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## **An unreported African sign language in Northeast Nigeria**

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## An unreported African sign language in Northeast Nigeria: Roger Blench and Victoria Nyst



In October 2003, I [Roger Blench] was conducting a survey in the Bura-speaking area of Northeast Nigeria, when I came across an apparently unreported sign language. Our team was in the village of Kukurpu [not on any map I can find, but ca. 40 km. SE of Biu on the Garkida road] when I saw two men signing to one another. When I expressed an interest, a third man was called, who apparently lost hearing later in life and could articulate Bura fairly intelligibly. He was able to translate signed utterances into Bura quite fluently. It then appeared that there was a relatively high incidence of congenital deafness in the immediate area and a community of signers exists. I was able to establish that none of the speakers had attended any school, let alone a school for the deaf and this is a remote area, so links with better-known sign languages seem unlikely. It seems likely that this sign language is quite independent. I was able to make a short videotape of the signers and I hope to post this on my website in due course. By a fortunate chance I was able to show the videotape to Victoria Nyst, who comments below.

I believe the existence of a signer who can ‘translate’ signed utterances would be of considerable assistance in learning more about this speech form. It may be difficult to return to the area in the immediate future and I would be glad to help anyone else who would like to investigate further. I have a draft electronic dictionary of Bura, which would obviously be useful.

*Victoria Nyst (University of Amsterdam) comments:*

Most research done on African sign languages has been carried out for the sake of dictionary making by the National Associations of the Deaf. This lexicographic research concerns the “official” sign language of a country, usually a sign language imported with the introduction of deaf education by foreign

institutions. Local sign languages in Africa are often seen as inferior and they have rarely been studied.

Exceptions are the descriptive grammar of Hausa Sign Language by Schmalig (2000) and a paper on the sign language of Mbour in Senegal (Jirou, not dated). A description of Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL), the local sign language of a village with a high frequency of hereditary deafness in Ghana is in progress (Nyst 2003; in progress).

The signing of the two deaf Bura men in the videofragment shows some remarkable similarities with other types of signing in West Africa, more specifically in the manner of articulation. Contrary to many signs in western sign languages, handshapes have a lax articulation. The signing space used is large, with outstretched arms when pointing at locations. The sign for the verb GO is identical to the sign for GO in Adamorobe Sign Language and in the sign language of a deaf family in Nanabin (Ghana). The same sign GO is found as a co-verbal gesture with hearing Malians, Ghanaians, and Nigerians. Other signs in the fragment are identical to signs and gestures in these other signed and spoken languages as well, such as ‘sweat’ with the meaning ‘to work’, ‘sleep’ with the meaning ‘(next) day’ and others.

The striking similarity between the different types of signing and gesturing in parts of West Africa points to the existence of a regional gesture system. Frishberg (1987) suggests that AdaSL may be related to the ‘gestural trade jargon used in the markets throughout West Africa’. Clearly, much more research still needs to be done to be able to answer this question. A descriptive study of Bura Sign Language and other local sign languages would be an important step forward.

### References

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## 7. Overheard on the Web

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