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Article

## “The Gong Gong Was Beaten”—Adamorobe: A “Deaf Village” in Ghana and Its Marriage Prohibition for Deaf Partners

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**Abstract:** Adamorobe is a village in Ghana where the historical presence of a hereditary form of deafness resulted in a high number of deaf inhabitants. Over the centuries, a local sign language emerged, which is used between deaf and hearing people in everyday life, rendering Adamorobe into a unique place of inclusion of deaf people. However, in 1975, a law was introduced to reduce the number of deaf people in Adamorobe: deaf people cannot marry each other in order to avoid deaf offspring. In the long term, this law threatens the linguistic and cultural diversity in this village where the use of sign language is omnipresent and where deaf people are perceived as fully productive and worthy members of society. This article is structured around two sets of tensions in the village, Firstly, hearing people’s acceptance and inclusion of the deaf inhabitants, *versus* the wish to live in a village with no (or less) deaf people. Secondly, there is a tension between deaf people’s subjection to, and resistance against, the law, this is a tension that can be observed in the existence of relationships between deaf partners, and abortions when these unions lead to pregnancies.

**Keywords:** deafness; heredity; Adamorobe; Ghana; stigma; marriage; abortions; sign language; law; disability

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### 1. Introduction

*Everywhere [in Adamorobe] the gong gong was beaten [to announce and spread some news]. I wondered: what happened? Did something get stolen? Did someone get killed? But that wasn’t the case; the message was that deaf people cannot marry each other. The gong gong was beaten and it was said that deaf people have to marry hearing people.*

*The gong gong was beaten, “Because deaf with deaf get children who can’t hear, can’t hear, can’t hear.” Ooohh we were stunned. Such a shame...The gong gong was beaten: marry hearing, marry hearing. With hearing, not with deaf. Everywhere the gong gong was rung: “Marry hearing, then hearing children are born, hearing are born, hearing are born. That is good, that is right. Deaf deaf deaf people everywhere, no that is not good.” The gong gong was beaten...Such a shame...(regret) [1,2].*

In this quote, Adamorobe’s oldest deaf woman laments a historical moment. In 1975, during the first year of his chieftaincy, Nana Kwaakwa Asiampong introduced a law—promulgated in the village by a gong gong beater—that the deaf people in Adamorobe are not allowed to marry each other because this would lead to deaf offspring. Instead, they have to marry hearing people because in Adamorobe, deaf-hearing unions are much less likely to bring forth children that are deaf.

Adamorobe is a village in southern Ghana where 41 deaf people live among 3500 hearing villagers. This unusually high number of deaf villagers is due to the historical presence of a “deaf gene,” a Connexin 26 R143W mutation [3] which was probably circulated in Adamorobe through marriages between the founding Akan matrilineal clans, starting in the late eighteenth century [4]. Over the years, the need to communicate with each other in the dense sociocultural networks of Adamorobe has led to the emergence of a local sign language used by both deaf and hearing people. Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL) is known and used by all deaf people in Adamorobe and by a large part of the hearing population, who have grown up seeing and using the language, in addition to Akan, their spoken language [5]. Therefore, Adamorobe is known as “*mumfo krow*” in Akan, meaning “deaf village,” for as the number of people in Adamorobe who know sign language is large, it is said that outsiders cannot automatically identify who is deaf and who is hearing, and therefore think that everyone in Adamorobe is deaf.

Since Adamorobe’s “discovery” in 1960, the number of deaf people has varied from 34 to 45, but has seemingly remained more or less stable [5–8]. It also appears that the overall population has grown dramatically, *i.e.*, from 405 in 1961 to 3500 people in 2012, as a result of both births and immigration. This means the percentage of deaf people in Adamorobe has declined dramatically, from 11% in 1961 to 1.1% in 2012 [9], although this is still comparatively high as the rate of deafness in Europe is about 0.1% [10]. While the total number of deaf people in Adamorobe seems relatively stable, the deaf population is aging, *i.e.*, it appears that fewer deaf people are born now than in the past. This is probably the result of a dual cause that impeded the circulation of the ‘deaf gene’: firstly, the people from Adamorobe increasingly married immigrants, and secondly, as mentioned in the beginning of this article, since 1975 deaf people are not allowed to marry each other anymore because deaf-deaf marriages (formerly common in Adamorobe) brought forth deaf children. Whilst deaf-hearing or hearing-hearing couples in Adamorobe brought forth either deaf or hearing children (and most deaf people in Adamorobe have hearing parents), deaf-deaf couples invariably brought forth deaf offspring because both partners passed on the Connexin mutation to their offspring. Therefore, deaf-deaf unions, which were common in the past, were targeted by the law. Hence, the number of deaf people with deaf children was much higher in the past, because after the promulgation of the law in 1975, only very few deaf couples had children (as is clearly visible in deaf people’s family trees).

In this article, I will discuss the tension between acceptance and inclusion of the deaf inhabitants in

Adamorobe, and the wish to live in a village with no (or less) deaf people. I will first shortly review the literature about attitudes towards deaf people in Ghana and Congo. Subsequently, I will illustrate what Adamorobe's inclusion of deaf people means in everyday life contexts, and discuss deaf people's attitude towards their deafness. I will then explain why the marriage law was introduced, with particular reference to Adamorobe's reputation as "deaf village," and locate its introduction within the timeframe of the early seventies. I argue that, in the long term, the law threatens the linguistic and cultural diversity in this village where the use of sign language is omnipresent and where deaf people are perceived as fully productive and worthy members of society. However, perhaps more importantly, the law provides a much more direct threat to deaf people's quality of life. In the decades following 1975, deaf people experienced several destructive and marginalizing effects of the law: deaf men remained unmarried and childless, and deaf women often (were) divorced (by) their hearing partners. The article will set out how deaf people negotiate the law and its effects, and in so doing, a second tension will become visible: the tension between subjection to the law and resistance against the law. In response to disagreement with the law, a number of deaf couples are openly in relationships with each other, even though it is not allowed by law. Few of these relationships brought forth deaf offspring but most pregnancies in these unions led to abortions. In conclusion, deaf people in Adamorobe feel marginalized and unwelcome, and regret the diminishing of their numbers.

I am a deaf anthropologist and the research results described in this article are based on ethnographic research undertaken in Adamorobe in 2008 and 2009, during which the main methods were participant observation and ethnographic interviews with deaf people in Adamorobe Sign Language. In addition, a hearing research assistant called Okyere Joseph did semistructured interviews with 19 hearing people (with very diverse backgrounds) in the local language Akan, about their experiences with, and attitudes toward, the deaf population of Adamorobe.

## 2. Adamorobe and Its Acceptance and Inclusion of Deaf People

The scarce evidence that is available about attitudes toward deaf people in Ghana is anecdotal and impressionistic, and mostly negative. Markides [11] writes that deaf people are "dreaded and shunned." Sarkodee [12] complains that hearing people exclude deaf people; laments that parents reject, hide, or overprotect deaf children; reports difficulties in finding marriage partners; and, regrets the fact that deafness is seen as contagious, which has the result that people avoid associating with deaf people. Oteng [13] writes that it is mainstream in Ghana to mock deaf people by comparing them to leaf-eating animals like goats, by putting a leaf in the mouth and pretending to chew on it. What also often happens is replacing the name of deaf people with a term signifying "the deaf one" (*mumu* or *mum* in Akan), which Oteng regarded as pejorative. Walker [14] on the other hand, having done a survey among health professionals, reports rather more positive perspectives of personnel working with people with disabilities (including deaf people). They, for example, believed that those people should be allowed to marry. Oteng and Markides noted a slow but perceptible improvement of deaf people's status in society with the establishment of deaf education in Ghana since the late fifties.

None of this Ghanaian data is based on in-depth ethnographic research. Whyte ([15], p. 259) emphasizes that "we must take living people as our starting point. To get a true picture we have to analyze actual life situations." According to Devlieger ([16], p. 97), among the Songye in Congo, the

person with a disability is not seen as a marginal or deviant figure but rather as a *liminal* one: “People with faults are at the same time part of normality and not part of it.” This means that a disability does not give a person “an a priori negative status that has to be changed; the person, like any other, is seen as having ‘potential’, with a right to development” ([16], p. 96). Among the Songye, the disabled person is “integrated into normal life in an indifferent way, without ceremonial, without a lot of medical attention, but without being hidden” ([16], p. 98). Dalle-Nazébi [17] reports the same with regard to deaf people in Congo: they are integrated in their family by the use of conventional gestures. Deaf people in Adamorobe are “situated” in a similar way as described by Devlieger above.

The people from Adamorobe are part of the Akan, the largest ethnic group in Ghana, speaking (dialects of) a common language, Akan [18]. Adamorobe is located 40 km from Ghana’s capital Accra and very close (three km) to the ethnic border between the Akan and a smaller ethnic group, the Ga. The dominant religions are traditional Akan religion and Christianity, and many people practice (aspects of) both religions. Although there is an increasing number of detached houses, the village mostly consists of brick or clay houses in a traditional compound structure housing extended families: rooms built around an inner courtyard, where people do everything in the open air, e.g. wash clothes, prepare food, and socialize. Imagine you have just arrived in this densely populated village. You order a cool drink in a “drinking spot” near to the market square and observe village life. You see movements of hands and arms from the corner of your eye. A handsome young man is animatedly signing a story to an older, white-haired man sitting beneath a tree. At the opposite side of the square a young woman is signing to a shopkeeper who hands over bread and tomatoes. You start wondering. You ask the waitress about it. She replies: “Oh...you know, there are a lot of deaf people here. We’ve been with them since time immemorial.”

The fact that deaf and hearing people live together in Adamorobe is integral to the inhabitants’ everyday lives. The argument that returned over and over again in interviews with hearing people was that “There are differences but not vast. It is only they can’t speak. Very little difference.” All respondents believed that everything can be said in Adamorobe Sign Language, just like hearing people can do in Akan. Respondents said that deaf and hearing people are “the same” or that deaf people “are just like us,” arguing that deaf people have “the same blood”; that it is natural that deaf people are born; that deaf people are human beings; that deaf people are created by God just like hearing people; and that deaf and hearing people do the same things, *i.e.* farming, marrying, housekeeping.

Therefore, Okyere Joseph contrasts Adamorobe with the world outside:

*[Outside, p]eople don’t understand what “deaf” means. They think that it is a disease or taboo to give birth to a deaf child and they don’t regard deaf people at all as people who can do some things even better than hearing people. But in Adamorobe we do everything with deaf people so we do understand them. [19]*

This is not to say that hearing people never reported negative experiences with deaf people; deaf people were, for example, said to be short-tempered, stubborn, unforgiving, inflexible and difficult to convince; but also positive characteristics were attributed to them, such as that they are hardworking, careful, kind, social, loyal, helpful and respectful. However, while reporting general differences between deaf and hearing people, the final or overall emphasis in interviews and informal

conversations lay on sameness, and on connection. Hearing respondents uttering statements such as “We are all the same people, one family”; “Deaf and hearing in Adamorobe have a cordial relationship. We do everything together nicely. We eat together, farm together, almost everything,” “We have been with them since time immemorial and we will be with them until the end.” The last quote emphasizes that the presence of deaf people in Adamorobe, as well as the unity of deaf and hearing people as one people or one family, is embedded in Adamorobe’s past, present and future. This is exemplified by the historical embedding of deaf people in the local kinship structures (e.g. “Our great grandfathers and -mothers were deaf ancestors,” or “Communicating with deaf people is what our ancestors did”) but also by local stories about the cause of deafness.

As for these stories, in Adamorobe, all kinds of explanations for the high prevalence of deafness can be found, such as witchcraft, ancestors, gods, God [20], magic, breaking pregnancy taboos and contagiousness; these are consistent with explanations for deafness in the rest of Ghana. Some of these elements are incorporated in stories, called a “particularly curious and bizarre set of legends” by Dery ([21], p. 67). I found that there are several “clusters” of such “legends.” Firstly, there were a number of “historical stories” in which deafness is associated with historical events, such as a story about a young strong deaf man whom every woman wanted to marry because of his good looks and his hard work: the story goes that this man was asked by the first people from Adamorobe to “breed” deaf people to work on the farms. A second cluster is the “river stories” in which deities or spirits that live in or around two rivers in Adamorobe are said to cause the deafness in the village. In some of these stories, deafness is said to be a punishment, while other stories lay emphasis on positive characteristics that are believed to come with deafness (such as being hardworking, strong and unafraid) or describe deafness as a gift. Because these stories embed deafness in the space and time of Adamorobe, these imply that deafness is natural to Adamorobe, passed down from generation to generation.

When deaf people talk about the late Nana Kwaakwa Asiampong (the chief who introduced the law) they explain that they appreciated the fact that he often addressed the deaf people as a group at the Odwira festival (*i.e.*, the yam festival, the Akan New Year celebrations) and other festive occasions, offering them gifts such as soft drinks and a little money. Apparently, because he grew up in Ghana’s capital Accra, although he was native to Adamorobe, he was not a proficient signer, but he learned some sign language and actively tried to communicate with the deaf people directly. All this made the deaf people feel respected.

Deaf people also had a generally positive attitude towards their own deafness. It appeared that they were resigned to their destiny and actually grew to like it: “I like being deaf, being deaf is good”, “Hearing people like to hear, so be it, I am deaf, I like being deaf, so be it,” “I like to sign,” “Deafness does not kill you,” “I like being deaf, I live here, I go to the farm and eat off my farm, it’s good for me like this.” Sometimes, people also gave arguments that were linked to the *benefits* of being deaf, putting forward the aforementioned “deaf-specific attributes” such as being strong and hardworking, honest and straightforward. It even proved to be controversial to want to be hearing.

With this background in mind, it might be difficult to understand why people would want to eradicate deafness from Adamorobe, where deaf people are socially included, where the use of sign language is self-evident and pervasive and where people believe that “deaf people can do anything that hearing people can.” Also, why was it this particular chief who introduced the law, bearing in mind that he is recalled so positively in other aspects?

### 3. Adamorobe's "Courtesy Stigma"

A few hearing elders explained the introduction of the law by pointing out the "inconvenience" of having deaf people in the family. Ama Oforiwaa explained: "Deaf people do not hear if you call them, so we decided to get all children hearing to avoid any trouble. So that our living will be okay for us." Abien commented that "Even though deaf people are good people and they are all human beings, people are worried of giving birth to deaf because they can't speak to their children or play with them." Most of all, however, the introduction of the law seemed to be motivated by Adamorobe's reputation as "deaf village." Ingstad states that "the presence of a disabled person in a family may influence the way the whole family is looked upon by others. This is what Erving Goffman (...) calls 'courtesy stigma'" ([22], p. 256). In the case of Adamorobe, it is not just one family, but (people from) a whole village that are stigmatized. Okyere Joseph explained that in places like Accra, he was brushed away with comments such as: "Oh don't mind him, he is from deaf village," implying that he is stupid. Tuan [23] draws attention to the role of language in the making of a place: naming can link places to discourses surrounding these places, and, thus, naming is power. The people from Adamorobe experience problems as a result of the "deaf village" label: the label is misleading, restricting and derogatory.

Firstly, it is misleading because most people in the village are hearing, currently and in the past. The aforementioned rumors about the fact that everyone in Adamorobe is deaf sounded particularly odd to me, because I found that the pervasive use of sign language in Adamorobe is not clearly discernible on the first sight, as the language is used mostly by and with the deaf minority. However, evidently this belief took shape in the past when there were less hearing people, the overall percentage of deaf people in the population was higher, more hearing people knew how to sign and there was more interaction between deaf and hearing people. It is a very persistent rumor, though; an article from 2003 in the *Ghanaian Chronicle* titles "Deaf persons majority at Adamrobe" [24]. Another article from 1998 in *The Mirror*, written by a journalist who decided to check out the story that over 95% of the people in Adamorobe are deaf, is entitled "We are not deaf and dumb" [25]. The author learned from some elders that there were "only a few cases of hearing impairment some years ago," which is, of course, an understatement, probably because these elders were not pleased that Adamorobe is known as "deaf village." Also, deaf people themselves felt that they were a small minority in Adamorobe: "In the deaf school in Mampong and in Accra there are many more deaf, right, you saw that yourself! Here are only a few deaf and a lot of hearing." Secondly, it is reductionist and restricting because Adamorobe is known for several other things, such as the fact that the clans that founded Adamorobe possess many lands in the areas surrounding the village. Thirdly, the term is intended to be derogatory. In Ghana, deaf people are often excluded, rejected, hidden or overprotected, and the typical life experience for most deaf people is one of problematic communication with wider society. Because of its high number of deaf inhabitants, the "deaf village" is regarded as "dirty," as a place of contagion, curses and witchcraft [5]. It is especially the Ga, the neighboring ethnic group, who call Adamorobe "deaf village" ("*mumu maame*" in Ga language). Kofi Pare explains:

*(frustrated) The Ga spread the word: "Say, in Adamorobe, there are a lot of deaf, they do silly signs. There are many deaf". All of them say: "YEAH? Is that so? So then they sneakily come here with the car and walk around and they see signs here and there and say: ah, look,*

*a deaf person. Then they go away again and spread the word: “It is true, there are a lot of deaf! It is true! It is true!” Then they all insult us because there are a lot of deaf here (ugly face). [26]*

Kofi Pare even thought that deaf people were not involved in guarding and fighting anymore—roles in which they were prominent in the past—because outsiders afterwards take revenge by spreading the word about the presence of deaf people in Adamorobe in a negative way. This was a reason not to use sign language at funerals. Funerals are big events in Ghana where a lot of dancing, drinking and crying happens, typically with a number of visitors from other places (for example, family or friends of the deceased). Kofi Pare explained that “When those people see deaf people signing, they go talking around everywhere that Adamorobe has many deaf people, in a malicious way, and laugh about this.”

#### **4. The Marriage Prohibition**

Although the descriptions and quotes above are all recent, the 1975 law needs to be situated within this climate of hostility or anxiousness toward Adamorobe. Agnes Bomo, a hearing woman with deaf parents and siblings, explained:

*This law came through the way Adamorobe’s name has been spread and broadcasted through the whole world: Adamorobe people are deaf. When visitors come, they say to others that Adamorobe is a deaf town: there are no hearing people here. So the chief was worried and made a law that no deaf should marry deaf, to see if the deaf will reduce or not. (...) It was said that if you come here you can’t get any hearing people to talk with. This became a major problem for the town: people don’t want to come here because we are deaf. [27]*

One hearing interview respondent gave a telling example:

*I once had a chance to talk with somebody at Tema. She was almost 60 years old and a native of Adamorobe. She says she will never come to Adamorobe, let alone allow her child to come. Her reason is that her late father told her if she comes to Adamorobe she will produce deaf children. [28]*

These arguments do not provide any clues as to why these exactly became prominent in the seventies, after the hearing people in Adamorobe had been living with deaf people for so long (*i.e.*, since the 18th century). In other words: what happened in that time that triggered the introduction of this law? There are four possible options that are possibly interrelated or supplementing each other.

Firstly, Nana Gyasehene (who is Adamorobe’s administrator chief) narrated: “We discovered that it is not advisable for a male and female deaf and dumb to marry, so we put a stop to that practice and it has reduced the number drastically.” It is not clear if and how people indeed suddenly “discovered” that while deaf–deaf marriages in Adamorobe always have brought forth deaf offspring, this is not automatically the case for deaf–hearing marriages. In the past, deaf–deaf marriages were common, and deaf–hearing marriages were exceptional, so perhaps people’s attention was caught by the marriage history of two deaf women: Yaa Awurabea and the late Afua Tatyifu. They married a hearing person with whom they got hearing children, then divorced and remarried with a deaf man with whom they



brought forth deaf offspring. While the timing (*i.e.*, early seventies) corresponds, it is not clear if it was really new information that deaf–hearing marriages bring forth hearing offspring; it appeared that these were not the first deaf–hearing marriages ever in Adamorobe. Secondly, in the period that the law was implemented, there were many deaf children, perhaps a deaf “baby boom.” Thirdly, Agnes speaks about the way Adamorobe had been “broadcasted around the world.” In the early seventies, several teams of researchers [6,7] had visited Adamorobe. Fourthly, Amedofu *et al.* [8] suggest that “genetic counseling [29] given by the medical team [6] to discourage intermarriages among the affected families have proved effective in controlling the spread of the disease [sic] in the village.” The provision of genetic counseling was probably motivated by the earlier mentioned eugenics practices in the West to avoid the birth of people with disabilities. Although the elders whom I consulted did not seem to remember the counseling, again the timeframe fits more or less (*i.e.*, 1970–1975), so it could be that the counseling has informed or stimulated the decision to introduce the law.

The fact that the accommodating perspectives in Adamorobe are outweighed by the courtesy stigma and/or some practical inconveniences might seem contradictory. Through the interviews done by Okyere Joseph, I tried to get more insight in the opinions of hearing people. The question I prepared was: “Do you think it is wrong if deaf people are born? Does this have to be avoided? Do you think Adamorobe should have (no) deaf people in future?” Only one third of the replies reflected the opinion that it is better to avoid more deaf people in Adamorobe, or that it is “wrong” for deaf people to be born; echoing the arguments mentioned earlier (such as that deaf people are quick-tempered and are the cause that Adamorobe is insulted as a “deaf village”). However, two-thirds of the replies incorporated the other discussed arguments: that deaf people are part of Adamorobe from generation to generation, are ancestors and therefore also part of its future; that deafness in Adamorobe is natural and/or created by God and that both are uncontrollable; and hence, the birth of deaf people should/could not be avoided. It might seem that by far the majority of these replies imply that the marriage law does not reflect the ideas that generally prevail in the village. Can the marriage prohibition be seen as a top-down juridicial intervention that has limited impact on what is happening on the ground? I found that the aforementioned interview replies could be misinterpreted: the point of these replies seemed to be that the deaf people who are already there, are accepted as part of Adamorobe, but that any new deaf people should not be “produced” if it *can* be stopped or avoided. My interpretation is that the respondents are only taking an accepting attitude towards those cases of deaf offspring from hearing parents, which are regarded as “uncontrollable” and “from God.” Deaf-deaf marriages are believed to bring forth deaf children anyway/only, are controllable after all, and thus should be prohibited.

Rue ([30], p. 16) asked various hearing people’s views on the loss of cultural and linguistic diversity in Adamorobe following the law; “whether or not they were scared of losing an important part of their culture” when there would be no deaf people in Adamorobe anymore. She reported that the answers were negative, concluding that “Since there is no real separation between the deaf and the hearing they feel that life will continue much as it always has.” It seems that the presence of deaf people is accepted because there is “nothing to do about it” and that hearing inhabitants do not seem to value deaf-hearing diversity in itself. It also appears that while Adamorobe Sign Language is recognized as a language in which everything can be communicated, at the same time, people seem not

to be worried about its loss if deaf people were to become extinct from the village. It might be that AdaSL is regarded as a way to communicate with and between deaf people when they are present, but it has no value in and of itself outside of its practical use in everyday life situations.

In summary, there is thus a tension between acceptance and eugenics: deaf people are accepted and included, and sameness and unity between deaf and hearing people are emphasized in the past, present and even the future. The emphasis on living with deaf people “until the end of days” seems contradictory because at the same time people struggle with the courtesy stigma which leads to the wish to have a “deaf-free” village in the future. Deaf people struggle daily with the tension between acceptance and eugenics, the latter leading to a feeling of marginalization. They also struggle with the consequences of the marriage law itself, which caused another tension: a tension between resistance and subjection towards the law. The deaf people’s problems with the marriage law and their coping strategies will be discussed in the next sections.

## **5. Deaf People’s Problems in Finding Hearing Partners**

The law left all but one of the deaf men unmarried. While the law prescribes that the deaf people should marry hearing rather than deaf partners, it turns out that hearing women generally are not eager to marry a deaf man, because of a belief that deafness is passed on by men rather than by women: it is believed that a man’s semen or blood is “harder” than a woman’s blood and that men therefore pass on deafness [31,32]. In the interviews with hearing people, the majority of the women said they would therefore never marry a deaf man, while the majority of the men said they did not see any problem in marrying a deaf woman. Thus, the result of the law was not that deaf and hearing people married freely, but that deaf women married hearing men and had children with them, and that most of the deaf men remained single and childless. Only one deaf man was married to a hearing woman and had a hearing daughter with her.

Not only do deaf men have problems with finding a hearing partner, but also most of the deaf people complain that they were not happy in current or previous relationships and marriages with hearing people. One of the reasons they gave was a lack of communication, but most of them pointed at a lack of commitment. The majority of the deaf women complained that their hearing (ex)partner does/did not provide her with the things she needs, such as sufficient food, traditional clothes and household items, or left as soon as she became pregnant. Another reason for not wanting to marry hearing people was although deaf–hearing relationships in Adamorobe were generally good, many hearing people utter deaf-related insults during conflicts, like “you hear nothing!” and “your ear is hard!”. The deaf men gave similar arguments. Based on earlier experiences in “free marriages” (see next section) with hearing people, they argued that hearing women do not accept their responsibilities in the home and cheat on them, do not take the relationship seriously and “play around.”

These stories give the impression that they are poverty-related problems mixed with discrimination of deaf people; the latter seems to be related with the ambiguity that exists with regard to accepting the presence of deaf people in Adamorobe. There were a few exceptions of deaf women who were happy (or at least satisfied) with their hearing partner, but such people seemed to be the exception that proves the rule: deaf-deaf marriages are typically portrayed as ideal marriages in which the partners are committed, caring, respecting and honest. They also believe that communication will be better and

more frequent with a deaf partner as both have sign language as their first language, and that a deaf partner will not easily leave them behind, talk behind their back, or have secret relationships, in other words, that deaf people can be trusted. Yaa Awurabea, the woman who provided the quote in the beginning of this article, was married to a deaf man (when it was still allowed) and claims that deaf people are good partners who generally live together in peace, concluding that “marrying a deaf person is the RIGHT thing to do.” It is important to keep in mind that deaf people do not marry each other “because hearing people treat them badly,” but that they did this always, possibly because of the feeling of sameness and connectedness and because of the self-evident communication in sign language. Kwame Osae, who is a confirmed bachelor, asked me: “We are all deaf, deaf people are the same and play and have fun, so how can it be wrong to marry each other???”

## 6. Deaf-Deaf “Free Marriages”

While a number of deaf people in the village *subjected* themselves to the law in that they engage in relationships or marriages with hearing people, there was also a fair amount of *resistance*. Because most deaf people do not believe that the law is right, not all of them follow it strictly. More specifically, there were four deaf-deaf “free marriages” in Adamorobe during my research, and there were countless stories about other (shorter or longer) deaf–deaf relationships in the previous years. “Free marriages” [33] are sexual relationships between people who eschew the fulfillment of the traditional customs to marry, especially after a divorce or with their second and third wife in a polygamous union, for the following possible reasons: (1) the disapproval of the marriage by one of the partners’ lineages, for example because the Akan marriage rules are broken; (2) not having enough financial resources to pay the *tiri nsa* (an agreement concluded with money and gifts from the man to the woman and her family), (3) wanting a “trial relationship” with their partner before marrying, (4) not intending to be in a long-lasting union.

The deaf people involved in deaf–deaf “free marriages” were aged between approximately thirty and fifty-five. Two of the relationships lasted between five and ten years, while the other two lasted between one and five years. All of these deaf couples were living together: three in the woman’s room and one in the man’s room. Because of the marriage law, one needs to be daring and brave to have a relationship with another deaf person openly, because of resistance from the family and the environment. This is illustrated by the beginning relationship between two deaf people. A deaf woman in her forties had recently broken up with her hearing partner (also a “free marriage”) and became interested in a deaf man in his thirties who courted her. She felt reluctant to become his partner, however, because of comments and insults that she received from a number of hearing people who learned about it. There was considerable counterpressure from the deaf people who were already in a deaf–deaf relationship on the woman to engage in a “free marriage” and to move into the deaf man’s room. Eventually she accepted him as her partner and moved to his place.

Even if one is brave enough to defy the marriage law, there is another obstacle: the Akan marriage rules. Marrying someone in the same lineage or clan or marrying your parallel cousin (*i.e.*, your mother’s sister’s child or your father’s brothers’ child [34,35]), is not allowed. Also, two women from the same lineage cannot marry the same husband or marry two brothers or two parallel cousins. In AdaSL, such “faulty” marriages are called “goat marriages,” because goats have intercourse with their

relatives. At least three of the existing relationships between deaf people are breaking Akan marriage rules, for which they were highly criticized by *both* deaf and hearing people who used this as an insult: “You are a goat!” In most deaf people’s eyes, engaging in a “goat marriage” was much more problematic than disobeying the deaf marriage law. Some single deaf people want a deaf partner but do not want a “goat marriage” and do not want to start a relationship with one of the very few available possible deaf partners because of grudges from the past or because of finding each other unattractive. Two of the deaf-deaf relationships were also condemned because of the vast age difference between the partners: in both cases, a divorced deaf woman aged over fifty and with children, was together with a young childless deaf man in his thirties. About these relationships it was said that the women only “eat a lot” and will not provide their childless partner with offspring anymore. As such, some deaf-deaf “free marriages” were scrutinized in three ways: they break the deaf marriage law, they break the Akan marriage laws, and they do not respond to other cultural expectations about what marriage should entail. It appeared that it was conceivable for each of the couples to separate in the future, not only because Akan “free marriages” are often temporary, but also because the social pressure to break up the unaccepted relationship could become unbearable.

A possible way to avoid the problems of “goat marriages” and the unavailability of attractive deaf partners would be to marry a deaf person from outside Adamorobe. Three previous or current marriages between deaf people from Adamorobe and Accra had produced hearing children, in contrast to marriages with deaf people from (villages surrounding) Adamorobe. However, it was no realistic prospect for the deaf people to solve their marriage problems by seeking a deaf partner in Accra. I questioned especially the men as they were experiencing the most problems. First of all: these men wanted to stay in Adamorobe, where they had build up their life as farmers with their heart and souls, so moving to Accra was something they did not imagine as desirable or as realistically achievable [36]. Trying to convince a deaf woman from Accra to move to Adamorobe was not regarded as an attractive option either, as they thought city women were lazy, feeble and inexperienced on the land [37]. They also believed that it was possible that such a marriage would provide hearing children only if the couple lives in Accra: when staying in Adamorobe, the child would possibly still be deaf. In addition, marrying a person from Accra is equated with a Christian marriage which is seen as beautiful (with a ring, a white dress, a church ceremony and a big party) but unaffordable. Hearing people also did not encourage such marriages: deaf-deaf marriages are condemned altogether, and the aforementioned known exceptions of deaf-deaf marriages with hearing offspring were not convincing them.

## 7. Abortions in Deaf-Deaf Unions

While a number of deaf people *resist* and thus break the marriage law by engaging in relationships, the majority of these relationships remained childless. Here we see that the underlying motivation of the law, *i.e.*, avoiding (deaf) offspring, was seldom challenged and can thus be interpreted as *subjection* to the law. More specifically, three of the four deaf–deaf couples do not have children together, while the fourth couple has one deaf child. Also, the high number of other deaf-deaf relationships and “free marriages” in the past almost never resulted in (deaf) offspring. It appeared that contraceptive methods are hardly used, and that unwanted pregnancies end in abortions. The motivation for doing an abortion was often not straightforward; *i.e.*, not only to avoid deaf

children. I identified five different reasons, and often, more than one of them was combined: (1) “goat marriages”; (2) secret relationships that nobody knows about; (3) the man was not intending to provide for the child financially; (4) the wish of the mother to complete her school education; and, (5) preventing the birth of a deaf child. The first four reasons correspond with possible reasons for abortions identified by Bleek during his research in an Akan village in the 1970s [33], and his findings remain relevant to this day. Bleek [33] identified 79 different methods to perform an abortion, most of them herbal, although not all of them are effective and many of them are dangerous for the women that use them. People typically strongly disapproved of abortion, not because it is seen as “unlawful” [38,39] or as “murder,” but because one can become infertile or die from it [40,41]. However, when an abortion is successful, without medical complications, and remains hidden, it is silently approved of [42]. Because of the required secrecy, it was very difficult to investigate the theme [43]. Information was concealed, so only after six months of research did I start to realize the scope of the phenomenon.

The deaf people (mostly women) who confided in me, told me stories about what happened to *other* deaf women, sometimes explaining how they helped with these abortions. Because of contradicting information, I suspected that these informants were lying about their own abortion histories, utilizing arguments like: “I have no idea how to do it,” “I am menopausal,” or “I lost that child due to a spontaneous abortion [*i.e.*, a miscarriage].” Bleek ([43], p. 319) framed this lying as a “cultural phenomenon,” stating that “it is a strategy for survival, a code to preserve one’s own and other people’s self-respect.” Hence, I have no precise indications as to how common abortions are nowadays [42,44], nor how common they were for deaf–deaf relationships, although the stories gave me the impression that it happened (and still happens) fairly often. Some of these stories dated at least up to 20 years; a number of deaf women apparently aborted pregnancies from different deaf men at different points in time, or more than one time in a relationship. In conclusion, we could assume that, if no abortion ever happened in Adamorobe, there would be proportionally more deaf people in the village today, and I even suggest that abortion is one of the main reasons why the prevalence of deafness is declining in Adamorobe, more than the marriage law itself.

## 8. “Just One child”

Having learned that deaf women have abortions and that this is at least in a number of cases motivated by the wish to avoid deaf offspring, the question is how they actually would feel about bearing deaf children. When I asked deaf people if they would like to have deaf children or not, a number of them replied positively. Most of them referred to a “good cause” of deafness (rather than witchcraft or other causes with a “negative feel”): “A deaf child comes from God.” They also remark that deaf people can be educated: “I can send it to school,” *i.e.*, the residential deaf school in Mampong, a nearby town. Here is an example from Kofi Pare, a deaf man in his thirties:

*(love-filled facial expression) I’d like a deaf child: I would take good care of it! I would help it and take care of it, I would welcome a deaf child with open arms. It is a gift of God, I like it. (...) I would take care of it and send it to school. I would like that. Yes. [26]*

The referral to school is important for the deaf people because they feel frustrated about their own lack of schooling, contrasting this with the opportunities that the deaf children from Adamorobe get nowadays, as they attend the school in Mampong. In addition to the “God” and “school” arguments, some deaf people argued that there is a sense of community between them, because of their “sameness.” For example, Afua Kaya said a hearing child could insult its deaf parents in spoken language, which leaves them in an asymmetric position. She concluded: “I want a deaf child, like myself, deaf people are the same, we have the same way of communicating.”

Most of the time, however, deaf people gave the evasive answer that getting deaf children “is not allowed by law.” A typical example is this telling conversation with Adwoa Bomo [45]:

- Me: Have you already been with deaf men?  
 Adwoa Bomo: Three hearing men.  
 Me: Why no deaf?  
 Adwoa Bomo: I don't want a deaf partner because that's not allowed by law because then I'll have a deaf child.  
 Me: But what do you want, is it okay for you to have a deaf child?  
 Adwoa Bomo: It's not allowed by law.  
 Me: But what do you *want*?  
 Adwoa: It's *not allowed* by law.  
 Me: But what do *you* yourself really want, would you like a deaf child?  
 Adwoa Bomo: (*softer, confessing look*): Yes I would like...

What became clear from this excerpt and other similar conversations is that the deaf people in Adamorobe regarded what they wanted as of secondary importance, which explains the practice of abortions. In Akan collective culture, individual decisions can have significant social consequences; one reason for deaf couples to avoid having children is that their family and wider social environment would not behave in an accepting way. This could affect the quality of their life and that of their children significantly, as well as their relationships with their deaf partners, which would no longer be tolerated. For example, about 10–20 years ago, a deaf man had a relationship with a deaf woman and she became pregnant. Her family got very angry and took her outside of Adamorobe, to a cocoa farm where she delivered their deaf daughter. The girl stayed there when her mother eventually came back to Adamorobe and the couple was forced to break up. Another example is the story of a young deaf woman who narrated the reaction of her environment when they found out that she was pregnant:

*I made a round through the village to sell food and at a certain moment I had to throw up somewhere. A male family member of mine saw me, and he got angry because he understood that I was pregnant. He already wanted to start hitting me with a stick, because he thought I was together with a deaf man. When I told him the child was from a hearing man, he calmed down. [46]*

When the baby was born and it turned out that he was indeed hearing, she was happy to have avoided big problems with her family. She said that if the baby was deaf, everybody would be

convinced that a deaf man was the father. She admitted that she actually would love to have a deaf child, but regarded the potential consequences as unacceptable:

*I'm glad that my child is hearing, because of the insults I would have to endure. And they would all tell me off if I would marry a deaf person. If I would have a deaf child then they wouldn't even want to help take care of it. [47]*

In Adamorobe, where people typically live with the extended family, “breaking away” from the family was regarded as a very unattractive and ultimately undesirable option. A way for a number of deaf men to compromise between the marriage law and their feelings of resistance toward the law was to argue that they would like to have “just one child”; that this is their right as a couple even if the child will be deaf, especially if they did not have children yet [48]. In Akan culture, to have children is even more important than being married, which is true for both men and women. I was told a few stories about childless deaf men who learned about the abortions of their deaf partners and were angry because they wanted “just one child.” A man of appropriate age who is not a father is seen as defective or incomplete, so remaining childless is seen as the greatest tragedy or humiliation [35,49]. Children are not only important for one’s social identity, but also important for the future: children are expected to provide their parents with money and food and help them when they need it.

## 9. “Sooo Many Deaf Here in the Olden Days”

In 1992, Nana Kwaakwa Asiampong died in a car crash, and many deaf people described his death as a punishment of God for introducing the marriage law. According to them, justice had been served. Also, the gongbeater was blamed for their misfortune [50]. The marriage prohibition has a triple effect in Adamorobe: not only are the deaf people denied deaf partners and are deaf couples denied children, they also feel unwanted in society. Implicit in the law is the assumption that deaf people have less of a right to live and marry freely than hearing people:

*They said: “Listen up: marry hearing people, get hearing children. Not with deaf deaf deaf deaf deaf (angry look)!” Because deaf people cannot speak. For example I go somewhere and buy slippers, peppers, or this...or that...You can write it all down. That’s good like that! But they say (indignant): “Deaf don’t hear talking. Being hearing, that is fine!” The gong gong was beaten: “Have hearing children, hearing children.” “Because when you take a bus to different places, like also to the sea, and people talk to you, then you don’t hear that. A hearing person can hear, that is good, being deaf isn’t.” That’s the way it is, it’s a shame...(sorry look). [2]*

In combination with occasional insults and discrimination of deaf people in Adamorobe, and the courtesy stigma, the triple effect of the law gives rise to very bitter feelings.

There are other examples of attempts to “extirpate” the deaf people (thus other examples of the tension between acceptance of deaf people and the wish to have no deaf people in Adamorobe anymore): one hearing person explained that some hearing people suggested in the past that all the deaf people should be relocated. There also are some fantastic stories told by deaf people about hearing people wanting to do away with the deaf by throwing them all in the water. However, most stories are about poisonings and witchcraft: deaf people repeatedly told me that they believed that hearing people

(often witches) are removing the deaf people from Adamorobe one by one, over the course of years: “The witches killed a lot of deaf, a lot of deaf died, died, died, now there are only a few here.” With the late Kwadzo Okoto’s untimely death during the last week of my research, in October 2009, some deaf people thought that hearing people had killed him with poison or magic. While it is typical in Akan culture to explain deaths as the result of witchcraft, magic, and so on, deaf people think they are specifically targeted because of their deafness. This belief sometimes motivates suspicious behavior among the deaf people: sometimes they do not want to accept a drink that a hearing person offers, or to eat food that a hearing person prepared, for fear that they are accepting a poisoned gift.

The deaf population is aging and so the number of deaf people will decrease over the next few years and probably become (nearly) extinct within a few decades. There is a deeply felt sorrow among them: while because of the marriage law, less deaf people are born, the remaining deaf adults are (according to them) dealt with through poisonings. Remembering the deceased deaf people therefore becomes even more bitter, and these deaths are deplored in utterances such as: “Sooooo many deaf died, there were soooo many deaf here in the olden days.” When Kwadzo Okoto died, deaf people summed up the names of the deceased during the last few years, to add Okoto to the list. They felt one of them was lost, and that the number of deaf people was further decreasing. Kwaku Duodo lamented: “They are all dead... it’s over (*sorry look*) Now there are mostly a looooooot of hearing.” I regularly saw them wonder: “What if...the gong gong had never been beaten? What if that marriage law had never been enforced?” In their ideal world, they are happily married with a deaf person, and both deaf and hearing offspring would be welcomed as part of natural diversity or diversity created by God.

## 10. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how deaf people in Adamorobe struggle with a tension between subjection to and resistance against the law that prevents them from marrying each other. In the nearly 40 years that have passed since the promulgation of the law, deaf people have obeyed the law by marrying hearing people, but also openly resisted the law by having relationships with deaf partners. At the same time these deaf couples seem to subject to the law by complying to its underlying aim: most of them avoided bringing forth offspring, with only a few exceptions. In some deaf people’s discourses, a compromise is put forward: they want just one child (who would probably be deaf) with their deaf partner. However, the wish to comply to expectations in their social environment has proven to be stronger: if deaf couples resist the marriage law too much by having children together, life will become very hard for them. They fear that they would be subject to extensive and frequent insults and that they would receive minimal familial support in the care for their child. We could therefore also interpret the abortions as *agency* rather than mere subjection: deaf people maintaining control, by making decisions about life and death to be able to live a worthy life.

The deaf people are struggling with a *twofold* tension: not only the tension between subjection to, and resistance against the law itself, but also the tension between their inclusion in Adamorobe and the stigmatizing and discriminating ideologies in the “deaf village.” This article has demonstrated the significance of external views in this tension between eugenics and acceptance of deaf people in Adamorobe, especially the courtesy stigma, but also the possible role of genetic counseling. Similarly, Kisch [51] describes how genetic discourses about avoiding deaf offspring have been



imported by a genetic intervention programme aimed at the Al-Sayyid Bedouin, another community where hereditary deafness has been spread and a local sign language emerged. These discourses are locally negotiated in ambiguous ways. Sometimes people employ these discourses, sometimes they challenge them by stating that the cause of deafness “is not in the family.” Kisch [52] also reports that, generally, these people seem to be more interested in forming marriage unions rather than avoiding them because of “genetic risk.” In Adamorobe, however, the tension between avoiding such a risk and accepting it has weighed over into the former direction.

Because of the marriage law, the cultural and linguistic diversity in Adamorobe is threatened. The unique social inclusion of deaf people in Adamorobe will probably become a relic of the past, and Adamorobe Sign Language is endangered, because this language is used by and with deaf people only. When there are no more deaf people in Adamorobe, due to the prohibition to marry and due to the steady increase of immigrants (mentioned in the introduction) and thus the impediment of the spread of the hereditary form of deafness, Adamorobe Sign Language is likely to become extinct. When following authors such as Sauer and Leighly [53], the marriage law in Adamorobe should be regarded as destructive. Defending “traditional” ways of life, in recognizably separate communities, they regard activities which threaten place-based distinctiveness as a threat for diversity. Such thoughts were not expressed by hearing inhabitants of Adamorobe. They accept and include deaf people as part of the population, but feel an urge to lose the stigma of the name “deaf village” when possible. Although they see interactions with deaf people as an inherent part of Adamorobe’s everyday life, they do not seem to regard the presence of deaf people and Adamorobe Sign Language as having value in itself; evidently regarding the former as an accident, coincidence or fate, and the latter as an accommodation. The deaf people, however, feel discriminated and marginalized. The situation in Adamorobe is paradoxical: marriages between deaf people and (signing) hearing people could be regarded as “building bridges” between deaf and hearing people, but the result was exactly the opposite. Deaf people want the right to “deaf sameness” in marriage in order to be able to participate happily in the hearing society. When that was taken away from them, it left the deaf men unmarried, it made many deaf women frustrated and unhappy in their relationships, and deaf people began to feel marginalized among a hearing society, especially the men, since in Akan culture great emphasis is placed on having children. They do not contemplate the future of their sign language (and thus the loss of linguistic diversity) but they do feel embittered that the future existence of deaf people in Adamorobe is threatened (“It is all over”). They are proud deaf people; proud of the characteristics attributed to them (such as being hardworking and good fighters); using sign language and feeling “sameness” and their connection to each other and hearing people in Adamorobe. As a number of them said to me: “how can it then be wrong to marry each other, and how can it be wrong to want children together, even though they might be deaf?”

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References and Notes

1. Adamorobe people's real names are used in publications that result from my research: they thought it was odd to change their names in accounts about them and their lives. Hence, I decided not to change the names. I have tried though, when describing grave conflicts and sensitive subjects such as abortion, to obscure names by writing more generally (such as 'a deaf woman').
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37. Of course there are other ways for (deaf) women to make a living (such as seam-stressing or petty trading) but the deaf men from Adamorobe want a farmwoman.
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45. Conversation with Adwoa Bomo. Private communication, 2 October 2009.
46. Interview with an habitant of Adamorobe. Private communication, 21 December 2008.
47. Interview with an habitant of Adamorobe. Private communication, 29 June 2009.
48. The "just one child" argument was also sometimes uttered by hearing people. It has been 35 years since the law was announced, and it is now clear that this has heavily affected the deaf people's lives, especially that of the deaf men who remain unmarried and childless. The hearing sister of a deaf man signed: "My three deaf brothers are good, handsome men and all three of them do not have a child, I have been thinking about that and thinking and having heart ache, that really doesn't feel good, so it's better that they have one child, a girl, and that will be deaf but that is from God." (Field notes 3 September 2009).
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