

## **"Decolonizing the Sign: Towards Independence of Expression in African Deaf Pedagogy"**

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Ngugi's *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) has become a seminal work advocating for the recognition of the pernicious nature of colonial languages on African cultural expression and the need for writing in indigenous African languages in order to escape neocolonial modes of thought and social structure. While Ngugi's focus is on written, literary language, his theory of language is equally applicable to another area of linguistic communication – (pseudo) American Sign Language pedagogy across the continent, and specifically in Nigerian Deaf schools.

A foreign signing system was introduced into Nigeria in the late 1950's and early 1960's – ironically right around the time of independence - by Andrew Foster, the first Deaf African-American to earn a degree from Gallaudet University. His missionary work in several African countries brought more opportunities and recognition for Deaf children's capabilities and educational futures. It also, however, suppressed indigenous signed languages that were vibrant and culturally appropriate to Nigerian Deaf communities, reflecting grammar, vocabulary, and ways of understanding that were reflective of indigenous life and social structure. The “cultural bomb” that Ngugi posits is, in this case, therefore English language signing referred to as American Sign Language, an idea introduced with good intentions, but one which has had negative repercussions.

The two main difficulties that Manually Coded English (MCE) presents in Nigeria are its reified status at the national pedagogical level and its inaccurate assessment at the local level. Nigerian governmental institutions push the teaching of MCE with basic ASL vocabulary in Deaf schools and provide ASL-based materials and ASL-trained teachers, thereby contributing to the colonial alienation that Ngugi describes as the “deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community.” Just as troubling, however, is the fact that the use of this pseudo-ASL in Nigerian Deaf schools and communities, despite being identified

in numerous academic studies as being present, is *not*, in fact, what Deaf children and their families are predominantly using. In other words, there are viable and vibrant indigenous sign language varieties appropriate to the cultural milieu, and yet both governmental pedagogical policy and cursory outside (Western) assessments are suppressing the development, formalization, and dissemination of what we can call Indigenous Sign Languages (ISL). This paper makes the case for the abandonment of neocolonial foreign signed language pedagogy and the adoption of ILS pedagogy in Nigeria.

This paper is supported by ongoing research at the schools for the Deaf in Ofekata Orodo in Imo State, in Abuja, and in Lagos (Nigeria). We will show a short clip of contrasting sign languages from these schools illustrating some of the incongruities. We are especially looking for advice on how to present our findings and analysis in a way that appeals to scholars of linguistics, literature, and cultural studies. The project is very much in its infancy, and therefore we are very open to suggestions.