

An unreported African sign language for the deaf among the Bura in Northeast Nigeria

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1. Introduction

In October 2003, I [Roger Blench] was conducting a survey in the Bura-speaking area of Northeast Nigeria, when I came across an unreported deaf 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. 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 deaf language is quite independent. I was able to make a short videotape of the signers and to show the videotape to Victoria Nyst, who comments below.

Andy Warren (UBS Bible translation consultant), assisted by Joshua Pakshar, a Bura Bible translator from Shaffa made a further visit on December 13 2003 and our results are combined in this paper.

2. Signers

The images show the main signers who helped us with examples.



Sule Auta Iliya, Salihu Ibrahim unidentified man



From left to right: Salihu Ibrahim, Sule Auta Iliya's father, helper (name not known), Sule Auta Iliya (back), Musa Ibrahim (front), Habiba Iliya, Rubeka Ali (with child)

Salihu Ibrahim (m, 1962; Bura, Bia clan; Muslim; NURTW official in Kukurpu)

Hearing: deaf; has hearing wife and 4 hearing children

Languages: Bura, Hausa; has never attended school

Lip-reading: Bura spoken by his older sister; no Hausa

Literacy: Hausa, Bura (comprehension in both of these tested; some interesting errors in letter-formation [e.g. T for I] and spelling [e.g. YLEWA for YELWA])

Signing: excellent; started as a small child with parents
 n.n. (f; Salihu Ibrahim's wife): hearing; signing reputedly excellent; not met

Rubeka Ali (f, c. 1964; Salihu Ibrahim's younger sister; widow): hearing; signing excellent

Sule Auta Iliya (m, 1983; Bura, Tarfa clan; Muslim; farmer, rare handicraft ability (showed me a very sophisticated 1½m-long model aeroplane he'd made out of cane))

Hearing: deaf
 Languages: Bura, no Hausa; has attended P1-3
 Lip-reading: Bura spoken by his younger sister
 Literacy: none
 Signing: average; started c. 8 years old with father and paternal uncle



Habiba Iliya (f, c. 1985; Sule Auta Iliya's sister): c. ¼ deaf; signing good
 Musa Ibrahim (m, c. 1995): deaf; signing ability unknown
 Kworviya (not met): deaf; signing ability unknown

3. Signs

The following signs were observed in use ('conventional' indicates signs known throughout Bura hearing society):

Grammatical and Pragmatic Functions

greeting	wave or high fist for extra respect (conventional)
question	turn both hands upwards and outwards (similar to British conventional 'I don't know', but without the shoulder-shrug)
yes	nod (conventional)
no	shake head (conventional)

Deictic

this, today, here	point down
relative space	holding hand up, with palm down, flick fingers away in that direction (conventional)
early morning	point all right fingers forward at slight upwards angle (indicating position of sun)
morning	throw right hand over left shoulder (presumably indicating any past time)

In general, expressions for relative time are often based on those for relative space (past is behind, future is in front of), as is often the case in natural spoken languages.

Things

woman	point to both nipples
bird	flap fingers of both hands (mimicking wings flying)
trap	rest right forearm in left hand held upwards and repeatedly extend and retract it
money	wipe right fingertips inwards on vertical left palm
	or: wipe tips of left ring and small finger with right thumb (right fingers held behind left fingers)
	or: put bunched right fingers into upper left shirt pocket
numbers	hold up number of fingers (conventional)

okra	tap with right index finger across inner side of left index finger held horizontally and then along it (okra is cut in both directions in this way)
guinea-corn	hold right forearm and hand up vertically, held in left hand, then curve fingers downwards (suggesting the hanging head on guinea-corn stalks)
maize	use right thumb and fingers to mimic breaking off dried maize grains from left forearm

People

white person	smooth hand over hair (suggesting combing), then stroke inside of right fingers against inside of left forearm (suggesting 'skin')
Fulani person	use both hands to mime horns, and then right hand to mime cutlass under left arm (Fulanis traditionally look after cows and carry swords)
Marghi person	use right index and middle fingers extended to suggest tribal marks vertically twice on each cheek, once on forehead/nose, and then bunch right fingers to mime taking a 'pinch' of something (suggesting gorongo, a herb typical of the Marghi)

Bank notes (each of these suggests the person pictured on the respective Nigerian banknote):

₦1 (obsolete)	on both left and right, touch tips of index finger and thumb, and mimic twirling ends of a moustache
₦5	to draw each side of a circle around face with both index fingers and then draw tribal scar diagonally across right cheek with right index finger
₦10	on both left and right, touch tips of index finger and thumb, and draw them across eyes outwards (suggesting glasses)
₦20	draw diagonally over left shoulder-blade (suggesting Murtala Muhammad's leather cross-strap)
₦50	mime shape of Hausa cap, then tip off to one side or: ₦20 twice, then vertical right fingers slice downwards
₦100	on both left and right, touch tips of index finger and thumb, and draw them across eyes outwards (suggesting glasses), then crimp sides of Hausa cap or '1 sack': mime shape of a sack with both hands, then hold up right index finger
₦200	mimic binding on a turban
₦500	hold ears and pull them outwards, then inflate cheeks to make a fat face
₦5,000	hold both hands, pointing forward, with palms facing, small space between (suggesting small pile of notes)
₦10,000	hold both hands, pointing forward, with palms facing, large space between (suggesting large pile of notes)

Actions

to write, writing	vertical zigzag motion with right index finger on vertical left palm
to farm, a farm	both hands together make simplified hoeing action (mimicking the motion, not holding a hoe)
to fish, a fish	throw right hand forward, overarm, with fingers bunched (mimicking throwing a fishing hook)
to repair a car, a mechanic	use fingers to mimic shape of a spark-plug
to sleep, night	hold chin and right cheek in right flat hand
to wash	circle around face with right flat hand
to wake up, morning	combine 'to sleep' and 'to wash' into one smooth action
to bathe, a bath	both hands together make simplified action of splashing water towards face/shoulders (mimicking)
to eat, food	bunch fingers of right hand and touch lips with fingertips (conventional)

Attributes

together	bring together both extended index fingers
small (person)	motion downwards with right hand, fingers spread
own/one	place right index finger flat on upturned left index finger
many	hit inside of right fist against vertical left palm

Comments

'How did you come to market?' was asked by offering alternatives (mimicking walking [stepping feet], cycling [motioning hands as cycle pedals] or driving [motioning hands as on a steering-wheel, though of course he would have only been a passenger]) or, interestingly, by beginning a narrative from the time the sun rose up to the time he left house, and asking him to continue it.

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 Schmaling (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.

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