto Novo he was in constant struggle with the hearing teachers and administration who – following his narrative – were intimidated by his intelligence. After graduating from school despite the barriers the school's director and teachers had built for him, he meant to get involved in deaf rights and advocacy but again felt stuck in the bequeathed ways of exalting the old men that defined the dynamics in ANSB. Thus, again he felt his dynamism and potency impeded by the older generation that, so he said, had only their own interest in mind. They would not listen to his critique and suggestions, so he swerved to social media to publicly decry and denounce their misdemeanors, causing quite a fuss among both the deaf aristocracy of church and ANSB as well as the hearing administration of the school in Porto Novo. Not very surprisingly, this did not motivate them to value his opinions, and so, eventually, he created his own association in 2019.

Joachim has been an active member of family, community, and society but experienced running into a kind of glass ceiling when engaging with the hearing in local politics or disability rights movements. Even in his function as the president of RAPHAL, he felt that he did not achieve inclusion into

disability networks because many disability activists struggled (or refused to even struggle) with bridging the communication gap. It is through his chieftaincies within the deaf community – as *secrétaire général* of ANSB, as a *pater familias* and *communitatis*, as the head of a deaf school – that he achieves recognition. He is being recognized at the national border; he is greeted with respect when passing by the public secondary school for the deaf. This recognition does not give him economic wealth, he is not siphoning considerable financial resources, and surely not from his constituents. As with all civil rights activists, he finds some money in the transport and catering funding that participations in workshops and conferences often entail. As a disabled people's spokesman, he gets invited to the champagne reception on July 14 at the French embassy – but all this does not make him rich. It does not even suffice to cover the daily expenses for his families or the transport for his errands in the name of the deaf or the disabled communities. The access to funding, stipends or investments by international organizations or the state does not mean an extraordinary gain – even though some of this money always disappears into some pockets along the way, including those of Joachim himself. Rather, the resources channeled *through* Joachim made him an important person, a *chef*. People who followed and supported him had a chance to get funding for a sewing machine, a motorcycle, or other small investments. This is what Paul, in the opening quote, meant with deaf transhumance. Being a school director gets him access to resources like French donors and volunteers or German anthropologists, but it remains obvious that while he is a socially wealthy and well-connected man, he has to worry every single day to make ends meet like any other deaf Beninese. Yet, being *chef* makes him a personality and gives him a status and social capital in community – among the deaf – but also in the society beyond.

The omnipresence of suspicion, jealousy, and rivalry in the dynamics of power and authority within the deaf community may characterize it as Beninese as these are traits that many Beninese, deaf and hearing, see as some of their national characteristics. *Tout le monde veut être chef* leads to DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT, or DEAF-DEAF-DIFFICULT – SOURDS-DURS as Zeïd said – because there are only so many chiefs one can be. Gossiping and *Schimpfklatsch* may be of use to establish moral values, control and reproduce the different kinds of social ties within the deaf networks. If haranguers and gossipers, however, play on the divisive and distinctive power of gossip to create inner others, deaf similitude and sociality as social values are under threat.

A major challenge for national deaf representation is the fragmentation of the deaf community and the lack of communication and cooperation

between the different factions. There is maybe half a dozen of associations run by deaf people, mostly connected to specific projects. These kinds of associations were, however, not created as representative bodies but to have a framework to realize projects and – most of all – to receive funding and donations to implement different projects. Furthermore, the more associations existed, the more people could claim prestigious titles of board members, presidents, vices, treasurers, and secretary generals.

The church schism had further repercussions on ANSB. Yunus had been caught up in the church struggle as both Homère and Guillaume tried to pull him on their side. When he died, he had not been holding ANSB meetings for a while and all his documents, photos, reports, etc. were gone without trace or ended up in Godomey and were not available to the new president. Many deaf people, including Pasteur Homère himself, lament this situation particularly in contrast to other quite successful disabled persons' organizations like the association of the blind or of the mobility impaired[97] who have a stronger advocacy and involvement with the state. While they serve as representatives of their peers and are in constant exchange with national and international, governmental, and non-governmental bodies, there is only limited representation of the deaf community. Officially, ANSB was in contact with the WFD and listed in the Gallaudet registry as a contact. In practice, nothing much happened during the time of my research. Part of the challenge is also that the people in charge do not issue a clear commitment to the representation. Both president and vice have full-time jobs, are priests in their churches and heads of families – the ANSB functions are only of third priority at best.

It reflects the *being torn* of the deaf community as such. ANSB, subsequently, has no leading voice in discussions of deaf issues in Benin, a fact that many deaf lament. Leading deaf voices come either from a strong individual in disability rights movements – Joachim – or from half a handful of young, social media competent deaf individuals – Léon and Isaïe – who have received some formal education. On a political level, it is not the deaf themselves – apart from Joachim – but hearing actors from the deaf school in Louho, Porto Novo, or Patrice, the sign language interpreter from the public television station ORTB, who get involved in questions of education, sign language harmonization and other issues of the deaf community. This

[97] Many disability activists in Benin prefer very "modernist" terms for (people with) disabilities, like "la déficience auditive" instead of deafness, or "la déficience sensuelle" more generally for deaf or blind. The deaf, quite the contrary, prefer shorter, catchier terms that imply both identity and diagnosis like *sourds* or *aveugle*. In this vein, people with mobility impairments are simply referred to as *les moteurs*.

became painfully obvious in the celebration of the 40th anniversary of deaf education in Benin in 2017. While ANSB was setting up an event, the only person to be actually consulted in the media coverage was the hearing president and director of the school in Louho, Porto Novo[98], a person that many in the deaf community despise of (see also section 4.4).

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The question of deaf leadership has shown that being chief is currently synonymous with a certain gerontocracy that is also justified by connections to ancestry of the deaf community. Furthermore, the roots of deaf leadership are deeply tied into Christian missionary work – so where does that put deaf Muslims? It is also a male-dominated field – so where does that put deaf women?

What deaf men do gain from "being chief" is respect and recognition within but also beyond the deaf community. This points back to what deaf people often lack, to their experience of exclusion, denigration, mockery, and disrespect. Looking at the rivalries and jealousies within the leadership of the deaf community also points at DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENCES in the way that shared deaf experience does not (only) mean harmony as some enthusiastic Deaf culture activists suggest (Lane 2008:290) or critics of the utopian uses of term community suspect (Werbner 1991; Liebelt 2011:106). Instead, deaf sociality is also characterized by competition, jealousy, and conflict.

But beyond all the conflicts, similitude is of course not entirely absent from social interaction. Even though Joachim found Homère boring, moralistic, and annoying at times, he still thought of him as a brother. Even though Isaïe and Homère threw insults, threats, and slanders at each other over months and years, Homère considers Isaïe as (deaf) kin and *vice versa* – a closeness that makes the conflicts just the more painful for both. DEAF-DEAF-DIFFICULT does not only mean that it is hard with the deaf, but also that relationality and interaction are complex, contradictory, and that DEAF-SAME and DEAF-DIFFERENT happen to go hand in hand.

Difference and deaf diversity create interstitiality that fuels men's ongoing endeavors to be chief. I suggest that part of the motivation for becoming a big man is an attempt to manage a spoiled identity, or maybe rather a spoiled masculinity. That game, in turn, produces difference, suspicion, and division in the community. There is nostalgia for unity among the old and a wish for unity among the deaf youth in Benin, which is echoed in the DEAF-SAME

[98] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMIi93Ga_24, last access 19.05.2020.

discourses of WFD and others. The reality is, however, different. When uttering *tout le monde veut être chef*, the reference is often an immediate conflict, a recent public dispute. What is being lamented, however, is not the conflicts themselves but the division and lack of unity of which these conflicts are symptomatic. It is a comment on Beninese deaf sociality in general: SOURDS DURS. Everybody hated the game, and yet, everybody played along.

Consequently, ANSB does not do much advocacy or community building. It seems that the group that ANSB should be representing only exists in the awareness of the lack of representative structures, not through an actual practice of shared sociality and community. The dynamics may change with the coming generation of young deaf who are more in touch with regional and global discourses of d/Deaf culture and rights. So far, however, the young and some of the older ones too, feel stuck in a deadlock situation without leaders who are actually interested in leading and making a change.

Big-men and big-man-aspirants juggle Bourdieu's forms of capital in order to make ends meet as well as to create social and symbolic resources that might be of use in unexpected situations. Not only does the interstitiality of deaf identity offer little certainty, likewise, the economic situation of the deaf is highly unpredictable and therefore any pooling of resources and "wealth in prospects" (Johnson-Hanks 2016:9) might proof useful.

In this chapter I have demonstrated how deaf sociality in Benin is complicated and DEAF-DEAF-DIFFICULT. For many deaf Beninese, however, deaf sociality, community, and similitude play no role at all. The following chapter is dedicated to understanding this so far understudied field of deaf lives off deaf sociality.

6 off deaf sociality

> I walk over to meet Moukwari, the only deaf man in Pepèrkou. He lives with his brother and his sistster-in-law. They sign with him, but it seems very basic to me, very referential. I use signs and gestures to tell him that I would like to go to work with him to his field. He seems a bit surprised but understands. Moukwari's brother repeats my request in similar ways; YOU, HE, THERE, COTTON, TOMORROW, GO, TOGETHER. Moukwari nods in agreement. We seal the deal by having a *sodabi* in the village shop. We share the small and dirty glass bottle I paid for with the other customers. While the bottle, a filthy plastic cup, and cigarettes are going around, people chat and joke in Waama. Moukwari and I hang out. He asks me what the others are saying. I answer with a clueless face and a shrug of shoulders that I do not know. He looks confused and disappointed. Does he think that all hearing people understand each other? Does he know that there are different languages? Does he think the others are all same? (fieldnotes 29/06/2019)

Given my understanding of being deaf as social, this book has so far been focused on deaf spaces and settings where deaf people negotiate their being among deaf peers and in confrontation with hearing others. Deaf sociality is where and how deaf people orient towards each other, where they practice and negotiate values and norms in local deaf worlds (Friedner 2014b:39). These practices and negotiations are, however, not accessible to everyone who is deaf. In this chapter, I wish to cast some light on those deaf individuals *off deaf sociality* who have often been overlooked by studies on deaf worlds.

In Benin (and beyond), those deaf people generally live in rural areas beyond the reach of educational and activist infrastructure (Foster 1975; Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba 2012). Deaf people in rural areas have received little scholarly attention (see for example Green 2014b; Zeshan and Vos 2012), as in general research on disability has an urban bias (Whyte 2019; Chaudhry 2015). Those deaf outside the deaf communities are usually discussed as isolated (Kiyaga and Moores 2003:20), a tendency that can be seen as a shade of what Jessica Scheer and Nora Groce identified as a "marginalization bias", arguing that "social sciences too often assume that disability automatically causes an individual to become marginal to his or her social group" (1988:26; 25). Rolf Kuschel (1973) studied one of these presumably "isolated" deaf people on Rennell Island. He describes the creativity of Kangobai, the deaf individual, and his community to enable communication and participation, showing that a deaf person who is "isolated" from other deaf peers does not necessarily live a life that is characterized only by isolation and exclusion. In Deaf Studies discourse, the isolated deaf tend to be considered

as the most miserable, deprived of opportunities, much like the *vrai·e·s sourd·e·s*, and of Deaf culture, and there is a political argumentation that would go as far as to consider deaf life without sign language as "not worth living". In a guest lecture on Deaf culture and sign language at the University of Bayreuth in 2019, a (hearing) sign language linguist said that deaf life was not worth living without sign language. The two deaf persons present nodded in self-evident agreement – as many activists and deaf studies scholars might. Sign language is the core of d/Deaf culture and the primary means of emancipation (WFD 2019, 2016). The assumption is that without language, there is no culture, no life. These convictions are nurtured in contexts where deaf people do know sign language, defend it against oralist and normalization approaches (see Davis 1995; Sacks 1989; Neubert 2017), and have an option to access deaf communities – as difficult as their situation may be. It is, however, a confusing statement regarding the grand share of deaf people who do not have access to communities, sign language, or any kind of contact to other deaf persons. As much as I understand the political argument, this generalization does not square with all deaf experiences and casts a shadow of paternalism and ethnocentrism. This notion is also present among the deaf in Benin, as Jean-Louis, a deaf educator of the deaf in the northern town of Djougou, expressed when telling me about

> those deaf who did not go to school, they just sit around, they have no friends, they just sit or stand, and they are always tense, never part of anything. (fieldnotes 25/07/2019)

To Jean-Louis, as to other deaf and deafened Beninese who pity the *vrai·e·s sourd·e·s*, deaf life without sign language and deaf community is misery.

With this chapter, I want to explore the unmapped territory of Beninese deaf geography and add some different nuances to the description of lives of the rural deaf. Living *off deaf sociality* means experiencing the ambiguity of belonging and not-belonging, of being both integrated in and marginalized within the hearing community. I will argue that socialization without elaborate language is not automatically doomed to fail as some Deaf political discourse or Jean-Louis expect. Instead, the rural lifeworld offers a somewhat more flexible approach to difference than the city that, following Aude de Saint-Loup,

> produced a dual and paradoxical effect: while allowing the deaf to interact among themselves and develop a form [of] sign language (as Montaigne noted), it also forced them into a new way of living in which education took first place and grass roots solidarity no longer operated (1996:12–13).

In introducing Moukwari, a deaf young man living in a village in the Atacora region in northern Benin, I will have a closer look at the potentials and limits of this grass-roots solidarity. In 2018 and 2019 I spent about two months in the north, of which I spent five weeks in the village Pepèrkou where I got to know a deaf man who had never interacted with a deaf community or other deaf individuals – at least as far as he or anyone in the village could tell me. Instead of presenting his life merely as woe and suffering, as isolation and marginalization, I wish to illustrate the ways he participated in village life and work. I will take this social life seriously and present it in its ambiguous experience of both exclusion *and* participation – as limited as the latter may be.

In many settings beyond the reach of deaf spaces, education, and sociality, deaf villagers live their lives among the hearing communities, unconnected to other deaf people, unaware of sign language beyond "ad hoc communication systems with a low level of conventionalization" (Zeshan 2011:228)[99]. They cannot participate in gossip, religious and political discourse, in most verbal exchange, jokes, and sharing of thoughts and worries. I will suggest, however, not to limit the understanding of their lives to exclusion and agony but to acknowledge their situation in its complexity and ambiguity. They are farmers and workers, friends, brothers and sisters, fellow villagers, and more. Given the small number of deaf schools in Benin in general and its northern regions in particular, as well as the high rates of acquired deafness in the given contexts of hygiene, sanitation, and medical care, those deaf villagers outside the networks are likely to represent the majority of deaf people in Benin as in many other countries in the global south. Nyst et al. clarify that

> the majority of deaf Africans have no access to deaf education. It is likely that most of them are not in regular contact with a large, stable deaf community [and that] in fact the majority of deaf people in the world are in precisely this situation (Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba 2012:251).

Therefore, when talking about being deaf in Benin, deaf lives *off deaf sociality* must be taken into account as well. Without claiming to establish reoccurring traits of *rural deafness*, I do think that this exploration can contribute to taking apart present biases and presumptions about being deaf in rural contexts – in Benin and beyond.

I will first share some general observations about being born deaf (section 6.1) and being late deafened (section 6.2) in the village which both tend

[99] Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba (2012:269) consider these "home signs" rather a system than an actual language as they do not fulfill some defining criteria of full languages like shared use across a user community or transmission across generations, see also Frishberg (1987).

to differ quite a lot from the ways to be deaf discussed in chapter 2. I will then take some space to introduce Moukwari and his life in Pepèrkou in section 6.3. Without any intention of generalizations, I include these ways of being to stand for the varieties of experience of the majority of deaf lives in Benin that happen outside deaf networks, communities and sociality. Their ways of being deaf reveal more ambiguities of the Beninese deaf experience as being both others and not others (section 6.4). Before introducing the deaf people *off deaf sociality*, I will give a short introduction to the context of my research trips to the rural north of Benin.

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I first came to the villages in the Atacora region in 2016 to check up on rumors about infanticide that I had heard in the south. The people up north, southerners said, killed their disabled children. I read the same information in a national action plan on disability, issued by the *Ministère de la Famille, des Affaires Sociales, da la Solidarité Nationale, des Handicapés*[100] *et des Personnes de Troisième Age* (Zodehougan Agbota, Aplogan, and Agbogbe 2011:13; 28). In July 2016 I had the chance to interview Lorenzo, the then director of the *direction pour la réadaptation et intégration des personnes handicapées* at the ministry and asked him about the sources for these assessments. He answered that there were no sources, no literature or studies he could refer me to: "On le sait, c'est ça" – they know it's like that, and that's it. A secretary of the FAPHB, the umbrella organization of DPOs in Benin, told me the same (interview 28/11/2016): It was just common knowledge that these things happened in the north. So, when I went to visit deaf friends in Natitingou in December 2016, I asked around for more information on these infanticides.

Already before coming to Benin, I had read and heard about a particular trait of Bariba/Baatonum culture where so called *enfants sorciers*, witch children, are either killed, abandoned or given away straight after birth (Martin 2018; Sargent 1988). They are identified by particularities at birth; being born with the face towards the ground, born feet or bottom first, babies who fall on their right arm during birth, births before the ninth month of pregnancy and babies born with teeth (Bio Sanou and Ghanaba 2015:11; Alber

[100] Whereas many public and corporate texts take care to refer to "personnes handicapées" or "persons with disabilities", the ministry in charge actually was simply called "for the handicapped" as part of its long title. The ministry's name has been changed to *Ministère des Affaires Sociales et de la Microfinance* in the transition to the administration of the newly elected government in the 2016 elections.

2014:252)[101]. The same I heard from various people in Natitingou and the villages around – but nothing else: All knowledge of infanticide was connected to *enfants sorciers* among the Bariba. All other language groups, so I was told, would consider infanticide a horrendous crime. Even Catholic and Evangelical priests who might have had a certain interest to discredit *heathen practices*, objected to the suspicions I brought from the south[102]. While I was village-hopping with a friend to learn about the infanticide allegations, I also told the villagers why I was in Benin in the first place. In literally every village I heard "Oh, deaf people? Yeah, we also have/had one, but he's gone to Nigeria" or "but she was married off". The omnipresence of deaf people in rural northern Benin was not surprising: It is in the heart of the meningitis belt of the Sahel region (Molesworth et al. 2002). I visited around a dozen villages to speak with late-deafened people and families and neighbors of deaf villagers. Conversation with the born-deaf who did not know sign language was not possible in these very brief encounters, so I spoke with their hearing kin with the help of an interpreting friend. In 2018 and 2019, I spent several weeks in the village Pepèrkou and exchanged more intensively with Moukwari, a born-deaf man in his late twenties, who will be in the center of this chapter. I will start with an overview of the different deaf persons I met and what I learned during short visits.

6.1 late deafened in the village

On a number of moped trips to villages in the region, I met deaf villagers with various deafnesses. I asked my friend Jacques, a village-born Waaba man who worked as a tourist guide in Natitingou, to come along and help me translate between French and Waama, Gourmanché and Otammari. Neither Signs nor French would help me much in the rural areas. Even though the villages were not further than fifteen to twenty kilometers from the regional semi-urban center Natitingou, the setting was very rural, without running water, electricity, paved streets, or much other public infrastructure. There were many older people who spoke flawlessly but had become deaf. They

[101] In December 2016, I had the chance to interview the priest Pierre Bio Sanou who created an NGO to take charge of abandoned witch children of the Bariba, partially by organizing adoptions to Europe, see more in Bio Sanou and Ghanaba (2015) and the feature film by François and Guichou (2011).

[102] In 2019, I discussed the infanticides again with Jean, a disabled activist from Cotonou. He said: "Well, of course they would not tell you, as they probably told you they would no longer do female excisions" (fieldnotes 07/23/2019). I remembered walking with a young boy in the bush near Pepèrkou in 2018, passing a circular clearing. He told me it was where the girls had their excision – hidden and far off from the village center where we had attended the public circumcision of young men during the last days (fieldnotes 04/21/2018).

complained a lot about their lack of access to the village talk. They were afraid to go alone to the fields for they would not be able to hear approaching animals and strangers, they said, or hear shouts of warning about snakes, robbers, and other dangers. They were weary because they could no longer talk with their friends and family. They experienced the loss of their hearing social identity and seemed traumatized, they became quite anxious and idle. For the older deafened villagers, it seems that their deafness shook their notion of ability and confidence; they felt impaired and inferior to their hearing peers. In the village of Ditchimboni I met a family where four of six family members deafened when they were beyond the age of thirty. They did not use manual communication but tried to talk and shout to each other, trying to recognize each other's speech. This barely worked and left them quite desperate and frustrated.

Not so Kayo, a late-deafened woman in Tiquati, about twelve kilometers northeast from Natitingou on the road to Kouarfa. She deafened in her early twenties, after she had had children. Now in her late forties, she lived with her brother and worked the fields, harvested tobacco, and made charcoal. She spoke Waama and knew how to read lips a bit. She was well versed in Waaba culture and customs regarding rituals, greetings, festivities, jokes, and buffoonery. At a circumcision ceremony[103] in Tiquati she asked me to dance, which we did, much to the amusement of the other villagers. She was confident and willing to work, to put herself in the position necessary to read lips. She worked as hard as any other village woman. She contributed and gained respect from her neighbors and family. Only when she stayed out longer than usual in the field or at the market were the other villagers worried; they watched out for her more than they did for others, they said.

Both the desperation of the old deaf and the hearing-world-competence of people like Kayo are due to their late deafening. They either feel that they lost their identity as a hearing villager or they mobilize their hearing world competence to continue their life among the hearing as a non-hearing member. The late-deafened villagers live with their hearing families or on their own, moving through the hearing world as disabled persons. They have been socialized into the hearing world and cannot play their roles fully anymore, feel impaired, experience *hearing loss* – or, like Kayo, continue living their lives, possibly impaired, but just do not seem to care that much.

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[103] In 2018, I was lucky to be there during a season of circumcisions that only happens every few years. During the dry season, that is, after the harvest and before planting, villagers would go to another village every other day to assist in the ceremonial tasks and talks, or just to drink and dance their heads off.

6.2 born deaf in the village

I met many children and some young adults in the villages who were born deaf, deafened before they learned to speak, or who refused or forgot how to speak. They usually worked with their families in gender specific work: Boys went to the fields with their father, and girls stayed near the homestead with their mother and sisters. I have often heard hearing people complain that deaf children were difficult because they would not understand orders (see also Sacks 1989, 117; Kiyaga & Moores 2003, 22; Kusters 2015, 154; Kara & Harvey 2016, 80). Never, however, did somebody complain about their work in general. Quite the contrary, the deaf children and adults were always praised for their hard, diligent work. Often this happened in a way of expressing surprise, like "He is deaf - *but!,* he works really well!", a logic that I came across all over Benin.

In Tchoundékou I met a family with three deaf children. The parents – both hearing – had had three hearing children, then three deaf children, followed by two hearing children again. There was, thus, no apparent hereditary deafness involved. The two deaf sons who at the time of my visit were about seven and nine years old, did not go to school but went to work the fields with their father. The deaf girl, younger than the boys, stayed home and worked with her mother, preparing food, taking care of small livestock and the fields around the house. As I was in touch with the Catholic school for the deaf in Pèporiyakou, I made two attempts to invite the father to take his children to school, once alone in 2018, and once in 2019 with Sœur Greta, a Brazilian nun from the school. The first time, I asked a French speaking villager to translate, which did not work out too well – he turned out to be totally drunk and told the father that I had a school and wanted to take away his children. The second time, Sœur Greta, through the translation of a hearing graduate from the Catholic school, used a rhetorical strategy that did not strike me as quite suitable to convince the father: With some indignation she asked him: "Do you want your children to stay in the village all their life?!" Well, yes, why would he not want that? On both occasions he explained that he saw many people go to public school in the village and it was good for nothing. Nothing became of those children, he said, and eventually, they would end up working the fields in the village anyway – an opinion that is not rare in West Africa (see Gnanou 2017:53). So why bother investing in school (for similar skepticism towards schooling in Senegal see Faye 2007:123)? Also, the children were deaf, he said, they would not understand. They were better off with him and his wife. They understood their children, they knew what they needed. The children belonged home and the parents also wanted

them around. "Quite a Catholic family model," I could not resist remarking to Sœur Greta.

In her history of the deaf, Aude de Saint-Loup also recognizes a somewhat integrative atmosphere towards the deaf "in any rural area where education is not the first priority and where the interdependence of village or community life holds sway" (1996:11). Education, here, refers to school and institutional education rather than, for example, "situated learning" (Lave and Wenger 1991) that understands the acquisition of knowledge and competences as a process that cannot be disentangled from social integration. Saint-Loup continues:

> Moreover, because of the closer connection among the community's inhabitants, a better knowledge of the deaf is made possible because they retain their place in the family and community. A spontaneous form of communication arises [...] marking the acknowledgment of these individuals and of the will to share with them. (1996:11)

Nyst et al. found similar situations in the rural region of Douentza in Mali, where

> there seems to be no stigma whatsoever attached to the use of gestures [with the deaf] and many of them participate actively in family and community life. (Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba 2012:267)

The active signing of hearing villagers in Benin is, however, exceptional. Unlike Nyst et al. in village communities in Douentza or Constanze Schmaling in Kano, Nigeria (Schmaling 2000:17f), I did not witness any established form of visual communication between parents and deaf children in Tchoundékou. The deaf siblings, however, signed among themselves without ever having met another signing person. Obviously, we could not establish a level of understanding in the short time I spent with them. Yet it was clear that they were developing their own natural sign language or system, probably also inspired by gestures from the villagers and spontaneous signs that others used to communicate more *to* than *with* them.

Communication and education here do not solely rely on language – verbal or visual. Gerd Spittler has argued that in African settings of domestic learning, children are not so much taught by verbal instruction and explanation but rather learn through observation and imitation (Spittler 2016:116–18)[104]. When I was taking part in working the field, people – deaf or hearing,

[104] Sebastian Wenz (2015:131, 149) observed in his research on car repair in Sierra Leone that also in apprenticeships, verbal communication is subordinate to participation, observation, and imitation; see also Coy (1991:2), Kresse and Marchand (2009). In an unpublished working paper on a research project on apprenticeship and analphabetism in Parakou, my

children or adults – would just give me a hoe and maybe a glance that I interpreted as a warning not to hurt myself, but no further instruction. I was expected to watch and do what they did. Deaf people are thus not necessarily less able to participate in village economy than others.

This general competence was also why it was no big hurdle for hearing parents in Tiquati to marry off their deaf daughter. When I first met them in 2016, I asked them if they saw any difficulty there. No, her father said. Either they would find somebody – and why shouldn't they, he said – or she would stay home with them. Village life is based on a mix of subsistence farming and cash crops to generate income for investments into cement, motorcycles, medical treatment, and school – or cigarettes and booze. The staff of life, however, was generated locally so that providing for more people in the household is less challenging than in towns and cities. Unlike some other disabled persons, the deaf can contribute to household economy to the same extent as their hearing kin. Eventually, the teenage girl in Tiquati was married off to a hearing man, and I assumed she moved to live with her husband's family. I learned in 2019 that she and her husband had probably moved to Nigeria for work. Her father had not seemed too bothered; this was the way things went with most daughters, hearing or deaf.

The socialization of deaf villagers always depends on the given individual, family, and community context. I had the chance to get to know Moukwari, one of the born-deaf villagers more closely, so I will focus on his village life – as far as it was accessible to me through chat, observation and participation with him and conversations about him in his village Pepèrkou. Properly studying an isolated deaf person in his hearing cultural environment is an endeavor that cannot be realized in a few weeks. Rolf Kuschel pointed out in his beautiful article on Kangobai, the only deaf person on Rennell Island, that an investigation to understand Kangobai's language and social

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colleague Issifou Abou Moumouni quotes an apprentice in metal works in early 2020 saying: "'On peut voir le patron prendre des mesures, mais il ne nous explique pas comment prendre les mesures.'" Abou Moumouni concludes: "C'est par l'observation du patron lorsqu'il travail que l'apprenant a une idée de comment réaliser une tâche. C'est pour cela que dans les ateliers de formation ou sur les chantiers, il est assez courant de voir les apprentis attroupés autour du patron lorsqu'il travail. […] Cependant, il ne suffit pas de simplement voir le patron réaliser une tâche pour prétendre d'emblée la reproduire avec succès. Il faut s'exercer en répétant la même chose." ["We can see the master take measure, but he does not tell us how to take the measure." […] It is through observing the master at work that the apprentice understands how to fulfill a task. It is therefore common to see the apprentices gather around the masters at work in workshops and on construction sites. […] It is, however, not enough to simply watch the master do the work to appropriate the skill. One also has to try and do the same thing.] Both observation and imitation are central to learning a craft or trade in Benin, see also Houngbedji (forthcoming) – whether the learners are literate or not, hearing or deaf.

integration “required a thorough knowledge not only of Rennell language, but also of the culture under study” (Kuschel 1973:2, see also Friedner and Kusters 2014:8 on Adamorobe Sign Language in its cultural context). Yet, I will share the sketchy portrait that, given the limited time we had to get to know each other, remains more external, descriptive and interpretative than I would want it to be.

6.3 Moukwari in Pepèrkou

“ ”

(Robert Schumann: The Poet Speaks, from op. 15, 1838)

On a visit to Jacques’ family in Pepèrkou in 2016 I quickly met Moukwari for the first time. As I had the impression that his brother Frank had found me a bit suspicious, I did not feel comfortable asking them to host me. So, in 2018, I moved in with Jacques’ brother Ntcha who had a homestead in the village and I lived there for four weeks and another two weeks in 2019. As my time was limited, I found it useful to have a certain affiliation, to be recognized as *Jacques’ friend* who had an interest in learning more about deaf villagers. As a guest in Ntcha’s family I learned about the social structure of the village, spiritual beliefs and practices, and the rhythms of farming and community life. I also learned that Ntcha’s family had little to do with Moukwari.

Moukwari in village sociality

Moukwari’s family moved to Pepèrkou around 2010. Their homestead is on the eastern edge of the village, towards the gravel road to Yarikou, the capitol of the Waaba who are organized in various families and clans. The Waaba (or Yoabou, see Ceccaldi 1979:251-253, 268-259), as most so-called ethnic groups, are not an ethnic entity as early European and American anthropology understood them for decades, but a dynamic, not necessarily exclusive we-group loosely organized around kin as well as socio-professional, linguistic, religious and other affiliations, (see Elwert 1989:26–31). The loose, somewhat acephalic and flexible structure is reflected in the fact that some cultural practices vary greatly even in small settings like Pepèrkou. Moukwari and his family are Waaba themselves, but not part of the few major families in Pepèrkou. His family does not practice male circumcision like the Pepèrkou families, yet they have the characteristic Waaba scarifications. These *identity cards* of northern Benin are cut into children’s faces around the age of five, sometimes only at the age of 30, depending on the need or the occasion, as villagers told me. They are specific to each language group and partially also reflect a more precise regional or kin belonging (Toumoudagou 2018, see also

Schildkrout 2004). Moukwari was born deaf; through the scarification his kinship belonging was, however, made clear at an early age. His name also reflects the very social practice of naming. It translates as "elle ne trouve pas", she does not find. The name refers to Moukwari's mother, who had had several stillbirths before Moukwari was born deaf but living in the early 1990s. His name expresses that "she had not found, but now she did", that she had been waiting for a surviving newborn for a long time. There is a ring of "finally God gave her a child" to the name. Among the Waaba, it is common to give names that reflect the immediate social context. Jacques, my friend and assistant, is called "Tépa" in the village, "no father", because his genitor died before he was born. The wife of Ntcha, my host in Pepèrkou, was called "the foreign woman" because she came from another village. No-one in Pepèrkou called her by her given name (that would be impolite and indicate that she still belonged to her home village and family), most did not even know her given name. Moukwari's name then locates him in his family history and kinship belonging and also reflects the dire conditions in which mothers give birth in rural northern Benin. Complications at birth are another common cause of deafness.

While his family called Moukwari by his name, most of the villagers referred to him as *wounga*, the deaf[105]. As he was the only deaf adult in the village – there was also a deaf boy who was regularly traveling with his father to Nigeria – naming him *wounga* was not generalizing but referring to him individually, specifically, as they were when calling me *yiporo*, the only white person in the village. Scheer and Groce recognize that in

> small-scale societies [...] regular face-to-face contact between community members is frequent. Individuals are related and connected to each other in diffuse social roles and contexts […]. In such situations, a single personal characteristic, such as a physical impairment, does not generalize to define one's total social identity. (Scheer and Groce 1988:31)

Similarly, in an early essay on cross-cultural research on disability, Susan Reynolds Whyte suggests that one should consider the social qualities that make one an able and full person in a particular culture to understand disability without a Western bias (Whyte 1990:201). She states that "[i]n a society where identity is fixed by kinship, position in the community and age organization, one is a person despite physical impairment" and that "[i]ndividual ability is less crucial for the formation of social identity" (Whyte 1990:203).

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105 In Waama, there is a word for a deaf (*wounga*) and one for "deaf-mute" person (*mounka*). Both were, however, often used interchangeably disregarding whether the person in question spoke or not.

In this sense I would argue that calling him *wounga* was merely referential and not categorical. His social identity went beyond merely being the deaf person.

In 2018, I attended a funeral in Takessali with Moukwari and many villagers from Pepèrkou. He joined in the celebrations, had some shots of *sodabi* and danced like everyone. He only provoked some laughter when he would lose focus on those around him and continue dancing when the music, running on a ramshackle generator, stopped every few minutes. People would tap on his shoulder and scold him, telling him the music was off. They noticed and sometimes mocked his particularity, but also taught him about *wrong* behavior. In any case, he participated in get-togethers, festivities and was welcome.

One market day, however, I was sitting and chatting in the shade with some farmers who took the afternoon off to have *tchoukoutou*, warm homemade millet beer, at the market. We saw Moukwari go back to the field with a pesticide sprayer on his back. "He doesn't sit like this" said a farmer next to me, lighting up another cigarette. Everybody around agreed that Moukwari was a very tough worker, one of the best. He worked his own field that was about 45 minutes north of Pepèrkou on foot. As his family had moved to Pepèrkou recently, they could only claim land far from the village. The fields nearby were parceled out between the long-time resident families long ago. Moukwari was working four hectares of cotton, all by hand and usually on his own. Depending on the trade price and the yield, Pepèrkou farmers told me one can earn between one and two million francs CFA per hectare. Following this probably way too optimistic prospect, Moukwari could earn close to 10,000 USD a year, minus the significant investments in seeds, mineral fertilizer, and pesticides. It is his prosperity as well that helps him start a family. In 2018, on the mentioned funeral, he communicated to me that he really wanted a wife and was frustrated that he had not married yet. By 2019, his brother Frank had found a wife and arranged that they would marry when the harvest was sold, thus, when Moukwari can afford the necessary expenses, when he could prove his ability. It was often said in Benin that it is a lot harder to marry off a deaf son than a deaf daughter. Women are considered to be in need of support and guidance anyway, so it does not matter if one is deaf – she would be only a little less independent than a hearing woman. Deaf men on the other hand are often not trusted to be able to protect and provide for a family and end up with the "social handicap" of remaining unmarried (Kuschel 1973:6, see also Halatine and Berge 1990). Moukwari, however, demonstrated that he could be a capable Waaba man and wedding plans were under way.

During participant observation in Pepèrkou, watching him interact with me, an outsider, told me a bit about how he socializes in the village. The first time I went with him to work the field, he made me carry a hoe and a jerry can of water for the 45-minute-walk. Arriving at the field, we got to work, not stopping until the early afternoon to have lunch break. I forced myself to keep up with his pace but was absolutely exhausted after four hours of arduous work in the Sahel sun. When I told him that I had had enough, he looked at me with genuine disappointment and indicated we should finish the rest of the section we had started. I did my best and enjoyed his recognition. Yet, when we met other villagers later that day, my hands covered in blisters, they were angry that Moukwari would make the white guy work like that. He does not have the abstract village knowledge on how to deal with the particularities of a foreigner, he does not understand that *yiporo* cannot be expected to work, that *yiporo* needs breaks all the time, that *yiporo* cannot carry heavy things.

Another time he had visited me at Ntcha's homestead where I was staying. When he was about to go, another farmer arrived and talked to me. Moukwari stood waiting in the yard, and I was a bit confused by the newly arrived neighbor nagging me to buy him a drink. Ntcha's wife then told me I should walk Moukwari back to the street – as is the custom in (rural) Benin: If a visitor leaves, you accompany him a part of the way. Another villager might have understood that I was just a foreigner who was not aware of the local customs. But Moukwari was standing around uncomfortably, apparently not knowing what to do because protocol was broken. Both instances suggest that Moukwari is perfectly competent with everyday practice and experience that he can observe and copy or – when dancing at the funeral – is being corrected directly. Extraordinary situations that can only be learned in the abstract are unknown territory to him. Those confusing visits by anthropologists are, however, nothing but minor disturbances in the demands of village life. It would, though, also fit his confident and proud personality if he did not accept my ignorance to local norms and – rightfully so – expected me to treat him with respect.

Moukwari signing

His participation in gossip, chat and abstract knowledge was challenged by the limits of communication. The villagers communicated with him with a few dozen gestures that he and they made up. They had quite a number of signs for agricultural terminology like cotton, seeds, fertilizers, hoes, etc., that were all quite iconic representations of the referenced object or activity. The shared work experience facilitated the communication. If he would show how

high his cotton seedlings were standing, everyone would know what his days looked like, as they all knew which tasks were on at that state of growth, as they all pretty much did the same work. Carol Padden states that often home or village signs do not develop in complexity due to the "great deal of shared information" that relatives or fellow villagers have (Padden 2011:24). Communication was usually done with directional indication and reference to objects, persons, and places, with mimicry, mime, and facial expression. Some of the villagers were more able to communicate with him than others which indicates that it was more than the colloquial *talking with hand and feet*. Yet, it was far from what linguists, or ideologies of language as Erin Moriarty Harrelson (2017) critically discusses, would consider a language.

In community gatherings, Moukwari would watch closely when people talk and gesture. With eyes wide-open he would follow the conversation, from speaker to speaker, to decipher meaning in facial expression, movement, mood, and gestures. William Stokoe has described this raised visual awareness of deaf people in hearing settings in his pioneering work on American Sign Language (Stokoe 2005[1960]:7). In the village setting, Moukwari sticks out because a lot of conversation happens while people are doing other things. They cook, chop, mend, whittle or repair tools while talking. People have conversations while working in the fields. When you walk across the fields and you see someone working, you greet and have a chat, often from a distance of several dozens of meters. The farmers would respond without necessarily taking a break from ploughing and hoeing, possibly not even raising their heads, yet answering the generic greetings and questions. Not responding to these greetings was very impolite. One day when Moukwari and I were on his field, two women walked by, probably on their way to the market in Pepèrkou, and greeted us. I answered in surprisingly well pronounced Waama – the greetings are very generic and repetitive, so I had a lot of practice – while Moukwari did not react at all. They kept on shouting at him to no avail until I walked over to him, tapped his shoulder, and pointed at the ladies. He nodded, smiled, and waved. The women left confused but satisfied.

People would have conversations in the dark, or while lying in the shade with eyes closed. Often people participated in conversations even though they were inside their huts, in the shower, sitting around a corner or while they were busy with household chores. It seemed to me that Waaba village chat was very spoken-word-based, and that face-to-face communication mostly happened either when people had arguments or when breakdowns of communication had to be bridged – with foreigners or with drunkards in the liquor shops.

In Moukwari's family's homestead, though, the battery-powered lights were on longer than in others. Members of the homestead gathered around the central cooking stove in the middle of the yard, often in a semicircle. Moukwari would sit on a jerry can and follow what was going on. When he would work on his tools, he would rather sit off the circle as if he would not want to split his focus. The arrangement in the homestead represents the incorporation of Moukwari into the group. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock stated in their article on the body social that bodies in interaction express relationality (1987:8). By accommodating the homestead sociality to Moukwari's focus they did communicate belonging. By his insistence on eye-contact and visibility, he expressed claims for participation and respect that he deserved as a (productive) member of the family. Though verbal or visual communication was limited, the way of living together was communication of relationality, too. The daily sharing of food also constructed and reaffirmed their intimate relationships through what Arjun Appadurai called "gastro-politics" (1981).

There were only two people in the village who claimed to know Signs – Moukwari's brother Frank and Kori, a farmer from the more established Pepèrkou families. Frank was the only person in Pepèrkou who had a sign name: tap your left arm with your right hand – Frank was left-handed[106]. The hearing villagers knew this name – though they would not call it a name but say that that was Moukwari's gesture for Frank. He himself did not have a sign name – why would he? If he or others were talking about him, they would just point at him. If he was not there, people would not sign. The fact that only Frank gained a village-wide known sign name indicated the importance he has for the social integration of Moukwari. He remained, however, suspicious and distant from me throughout my stay. Instead, Kori, Moukwari, and I hung out quite a bit. I could not acquire much comprehension or competence in their Signs, but there seemed to be a canon of signs, mostly for agricultural plants, tools, objects and processes as well as for man, woman, child, house, foods, etc. These signs were mostly very iconic and often also comprehensible to people who did not claim to understand Signs. The few signs

[106] I actually do not know Frank's real name (therefore the somewhat obvious pseudonym *Frank*). Moukwari would use the sign name and whenever hearing villagers spoke to me about him, they would call him "Moukwari's brother", the "*mounka*'s/*wounga*'s/the deaf man's brother", or simply "the/his brother". As mentioned above, calling people illustrates how intrinsically social and relational village lives and networks are if individual names are barely necessary, for a person is always most precisely referred to in their relational entanglements.

that were used were set in semantic context with a lot of indication, deictic, facial expression, dynamic, and mime.

Kori and Moukwari communicated beyond the understanding of reference and gesture in a more complex way that Kori could not explain – possibly also because our mutual understanding was very limited – my Waama worse than his French. Kori, born in the mid-1980s, grew up in Pepèrkou and stayed while many others of his generation left to Natitingou, Nigeria, or the south. He stayed in touch with them through short phone calls, often visiting town on his motorcycle, while being a common member of the village community, married with children, working his own field, taking care of his old parents at home. It seemed to me like he felt a bit in-between the chairs of traditional village life and the savors of town that he tasted time and again. Maybe that is one reason why Kori engaged with Moukwari so much when he arrived in Pepèrkou.

Another aspect of their communication – besides meet-and-greet and the exchange of some information – was hanging out and doing nothing but share time – something that Moukwari rarely does outside his homestead. It seems that the effort that Kori (and I) made to communicate was understood as expression of appreciation, acceptance, and relation. Whether communication eventually worked was not too important.

An integral part of communication in the absence of a shared language is an active conversational co-participant as Charles Goodwin (2000) asserts in the context of meaning making in people with aphasia. A similarly mutual commitment to understanding is noted by Mara Green who looks at communications in international sign at transnational deaf-deaf encounters (Green 2014a) or between deaf and hearing Mumbaikars in Kusters' and Sahasradbudhe's film project on gestures and signs in India (2016). These works emphasize the importance of effort, orientations, and attention on both sides to bridge communicative challenges. In Pepèrkou, it seems that only Kori and Frank were active listeners and communication partners willing to do the labor of interpretation. Faced with a breakdown in communication, many hearing villagers turned to Kori or Frank for help, or they avoided communication with Moukwari entirely.

Moukwari is but one of many deaf adults living among the hearing in northern Benin and he surely represents just one way of being deaf in these contexts. This situation is not only doom and misery as some simplify it. There is a wide ambiguous spectrum between full participation and exclusion.

without and within the hearing world

The situation of those early-deafened or born-deaf into hearing village is more ambiguous than that of the late-deafened villagers. Even though deaf people seem to be all over northern Benin, there are rarely more than two or three in one village. Due to the age and gender disparities, even those two or three do not necessarily have a common basis to establish commonality based on shared experience. As a reflection of deaf diversity, a boy deafened at the age of eight would have no shared social space with a twenty-year-old born-deaf woman from another family. Why should they form a community, especially since there is no sign language?

The born-deaf villagers like Moukwari also have not known what they do not have: neither deaf community nor full participation in hearing communities. Yet, in spite of this, they live their deaf lives. Their lives take place in the ambiguity of being and not being part of their hearing communities. They are excluded, but that does not automatically mean that they have no life. Exclusion does not mean social death – particularly in village life that provides some degree of integration of disabled and deaf community members. During an exploratory research project in Uganda, a paraplegic wheelchair-user asked me:

> Do you have disability at all [in Europe]? You know, I once saw a guy on TV, he had no arms, no legs. And he had a job, and wife and children and was happy. That's not disabled. (Rambo, conversation in Kansanga, Kampala, 22/08/2015)

His perception of disability is reflected in Joachim's argumentation of (deaf) values in section 4.6: If you are a productive, more or less independent member of society, you are not disabled (see also Foucault, Stastny, and Şengel 1995). Moukwari is on his way to achieving all that an average villager in northern Benin can hope to have: A family of origin that respects and supports him, a village community he belongs to, a prosperous economic activity, and he will quite likely start a family on his own. The deaf girl from Tiquati is married into a new family, the deaf boys and girls in Tchoundékou, Ditchimboni, and other villages I visited have as much a chance to achieve what Moukwari has as any other village child.

And yet, there is exclusion from the village life. When the farmer said that Moukwari does not "sit like this", one has to know that the villagers very often "sit like this". Every other night they meet at the village shops that sell gasoline and antibiotics, booze and cookies, batteries and cigarettes, and chat, laugh, and drink. They tell each other stories, share news from other villages, discuss politics, mock each other, or laugh about the clumsy farming attempts

of a German anthropologist. For a deaf person, this daily, friendly mockery and laughter must be very exhausting for they will constantly assume that they were the object of ridicule (Kusters 2015a:99). Kusters observed the same reluctance to engage in social activities in Adamorobe and believes that it is because they do not want to experience deaf-related insults or gossip (Kusters 2015a:62).

The topics that the villagers talk about are often abstract and go beyond the scope of improvised gestures. They wonder whether the lightning that struck the neighbor's palm tree was a natural phenomenon or caused by witchcraft, and who might want to attack the neighbor and why. They would listen to Waama-songs on their cell phones. They would talk and laugh about mishaps they heard from other villages. They would talk about the silly things a cousin brought from town. They would talk about how a nephew was doing in the capital in the south. Thus, the life beyond life itself was shared in conversations. When Moukwari was present, he tried to follow and was very attentive to who was talking and what the mood was. But how much would he actually get of what was being said? The hearing on the other hand were careful not to laugh in ways that he could possibly perceive as if they were mocking him. He had a reputation of being potentially aggressive when he felt misunderstood, mistreated, or disrespected, though I never experienced him as aggressive.

As a matter of fact, it was quite the opposite. An anthropologist friend who visited me during research in 2018 remarked that the deaf in cities look a lot more discontented than the ones in the village. This might be due to the fact that they feel less structural discrimination than their urban peers. Moukwari was never actively or consciously excluded or offended. Instead his absence at "sitting like this" was noticed with slight disappointment. Apparently, the farmers were unaware that the focus on conversation prevented him from partaking in their social activity. Yet, he was considered part of the community. This is also quite evident given the fact that there were explicit others – the nomadic Peulh who pitched their camps in the scrub outside the village. The deaf Waaba were still Waaba. Moukwari and the other born-deaf northerners I met lived with their families or married into new families – they were never properly expelled or excluded. They were different, but they were no Others. Yet, their lives are characterized by disability; in any social interaction they are confronted with their impairment (Jenkins 1998).

6.4 others not others – it takes a village..

The logic that deafness without communication and sign language is affliction and agony or a life not worth living (as members of deaf communities in Benin and many deaf rights and sign language activists around the world would precipitously claim) rings an uncomfortable memory of eugenic ideas. The linguistic bias that understands language as a *conditio sine qua non* of being human (see section 2.3) furthermore works in logics that does not account for the diversity of ways of being deaf in the world. I wish this section encountered these generalizations with a more nuanced recognition of the ambiguity of deaf and disabled lives in Beninese villages. In chapters 4 and 5, I have discussed the history and (re)production of deaf communities in Benin in detail. As constitutive as those communities are to what being deaf means for deaf signers in Benin, there are many other ways of being deaf. With this chapter I have shed light on some ways these deaf lives can turn out. Lives outside the deaf networks (Kusters 2017) are characterized by ambiguity – and cannot be generalized much beyond that assessment.

People born deaf in the villages experience both inclusion and exclusion. They feel that they are different *from* the hearing others while having little opportunity to identify *with* someone. They blend into their village communities to some extent, clearly experiencing limits to this integration. Moukwari's story has illustrated how his integration depends on many factors like individual ability, family support, and acceptance as well as the socio-economic context. Many late-deafened villagers experience becoming deaf as 'hearing loss', as disability, as deprivation of status and social role in society, and hence as a disaster. They own property, they hold hierarchical positions within the family, but they can no longer fulfill the roles and cherish the privileges connected to their positionality in the hearing society.

These impressions are neither representative for deaf northerners nor for rural deaf Benin in its entirety. Instead, social participation of deaf individuals in hearing majority villages depends on particular contexts; motivation, personality and ability and cannot be generalized (see also Nyst, Sylla, and Magassouba 2012:267). Especially in southern Benin, people born deaf happen to be considered as victims of ancestors or spiritual beings, as punishments for parents' immoral conduct (see also Kara and Harvey 2016:77, Kusters 2015a:111–15, 2015b, for similar explanatory models on the Solomon Islands see Kuschel 1973:5), or as chosen by a *fétiche*, a spirit that is present in a sacred object, as companion. In one village in the Mono region in south-west Benin, there was a deaf girl who was understood to be born as the wife of a local *fétiche*. She lived at the shrine for some years, without human

interaction apart from receiving food in the same manner that the *fétiche* was fed and cared for on a daily basis. Later, teachers from Haindé school for the deaf convinced the villagers to let her come to school. The social neglect, the teachers told me, had inhibited her development and she did not learn to sign or integrate into school. I briefly met her on a short visit to a bible camp for the deaf in Haindé. She seemed to me to experience heavy intellectual impairments. I could not tell whether her condition was the consequence of her story, or if her story was a way to make sense of her condition. Whatever truth might lie in this story, or if the teachers and missionaries – as agents of modernity – wanted to decry heathen village practices, it illustrates that deafness is understood and narrated in various ways across the country. Although fetishism, sorcery and ancestor worship are very present in daily life in the north, northerners never explained deafness as a consequence of those practices. Instead, deafness was accepted as a natural occurrence. The social reaction to deafness might be entirely different in other regions where the narratives surrounding becoming deaf have more social and spiritual implications.

What I wish to emphasize for the rural realm of Benin is that deaf people are potential social actors in their communities and not only oppressed marginalia. While they do experience exclusion and discrimination, their lives can only be understood in recognizing the ambiguities and not reduce them to a marginal, bleak existence.

Given the limited access that I as a researcher had to their life worlds, these interpretations cannot claim truth. Deaf lives without sign language, communication and community are hard to access; people's own voices can eventually only come forth retrospectively when deaf people remember the time before learning a sign language (Desloges and Abbé Deschamps 1779; Sacks 1989:18–19). At that point, the deaf who speak up know what they did not have; which surely taints their memories of how their lives felt before. Could they report on what it meant to be deaf *off deaf sociality*? Or would late signers exaggerate their previous marginality? And who could tell?

In the urban contexts, the hearing people can approach deaf sociality through learning sign language from deaf friends, family, or neighbors or hearing signers. In the rural areas, this access is at the same time more and less complicated. It is less complicated as life-worlds are usually not as diverse and deaf villagers generally perform the same tasks as hearing villagers. Daily life is relatively homogenous, and sharing experience is thus more natural than in diverse urban centers. However, in the rural areas there are few conventions like Signs that hearing people can clearly focus on. Deaf-hearing interactions thus always require some improvisation and acculturation from

both sides; the deaf need to learn to interact with the hearing as much as the hearing need to learn to interact with the deaf.

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Moukwari's story is one of many so far untold stories of deaf individuals living in hearing communities without having opportunities for deaf turns, orientations, or similitude. I do not see them as "illiterate, languageless, and [therefore] isolated" as Andrew Foster did (quoted in Kiyaga and Moores 2003:20), because they are not. They are also not living miserable lives in "the hearing world" that they have no access to. Instead, they are deaf members of hearing communities, with ups and downs, with experiences of ex- and inclusion alike. Generalizing on rural deaf lives from one person's story would be presumptuous. What I do claim, however, is to understand deaf lives outside deaf sociality not as purely miserable or lives not worth living.

This chapter has laid bare the epistemological challenges of deaf diversity: If everything is so DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT, what can be said about being deaf in Benin? I will try to give an answer in the following, final chapter.

7 multiple belongings, ambiguous being, and how to be (deaf)

An anthropological inquiry into being deaf in Benin must look at both the unifying and binding experiences of similitude as well as the diversity and controversy that split the community. The result is necessarily ambiguous – the same ambiguity that the deaf in Benin face in many of their encounters, interactions, and attempts at making their lives. I argue that although some of the deaf in Benin consider themselves a distant kin group of similitude and shared experience, their deaf lives and ways of being are also heavily characterized by being DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENT.

My initial interest in researching being deaf in an African country lay in the question how deaf identities would arrange in the multicultural and multilinguistic societies. Having read some central works of Deaf Studies, I was wondering whether a local Deaf culture might evolve as a practice of identity and belonging among many others or maybe exist as a somewhat supra-cultural reference of belonging for d/Deaf people who come from all kinds of cultural backgrounds. During short exploratory research trips to Uganda, I had found this kind of supra-cultural belonging in a deaf church where the congregation was not only made up of deaf people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds from all across Uganda and neighboring countries, but even Muslims came to deaf church to join their deaf peers to pray (Mildner 2020b). This space was a deaf community space like the "church of deaf sociality" that Michele Friedner describes in Bangalore (Friedner 2014b); but conversion to Christianity was apparently not an issue here. Being deaf trumped religious belonging – even in the missionary hotspot that Uganda had become since the end of the 20th century (Ross Williams and Goldman 2013). This is of course not to say that there was something like an all-encompassing Ugandan deaf community – but I did learn that deaf similitude had unifying potential. With these ideas in mind, I arrived in Benin to quickly discover that both – the supra-cultural idea as well as a Deaf culture – were not to be found. Instead, deaf being and belonging are woven through the complex Beninese thickets of belonging. Being deaf is another axis of difference among the many axes that the deaf in Benin negotiate and navigate to find and make their place in the world.

7.1 choices and constraints

Throughout the book I have shown that what being deaf in Benin means depends on a wide range of constraints and choices. How one acquires deafness, at which stage in life and to which degree, sets some perimeters of the

arena where being deaf plays out, but certainly not all. The place where one is born or deafened opens or inhibits access to education and deaf sociality, the kind of economy that shapes people's lives means different affordances to different kinds of people. Family or neighborhood histories of deafness, disability, and difference may shape the hearing response to the deaf person. A major factor that prescribes (deaf and hearing) life courses in Benin, however, remains gender. Which roles are available within the family, in education, in romance, in church, in the economy, in shared households?

Beyond the constraints that bodies, communities, and society lay upon the deaf in Benin there are also individual choices that shape deaf lives. These may either be the decisions of parents and other kin about how to deal with a deaf child. Sometimes they integrate the child into hearing sociality as I witnessed a lot in the villages in the north, sometimes they neglect the child as happens in many stories the deaf tell, and sometimes they straight out abandon the deaf child as has happened to Elie. The deaf themselves, however, choose as well and make their lives between discourses and interactions.

Anne's story has shown how a person can be at the heart of community and sociality and yet feel estranged. Instead of being involved in deaf affairs like Yunus, who seemed to have turned into a playball of others' game of chiefs, Anne oriented towards her hearing family. She always stayed in the hearing world, as she said herself. Yet, she remained a central figure of Beninese deaf history.

The young seemed to orient themselves more towards deaf sociality, but possibly also because they can experience deaf community in schools and other deaf spaces earlier in their lives than their deaf ancestors could at the time. For the prior generation of Jérémy, Claire, Maurine, the deaf communities were less established, less ubiquitous, less self-governed – just less. Deaf turns, though, require something to turn to, an alternative, that had not been available to most of the older deaf.

For Zeïd, in turn, the deaf community was not a real alternative as he experienced his Muslim identity as an obstacle to achieve deaf Beninese belonging. The zeal that many members of both deaf churches reveal in their religious practice and sense of mission clearly shows that while being DEAF-SAME might trump some DEAF-DEAF-DIFFERENCES, Benin does not seem to be the place where it trumps religion.

The deaf citizens of Benin are barely considered to be an affair of the state. They are subsumed among disabled people which usually does not square with what they are to themselves; especially in distinction to those whom the deaf consider disabled. The school curriculum that is enforced by

the state is the major means to shape hearing and deaf schoolchildren alike. In not providing any meaningful accommodations and specifications for either deaf or otherwise disabled pupils, the state follows either an ignorant or a normalizing politics towards difference in school. The implementation of education for the deaf is relayed to private institutions, often with foreign support and influence. Through its neo-liberal orientation (see also Friedner 2010a:343; Chaudhry 2015) and the subsequent retreat from education implementation (Fichtner 2012), the state communicates that it feels no obligation or responsibility towards the deaf; expressing a denial or refusal of belonging.

Some deaf persons have almost entirely cut the ties to their hearing family and fully emerged in the deaf space of church in Vêdoko. Most others, however, remain in touch and ties with their hearing families. Some appreciate the affirmation they get from their families as a somewhat superior evaluation: Maurine is adored and respected in deaf church and beyond but seeks and receives not only financial support but also appreciation and affection from her hearing mother. Others like Fabian remain in contact because of obligation – taking part in festivals, events and family affairs in his home village where he is the only signer.

The deaf beyond the networks, meaning those who opted out of community ties, emphasize how life within the communities can be coercive, constraining, and exclusionary. Not everyone who does have access to sign language and community wishes or is welcome to stay among their peers. Deaf diversity plays an integral part in how those lives beyond the communities roll out. Jean-Louis, Anne and Fabian rely on their hearing world competences. Were they not able to speak to some degree and navigate the hearing world, their independence from the deaf communities would be way more challenging. Zeïd is fortunate to be able to rely on the kin networks of his own family and his in-laws to overcome the limits that he experiences in his intersectional identity as a born deaf Muslim. Jean-Louis, as possibly the *least socially deaf* and *most hearing world competent* is locked in an entirely liminal sphere that leaves him with few other options than to celebrate his being an outsider and quash everyone else. None of these turns is absolute, turning backs does not necessarily mean not to be involved at all anymore. Instead it is a comment not to want to be part of what the community constitutes and as such is a critical engagement with it.

Most of deaf Beninese make selective choices and follow different orientations in their navigation of multiple belongings. The same person can be deaf, disabled, hearing impaired, can be inside and outside, depending on the

context and the space they are in. Deaf people *are* deaf, in a factual, physiological way. They *are made* by others as well, through people, values, narratives, and discourses. But deaf people also *make themselves* (Hacking 2011) in juggling the discourses and practices of disability and deafness, of similitude and difference, in the interstices between discourse and interaction. Belonging can be in the heart of the community, on the brink, or totally beyond, voluntarily or not, and all those divers modalities of being deaf constitute what the big, blurry *being deaf in Benin* is.

7.2 how to be (deaf)...

Deaf culture proponents might argue that the production of Deaf pride and Deaf Gain (Bauman and Murray 2014) is at the heart of deaf communities. It seems that in deaf practice in Benin, the *deaf* in deaf communities is put in brackets. Instead of focusing on being deaf, it is in these communities that they can focus on other shades of their being. The dictum that "the deaf can do everything but hear", that is quoted in transnational discourses as well as in deaf Beninese's corner shops, represents – though not audism exactly – normalizing and ableist implications. Proximity and access to the hearing majority society are what creates status, and so is similitude to what are *normal* achievements: a job, a house, a car, family, responsibility – things you achieve *despite* being deaf. These achievements distance the achiever from deafness, from *les vrai·e·s sourd·e·s*. Both the deaf and the disabled want to be as normal as possible, normal in the sense of good, right, and accepted, to avoid the "problem of personal instability" (Benedict 1934:72) that being (considered) abnormal raises.

I have argued that in deaf communities, the discourses of being deaf are not focused on the deafness itself. The priests instruct the congregations in norms of how to be a good (deaf) Christian, while in schools, work and associations, the task is to be a good (deaf) Beninese. This also explains the tension between the deaf and the disabled that I discussed in chapter 4. In ableist (not audist) discourse, deaf and especially the deafened people can pass far more easily as normal than many other disabled folks. The disabled Beninese often mobilize an audist approach to distance themselves from *the deaf*, to make an Other that, through the limits in communication, is less accessible and less *able* to access than themselves. Both logics strive to position themselves closer to being normal; they make Others in order to be less other themselves.

Deaf values are not deaf-specific but refer to Beninese norms and expectations. It is those deaf people who are outside and beyond the deaf

communities who deal with being deaf a lot more as it challenges them in most of their daily situations in work and family life. This is, of course, true for deaf people in community as well, as most of them do not spend all their lives in deaf sociality but face different roles and confrontations in different phases of their days and lives. The appeal of deaf communities and spaces is not to celebrate deafness. Instead, they offer the possibility not to focus on being deaf all the time.

7.3 ...in Benin

I argue that, given the structural context, deaf diversity is more characteristic of Benin (and maybe many other African societies) than it is of Europe and North America. The medical and geographic conditions allow for more ailments that lead to deafness. Untreated ear infections, wrong medication or wrong dosage thereof, incomplete meningococcal vaccinations, severe courses of diseases with insufficient access to treatment all increase the risk of subsequent damages, of becoming *sourd·e plutôt que mort·e*, even if the disease is overcome. In this sense, but also in regard of hazardous working conditions, higher rates of poverty contribute to impairments such as deafness (Groce et al. 2011). Therefore, there are proportionately more deaf people in countries like Benin. All these factors cause deafness at a later stage of life, whereas deafness in the global north is often culturally constructed around people who are born deaf. There is no reported hereditary deafness in Benin and thus no deaf families as nucleuses of deaf sociality. Instead, born deaf children only start socializing into deaf-deaf sociality when they access schools or other deaf spaces which is usually beyond the age of four and sometimes only in teenage years.

The majority of deaf people in Benin deafened after speech acquisition and maintain their speech to differing degrees. The fact that there are only few established deaf spaces, communities, and networks, and also close to no public or medical services for them, means that the social deafening is almost always an improvised process and not an immersion into existing deafness-related itineraries, institutions (in a broad sense), communities, discourses, or cultures. The relatively short history of sign language education offers fewer homogenizing discourses than can be found in other regions where values of d/Deaf or sign language cultures and ideologies have fixed spaces in social geography and society or where welfare states provide deaf and disabled people with institutional pathways, categorizations, and identities, as oppressive they may be. That is of course not to say that Deaf cultures elsewhere were static; but they do have more stable normative and social frameworks (see

Nakamura 2006; Bechter 2008; Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011) than can be found in Benin.

From Oliver Sacks (1989) to Peter Graif (2018), and from the first to the most recent international congresses of the d/Deaf (Gulliver 2015; WFD 2016, 2019), sign language as well as successes and breakdowns in communications have been discussed as major issues in deaf experience. In multicultural and multilingual contexts like Benin – and many other (West) African countries for that matter – bridging gaps between languages and cultures, thus, linguistic and cultural diversity, are not so much considered an existential challenge to society (as did Georg Simmel 1890:101f, see also Böllinger, Fink, and Mildner 2020), but have been part of life for generations; often preceding notions of ethnicity, distinct linguistic categories and exclusive adherence to one religion or another. Negotiations of diversity, integration, and participation are not as existential a challenge as it is perceived of in Europe, but a daily practice. This shall not paint a merry picture of intercultural understanding in African societies. But not understanding each other is a common experience that is bridged better or worse every day and is not (always) an existential, Sacksian "breakdown" or "affliction". I argue that there is a greater disposition to manage challenging communication, greater acceptance of difference and diversity – unless it is politically instrumentalized, of course. This readiness makes a cultural, Deaf self-distinction less urgent and less radical than where the deaf mobilize decades of experiences of systemic discrimination and oppression (Ladd and Lane 2014). The same might be true to family contexts that tend to be seen as more reliable and fundamental in African contexts than in Europe or the USA (Whyte 1998; Mvone Ndong 2014:28). While "deaf turns" away from the hearing family are experienced as necessary and definite in Bangalore (Friedner 2015:156), orientations in Benin are generally more multiple.

As I have discussed around the deaf-disabled interactions in chapter 4, this is not necessarily true for any members of other marginalized groups. Disabled people, persons with albinism, queer folk, and depending on the context also women struggle to get a fair stand in Beninese society. But in the case of deafness, where understanding is the key aspect, Beninese or (West) African societies seem better set up to accommodate difference than nation states that debate "Leitkultur" or "whichever-country first", or, even worse, selective supremacy instead of diversity. As these references already imply, homogeneity is as unrealistic as it is undesirable. That is true for entire societies as for d/Deaf communities and cultures. By putting diversity center stage in this book, I also wish to encourage reflection on similitudes and differences

in deaf socialities of the global north. Not to weaken political arguments that ground in identity orientations, but to understand the sometimes artificially homogenizing and limiting implications of identity politics.

7.4 outlook

In this book, I wrote an ethnographic, phenomenological study of being deaf in Benin, focusing on interactions, life stories, and a cursory mapping of the social arenas where Beninese deaf lives and socialities are negotiated and experienced. Further and more applied understanding of these questions requires are comprehensive quantitative or quantifying studies on rates of different deafnesses, statistical data on education, family, and socio-economic standing – especially if insights shall be turned into projects and politics: What is the demand for investments in education and treatment infrastructure? Which itineraries of education are most promising to deaf learners? How do deaf Beninese do economically? Are the deaf (and the disabled) Beninese really poorer than the abled, as studies suggest (Groce et al. 2011), or is economic uncertainty as much part of being deaf in Benin as of being Beninese in general?

The ambiguity of deaf experience grounded in deaf diversity is not specific to Benin. Mills' (2015) notion of deafnesses and the idea of deaf diversity should be thought through regarding other aspects of being deaf in other places, too. Are cochlear implant (CI) users similarly interstitial like the deafened? They, too, defy dualist categorization. Jim Reisler regards oral deaf users of CIs and what he calls "Deaf Culturists" as opponents (2002) and so do critics who discuss CI technology as a threat to Deaf culture and community (Ladd 2019; Tucker 1998; Sperling 2020), some even referring to it as ethnocide or genocide (Hladek 2002; Sullivan 2017). Deaf diversity rather suggests seeing CI users as part of a spectrum of multiple normals (see Friedner et al. 2019).

Diversity in deafness and communication furthermore points to the variety of sign languages and sign language development in rural spaces like the Atacora region. As today's understanding of Signs and sign language in Benin has been initiated, informed, and obstructed by deafened missionaries and teachers, the general assumption is that there has been no sign language before the advent of deaf church and school. There have obviously been deaf people before this collective vital conjuncture – how did they communicate, what did they orient towards? What has been covered by the ambitious, well-meaning, yet somewhat colonizing project of ASL-inspired deafened people? What can sign language creation and acquisition in the villages or among deaf

siblings as in Tchoundékou contribute to an insight into pre-missionary education and communication? So far, we have only retrospective accounts of deaf people who learned to sign and remember their language-less past. These retrospections tell us a lot about how important language and communication is to them at the time of telling their story, but how reliable are these accounts regarding their prior experience when language was out of question? Would late signers not tend to exaggerate their previous marginality? Given that many if not most of the deaf people world are living without sign language among the hearing, would it not be worthwhile to also approach their way to be deaf in the world in their own right?

In the interstices between global d/Deaf discourses and local negotiations of difference, the dynamic of Beninese deaf sociality is in full swing. As deaf community only came with deaf education and sign language, as Joachim said, deaf-deaf couples and marriages are a rather recent phenomenon. The oldest child of a deaf-deaf couple that I met – my hearing sign language teacher André – was born in 2000. If the deaf community is continuing to foster and support deaf-deaf marriages and parenting, the future might see deaf children growing up in deaf families, thus the kind of core group of Deaf culture that has been discussed in many other places around the world (Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg 2011). How may this new way of being *sourd·e·s profond·e·s* reshuffle the cards of deaf diversity? Will it challenge the normality orientation of Beninese deaf sociality? Will it turn (deaf) into Deaf? My observations of Beninese deaf sociality, identity, and community were just a snapshot of an ever-changing interaction, an ongoing production of meaning. Deaf sociality is, as Deleuze would say, made of lines of flight. I would love to see Beninese deaf to find their own way, a third way, as Vollhaber (2018) would have it, between and beyond being Deaf [sic!] and having a *déficience sensorielle* [sic!].

epilogue

In fall 2018, Isaïe planned to go to Cotonou. Joachim had warned him that by then he was so enraged that he was going to lambaste him if he dared to show up in Agla. He would not tell me or the French volunteers not to talk to Isaïe, but he should stay the f away from Agla. Knowing this, Isaïe searched for work-out tips to get his gawky body in shape to be able to face Joachim's rage. Both of them were both joking and serious about the affair; Isaïe trained hard and even started swallowing raw eggs after he was told that Sylvester Stallone did so in the *Rocky* movies. I was not in Benin anymore when Isaïe eventually showed up at a ANSB gathering in late 2018, but several people told me that the atmosphere was seriously poisoned and aggressive. Claire was embarrassed that Joachim, a grown, established man, would behave like that towards a youth like Isaïe; *un jeune*. Issues could not be settled, though. Isaïe went back to Natitingou, Joachim back to Agla, and both kept on gossiping and slandering each other on- and offline.

In August 2020, Joachim told me that FAPHB, the umbrella organization of DPOs in Benin, in cooperation with Handicap International and the West African Federation of the Disabled (WAFOD) had organized a workshop on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). As one of the most prominent and outspoken deaf in Benin, Joachim was invited – and took care that Isaïe would come as well, he told me. I was somewhat surprised and asked if they started cooperating again. "No," he told me:

> Mais je suis à l'écoute. Je collabore avec tout le monde, Homère, Troyen, Isaïe, Paul, Léon… Pour l'intérêt général. Pour cette formation, je crois que Isaïe est le mieux placé, sinon j'aurais pris Léon. (WhatsApp 12/08/2020)

He texted me that despite their conflicts, he listened. He worked with everyone – Homère, Troyen, Isaïe, Paul, and Léon, listing all those with whom he had had or still had juicy conflicts. Isaïe was best suited for the workshop, he said, or else he would have taken Léon, the other ambitious young critique of the elder deaf's ways. He would choose between two of the deafened and not even think of taking a born-deaf person along, not to mention a woman. I told him that I was glad to hear that they did somehow get along again. "Le problème avec les jeunes c'est qu'ils sont impatients", he continued. "En parlant des jeunes, je n'ai que 48 ans 😁" (WhatsApp 12/08/2020)[107]. Joachim

[107] "The problem with the young is that they are impatient. Talking about the young, I'm only 48 years old 😁"

seemed to understand the future to be in the hands of the young deaf, he did not want to block them from getting in charge. Their time had just not come yet, he thought, and he would still be around to keep them down a little. Yet, beyond all the conflicts and all the divisions – despite all their differences – they may be DEAF-SAME after all. They share a belonging and share a common fate, whether they want it or not.

acknowledgements

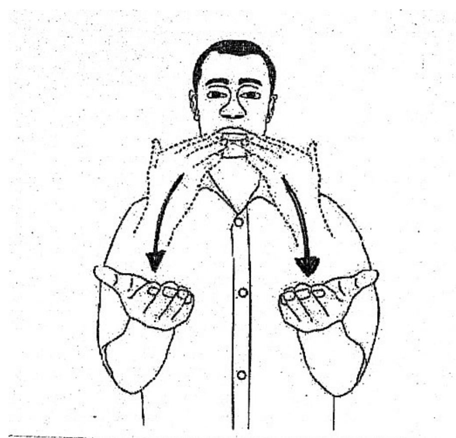

illustration 17: MERCI, thank you, visualization by Vadim, 2021.

Avant tout il faut que je dise merci aux sourd·e·s du Bénin. J'espère qu'ils comprennent que chaque page de cette livre respire ma gratitude pour leur hospitalité et leur amitié. Comme j'ai décidé d'anonymiser leurs noms dans cette thèse, je ne peux pas les dire merci individuellement ici. Je comprends que leur contribution à mon doctorat m'oblige de demeurer un allié, un soutien, et un partenaire aux sourd·e·s du Bénin ; et je le resterai avec plaisir et humilité. My deaf friends and research participants in Benin welcomed me among them in their public and their private spaces and lives. I received openness and hospitality, encouragement, and closeness, with friendly ridicule and respect. I hope I could share as much of that with them as they did with me. I also experienced deceit and theft, but this is an acknowledgement section.

I want to thank my teachers in sign languages who opened doors to different deaf worlds to me: Thomas Kufner in Bayreuth, Michael Okwadi in Kampala, André in Cotonou, and David Reinhart in Chicago.

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I am grateful for the love and friendship from Signe Sander, Lotta Maaß, Carolin Thalhofer, Clara Hörmann, Michael Neumann, Güneycan Solmaz, Bodo von Husen, Karl August, Paule Otto and Marius Menholz. I thank Klaus Wührl-Struller for being such a fun partner in crime outside the academy. Bringing this phase of my life to an end would not have been possible without the support of Helga Purucker, Regina Spektor, Khatia Buniatishvili, Max Richter, and Bruce Springsteen.

I thank my parents and my sisters for everything they did, were, and are.

Hafis doesn't do you justice, Julika.

appendix

index of persons

In this index you find the people mentioned directly or indirectly in the book. All names are pseudonyms apart from Andrew Foster, Serge Tamomo, and Victor Vodounou who are historical persons and have also published under their real name.

Some of persons in this index had emigrated or had already passed away, others were participants in my research to varying degrees. I quickly introduce each person and give an indication how they have been part of my field research. Most of the interviews that I conducted were preceded and followed by more meetings, chats, and conversations. With many I conducted no formal interviews at all but had chats and conversations that evolved during participant observation. There are only a few interviewees who I only met once, like the otorhinolaryngologist Dr. Futé or Maurine's mother Iwero. The indications of age, location, and occupation refer to the time of my research between 2016 and 2019.

The list is not comprehensive as there were countless more haphazard conversations and encounters with deaf and hearing people who taught me something about the deaf in particular or Benin in general.

Abelle	Abelle was married to Pasteur Serge and, after his death, founded a school for the deaf in Glo. She had also been the sign language interpreter at ORTB and offered women's education on hygiene and sexual health in sign language, through which she gained fame and gratitude among many deaf mothers. She passed away in 2018. I did not get a chance to meet her in person.
André	André was Maurine and Homère's hearing son and born in 1999, he was the oldest hearing child of a deaf couple (CODA) I met. He played drums in deaf church in Vêdoko, Cotonou, and was my sign language teacher during my first field trip in 2016. He often translated in church or when his father interacted with hearing people.

	I interviewed him on 24/09/2016, 26/10/2016, and 23/07/2018 and we met and chatted a lot after church and after our sign language classes.
Andrew Foster	Andrew Foster, "the Father of the deaf in Africa", was the first deaf African American to receive a degree from Gallaudet College in Washington DC, now Gallaudet University. He created the Christian Mission for the Deaf that founded more than 30 schools and churches in 13 African countries, including the deaf church and deaf school in Benin. He died in a plane crash in Rwanda in 1987.
Anne	Anne was one of the first deafened teachers in Benin, learning from Andrew Foster in Ibadan, Nigeria. She taught at EBS for decades. She spoke and never really considered herself deaf. In 2018, she was in her mid-sixties and did not interact much with the deaf communities apart from going to deaf church in Godomey. She mostly stayed home in her remote house in Togbin. I interviewed her on 09/08/2018 and met her a few times in deaf church in Godomey.
Antoine	Antoine, in his forties, was a hearing teacher for the deaf at EBS. He interpreted in his church and at some disability rights events. As a hearing teacher of EBS, many deaf were suspicious that he was putting money that was meant for the deaf into his own pockets. Yet, they agreed that he was a very good signer. I interviewed him on 05/04/2018 and we chatted on several occasions when we met at disability advocacy events or in EBS in Vêdoko.
Audrey	The hearing sister of Ruben in Parakou.
Ayi	Yves' hearing mother Ayi, in her sixties, lived near to the deaf church in Vêdoko but had no connection to

	the congregation. Even her deaf son and daughter-in-law did not see her often. I stopped by her place to talk about her experience as a mother of a deafened son. We did an interview on 01/08/2018.
Batiste	Batiste was the deaf night watchman at the deaf center in Agla, Cotonou. He was the half-brother of Odile and Michel. He passed away in his forties in early 2021. We often met and chatted in church, on deaf events, and in the deaf center in Agla.
Cicéron	Cicéron was the wheelchair using president of FAPHB, the umbrella organization of DPOs in Benin. We met for an interview on 19/11/2016.
Claire	Claire was a deafened woman born in the 1970s. She was Joachim's second wife in a polygynous arrangement. She worked in the deaf center in Agla, Cotonou, taking care of the canteen and the schoolgirls. She signs and speaks French, Fon and Goun. She has three hearing kids of her own. I interviewed her on 29/10/2016 and we had countless conversations at her corner-shop, on the market, on deaf events, and in church. We often shared her favorite drink (Johnny Walker Red Label) and I was invited to her mother's funeral in her natal village on the Ouémé river.
Claudius	Claudius was a radio journalist, wheelchair basketball player, and disability rights activist in Cotonou. We often met at disability advocacy events, wheelchair basketball training, and I was a guest on his radio show.

Claus	Claus, in his early thirties, was the singer in deaf church in Godomey. He also functioned as Troyen's messenger and assistant and worked as a photographer. As such, he taught deaf apprentices and appeared at many events in the deaf communities. We met in and after church in Godomey and I visited his photography atelier in Aidjedo, Cotonou.
Donald	Donald, in his late thirties, was a deaf preacher in the deaf church in Vêdoko, who was being instructed by Homère. On Sundays, he would often travel to Porto Novo to preach to the deaf. I interviewed him on 06/06/2018 and I visited him and his wife Elza at home for a long conversation/interview on 08/07/2018.
Elie	Elie was born deaf or deafened shortly after his birth in the late 1990s in Parakou in northern Benin. His Nigerien parents abandoned him in the street where he was found by Catholic nuns who named and fostered him. Joachim met him at the deaf school in Parakou and took him to Agla. Elie became a foster child of Claire and Joachim and started an apprenticeship at the tailor workshop in Agla after leaving primary school without being able to pass the final exams as he could not produce a birth certificate or ID. We tried to do an interview on 04/06/2018, but the rather formal setting and questioning did not work well with his way of signing. Our communication and conversation were a lot easier in everyday situations. There were a lot of those since we lived at the same place in Agla for several months.
Elza	Elza was a member of deaf church and wife to Donald. I interviewed her when I visited their home on 08/07/2018

Erneste	Erneste was a deaf construction worker in his twenties, a zealous member of deaf church and singer in the church's choir. He was known, admired, and mocked for his ridiculously sporty motorcycle. We often spoke at Maurine's corner-shop or after church, and I visited him on the construction sites he was working on where I talked to his foremen as well.
Fabian	Fabian was born in the late 1980s and deafened as a young child. He finished primary school for the deaf. He spoke and was very competent in navigating the hearing world. A confectioner by trade, he worked as a cleaner for an international NGO, earning him a decent salary and health insurance which was more than most deaf could hope for. He was a good friend of Isaïe and Gustave. I interviewed him on 29/10/2016 and had countless chats and conversations with him. He invited me to his aunt's funeral in his natal village north of Porto Novo.
Féline	The teenaged hearing daughter of Maurine and Homère. She plays the keyboards in deaf church.
Foster	see Andrew Foster
Dr. Futé	Dr. Futé was an otorhinolaryngologist at a private clinic in Cotonou, who cooperated with Rotary clubs to supply deaf children with hearing aids. We had a very formal interview on 01/06/2018.
Gaspard	Gaspard was a blind friend of Joachim. He worked as the secretary of FAPHB, the umbrella organization of DPOs in Benin. I interviewed him on 19/11/2016, but also often met him for a drink or on disability advocacy events.

Guillaume	Guillaume was a deaf peer of Homère in their youth. After Homère became the priest in Vêdoko, their friendship fell apart and Guillaume went to teach and preach to the deaf in Gabon. Upon his return in 2013, he founded a new deaf church in Godomey, laying the ground for the ongoing schism of deaf church in Cotonou. He left again to Gabon and transferred his functions in church to his deaf brother Troyen. He died in 2018 in Gabon. I met him a few times in 2016, but the encounters were always characterized by conflicts with others and I did not get a chance to speak with him one-on-one.
Gustave	Gustave was one of the three deafened Beninese who graduated from lycée in Louho, Porto Novo, and studied at the university in Calavi. He married a French woman, who had been a volunteer in Benin, and now lives in Paris. He still engages in deaf sociality in Benin through WhatsApp and Facebook. We did not get a chance to talk.
Hakime	Hakime was born deaf in Djougou. His mother moved with him to the south so he could visit the deaf school in Louho, Porto Novo, where he was working as a part-time teacher in the primary school. He was always struggling to make ends meet, and to find a hearing woman to marry. We met and talked a lot while I was participating in the sign language class for teachers at the school in Louho, Porto Novo, in August 2016.
Homère	Homère was my first deaf contact in the field. He deafened as a young child but stopped speaking. He is the priest of the deaf church in Vêdoko, Cotonou, and the president of ANSB. He is married to Maurine and father to two hearing children, one of them André, my sign language teacher.

I interviewed him on 30/10/2016 and we had numerous conversations after church but also in his home where he invited me a few times.

Hugo — Hugo was a member of deaf church in his twenties. He died in April 2020; causing worry and fear among the deaf that he might have died of Covid-19.

We met and chatted a few times after church in Vêdoko, Cotonou.

Ibrahim — Ibrahim, a hearing tailor in his 40s, was a neighbor of the deaf school in Agla, Cotonou. He learned to sign, sometimes translated for the deaf, and used the tailor workshop when he got an order every once in a while.

We often met and chatted at the deaf center in Agla.

Isaïe — Isaïe was born in Nikki in northern Benin and deafened in primary school. He was one of three deaf graduates of the lycée in Louho, Porto Novo, and studied at the university in Calavi. He worked as a teacher at several deaf schools in Cotonou, Haindé, and Natitingou. He had a hearing son with Nadège. He was a very controversial figure in the deaf community, admired by many young and dreaded by older deaf authorities for speaking up and presumably lacking respect. He was very educated and eloquent in spoken and signed communication. He was a good friend of Fabian, Gustave, and Yann.

We had interviews on 30/09/2016 and 18/04/2018 and countless conversations and discussions throughout my research. I stayed with him, Nadège, and Yann for some weeks in 2016 and 2018.

Iwero — Iwero was the hearing mother of Maurine. She lived in Abomey but came to visit her daughter in Cotonou every few months.

I had the chance to interview the bright and eloquent septuagenarian on 06/06/2018 in Cotonou.

Jacques	Jacques was a hearing man in his early thirties who worked as a tourist guide in Natitingou. He assisted me during field trips to the villages in the Atacora region as a guide and interpreter. In Pepèrkou, I stayed with his brother. We had an interview on spiritual beliefs in the Atacora region on 22/03/2018 and numerous conversations whenever I was in Natitingou.
Jean-Louis	Jean-Louis deafened after he finished his apprenticeship as an electrician. He worked with Paul in educating and preaching to deaf adults. After they split ways, he went to Djougou to teach the Muslim deaf that he understood to be absolutely marginalized. He had barely any contact with other deaf who considered him a fanatic and mocked his reluctance to consider himself as deaf. We had a long and intense interview on 25/07/2019.
Jérémy	Jérémy was a basket maker and member of deaf church in his forties. He was very short-sighted which made communication hard for him at times. Though he was less committed to Christian values and discussions, he relished the gossip in the congregation in Vêdoko, Cotonou, and ranted about hearing signers who he saw as exploiting the deaf. We often met in church and chatted at Maurine's corner-shop.
Joachim	Joachim is in his late forties and the most outspoken and most prominent deaf in Benin, active in deaf and disability politics and also appearing on TV every once in a while. He is the director of the deaf school in Agla, Cotonou, the only deaf school that is run by deaf people themselves. Joachim was one of my main research partners. We had countless conversations, interviews, discussions,

	and chats when I stayed at the deaf center in Agla, when we moved around town together, or when he took me along to disability advocacy events of all kinds.
Joël	Joël was Anne's hearing son. He only learned to sign after he graduated from lycée. He taught at EBS, funded by the parents of the schoolchildren because the school and education board did not hire enough teachers. We often met in EBS and he was present during the interview with Anne as well.
Joseph	Joseph was the deaf tailor teaching deaf apprentices in the workshop in Agla. We had an interview on 10/04/2018 but we chatted almost daily when we were hanging out by the street outside his tailor workshop.
Jumeau	Jumeau was a deafened Togolese man in his eighties when I met him in Lomé in 2019. He learned sign language and the gospel from Andrew Foster in Ibadan and was the pioneer for deaf education in Togo, like Victor Vodounou in Benin.
Karimou	Karimou was a wheelchair basketball player and the former president of Handisport Benin, the Beninese Paralympic organization. We often met at wheelchair basketball training and had an interview on 07/30/2019.
Kiva	Kiva was born deaf in Togo and came to Benin as a child with her mother, fleeing the conflict in the neighboring country. She married Yves, had two children and became a friend and helper of Maurine. We often met in church or in Maurine's corner-shop and had an interview on 11/06/2018 that turned into

	a group interview with Yves, Maurine, and others who happened to drop in.
Léon	Léon was one of the three deafened graduates from lycée in Louho, Porto Novo. He studied at the university in Calavi and taught at the public collège in Akogbato. He started his own deaf association in Porto Novo. We met several times when I took a sign language class for teachers at the school in Louho, Porto Novo, and he invited me to the founding assembly of his association of young deaf in Porto Novo on 05/09/2016. We also met at the *collège* in Akogbato when he was teaching there.
Lorenzo	Lorenzo was the former director for rehabilitation and integration of disabled people in the ministry for social affairs before that office was dissolved as part of the administrative restructuring after the election of Patrice Talon in early 2016. I interviewed him in his office in the ministry in Cotonou on 07/07/2016 and met him a few times afterwards.
Luc	Luc was a deaf apprentice in the tailor workshop in Agla, Cotonou. We did an interview on 04/06/2018 and chatted daily when I was around at the deaf center in Agla.
Marie	Marie was the mother of a deaf schoolboy in the deaf school in Agla, Cotonou. She moved to Natitingou to be with her father, leaving her son with his father in Cotonou. In Natitingou, she shared her workshop with Yann. I interviewed her and her sister on parenting a deaf child and on hearing perspectives on the deaf across Benin on 22/03/2018.

Mauril	Mauril was in his early thirties, married to a deaf wife and father of two hearing sons. He ran a barber shop in Akpakpa, Cotonou, where he had hearing apprentices that worked for him. We had an interview on 17/07/2018 at his barber shop, but we also often met for a drink in Akpakpa, Cotonou.
Maurine	Maurine deafened as a young child and was one of the first students of the EBS in 1977. She was married to Pasteur Homère and became a mother figure to many members of the deaf church in Vêdoko, Cotonou. Her corner-shop was located in the deaf church right next door to the EBS, thus a space of deaf sociality for deaf people around both church and school. I interviewed her several times off and on tape (21/11/2016, 06/04/2018) and we had countless conversations about Beninese deaf history.
Michel	Michel was one of the oldest deaf in Benin. He had learned and worked as a tailor before the first school for the deaf opened in 1977. He never had a formal education and signed quite uniquely. Even though he worked at the tailor workshop in Agla, Cotonou, six days a week, he barely interacted and was kind of a loner. The young deaf often mocked him. He was the half-brother of Odile and Batiste. We could not establish a shared way of signing but often interacted amicably and hung out together at and outside the tailor workshop.
Moïse	Moïse was a committed member of deaf church and close friend to Maurine. He spends most of his free time at Maurine's corner-shop in Vêdoko, Cotonou. He sings in the deaf church choir. We often chatted after church and in the corner-shop.

Moukwari	Moukwari, in his late twenties, was the only deaf man in Pepèrkou in northern Benin. He lived with his hearing family and worked on his own fields where he mostly grew cotton. In 2019, his brother Frank was confident that Moukwari would marry a hearing woman after the harvest. We shared a lot of time when I was in the village, we worked and danced together and attempted to chat. His brother Frank, his friend Kori, and other villagers told me more about his life in the village that I mostly accessed through participant observation.
Nadège	Nadège was born near Abomey in central Benin and deafened at a young age. At the school in Louho, Porto Novo, she met Isaïe with whom she had a hearing son in 2018. She had internships in teaching at different schools but could not find a permanent job. She was very fluent in sign language but felt inferior to the speaking deaf like Isaïe. She never felt confident with a formal interview situations but we had numerous conversations at their houses in Natitingou and when I visited her at her aunt's place in Cotonou in 2018.
Ntcha	Jacques' older brother and my host in Pepérkou in the Atacora region. On numerous walks around the village, the bush, and the fields, he taught me a lot about village life, work, and beliefs. Our linguistic limitations were bridged by a lot of mutual attention, curiosity, and affection.
Odile	Odile was a member of deaf church in her late forties. She also worked in the canteen of EBS. She was the half-sister of Batiste and Michel. We had an interview on 21/11/2016 and many conversations and chats after church and at EBS.

Omolayo	Omolayo was the deaf son of a Nigerian family living in Cotonou. During the school vacation in 2018, they brought him to the school in Agla so he could be with "his people". We chatted and shared time while we were both living in the deaf center in Agla.
Pasteur Serge	see Serge Tamomo
Patrice	Patrice had been the director for rehabilitation and integration at the ministry for family affairs but switched to become the sign language interpreter at ORTB after Abelle resigned. He often interpreted at workshops, weddings, and negotiations involving deaf people. I interviewed him on 19/09/2016 and 17/11/2016. We met often on disability advocacy events, weddings, and other functions where he served as an interpreter. He also often magically appeared whenever I invited someone for a beer, which usually lead to interesting conversations, too.
Paul	Paul started the deaf center in Agla with Joachim but they parted in conflict. Paul struggled to make a living teaching sign language to deaf adults in the outskirts of Cotonou. He once was a core member of deaf church but fell from grace when he remarried. He was often mocked and ridiculed by church members and friends of Joachim. His hard-of-hearing wife was a teacher at EBS. The rumor that she, allegedly, had an affair with the school's director in 2019 was great fun for many members of deaf church. We had an interview at his house in Womey on 19/09/2016, after he which he took me for a long tour around the village on the outskirts of Cotonou to meet the deaf people around. We met and chatted on several other occasions afterwards.

Richard	I only realized that Richard was deaf when I met him for the third time. He spoke very well and was a close friend of both Claire and Zeïd. He worked as a painter in Cotonou, both producing paintings and doing paintjobs on houses and the like. We met and chatted a few times at deaf events like weddings or funerals or when he dropped by in the deaf center in Agla.
Ruben	Ruben was in his late twenties and learned to be a tailor after finishing deaf primary school in Tibona, Parakou. He deafened as a child. He has his own workshop outside the family home in Parakou that he shares with his hearing sister. I interviewed him at his workshop on 19/10/2016 and we also went to see a few football matches while I was in town.
Ségolène	Ségolène, in her thirties, was a very outspoken deaf member of the deaf church in Vêdoko, Cotonou. She caused some outrage among the deaf in 2019 when she, allegedly, cheated on her deaf husband. I interviewed her on 13/06/2018 and we often had great chats and laughs after church.
Serge Tamomo	Pasteur Serge was one of the founding figures of the deaf community in Benin. He was a teacher and a priest and created ANSB. He chose Homère as his successor before he died in 1996.
Sœur Greta	Sœur Greta was the director of the catholic deaf school in Pèporiyakou, near Natitingou. She came from Brazil and mixed a passion for helping deaf Beninese with a sharp criticism of Beninese education policies, bureaucracies, and ways of being in general. We had an interview on 23/05/2018 and many earnest and rich conversations whenever I came by the school.

Sorel	Sorel, in his late twenties, was a hearing teacher at the deaf school in Agla. He had learned to sign from Gustave who was his neighbor growing up. He and Joachim split ways after Sorel was tired of not being paid regularly. We had many conversations and on 02/12/2016, we had an interview with his father who was an old and known *féticheur* in Cotonou.
Tanya	Tanya was the hearing director of the deaf school in Tibona, Parakou. We had two very rich interviews on 18/10/2016 and 20/10/2016.
Théodore	Théodore was a deaf singer in the choir of the deaf church in Godomey.
Tibor	Tibor was one of the first deaf teachers of the deaf at EBS. Many deaf Beninese remember him as an ancestor. He passed away long before I started my research project.
Tino	Tino was a professional poet and storyteller. He shared folktales and proverbs involving deafness and the deaf with me. We met and recorded folktales and interviews on 30/06/2018 and 14/08/2018.
Toussaint	Toussaint was a young deaf carpenter who worked at Ruben's workshop in Parakou. He showed me around a number deaf spaces in Parakou and was flabbergasted that I did not share his passion for the FC Barcelona.
Troyen	Troyen was Guillaume's younger brother and took over the priesthood in the deaf church in Godomey

after Guillaume left. He was a father to three hearing children who sang and played instrument in deaf church in Godomey.

We had a long conversation after church on 08/04/2018 and a number of chats when we met at weddings or funerals.

Vadim

Vadim, in his late twenties, was born deaf and learned to be a painter after school. He became a teacher for the deaf in Agla, Cotonou. He was also the coach of the deaf football team in Cotonou.

I interviewed him on 02/06/2018 and we had countless conversations at the deaf center or at his mother-in-law's house who had the best *sodabi* in town.

Victor Vodounou

Victor Vodounou was the first deaf Beninese to learn sign language from Andrew Foster in Ibadan, Nigeria. He founded the deaf school and deaf church in Cotonou, then left to the USA to pursue his education. He received a PhD in education, wrote an autobiography (REF) and comes to Benin annually to organize bible camps for the deaf youth. He also patrons a school for the deaf in the village Haindé.

I met him in 2018 and 2019 when he came to Benin to organize the bible camps. We had a number of conversations over lunch in Vêdoko, Porto Novo, Haindé, and Lomé.

Yann

Yann, in his early thirties, was Isaïe's best friend. He was born deaf, learned to be a tailor and worked in the deaf center in Agla, Cotonou. He was known to be one of the best tailors, deaf or hearing, of classical West African attire. He moved to Natitingou with Isaïe and Nadège where he met his hearing partner who gave birth to their hearing child in 2019.

I interviewed him on 29/09/2016 and we spent a lot of time at his tailor workshop and in bars and cafés in Natitingou.

Yonawan	Yonawan was a hearing tailor who took two deaf apprentices in her workshop in Natitingou. I interviewed her about her experience with the two teenage girls on 17/04/2018.
Yunus	Yunus was one of the first deaf teachers of the deaf in Benin. He was a member of deaf church but as a born Muslim never held an office in church. Instead, he became president of ANSB after Pasteur Serge's death. He passed away in 2015.
Yves	Yves was a deaf carpenter in his early thirties. He was a committed member of deaf church in Vêdoko, Cotonou, and the leader of the church choir. He was married to Kiva, an assistant to Pasteur Homère, and a frequent visitor of Maurine's corner shop. I interviewed him on 21/11/2016 and we chatted and laughed a lot after church, in the Maurine's corner-shop, or when he and Kiva invited me to their place on 01/08/2018.
Zeïd	A deaf jeweler in his forties. He went to school with Joachim and others of the deaf community. Being a Muslim, he is somewhat sidelined in the predominantly Christian deaf community. He ran unsuccessfully for the board of ANSB. He stays in touch with some deaf but lives mostly with his hearing kin and in-laws. In 2018, he was the only deaf person I knew who owned and drove a car. He had had deaf apprentices but gave up because the deaf were "too difficult". We had long conversations at his atelier and at his father-in-law's funeral.
Zomi	Zomi was a deaf graduate of the school in Tibona, Parakou, who came back to his parents' home in

Natitingou and made an apprenticeship in a barber-shop where I interviewed him on 17/04/2018.

list of illustrations

All photos are taken by the author unless noted otherwise. The visualizations of Beninese signs were created by my deaf friend who Vadim who is a painter by trade and a passionate teacher of the deaf in Cotonou. The illustration on the cover, DIFFÉRENT, different, was also made by him.

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abbreviations

AdaSL	Adamorobe Sign Language
ADES	Association pour la Défense et l'Epanouissement des Sourds (Association for the Defense and the Blossoming of the Deaf)
ANSB	Association Nationale des Sourds du Bénin (Beninese National Association of the Deaf)
APES	Association pour la Promotion de l'Emploi aux Sourds (Association for Advancement and Employment of the Deaf) in Agla, Cotonou
ASL	American Sign Language
ASSC	Suore Salesiane dei Sacri Cuori (Order of the Salesian Sisters of the Holy Heart)
ASUNOES	Association Universelle d'Œuvres pour l'Épanouissement des Sourds (Association for the Flourishment of the Deaf), Louho, Porto Novo
BEPC	brevet d'étude du premier cycle (see school system in Benin)
BSL	British Sign Language
CAEIS	Centre d'Acceuil, d'Education et d'Intégration des Sourds (Center for Reception, Education and Integration of the Deaf), name of the deaf school in Louho, Porto Novo
CBR	community-based rehabilitation
CEFIS	Centre d'Education de Formation et d'intégration des Sourds (Center for Education, Training and Integration of the Deaf)
CE1/CE2	cours élémentaire 1/cours élémentaire 2 (see school system)
CEG	Collège Enseignement Général (high school of for general education)
CEP	(see school system)
CFA	franc de la communauté financière en Afrique, common currency of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA). The franc CFA has a fixed exchange rate to the Euro: 100 franc CFA = 0.152449 Euro 1 Euro = 655.957 franc CFA

CI	cochlear implant, also: cours d'initiation (see school system)
CM1/CM2	cours moyen 1/cours moyen 2 (see school system)
CMD	Christian Mission for the Deaf
CNHU	centre national hospitalier universitaire
COCOF Belgique	Commission Communautaire Française Belgique (French Community Commission Belgium)
CODA/s	child/ren of deaf adults
CP	cours préparatoire
CPISB	Centre pour la Promotion des Initiatives des Sourds Béninois (Center for the Advancement of Initiatives of the Beninese Deaf), name of the deaf center in Agla, Cotonou
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DGS	Deutsche Gebärdensprache (German Sign Language)
DPO	Disabled Persons'/People's Organization
EBS	École Béninoise des Sourds (Beninese School of the Deaf) in Vêdoko, Cotonou.
FAPHB	Fédération des Associations des Personnes Handicapées au Bénin (Federation of Disabled Persons' Organizations in Benin)
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Corporation for International Cooperation)
GSL	Ghanaian Sign Language
GSM	Global System for Mobile Communications
hdi	Human Development Index
JSL	Japanese Sign Language
LGBTQ	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer
LSAF	Langue des Signe de l'Afrique Francophone (Sign Language of Francophone Africa)
LSF	Langue des Signe Française (French Sign Language)
MVSL	Martha's Vinyard Sign Language
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

ORTB	Office de Radiodiffusion et Télévision du Bénin (national public Radio and Television Broadcaster of Benin)
RAPHAL	Réseau des Associations des Personnes Handicapées dans l'Atlantique et le Littoral (Network of Disabled Persons' Organizations in the Atlantique and Littoral departments)
SLPs	Sign Language Peoples
UgSL	Ugandan Sign Language
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WAFOD	West African Federation of the Disabled
WFD	World Federation of the Deaf
WHO	World Health Organization

glossary

baccalauréat	see school system
bissap	a usually cold and heavily sweetened hibiscus tea
collège	see school system
fétiche	a spiritual being that takes the form of an object through which it can be addressed (French)
féticheur	a practitioner of *fétichisme*, a practice to connect with the spiritual world through animate objects. Féticheurs can be either malicious or not. The latter are often referred to as *guérisseurs*. Depending on the context, the term *féticheur* itself can already carry the implication of immoral, evil and/or primitive practices. (French)
gari	granular flour made from cassava roots
gris-gris	A talisman that can be made in various ways out of various materialis. It is usually worn on the body to protect the wearer from malicious attacks.
guérisseur	usually used to describe a *féticheur* who does not use his knowledge to hurt but to heal people. (French)
kel assouf	people of solitude, spirits of loneliness (Tamasheq)
lycée	see school system
maître, maitresse	title for a teacher. The male form seemed to invoke more respect and authority than the female. (French)
maternelle	see school system
mounka	deaf-mute person; also deaf person (Waama)
pâte	corn porridge, most common food in Benin (French)
secrétaire général	general secretary (French)
sodabi	local palm wine schnapps
sourd	deaf (French)
sourd-muet	deaf-mute (French)
SOURDS-DURS	the deaf are difficult (Signs)
tchoukoutou	home brewed millet beer (Fon)
tokounoun	deaf person, bearer of dead ears (Fon)
weltwärts	German state funded volunteering program for young adults
wounga	deaf person (Waama)
yiporo	white person (Waama)
yovo-yovo	white person (Fon)
zemidjan / zem	motorcycle taxi (Fon)

school system in Benin

The Beninese school system is largely based on the French model (Fichtner 2012:40–41). The classes, diplomas, and certificates are usually referred to in their abbreviations. Among both deaf and hearing children in Benin, classes are often quite diverse regarding age. Schoolchildren repeat classes, pause for a year due to health or money issues, or only get funding and access to school at later age. In the case of deaf children, this variation is even greater as education for the deaf is not always adapt to deaf children and because some families only learn about schooling options for their deaf children when they are already older. Whereas most deaf schools are private, the curricula and materials are regulated by the state. The graduation exams (CEP, BEPC, and BAC) are organized and graded by public officials.

enseignement maternel (kindergarten/pre-school)
  section des petits (section for the small)
  section des grands (section for the tall)
enseignement primaire (école primaire) (primary education, primary school)
  cours d'initiation (CI) (initiation class)
  cours préparatoire (CP) (preparatory class)
  cours élémentaire 1ère année (CE1) (elementary class 1)
  cours élémentaire 2ème année (CE2) (elementary class 2)
  cours moyen 1ère année (CM1) (middle class 1)
  cours moyen 2ème année (CM2) (middle class 2)
    certificat d'études primaires (CEP) (primary education certificat)
enseignement secondaire (secondary education)
  premier cycle (collège) (first cycle)
  sixième
  cinquième
  quatrième
  troisième
    brevet d'étude du premier cycle (BEPC) (first cycle education diploma)
enseignement secondaire (secondary education)
  second cycle (lycée) (second cycle)
  seconde
  première
  terminale
    baccalauréat (BAC) (baccalaureate)

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