

# WELLNESS AND LINGUISTIC BARRIERS IN DEAF COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA AND PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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# OUTLINE

- ▶ Background
- ▶ Issues specific to Deaf people & communities
  - ▶ Linguistic barriers
  - ▶ Society-imposed 'unwellness'
  - ▶ Restricted opportunities
  - ▶ Physical Unwellness
- ▶ Best practices for working with similar communities
- ▶ Conclusions

# BACKGROUND

## Deafness, Wellness & Language Endangerment Globally

- ▶ Linguistic barriers
- ▶ Stigma
- ▶ Identity
- ▶ Unique factors for language endangerment
- ▶ Small sign languages can contribute significantly to our understanding of language universals

# BACKGROUND

## Nigeria

- ▶ Deaf people are the most vulnerable group in Nigeria. (Asonye, et al, forthcoming)
- ▶ The deaf children and youths are highly marginalized and underdeveloped
- ▶ They have very low communicative competence in their language
- ▶ We have been working in multiple deaf communities in four States in Nigeria since 2013.

SouthEast 1

 School for the Deaf Orodo

SouthWest

 National Stadium

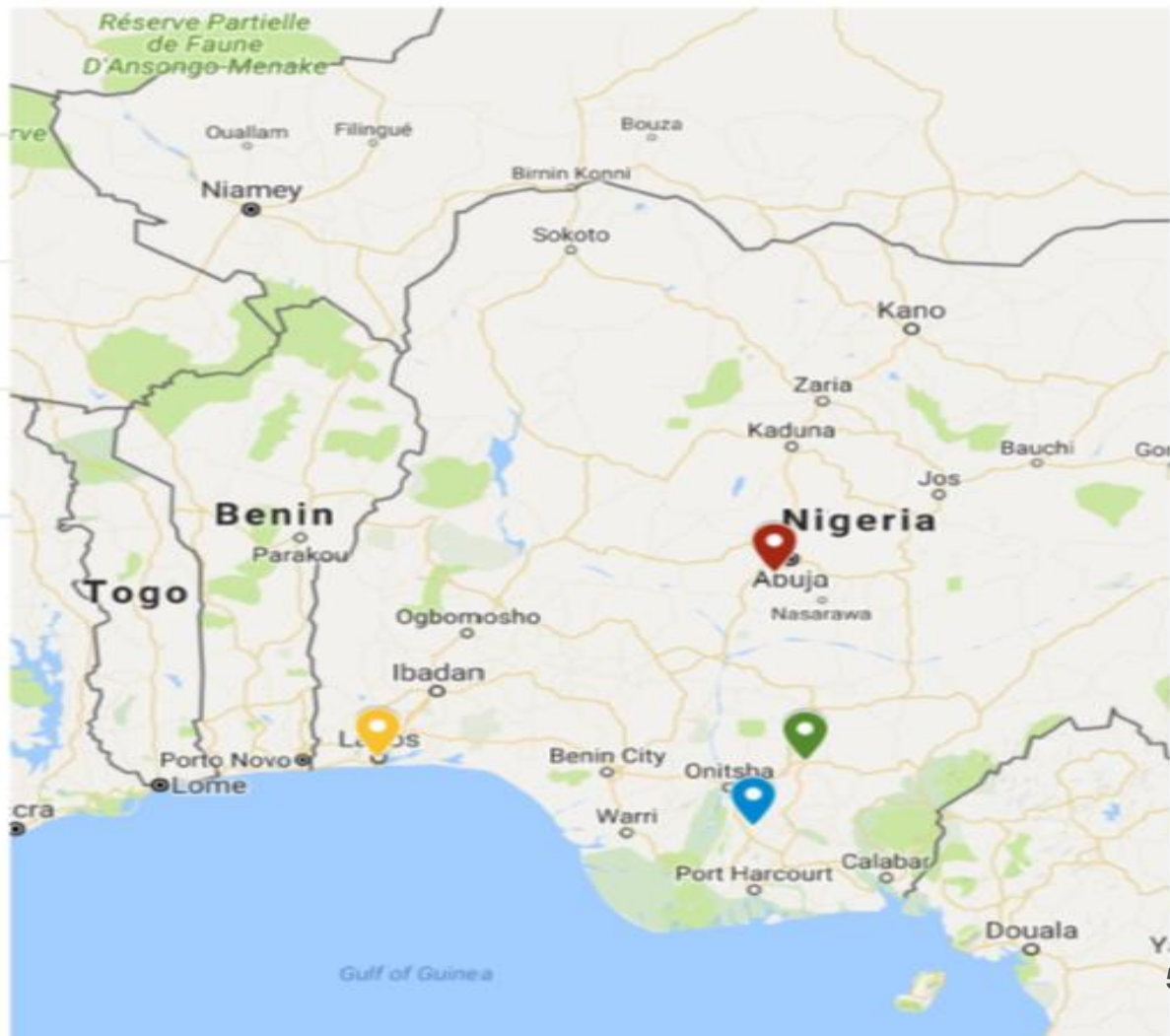
Federal Capital Territory

 Kuje

SouthEast 2

 Enugu

Map Showing the areas with  
Communities we're currently  
documenting



# BACKGROUND

## Papua New Guinea

- ▶ Despite the fact that Papua New Guinea features extreme linguistic diversity, little is known of its sign languages (Kendon 1980; Lewis et al. 2016)
  - ▶ Two sign languages had been reported in the country before my research with Sinasina Sign Language began in 2016
  - ▶ This is due in part to stigma against Deaf people and their languages
- ▶ Sign languages in the Pacific face endangerment for a variety of reasons which is an issue closely tied to physical and emotional wellness for Deaf people in the region (Mathers et al. 2000:19; Woodward 2003; Nonaka 2004; Schembri 2010; Sze et al. 2012)
  - ▶ Language documentation & conservation can address such issues here and in Nigeria



# ISSUES THAT DEAF PEOPLE FACE

## Education

- ▶ 86% of the Deaf adults in Lagos State have only high school certificate.
- ▶ Deaf people in Sinasina do not attend school.

## Work

- ▶ 80% of Deaf adults in Lagos State are unemployed.
- ▶ Deaf people in Sinasina are subsistence farmers.

## Poverty

- ▶ Highly prevalent in low income, low education families.
- ▶ 75% of hearing loss in children in Nigeria is accidental and avoidable.
- ▶ Street begging is almost 'a deaf thing'



Outreach with Members of Lagos State Deaf Association



# WELLNESS & LINGUISTIC BARRIERS

- ▶ Linguistic barriers
  - ▶ Less than 5% of hearing parents and family members in Imo, Abuja and Lagos can sign.
  - ▶ Communication is next to zero with deaf family members
  - ▶ While a significant portion of the hearing population in Sinasina signs, there are no educational materials available for signers.
- ▶ Society-imposed 'unwellness'- medical model of deafness



# SOCIETY-IMPOSED ‘UNWELLNESS’

## Stigma

- ▶ Due to long-term stigmatization, the Deaf in Nigeria, to a large extent are still looked upon as cursed, unwell. (Nweze, 2013; Asonye, 2016)
  - ▶ Cases of job denials; drivers license denials in Lagos State
  - ▶ In Sinasina, people often deny the existence of Deaf people and signed languages

## Terminology

- ▶ Very many hearing people in Nigeria still use the expression “deaf and dumb” to refer to the deaf individuals.
- ▶ In Tok Pisin, the word *longlong* ‘crazy, stupid’ is often used for Deaf individuals; signed languages are often dismissed as being ‘just gestures’

# PHYSICAL UNWELLNESS

## Physical health issues

- ▶ STD's - 71% of female deaf students in the dormitory in Imo State tested positive to different STD in 2015. (S-DELI, 2015)
- ▶ Homelessness
- ▶ Abuse: 70% of those girls in the dormitory had been abused sexually



Healthcare service in Deaf School, Imo State, Nigeria

# ISSUES THAT RESEARCHERS FACE

- ▶ Bureaucratic issues
  - ▶ Denied or delayed access to deaf communities.
- ▶ Finding these languages can take time
  - ▶ Building trust can take even longer



# WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES IN LIGHT OF THESE ISSUES

- ▶ Understand where they are coming from- Face
  - ▶ Family & community levels
  - ▶ Stem from stigma & perceived 'unwellness'
- ▶ **DON'T** reinforce stigma
  - ▶ Deafness/hearingness
  - ▶ Linguistic genocide
  - ▶ Colonization
- ▶ **DON'T** take things at face value

# WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES IN LIGHT OF THESE ISSUES

- ▶ Include deaf researchers & community members
  - ▶ In Abuja, we are working with Mr. Victor, a deaf teacher; funded his 6-week study trip to Gallaudet University
- ▶ Training- linguistic & technical
- ▶ Build trust within the community - We emphasize on “giving something back” to the community - free medical services, talent hunts and supports.
  - ▶ Become a community ally - We mediate between the two communities - Deaf and Hearing.
- ▶ Bridging the gap between Deaf and hearing communities - We use media a lot.
  - ▶ Re-sensitization - We hold sensitization forums with the deaf communities.

# BEST PRACTICES

- ▶ Understand issues of society-imposed unwellness
- ▶ Create materials which are appropriate for the community & address a range of wellness issues
  - ▶ Create appropriate educational materials, esp with respect to health
  - ▶ Create job-related training opportunities
- ▶ To bridge gaps between deaf and hearing people
  - ▶ Work against stigma
- ▶ Remember that even if you aren't a sign language researcher, simple recordings can still be immensely useful

# CONCLUSIONS

## Is there unwellness?

- ▶ Yes
- ▶ It comes from hearing people

## Use community-driven language documentation & linguistic research to give people a chance

- ▶ To bridge gaps between deaf and hearing people
- ▶ Work against stigma
- ▶ Create appropriate educational materials, esp with respect to health
- ▶ Create materials that work for signers



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THANK YOU!

QUESTIONS?