

# A Deaf Anthropologist's Journey

# 1

WHEN DEAF people ask me what is special about Adamorobe and why I chose this place to do research, I usually reply, “You know Martha’s Vineyard, right? The place where a relatively large number of deaf people were born and many hearing people knew sign? You know that this situation has vanished now? But did you know that there are actually similar communities around the world? Well, one of these is located in Ghana and called Adamorobe.” Often, the reaction is fascination, and sometimes I got the remark “Wow, I HAVE to see that!” Martha’s Vineyard, an island off Cape Cod in Massachusetts on the Eastern seaboard of the United States, is renowned as a community where “everyone spoke sign language” for several hundred years.<sup>1</sup> Due to a recessive pattern of genetic deafness circulated through endogamous marriage practices, the rate of deafness on this island averaged 1:155 and peaked at 1:4 in a neighborhood in the town of Chilmark.\*

The community featured a dense social and kinship network, and this close contact between deaf and hearing people resulted in the evolution of a sign language that was widely used by both deaf and hearing people on a daily basis, for generations. Deaf people were reportedly “fully integrated” into the hearing community. Based on her interviews with older surviving hearing members, Nora Groce reported that being deaf was seen as “pretty normal,” merely as a human variation as unremarkable as eye color. Beginning in the nineteenth century, changes in the marriage patterns of both deaf and hearing inhabitants resulted in the disappearance of this particular strand of deafness on the Vineyard.<sup>2</sup> Several deaf people married off-island deaf classmates, and hearing islanders increasingly married off-islanders, people who lived on the Vineyard only during the summer holidays, or Portuguese immigrants who moved to the Vineyard.

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\* In this book, I use the term *deafness* in a purely biological sense. As such, my use of the term does not mean that I subscribe to the medically inspired ideology of deafness as “lack” or “problem.”

Martha's Vineyard became an especially powerful part of the collective memory of the international deaf community. Deaf people often imagine it as a paradise, so they are disappointed when they learn that this "dream" ceased to exist after the mid-twentieth century. For example, the author of an online article on Martha's Vineyard writes, "If you could create a deaf utopia, what would it be like? Everyone would communicate in sign language, both deaf and hearing. Many, if not most, children would be born deaf. There actually was such a place once."<sup>3</sup> This idealization of the Vineyard happens because of an apparent contrast of life on the Vineyard with that of so many (if not most) deaf people in contemporary societies.

The reality for probably the majority of deaf people is growing up in hearing nonsigning families, having hearing nonsigning teachers, and having to comply with a hearing nonsigning society, notwithstanding the often devastating social, psychological, linguistic, and educational effects that come with this. Deaf people have, therefore, been described as constituting a geographical diaspora, longing to be together and to use sign language whenever they want to, leading to them imagining ideal places such as Martha's Vineyard.<sup>4</sup> It is not unusual for deaf people who are told about Martha's Vineyard to sigh, "I wish I could live there," or state that they would go there on holiday if the place still harbored its deaf population.

While the retrospective and idyllic stories about Martha's Vineyard have taken on mythical proportions, other communities currently exist where a high rate of genetic deafness leads to the emergence of a local sign language known and used by a hearing majority and a deaf minority. Most of them are located in the global South, mostly in rural rather than urban settings. Since the late 1970s, at least fifteen examples have been reported in Asia, Mesoamerica, South America, the Middle East, and Africa, including Adamorobe in Ghana, West Africa. After my explanation above, it might be unsurprising that communities of this type are attractive for (deaf) tourists and researchers. A white deaf person who once visited Adamorobe explained what brought her there: "I read a simple sentence about Adamorobe in a deaf literature work, and got fascinated by the deaf village."

Such a trip could mean much more than a mere visit to an interesting place. The term *pilgrimage* has been used to describe deaf people's participation in the "ritual" of the Deaf World Games (aka Deaflympics), where deaf people from around the world come together for a "sacred occasion," in which sign language users temporarily constitute a majority.<sup>5</sup> Another ideal deaf place is Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., the only

liberal arts university for deaf people in the world, a “deaf Mecca” to where deaf people from around the world make pilgrimages.<sup>6</sup> For deaf people, this experience of a barrier-free environment fascinates them, inspires them, and recharges them.<sup>7</sup>

It is not the search for a deaf dreamworld, nor for a utopian place that brought me to Adamorobe, though. What brought me there were master's degrees in both anthropology and Deaf Studies, and a personal and scientific interest in the many different ways in which deaf people lead their lives in different sociocultural contexts.

### Becoming “A Real Anthropologist”

This is how it happened. Just like my younger deaf sister, I was mainstreamed in a “hearing school” at an early age. I did well at school, I spoke well, I used hearing aids. However, since I am profoundly deaf, an easy, natural unhampered flow of two-way or group communication was non-existent in my life. In 2003, I was an anthropology master's student at the University of Leuven in my home country, Belgium, and dreaming of becoming “a real anthropologist.” Something was missing though, a focus, a topic that would fire me with enthusiasm. I was quite adrift, until I received the list of possible dissertation topics. A small flame reluctantly started to smolder when I saw that “Deaf culture” was one of the topics on Professor Devlieger's list.

Not yet convinced that this topic could be something interesting and profound (which strikes me as extremely ironic now) and with a lot of other topics in my mind, I casually told Professor Devlieger that I would maybe, possibly, be interested. He pushed me quite firmly in that direction by suggesting a few books: Padden and Humphries' and Baynton's classics on American Deaf culture and history.<sup>8</sup> The library did not have them, and so my first orders through the Internet became fact. These books were revelations: my interest was aroused immediately, and many things were turned around profoundly and definitively, never to look the same again. I realized that it was not too late, that there were many people like me who had become “late-adopted children” in deaf communities. I withdrew from my hearing scouts group, enrolled in a deaf youth club, and started to learn Vlaamse Gebarentaal (Flemish Sign Language) enthusiastically.

What was more, I found my purpose. Those two books made me throw away all my reservations about the “Deaf culture” theme at once. I decided that I wanted to be a *deaf* anthropologist researching *deaf* people's

life-worlds, rather than an anthropologist trying to “overcome” her being deaf while doing research. I started to devour other Deaf Studies classics and in October 2004, I stepped onto a plane to the former Dutch colony Surinam (South America) to conduct research for my anthropology dissertation. I focused on the urban Deaf community in the capital, Paramaribo, exploring the role the deaf school, the deaf club, and the former colony played in deaf people’s everyday lives.

During my three-month stay in Paramaribo, I learned that some of the schoolchildren came from the inland where small communities of Indians and Maroons lived, with a high rate of hereditary deafness and that these children used “their own sign languages.” A few months earlier, I had read Groce’s classic about Martha’s Vineyard. The flame of my interest started to burn more fiercely. I wanted what I then regarded as the “traditional” anthropological experience: doing research in a rural location. I did not go to the interior of Surinam—this was not part of my research, nor did I have the precise coordinates or the financial means to travel into the Amazon, nor did I feel ready for that. I was still very much a new inductee in the fields of anthropology and Deaf Studies. Nonetheless I started thinking: “Who knows, maybe one day . . .”

I not only wanted to learn about Deaf histories and lives from books and by interacting with deaf people; I also wanted to be taught. I commenced an additional master’s degree at the University of Bristol, United Kingdom. I immensely enjoyed my MSc in Deaf Studies, but from the outset of the degree, I missed the wide scale of anthropology. At that time, I felt the Deaf Studies canon to be mostly Western-focused, something that has hugely improved over the past few years. As a response, I read every non-Western Deaf culture–related piece that I could get my hands on, and by way of that process discovered that there are “many ways to be deaf.”<sup>9</sup>

As part of this quest, I started reading more about “Martha’s Vineyard situations,” which ultimately led to a published critical review.<sup>10</sup> In that article, I noted that most (but not all) of those studies were done by linguists and geneticists, who often published sociocultural data on the communities without having done sustained ethnographic research there. Several of these accounts have contributed to the existing idealized images of such communities as places where deaf and hearing people intermingle to the extent that deaf people are said to be “equal” to hearing people, living in happy and harmonious relationships with them.

## Shared Signing Communities

“Shared signing communities” as Kisch calls “Martha’s Vineyard situations,”<sup>11</sup> are villages, towns, or groups in which, due to the historical presence of a hereditary form of deafness that is circulated in the communities through endogamous marriages, a relatively high number of deaf people live together with hearing people for decades or even centuries. Over the years, the need to communicate with each other leads to the emergence of local sign languages used by both deaf and hearing people, called “shared sign languages” by Nyst.<sup>12</sup>

The most well-known and best-documented such communities are the Al-Sayyid Bedouin in Israel,<sup>13</sup> Desa Kolok (Bengkala) in Bali,<sup>14</sup> Chican in Mexico,<sup>15</sup> Ban Khor in Thailand,<sup>16</sup> and Adamorobe in Ghana. There seems to be considerable variation within and between shared signing communities with regard to rates of sign language proficiency and use, deaf people’s marriage rates, deaf people’s participation in village economies and politics, and the role and results of (deaf) education. Traditionally, the common factors among these communities (factors that are rapidly changing in a number of communities) seem to be the high degree of kin relationships in the groups or locations, traditionally labor-intensive and subsistence-oriented economies, and low degrees of differentiation between deaf and hearing people’s levels of education and occupation.<sup>17</sup>

The normal ratio of babies born deaf in the West is about 0.1%,<sup>18</sup> although this is generally reported to be two to five times higher in developing countries. In the 2010 Ghanaian population census, 0.4 % of Ghanaians were reported to have a hearing disability.<sup>19</sup> Some recent figures (at different moments in time) from shared signing communities are represented in Table 1.1. In this table, it appears that the percentage of deaf inhabitants in shared signing communities varies and can change considerably over time. This percentage also seems to decline in a number of communities, especially in places experiencing rapid immigration (such as in Adamorobe). Numbers of hearing inhabitants naturally increase much more rapidly than numbers of deaf inhabitants due to births and immigration. Sometimes deaf people move to other areas, such as in Bengkala and Adamorobe. Sometimes percentages of deaf people are even not that high in comparison to the average numbers in developing countries (such as in Ban Khor).

However, the exact (relative or absolute) numbers of deaf people in such communities do not say much in themselves. Rather than a particular

Table 1.1. Deaf Inhabitants in Selected Shared Signing Communities.

Community	Year	Number of Deaf/ Hearing Inhabitants	Percentage of Deaf Inhabitants
Adamorobe (Ghana)	2000	35/1356	2.58
	2008	43/2500	1.72
	2012	41/3500	1.17
Al-Sayyid Bedouin (Israel)	2008	120/3700	3.24
	2012	130/4500	2.89
Ban Khor (Thailand)	2009	16/2741	0.58
Bengkala (Indonesia)	2000	47/2180	2.15
	2008	46/2740	1.68
Chican (Mexico)	1991	13/400	3.25
	2012	17/720	2.36

Note. The number of deaf people in Bengkala in 2008 would be 38 with emigrated deaf people excluded. The number of deaf people in Adamorobe in 2012 would be at least 52 with emigrated people included.

Sources. For Adamorobe, numbers for 2000 are from Victoria Nyst, *A Descriptive Analysis of Adamorobe Sign Language (Ghana)* (Utrecht: LOT, 2007), and data for 2008 and 2012 are from my own research.

For Al-Sayyid Bedouin, information for 2008 is from Shifra Kisch, "'Deaf Discourse': the Social Construction of Deafness in a Bedouin Community," *Medical Anthropology* 27 (2008): 283–313, and for 2012 is from Shifra Kisch, "Demarcating Generations of Signers in the Dynamic Sociolinguistic Landscape of a Shared Sign-Language: The Case of the Al-Sayyid Bedouin," in *Sign Languages in Village Communities: Anthropological and Linguistic Insights. Sign Language Typology Series No. 4*, eds. Ulrike Zeshan and Connie de Vos. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter & Ishara Press, 2012), 87–125.

For Ban Khor, information is from Angela Nonaka, "Estimating Size, Scope, and Membership of the Speech/Sign Communities of Undocumented Indigenous/Village Sign Languages: The Ban Khor Case Study," *Language and Communication* 29 (2009): 210–229.

For Bengkala, numbers for 2000 are from I Gede Marsaja, *Desa Kolok. A Deaf Village and its Sign Language in Bali, Indonesia* (Nijmegen: Ishara Press, 2008), and for 2008 are from Connie de Vos, "The Kata Kolok Perfective in Child Signing: Coordination of Manual and Non-Manual Components," in *Sign Languages in Village Communities: Anthropological and Linguistic Insights. Sign Language Typology Series No. 4*, ed. Ulrike Zeshan & Connie de Vos (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter and Ishara Press, 2012), 127–52.

For Chican, numbers for 1991 are from Robert Johnson, "Sign language, culture & community in a traditional Yucatec Maya village," *Sign Language Studies* 73 (1991): 461–474, and for 2012 are from Cesar Ernesto, Escobedo Delgado, "Chican Sign Language: A sociolinguistic sketch," in *Sign Languages in Village Communities: Anthropological and Linguistic Insights. Sign Language Typology Series No. 4*, eds. Ulrike Zeshan and Connie de Vos (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter & Ishara Press, 2012), 377–381.

percentage of deaf people in a community, it is the communities' *social activities and networks* that create the possibility for a shared sign language to emerge, and to be spread and passed on throughout a community, especially when deafness exists for a number of generations.<sup>20</sup> Endogamous marriage practices are associated with a dense social and kin organization and collective culture (and not necessarily with geographical isolation, as many authors on shared signing communities have assumed). In these contexts, deaf and hearing people do (or did in the past) similar things in daily life and frequently engage in common activities. They are therefore likely to have considerable contact with each other, and a shared sign

language can thus evolve and be circulated widely throughout the communities, and transmitted down through the generations.

Shared sign languages are said to differ from larger urban/national sign languages, because their user communities and circumstances of development are very different. Urban sign languages (such as Bamako Sign Language in Mali) and national sign languages (such as American Sign Language or Ghanaian Sign Language) have typically emerged in user communities consisting of mainly deaf users, such as in schools for the deaf or urban deaf networks. In contrast, in shared signing communities, there is only a small minority of deaf signers and a large majority of hearing signers. The latter typically play an important role in the development, maintenance, and transmission of shared sign languages. Deaf inhabitants of shared signing communities often also come in contact with urban/national sign languages, such as through attending schools for the deaf. Formally educated deaf children of shared signing communities often use the school sign language with each other.

Shared sign languages are different from urban and national sign languages with regard to form and linguistic characteristics. Examples are the use of relatively few different handshapes, a large signing space heavily making use of pointing to real locations for person and place reference (based on shared knowledge of places and persons' homes), a high degree of macrofunctionality (i.e., one sign can have many different meanings according to the context in which it is used), and the absence (or infrequent use) of classifier verbs and simultaneous constructions. It has been suggested that these languages are maximally adjusted to user communities with more hearing than deaf signers, and where these hearing signers have various levels of language proficiency. The more complex structures that are typical for urban/national sign languages would be more difficult to learn and produce for hearing users.<sup>21</sup>

Most of the linguists and geneticists who visited shared signing communities during the past two decades argued that the use of shared sign languages facilitates deaf people's *integration*, which is a term that has been criticized in disability and minority discourses because it suggests the assimilation or normalization of an abnormal person in a normal community. A more adequate choice of words to describe shared signing communities as spaces produced by both deaf and hearing people is *habitus*; these are communities in which the fact that deaf and hearing people live together is integral to these people's *habitus*.<sup>22</sup>

Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to suggest that people's practices are structured by their sociocultural environments.<sup>23</sup> I use it not to imply that deaf people in shared signing communities are included in every aspect of the village's public, political and religious life, which is seldom the case,<sup>24</sup> but to reflect the fact that shared signing communities are not just villages, towns, areas or groups with a high number of deaf people, but places where deaf people and being deaf are *situated* and where life between deaf and hearing people is to a great extent *shared*, as are the sign languages used between them.

The deaf-inclusive habitus in shared signing communities is challenged by developments such as urbanization, capitalism, the switch from subsistence economies to cash economies, migration, diversification of employment, and increased rates of formal education. These processes may place deaf people in shared signing communities in disadvantaged or even marginal positions. In addition, many shared sign languages are on the brink of extinction, mostly because of contact with larger, urban (often national) sign languages.<sup>25</sup> As Groce has been criticized for her "glorification of the past,"<sup>26</sup> of Martha's Vineyard, I criticize romanticizing accounts of these communities: contemporary shared signing communities are (naturally) not what could be called deaf utopias. The picture is naturally ambiguous.

Still, even with oppressive and marginalizing discourses, practices, and processes present, the very existence of shared signing communities highlights particular practices and ideas that may seem utopian for many deaf people, such as the practice of using sign language automatically with a deaf person, or the common-sense nature of the knowledge that one can discuss everything in sign language, or the experience of being born deaf in a community where deaf people of various ages have been living for decades, if not centuries. Because of the existence of these patterns, I regard them as very interesting places to do ethnographic research.

### Preparing for the Field

Thus, while reviewing the literature, the idea took shape to go to such a "Martha's Vineyard situation" to do ethnographic research on deaf-deaf and deaf-hearing social relationships and discourses about being deaf and sign language. People often ask me what moved me to choose Adamorobe. I had read Nyst's account about Adamorobe Sign Language (which I will refer to as AdaSL from now on)<sup>27</sup> and learned that the number of deaf people there was rather large (i.e., not small and scattered as in Surinam) and



had a significant generational depth. The place had not yet been studied by anthropologists, but only by linguists, geneticists, and medical researchers.

What was more, I had already been in the country. In 2006, I volunteered at a school for deaf children with 200 pupils located in a rural and rather remote setting in the North Ghanaian savanna, residing with a host family in a nearby village. Already having a sense of village life in Ghana and of how to negotiate the country, as well having acquired the basics of Ghanaian Sign Language (which is very different from AdaSL, but proved to be useful in certain contexts), I could imagine myself doing fieldwork in Ghana.

Six months before I began my PhD research, in April 2008, I undertook a two-week pilot visit to Ghana, to introduce myself to the deaf inhabitants of Adamorobe and to seek informed consent. I stayed in Accra, Ghana's capital, which is located about 40 km from Adamorobe, and from there I visited Adamorobe three times. I was accompanied by Francis Boison, a deaf ex-president of the Ghana National Association of the Deaf, whom I had met before in the UK and who had facilitated Nyst's access to Adamorobe when she did her linguistic research a few years earlier. Francis's hearing sister acted as an interpreter, translating between Akan and Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL).

During the first visit, we had a meeting with the deaf people's gatekeepers: the late Agnes Bomo, a hearing woman from a deaf family who acted as the deaf people's interpreter and gatekeeper in interactions with outsiders and village officials, and Samuel Adjei, a deaf man from Accra who lives in Adamorobe. The second visit to the village was aimed at acquiring group consent from the deaf people, after their weekly church service on a Sunday. I signed in plain Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL from now on) and Francis translated this into a mixture of GSL and conventional gestures, adding culturally suitable examples to indicate what my research would mean for the deaf people's everyday lives.

I explained that I wanted to take part in the deaf people's daily lives by observing and having conversations, that I would ask questions about their life experiences, families, communication, histories, and so on, and that I would also record interviews about these themes. Agnes Bomo then offered additional explanations in AdaSL, based on our conversation with her the week before. Because there was nobody who could translate directly from GSL into AdaSL, this appeared to be the best way forward. During the third visit we gained the consent of the village authorities, more specifically from an official called the Assembly Member, with the GSL/Akan interpreter.

Thus, I gained consent for participant observation and interviews, and also discussed the issues of reciprocity, anonymity, and confidentiality. The reciprocity requested by the deaf people in Adamorobe and their leaders during the pilot visits was of the kind they were used to receiving from previous visitors and researchers: regular gifts such as clothes, rice (considered a luxury product), or a big piece of laundry soap (however, see chapter 8). Anonymity in video materials also did not seem an issue for them (however, see chapter 9), and the idea of changing their names in a book that is about them seemed very odd and counterintuitive to them. Hence all names in this book are real names, rather than pseudonyms. I have tried, however, when describing grave conflicts and sensitive subjects in this book, to obscure names by writing in generic terms (such as “a deaf woman” or “X”).

### Daily Research Practice in Adamorobe

So, in October 2008, I was sitting in a taxi with Francis, my bags, and an excited but anxious heart. After spending hours in traffic jams in Accra, we drove to Oyibi relatively smoothly. We turned right to commence a bumpy ride on the 5-meter-wide dirt road that stretched out before us. Previously, this had been only a path; cars could only go one way and there was no public transportation. In front of us, the green hills of the Akwapim ridge arose. On each side of the road were lush low vegetation and palm trees, and here and there in between the green, houses and stone skeletons had been mushrooming over the past few years. In my eyes, these large villas, built of rough gray concrete, seemed strangely and awkwardly out of place in the landscape. Several small side paths led to these houses—the name of one path was clearly inspired by the then current political climate: Obama Avenue.

The hilly road continued for about 3 to 4 km. Reddish dust blew around us and laid on the vegetation. Here and there people walked, coming from or going to their farms or Oyibi, often carrying a load on the head. Now and then, a car passed. We left behind us a large brick factory on the left side and then the road ran down for the final time, revealing the glistening corrugated iron roofs of Adamorobe that could be seen in the distance, laying extended in the valley between the vegetation. We passed some low small school buildings on the right side between the trees. The dirt road ran further uphill to Aburi, but we turned left, into the main road of Adamorobe village.

I had no idea what it would be like. A village where deaf and hearing people largely mingle? Silently, I feared that this would be why my stay could

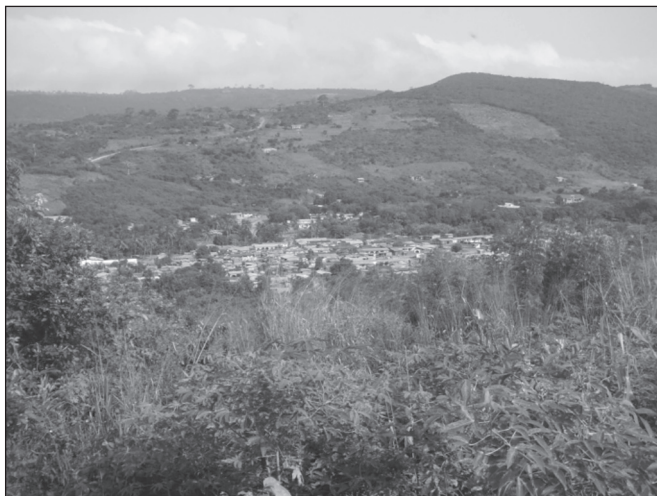


Figure 1.1. Adamorobe, seen from a farm on the Akwapim hills.

become very dull. With the warnings of my anthropology professors in the back of my mind, that fieldwork in a village could be unbelievably boring and frustrating, I feared that I might need to drag myself through it, like an exhausting trip through the desert. But while it was often frustrating and certainly exhausting, it wasn't dull. Not at all. What I found was an intriguing village where sign language is indeed used by many, and where deaf people have indeed established their place in the village's everyday life. At the same time, in this village, deaf-hearing relationships are complicated and characterized by ambiguity. I learned about the tensions that exist between deaf and hearing perspectives, and also between outside perspectives and discourses that originated within Adamorobe. I learned about the changes that deaf education, a deaf church group, charity, tourism, development projects, migration patterns, and capitalism had brought about in Adamorobe.

### My Fieldwork in Adamorobe

I undertook my fieldwork in two stints. The first one lasted three months (in 2008), and the second stint, in 2009, lasted five months. I resided with a hearing family who had a large house with a spare room, located centrally in the village, just a few meters from a number of deaf people's homes. Every day I woke up at the same time as the sun and the rest of the village: at 5:30 am, bathing myself quickly and going outside to mingle in the highly social village life in the morning hours, before many people left for their farmlands,

jobs, or schools. As the main focus of my study were the deaf people and their experiences of life in Adamorobe, I mainly interacted with them.

AdaSL was used intensively between deaf people in deaf-only conversations that frequently arose in various places in Adamorobe, so I usually went to spots where deaf people often met each other to exchange greetings and have a chat. I also followed the local custom of making rounds in the village to greet (mostly deaf) people that I knew. If I came across deaf people processing maize or other small farm products or plants, I sat down and lent a hand. The majority of daily life in Adamorobe happened in the open air, which facilitated all these contacts, although deaf people also came to my room to visit and chat, or to discuss their lives, concerns, and histories in a more private way. Finally, I visited the farmlands of some deaf people, and attended the weekly signed (in GSL) Lutheran deaf church services and other village events such as funerals or festivals.

Learning AdaSL proved to be the ideal icebreaker. Several deaf people spent many hours teaching me their language. They started by telling me the signs for food items and animals by demonstrating, pointing, drawing, or pantomiming. They talked about topics such as their farms, witchcraft, dwarf spirits at the river at the edge of the village, their relationships with hearing people, village life in the past, traditional religion, and the Christian church. When talking with me, they adapted their signing, signing plain AdaSL slowly and providing additional contextual information that they would normally leave out, and they initially mixed their AdaSL with GSL (which they had learned at school and in the church) here and there.

Gradually our mutual language use became more and more AdaSL, and the deaf people were very proud that their teaching was fruitful. Naturally limitations in my understanding of the language remained (see chapter 2), but conversations in which I was involved (rather than conversations that I observed without participating) went pretty well. Deaf people increasingly expected me to actively participate in conversations and to talk about where I come from. For example, during a recorded interview Kwame Osae signed:

You should not sit still with your hands in between your legs but have to conduct conversations actively. (...) You have to tell me something, just like I tell you something. Not sitting with your hands in between your legs and me explaining, that is wrong. You have to tell things to me, just like I do. You see? You get it? Well then, bring it on! (Kwame Osae, Interview, 29 August 2009)

My conversations often included explaining my research. Once my AdaSL improved, I found myself explaining what kind of information I was

gathering and why I was making notes. I also showed pictures and movies of myself giving presentations in order to give the deaf people an impression of how I was going to spread the information. We altered some of the initial ethical agreements and plans as they ceased to fit deaf people's expectations and sensitivities, such as the requests for reciprocity that gradually arose in the course of my research (see chapter 8).

There were about fifteen deaf people with whom I conversed most, although I interacted with almost all deaf people in Adamorobe at regular intervals. It was a source of constant concern whether the experiences of the persons with whom I interacted most were representative of all of Adamorobe's deaf people. So, mainly in the second fieldwork period, I intentionally worked on broadening my deaf social network and regularly went around to the houses of the deaf people that I knew less well, in order to greet them and sometimes stay for a short conversation, trying to develop good relations with them and discussing a number of themes with them.

I always carried a small notebook with me to write jottings as an intermediate stage to my fieldnotes. I often openly jotted during conversations when people were describing past and present life in Adamorobe. Most of the time, I didn't use the notebook, however: I did not make any notes when people were greeting, catching up on news, gossiping, quarreling, conversing about sensitive topics, or during observations and participation in everyday life. At those times, I made mental notes. In my room, I used these written and mental jottings to write elaborate fieldnotes on my laptop at least once a day, ending up writing approximately one to three hours everyday, describing observations and conversations, reflections on my methodology, and analytical ideas. In later stages of the research I also organized unstructured ethnographic interviews to explore a number of themes in depth, such as to record stories of historical events.

In order to gain access to hearing people's views, I asked help from a hearing man named Joseph Okyere. We had regular written conversations, filling several notebooks with writings on Ghanaian culture, chieftaincy, the Akan religion, Adamorobe's history, the experiences of hearing people with the deaf in Adamorobe, and so forth. When Okyere did not know the answers to my questions, he took the initiative to ask one or more elders and reported back to me some days later. Upon my request, he interviewed nineteen hearing people, asking them about their positive and negative experiences with deaf people, whether they regarded deaf people to be equally intelligent as hearing people, and so on.

He visited the interviewees at their homes, asked the questions in Akan, and wrote their answers down in English. The interviews were anonymized, but having given Okyere an explanation about sampling with the aim of creating as varied a sample as possible, he documented the interviewees' (estimated) age, gender, ethnic background and migration status, AdaSL knowledge, if they had close deaf relatives, and if they had a lot of contact with deaf people. Joseph Okyere also accompanied me as interpreter (spoken Akan–written English) during about ten unstructured interviews I conducted with hearing elders who had specific knowledge of Adamorobe's culture and history, such as a priestess, one of the subchiefs, the deaf people's former teacher, and some other elders. He also helped me to construct family trees and to draw a map of the village.

### **My Positionality as a Deaf White Female Anthropologist**

Most researchers who visited shared signing communities were hearing linguists and geneticists/audiologists, and a few hearing anthropologists. It is only in the last few years that some deaf linguists have visited shared signing communities, but at the time of writing, no deaf anthropologist other than myself has emerged in the literature on shared signing communities. The research that led to this book therefore responds to a gap: it was conducted by a deaf researcher with a deaf supervisor, it had a deaf-centered theme, and most research participants were deaf. During the pilot visit, the deaf people in Adamorobe were enthusiastic about my being deaf: they said this was the main factor for their willingness for giving the consent. This is an early example of how my being deaf played a role for the people under study, at least in their discourse. During my fieldwork, deaf people told me that they were attracted by the fact that I was “like them.” For example:

A few deaf people gathered at Ama Korkor's house in the night. Kwasi Opare was very enthusiastic. He said he wanted to give me cassava from his farm because we are both deaf. He shook my hand and said enthusiastically: “We are both deaf, you are white, but do I chase you away? No! We are friends, both deaf.” He repeated this time after time: “You are white and I am black, but do I chase you away? No!” (Fieldnotes, 25 October 2008)

Several deaf people contrasted my visit with those of the many white hearing people who had visited Adamorobe for shorter or longer periods. Kwame Osae told me, “These visitors let the deaf people be called to talk with them, but they are hearing white people, bah.” He paused, pointed at me, and said, “YOU DEAF SAME!” and continued, “They just talk and talk,

they give money to us, say bye-bye and are gone” (Fieldnotes, 9 November 2008). Because in Ghanaian culture, hospitality and generosity are highly valued, I cannot judge if they were really more hospitable and generous toward me than they would be toward hearing white people; but this was the discourse they maintained when giving me a place in Adamorobe. As a result, after ten days in the field, I wrote, “I don’t really feel like a complete outsider here, because the deaf sign WE DEAF SAME so often.”

As a deaf person, I understand certain deaf-related experiences from the inside out, for example, being primarily visually oriented and experiencing barriers. This commonality was meaningful for deaf people in Adamorobe. Central to the research was the experience (or the discourse) of being deaf, and I became a magnet for deaf people and for the discussion of deaf-related themes. They wanted to learn my deaf-related opinions and experiences just like I wanted to learn theirs. For example, I was asked “if a faith healer came and offered to make you hearing, would you say yes?” (see chapter 5). These conversations made me wonder whether deaf-related issues would be spontaneously shared in the same way, and to the same extent, with a hearing researcher. I also suspect that they complained more about hearing people to me than to the hearing linguistics researcher Nyst, who interacted with the deaf people intensively during an equally long fieldwork period. Nyst told me that, in her presence, they did not often say that “hearing people are bad,” a remark caused by experiences of discrimination.

It was much easier for me to sign with deaf than with hearing people, because hearing people’s signing was often more or less accented by spoken Akan (see chapter 2). Hearing people’s behavior toward me varied from curiosity and friendliness to reservedness and sometimes annoyance. Because I unwittingly became a kind of a magnet for deaf people, it was difficult to analyze longer deaf–hearing interactions. A related difficulty was that deaf people “protected” me from (allegedly “bad”) hearing people and claimed me as “their” guest; the price I had to pay for their hospitality was being “theirs” in the sense of membership and even ownership. If hearing people approached me with doubtful intentions (according to deaf people), such as playful requests to marry me, deaf people would tell me to ignore them, pull or push me away or scorn these people. Joseph Okyere’s assistance was therefore indispensable to gain insight into hearing people’s perspectives.

While important and powerful, the argument “DEAF SAME” did not overturn other cultural customs or values such as “respect for (foreign)

visitors.” In Ghana, it is customary to give guests the chance to eat alone: this is a sign of respect, and it took me some time to convince deaf people to eat with me. Similarly, they would not allow me to sit on a small chair or dusty surface and would always make the effort to fetch a comfortable plastic garden chair for me, arguing, “You’re a white foreigner and our guest and so you stand above us, you are big.” Helpfulness and politeness toward guests are central aspects of Ghanaian culture, and I could not convince them of my standpoint that white foreigners are not “more big” than black Ghanaians and that I would stay in Adamorobe for so long that they should not treat me as a guest, or that we are DEAF SAME and thus should sit on similar surfaces. I was told that it would be wrong if someone passing by saw me on a bad or small chair, which would signal that the deaf people do not treat their guests well, the underlying implication being that if I respected the deaf people and their reputation in the village, I would accept my position as “big” or “important” guest.

Another element central to my positionality was my gender. To a certain extent, men and women in Adamorobe do the same things in everyday life. For example, both genders go to the farm, and while household tasks are mostly done by women, I also saw men washing clothes and pounding *fufu*, a local dish made of cooked and pounded cassava. Deaf and hearing men and women mix and interact all the time but also have male-only and female-only conversations. I noticed that some themes—fertility, pregnancies, the female body, and gossip about men—occurred more often (or only) in female deaf conversations. However, many deaf conversations were mixed; deaf women did not exclude men from entering female deaf conversations and I was always naturally welcomed in male deaf conversations.

As a result, I never gave much thought to gender until my (deaf) husband visited the village. I was baffled when a number of deaf men took him to one side, and indicated to me that it was now a male deaf conversation in which I was not welcome. I wondered if up to that point, my status as foreign deaf guest had prevailed over my gender. I realized that a deaf male researcher would possibly be drawn into male deaf spaces and have less access to women’s conversations. Being a foreign woman working alone meant flexible access to different spaces, including unchallenged access to male spaces. I also wondered if and in which way my gender was influencing the gender construction of deaf group conversations. However, while deaf conversations tended to be (more) mixed in gender after I joined them, I very often stumbled upon already mixed deaf conversations. Also,



although hearing men often engaged in the above-mentioned playful marriage proposals (typical in Ghanaian culture), only a few deaf men did so; deaf people regarded it as unethical behavior to ask me to marry. Hence, I felt to a certain extent de-gendered in deaf spaces.

My being deaf, my gender, my status as a guest, and my race had more far-reaching implications than facilitating or hindering access. Deaf people made me aware of researcher effects by pointing out how the atmosphere changed when I was present in Adamorobe. For example, several of them told me that when I was there, deaf people had fewer arguments and conflicts. They also said that deaf people more often sought each others' company for conversations. In addition, deaf people who normally do not visit each other would stay at the homes of other deaf people when they saw that I was there: "When you are not here he never comes to our place." Deaf people's reflections on the effects of my presence thus revealed how they theorized deaf-deaf relationships and expectations, what it meant to show "good behavior," and which values were important for them. They led me to question how I should interpret those researcher effects. Was this because they want to behave better when outsiders are there? Was my presence a refreshing new experience or distraction? Did they feel more united as deaf group when a (deaf) researcher investigated their deaf experiences? Did I unconsciously and unintentionally confirm and boost their DEAF SAME intuition?

Being a magnet for deaf people and conversations about being deaf led me to wish I could be a fly on the wall to see what deaf-deaf and deaf-hearing interactions were like without my presence. Also, if only that fly could understand spoken Akan, I would have been able to learn more about what hearing people say about deaf people. While deaf people often complained about hearing people discriminating against them in daily life (such as insulting them), I rarely observed such discrimination. Did hearing people also behave "better" when I was around? Also, did hearing and deaf people perhaps have more contact with each other when I was not around? After all, when I was present, many deaf people preferred to talk with me or with other deaf people (who joined our gathering or whose conversation I was joining) than with hearing people.

There were other obvious limitations in my understanding: I am deaf, but I am not Adamorobe, not Ghanaian, and not black. I am deaf, but I did not grow up with sign language. I am deaf and I can read; I am educated, while they were not. I am deaf and I married a deaf person without

any problem, a right that they could not enjoy. In short, I was an insider in terms of being biologically deaf and having certain social experiences that come with it, but I was an outsider in most other domains. The latter became especially clear with regard to our differences in access to financial capital. Even though I was a student and not yet earning money, I had a laptop and a camera, I lived in a “rich country” and had more access to financial capital. This gave rise to increasing expectations of (financial) support, and deaf people argued that I was DEAF SAME and therefore had the obligation to help. This caused difficulties with regard to my being accepted and tolerated in Adamorobe (see chapter 8 for an elaborate account of this problem).

As a result of my positionality and research theme, I experienced a constant tension between “identifying a focus” and preventing that focus from becoming “too deaf.” I often caught myself wondering: “Is this deaf-specific?” with regard to behavior, spatial practices, attitudes, and beliefs. During the highly selective process of writing, I found myself disregarding data that was not so much associated with being deaf. If the deaf people from Adamorobe were able to read this book, they might be surprised about the strong focus on deaf experiences. For them, life in Adamorobe was so much more than “being a deaf person.” It meant being a member of an extended family, being a farmer, hating the Ga (the neighboring ethnic group), and being afraid of witches. Most of the time they were *not* talking about “deaf issues”; even when meeting each other in deaf-only conversations, they were mostly discussing what was happening in their village. Similarly, I recognize that it is potentially problematic that I often use the phrase “the deaf people,” as it might signal that deaf people in Adamorobe are a unified and undifferentiated group (which they naturally are not). “The deaf people” is a generalization that gradually happened in the process of looking for patterns in Adamorobe’s deaf people’s experiences and utterances. I have tried to point out individual variations where relevant, however.

This book thus comprises *my representation of my observations and our conversations during my visit in Adamorobe, not a representation of Adamorobe deaf people’s everyday life*. My position as (deaf) outsider with a background in Deaf Studies and anthropology was important in that I asked (often unexpected) questions, stimulated my interlocutors to elaborate on certain themes, to tell me certain stories. We revisited the same themes over and over again and a (highly ambiguous) picture started

to emerge. In this book, I am presenting quotes, situation descriptions, and transcripts of dialogues to illustrate and evoke what I saw and what we discussed; but again, these are the interpretations and translations of an outsider with a necessarily limited understanding of local culture, kinship structures, history, and language. Also, since this research happened during a particular moment in time (2008–2009), deaf people in Adamorobe might tell other stories and lay different emphasis in their present discourses.

### Deaf Space and Deaf Sociality

In the previous sections I have illustrated that the experience of being deaf in Adamorobe (and the researcher's hearing status) is an important aspect in these people's social lives. However, an assumption made by several early visitors and linguists in shared signing communities is that in these communities, no Deaf culture, community, or identity exists. This has led to simplified conclusions such as that in these communities, "being deaf itself is irrelevant, as deaf people have access to everyone in the village."<sup>28</sup> Authors have reasoned that if deaf people can use sign language with the hearing people who surround them in their daily lives, they do not *need* social relationships with deaf people in particular.<sup>29</sup>

I suggest that, on the contrary, deaf people in shared signing communities engage in deaf social relationships easily in everyday life *because* they are part of a shared signing community. Because of the high number of deaf people in these dense communities, they automatically meet other deaf people in everyday life. Evidence that deaf people in at least some shared signing communities actually do identify with each other and seek each other out is typically downplayed by arguing that these deaf social interactions and relations cannot be described by using Deaf Studies' founding concepts, Deaf culture, Deaf identity, or Deaf community.

The most important example is that, first, in shared signing communities, deaf people do not organize themselves in large deaf-only events or organizations, and second, that deaf identity is not seen as primordial or hierarchically more important than the family. Since deaf people in shared signing communities are well embedded within their hearing families, they may resist the creation of formal deaf-based support networks for financial assistance, income generation, and social security (although see Marsaja's account on Bengkala in Bali).<sup>30</sup> However, that does not mean that existing deaf-based social relationships are nonexistent, irrelevant, or meaningless. I argue that the problem is one of terminology and classifications, and

I suggest that the alternative terminology of *deaf space* and *deaf sociality* works better to frame deaf social interactions and relationships.

The term *deaf sociality*, coined by Friedner, refers to deaf people interacting with each other, having social relationships with each other, and/or having orientations toward each other.<sup>31</sup> “Deaf sociality” is more broad and inclusive than the founding concepts of Deaf Studies such as “Deaf identity,” “Deaf world,” “Deaf community,” and “Deaf culture.” Murray suggests that the oralist rhetoric (i.e., that deaf people should only speak and not sign) and assimilation of deaf people in hearing environments have (ironically) given a push to the understanding of a Deaf world, culture, or community as a closed sphere, especially in the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup>

The concepts “Deaf culture/community/world” are exclusive, and their persistent and often uncritical use is a wider problem in deaf-related writing. These terms are particularly inappropriate when used with regard to shared signing communities, where oralist or other divisive ideologies and practices have apparently not had significant influence (yet). Therefore, these communities are splendid examples of the shortcomings of the separate “Deaf worlds” or “Deaf cultures” paradigm in framing how deaf people experience and describe relationships with deaf and hearing people.

The title of this book suggests the use of another relatively new concept: “deaf space.” Gulliver writes that although deaf people inhabit the same physical spaces as hearing people when working, eating, drinking, shopping, and so on, signing deaf people also produce special spaces when they engage in deaf sociality, that is, “deaf spaces.”<sup>33</sup> In writing about deaf spaces as *produced*, Gulliver was inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s magnum opus *The Production of Space*.<sup>34</sup> Some authors have described deaf spaces as a kind of “safe space” in opposition to a hostile, unaccommodating, marginalizing, and disabling hearing environment.<sup>35</sup> However, like Gulliver, I suggest that deaf spaces are not produced in the first place *because of these negative experiences*, even though these experiences are internalized in how deaf spaces are produced, experienced, described, and depicted.

I argue that instead, deaf spaces are produced in the first place because deaf people share their embodiment, their first language, *their way of being*. I therefore clearly distinguish deaf spaces from deaf–hearing spaces in which sign language is used. The dynamics and expectations with regard to language use, way of social interaction, and values are different in deaf spaces from those in deaf–hearing visual communication

spaces; at least they were in Adamorobe. For these reasons, deaf people in Adamorobe described their interactional spaces as being “deaf specific.” They had certain expectations and fostered certain values linked with the shared experience of being deaf. In other words: while deaf and hearing people in Adamorobe signed together, it is *only the deaf who can be deaf* (and produce deaf spaces).

Interestingly, Adamorobe deaf people's descriptions of themselves and their place in society took similar forms as the “co-equality” discourses of nineteenth-century deaf Americans. *Co-equality* means that deaf people as individuals have their place in larger society; they are able to be successful and productive, capable workers, family members, and citizens in larger society *but without being submerged in it*: they also are members of a sign-language using community (hence the “co” in “co-equality”). The idea of *equality* (with hearing people) in “co-equality” does not mean that deaf people are (or should aspire to be) *the same* as hearing people, but means “to be equal in a manner of their own choosing.”<sup>36</sup> Rather than the discourses on “integration/assimilation” *or/versus* “separate community/culture” (such as the earlier mentioned concepts “Deaf culture” and “Deaf community”), “co-equality” *incorporates, emphasizes, and transcends both dimensions*. Significant in Murray's descriptions of co-equality is his regular referencing to “Deaf spaces,” (although he does not explicitly define or describe the “deaf space” concept as a wider framework), for example as found below:

Co-equality should not be read to mean Deaf and hearing people sought to come together in an idealized mainstream, but of Deaf spaces and non-Deaf spaces as being mutually constitutive in the lives of Deaf individuals and of Deaf-centered spaces necessarily being influenced by ideas in the societies in which these spaces existed.<sup>37</sup>

Murray uses “co-equality” in a national (American) context of literate, educated, widely scattered deaf people sharing their deaf social and linguistic identities in not only local and national but also transnational and thus cosmopolitan contexts. However, the abstract version of co-equality, i.e., the understanding of “Deaf lives as being influenced both by Deaf-centered spaces and by larger society,”<sup>38</sup> could just as easily be applied to the context of Adamorobe. The deaf people from Adamorobe see themselves as part of wider society and as equal to hearing people, but they are also proud to be deaf sign language users who have an existential bond with each other.

Thus, rather than describing a separate Deaf world or Deaf culture in Adamorobe, I find the concept of “deaf sociality” useful, to point to the existence of social bonds between deaf people and to pinpoint that these bonds are experienced differently from deaf–hearing relationships. I use the concept of “deaf space” to frame *how deaf sociality is produced in space*. The book describes my interpretation of the production of different deaf spaces in Adamorobe, discourses related to these spaces, and how both have changed through time.

### The Book

In this book, I aim for an accessible and descriptive style of writing, deliberately not inserting many theoretical interpretations or interventions until the conclusion. I also avoid making comparisons between Adamorobe deaf lives and deaf lives in Western settings. While the contrast between Adamorobe and Western contexts certainly motivated and triggered me to do this research project, comparison was not the *aim* of the project.

On another but unrelated note, when narrating historical events and processes in Adamorobe, I mention quantitative information such as years and numbers. Most of this information is based on competing accounts of oral history, hence I was uncertain about the amount of detail to include. In order to offer the reader some rough estimates and time frames, I mention some of the quantitative historical material that I gathered, but with a caveat. It is safest to understand and treat this information as approximations or even guesses, not as truthful claims.

To be able to differentiate deaf from hearing people in this book, it should be noted that all the people who are called by their names are deaf people, unless otherwise stated. People in Adamorobe have at least two first names: their day name (i.e., the day of the week that they were born) and a second name, after an elder from the family. In the day names, the gender is easily identifiable (see table 1.2).

An example of a full name then, is Kofi Boahene. The women’s names often have a similar core as the men’s, but often end on “wa” or “bea,” for example, Ofori becomes Oforiwa and Asare becomes Asabea.\* If I only used one of a deaf person’s two first names, it would often not be possible to

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\* These names are often written down phonetically and consequently did not seem to have a fixed written form, so Okumbia and Okobeia were the same person, or Esabia and Asabea; Apetere, Obutere, or Obutwe.

Table 1.2. Day Names in Akan Culture.

Day	Male	Female
Monday	Kwadwo	Adwoa
Tuesday	Kwabena	Abena
Wednesday	Kwaku	Akua
Thursday	Yaw	Yaa
Friday	Kofi	Afua
Saturday	Kwame	Ama
Sunday	Kwasi	Akosua

identify whom I am talking about, because people often share either the same day name or the elder name, such as Kofi Pare, Kofi Boahene, and Kwasi Boahene. Therefore, for most people I will use both names. Sometimes names are turned around, as Asare Kwabena instead of Kwabena Asare. In some cases when a person has an elder name that he/she does not share with another deaf person (such as Owusua or Okoto), I use that name only.

Also, one person can have even more names, such as nicknames and Christian names, and some younger, schooled deaf people were better known by their Christian name rather than their Akan name, such as Naomi and Belinda. Hence, for these people I use their Christian name. Some deaf people, such as the late Abena Mumu, had “mumu” or “mum” as nickname, which means “deaf.” The same phenomenon is visible in deaf people’s name signs: they always first sign “deaf” and then the person’s name sign, as such deaf and hearing people were distinguished on the level of their name.

When I do not mention a deaf person’s approximate age, the reader can assume that the person involved is aged between 30 and 50 approximately, like the majority of the deaf people in Adamorobe.

I begin setting the scene in chapter 2, offering information on Adamorobe’s geographical situation and its social, historical, political, economic, and religious life. I also describe what is known about the historical presence of deaf people in this village, the causes of their being deaf, demographic facts about them, and some features of AdaSL.

Chapter 3 starts with a narration of a morning in a compound house, in order to shine light on everyday deaf–hearing interactions. I illustrate which social contexts were (made) accessible for deaf people and which were not and include reflections of hearing people on AdaSL and on their interactions with deaf people, which they contrasted with life outside the village.

Deaf people produced deaf spaces, and chapter 4 highlights how and where in the village this happened, and how deaf people gave meaning to

these spaces, authoring the DEAF SAME discourse. I highlight how historical processes such as capitalism, land commodification, and processes of immigration were said to have impacted on deaf-hearing and deaf-deaf relationships.

The large presence of deaf people in Adamorobe was explained in multifarious and ambiguous ways. Stories and explanations that I encountered in print and in the field are set out in chapter 5. I describe how these discourses were utilized, negotiated, and renegotiated during my conversations with the people from Adamorobe. Deaf people's feelings with regard to being deaf are discussed as well.

In Adamorobe, deafness was given meaning and deaf people were situated in multiple ways, but the village also carried a stigma as a "deaf village." This stigma played a role in the marriage ban for deaf people: in order to avoid producing new deaf offspring where possible, they were not allowed to marry each other. Chapter 6 reports on discourses surrounding the law and describes how deaf people both challenged and complied with this law.

Outsiders have singled out the deaf people from Adamorobe. In church and educational contexts, deaf people were separated from hearing people and Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL) has been introduced. This process, the relationships between deaf school children and deaf adults, and their views of both on AdaSL and GSL are described in chapter 7.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), churches, and visitors brought charitable donations and initiated development projects aimed at the deaf people from Adamorobe. In chapter 8, I suggest that the consequences of the construction of deaf people as "needy" created an economic and ideological division between deaf and hearing people in Adamorobe.

In the wake of these patterns, visitors and researchers were received in Adamorobe in ambiguous ways. I describe stories of visits of white deaf tourists, deaf Ghanaians, and researchers in chapter 9, concluding with the question to which extent tourists were deemed welcome in the village.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize how the production of deaf space in Adamorobe seems to have changed through time, and I situate the socio-historical trends and patterns that affected deaf people's situation in Adamorobe in a broader frame. I then try to imagine what the future of deaf spaces and deaf people in Adamorobe might look like.