

Exploring an African Perspective in Black Deaf Studies

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

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Abstract

Dr. Sam Lutalo-Kiingi emphasizes the rich cultural tapestry of the Deaf community in Uganda, highlighting the resilience and evolution of Ugandan Sign Language (UgSL) amid historical colonization. Born Deaf, Dr. Lutalo-Kiingi's journey, marked by education and international exposure, underscores a concerted effort to research and preserve UgSL, honoring its indigenous roots despite external influences. Navigating through the complexities of language colonization and external influences, particularly from American Sign Language due to Dr. Andrew Foster's impact, the preservation and official recognition of UgSL stands as a testament to cultural resilience. The collaboration of various stakeholders, including international allies, accentuates a narrative of empowerment, education, and the continuous quest for self-definition amidst a globally interconnected landscape.

Keywords

Ugandan Sign Language, Colonization, Deaf Community, Cultural Resilience, Language Preservation, International Collaboration

Presentation Transcript

[00:05 - Slide 1]

Good morning, everyone! Black power, right? African power! I can feel the energy in this room.

Over the past few days, I've had the pleasure of watching various presentations and have thoroughly enjoyed them. It's an honor to be selected to present to you all by the Black Deaf Studies Center.

I was born Deaf and hail from Uganda in Africa. I currently work at Kyambogo University, where I specialize in Sign Language, interpreting, and teaching. I am also a researcher with a

focus on Deaf African culture, history, communities, and the linguistics of African sign languages, having been involved in numerous scholarly activities.

Today, I am excited to share with you an exploration of the African perspective on Black Deaf studies.

Next slide.

[01:21 - Slide 2]

As you may be aware, many African countries experienced colonization. In the South-Eastern part of Africa, which was colonized by the British, spoken English predominates. Meanwhile, in North-Western Africa, French is common due to French colonization, and a few countries were influenced by Portuguese colonization. As a result, European languages were imposed on these African nations. Specifically, in Uganda, English is the primary language for both spoken and written communication, followed by Swahili, and then the local spoken languages. Totaling 40 local spoken languages, adding Ugandan Sign Language (UgSL) brings the total to 41 distinct languages used within the country.

I want to focus on the postcolonial era, where each African country had its unique postcolonial experiences. Take Uganda, for example, which became independent in 1962. This period marked the beginning of independence for many African nations from British and French rule during the 1960s.

Deaf schools were established all over Africa before this. Many people might think that Africa has no sign language and no culture, but that is not the case. Many different countries in Africa already had culture and sign language before (1960s.) Next, I'll be explaining this in more depth.

You may be wondering to learn that Uganda has its own unique sign language, distinct from those of other countries. How does Uganda have its own? How does the Deaf community remain strong? I will be explaining these aspects next.

Next, please.

[03:41 - Slide 3]

In my previous experiences, I traveled to the United Kingdom and visited their Deaf community, as well as to Denmark and some places in the United States. While in Africa, I traveled to Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Ghana. I have had various teaching experiences there.

You see me here in this image. I am Sam Lutalo Kiingi (name sign). I have traveled to many countries. I've often been asked whether I was going to return to Uganda or stay.

Why is that?

One example is in the image to the left. All individuals here are Deaf Ugandans. They went to the first school for the Deaf in Uganda and were raised there. Currently, they live here in America. Unfortunately, one of them could not come due to illness. I will provide more context later. They asked me if I'd be willing to come to work here. Firstly, I'd like to acknowledge and honor those who have traveled here to Gallaudet to study, and then decided to stay and settle down here after studying for various reasons, like work. I definitely respect that.

However, for me, I imagine things a little differently. From learning different African histories, how do I think about things?

Next slide, please.

[05:22 - Slide 4]

We have an image of my family here. Without their support, I wouldn't be here today, standing in front of you, discussing my research. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to them.

In the projected picture, my parents are on the far right. My mom is to the far right, dressed in a 'gomesi,' a traditional dress. Next to her is my dad, clad in a white 'kanzu,' which is worn by respected elders and leaders at special celebrations and weddings. My apologies for my attire today, but I wanted to match all of you. However, in Uganda, you'd typically see me in similar traditional attire during special occasions, out of respect for my ancestors.

So, what has my family taught me? This is something I frequently reflect on and remind myself about. Notice the image of a book to the right here. My dad is standing in the photo on the left, and next to him is my father's brother, a doctor in Australia who loved researching family genealogy. He wrote in the Ugandan language.

In the past, I studied in the United Kingdom where I earned my bachelor's degree. People congratulated me on my success, and excitedly asked me to read a document, which I couldn't understand because it was written in Ugandan. They eventually provided an English translation.

Why did this happen? I was educated and raised in English and was mentally and physically colonized. As a result, I couldn't understand or read my family's language.

My family emphasized two crucial teachings. From our tribe in the 1400s to 1500s, our chief highlighted two important points: first, the importance of education; and second, the value of family. No matter where you travel, your roots always connect back to Uganda. Although they are hearing, their words have profoundly influenced my thinking.

Next, please.

[8:18 - Slide 5]

You can see a series of three images on the PowerPoint. How do these images relate to my personal journey, including my research?

First, let's discuss the picture on the left. This dates back to between 1990 and 1994. A Deaf white woman from Denmark came to Uganda, and we collaborated. I will share more details about this collaboration later. When they arrived, their first action was to learn UgSL and understand our customs. Following this, they taught us, enabling us to educate others. We then passed this knowledge on to parents, interpreters, and others involved with UgSL.

During a discussion captured in the group photo, someone suggested that materials for Ugandans could be adapted from Danish Sign Language. However, some disagreed, advocating for the use of our own language, UgSL, and embracing our culture. This stance fostered a sense of empowerment and profoundly influenced our thinking. My sign language, my culture...

We established our own guidelines and curriculum, acquiring skills to develop these materials, and we have continued this work ever since. That's one significant effort I'm involved with.

The second effort focused on developing a dictionary. Although UgSL was used for teaching and learning visually, it lacked formal documentation. During this period, we sought funding from Denmark. Then we met a Deaf linguist from Sweden. We taught him UgSL, and he shared his knowledge of linguistics with us. We exchanged ideas—and, just for context, he is a white person. Between 2000 and 2006, we worked on collecting the UgSL corpus throughout the country and eventually published our UgSL dictionary. Now, we finally had a tangible sign language dictionary in our hands.

But our work didn't stop there.

Thirdly, I considered the grammar of UgSL. Countries like America and Britain had their own sign language linguistics—so why not for our own language? I gave this much thought.

While earning my Bachelor's degree in the UK, I came across someone—whom I won't name just yet—who had already collected data on different African sign languages. At that time, I worked with video recording signs and some basic editing. We exchanged these videos back and forth. This individual later asked if I would join their university as a research assistant, to which I eagerly agreed. At Kyambogo University, I had to secure approval for this transfer. Because of their policy—since I wasn't a professor

and didn't hold a doctorate—I was at the bottom of the list. So, I requested the UK program to provide a job description and a letter of support. I presented these documents to my university, explaining why this opportunity was essential. They fully supported my move, understanding its importance, and instructed me to go and then return. So, I went.

From my Bachelor's to my PhD, my studies in the UK were all focused on UgSL. The data I collected was personally gathered. My final dissertation topic was on vocabulary and sentences in UgSL. And that was my dissertation. Woo! After finishing my PhD, I returned to Uganda. Remember, as I've always said, whenever I left, I returned; I went to the UK and came back, always returning to my Ugandan roots.

Next, please.

[12:38 - Slide 6]

I was taught sign language linguistics, and in turn, I taught others UgSL. We developed the dictionary with various visual layouts. Let me explain—the dictionary is not structured alphabetically but is organized based on handshapes and locations related to signs, which vary across the sign languages in Africa. For example, Kenya has its own, and UgSL is distinct from others.

We have seen all the presentations and discussions yesterday and today. Throughout these sessions, we learned about history, Deaf Black, Deaf African, and so forth—I've been observing, and they all connect to this slide.

There is one woman, a Deaf woman from Belgium, however white, who has extensive knowledge of anthropology and culture. My specialty is linguistics. Together, we sought and ultimately obtained a grant. From 2013 to 2015, we began documenting and collecting data on Deaf Ugandan history, language, and community. However, when we searched for data in libraries, we found nothing. How can we learn more about Ugandan history?

I decided to gather a group of people. In the photo to the left, see the old man. I hold a lot of respect for him. He is about 80, now 85 years old. He grew up without schooling. Why was this?

This individual was born in the 1940s, a time when there were no Deaf schools—nothing at all. By the postcolonial era and after the establishment of Deaf schools around the 1960s, this individual had already grown up, making it impossible for him to attend any Deaf school. However, he learned the language by interacting with other Deaf children. My point here is that he gained incredible knowledge about life and history through storytelling.

We requested that people send us images and photos. We received various pictures depicting celebrations in their lives, such as weddings, festivities, school events, and other contexts. We collected these.

The woman in the discussion is a second-generation UgSL user, and I will explain why she is considered such. The individuals on the right are from a younger group; they represent the third- and fourth-generation UgSL users. This indicates that UgSL, which started more as a home sign by the first generation, has evolved significantly by the time of the fourth generation. This is the form of UgSL now used by the Deaf community. From this group, we exchanged images and discussed them.

[15:35 - Slide 7]

Here is an example with a picture. The person in the photo, a woman, was teaching but did not possess strong literacy skills. While my focus is not solely on educators, but rather on individuals from a broad range of backgrounds, regardless of gender or age, I am setting aside the importance of teaching for now. Instead, my focus is on the Sign itself, which I consider more important. This image exemplifies teaching in action.

I often wondered how UgSL emerged.

Two white women, one British and the other Australian, came and used gestures along with British Sign Language (BSL). They were adequate signers. However, the children here were using UgSL. And, as you all are aware, this was during the Milan era, which was characterized by the use of oral education methods. They were using sign language.

Well, there are several issues. We covered many topics, but the youth are not aware of their history, or of the lives and experiences of their elders.

When they viewed the poster, they learned about the importance of Deaf history, the struggles encountered, and aspects of life. They were actually able to access this knowledge directly from the poster they were looking at. This person created a learning space.

Next slide, please.

[17:02 - Slide 8]

Here is an image of Dr. Andrew Foster, a figure well-known to us all. He was instrumental in founding numerous schools for the Deaf across the African continent. In the photo to the right, there are four individuals. The first is a Deaf person from Zambia, who became deaf later in life and uses some speech. The second and third individuals

are from Uganda, also late-deafened and they too use some speech. Unfortunately, I do not remember the fourth person in the image.

Around 1964, Dr. Foster went to Uganda. He was interested and looking for pupils. This was after the schools for the Deaf were established in Uganda before he came. Then, there is no reason to establish one. Two Ugandans went with him to Nigeria to study the Bible and religion. Afterward, they came back to Uganda. As you know, Africa has a deep history of missionary work, and religious preaching, preaching the love of God. So after those two individuals finished their training, between approximately 1970 to 1975, UgSL was already firmly established. They came to the church and invited Deaf people to come. Deaf people would come in and were thrilled to see two signing preachers. Before, at their churches, the preachers were hearing. The Deaf individuals did not understand the services and could not understand the Bible reading. They would see the Deaf-led church and be ecstatic about the service. However, understand this: they signed in American Sign Language (ASL).

Regardless of that, they started learning some ASL from them. Obviously, outside of the service, they would switch back to using UgSL. Were they resisting? They were encouraged not to use their UgSL, but rather to use ASL for all church teachings. For example, they were told to use the ASL sign for FATHER instead of the UgSL. They would say, don't use that UgSL sign for FATHER [index-horizontal-on-chin to palm-hand forward]. We were encouraged to change, but Deaf Ugandans felt strongly about their language. They were deeply rooted and remained firm in their use of UgSL. Ultimately, they committed to ASL, where power dynamics played a significant role.

I do respect and honor Foster's efforts to establish many Deaf schools in the West and other places in Africa. Dr. Foster has since passed away, and we are very grateful to him. However, we cannot ignore the linguistic colonialism that he indeed introduced to Africa. Perhaps if

he were still alive today, ASL would be the most widely used sign language across Africa. But would the culture still be ours? I'm just saying. All right.

Next.

[19:53 - Slide 9]

From its independence in 1962 to 1990, Uganda experienced many conflicts and wars. In contrast, Kenya and Tanzania were stable during this period and did not experience civil wars. This stability, along with the lack of outside influences, allowed their native sign languages to thrive.

So, let me explain about these photos here. In the top left photo, you saw the old man signing. There are three individuals. The third individual is the hearing mother of the individual in the middle. As you recall in two photos prior, in that picture there were two boys – he was one of the two boys birthed by the mother. The hearing child of this

family went to school, whereas the Deaf child ended up staying at home and was left uneducated. The mother does not feel right about this.

The government's policies strongly support and finance opportunities for Deaf children to study abroad. As many of you are aware, in the UK, the educational approach heavily favors oralism, and parents often do not know sign language. Despite this, the child uses British Sign Language (BSL) to communicate with their peers during recess. Upon their return to Uganda, I noticed the influence of BSL on their signing. For instance, the sign for the capital city, KAMPALA, uses a technique resembling BSL fingerspelling [index + index-bend]. This is a reflection of BSL's impact.

Moving on, in 1994, the Ugandan government finally recognized UgSL in the constitutional laws, marking a significant shift from the previous adherence to British constitutional principles, which were misaligned with our needs. We, the Deaf community in Uganda, spearheaded the initiative to formally recognize UgSL in the constitution. The photo displayed here captures me interacting with Members of Parliament. At the parliament, we actively engaged with members, emphasizing UgSL's importance and raising awareness. This advocacy resulted in discussions and support for ratifying UgSL as an official language in the constitution—a milestone in our history. Notably, Finland was the first country to take such a step; Uganda was the second, a profoundly empowering action that helped safeguard UgSL.

The figure I'm showing illustrates the connections and interconnections between governments and projects, emphasizing the importance of community-based links. Without these connections, efforts to empower Africa are undermined, and funding fails to achieve its

intended goals. A prime example is the collaboration between a Danish Deaf organization and a Ugandan Deaf organization. Historically, Scandinavian, Nordic European countries like Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland have engaged in similar collaborations. For instance, the Swedish government partnered with Kenya's government to fund infrastructure projects such as roads, hospitals, and buildings. Additionally, the Swedish Deaf Association aimed to support Kenya's Deaf Association. Sweden contributed about 90% of the funds, with the remaining 10% from the Deaf Association amounting to a total contribution of 100%. These funds were utilized to promote Deaf leadership, create dictionaries, and support related initiatives. Similarly, Denmark-funded projects in Uganda, and Finland worked with Tanzania and Zambia. From 1990 to 2010, Uganda benefited from fourteen years of such funding, which supported the establishment of interpreter training at Kyambogo University, a Deaf school, and community initiatives. We also trained older individuals as linguistic models to preserve UgSL. However, there is a growing concern that as the older generation ages—now around 50 to 60 years old—the younger generation is not receiving this knowledge, which poses a significant challenge for the continuation of these efforts.

The project was coming to an end, and just before the Danish team departed, I asked them to review our agreement. I had a paying job at the University thanks to their funding, but with their departure, I would be left jobless. They were initially unsure of what had occurred but eventually revisited the agreement. When they ended their support, the responsibility fell to the Ugandan government to continue the work. They recognized this as an issue and brought it to the government's attention, advocating that Sam and his team should continue working at the university with government financial support. They agreed to take over from there. So, the reason you see me here today is because of that agreement. Without it, I wouldn't have been able to come here, travel, and study in the UK. Unlike Kenya and other places that did not have such agreements, where funding dried up after the project ended, leaving the Deaf community with almost nothing.

Next slide.

[25:53 - Slide 10]

I am concluding my remarks here. As I've mentioned, Africa has experienced linguistic colonialism, which extends to education as well. There are two crucial points to emphasize: the importance of documentation and education, which are topics we've all discussed extensively. However, there is a pressing issue: While African countries have made significant progress, the current youth generation remains largely unaware. Despite their university education, many are still uninformed.

The older generation in countries like Uganda and Kenya has been heavily involved in advocacy efforts and various initiatives. However, it is often said that their literacy levels are lower and they lack formal degrees. Despite not having achieved higher education, their contributions are significant. Does this mean that you, the younger generation, view someone like me, who uses UgSL, as lesser?

This issue is a direct reflection of past linguistic colonialism. The youth believe that English is superior, preferring English-based signing over UgSL. For instance, while UgSL uses a specific sign for 'MALE TALL', the younger generation favors signs initialized with the letters 'M' and 'T'. This shift indicates a backward movement in our linguistic structure, showing a colonial mindset. It is crucial that we remind the younger generation about their history and the advocacy efforts of past initiatives. This trend is concerning.

Okay, I'm going to summarize the ending here. Resources are crucial, as are individual initiatives to collect these resources. We need to continue collecting data and documenting Deaf history. I often teach interpreters about historical figures like Abbe de l'Epee and Gallaudet, as well as Germany's approach to oralism. However, these historical perspectives do not entirely align with our culture. I wish we had a single book dedicated to our own Deaf history. I hope you all can help make this a reality.

Having a book specifically about the history of the Ugandan Deaf community would be invaluable for teaching and spreading knowledge. Additionally, it's important that all countries in Africa document their histories and publish books to preserve and share their unique cultural narratives.

Previously, Lindsay Dunn discussed the global perception of Africa. At that time, I referenced L'Epee, but now it's time to shift our focus. I want African American history to be emphasized and taught more extensively. I hope you all can use your influence and resources to mentor others, based on their culture, African culture. It's important to either step back after establishing these mentorships or to expand the number of mentees. I have seen funders come, impose their agendas for a month, and then leave, which often leaves the Deaf community in a vulnerable state, unable to sustain itself.

Please, in any future partnerships, it's crucial to focus on mentorship to empower and elevate those involved.

The theme of our discussions has been global perspectives on Black and African communities and their heritage. Be strong!

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