



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Creating a sign language out of everything and everywhere: an example from the deaf people of Bissau**

Sousa da Silva Martins, M.

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## 2 THE DEAF COMMUNITY OF GUINEA-BISSAU AND ITS SIGN LANGUAGE

*[...] understanding iconicity in another language  
is experienced as gaining insight into another culture.*  
(Moriarty 2020, 201)

### 2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 presents the first detailed description of the deaf community coming together in Guinea-Bissau and the contexts in which its language has thrived. Although the circumstances of the emergence of *Língua Gestual Guineense* (LGG) have been briefly portrayed in previous publications (Martins & Morgado 2008, 2016, 2017; Martins 2022; Morgado 2024), I now aim to describe it in more depth. With this detailed account of a rising deaf community, I hope to contribute to the field of deaf histories, which remains scarce in its early years.

In this chapter, after this introduction, I review the literature on sign language emergence to better understand the way LGG has emerged in relation to other sign languages in the world (§2.2). In particular, the places where they typically emerge, i.e., where deaf people usually interact with each other (§2.2.1), the relevance of community size (§2.2.2), and how to study diachronic change in sign language emergence (§2.2.3). I then describe the fieldwork undertaken on site over the past 22 years (§2.3). Next, I expand on the ethnographic data collected for the characterisation of the local deaf community and its sign language (§2.4).

Based on the available data, I set out to describe the dynamics shaping the deaf community of Guinea-Bissau over the years (§2.5). The sociolinguistic description presented here focuses on the deaf people's ways



of life (§2.5.1), deaf schools as important gathering spaces (§2.5.2), other places where deaf people meet (§2.5.3), contexts of language contact (§2.5.4), and sign language use (§2.5.5). In the end, I propose to portray LGG's emergence in relation to the literature (§2.6).

## **2.2 Sign language emergence: places, community size, and timeframe**

Given that sign language has only recently arisen in Guinea-Bissau, it is essential to look at the concept of sign language emergence and how *Língua Gestual Guineense* (LGG) fits within it. Sign languages have been emerging everywhere whenever deaf people get together. It is well attested for at least 250 years since the first school for the deaf was established in Paris. Even if it is usually associated with school contexts, its emergence has been observed in diverse settings, beyond the educational context, and within groups of different sizes and shapes. It has even been documented well before the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the Ottoman Court (c.f., Miles 2009).

To situate the emergence of LGG in the existing literature, the present chapter seeks to clarify the terminology on this topic to understand what is implied by the concept of sign language emergence. I begin by exploring the different places where deaf people typically interact, which leads to the emergence of sign language (§2.2.1). I then look into the importance of community size to language development and the reasoning behind signers' quantification (§2.2.2). Finally, I review how sign language emergence has been studied over time through signers' cohorts (§2.2.3).

Based on the hypothesis that LGG is autochthonous, I give special attention in the literature to sign languages that have emerged locally, i.e., with limited influence from other sign languages.

### 2.2.1 Places of interaction between deaf people fostering sign language emergence

The geographies where sign languages come about can be associated with educational contexts or not. In this subsection, I briefly review sign languages that are said to be either school or locally-based, with a special focus on West Africa, to contextualise LGG. In both settings, sign languages may come into contact with spoken/written languages and other signed languages.

#### 2.2.1.1 *School-based sign languages*

The documented history of sign languages has followed a path parallel to the history of deaf education, which can be traced back to the first public school for the deaf, established in 1760 in Paris. Deaf children of various backgrounds are usually concentrated in special schools in urban areas, where they grow up. Later, they tend to gather in other places that can be fixed, such as deaf clubs, or mobile, like occasional events of the community.

Sometimes, once their education is completed, they move to different parts of the country, spreading sign language. Moreover, gathering deaf people from various schools in clubs and events scattered across the country promotes the development of a national sign language (Branson & Miller 1998). Thus, sign languages emerging in schools tend to be used outside as well, expanding to other deaf spaces and becoming mainstream, not only as a communication medium but also as a privileged way to access information.

In general, it will be the variant used by most signers that will be adopted in formal education, media, interpreters, sign language materials, and various language dissemination channels (Eichmann 2009). These sign languages are legally recognised in some countries, strengthening their national status (de Meulder 2015). However, more recent educational ideologies, especially in the global north, tend to mainstream deaf students, i.e., to include them in hearing-only classes, which compromises school settings as privileged meeting places for deaf children and youngsters.

#### 2.2.1.2 *Locally-based sign languages*

Sign languages that have not expanded from a school basis, but are locally circumscribed, typically arise in small villages or wider rural areas with a high incidence of deafness. Since they serve primarily a close-knit community of both deaf and hearing members, the so-called *village* (Zeshan 2006) or *rural sign languages* (de Vos 2011) are highly unlikely to spread beyond the outskirts of their habitual gathering location(s). It is also important to note that, even if schooling is provided locally or if deaf people receive education elsewhere, the local sign language can develop irrespective of the educational process.

This simplistic classification is not without shortcomings. Zeshan (2006) considers that village-based sign languages may involve one village (e.g., Nyst 2007, for the sign language used in the village of Adamorobe, in Ghana) or a group of villages (e.g., Safar 2020a, for the sign languages used in four villages of the Yucatán state, in Mexico). To include broader regions (e.g., Lutalo-Kiingi & de Clerck 2015, for the sign language used in the extreme north Cameroon), such as islands (e.g., Omardeen 2021, for the sign language of Providence Island, in the Caribbean), the term *rural sign language* seems more adequate.

However, sign languages that develop in urban areas outside school settings do not fit within this traditional classification. Nyst (2010a, 17-21) distinguishes these as *local sign languages*, i.e., locally evolved outside of formal education, especially in the West African context. A good example of this distinction is made by Yoruban deaf bilinguals when designating the sign language prevailing outside schools – where Nigerian ASL is used – as *local sign* (Orie 2013, 245). In this line of thought, I put forward the term locally-based sign languages to include sign languages that may be geographically circumscribed to both rural and urban settings.

The primary purpose of such a designation is to distinguish sign languages developed informally outside school, regardless of their community size, from the typical (national) widespread school-based sign languages. At the same time, it allows for including urban sign languages that are not school-related. In this way, it becomes more adequate to account for sign languages developing in a city district (e.g., Yano & Matsuoka 2018, for Miyakubo SL), a city capital (e.g., Nyst 2015, for the sign language of Bamako, the city capital of Mali), a small city (e.g., Jirou 2008, for the sign language of the fishing town of Mbour, in Senegal), a small-scale combination of urban and rural settings (e.g., Nyst et al. 2012, for the sign language[s] used in the circle of Douentza, in Mali), a large scale area involving both environments (e.g., Schmaling 2000, for Hausa Sign Language, in the Kano state of northern Nigeria) or even people that migrate to different places (e.g., Lanesman & Meir 2012, for the sign language used by the Algerian Jewish community, initially in the city of Ghardaia, in Algeria, and later in parts of France and Israel).

### 2.2.1.3 *Locally-based sign languages in West Africa*

Classifying locally-based sign languages to encompass both rural and urban settings can be especially useful in West Africa, where these co-exist, side-by-side, with school-based ones, mainly ASL variants (e.g., Asonye & Edward 2022, 42, for Ghana and Nigeria; Tano 2016, 57-58, for Ivory Coast). Here, locally-based sign languages can be used by a few deaf people in villages as part of the same family (e.g., Tano 2016, in Bouakako, Ivory Coast; Nyst 2010a, 31, in Nanabin, in Ghana; Nyst et al. 2012, 265-266, in Berbey, Mali), or scattered within a larger region (e.g., *ibid.*, for the Dogon area in Mali).

Until now, the village sign language studied in more detail in West Africa – and the whole continent – is the 250-year-old sign language used by the 33 deaf people in Adamorobe, Ghana (cf., Nyst 2007; Kusters 2015; Morgado 2024). Jirou also identified a few dozen deaf people in the fishing city of Mbour, Senegal. Here, deaf people, especially men, have the habit of meeting under a central tree to socialise (2008, 140-141).

Other local sign languages are instead concentrated around important urban centres, extending into macro-communities of deaf users. The more thoroughly documented is Hausa Sign Language or *maganar hannu*. It is used by thousands of deaf people in Hausaland, meeting in rural and urban settings within Kano state. It is probably the oldest macro deaf community developing outside the educational context, at least in West Africa, since it has been transmitted through a strong network over generations (Schmaling 2000, 47). Whether scattered or part of different subgroups, deaf people feel connected to each other by a common identity and language (*ibid.*, 14-15). The sociocultural context in which deaf people often meet outside prioritises male over female interactions (*ibid.*, 50).

Also, in Nigeria, a local sign language based on conventional gestures is used in the city of Akure, Yorubaland, and outside the schools for the deaf (Orie 2012, 81; 2013, 244). Here, deaf people meet in markets and religious settings (ibid., 81). Apart from scattered deaf people using a gestural communication system, Orie (2013, 245) identified gender-based micro-communities, such as a group of 32 deaf women.

Another well-documented local sign language is the *Langue des Signes Malienne* (LaSiMa), based in Bamako (also known as *Langue des Signes de Bamako* or *Bambara*). LaSiMa is mainly used by older urban or younger deaf people lacking education and/or living in rural areas (Nyst et al. 2012, 253). This sign language emerged from the communication between deaf people, especially men (c.f., Pinsonneault 1999, 6), gathering in the afternoon around *grins* (informal, traditional gatherings) in someone's house or workplace in the capital of Mali, Bamako (Nyst et al. 2012, 253). Gender distinctions in gathering habits of deaf people reflect cultural patterns from a larger patriarchal society (Pinsonneault 1999, 5-6; but also Mildner 2021, 68, for Benin), leading to consequences in communication opportunities, favouring deaf men, as seen in LGG by Morgado (2024). Although varieties of LaSiMa are used in other urban centres, including the town of Douentza and surrounding villages in the Dogon area (Nyst 2015, 135), it is unclear how much it has spread across the country (Nyst et al. 2012, 254).

Similarly, in the city of Maroua and surrounding villages, in the Extreme North of Cameroon, a local deaf community with about 200 deaf members (Lutalo-Kiingi 2014a) expanded the gestural communication used in rural areas (Lutalo-Kiingi & de Clerck 2015, 48) into an "indigenous sign language" (ibid., 51). Deaf people seem to have gathered for at least the past 100 years (ibid., 57) in an informal network of deaf and hearing peers that facilitates their social inclusion (de Clerck 2012, 98-99).

In this region, Sorin-Barreteau (1996, 25, 38, 211-212) looked at the propensity of the Mofu-Gudur people to use gestures and was overwhelmed by the presence of many deaf members integrated into the community's daily life. This author is likely referring to the same group that de Lutalo-Kiingi and de Clerk mentioned, since the closest urban reference to the Mofu-Gudur is also Maroua, about 50 kilometres to the east. At the time, she identified 161 deaf people (Sorin-Barreteau 1996, 211), 103 men and 58 women (*ibid.*, 215).

Sorin-Barreteau observed that they usually met with each other at the market, where they signed in a “more elaborate and faster” way than the gestural system that they used with hearing people (*ibid.*, 207, 212). In individual interviews, she states that almost everyone could easily communicate with family members and neighbours, most with hearing people at the market and some with the hearing in the city (*ibid.*, 215-259). One of the most communicative deaf men travelled frequently for work with Fula people (*ibid.*, 221), who constitute the largest ethnic group in Guinea-Bissau (INE 2009a, 26).

Markets have a central role in daily life, not only in buying and selling goods but also as essential gathering places. This is especially true in West Africa (Fréchou 1984, 445, cited in Sorin-Barreteau 1996, 8). Communication in local markets is based on visual strategies, such as pointing and finger numbers, which enable deaf people's participation in traditional bargaining (Mildner 2021, 94, in Benin).

Moreover, the multilingual setting in which commercial exchanges typically occur relies, usually, on gestures. Mildner (2021, 106) illustrates a gestural negotiation between a deaf man and a Fula saleswoman in a city market in Benin, where she probably did not notice that he was deaf and “definitely did not care”. Street vendors in particular tend to value gestural communication (Mildner 2021, 64). These interactions can involve discussing goods and lead to conversations,

including teasing (Kusters 2015, 64-65, in Adamorobe, Ghana). Dalle-Nazébi (2010, 3) also witnesses playful interactions between deaf and hearing people on the streets in the Republic of Congo.

These sign languages used by various deaf communities have been studied to different extents. It is, however, worth mentioning that some of them have been compiled in individual corpora, like the sign languages of Adamorobe, in Ghana (Nyst 2000-2004), Bamako (Nyst 2010b) and Dogon, in Mali (Nyst 2010c), Bouakako, in Ivory Coast (Tano 2013), and the Extreme North Cameroon (Lutalo-Kiingi 2014b).

Thus, even if LGG has emerged in a school setting in Bissau, it seems essential to consider the possibility of signs having been used previously outside the school space.

#### *2.2.1.4 Contexts of sign language contact*

In truth, it is rare to find documentation on sign language isolates or “indigenous sign languages” (Woodward 2003) emerging on school premises. Here, deaf students are potentially exposed to the language(s) of education: the written (and spoken) language and eventually a foreign – and more prestigious – sign language. Still, their communicative backgrounds when entering school will likely be similar, i.e., based on individual homesign systems (e.g., Coppola 2020, for Nicaraguan Sign Language).

When talking about languages with which deaf people have contact, settings are crucial. In their daily lives, deaf people are continuously exposed to the spoken language(s) used by their surrounding hearing peers. Visually, they also have contact with the written language, which they can understand only if they are literate, i.e., if they are schooled. Importantly, the interaction with other sign languages is most likely dependent on the community's access to the ‘outside’



world, i.e., to deaf people from different places. Quite recently, social media has also become an enormous influence, especially in spreading International Sign across borders and generations (c.f., Morgado 2025).

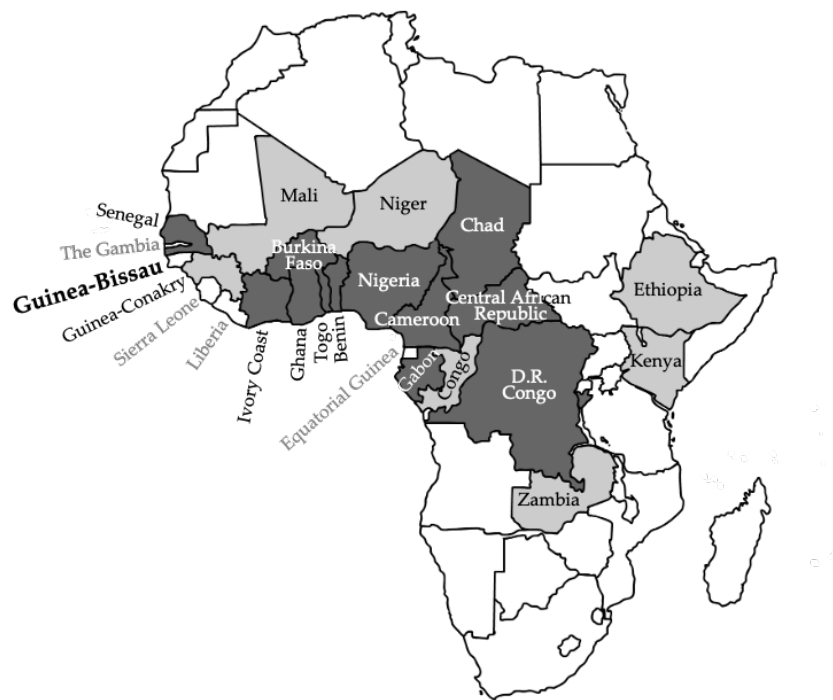
In an educational setting, the presence of the written/spoken language in teaching materials is constant and available to be absorbed by school-based sign languages. Its impacts may be visible in different ways, such as employing mouthing and fingerspelling, modifying word order or applying literal translations in sign formation. Similarly, sign languages that are locally circumscribed cannot avoid the fact that the spoken language is present in daily interactions between deaf and hearing individuals. In these contexts, where deaf people usually have very little access to schooling, they may grasp the shape of spoken words through lipreading and combine such mouthings with signs of similar meanings (e.g., Nyst 2007, 54).

In addition to inter-modality contact, schooled signers are more likely to develop a higher awareness of, or even interaction with, other sign languages. For instance, outside the school context, local deaf communities can also be exposed to other (more widespread) sign languages, such as through religious practices or contact with signers from different parts of the world, such as volunteers, tourists or researchers.

When a deaf school is established, different sign languages can be occasionally merged (e.g., Meir 2010, for Israeli Sign Language emerging out of the contact between signers from Germany, Austria, France, Hungary and Poland), but, more frequently, a foreign sign language is introduced. This usually more instrumentalised sign language tends to superimpose on the local one(s). In reality, it is not unusual, and more so in recent decades, to observe the prompt adoption of an older sign language when the need to educate deaf children first arises. For example, American Sign Language has influenced the development of

about half of the school-based sign languages in Africa and South and Central America to different degrees.

Especially in West and Central Africa, Andrew Foster, a deaf African-American missionary, had an essential role in founding schools for the deaf in thirteen countries between 1957 and 1987 (Runnels 2020, 233), as shown in Figure 2, in dark grey. Moreover, he trained teachers for the deaf, many of whom were deaf themselves, from eight more countries during annual summer schools held in Ghana and Nigeria, indirectly influencing the spread of ASL (Sanogo & Kamei 2019, 8), as shown in Figure 2, in light grey.



**Figure 2.** African countries influenced by Andrew Foster, where he established mission schools for the deaf, in dark grey (adapted from Runnels 2020, 233), and where he did not establish schools but trained teachers, in light grey (adapted from Sanogo & Kamei 2019, 8)

Particularly in French-speaking African countries, Sanogo and Kamei (2019, 1) observe that varieties of ASL look like a creole of ASL, French and indigenous signs. They propose to designate them as a unique *Langue des Signes de l'Afrique Francophone*. Although national varieties would constitute dialects of such creole (ibid., 9), the authors are mainly overwhelmed with the similarities involving signs from ASL and the use of (parts of) French words.

However, taking the example of Benin, Mildner (2021, 27, 86, 92) notices an entire spectrum in deaf people's signing, varying between more significant use of local signs (more prominent in rural areas by unschooled deaf people) and their mixing in different proportions with ASL signs supported in French grammatical features (predominant in urban centres by schooled deaf people). This was also the case in Ghana, where Hadjah describes three major signing varieties: a *local* native variety; an intermediary *broken* variety, mixing local and ASL signs; and an ASL-based and English-influenced variety (2024, 22). He further finds that native varieties across the country, which include the one used in the village sign language of Adamorobe, are very close to each other (ibid., 135). Overall, he concludes that the local variety is highly influenced by the gestural environment, homesigns and locally evolved signs (ibid., 359–366).

Local sign languages based in urban centres where schools for the deaf have been established, like Bamako, Mali, and Kano, Nigeria, are more easily threatened by the higher prestige of ASL (Nyst 2010a, 10, 22). Even if deaf education in Mali started advocating for sign language in 1993, it shifted towards ASL in 2001 (Nyst 2015, 129).

As mentioned previously (in §2.2.1.3), gender differences from the general society also reflect on the deaf schooled population. In this way, women are also expected to clean and cook at schools, limiting their socialising time. Many, however, do not even go to school, being

preferably kept at home to protect them from sexual abuse and early pregnancies (Mildner 2021 69, for Benin). Similarly, in Cameroon, de Clerck reveals the existence of systematic reports of sexual abuse of girls – and boys – in deaf schools (2011, 1426).

To summarise, sign languages can emerge within or outside educational settings. In West Africa, both scenarios can occur side by side, as is likely the case with LGG. Either way, deaf people are often exposed to other languages. Thus, if gesture represents the common ground in local interactions with hearing people, the written language is mainly dependent on schooling.

### 2.2.2 Community size

In addition to the places of emergence, community size also plays a role in how sign languages emerge and, especially, in how fast the language develops, as the community size increases. To understand how deaf communities can be classified in size, it is essential to review the existing terminology, seeking to clarify two main aspects: what the implications of community size are in language dynamics and which users are to be included in the sign language community.

#### 2.2.2.1 *Why does community size matter?*

To weigh the implications of community size on its inner dynamics, I first seek to identify the dividing line between micro and macro-communities, as suggested by Schembri (2010), relating such a partition to language use. Studies on the impact of community size have shown that the more speakers a language has, the more conventionalised it is and the more likely it is to expand linguistically (Wray & Grace 2007). In larger communities, conventionalisation occurs faster because individual variations seem to disturb the effectiveness of broader

communication. On the contrary, idiosyncratic differences are readily accepted in smaller groups since they can be retained. Still, Lutzenberger and colleagues (2023) have challenged such a distinction by specifying that variation in larger signing communities, like the BSL one, is more evident at the community level rather than locally, within subgroups.

According to Wray and Grace's (2007) analysis, in a smaller community, (esoteric) communication is mainly restricted to familiar topics, where knowledge is shared without the need for contextualisation. In opposition, (exoteric) communication is used between strangers as a *lingua franca*. When a larger group is constituted, interactions by its members involve both familiar (esoteric) and unfamiliar (exoteric) people and a multitude of contexts, pressuring messages to systematic coding, lexical expansion, grammatical regularities and complex constructions.

When comparing language structures of different communicative ecologies, community size is decisive in motivating complexity. Thus, micro-communities are usually associated with simpler structures, whereas macro-communities typically present more complex ones with a faster rate of language change. It has even been suggested that this distinction is compatible with a developmental cline, where linguistic complexity could be ordered according to the number of deaf signers in a community (c.f. Meir et al. 2010).

Nyst (2012, supported by other scholars such as Hou & Kusters 2019) rejects this evolutionary notion that puts 'immature' systems of signs or gestures and 'fully-fledged' sign languages on opposing sides of a developmental scale. She argues that each communicative context adjusts to the needs of the interlocutors, and the language being construed upon those interactions expands accordingly.

Contrasting with the micro-sized sign languages based locally in villages, those used in urban settings can spread over small or large scales. Also, not all school-based communities are macro-sized. Considering that many sign languages have fewer than ten thousand users, even at a national level, I turn to Dunbar's (1993) study on the evolution of social bonding in smaller communities. By observing the distribution of group sizes in traditional societies, Dunbar (1993, 684) identifies three distinct patterns:

- Small groups (or camps) of 30 to 50 members
- Intermediate groups (villages or clans) of 100 to 200 members
- Large groups (or tribes) of 500 to 2.500 members

Small and intermediate groups have high longevity within these community sizes (Dunbar & Sosis 2018). Intermediate social networks may be dispersed geographically, but the interaction between their members occurs regularly enough to establish the necessary bonds to maintain social cohesion. At this level, 150 represents a functional threshold enabling direct individual interactions. When that threshold is reached, groups usually fission into smaller units or grow further to organise their members hierarchically (Dunbar 1993). If they increase, they tend to be more linguistically homogeneous and reach a long-term stable size of around 500 members. Beyond this upper limit, new pressures arise for more sophisticated social structures (Dunbar & Sosis 2018, 110).

In the end, it is possible to argue that community size impacts language conventionalisation, particularly with larger communities. Still, one has to keep in mind the particular communicative contexts in which language use is shaped. To further understand these contexts, I look next at the typical users of sign languages.

#### 2.2.2.2 *Who to include when counting signers?*

To begin with, a community depends on the physical concentration of a (minimal) number of users. Of course, the smaller the community, the easier it is to count its speakers. In opposition, it becomes harder to track them the more there are, especially when non-native speakers are included. Thus, it becomes challenging to count the number of users and whether to add non-native signers to the total number of community members.

Signs created idiosyncratically by a deaf person and agreed upon with the hearing co-habitants are traditionally referred to as *homesigns* (c.f., Goldin-Meadow 2012, for deaf children growing up in hearing families without exposure to a conventional sign language). Thus, a sign language label is given only when arising in sociolinguistic ecologies where deaf people constitute a group and, together, experience the mutual pressure to create a sign language, triggering linguistic properties to unroll. When they belong to the same family, their communication can be designated as *family sign language* (Hou 2016, in San Juan Quiahije, Oaxaca, Mexico) or *family homesign system* (Haviland 2013, in Zinacantán, Chiapas, Mexico).

On closer inspection, locally-based sign languages are not always used by a close-knit deaf community (e.g., Nyst 2007, in Adamorobe, Ghana). Deaf people may also be gathered in small groups, such as a family (Dikyuva 2012, in Mardin, Turkey), or scattered across a larger rural area (e.g., Reed 2021, in Papua New Guinea). When a few deaf signers do not strictly constitute a community, scholars tend to be more cautious in labelling signed communication as a sign language.

In the case of signing populations, classifications are again applied dichotomously. In this way, schools typically give rise to large *deaf community sign languages*, often adopted within country borders. At the same time, those more locally circumscribed are usually related to

much smaller communities of both deaf and hearing members, using *shared sign languages* (Nyst 2012, based on the term *shared signing communities* by Kisch 2008). For that reason, Schembri (2010) suggests a categorisation based on the community size, designating them as *micro* or *macro-community sign languages*.

Even though a bipartite classification based on demographics may seem adequate, the relation between population size and geographical settings brings to light intersections that challenge such duality. It can be the case where school-based sign languages, especially if still in their first years of emergence, are used by smaller deaf communities (e.g., Mineiro et al. 2021, for the sign language of São Tomé and Príncipe). Otherwise, communities of different sizes can use sign languages that are circumscribed to urban areas outside the school context. In such settings, micro-communities can be present in a city district, a town or a small-scale combination of urban and rural environments, as seen in the previous subsection. In contrast, large deaf communities, such as the ones in Bamako, Mali (c.f. Nyst 2010a, 2015), and in Kano state, northern Nigeria (c.f. Schmaling 2000), can also occur.

While it seems unproblematic to distinguish sign languages based on community size, one has to wonder who exactly counts as a community member. Tracking the exact number of speakers of a specific language or linguistic variant is often challenging. Sign languages, in particular, are potentially available to all deaf people, but only a part of them engage with the community for various reasons. Thus, statistical data about people with different degrees of hearing loss, usually calculated under the generalised proportion of about 0,1% of the total population, will not necessarily correspond to the actual number of deaf signers, especially in non-Western, educated, industrialised, and rich countries. For instance, according to the Ethnologue (Eberhard et al. 2022), Portuguese Sign Language is said to have 10.000 users in an overall population of about ten million people, while the European



Union of the Deaf estimates 60.000 users for the same language (Wheatley & Pabsch 2012, 22). Crucially, estimates on the deaf population vary, since such information has likely not been collected adequately in censuses, as is again the case in Portugal.

Locally-based sign languages in urban settings may also reach estimates up to a few thousand. In such circumstances where deafness is caused mainly by diseases, such as meningitis or malaria, and medical care is insufficient to diagnose and treat it adequately, the generalised proportion of deafness incidence may double. In addition, in countries of the global south, statistics may be more challenging to apply, and counting the approximate number of deaf people, or more arduous still, the number of deaf signers, becomes extremely difficult (e.g., Schmaling 2000, for Hausa Sign Language).

By contrast, deaf members of sign language micro-communities are much easier to identify, especially considering that deafness is often hereditary and, in such contexts, limited to family circles (e.g., Nyst et al. 2012, for a family of six deaf members in the village of Berbey, Mali). Out of the documented sign languages in rural areas, the highest number referring to deaf signers is about 150 (e.g., Panda 2012, for Alipur Sign Language, in India), to which hearing signers can also be added in various proportions to establish the community size (c.f. de Vos & Zeshan 2012, 4–5, for an overview).

If it is arduous to account for the exact number of deaf people who use sign language, the fact that not only deaf people use sign language cannot be overlooked. In this line of thought, Jokinen (2006) argues that the group of sign language users should include hearing members, such as professionals, family and friends, who, unlike most deaf, use sign language as a second language.

When counting sign language users, the role of hearing signers is not always straightforward. School-based sign languages have deaf

people as native signers at their core. Because these sign languages used by large deaf communities are usually widespread at the national level, through formal education and media, many hearing people are motivated to learn them. This results in many hearing professionals, family members and friends with different fluency levels gravitating around deaf spaces.

In a different way, in village settings, where hereditary deafness usually persists across generations, hearing people view the local sign language as part of daily life, naturally using it to communicate with their deaf cohabitants. However, in these shared sign language cases, hearing kin, friends, and neighbours present different proficiency levels, most likely dependent on how regular deaf-hearing interactions occur (Nonaka 2009, 225–226, for the village sign language of Ban Khor, in Thailand).

The main difference regarding the motivations of hearing people in being part of these deaf communities is that national sign languages are usually learned by choice (often a career-driven one). It is crucial to notice that schooled deaf people (many with access to hearing aids and speech therapy) are usually expected to use the spoken language, ‘relieving’ their families from the need to learn the sign language. In opposition, at a local level, sign languages are embedded in daily routines and acquired readily in regular interactions between deaf and hearing individuals. Even if deafness is not positively acknowledged by the local cultures (where medical assistance is often nonexistent), sign languages are usually perceived as “the natural way of communicating with deaf people” (Nyst et al. 2012, 268).

The fact that the fluency of non-native signers, both hearing and deaf, is highly variable in school-based and locally-based sign languages makes the task of counting signers harder. By trying to add up all these

numbers in the most accurate way, calculating the size of a sign language community becomes even more complicated as it grows.

### 2.2.3 Studying diachronic change

To study diachronic change in the early stages of a language, it is essential to understand the time window for its emergence. Thus, I review relevant studies on language unfolding over time. In addition, I explore the implications of time depth in language emergence and how signers can be accounted for in diachronic studies.

#### 2.2.3.1 *Agreeing on a time window for the emergence status*

Understanding the emergence status is especially relevant for the study of LGG, since its emergence is being observed through real-time data. To highlight how unique its situation is, it becomes crucial to look at LGG in the light of other so-called ‘emerging’ sign languages.

By definition, emerging sign languages are young (Meir et al. 2010, 8) and are created by “deaf people without any prior exposure to either signed or spoken language” (ibid., 3). However, as previously shown, language contact is often difficult to avoid, especially in school settings. In that case, the notion of a ‘young’ or even a ‘new’ language remains ambiguous. Scholars have not yet been clear about when and how a language is regarded as emerging (Hou & Kusters 2019). Kisch (2012) offers one criterion: a new sign language should be traceable back to its initial users to establish a timeframe. Brentari and Goldin-Meadow highlight the importance of looking at the “moments in historical time when non-linguistic systems become linguistic” in the emergence of a language (2017, 1).

To assign the status of 'emerging' to a sign language, it seems essential to determine beforehand what exactly 'young' or 'new' means. For how long can we consider a language as being in an emerging process?

In school-based sign languages, the milestone case of an emerging sign language has been, for decades, the Nicaraguan Sign Language (LSN), which was created by successive cohorts of deaf children in a school setting in Managua (e.g., Senghas & Coppola 2001). Although Nicaraguan deaf children had been attending special schools (for disabilities in general) since 1946 (Polich 1998, 89), the emergence of the national sign language is considered to have begun with the foundation of the Managua school. Contrasting with the previous temporary gatherings involving very small groups, it was only at the establishment of that school, in 1977, that the systematic contact between an increasing number of deaf children and youngsters set off a deaf community and, consequently, a sign language to emerge.

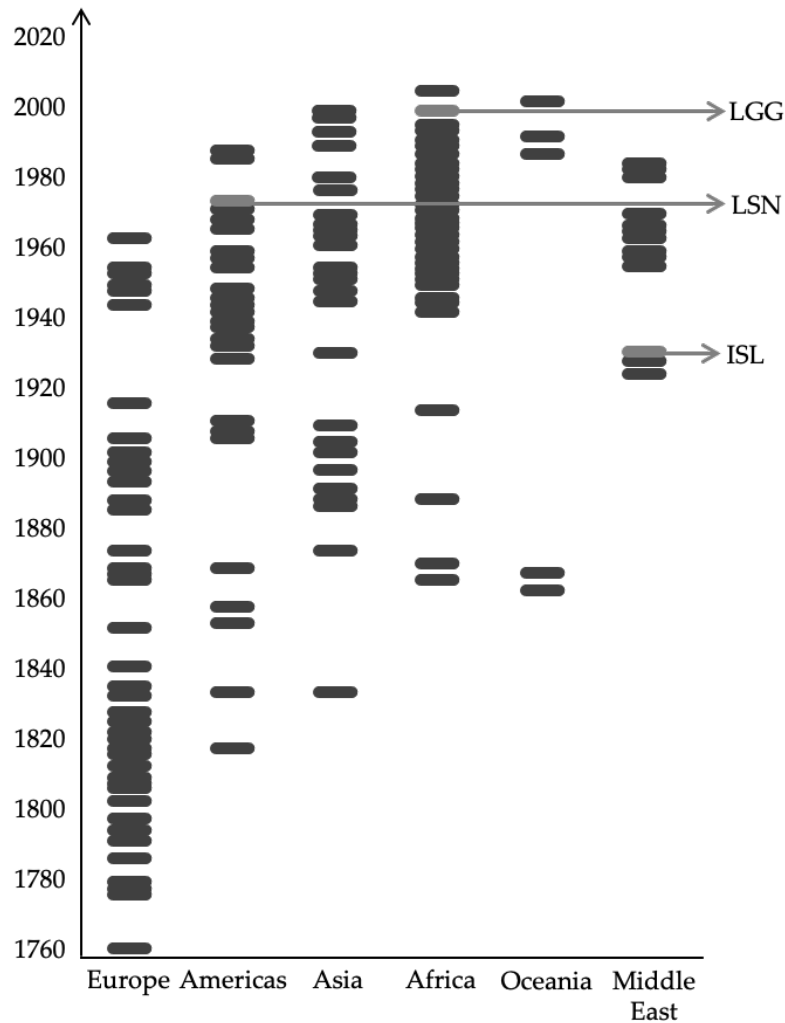
With twice its time depth, Israeli Sign Language (ISL) has been comprehensively described since its earliest signers. Although the first school for the deaf was established in Jerusalem in 1932, the first generation of deaf people had already attended other educational institutions in Germany, Austria, France, Hungary or Poland (e.g., Padden, Meir, Aronoff & Sandler 2010). Even if traceable to its first users, Israeli Sign Language is, in some way, rooted in pre-existing sign languages, making it similar to a creole (Meir & Sandler 2007, 5–6). Consequently, it can only be considered partially new, which breaches one of the defining criteria proposed by Meir and colleagues (2010, 2) for the status of sign language emergence: signers who had prior exposure to other sign languages.

Besides these two well-known studies of school-based sign languages, studies of other languages with ages between LSN and ISL have also been labelled as emerging, new, or young. These include the ones of

Kenya (Morgan 2015, 2020), Jordan (Hendriks 2008) and the Mauritius Islands (Adone 2012). In addition to LGG in Guinea-Bissau (Martins & Morgado 2008, 2017), the emergence of sign languages in school settings after the year 2000 has been documented in two other places: Tibet (Hofer 2017) and São Tomé Island (Mineiro et al. 2017, 2021). Although they appear to be similar to LGG, they differ in the kind of data they provide. In Tibet, Hofer (2017) presents only a short ethnographic report. The study of the emergence of the sign language of São Tomé Island has focused instead on two years of sign collection, particularly in the modifications from initial mimetic enactments to more reduced signs in their form. Overall, as shown in Figure 3, there is a significant number of sign languages emerging after ISL that remain understudied, at least under the status of emerging.

Focusing on school-based sign languages, such as that of Guinea-Bissau, a time window for emergence has spread out based on the two reference studies of the sign languages of Israel and Nicaragua. Figure 3 situates Guinea-Bissau Sign Language (LGG) in terms of those two time marks and the overall panorama of the time-depth range of the about 160 school-based sign languages worldwide. Here, Europe hosts the majority of older national sign languages (35 of 41 European sign languages have existed for more than 90 years). In all remaining continents, around 60% of the sign languages have emerged after the establishment of the first deaf school in Israel in 1932. In addition, 34 school-based sign languages (of which 17 are African) are less than 48 years of age, the same as Nicaraguan Sign Language. I stress here that setting an initial date for the birth of a sign language based on establishing a specific school for the deaf is not straightforward. Thus, although this is what has been reflected in the literature, one should not assume it marks the emergence of a sign language. Therefore, I prefer to give a general idea of the distribution of such sign languages worldwide in

Figure 3 (but see Appendix 1 for details on the chronological listing that I collected from different sources).



**Figure 3.** Overview of the time depth of school-based sign languages in the world per continent (the bars refer to the years in which deaf schools were first established per country), pointing out Israeli Sign Language (ISL) since 1932, Nicaraguan Sign Language (LSN) since 1977, and Guinea-Bissau Sign Language (LGG) since 2003

With the perception that most school-based sign languages are very young, they could be easily seen as emerging. However, the question remains of having had prior exposure to other sign languages. How many sign languages can be said to be truly autochthonous? In my review of the literature, only around 30 out of the 160 school-based sign languages did not adopt any other sign language in the education of deaf students. Besides an overwhelming implementation of American Sign Language, many schools have imported an older sign language from one of the European or neighbouring countries' sign languages. As such, only a small percentage could be attributed to a fully autochthonous origin. Of these, 22 have had their onset in the last 90 years, making them good candidates for the study of sign language emergence (in Appendix 1<sup>2</sup>).

The opportunity to observe language building up from a very early stage is crucial for understanding how non-linguistic systems become linguistic, as stated by Brentari and Goldin-Meadow (2017, 1). Therefore, studying locally-based sign languages, i.e., beyond the school setting, is particularly important. Still, only a few such sign languages have been described in more detail and are thus used as case references. For one, the sign language used in the village of Al-Sayyid in Israel (e.g., Sandler et al. 2011) has been studied alongside the national sign language of that country. With a similar time depth of a little over 90 years, it is used by about 130 deaf signers. Of approximately the same age but with significantly smaller communities, two other sign languages have been studied at length, the ones of the villages of Bengkulu, in Indonesia, known as Kata Kolok (e.g., de Vos 2012), and

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<sup>2</sup> In the chronological listing of school-based sign languages in Appendix 1, I refrain from including influences from other sign languages. I considered their actual impact on the language used by the overall community to be hard to estimate.

the one of Ban Khor, in Thailand (e.g., Woodward 2003). More recently, the emergence process has been looked at in other rural settings, such as the ones developing in four Yucatán villages in Mexico (Safar 2020a) for about 80 years and in three villages of the Taurus mountains in Turkey (Ergin 2017), for about 50 years.

Thus, a time window for language emergence corresponding to a life span of 90 years enables tangible contact with living first signers, at least when there is a higher life expectancy. The observation of language change from the first generation onwards represents a unique opportunity “to track emergence in ‘real time’” (Jaraisy & Stamp 2022, 2).

Yet, zooming in to look at language change from the beginning might be the key to recognising the moment when it can finally be considered an *established sign language*. Even though an established language continues to change, as demonstrated by historical linguistics (Abner et al. 2019, 259), real-time emergence may reveal clear stages of language development. Most research has been done on sign languages that are many decades old. In those cases, how has sign language emergence been studied through the lens of change over time?

#### 2.2.3.2 *Determining the first generations of signers*

In crosslinguistic comparisons, one challenge is the delimitation of generations – or cohorts. To address this, research on the two best-documented school-based sign languages, in Nicaragua and Israel, has followed different assumptions. Moreover, the partition of cohorts of deaf people acquiring sign language from their peers in a school setting has been decided according to principles distinct from those sub-jacent to village sign languages, where language transmission is vertical.



In the earliest study of Nicaraguan Sign Language, Senghas (1995, 544) distinguishes between age and year of entry at school. The first factor presupposes that the younger the child is, the easier it will be to acquire a language. The second factor implies that an earlier year of entry encounters the sign language still in its first stages of development. With these two variables in hand, Senghas (1995) confirmed that the language was easier to master by both younger children and those entering school in more recent years. In subsequent studies on Nicaraguan Sign Language focused on language change over time, the main criterion has been the year of entry, i.e., social contact occurring in school. This led to a general delimitation of cohorts of deaf people for approximately every ten years (Senghas 2021). Such division of signers was set for the first three decades and has been systematically followed by other scholars.

Since Israeli Sign Language is supposedly twice as old as Nicaraguan Sign Language, and thus, harder to track its initial stages in real time, the Haifa team has implemented the apparent-time hypothesis in their studies (Sankoff 2006, for an overview). This approach allows us to interpret diachronic language change by studying synchronically different age groups (e.g., Stamp & Sandler 2021, 6). When aiming to reconstruct language history from a specific point in time, it is necessary to set aside internal variations at the individual level and focus on an age range generally assumed to be more stable. The age of speakers for such assessment should then be considered ideally only after adolescence, when changes occurring during the individual lifespan are not so significant anymore (Sankoff & Blondeau 2007).

Moreover, the concept of generation in school-based sign languages is not straightforward. Because communication is often transversal across relatively small school cohorts, changes are likely to occur more or less at the same time across the community. Nonetheless, language transmission operates downwards in the long run, from older to

younger signers. Thus, in an emerging multigenerational school-based community, younger signers tend to show linguistic modifications, often as more complex forms, in their productions (Senghas 2021, 78). The comparison between cohorts reveals an increasing linguistic complexity across generations in both LSN (e.g., Flaherty 2014, in argument structure; Senghas 2021, in motion events) and ISL (e.g., Dachkovsky et al. 2019, in discourse relations).

Within a different sociolinguistic setting, generations of locally-based sign languages are naturally associated with kinship relations that promote the early acquisition of a sign language (or system) in deaf children. However, Kisch (2012) points out the importance of distinguishing cohorts by their contemporary shared sociocultural experiences and regular communicative networks. This is expressed by a partition of age groups within a range of approximately 20 years each for the specific case of the Al-Sayyid Bedouin signing community (*ibid.*, 96). For the Central Taurus signers, Ergin (2017) determines the scope of three cohorts based on their ages, but within shorter periods of about ten years.

Overall, relying on successive cohorts enables understanding language change throughout its earliest stages (or versions). If each sociolinguistic ecology witnesses some language change over time, how many generations does it take to stabilise? When can we, without a doubt, accept a language as being ‘mature’, ‘established’ or ‘full-fledged’? There is some reluctance to do so with locally-based sign languages, which have been assigned an emerging status, even when possessing a more extended time depth (e.g., Godoy 2020, for the Ka’apor Sign Language, with a little over a century). This suggests that smaller communities take more time to conventionalise linguistic features, maybe because the existing forms of communication satisfy their immediate needs as they come. Alternatively, larger deaf communities may rapidly systematise a linguistic structure, pressured by the variety

and frequency of social interactions and less shared knowledge, as seen in the previous subsection. However, it seems to take at least three generations to obtain greater linguistic consistency, as shown in Nicaraguan and Israeli sign languages.

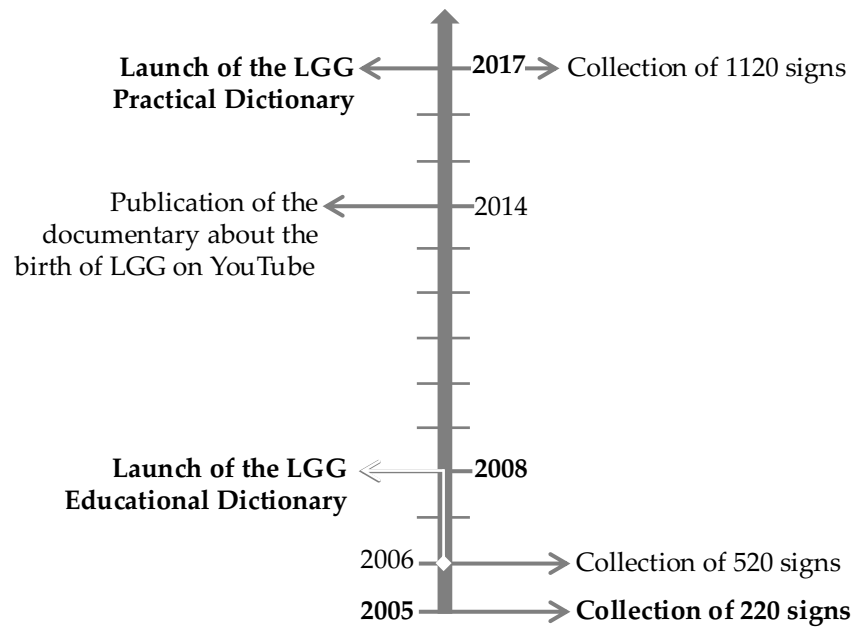
In sum, a sign language emerges whenever deaf people meet. If school is the usual place where they are brought together, it is often the case, especially in West Africa, where they gather locally, i.e., regardless of the educational context. To understand how autochthonous a sign language can be, one must consider that, in education, deaf students are more exposed to the written and spoken language(s) of schooling, and sometimes to a foreign sign language as well. It is outside of school that deaf people, relying foremost on gestures, tend to develop an autochthonous sign language. Finally, when is a sign language considered to be still emerging? Importantly, it will exhibit a higher conventionalisation the larger its community is, and will grow up to the third generation.

The existing literature on emerging sign languages highlights the exceptionality of the LGG case, particularly in terms of its short time depth.

### **2.3 Previous fieldwork and methodologies used in Guinea-Bissau**

This section presents the main initiatives in which I was involved concerning the documentation of the sign language of Guinea-Bissau, for the past two decades. These include sign collection for three dictionaries, in 2005 (§2.3.1), 2006 (§2.3.2) and 2017 (§2.3.3), as summarised in Figure 4. Apart from the dictionaries, Marta Morgado and I published additional materials (§2.3.4) and conducted our doctoral projects on LGG (§2.3.5). Such initiatives involved staying in Bissau for a few

weeks, and deaf signers and hearing teachers flying to Lisbon for a few months. During these occasions, training for Guinean deaf instructors and hearing teachers was generally provided in Lisbon at educational institutions for deaf people.



**Figure 4.** Chronology of relevant events concerning the documentation of LGG (with relevant events in bold)

Having grown up in former Portuguese colonies in Africa (Angola and Mozambique) and working at the Portuguese Deaf Association<sup>3</sup>, I was especially interested in gathering information about deaf people in Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa (which include, besides

<sup>3</sup> The Portuguese Deaf Association, locally designated as *Associação Portuguesa de Surdos* (APS), besides hosting social gatherings, plays an important political role in advocating for deaf people's rights and is a key institution in the professional training of deaf sign language teachers.

Angola and Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe). Thus, when the delegation from the Guinean<sup>4</sup> Association of the Blind<sup>5</sup> visited the Portuguese Deaf Association to ask for support in educating deaf children, we agreed to organise training for the teachers working with deaf students. As funds were minimal, this started as a volunteer project.

### 2.3.1 The informal LGG dictionary, printed in 2005

In July 2005, I visited Bissau for the first time with a deaf colleague. Marta Morgado was, at the time, the Portuguese Sign Language department coordinator at the largest school for the deaf in Portugal.<sup>6</sup>

The training in Bissau was addressed to hearing teachers. Nevertheless, one deaf person attended the training, Amaré Soares, who was studying economics at the public university at the time. It is important to note that Amaré represents an unusual case as a deaf person in Bissau. This could be due, at least in part, to a significant investment from his middle-class parents in his literacy development from an early age.

Because it was the summer holidays, only a few deaf people (about 50 students) were attending school during that first training. The ones we saw were actively communicating with local signs. However, the local teachers did not value that communication, as they were very attached to the *Língua Gestual Portuguesa*, LGP dictionary that had been brought from Lisbon in their earlier visit.

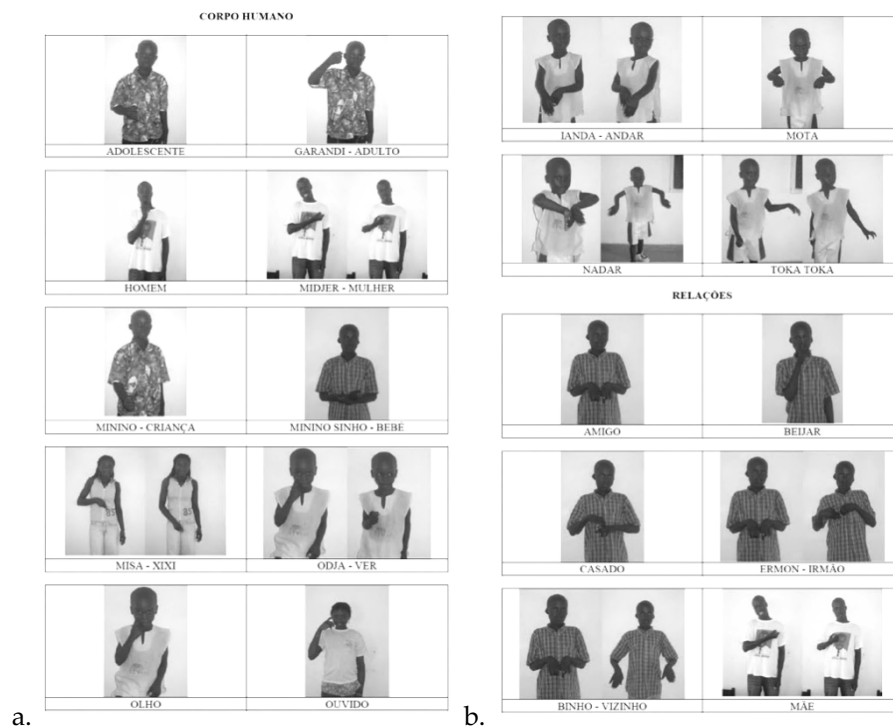
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<sup>4</sup> I will use 'Guinean' throughout this thesis to designate someone or something from Guinea-Bissau. This corresponds to the term used locally in both Portuguese and Creole, *Guineense* and *Guinensi* respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Associação Guineense de Reabilitação e Integração dos Cegos – AGRICE.

<sup>6</sup> Locally designated as Centro de Educação e Desenvolvimento Jacob Rodrigues Pereira, Casa Pia de Lisboa.

To show the hearing teachers some of the autochthonous signs already in use, we gathered with those few deaf people. Without previous preparation, Marta Morgado and I met for a couple of days with around ten deaf children and youngsters aged 5 to 25 years. Based chiefly on pictures from school books and drawings, we encouraged them to discuss and agree on which signs they would use for specific concepts. Then, when posing for photos, the signers quite naturally reduced and segmented the agreed-upon signs into frozen frames for the picture taking. This resulted in 220 signs of different semantic areas glossed in Portuguese and Creole that were informally printed and given to the school; two sample pages are shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Sample pages of the informal LGG dictionary printed in 2005 about the human body (a), transports and relationships (b)

In addition, the school decided to invest in Amaré Soares' training as a sign language teacher. Thus, that same year, he went to Portugal for a four-year course at the Portuguese Deaf Association.

### 2.3.2 The first formal dictionary, collected in 2006 and published in 2008

The informal printing of the first collection of signs made such an impact that we were asked to go back to make a proper dictionary. Hence, the following year, 2006, Marta and I returned to Bissau in July and August, together with Amaré, to collect more signs. That summer, a sizeable group of deaf people of different ages was gathered at the school, the usual meeting place, and we filmed the discussions based on topics from school books of natural sciences.

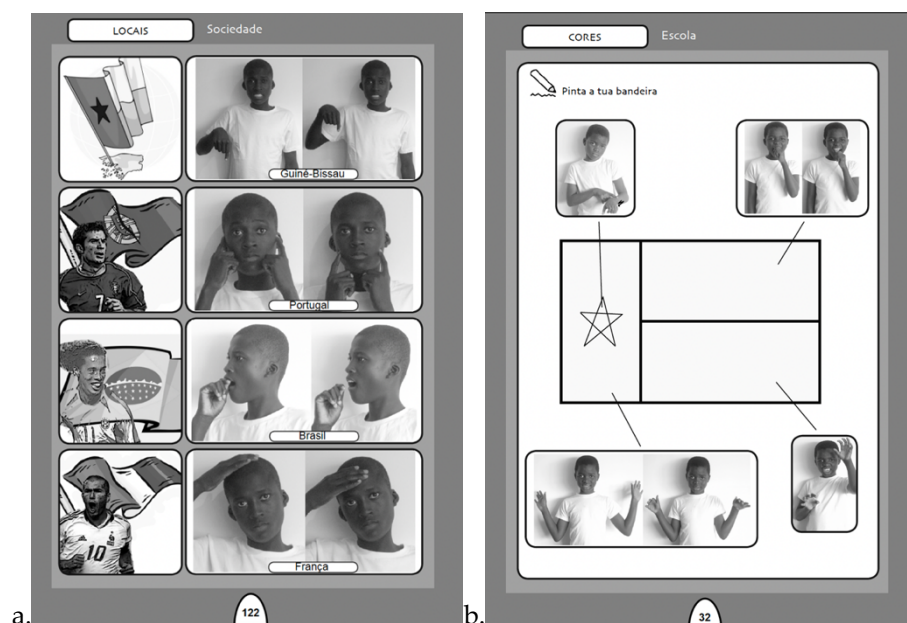
The sessions took place over two weeks. In the mornings, all deaf students were welcome and free to join, so the number of participants would fluctuate, reaching a few dozen every time. In the afternoon, only around 15 of the most active community members<sup>7</sup> were invited to confirm and elaborate on previously discussed topics. All sessions were filmed. Topics were freely discussed, not only in describing concepts but also in deliberating which signs were the most appropriate and why. When a lexical item was agreed upon, one of the deaf contributors would rise and sign it to the camera. Those video recordings consequently supported the pictures in the dictionary-making.

Since the goal – as they asked us – was to produce a dictionary for school use, two children were later photographed for the signs. One deaf boy from Bissau, Altair Gomes da Silva, went to Lisbon for three

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<sup>7</sup> The election of the most active members was based on suggestions of deaf people themselves and on our own observations of communicative dynamics during informal gatherings.

months for picture-taking, from April to June 2008. In these sessions, we photographed another deaf Guinean boy living in Portugal, Abubacar Turé, who was compensated with a trip back to Bissau to see his family in October 2008. The educational dictionary (Martins & Morgado 2008) was finally published that year. It included 520 signs with illustrations and exercises promoting bilingualism. Similar to the previous one, it was organised by topics and translated into Portuguese and Creole. Sample pages are shown in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** Sample pages of the LGG Educational Dictionary (Martins & Morgado 2008) about countries (a) and an exercise for colours (b)

In addition, a couple of Guinean teachers went to Lisbon for practical training at the deaf school where Marta worked, and at the Portuguese Deaf Association. Over the years that followed, Marta and I



maintained regular contact with people from Bissau, especially with Amaré and José Augusto Lopes, the school headmaster.

### 2.3.3 The second formal dictionary, collected and published in 2017

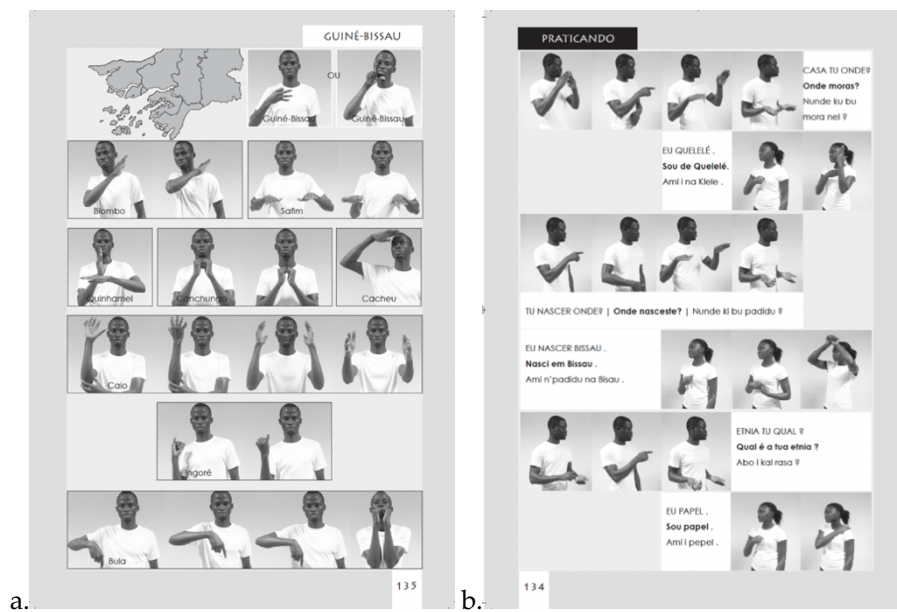
After a nine-year hiatus, I returned to Bissau in February 2017. This time, I went with Amílcar Furtado, a deaf sign language teacher from Guinean origin raised in Portugal, to update the dictionary. This time, the director of the deaf school wanted a dictionary update, aiming at the general population, so that more people could learn LGG. For that reason, the team – the 12 deaf LGG instructors working at the National School for the Deaf (*Escola Nacional de Surdos* – ENS) and I – decided to include as much vocabulary as possible and examples of real-life conversations in LGG per topic.

For that purpose, signs were discussed at the ENS within the group of deaf sign language instructors. The discussions were freely led, taking the 2008 dictionary as a starting point to check if signs had changed and to add any new signs within those topics. Examples of real-life conversations were simulated for each topic – or new ones that would arise in the discussions. All signs identified in the discussions and dialogue samples were filmed individually.

In a second moment, for the picture taking, four deaf people from the ENS and three from the other deaf school in Bissau, the Mariposa school, which had started a couple of years before, including Amaré, went to Lisbon for four months. The deaf leaders from the Mariposa school chose the deaf participants who were considered the most active in the community.

The fact that, at this time, there were two deaf schools in Bissau inevitably split the deaf community into two main groups. For that reason, the participation of the Mariposa group was crucial to confirm the

signs collected at the ENS. As a result, a few signs were adjusted, and, in some cases, variants were added. This more practical dictionary (Martins & Morgado 2017), comprising 1120 signs, is now directed at the general population, was again divided by topic, and translated into Portuguese and Creole. Sample pages are shown in Figure 7.



**Figure 7.** Sample of the LGG Practical Dictionary (Martins & Morgado 2017) about cities of Guinea-Bissau (a) and with a dialogue about place of residence, birthplace and ethnic group (b)

During this time, they also received additional training at the deaf school in Lisbon and the Portuguese Deaf Association. Currently, only the 2008 dictionary is available online. The 2005 one was never published, and the 2017 dictionary is now out of print.

#### 2.3.4 Additional materials about LGG and the Guinean deaf community

On top of the dictionaries, we published additional materials to showcase the uniqueness of the Guinean deaf community. These include an annual agenda, a children's book and a documentary film (see below). Since the second formal dictionary aimed at the general population, we made the point to produce LGG resources specifically for the deaf students as well.

In 2008, besides the dictionary, we published an awareness-raising agenda as a printed booklet, in Figure 8. It included messages advocating for sign language in deaf education, clarifications about deaf culture, like the sign names, and an overview of the context of deaf communities in other Portuguese-speaking countries. That annual agenda was freely distributed to stakeholders, parents, politicians and NGOs. During our visit to Bissau that same year, we gave a second teacher training course focused on bilingual methods.



than the process of agreeing on specific signs, we filmed the deaf in informal interactions; we interviewed some of the deaf adults and hearing teachers, and kept a video diary of our impressions. In the end, we just wanted to show how valuable what was happening was.



**Figure 9.** Snapshots of the documentary film “Guinea-Bissau: the birth of a language” on YouTube since 2014: an interview with Amaré by Marta in 2006 (a) and deaf children at the deaf school in 2008 (b)

In 2017, apart from the dictionary, Marta Morgado illustrated a set of ten vocabulary posters for educational purposes, as exemplified in Figure 10.



Figure 10. Poster sample about the cities of Guinea-Bissau in LGG

Besides these materials resulting from the community's requests, Marta and I carried out linguistic studies, especially during our doctoral projects.

### 2.3.5 Doctoral projects about LGG

More recently, in the context of the present doctoral project, Marta Morgado and I returned to Bissau in October and November 2018, where we engaged and worked with deaf people from both school-based groups in Bissau, the ENS and the Mariposa school. At this time, the two of us collected data for our respective doctoral theses. Marta filmed narratives about wild animal encounters in both schools. I collected transitive sentences from the Mariposa deaf people group and conducted interviews on gestures with groups of deaf people from

both schools and hearing teachers from the ENS. Considering the travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020, the deaf leaders of both schools were involved, as much as possible from a distance, for the preliminary analysis of the incorporation of gestures in the signed lexicon (Martins, Soares & Barros 2021). Finally, I returned to Bissau in October 2022 to update some information lacking from the analyses I had carried out.

Table 1 lists the work about LGG and the deaf community of Guinea-Bissau that has been published so far. All of these were authored by at least one of us, myself and Marta Morgado.

**Table 1. Publications about LGG and the deaf community of Guinea-Bissau**

| Year | Author(s)               | Title                                                                                                  | Format                         |
|------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 2008 | Martins & Morgado       | <i>Dicionário escolar de Língua Gestual Guineense</i>                                                  | Dictionary                     |
| 2008 | Morgado                 | <i>Mamadu, o herói surdo</i>                                                                           | Children's book                |
| 2014 | Martins & Morgado       | <i>Guinea-Bissau: the birth of language</i>                                                            | Documentary film               |
| 2016 | Martins & Morgado       | <i>Deaf communities in Portuguese-speaking African countries: The particular case of Guinea-Bissau</i> | Book chapter                   |
| 2017 | Martins & Morgado       | <i>Dicionário prático de Língua Gestual Guineense</i>                                                  | Dictionary                     |
| 2019 | Martins, Morgado & Nyst | The contribution of emblematic gestures to the emerging sign language of Guinea-Bissau                 | Poster (TISLR <sup>9</sup> 13) |

<sup>9</sup> Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research (Conference series)

|      |                               |                                                                                                                               |                                      |
|------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 2021 | Martins, Soares & Barros      | The incorporation of emblematic gestures to the emerging sign language of Guinea-Bissau                                       | Video paper (WOCAL <sup>10</sup> 10) |
| 2021 | Nyst, Morgado, Martins et al. | <i>Object and handling handshapes in 11 sign languages: towards a typology of the iconic use of the hands</i>                 | Paper                                |
| 2022 | Martins, Morgan & Nyst        | <i>Argument structure in the emerging sign language of Guinea-Bissau</i>                                                      | Book chapter                         |
| 2022 | Martins                       | Distinguishing human arguments in the new sign language of Guinea-Bissau (LGG)                                                | Poster (TISLR14)                     |
| 2022 | Nyst & Martins                | West Africa as a 'gesturebund': mapping the spread of emblems and their influence on the lexicons of unrelated sign languages | Poster (TISLR14)                     |
| 2024 | Morgado                       | <i>Personal experience narratives in three West African sign languages</i>                                                    | Doctoral dissertation                |
| 2025 | Morgado                       | <i>Deaf men and women sign differently in Guinea-Bissau: the importance of social interaction</i>                             | Poster (TISLR15)                     |

It is important to note that the initiatives to document and spread LGG were community-led. There was a need to produce an output in a specific format aimed particularly at addressing risks to the sign language. For instance, the temptation to rely on the older and more instrumentalised Portuguese Sign Language (*Língua Gestual Portuguesa* – LGP) was present at the earliest stages of deaf education in Guinea-Bissau and remains today in schools in other parts of the country that have no information on the importance of LGG to the growing deaf community. The influence of LGP is also unavoidable in the informal contacts between deaf people of Guinea-Bissau and Portugal. Other than these, other contacts occur naturally between deaf people visiting Bissau

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<sup>10</sup> World Congress of African Linguistics



from the neighbouring countries where the American Sign Language variants are dominant. Despite these possible influences that could supplant local LGG signs, the deaf community centred in Bissau is young, vibrant, and, most crucially, very proud of their self-created sign language.

## **2.4 Ethnographic methods**

Understanding deaf people in Guinea-Bissau and the contexts in which their sign language was used has required me to take different approaches. I have relied primarily, of course, on direct observations of the interactions occurring in my presence over the past 20 years (§2.4.1), including repeated viewings of signing on video. I complemented this with interviews with deaf and hearing people, some of which were included in the documentary film (§2.4.2). In my last visit, I sought to verify the information gathered from observations and interviews via documentary sources (§2.4.3).

### **2.4.1 Participant observation on site**

Since the first visit to Bissau in 2005, Marta and I have felt very welcomed in the deaf community, and sensed they were quite comfortable around us. If in the first three visits, we were astounded by what was happening in front of us, in subsequent visits, we had already assimilated the singularity of such a phenomenon. Thus, we moved around their spaces more swiftly.

In 2005, 2006, 2008, and 2018, I went with Marta Morgado. In 2017, I went with Amílcar Furtado (a deaf sign language teacher, born in Guinea-Bissau but raised in Portugal). In 2022, I went on my own, and, in 2024, Marta went by herself.

During our first three stays in Bissau, Marta and I kept a video diary that served as a basis for the documentary film published in 2014 on YouTube. Apart from these daily videos, we often registered personal observations in writing – a habit that was maintained in subsequent visits.

It is important to note that we were not intentionally keeping records of our experience with the deaf community of Guinea-Bissau. This was just the way Marta and I found to express our constant amazement about what we were witnessing. The intent arose more consciously during the visits in the context of our doctoral projects, between 2018 and 2024. Here, we kept a written diary and numerous written observations that we shared.

#### 2.4.2 Interviews and informal conversations

Between 2005 and 2008, Marta and I interviewed pivotal people, deaf and hearing, who had some relevant role in the history of the community. Their reports are included in the documentary film published on YouTube (Martins & Morgado 2014).

For the present thesis, I interviewed more people for specific purposes. I filmed six deaf leaders (four men and two women) about the group division leading to the creation of the Mariposa school. These interviews ranged from around six to 30 minutes, with an average duration of fifteen minutes. I also talked to two hearing directors and four deaf teachers (two men and two women) at the ENS to understand their perspectives. I did not film them, but opted to take notes instead, since they were particularly uncomfortable with this topic. Finally, I sat down with one of the hearing teachers at the Mariposa school, whom we knew from the beginning, to ask him about various topics. Because I wanted to create a more relaxed atmosphere, we met at a café. Here, we talked about interpretation (as he has been acting as an LGG

interpreter for a long time), the group division and the development of deaf people's social status over the years. Again, since we were in a public space, and to make him feel as at ease as possible, I did not film our conversation, but took notes instead.

Apart from these more formal question-answer exchanges, I profited from many occasions where I could chat, mainly with deaf people, but also with some hearing individuals. In these informal conversations, they would tell me about their lives, their homes, their families, their social interactions, their daily activities, their views on politics, cultural habits, and so much more.

#### 2.4.3 Documentary sources

For a more accurate sociolinguistic description of the deaf community of Guinea-Bissau and its sign language, I sought to confirm the data gathered through interviews, informal conversations and observations with available documentation.

To confirm the number of deaf students in the different schools of the country over the years, as well as the number of training courses nationwide, I consulted the schools' archives.

Finally, to embed deaf people's testimonies in the surrounding sociocultural context, I relied on data from the latest census, collected in 2009 and available studies on the topics covered.

## 2.5 Sociolinguistic description of the deaf community of Guinea-Bissau

In this section, profiling the deaf community of Guinea-Bissau, I describe the available statistical information (§2.5.1), the educational initiatives taken so far (§2.5.2), and how the community is organised in different meeting spaces (§2.5.3). In addition, I account for the kind of language contact that has occurred so far (§2.5.4) and the contexts of sign language use (§2.5.5).

For context, Guinea-Bissau is one of the smallest countries in Africa. The borders of a 36,125 km<sup>2</sup> territory separate it from Senegal to the north, Guinea-Conakry to the east and south and the Atlantic Ocean to the west.

### 2.5.1 Deaf people in society

To view deaf people in Guinea-Bissau as part of the broader socioeconomic community, I present a compilation of data from the latest census, collected in 2009 by the National Statistics Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Estatística*, henceforth INE), concerning the population in general and about deaf people in particular. Data about deaf people is included in the category of people with disabilities. Whenever possible, I also add information based on personal observations from visits between 2005 and 2024 (see §2.3).

#### 2.5.1.1 *Economy*

Guinea-Bissau has been through overwhelming political turbulence in its short history as a republic, including a civil war in 1998–1999 and several coups d'état and coup attempts. Only one president has completed his five-year mandate to the end (2014–2020). This instability jeopardises the national economy and social conditions, making the

GDP (gross domestic product) per capita and its Human Development Index one of the lowest in the world and ranking it as one of the ten poorest countries on earth according to a 2021 report by the International Fund for Agricultural Development of the United Nations.<sup>11</sup>

Subsistence agriculture, small-scale fishing and animal breeding are the main economic activities. At the same time, the country has been highly dependent on cashew production, representing more than 90% of its exports (World Bank 2010, xx, xv). To gain some financial credibility, Guinea-Bissau joined the CFA (*Communauté Financière d'Afrique*) monetary system in 1997, which was used in fourteen francophone countries of West and Central Africa and Equatorial Guinea. There is a high rural exodus, mainly to the capital, Bissau. Moreover, immigration is very low (2.7%), mainly from Senegal and Guinea-Conakry (INE 2009e, 33). In turn, the emigration of young men has been increasing, especially to Portugal, Senegal and Cape Verde (ibid., 44).

#### 2.5.1.2 *Everyday life*

Most of the population lives in large households, with an average of eight people each (INE 2009b, 13). The houses are mainly made of adobe or baked clay, and lack access to energy, running water, or basic sanitation. Under these conditions, most households use candlelight (70%) and fetch water from a well (68%), usually at a considerable distance. About a quarter (26%) do not have sanitary facilities in the house. The garbage is thrown on the street (53%), burned or buried (37%). This is also the case in the capital (ONU-Habitat 2019, 31).

Even if the historical centre in Bissau mirrors colonial architecture, with wide avenues and aligned buildings, the city has grown rapidly

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/operations/w/country/guinea-bissau> (accessed 03-03-2024).

and disproportionately up to more than 30 neighbourhoods (*ibid.*, 16–39). The spontaneous and unregulated expansion of the city outskirts has not been managed adequately, with increasing open sewers and litter piles (Mané 2019, 101). Such ‘villages’, as they are called, have expanded in a cluttered and disorderly way, similar to rural settlements, usually in family compounds around a tree or another natural marker, as exemplified in Figure 11a. Compounds share a small private quarter on the exterior for bathing and physiological needs. The common well generally serves a much larger area (Acioly 1993, 88), as shown in Figure 11b for the city of Ingoré.



**Figure 11.** Examples of a street and a well, respectively, in the neighbourhood of Reno, in Bissau (a), and the city of Ingoré (b) in 2024

Typically, the houses in Bissau neighbourhoods follow a Balanta style, a major ethnic group in the area. They are rectangular, with four to six rooms, and surrounded by a porch where people prepare food and wash clothes (*ibid.*, 89–90). They are mostly built from adobe or rammed earth, with a roof of zinc sheets or thatch (Vicente 2021, 47). Family life on compounds is projected to the outside of the houses (*ibid.*, 52–53). Here, an average of ten people per house foster

community relationships around exterior common spaces (ibid., 91). Many of the houses are limited in their interior to a bare minimum. Thus, from observations on the site, houses further away from the main streets do not have furniture, and people sleep on plain mats. In addition, sometimes, houses do not have wooden or zinc sheet shutters on their doors and windows, but cover them instead with fabrics.

In general, but also in Bissau, where a village-like lifestyle is maintained, the typical daily food is cooked on firewood (62%) or coal (33%) (ibid., 15), as shown in Figure 12, and consists mainly of rice or corn, vegetables, tubers and fruit. Fish from the sea and the rivers are highly consumed. Palm and cashew wines are also very popular (INE 2009d, 15). As I have systematically observed in a variety of contexts, people eat together from the same bowl, usually with their hands, as illustrated in Figure 12b.



**Figure 12.** Example of cooking carried out by deaf women (a) and during a meal with deaf men and women (b) in 2022

Despite being a poor country, most people have a cellular phone (85% in urban centres and 43% in rural areas) and a radio (79% in cities and 65% in rural areas). Televisions are owned primarily by people living

in urban areas (30%, the majority of whom live in Bissau) (INE 2009b, 104–105). From our observations (Marta Morgado and mine), especially in the last few field trips to Bissau, we saw that many deaf young adults had mobile phones to access social networks. However, owning a television is a rare commodity among the deaf, and the radio is obviously useless.

Finally, although many use a bicycle for transportation, especially outside the cities (47% in rural contexts and 23% in urban ones) (*ibid.*, 106), long-distance travel relies on shared vans, locally called ‘candongas’.<sup>12</sup> In Bissau, these same vans, with a capacity for 15 people seated plus a few more standing, are called ‘toca-toca’ (in Figure 13a) and, together with shared taxis (in Figure 13b), represent the local ‘public’ transportation. Otherwise, people tend to walk because the city is usually jammed with traffic. Transportation is primarily limited to the main roads because the neighbourhoods are connected by unpaved lanes where cars frequently cannot pass (Mané 2019, 103).

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<sup>12</sup> Branco, Sofia. Táxis, toca-toca e candongas: os heróis do asfalto na Guiné-Bissau. *Jornal Público*. October 6 2003. <https://www.pu-blico.pt/2003/10/06/mundo/noticia/taxis-tocatoca-e-candongas-os-herois-do-asfalto-na-guinebissau-1169503> (accessed 05-03-2024).





**Figure 13.** Public transportation in Bissau: the inside of a toca-toca with deaf passengers (a) and street view of taxis from inside a toca-toca (b) in 2024

### 2.5.1.3 Population

According to the latest census, Guinea-Bissau hosts a multiethnic population of about 1.5 million inhabitants<sup>13</sup> (INE, 2009c, 8). In the general population, there are slightly more women than men (INE 2009d, 24), mirroring what is observed in the total number of deaf people registered on that same occasion (INE 2009f, 43). A quarter of the entire population lives in the urban area of Bissau (INE 2009d, 23), where the main ethnic groups are the Fula, the Balanta, the Mandinga, and the Papel (INE 2009a, 26). Along with the multiethnicity, the majority of the population (90%) uses the Portuguese-based Creole of Guinea-Bissau (ISO 639 3 pov; Glottocode uppe1455) (INE 2009a, 36), locally designated as *Kriol* (e.g., Kohl 2018, 158) or *Guinensi* (Scantamburlo 2002), as a lingua franca (Kohl 2018).

<sup>13</sup> The latest estimate for 2022 is 2.105.566 inhabitants, according to the World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/guinea-bissau> (accessed 02-26-2024).

Most people (60%) live in rural areas (INE 2009d, 25). A similar proportion, 64%, is observed for deaf people living in rural settings (INE 2009f, 44). This is evenly distributed across the country's regions (*ibid.*, 47). The country's population grew 30% between 1991 and 2009, mainly due to its increase in the urban centres of Bissau and Gabu (INE 2009d, 27–28). In the overall country, at the time of the 2009 census, youth was predominant (the average age was 22 years old) (*ibid.*, 52–53), while there were only a few people over 65 years of age (3%). Life expectancy was 47 years of age (INE 2009b, 108), though, according to the World Bank<sup>14</sup>, by 2021, it had risen to 60. Analogously, most deaf people were young (60% were under 34) (INE 2009f, 49).

In general, the unemployment rate in the active population (over 15 years of age) was only 11% (INE 2009a, 57), considering that employment includes self-employed people and those working without payment in a household (INE 2009b, 74). This occurs similarly among deaf people over 15 who are primarily employed (60%), though without payment, either within their family network, as apprentices or on their own (INE 2009f, 76). Most deaf people live with their extended family in households with more than five people (*ibid.*, 84), coinciding with the average household size in the country, composed of 8 family members, mainly descendants and spouses (INE 2009b, 108).

In 2009, half of the Guineans over 15 years of age were illiterate (74% in 1991), most of those being female (63% in 2009, and 86% in 1991) (INE 2009c, 30–31). Although the country has reached gender equality in the admission rate of children at the start of the first grade, the proportion of drop-outs is higher among girls as they grow up (INE 2009c, 52–53). From the first to the sixth grade, compulsory education often lacks the necessary conditions and quality (*ibid.*, 16–17). As a result,

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<sup>14</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/country/guinea-bissau> (accessed 26-02-2024).

students are usually much older than expected for their grade level, and school attendance gradually decreases the higher the level of education (ibid., 53–58). Escalating these data, the majority of deaf people (70%) at the time of the 2009 census (only a few years after the first school for the deaf was established in Bissau) had never attended school (INE 2009f, 59).

In sum, deaf people reflect the general characteristics of the population, as a very young, multiethnic group, though with slightly more men than women. They are overall more spread across rural areas than concentrated in urban centres. A large percentage, especially of women, is illiterate and lives with extended family, where many contribute to the household economy.

#### 2.5.1.4 *Social roles*

Gender roles, led by cultural and religious norms, are uneven in Guinean society. Men are more associated with public, social spaces, while women are relegated to the domestic realm (Roque 2011, 30). Gender and the power relations related to it are internalised as natural (Silva 2019, 6) in such a way that they determine how genders feel compelled to behave in society (ibid., 21). Although they may be seen as having complementary roles, social hierarchies inevitably arise (Lundy et al. 2018, 39–40).

In Guinea-Bissau, the traditional notion of family is not based on the couple unit but on the extension of its members (Lundy et al. 2018, 40). In this context, families deriving from polygamous unions are commonplace across ethnic groups (usually of animist and Muslim beliefs) (Có 2006, 33), including in urban contexts (Domingues 2000, 514). Men are typically the head of the family (Roque 2011, 38), although women are self-sufficient in the informal economy (Domingues 2000, 510; Roque 2011, 53). Generally, women are expected to carry out all

household chores, namely cleaning, preparing food, fetching water, and washing clothes, while caring for children and working on food production or selling (Urdang 1979, 104–106).

Unbalanced power relations are culturally maintained, for instance, by limiting women's participation in managing their income (Silva 2019, 14) or denying them access to inherit the property of their late husband or father (Roque & Negrão 2009, 19). Hierarchised social roles where the authority is associated with men over women, older adults over children (ibid., 14) are socially accepted as "normal", "part of the culture", and "as it has always been" (ibid., 8, emphasis in the original).

Since social roles are much influenced by religion, it becomes relevant to note that, in Guinea-Bissau, there is a long-standing cohabitation between Muslims (45%), Christians (22%), and animist religions (15%) (INE 2009a, 27). Especially in Muslim groups, such as the Fula, the Mandinga and the Balanta, women have a lower status, typically bearing a submissive position towards men (ibid., 107–108, 112). In general, this gender-based imbalance occurs across West Africa, where the systemic patriarchy assigns women a lesser social status, often leaving them outside of education and constrained to domestic tasks (Tuwor & Sossou 2008).

#### 2.5.1.5 *Physical abuse*

Violent acts against women carried out in the name of tradition include genital mutilation and forced marriage. Female genital mutilation is practised mainly by ethnic groups who are predominantly Muslims – Fula, Mandinga and Beafada (Roque 2011, 65) – as a rite of passage to adulthood (designated as *Fanadu* in Creole). It is inflicted on around 2000 girls per year (Roque & Negrão 2009, 17) throughout the country (with less expression in the coastal area), with a total incidence of 45% of the Guinean women (Roque & Negrão 2009, 17).

In marriages arranged by families as a commercial exchange, girls are between 12 and 16 years of age, and their husbands are, on average, 20 years older than they are (Roque & Negrão 2009, 16–17). This often results in early pregnancies (Roque 2011, 20) and consequently decreases young women's access to education. Such early pregnancies may also derive from installed practices of sexual abuse (Roque 2011, 54). This crime represented 70% of the cases reported against children during the years 2004 and 2005, involving primarily girls between 12 and 16 (Roque & Negrão 2009, 15). Because the majority of the sexual abusers are family members and neighbours (Roque 2011, 115), silence is the rule among the victims (Có 2006, 40), and aggressors usually go unpunished (Roque & Negrão 2009, 15). Such a crime is so ingrained in power relationships against women and children that they are often ignored due to cultural acceptance or shame (*ibid.*, 16).

Overall, due to hierarchical gender roles and the expectation of assigning women to domestic chores, which is sustained by the school curriculum, girls are kept from going to school. Moreover, they are frequently exposed to the risk of sexual assault along lengthy distances to and from school and at school by the teachers themselves (*ibid.*, 25). On top of sexual abuse, hitting a child as punishment is considered 'normal' behaviour by adults both at home and at school (Có 2006, 29).

#### 2.5.1.6 *Deafness*

The healthcare system in such a poor country is particularly fragile, as the World Health Organisation states<sup>15</sup>. This results in people rarely

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.who.int/about/accountability/results/who-results-report-2020-mtr/country-story/2020/strengthening-guinea-bissau-s-national-health-system-through-infection-prevention-and-control> (accessed 04-03-2024).

being formally diagnosed with a hearing impairment and in the fact that auditory and speech rehabilitation are practically non-existent to the present day. Before there was an educational facility prepared for the deaf, they rarely attended school at all, and many did not even have an identity card. However, the inability to hear does not seem to have impeded deaf people from contributing to subsistence activities.

In Guinea-Bissau, a child with a disability is traditionally seen as a curse to the family, especially amongst the Balanta, the Manjaco and the Mancanha. From time to time, they are thrown into the sea or to the termites because they are said to belong to the god of water or the earth. Under such a stigma, they are often hidden within the family (INE 2009f, 20). Due to limited, non-standard, or absent speech, deaf people are commonly addressed as 'deaf-mutes' or 'mutes' and have often been kept out of school, especially outside Bissau. Nonetheless, they have remained active participants in daily family activities.

The 2009 population census in Guinea-Bissau assessed the population with different disabilities, including the so-called 'deaf-mutes' and 'mutes'. These labels were used in an open question to the heads of the families concerning existing disabilities in any of the family members. The interviewees gave out the designations commonly associated with deafness, which refers to the lack of hearing and speech abilities. These were both identified as hearing impairments for the survey's purpose (ibid., 27). Thus, I will henceforth treat them as a single group of deaf people. With this in mind, there were, in that year, 1,702 deaf people in Guinea-Bissau (819 'mutes' and 883 'deaf-mutes'), representing 0.12% of the overall population. Such a percentage is lower than the one estimated for other sub-Saharan countries (e.g., Tingang et al. 2020, who observed a variation between 0.9% and 3.6% in the prevalence of deafness in 17 population-based studies in Cameroon). The 2009 census informs that, in Guinea-Bissau, deafness is mainly acquired at birth (38%) or through a disease (48%) (INE 2009f, 52), primarily malaria and

meningitis, confirming the weakness of the health system. Thus, given the proportional disparity compared to other African countries, I hypothesise that many deaf people were left out of this survey. In fact, during our (Marta Morgado and mine) first field trip to Bissau in 2005, we were told that many deaf people did not have an identity card. One of the hearing teachers working with deaf students since the beginning said to me in 2022 that, in his earliest visits to Gabu, families would hide their deaf relatives since some of them did not even have a name.

#### *2.5.1.7 Deaf population*

Unfortunately, there is no updated survey on the deaf population of Guinea-Bissau. It is, however, clear that, with the establishment of the first specialised schools, deaf people rushed to the urban sites, especially Bissau. Such a tendency echoes in the deaf people concentrated in Bissau, the general pattern of internal migration, and an overall very young age and multiethnic background. What is more, a significant number of deaf students are over 15, tending to work while getting schooled. Figure 14 shows the iconic monument in the city centre celebrating the national heroes and the sign name for 'Bissau' depicting it.



**Figure 14.** National Heroes monument in the city centre of Bissau and the sign for Bissau in LGG

As their academic levels rise, their social autonomy and self-sufficiency increase while, in some cases, living in their family compounds. In Bissau, many deaf men work in groups, especially in fish and cement brick-related activities. The fish-related work is the most appealing to deaf men, as they get paid on the spot. Since the most challenging part of the job is going fishing offshore, they prefer working in the harbour, which involves unloading the boat (Figure 15a), washing it, and selling the fish at the local market (Figure 15b).

Additionally, one deaf man, after learning the trade, created his own business as a brickmaker, hiring only deaf employees (Figure 15c). One



has a kiosk of food and beverage items. Another is a barber walking around with his tools to do men's hair with special prices for the deaf. Recently, one deaf man started working as a security guard for the government, where he is praised for his exceptional eyesight.

Women are more likely to work individually as hawkers within a household working system (Figure 15d). There are, however, exceptions, such as one who bakes cakes (Figure 15e) and another working at a daycare centre, mainly as a cook.



**Figure 15. Deaf people working in Bissau:** deaf men unloading a fishing boat in Bissau's harbour (a), selling the fish at the harbour's market (b), working in brick making (c), a deaf woman selling peanut cakes (d) and carrying cake moulds for baking (e) in 2024

Similar to what occurs in Bissau, deaf people of Ingoré – a city in the north, near the border with Senegal (in Figure 22) – are becoming increasingly self-sufficient. In 2024, Marta was told that there were ten carpenters, eight tailors and four car mechanics among deaf men, and women worked mainly as seamstresses. Here, the majority of deaf people also study and work.

The information described above is based on observations from Marta Morgado's (January 2024) and my latest field trips to Bissau (February 2017, December 2018, and October 2022). It is essential to add to such descriptions the significant improvement that occurred, as a consequence, in the way society looks at deaf people. In 2022, I talked to hearing teachers working with the deaf since the beginning about this mentality change. One confirmed a significant evolution in the attitude towards deaf people because they have been doing everything by themselves without being embarrassed by their deafness. Usually, when deaf people do not know something, they point it out and ask about it. Another teacher believes that they are now looked at as equals. Nonetheless, when I talked to the teacher of a deaf young man studying civil engineering at a university in Bissau, he did not show any faith in his abilities to graduate successfully.

I should also note that, despite the increasing professional autonomy of deaf people, they still live in extreme poverty. Hence, following the idea ingrained in the minds of the general population, many believe they would be better off if they 'flew away to the land of the white'. From the deaf community in Bissau, I am only aware of four deaf men and one woman who emigrated to Portugal, with two returning later.

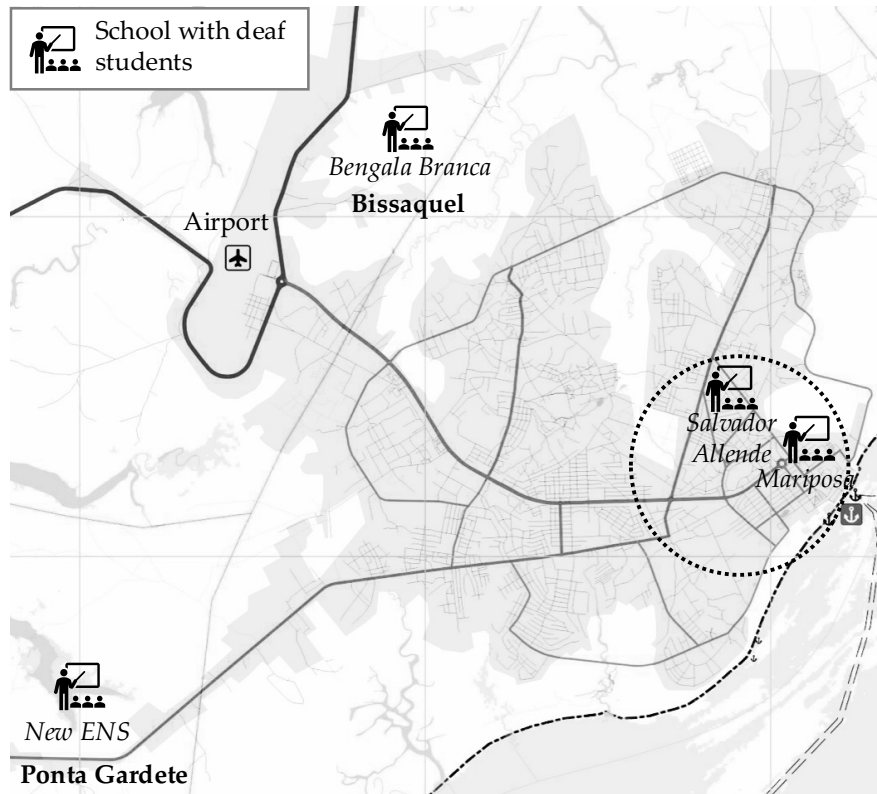
At the moment, the only documentation available to assess a more realistic number of deaf people is the one provided by school enrolments, described further in the following subsection.

### 2.5.2 Deaf school(s) as the privileged sharing space(s)

This subsection thoroughly describes the chronological establishment of different educational spaces as meeting places for a growing deaf community in Bissau. In addition, various educational initiatives are examined throughout the country. Besides the number of deaf enrolments in school, I list teachers' training and approaches to promoting deaf education.

As mentioned in the previous subsection, before there were special schools, the vast majority of deaf people were left without education. For instance, back in 2005, Marta and I met a 16-year-old deaf boy who had never attended school. He communicated with gestures with his father and made a living out of selling his candle holders made of soda cans. This began to change in 2003 when the recently founded school for the blind started receiving deaf children as well. After this first year, the number of enrolments of deaf students continued to increase to such an extent that a deaf-only school was established in Bissau in 2006, the National School for the Deaf (*Escola Nacional de Surdos* – ENS), followed by another one, ten years later, also in Bissau, designated as *Mariposa* (meaning 'Butterfly').

Meanwhile, schools across the country were setting up classes for the deaf. Before going into further detail about each of the schools in Bissau, it is important to visualise how they were first set up in the city centre and then relocated to the outskirts of the city (Figure 16). I note that it all started at the premises of a public school called Salvador Alende in the city centre. This school began by housing the school for the blind, named 'Bengala Branca', then the school for the deaf, the ENS, and remained the primary pick-up point when buses started taking deaf students to the new ENS building at Ponta Gardete. It also remains a meeting place for ENS students on weekends.



**Figure 16.** Map of the current locations of the schools receiving deaf students in Bissau, with the city centre within a circle: public school Salvador Allende, Mariposa school, new location of the ENS in Ponta Gardete, and new location of the school Bengala Branca in Bissaquel (road map in ONU-Habitat 2019, 23)

#### 2.5.2.1 School Bengala Branca, a.k.a. BLIND SCHOOL

Before there was a formal meeting place, deaf people were likely to have a few deaf neighbours or even family members. The first place where deaf people were able to gather in more significant numbers happened somewhat by accident. The school for the blind was created by the Guinean Association for the Blind (*Associação Guineense de*

*Reabilitação e Integração dos Cegos – AGRICE*) in 2002. It began by occupying a couple of blocks in a public school in the centre of Bissau, the Salvador Allende, very close to the Ministry of Education. Since the president of AGRICE and headmaster of the school *Bengala Branca* (meaning ‘White Cane’), Manuel Lopes, was a strong advocate for disabled people in general, it was without surprise that, in the following year, families started bringing their deaf children to the school for the blind.<sup>16</sup> I briefly add a side note here that the pairing between the sensory impairments is readily made when information is scarce.<sup>17</sup>

During the second year of the school for the blind *Bengala Branca*, between October 2003 and June 2004, there were almost 20 deaf children. The following year, they had more than doubled to 50, surpassing the blind students, and in 2005/2006, they were already more than 80 (Figure 17a). In 2006, it became too evident that the educational approaches for the two types of students were distinct. For that reason, Manuel Lopes, AGRICE’s president and *Bengala Branca*’s headmaster, had a fallout with José Augusto Lopes, his then secretary, because the former wanted to keep all students at the school, *Bengala Branca*, and the latter wanted to educate the deaf in a separate school. As a result, they parted ways, and José Augusto Lopes created the National School for the Deaf (*Escola Nacional de Surdos – ENS*), keeping the same premises at the public school Salvador Allende, in the city centre (Figure 17b). That same year, the school *Bengala Branca* moved to another

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<sup>16</sup> To exemplify this, the first special schools in Sweden and Portugal also aimed at deaf and blind students. These were the ‘General Institute for the Blind and the Deaf-Mute’, founded in Stockholm in 1809 (Bergman & Engberg-Pedersen 2010, 87), and the ‘Royal Institute of Deaf-Mute and Blind’, established in Lisbon in 1823 (Carvalho & Carmo 2023, 12).

<sup>17</sup> As an anecdote, for working with deaf people, I have sometimes been asked if I use braille, which I know is something that many deaf people have experienced as well.

neighbourhood, taking with it about ten deaf students. In 2007, the permanent building of the school for the blind was set up in Bissaquel, on the outskirts of Bissau.



**Figure 17.** School block with deaf students at the public school Salvador Allende in the centre of Bissau, in 2005 with the logo of AGRICE (a), and in 2008 with the logo of the ENS (b)

Before moving out in 2006, Manuel Lopes built a home to accommodate both blind and deaf students who wished to attend the school Bengala Branca but had no family support in Bissau. It started with eight deaf children, who got fewer every year until there was only one in 2013. This deaf boy, Usna Nhaga, a second-year university student of Civil Engineering, was the only deaf person at the home for the blind during my last field trip in 2022. Since no statistical data was available about the years preceding 2014, he also provided me with information from what he remembered about the number of deaf students at both the school and the home. Thus, between 2003 and 2006, the number of deaf enrolments was kept at the ENS records. From 2007 to 2013, Usna remembers an average of ten deaf students per year, at Bengala Branca, in both the school and the home. This was maintained until 2020. In

the few years that followed, only a few deaf students were left. Between 2010 and 2016, Usna attended a mainstream high school from the sixth to the twelfth grade. One of the deaf students who left in 2010 said that he was leaving because there were few deaf students, and he preferred to be around more deaf people at the ENS.

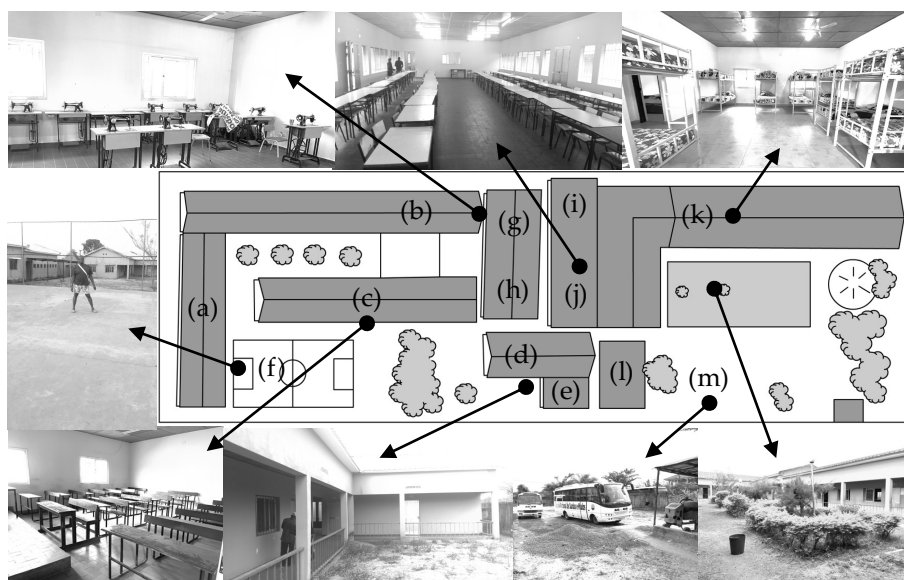
At the school Bengala Branca, classes from the first to the ninth grade included not only the blind and the very few deaf but also students with no disabilities. Despite having access to the LGG dictionary published in 2008, and their deaf students being LGG users, teachers at the Bengala Branca did not use LGG as an educational medium.

#### *2.5.2.2 National School for the Deaf (ENS)*

The ENS started in 2006 with 150 deaf students and grew yearly to around 500 students in 2021. With the rise of enrolments by deaf students, the school got funding from the Portuguese Cooperation (an agency of the Portuguese government) to build a new building in Ponta Gardete, 10 kilometres away from the city centre, where it was relocated in 2015.

Hence, from a previous sign name of SCHOOL BISSAU, it became known as NEW^SHOW. These premises, built from scratch, were large enough to accommodate the increasing enrolments with a maximum capacity of 1,600 students and provide housing for 120 children. However, the necessary support to secure student housing has yet to be obtained. Without housing, deaf enrolments were not sufficient to fill the ample space of the new building. Hence, hearing students from the surrounding area have also been admitted since its inception in 2015, reaching around 600 in 2022. Still, the deaf are taught in deaf-only classes from kindergarten to the ninth grade. In high school (tenth and eleventh grades), deaf students are in mainstream classes with the hearing

without LGG interpretation. Figure 18 displays the top view of the new ENS building, indicating all rooms and their corresponding functions.

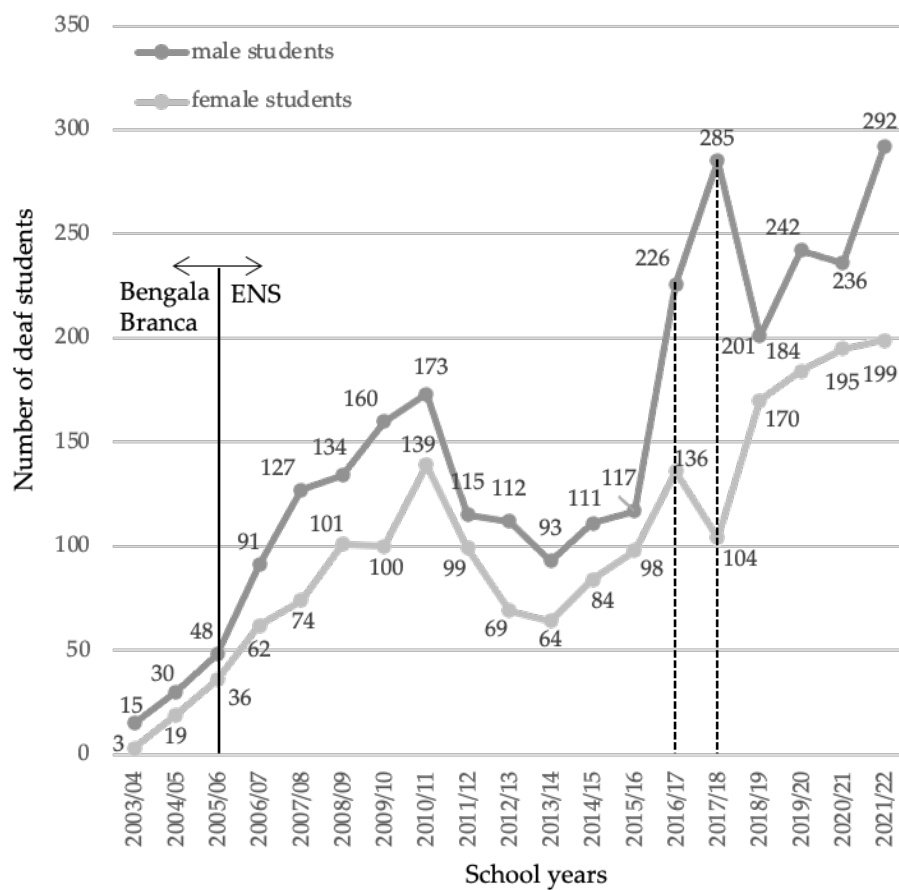


**Figure 18.** Top view of the new ENS building showing the blocks for hearing students' classes (a), high school classes (b), third to ninth-grade classes of deaf students (c), first and second-grade classes of deaf students (d), kindergarten of deaf children (e), sports' field (f), sewing class (g), administration (h), kitchen (i), canteen (j), dormitories (k), storage (l), and open space for brick making and bus parking (m) (picture of the school from satellite map)

Notably, the ENS is a private school, which implies the payment of fees, considered by many to be high. Student transportation became crucial since its new location is far from the city. Two buses, one with 56 seating places and another with 30, were obtained only later, in 2017. I recall that the data on students' enrolment over the years was collected at the archives of the Bengala Branca and the ENS.



In the years when the school was not able to provide transportation for the students, the enrolments showed, all the same, an increase in male students, contrasting with a decrease in female students (probably resulting from the danger of sexual assaults when walking long distances as pointed out in §2.5.1.5). As shown in Figure 19, the statistical data available at the ENS by gender shows that there have always been more male than female students, reflecting the general tendency in the country. One of the hearing teachers at the ENS adds that many girls in Guinea-Bissau still do not attend school or enrol later.



**Figure 19.** Number of enrolments of deaf students at the ENS since 2003/04 per gender, showing a more significant gap during the years the ENS moved to Ponta Gardete but did not have transportation (between pointed lines)

Another decline in deaf students occurred in the old building between 2011 and 2016. This was motivated by a wave of dissatisfaction from a group of older deaf students against the school administration, resulting in the expulsion from the ENS of about a hundred deaf people in 2013, though some returned. Such a distressing event left a profound mark on the history of the local deaf community and will, therefore, be further described in this section. Even so, at the ENS, the first few deaf students finished the twelfth grade in 2018. In 2020, the school began vocational training in sewing and brickmaking in cooperation with mainstream vocational training schools. The sewing instructor was a young deaf woman who had graduated. In 2022, she had about 20 deaf trainees, three of whom were deaf young men. In turn, the brickmaking training ran with around ten deaf male apprentices.

The ENS headmaster, José Augusto Lopes, explained that the school invested in brickmaking materials so that the deaf trainees could turn it into a self-sufficient business from which they could earn a monthly income. As a similar initiative, he invested in a fish-selling cooperative for deaf women.

#### 2.5.2.3 *Mariposa school, a.k.a. BUTTERFLY*

The dissident group of deaf people banned from the ENS in 2013 ended up being left out of school for the following two years. In 2015, they secured a temporary classroom at the school for the blind. One year later, they were given a small building of a former public school in the city centre, which they called *Mariposa*, meaning ‘butterfly’. From 2016 to 2019, the school had an average of 50 deaf students per

year, while in the following couple of years, the number of enrolments almost doubled. The school was composed of one decaying block with two classrooms. In the subsequent years, Amaré Soares assumed the leadership of the Mariposa and lobbied for financial support, including among the Portuguese deaf community. As a result, deaf people gradually renovated the building and built a second block with two more classrooms (Figures 20a and 20b), with a capacity for 30 seats each (in two daily shifts). When there was the need to hire professional help, such as brickmakers, painters, or carpenters, deaf workers were always favoured – one of them even came from Ingoré, 80 kilometres from Bissau, to help out.



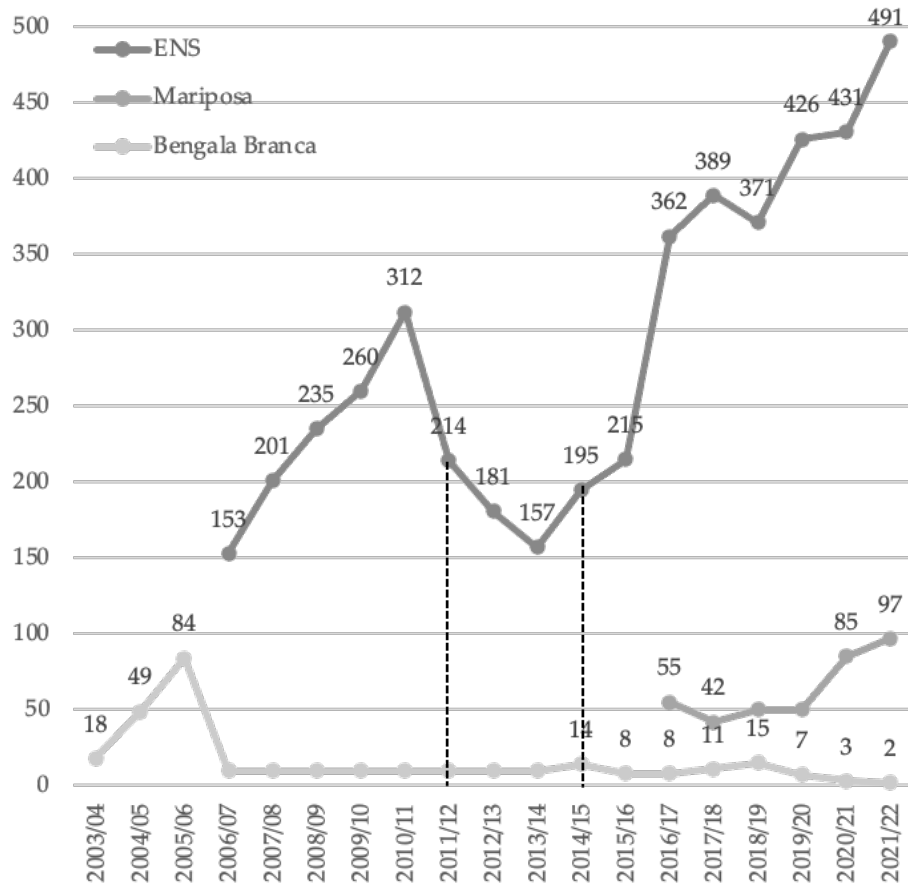
**Figure 20.** The second block being built from scratch by deaf men (a) in 2022, and the two buildings when ready (b) in 2024

The Mariposa school started in 2016 with two deaf teachers (Amaré Soares and one deaf woman who had been working for many years at the ENS with younger children) and five hearing teachers who were quite fluent in LGG, as stated by the deaf themselves (three often acting as interpreters). In 2022, there were seven hearing teachers and three deaf ones. As was the case in the ENS (including the years before

2006 as school Bengala Branca), the Mariposa school also showed differences in the number of attendances by male and female students. For example, in 2021/22, there were 62 male and 35 female students from first to tenth grade, with an average of six male and four female deaf students per class. It is essential to point out that most students at Mariposa are older students – teenagers and young adults. The gender difference is not a surprise considering the general educational context in Guinea-Bissau.

Amaré, as leader of the Mariposa school, has made a point of maintaining it as public so that the government is obliged to provide the necessary support. Rice and fish from the World Food Programme are also served daily.

Considering the total number of deaf students' enrolment in the different schools for the deaf in Bissau (in Figure 21), it is estimated that there is a minimum number of 590 deaf people constituting a community in the country's capital. I say 'minimum' because it is well-known that there are many deaf people who are part of the community but do not attend school. This is so because they chose to work full-time; or they are girls who got pregnant or were restrained by their families to stay home; or they are older and never actually went to school.

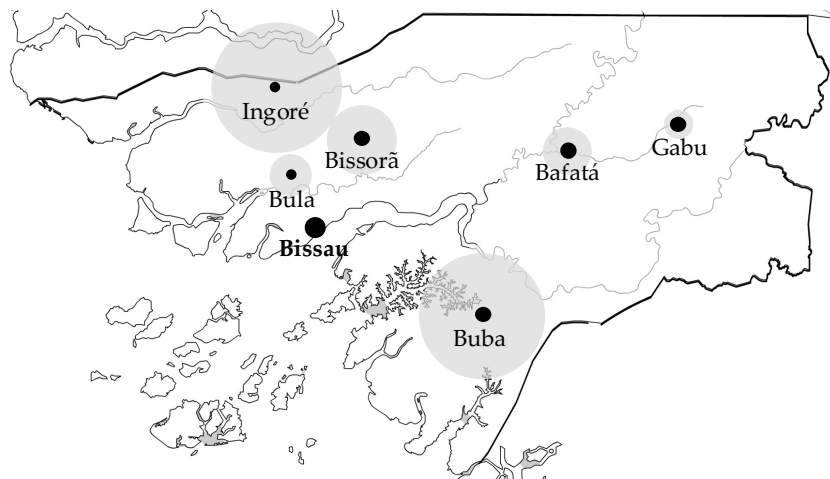


**Figure 21.** Number of enrolments of deaf students in Bissau since 2003/04 per school (dots without number labels correspond to estimated numbers), showing a more significant gap in ENS enrolments during the years a group of deaf people rose against the school administration (between pointed lines)

Besides the three schools receiving deaf students in Bissau, there are others across the country with smaller groups.

#### 2.5.2.4 Other schools in the country

Unfortunately, I could not collect in situ data about the exact number of deaf students attending other schools in the country. Nevertheless, I rely on a report carried out by the ENS in 2017 concerning Gabu and Bafatá; on a survey led by the Centre of Deaf Youth in Ingoré, Bissorã and Bula, in 2022, updated for Ingoré by the local deaf leader in 2024; and on information gathered during teachers' training and students' exchanges across the country carried out by Amaré Soares (deaf LGG teacher responsible for the Mariposa school). This was especially relevant in his visit to Buba in 2014, where he identified around 60 deaf students. Such a number is similar to the 62 identified in Ingoré, where the local deaf leader quickly added that many more deaf people were left out of school. Overall, in addition to the 590 deaf students in Bissau, 212 are put forward in the rest of the country. The six cities across the country and the approximate number of deaf students are shown in Figure 22.



**Figure 22.** Map of other cities of Guinea-Bissau with deaf students identified in approximate numbers: Ingoré (62), Bula (20), Bissorã (33), Bafatá (23), Gabu (14) and Buba (60)

The ENS report on the educational situation in Gabu and Bafatá stated that deaf students were scattered in different public schools. Even so, in both cities, one of the schools had a higher concentration of deaf students. In this way, there were six schools in Bafatá, with at least one deaf child each, except for one school called 'Amizade China' (meaning 'China Friendship'), which accounted for 17 of the total 23 deaf students. Similarly, in Gabu, there were five schools with at least one deaf student, of which only the school called 'Caetano Semedo' had eight deaf children out of 14. Also, in these two cities, the Guinean Association for the Blind, AGRICE, had student homes. In Bafatá in 2020, there were four deaf children in its local home, while in Gabu in 2021, there were two deaf children. All of these were attending schools with higher concentrations of deaf students.

In Ingoré, there was also a home, but it was only for deaf boys (the girls' house had been closed down). Here, the missionary in charge of the deaf school pays for their education until the sixth grade. After that, the deaf are on their own, and most quit school.

#### 2.5.2.5 *Teachers' training*

Teachers working with deaf students began with short training courses in bilingual deaf education and deaf studies by Marta Morgado and me in 2005 and 2008, and by a deaf Portuguese Sign Language teacher, Marta's colleague at the Lisbon school for the deaf, Amílcar Morais, in 2016. From the beginning, hearing teachers became aware of the importance of using deaf people's signs in teaching. However, only one has become fluent enough to act as an interpreter when needed. Apart from these awareness-raising short courses, hearing teachers had no other formal training in how to teach deaf children. Nonetheless, two teachers went to Lisbon for a three-month internship at the school for the deaf and at the deaf association in 2008 and 2011.

In addition, the headmaster of the ENS, José Augusto Lopes (former secretary of AGRICE), made a point of having young deaf people as sign language instructors in every classroom. So far, formal training in sign language teaching has only been received by Amaré Soares. Being the only deaf participant present in the 2005 teacher training, he was also the only deaf person identified at that time as having already graduated (he was a second-year university student of Economics that year). Because of that, he was immediately invited to attend the four-year course at the Portuguese Deaf Association.<sup>18</sup> When he returned in 2009, he only trained one other young deaf man as an LGG instructor. Even without any training, in 2017, the ENS employed 12 deaf instructors, and in 2022, there were ten deaf instructors and five deaf assistants. Of the deaf instructors, two completed a regular teacher's course at a higher education institution in Bissau in 2022, one from the ENS and the other from the Mariposa school.

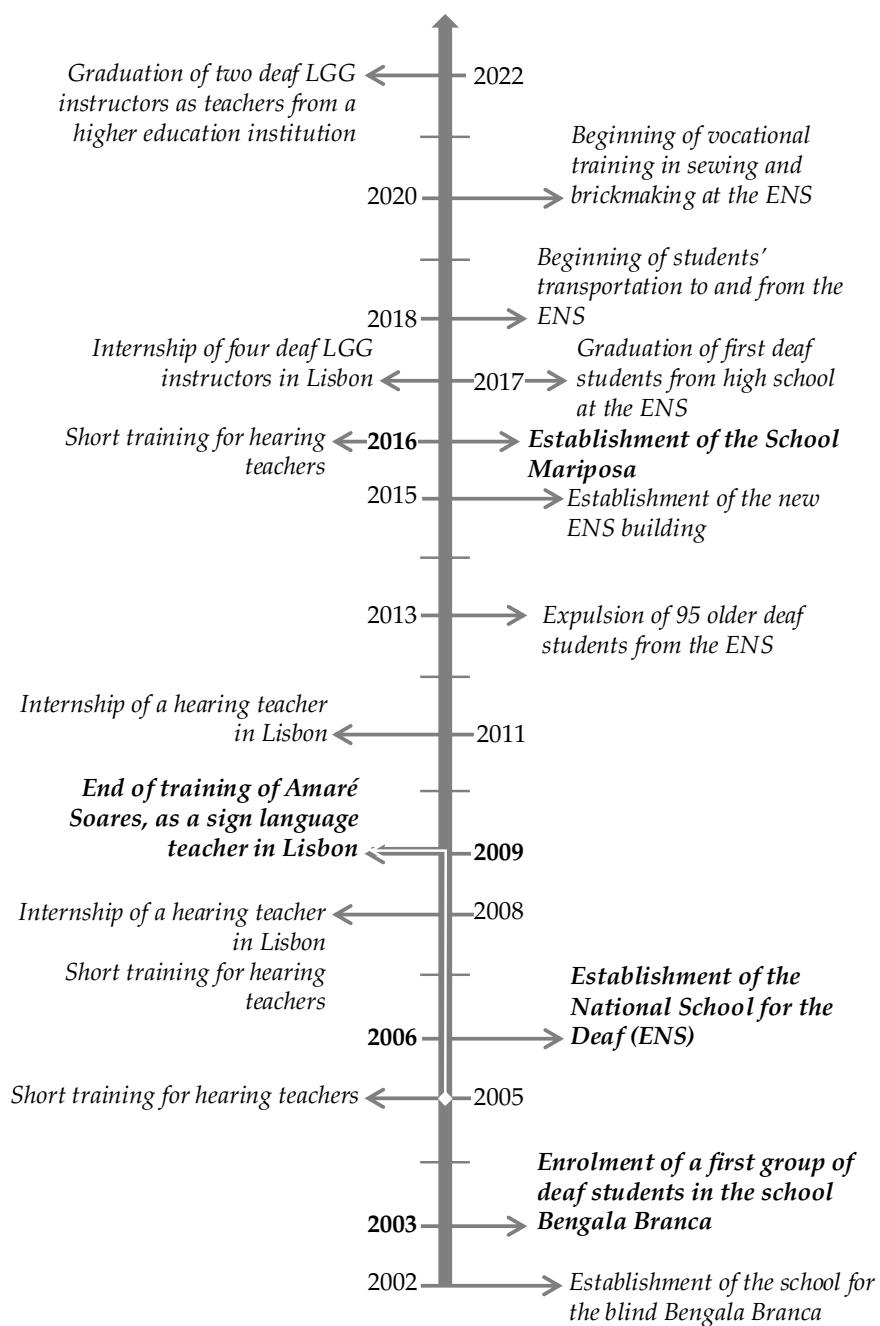
Moreover, José Augusto Lopes promoted the training of hearing teachers working with deaf children in other schools in the country. Amaré Soares led most of this training, which he pursued after leaving the ENS. Besides raising awareness in a couple of high schools, mainstreaming deaf students in Bissau, he provided teachers' training in Buba, Bissorã, Bafatá and Gabu.

Figure 23 summarises the main events outlining the history of education for the deaf in Bissau. The right side refers to the establishment of the three schools for deaf students, and the left side to various training sessions carried out by teachers and deaf students.

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<sup>18</sup> A deaf woman from Cape Verde was also invited to join this class of sign language teaching trainees between 2005 and 2009.





**Figure 23. Chronology of relevant events concerning the education of deaf people in Bissau (with most relevant events in bold)**

#### 2.5.2.6 *Educational approaches*

Ultimately, attitudes towards deaf people and their sign language in Bissau were crucial to developing a deaf community centred in the school space and stretching to the outside world. In a context where there is no medical rehabilitation for hearing loss, teachers readily use sign language as the easiest way to communicate with the deaf. In classrooms with deaf students, sign language replaced Creole, the most used spoken language, especially in Bissau. Considering that all school materials are in written Portuguese, deaf education became – without being planned – bilingual in both LGG and written Portuguese.

To intentionally develop LGG, the headmaster of the ENS carried out two critical initiatives: promoting social interactions between the different classes of deaf students and investing in deaf instructors. When the ENS was located in the city centre, at the public school Salvador Allende, the rising number of deaf enrolments had to be divided into shifts to fit the available classrooms. For example, in 2012/13, ten classes from kindergarten to the eighth grade were organised in two four-hour shifts, with four groups in the morning, corresponding to the younger children, and six in the afternoon. In such circumstances, between 2005 and 2015, Friday was established as the day for cultural activities, enabling extra-curricular activities for all deaf students.

When Amaré returned from Portugal in 2009 as a fully trained sign language teacher, he began teaching LGG as a formal course to deaf students throughout all school levels at the ENS. He taught three hours per week per class until the fourth grade and two hours per week in older classes until the ninth grade. He worked on LGG with students by developing story retelling, understanding grammatical aspects, and discussing topics from the dictionary published in 2008. On Fridays, he used to play videos, such as Charlie Chaplin, Mr Bean, and Jackie

Chan movies and the 'Switched at Birth' series. However, when running the Mariposa school, there was no electricity to show videos until 2022. Besides showing videos, Amaré also organised field trips to the city's monuments and student exchanges involving sports and games with deaf students in other cities, such as Bula, Bafatá and Gabu.

After he left the ENS in 2014, his trainee, Martinho Monteiro, continued his work. By 2022, Martinho and another deaf male graduate were formally teaching LGG. Apart from these two LGG instructors, the remaining eight deaf graduates taught school content. Figure 24a portrays one of them. Of the eight deaf instructors, three women were responsible for the lower classes. Two were working with a hearing teacher in the two preschool classes. The third one taught all the educational content to a first-grade class. The remaining deaf instructors, up to the fourth grade, were also teaching curriculum content. From the fifth to the ninth grade, deaf instructors worked in pairs with a deaf assistant (who had not graduated yet), teaching specific courses, such as mathematics, natural and social sciences, visual education and Portuguese. Amaré himself, as a teacher at the Mariposa school, stopped teaching LGG and went on to teach Portuguese and English to the deaf students instead, as he felt his skills would be better used there (in Figure 24b).



**Figure 24. Bilingual classes given in LGG by deaf instructors:** a deaf instructor with a deaf assistant giving a class of Mathematics to deaf students at the ENS (a) in 2022, and Amaré giving a class of English to deaf students at the Mariposa school in 2018 (d)

Although it is used as the primary language of instruction, policies or an LGG curriculum have yet to be issued. Thus, the only materials available are two dictionaries and a few informal videos on social media. Nonetheless, this subsection showed how decisive the school setting was in boosting a deaf community in Bissau and a sign language that would spread across the country with teachers' training. It has also been seminal in raising deaf people's academic levels and, consequently, their social autonomy. Yet, in 2022, as much as school played a determining role, it was outside its walls that the community spread its wings, as described in the following subsection.

### 2.5.3 Meeting spaces of a growing deaf community

The consolidation of the deaf community in Bissau undoubtedly stems from the frequency and intensity with which deaf people meet outside the school context, even before there was a school for the deaf. On top of a diversity of regular meetings, the deaf people of Bissau went

through an episode of significant unfairness that they rose against together, and ultimately made them stronger. As it is a sensitive topic involving charges still wrapped up in court as of this printing, I will omit the names of the accused and limit myself to how deaf people felt about it and how they grew from that collective feeling as a group. Descriptions of this event and its consequences are based on informal conversations and several interviews during my field trips in 2017, 2018 and 2022.

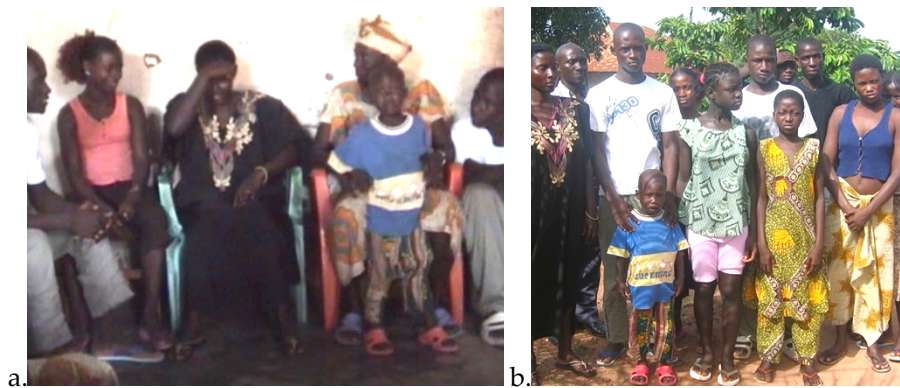
#### *2.5.3.1 Deaf meetings before the establishment of the school*

Amaré Soares's role is instrumental in supporting the establishment of a local deaf community. He became deaf at the age of eight as a result of malaria. For that reason, he could speak Creole and read and write in Portuguese (and English). He was also very well aware of his deafness. Thus, when he became acquainted with other deaf people in his neighbourhood, Quelelé, they naturally began to meet regularly at a 'cinema salon' (an informal place where people gather to watch movies). When Marta Morgado and I met Amaré in 2005, we met almost daily with about eight or nine deaf men. Deaf women were also around, but rarely joined the men. This group consisted of a total of about twenty deaf people of different ages, he said. At the time, none of these deaf people were going to school. He explained that even though they sought each other's company, the signs used to communicate and the topics discussed were, at that point, limited to the movie they were watching and sports.

The topic of sports, especially related to football, is a typically male-dominated space, also in Africa (Alegi 2010, 119). In Guinea-Bissau, among the hearing people, it is common to see boys playing football outside and groups of men watching European football at some bar, especially from the Portuguese League. Such interest is often

manifested in heated discussions about football among men (Bitchala & Caetano 2023, 11). The male preference for specific topics is also observed in deaf signers of LaSiMa in the semantic fields of football and vehicles (Nyst 2015, 137).

Amaré also noted that this type of gathering was likely happening in other neighbourhoods. That year, Amaré invited his deaf neighbours to his house so that we could meet them (in Figure 25a). The youngest was a deaf four-year-old boy, and most of them were young adults. Figure 25b portrays the group of deaf people present at that day's gathering.



**Figure 25.** Deaf people meeting in Amaré Soares' house (on the left with white t-shirt), in the neighbourhood of Quelelé in Bissau (a) and outside for a group photo (b) in 2005

Probably because he had concerned parents who fostered his interest in reading, Amaré got into the university to study Economics when most deaf people were still out of school. As the only graduate deaf person during our first visit to Bissau in 2005, he was invited to do the four-year training in sign language teaching at the Portuguese Deaf Association, interrupting his second-year study at the university. It is

important to note that Amaré left for four years at a time when deaf individuals, isolated in their neighbourhoods and villages, came together in large numbers in a school that opened its doors to them. In other words, during Amaré's absence, there was an ongoing community-building centred in the school space.

#### 2.5.3.2 *Deaf association (AS-GB)*

In 2006, we (Amaré, Marta and I) returned to Bissau to collect signs for the LGG dictionary. This same year, the ENS was created, as well as a deaf association (*Associação de Surdos da Guiné-Bissau* – AS-GB) to which Amaré was elected the president. The deaf association became responsible for the deaf school, working from a small office next to the deaf students' classrooms. While Amaré pursued his teacher training in Lisbon, the school headmaster became a successful lobbyist for the deaf cause, supporting teachers' payment, students' feeding, education materials, infrastructures, transportation, etc.

However, when Amaré returned to Guinea-Bissau in 2009, he became aware of general dissatisfaction because students were fed only once a week, although they were supposed to eat daily at school. Older deaf students knew plenty of food was in the storage because they would usually be asked to unload the sacks of rice from the UN's World Food Programme trucks. They also argued that the amount of food diminished as hearing members of the school administration were seen consuming it.

In addition to the general discontentment, Amaré Soares, president of the AS-GB, identified management irregularities that led him to have disputes with the hearing administrators of the school (which was run by the AS-GB). In 2011, he drew the attention of the funding organisation, the Portuguese Cooperation, to the issue, through the local representative: the Ministry of Women, Family, Social Cohesion and Fight

against Poverty. On this occasion, he asked for the AS-GB to be audited, but with no success. After several failed attempts to take hold of the association's affairs, he filed a complaint against AS-GB at the end of 2013 with the public prosecutor's office. Since then, the conflict between Amaré, supported by a large group of deaf students, and the school administration escalated. This went on to the point when, in 2014, the school headmaster and his followers succeeded in changing the name of the deaf association to replace 'association *of* the deaf' with 'association *for* the deaf' and were elected as the new board (in Figure 26a). Of course, this occurred under the protests of several deaf students (in Figure 26b).



**Figure 26.** General assembly of the AS-GB to replace the board where Amaré Soares was president (a), and a protest by deaf students to this event (b) in 2014 (pictures taken by Amaré Soares)

At this point, Amaré left the association and quit teaching at the school. From then on, the AS-GB was no longer controlled by deaf people, which did not mean that deaf people were not eager to take more control and agency over their own lives.



### 2.5.3.3 *Protests*

Primarily motivated by a perceived unfairness about how food was distributed, some of the older deaf students resented that, even on Fridays, food was often insufficient and sometimes spoiled, making children ill. They also complained that, on occasions, pork was served, disregarding the restriction of Muslim students from eating it. In general, they felt that the (hearing) administration of the ENS did not engage with the deaf: they did not use sign language, not even to greet them; they were not willing to listen to their concerns; they did not care when students got sick or even died. On top of this, the older deaf students sensed that the administration was not working as well as they should and that the education was poor. Such dissatisfaction seemed to intensify as they grew older and more aware of the injustice of the situation and, above all, as they recognised that the administration was unwilling to listen and change it.

The movement against the school administration was led mainly by five young deaf men, calling themselves the 'A' list. They had been meeting regularly to plan protest activities since 2010. When interviewed about this in 2022, they insisted they were not influenced by Amaré and reinforced their opinions on the wrong being done against deaf students and their will to fight against it. It is worth noting, though, that in lectures on deaf culture, Amaré had told them about the 'Deaf President Now' event at Gallaudet University in the United States of America, in 1988. The Bissau deaf leaders' initiatives included meetings with deaf students (in Figure 27), parents and teachers to explain their unrest, the distribution of a manifesto, and the organisation of a protest march in March 2013 involving hundreds of deaf students.



**Figure 27.** Meeting with deaf students to prepare the 2013 protest march (picture taken by Amaré Soares)

In retaliation, the school administration posted a list with 95 names of deaf students on the outside wall of the AS-GB at the beginning of the school year in October 2013. Those deaf students had participated in the protest march and were, for that reason and from then on, considered unwelcome at the ENS. After several unsuccessful attempts to solve the problems through dialogue, Amaré Soares finally filed a complaint with the public prosecutor's office against AS-GB in December 2013. Some months later, in May 2014, deaf people became restless due to the delay of the public prosecutor's office in launching the investigation and organised a vigil where they all wore black (in Figure 28a). They wore black again in the last trial session in 2021 to highlight the discrimination they endured (in Figure 28b during the clarification session after the trial).



**Figure 28.** Vigil in front of the Public Prosecutor's Office in May 2014 (a) and during a clarification session at the Mariposa school after the last trial in 2022 (b)

The fact that the deaf students came together under a common purpose, driven by a will to fight for what they believed, strengthened the community's sense of unity. They end up construing a narrative around the same concepts, which can be exemplified through some of the common signs used in the interviews collected in 2022: "For wanting to rise against DISCRIMINATION (Figure 29a), CONSTRAINT (Figure 29b), and a SIGN NOTHING attitude (Figure 29c), they matured their own OPINIONS (Figure 29d). Because they felt STRONG (Figure 29e) for being TOGETHER (Figure 29f) as GROUP ONE (Figure 29g), they joined in a memorable protest (Figure 29h) march (Figure 29i). As a result, they sensed that they had become FREE (Figure 29j) and IMPROVED as individuals (Figure 29k)."



**Figure 29. Key signs in deaf people's discourses about their uprising:** DISCRIMINATION (a), CONSTRAIN (b), SIGN NOTHING (c), OPINION (d), STRONG I, TOGETHER (f), GROUP ONE (g), PROTEST (h), MARCH (i), FREE (j), IMPROVE (k)

When the school managers replaced the board of the AS-GB in 2014, Amaré left the association and the school for good, joining the large group of deaf students who had been banned. This resulted in a poignant division between those who left and those who stayed at the ENS.

Nonetheless, first and foremost, they consider all deaf people as brothers and sisters belonging together if they had not been the victims of a bigoted situation led by certain hearing people. These hearing people, they say, go so far as to forbid the members of both groups from being friends with or dating each other. Critically, such division into two groups persists to this day and is fundamental to understanding the community's current dynamics.

#### 2.5.3.4 *Meeting spaces*

Having lost their main 'territory', the school, the outcast group started meeting every Sunday and then daily at Amaré's house. At the end of 2014, Amaré suggested that meetings be rotated between deaf people's homes and were held outside so families and neighbours could see them signing. Marta and I experienced such a strong stance – to be seen by everyone – on one occasion in 2018 when we went out in the evening with a group of deaf leaders. Because we were a large group, finding a bar where we could all sit together was problematic. When we finally found one, the owner suggested we sit at the back, but the deaf refused immediately and insisted on sitting in the front, again to be widely visible as deaf signers.

From 2015 to the present day, a different public place in front of a deaf person's house was picked every Sunday afternoon (approximately between 4 and 8 p.m.), following a list with the names of the deaf participants, to make themselves and the sign language more visible to the hearing people in the neighbourhoods (in Figure 30). Because meetings typically end after sundown, most deaf participants are older than 17

years old, which is when they can go home by themselves in the dark. These meetings were organised by the five deaf leaders known as the 'A' list, who had headed the movement against the ENS administration. From 2015 onwards, they were further supported by a 'B' group of five other deaf people. Their primary motivation was to keep deaf people informed about everyday issues since they no longer had a school to go to.

The meetings, shaped naturally in a big circle, have assigned moderators, spokespeople, and even a sort of 'audience behaviour controller'. The moderator indicates whose turn it is to come and speak to the audience. Each meeting usually focuses on a specific topic, covering health issues, family matters, politics, women's rights, proper behaviour, community work, etc. However, those that I witnessed brought about funny stories as well. At the end of the meetings, the women take on the responsibility of serving the participants lemonade. They are open to everyone from both schools, and the attendance depends significantly on the topic. The ones I attended during my field trips had an average of 20 participants per meeting and were gender balanced.



**Figure 30.** Sunday gatherings in rotating deaf people's houses in Bissau neighbourhoods: Bandim in 2017 (picture taken by Lamarana Baldé) (a), and Mindará in 2022 (b)

The traditions of these meetings are gently instilled in the younger generation. For example, in 2022, I witnessed a meeting in front of the house of a deaf girl, Clarice, and her older deaf sister. At some point, she was called to take the floor and sign to everyone there. However, she was so nervous that one of the deaf male leaders promptly went to her side and explained what she had to say: to greet everyone, thank the house's owner, and welcome me – the outsider. Warmly, when another young girl took the floor, Clarice readily stood up to help her out.

Concurrently, from 2015 onwards, deaf people began meeting in their neighbourhoods in the evenings (approximately between 7 p.m. and midnight), regardless of school. These smaller groups of friends living near each other meet daily after work in a more relaxed mood, telling stories and jokes and sharing different information. All groups have different sign names given by the local deaf neighbours, and, usually, they are established in lighted places. The first one to be created and, so far, the largest is located at the Bandim market next to a bread stand (Figure 31a), thus designated as BREAD. Here, they have lively conversations late into every night (in Figure 31b).



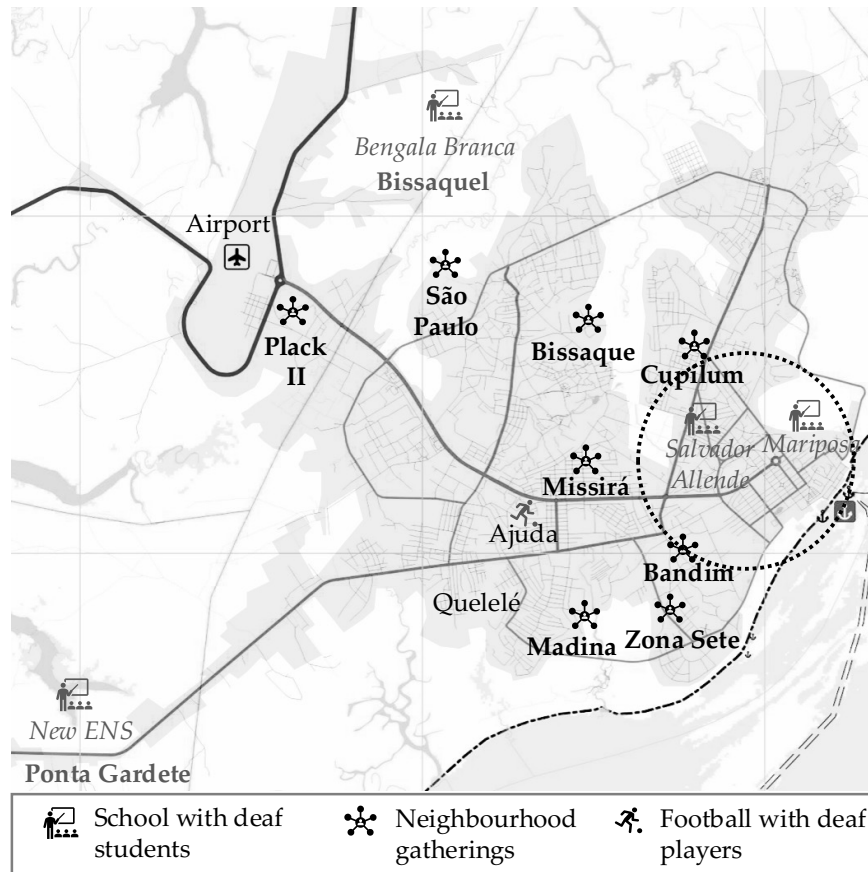
**Figure 31.** Night gatherings at the Bandim market near the bread stand (a) of a group of deaf people living in the neighbourhood, the BREAD group (b) in 2024

After the BREAD group, in the Bandim neighbourhood, other gatherings popped up all over the city: in Zona Sete (CHAPA<sup>19</sup>), Madina (CEMENT-BRICK), Missirá (LIGHT), Cupilum (TALKING-HAND), Bissaque (the only one that does not have a specific sign name), São Paulo (MECHANIC), and Plack II (AIRPORT), as shown in Figure 32. These groups take in deaf people from both schools and are overwhelmingly male-dominated. The few women attending the night gatherings are someone's girlfriend or the rare ones leading more independent lives. In general, families do not let young women go out at night because of the risk of sexual abuse.

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<sup>19</sup> The meeting place takes place in front of a metal workshop called 'chapa' (meaning 'metal' in Portuguese). Therefore, deaf people labelled it CHAPA, including when referring to it in writing. However, the sign they use corresponds to the sign name of a deaf man living in the area and not to 'metal'.





**Figure 32.** Map of the locations of the night meeting places in Bissau with the city centre within a circle: Bandim (BREAD), Zona Sete (CHAPA), Madina (CEMENT-BRICK), Missirá (LIGHT), Cupilum (TALKING-HAND), Bissaque, São Paulo (MECHANIC), Plack II (AIR-PORT) (road map in ONU-Habitat 2019, 23)

As the gatherings on Sundays and evenings gained more space in the social lives of deaf people in Bissau, deaf women began to claim a place of their own. With that in mind, in 2016, a small group of deaf women, led by Mariama Faty and four others, started meeting on Saturday afternoons. While following the same system as the Sunday meetings,

such as rotating houses and gathering outside to be seen (in Figures 33a and 33b), they plan their gatherings with a specific agenda covering topics that affect them. They are primarily concerned with providing women with a safe space. Besides sharing relevant information, deaf women gather to carry out different activities of interest together, such as making clothes.



**Figure 33.** Women's gatherings on Saturday afternoons in rotating houses in Bissau's neighbourhoods: Bissaque in 2022 (a) and Bairro Militar in 2024 (b)

When the women's group was first created, it included deaf women from both schools. However, due to quarrels, some women, mainly from the ENS, left the group meetings and the group on WhatsApp and started gathering more informally elsewhere (Figure 34a).

Deaf people from the Mariposa school meet daily during school periods or the holidays. Typically, some of the women prepare a daily meal for everybody. They do the groceries, cook, serve the food to the men around 4 p.m., and then do the dishes. Lastly, they eat separately. During this whole time, men chat with each other.

Meanwhile, when the four deaf instructors from the ENS returned from their internship in Lisbon in July 2017, they started organising meetings twice a week while on school breaks, on Wednesdays and Saturdays,<sup>20</sup> from 3 p.m. on, at the school's former premises. This corresponds to one of the blocks of the Salvador Allende public school in the city centre, which remained available for ENS use. During school periods, they meet on Saturdays alone. Here, they have four organisers: two deaf young men and two deaf young women. Of these, two are instructors, one is an assistant, and one girl is a student. They say they 'teach' the deaf participants. For instance, when witnessing one of their gatherings in 2022, they explained what yellow fever was since a deaf student had recently died of it (Figure 34b).



**Figure 34.** Saturday afternoon gatherings of the ENS deaf people in an informal women's gathering (picture taken by Lamarana Baldé) (a), and at the public school Salvador Allende (b), in 2022

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<sup>20</sup> They claim to have been inspired by the meetings organised by the Portuguese Deaf Association, aiming at older deaf people on Wednesdays and for everybody on Saturdays.

Because the ENS offers rice to the participants at the gatherings, the deaf people from the Mariposa school do not want to join in. Also, similar to what the deaf do at the Mariposa school, the deaf from the ENS make an individual monetary contribution to the food (usually fish and some seasoning). It is worth noting that contributing small amounts of money for a shared purpose is not limited to food. In fact, following a practice usually carried out by Muslims, as explained by Amaré, the deaf people at the Mariposa also began to contribute to a 'solidarity box'. Here, the aim is mainly to help a deaf person who gets sick and does not have a supportive family.

Every year, special dates are habitually celebrated as a group, such as holidays (e.g., New Year, Carnival...) and community celebrations (e.g., International Week of the Deaf, the anniversary of the association and of the school). While the Mariposa/Deaf Youth Centre (*Centro de Jovens Surdos*, CJS) tend to plan more party-like gatherings and awareness sessions for deaf people, the ENS/AS-GB typically organise events where the deaf children perform for mixed audiences of deaf and hearing people. In such contexts, the ENS students often present theatre plays and have participated in the city's school parade during the Carnival since 2016 (Figure 35a). Deaf women of both groups also enjoy catwalking in the clothes they make themselves on those special occasions (Figure 35b).



**Figure 35. Gatherings on special occasions:** ENS students at the city's school parade during Carnival in 2017 (a) (picture taken by Amílcar Furtado), and deaf women from the CJS catwalking for the HANDS! Festival<sup>21</sup> in 2021 (b)

Apart from these regular meetings, deaf people get together whenever possible for special occasions, such as birthdays and funerals. For instance, on her most recent field trip in January 2024, Marta arrived when Altair 'Daio' Gomes da Silva died. This young deaf man had spent three months in Portugal in 2008 as a young boy to take pictures for the first LGG dictionary. As a very popular deaf person, his three-day funeral drew in many deaf people (Marta estimated between 100 and 200 people). Jointly, they raised money at the harbour, where Daio worked, to buy food for the family to give at the three-day memorial gathering. At that ceremony, local cultural norms dictate that deaf men (in Figure 36a) and women (in Figure 36b) gather in separate groups.

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<sup>21</sup> Online festival of deaf African artists organised by Leiden University in 2021, available on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-iR1gLgHfw> (accessed 03-04-2024).



**Figure 36.** Funeral of a well-known deaf man, Altair Gomes da Silva, where deaf men (a) and deaf women (b) gather separately in 2024

Additionally, deaf people participate in political activities, such as campaigning for the major party, the PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde). In 2019, deaf people from both schools did it together, but when they got paid, they disagreed on what to do with the money, which further set the groups apart.

In sum, outside the school context, and irrespective of school affiliations, deaf people meet in the evenings in their neighbourhoods and on the weekends under various pretexts. Other than these, working deaf people, especially men, tend to work together in fish-related activities or construction.

#### 2.5.3.5 Football

In Bissau, football has been the most successful of all sports in bringing deaf people together. They have played regularly since the beginning, first on Fridays, the free-activity day at the ENS, and later on Saturday afternoons, in both the field and indoors. During the 2018 field trip, the team from the Mariposa school was using the football field 'Lino



Correia' in the city centre (Figures 37a, 37b, 37c). They later began training at the College of Physical Education and Sport in the neighbourhood of Ajuda, where the ENS had been for a long time. Here, the ENS practices indoors (see Figure 37d) and the Mariposa in the field outside, under different schedules (the first begins at noon and the second at 4 p.m.), preventing running into each other, though sometimes they do and greet each other. Also, in 2018, the Mariposa group had a female team (Figure 37c), which unfortunately did not last.



**Figure 37.** Deaf people playing football, in a field, where some chat on the benches (b), and where there is a male (c) and a female team (d), in 2018, and indoors (a)

When talking to some of the older deaf instructors from the ENS who also play football, they argue that football was another reason for disagreement between the two groups. They recall that when they were still playing together, they had a dispute about who their trainer should be, and, as they could not reach an understanding, they also split up in the football activity in 2016. In a meeting between leaders of both schools, which I witnessed in 2022, they argued that the most significant point of contention was precisely football. Nonetheless, at least on that occasion, they wished to set up a match between both teams.

Currently, the team from the Mariposa school is open to members of the ENS, unlike the ENS team. The Mariposa deaf feel that the ENS administrators have implicitly prohibited them from organising matches between both teams. Also, the Mariposa team, called 'Deaf Football Club', is fully deaf-led, while the ENS group is managed by a hearing administrator and trained by hearing teachers of physical education. The ENS football players are divided into four indoor football teams of five players ('ENS', 'AS-GB', 'Deaf Futsal' and 'Deaf Youth') who sometimes play against each other.

Another distinction concerns the context in which they play with other teams. The ENS plays under the Federation of Sports for the Disabled (*Federação de Desporto para Deficientes*). This has made their participation at the annual sub-regional beach football competition in Ziguinchor, Senegal, near the border possible. Thus, since 2014 (except during the COVID lockdown in 2019 and 2020), they have played with the deaf football teams of Senegal and The Gambia. In contrast, the Mariposa team plays within the city competition against hearing teams from different neighbourhoods. Very seldom do ENS football players join the city competition.



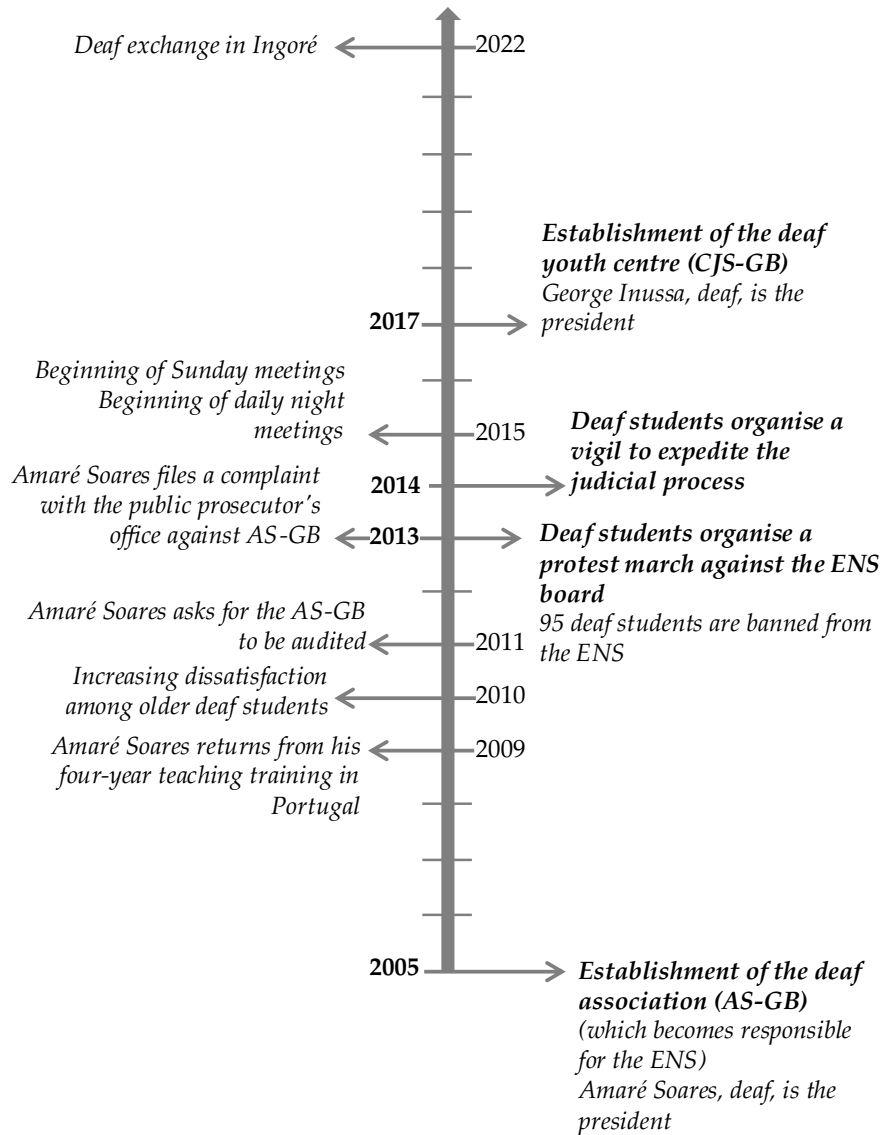
#### 2.5.3.6 Deaf Youth Centre (CJS)

As the deaf movement grew more robust and more organised, the 'A' list, active since 2010, and the 'B' list, since 2015, set out to create a new association of the deaf in 2017 focused on the youth, which was designated as *Centro de Jovens Surdos*, CJS (meaning 'Deaf Youth Centre'). These two lists became, respectively, the formal executive and meeting boards of the CJS. Later, they created a regional secretariat responsible for activity dissemination. Officially located at the Mariposa building, where the board and the different groups meet on weekends, the CJS took over the organisation of the Sunday meetings, the women's group (currently with nine deaf women in charge), and the football team.

A major initiative by the CJS was to reach out to deaf people in other parts of the country. In this context, they created regional circles like the one covering Bissorã, Bula, and Ingoré. Right before my 2022 field trip, they had just organised a one-week exchange in Ingoré between deaf people from Bissau, Bula and Ingoré, where the CJS board gave informative lectures about deaf people in the world, the political situation in Guinea-Bissau and the CJS mission. Besides these sessions, there was a modelling show and football games.

The Ingoré exchange was the main topic at the women's and the Sunday meetings that occurred afterwards. They talked about how good it was to be together, how they needed their help to stop being abused by their families and gain more autonomy, and how important it is to keep connecting with deaf people from other parts of the country.

To provide an overview of key events that changed the social dynamics in the deaf community, Figure 38 summarises the development of the internal organisation of the deaf movement in Bissau.



**Figure 38. Chronology of relevant events concerning the deaf community's organisation in Bissau (with most relevant initiatives in bold)**

#### 2.5.3.7 *Social media networks*

An increasing number of deaf people have smartphones, which they often use to look at short videos on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. They also have different groups on WhatsApp. For instance, one about the Sunday meetings, fishing, for women, per class, school, and the football team. When I asked about this in 2022, I was told that the largest WhatsApp group, called 'deaf family of Guinea-Bissau', had 67 members. In 2025, I joined another group called 'families are deaf' with 106 members.

Messages consist mainly of LGG videos and various GIF animations. The few written texts are primarily in Portuguese, but also Creole. Importantly, deaf people with smartphones often look for places with free wi-fi to hang out. This is very evident around the administration office at the new ENS. The ENS deaf – mostly the instructors – are frequently criticised by the Mariposa group for being all the time with their heads on the phone. Despite such regular use of social networks, a handful of deaf people still do not have mobile phones.

#### 2.5.3.8 *Deaf families*

In Bissau, there are very few cases of deaf families; that is, families with multiple deaf members. On our second field trip in 2006, we met a deaf young man who told us he had a deaf mother and siblings. Sadly, he died in the meantime, but his sister had a deaf child with her deaf boyfriend while studying at the ENS back in 2017. Since then, I have only identified a handful of deaf siblings. For instance, one of the deaf instructors at the ENS, originally from the Bijagos islands, has two deaf siblings, one of them much older. In Bissau, I met two deaf brothers, two deaf sisters, a deaf brother and sister and three deaf brothers. In Ingoré, I was told in 2022 that there were also three deaf brothers. All of these were still very young.

#### 2.5.3.9 *Deaf outsiders*

Apart from deaf people meeting each other at school at some point in their lives, other deaf people never went to school but run into one another in the city. In other words, deaf individuals who have not entered the community via school end up being identified by chance by other deaf people in the city's frenzy. Once identified, signed contacts between them are likely to occur repeatedly. Thus, even if they do not participate actively in the regular meetings and spaces of the community, they eventually make themselves known. Importantly, communication is expected to flow, and a strong sense of likelihood brings them together. For instance, there is one older deaf man, around 60 years old, who works as a security guard at a vocational school on one of the major avenues in Bissau. Whenever deaf young people pass by, he comes out and chats with them (as I witnessed in 2022) using LGG signs – which also exist as gestures – or he joins them briefly at the BREAD night gatherings (as Marta Morgado witnessed in 2024).

All in all, deaf people in Bissau have set up different meeting spaces, allowing them to choose the type of people, topics and meeting style they identify with most. In this way, they have built a network among deaf people, where, in case of need, especially in sickness, they can promptly step in and offer the necessary support to one another. However, deaf people of different cities hardly meet with each other, except on the odd occasions when a deaf sign language instructor visits for short training courses targeted at hearing teachers and, more recently, in CJS initiatives. Hence, it is challenging to acknowledge LGG as a national language.

#### 2.5.4 Contact languages

I focus next on language contacts shaping the emergence of LGG. These naturally occur with surrounding languages or culturally

ingrained ways of communication. It can also be the case when deaf people from the Guinean community interact with varying levels of intensity with foreign sign languages.

When deaf people come together, conditions are created for a sign language to emerge. Of course, all contexts have their particularities. Crucially, the acceptance of communicating manually determines the kind of basis that is available to deaf people. Also, how language contacts occur may influence how a new language is shaped. Notably, the mindset with which people take in – or not – external influences matters most. In this subsection, I refer to examples of gesture use by hearing people – as I witnessed them – and of sign loans in LGG – as acknowledged by deaf signers.

Before explaining the aspects that give us a rough idea of what LGG consists of, I have to go back to Amaré Soares as a key figure in the maturation of the local deaf community and its sign language. As an influential figure in Bissau, did his own language experience in Portugal affect LGG? Before leaving for his four-year training in Portugal, he was already part of a small group of deaf people meeting daily in his neighbourhood using still rudimentary communication based on gestures. He was also a multilingual, deaf young man fluent in Creole, Portuguese, English, and the local sign language. Hence, he had no trouble picking up Portuguese Sign Language (LGP). At the sign language teacher's training run by the Portuguese Deaf Association, he learned how to teach sign language, as well as sign linguistics and deaf culture, among other subjects. While his Cape Verdean colleague used LGP in her homeland<sup>22</sup> and was thus taught in the same way as the Portuguese deaf students, Amaré's case was dealt with more caution.

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<sup>22</sup> The sign language used in Cape Verde is historically rooted in LGP since deaf people were gathered in an educational setting in Santiago Island for the first time in 1997.

The deaf instructors at the Portuguese Deaf Association course were sensitive in guiding Amaré in the necessary adaptations of his academic learning to his cultural reality and, crucially, his sign language.

Although Amaré was always careful about keeping LGP from interfering with LGG, it is undeniable that he had acquired a whole lot of knowledge about sign linguistics and the deaf world. Since his return in 2009, he applied what he knew to the emerging LGG. When signs had to be created now and then in the new language, he avoided introducing LGP signs. While lexical loans can be relatively easy to identify, the underlying grammatical structure is not as easy to judge as being borrowed or not. Therefore, and at least in this thesis, I cannot assess the extent – if any – of Amaré’s influence on LGG grammar. What I can say is that, as a deaf leader, he has had an undeniable impact on the community and the language.

#### 2.5.4.1 *Gesture use*

The story of deaf people in Guinea-Bissau is intrinsically linked to communication with gestures. As suggested by a hearing teacher in 2022, hearing people all over Guinea-Bissau, from all ethnic groups, seem to naturally rely on gestures to communicate with the deaf (and probably among themselves as well). Deaf people promptly let the hearing know that they HEAR NO, to which the hearing adapt without hesitation, either by gesturing or by switching into a visual mode. Marta also observed in 2024, however, that while deaf men efficiently use gestures with the hearing, women tend to use speech instead. In addition, as a deaf person, her experience was that hearing people seemed to use more gestures during her earlier visits to Bissau than they do now, and they do more in Ingoré than in Bissau.

In 2022, I witnessed some interactions between hearing and deaf people that occurred naturally, even if at a basic level. When visiting deaf

fishermen at the harbour, I observed that the communication between deaf and hearing co-workers went smoothly, as well as during the selling of the fish. Also, on the toca-toca (local minibus) journey to the harbour, a hearing woman started chatting with the deaf man beside me since she was acquainted with him. She asked him about me and seemed to understand his signed explanations. They then talked about an accident that had occurred a few days earlier involving the collapse of a tower in the fish market. It looked like an easy and ordinary conversation carried out solely through gestures.

To give another example of such interactions between hearing and deaf people, one day at the Mariposa school, a hearing man holding a scale approached a group of deaf young people chatting outside. He asked them if they wanted to be weighed by resorting to pointing and facial clues. The deaf person asked for the price, and he replied with the gesture for 'little', which corresponds to the sign 25-FCFA. After a couple of them used the scale, they teased that the biggest one of the deaf would also get weighed. At this point, the hearing man responded with REFUSE by beating the elbow against the side of his body with his arm bent (in Figure 77).

Of course, deaf people experience hearing people talking to them in very different ways, depending on several factors, including whether they are outgoing and chatty or more reserved. When walking around with one of the deaf girls while she was hawking, I was impressed with the number of people talking to her along the way. Many hearing people called out her name, greeted her, asked about her family and what she was selling, always playfully. People talked while gesturing, to which she responded in the same way. Notably, she established cheerful and circumstantial conversations with multiple people uninhibitedly.

I experienced such gestural communication in 2022 while walking side by side with a hearing lady who started chatting with me in Creole. Since I could only reply in Portuguese, which she did not understand, she readily switched to gestures to tell me that her MAN SICK HOSPITAL DAYS, that her HOME FAR and her CHILDREN stayed THERE. All of these gestures I recognised as equivalent to LGG signs.

Knowing that West Africa, in particular, seems to be a gesture-prone region (Nyst 2010a; Nyst et al. 2012), one might expect that scattered deaf people communicate with the hearing people based on local gestures. In addition, it is possible to assume that this communication varies geographically depending on the intensity with which deaf people communicate with each other, as is the case in the capital's neighbourhoods and villages.

#### 2.5.4.2 *Contact with LGP*

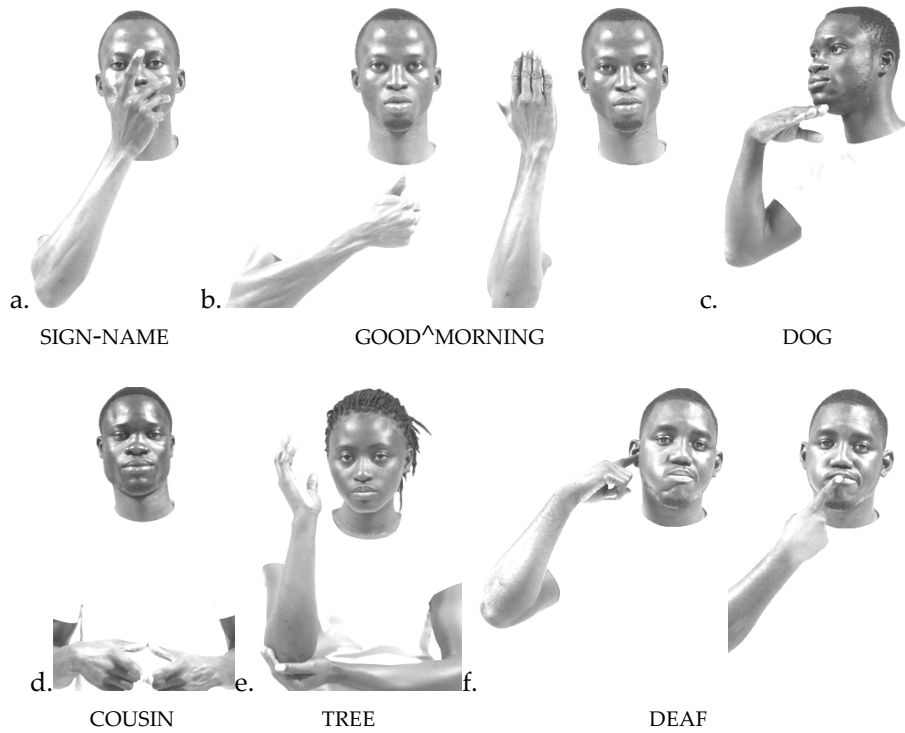
At the beginning of 2005, the school director and president of the association of blind people, Manuel Lopes, accompanied by his then secretary, José Augusto Lopes, visited the Portuguese Deaf Association. At that meeting, they asked for support for the education of deaf children, reaching out to the school for the blind. On that occasion, they returned to Bissau with a poster with the Portuguese Sign Language (*Língua Gestual Portuguesa* – LGP) alphabet and an LGP dictionary. With these materials in hand, the school started using the Portuguese manual alphabet, and the teachers tried to introduce some of the LGP signs from the printed dictionary. However, at the first teacher's training in July 2005, teachers were advised to rely on the signs that deaf people were already using instead of on LGP. At the time, Marta and I explained to them that the deaf created signs according to their cultural circumstances. Glaring examples were signs for the weekdays and months in LGP that, based respectively on boarding school habits and climate



properties, made no sense in Guinea-Bissau. Thus, signs would be more natural to the deaf if of local origin. Such an argument quickly convinced the teachers in a land where cultural diversity is deeply valued. Nevertheless, other public schools in the country receiving deaf students were drawn to LGP. To avoid this, the National School for the Deaf in Bissau invested in a sign language dictionary.

Besides the manual alphabet brought from Portugal, we inadvertently introduced SIGN-NAME (Figure 39a) from LGP at the first teacher's training in 2005. We saw that deaf people, in their informal interactions, used sign names for individuals but not a specific sign to designate the concept of sign name per se. So, to show the teachers the students' creative potential, we referred precisely to their sign names, SIGN-NAME, which is based in LGP on the sign for 'face' and pointing. Also, after the teachers attempted to apply the LGP dictionary, the only sign that stuck into deaf people's daily use was GOOD^MORNING (Figure 39b). In addition, one of the deaf instructors of the ENS who had done a short internship in Portugal suggested that there were a few other LGP loans, namely DOG (Figure 39c), COUSIN (Figure 39d), TREE (Figure 39e), DEAF (Figure 39f), and HAVE1. The borrowing of TREE and DEAF could be questioned since they are also found in other sign languages, like ASL.

Similarly, HAVE1 has been argued as being derived from the act of pointing. Thus, aside from the first two, whose influence I witnessed, the remaining are debatable. In any case, these six signs are the only potential LGP loans identified so far.



**Figure 39.** LGG signs that are likely loans from LGP: SIGN-NAME (a), GOOD^MORNING (b), DOG (c), COUSIN (d), TREE (e) and DEAF (f)

Other schools in Guinea-Bissau were not as aware of avoiding LGP and making the most out of the autochthonous signs used by deaf children. Despite several awareness sessions and handing over of the 2008 and 2017 dictionaries, a Dutch Christian missionary believed that LGP would be a more pragmatic option. Holding on to such an idea, he has been applying it from an LGP dictionary in the schools he has been passing by. He was first in Bula, followed by Bissorã and finally Ingoré from 2016 on. The local deaf leader and regional representative of the CJS clarified to Marta in 2024 that before the missionary arrived, the deaf were using local signs, at least since the school first started in Ingoré in 2011. The Dutch missionary justified his decision to Amaré

by saying that LGP should be used because Portuguese was the country's official language. In contrast, LGG would correspond to Creole spoken on the streets.

During her visit to Ingoré in 2024, Marta observed that deaf students were using a 'broken' LGP, i.e., unsmooth signs copied from static picture frames mixed with local gestures. In truth, they communicated mainly in LGG, saying that it felt better since it was similar to what they used at home with their family and neighbours. Currently, since the CJS established regular contact with deaf people from Ingoré, LGG has been successfully promoted among the deaf in that region.

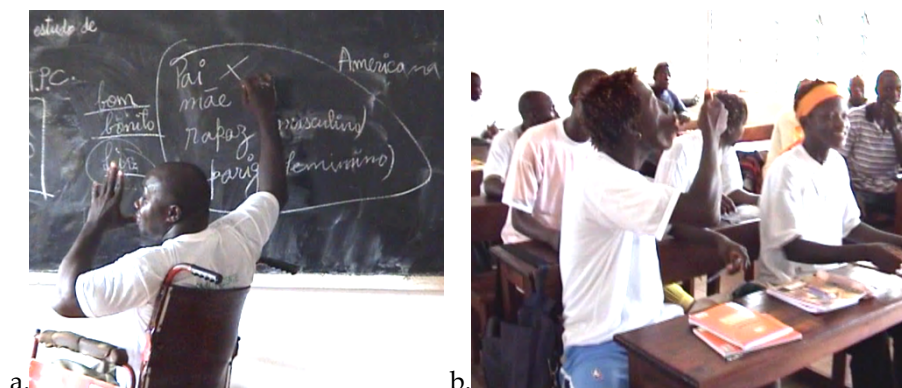
Considering the several contacts that deaf people from Bissau had with LGP, the number of loans is relatively small. First, Marta and I visited early on. Second, Amaré became fluent in LGP during his four years of training at the Portuguese Deaf Association between 2005 and 2009. After that extended period, he visited Portugal in 2012, 2015 and 2017. In addition, five deaf people moved to Portugal (as far as I am aware), maintaining regular contact with the local deaf community, and two eventually returned. Six other deaf people stayed in Portugal for a few months and came back. There is also a deaf Guinean who grew up in Portugal and moved to Bissau as a teenager. With all these deaf people, proud users of unmodified LGG, it is still possible to have a perfectly normal conversation in LGP. In other words, they have become proficient in the two sign languages.

In addition to Guinean people having contact with LGP, there have been deaf Portuguese visiting Bissau. When I went with Marta Morgado, Abubacar Turé (a Guinean child who grew up in Portugal) or Amílcar Furtado, we naturally used LGP between us. Because Amílcar has family in Bissau and has developed a deep connection with the local deaf community, he has returned for holidays a few times a year since 2017 (after we went together to work on the dictionary). On-site,

he only uses LGG, including in the training sessions he has been delivering about general issues, such as the rights of deaf people and women. He also took a Portuguese deaf friend with him a couple of times. Before that, another deaf Portuguese person had done a short training for the ENS teachers in 2016.

#### *2.5.4.3 Contact with foreign sign languages*

Deaf people in Bissau feel very strongly about their sign language and make a point of maintaining its originality. This attitude becomes evident when they take in deaf immigrants, as is the case with two Gambian men. One of them (whom I met in 2022) moved to Bissau as a teenager and quickly picked up LGG to integrate into the local deaf community. Also, in 2024, Marta encountered a deaf woman who had immigrated recently from Mali. She was making a considerable effort to use LGG and was praised for it at one of the women's gatherings. To illustrate deaf people's dismissive attitude toward foreign signs, I refer to one occasion when Marta was talking to a recently-immigrated deaf woman in her ASL-based sign language, and some of the deaf interrupted them after a while to ask them to switch to LGG. Before such pride in LGG took root in the community, Marta and I noticed, in 2008, that some of the deaf were using the ASL signs: FATHER, MOTHER, BOY, and GIRL. When asked about it, they told us that a deaf woman had moved to Bissau from Senegal and was imposing her signs on them, saying they were 'better'. This topic came up in a classroom after receiving the new LGG dictionary. The teacher responded by explaining that those signs were American and that LGG had their own signs for those concepts (in Figure 40a). The students reacted with relief and reclaimed the signs that were theirs (in Figure 40b). Thus, even though deaf people are familiar with other sign languages, at present they consciously choose not to adopt foreign signs.



**Figure 40.** Hearing teacher at the ENS explaining that the ASL signs for FATHER, MOTHER, BOY and GIRL did not need to be used (a), and a student reacting by saying that the LGG sign MAN was better (b) in 2008

Of all the deaf in Bissau, Amaré was the most experienced in international contacts. Apart from his immersion in LGP, he went to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, twice in 2013, where he was exposed to Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), first at an international conference organised by the National Institute of Deaf Education (INES), where he had LGP interpretation, and then at a meeting led by the students' group (GINES), where he relied on fingerspelling. Nonetheless, he was able to grasp a bit of Libras.

In the African context, he went to Senegal twice in 2016: to Ziguinchor (near the border with Guinea-Bissau) with a deaf friend and to Dakar, where he met local deaf people. A crucial international experience for him occurred later, in 2019, when he participated in the African School of Deaf Studies, a joint organisation of the Universities of Leiden, the Netherlands, and Legon, Ghana. The latter hosted representatives of eleven African countries. Besides Ghana and Guinea-Bissau, represented by Amaré, there were deaf academics from Mali, Ivory Coast,

Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Burundi, and South Africa. A conference was organised during this event, and about 30 deaf people from the village of Adamorobe in Ghana were invited to come (Morgado 2024, 62). On that occasion, Amaré told Marta Morgado, who was teaching at the School for African Deaf Academics, that from the different deaf people he encountered, he felt it was easiest to communicate with those from Adamorobe. The difference to him was that the agreed (international) communication between the deaf academics was much based on American Sign Language, with which he was unfamiliar. In contrast, he said, the deaf from Adamorobe were using signs that he found very similar to LGG, probably because they were based on a shared gestural substrate.

At the ENS, only one deaf instructor had the opportunity to attend an international meeting in Conakry about sexually transmitted diseases and sexual abuse. He struggled to understand the deaf from 14 other African countries since most sign languages were ASL-based, and felt more at ease with the interpreter from Cape Verde using LGP. Even though Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde have a close historical and cultural relationship, deaf people of both countries (Figure 41) established online contact on only one occasion: the World Congress of African Linguistics, organised by Leiden University in 2021.



**Figure 41.** Zoom meeting between deaf people from Bissau (a) and Santiago Island, Cape Verde (b), during WOCAL in 2021

Still at the ENS, recall that the football team has been participating since 2014 in an annual beach football competition with Senegal (in Figure 42a) and The Gambia teams. Also, in 2024, Marta witnessed the first visit of deaf students from The Gambia to Bissau (in Figure 42b).



**Figure 42.** Match between the ENS and the Senegal team at the beach football competition in Ziguinchor in 2022 (a), and visit from the deaf school from the Gambia to the ENS in 2024 (b)

Deaf people have had several football competitions with neighbouring countries, namely Senegal and The Gambia. In addition, they are sometimes visited by deaf people, especially from Senegal, Mali and Guinea-Conakry. This makes them aware of the surrounding sign languages, which are highly influenced by ASL and thus very different from LGG. They recognise this and are curious about it, but have not shown an interest (or need) in adopting foreign signs.

Moreover, most deaf people have cellular phones with internet and are regular users of social networks, like Facebook, which increases their exposure to other sign languages. This is not only the case in Bissau (in

Figure 43a), but also in Ingoré (in Figure 43b). However, all of these contacts have not influenced (yet) the autochthonous sign language of Bissau (Morgado 2024, 94).



**Figure 43.** Deaf people using mobile phones at the Mariposa school (a) and in Ingoré, where a hearing woman, on the left, is also on the phone (b) in 2024

#### 2.5.4.4 *Contact with spoken languages*

Before exploring the influences of spoken languages in LGG, it is essential to understand what languages are used locally around deaf people.

Most people from all ethnic groups in Guinea-Bissau consider their ethnic language their primary language (INE 2009a, 32). Along with such multilingualism, the majority of the population (90%) is fluent in Creole (INE 2009a, 36). This widespread use justifies its use in mass media (Embaló 2008, 104–105). Although Portuguese is the official language in official documents and education, less than a third (27%) of the population speaks it. Under this scenario, people use Portuguese-



based Creole in classrooms and public administration (Kohl 2018, 163–167).

That said, deaf people have access to written Portuguese mainly through education and to spoken Creole in their social interactions with hearing people. They are also likely to be exposed to other spoken ethnic languages, especially in their homes. Importantly, a number of deaf people have some hearing or became deaf after acquiring speech.

Thus, influences of spoken languages in LGG, even if minimal, should also be considered. Out of the 1100 signs identified in 2017, there are only 13 signs that include a fingerspelled letter of the corresponding word in written language. Such an initialisation reflecting the influence of Portuguese, the school language, manifests in four school-related signs (TIME<sup>H</sup> ‘schedule’ [*h*>*orário*]; T<sup>ROUND</sup> ‘class’ [*t*>*urma*]; F ‘absent’ [*f*>*alta*]; and P ‘<P>ortuguese (language)’), and four designations for more distant relatives (MAN / WOMAN<sup>T</sup>ADULT ‘uncle / aunt’ [*t*>*io/a*]; and MAN / WOMAN<sup>S</sup>CHILD ‘nephew / niece’ [*s*>*obrinho/a*]). Other words with fingerspelling initialisation are used equally in Portuguese and Creole, namely in four locations (B<sup>VALLEY</sup> ‘<B>andim’; C-M ‘<C>untum-<M>adina’; B-M ‘<B>airro-<M>ilitar’; and I ‘<I>ngoré’) and for the local currency (MONEY<sup>F</sup> ‘<F>ranc cfa’). Although there is no auditory or speech rehabilitation available in the national health system, some deaf individuals use speech. Overall, they present different hearing impairment levels. The onset of deafness for most people usually occurs in late childhood, i.e., after acquiring speech. In addition, they are generally experienced in everyday communication with hearing people. From my observations, over the years, they show a few mouthings from Creole, usually coupled with signs that are also used by the hearing as gestures, such as YOU+<abo> (the emphatic form of the second person singular), WOMAN+<mama> and MAN+<matchu>. Marta also observed in 2024 that, in general, deaf women use more mouthings than men.

Besides initialised signs and a few cases of mouthing, I have not observed any other influences. However, the data analysed here – mostly based on individual signs recorded on printed dictionaries – does not enable a further exploration of the potential influence of spoken languages on various other grammatical aspects of LGG.

LGG is surrounded by several spoken languages, including at least two written ones, Creole and Portuguese. Although Creole is the most used language in all social domains, families are likely to adopt one of the native languages within the household spoken interactions. The deaf, besides becoming naturally fluent in LGG, are formally taught to write only in Portuguese, which is spoken by less than a third of the population. This results in the lack of a common language between deaf and hearing people, which does not seem to represent an obstacle to their interactions, likely based on gestures.

#### 2.5.5 Contexts of sign language use

After illustrating different contexts of language contact, especially in Bissau, and before a more detailed look at the emerging lexicon of LGG in Chapters 3 and 4, I focus next on the nature and context of sign language use that emerged from the regular meetings between deaf people.

In particular, I focus on the varieties that are emerging from different contexts of communication. I emphasise how information is shared, assuming this has a fundamental role in pushing a language forward. Then, I identify literary uses of LGG, how deaf (and hearing) people have benefited (or not) from its interpretation, and the process that led to its naming as LGG.

#### 2.5.5.1 *Variation*

In terms of dialectal variation, the version that has developed within the larger deaf community of Bissau is the one with the most users. Here, linguistic variants correspond to circles around the two leading schools for the deaf in the city. Apart from the dialectal variation that results from the lack of contact between deaf people of different regions, there seems to be some gender-based variation based on cultural restrictions to socialisation imposed on women.

Language variation based on such gender-based power relations has been demonstrated in LGG, in what concerns the different storytelling abilities of deaf men and women by Morgado (2024). Also, some distinctions may likely develop between the groups of the two leading schools in Bissau since they have different meeting styles. In other words, they have come to use the language differently.

Various factors determine language variation, which is very much dependent on communication contexts and opportunities. Considering the previous description of social gender roles in Guinea-Bissau (in §2.5.1.4), it is essential to take into account how power differences may influence language variation (Eckert 1989). A clear example of such a phenomenon has been observed in a Nigerian village, where men and women have developed distinct lexical repertoires (Betiang 2023; but see the Ubang gender diglossia on Elar <sup>23</sup>)

In sign languages, lexical variation between deaf men and women has been observed as a consequence of gender-segregated education (e.g., LeMaster 1990, in Irish SL; Adam 2017, 87, in Australian Irish SL). Moreover, gendered variation may affect linguistic aspects other than the lexicon. This has been shown for simultaneous constructions and

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.elararchive.org/dk0492/>

topic constructions in Irish SL by Leeson (2005, 260–261), and the syntactic order of predicates with negative particles in the sign language of Indonesia (*Bahasa Isyarat Indonesia*, BISINDO) by Palfreyman (2019, 238–240).

In a different way, lexical variation between deaf men and women occurs in West African sign languages because of gender-segregated social dynamics, as seen in the description of locally-based sign languages in West Africa (§2.2.1.3). Such communication opportunities favouring deaf men, i.e., rarely attended by their female peers, have been observed in informal afternoon gatherings in Bamako, the capital of Mali (Pinsonneault 1999, 6; Nyst 2008), in Hausaland, in Nigeria (Schmaling 2000, 50), and deaf spaces within Benin’s urban centres (Mildner 2021, 68).

In Bissau, Morgado (2024) identified language variation between genders in the way they structure their narratives. Thus, the fact that deaf women do not participate as much as men in social interactions seems to make them less skilled in storytelling (ibid., 415–416).

Similarly, the social interactions of deaf children and teenagers in LGG are very much limited to the school settings (Figure 44a), showing, in their signing, a high influence of gestures used by the hearing (ibid., 414–415). The large number of deaf children at the ENS benefit from the additional time on the bus ride to and from school to socialise (Figure 44b).



**Figure 44.** Social interaction moments for deaf children at the ENS: during extra-curricular activities on Fridays (a) in 2008, and during bus travelling to and from school (b) in 2018

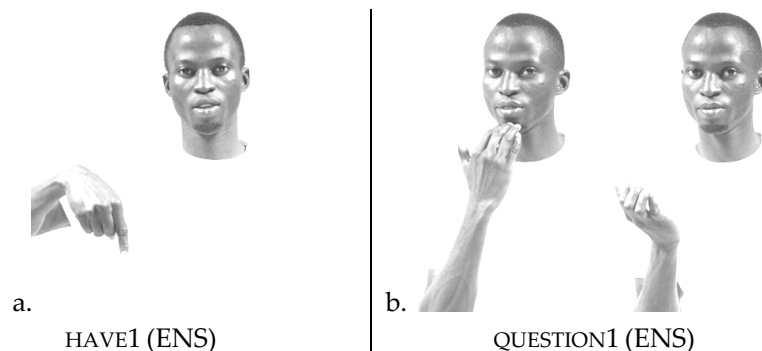
As mentioned previously, women and children in Guinea-Bissau are more restricted to their homes due to the risk of sexual assault. In fact, from our observations, deaf boys and girls of a young age seldom attend the weekend meetings unless they are hosting or live nearby. This is also true for women at night gatherings.

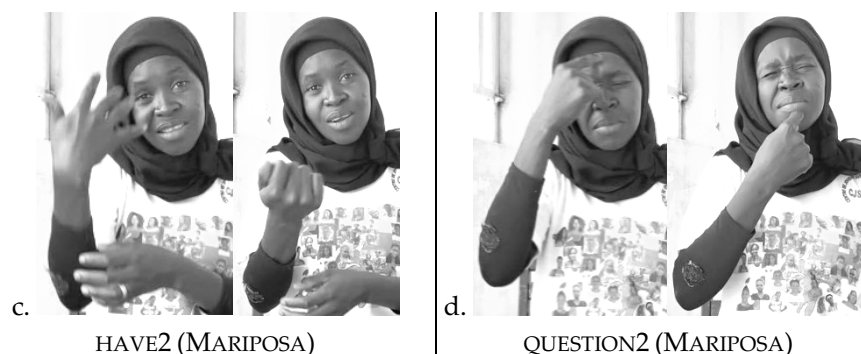
Based on the historical events that set apart two school-based groups in Bissau, one might expect some variation between them, though the predictive conditions are not completely clear. On one hand, grass-roots contacts have been maintained despite the group division; for instance, during Sunday and nighttime gatherings. On the other hand, even if deaf people from the two groups get together now and then outside their schools, the daily contact within groups has run a different course. Deaf people from the Mariposa school meet much more often and in a far more organised manner, likely impacting their LGG. In the present study, I have not been able to assess this.

Sticking to the lexicon, it is possible to identify from our observations, and as documented in the 2017 LGG dictionary, which had the

participation of elements of both groups, lexical variants only for 'have' (Figures 45a, 45b), and 'question' (Figures 45c, 45d). As already mentioned, HAVE1, used at the ENS, is suggested to be an LGP loan, though it could derive from pointing. A very different form is used by the Mariposa deaf, HAVE2, which is similar to the sign from International Sign and British Sign Language. Nonetheless, the deaf there deny it as a borrowing and justify it as being motivated by the act of grabbing something. The sign QUESTION1, used at the ENS, bears some similarities with the LGP sign (in LGG it involves the whole hand, while in LGP it is articulated with the index finger alone), which may raise some doubts about its origin. For that reason, discussions about it remain speculative. At the Mariposa, deaf people created QUESTION2 by tracing the question mark on half of the face.

These two pairs of signs are the examples that the deaf typically give when talking about language variation between the ENS and the Mariposa groups. They turn their respective variants into distinctive identity markers by considering them as the better choice. Of course, there may be additional lexical variants that I overlooked. Moreover, language variation between the two groups may extend to grammatical aspects other than lexical items, which I am not covering here.





**Figure 45.** Lexical variants in different school groups: HAVE1 (a) and QUESTION1 (b) from the ENS, and HAVE2 (c) and QUESTION2 (d) from the Mariposa school

Looking at Guinea-Bissau as a whole, Bissau remains by far the stage for the largest and most vibrant deaf community in the country. The fact that deaf students from other schools in the country seldom meet with the deaf community of Bissau results in regional variants. Amaré told Marta in 2024 that during his successive LGG training courses across the country and over the years, he saw ‘weaker’ variants of local sign languages. Assuming that there is a gestural substrate (as suggested by Nyst 2013a; Nyst & Martins 2022, in West Africa), these regional variants may correspond to less conventionalised degrees in language emergence used by smaller groups of deaf people (Wray & Grace 2007).

#### 2.5.5.2 *Information sharing*

How information is transmitted is very likely decisive for the development of LGG. Not only are the networks built across the different meeting places essential, but Amaré’s role has also been crucial in transmitting knowledge. Even if much of their conversations are playful, telling funny stories and teasing each other, they are moved by the need to

‘teach’ each other, as they say, to take them out of any isolation, to help each other, to make sure they are on the right track.

Amaré explains that he gathers information from multiple (hearing) sources and interprets them to LGG to keep everybody well informed, whether in person or through WhatsApp. This is especially so in the face of distressing events, such as political unrest, where they seek to protect one another. They gather at Amaré’s house and follow the updated news on such occasions. In this way, Amaré represents the primary information provider to the Mariposa deaf, whose example has been followed by a few others. Amaré added that, in every neighbourhood, there is at least one hearing person who befriends the deaf and passes on relevant information. Such information mainly concerns national politics and health issues, but covers many other topics. In the informal conversations that I witnessed at the Mariposa, involving mostly deaf men, they talked, for instance, about the implications of the war in Ukraine on world food distribution and the repercussions of the pandemic.

#### 2.5.5.3 *Literary signed forms*

Since Fridays were instituted as the free-activity day at the ENS, theatre plays performed by the students (in Figure 46a) and storytelling became regular expressions in sign language. While the organisation of theatre plays decreased over the years, storytelling became the preferred LGG expression across contexts. On top of this, it is worth noting that, since the beginning, deaf people enjoy signing while marking rhythm, as if dancing and singing in LGG (in Figure 46b). They do it spontaneously for fun between them to this day, as I observed in the Mariposa school (in Figure 46c).





**Figure 46.** Theatre play (a) and singing in LGG (b) by deaf students at the ENS playground in 2008, and singing in LGG by deaf people at the Mariposa school in 2024 (c)

#### 2.5.5.4 Interpretation

There is no professional training for LGG interpreters. Without such formal training, only a few hearing teachers have developed the necessary fluency in the deaf people's language to undertake such a role. In truth, no more than two are considered sufficiently skilled to interpret between deaf and hearing people. These two hearing teachers have been teaching the deaf since 2003. One, Carlos 'Midana' Cabral, moved to the Mariposa school after the fallout, and the other, Osvaldo Indi, remained at the ENS. Although two other male teachers at the ENS have basic skills in LGG, Osvaldo is the only one who is

constantly requested to interpret. This includes formal sessions that are often broadcast on public television.

Besides teaching mathematics and drawing at the Mariposa, Osvaldo interprets when necessary. For instance, he helped the deaf student who had grown up with the blind, Usna, in his vocational training in construction design. In the two years Usna was in mainstream classes, Midana interpreted for him regularly. I should note that, afterwards, Usna got admitted to a university course in civil engineering, where, in the second year, in 2022, he struggled without any support in LGG. The other three deaf men who have taken higher education courses, two in Basic Education and Amaré in Law (instead of Economics this time), did so without LGG interpretation. Mainly, Midana accompanies Amaré in his lobbying meetings. He also mentions that he rarely interprets for a deaf person in a medical context. Amaré adds that two other teachers at the Mariposa school are also minimally competent in LGG to interpret. Even so, he often relies on a cousin when in need.

More ‘formal’ interpreters have been acting in churches. Amaré has trained around 30 of them only in Bissau since 2014. Consequently, many Protestant masses have been interpreted in LGG (Figure 47). Curiously, in an evangelical mass attended by Marta Morgado in 2024, one of the three interpreters working that day had white gloves (in Figure 47b) to cover her painted nails. Deaf people told Marta they had asked interpreters to do so for their visual comfort.



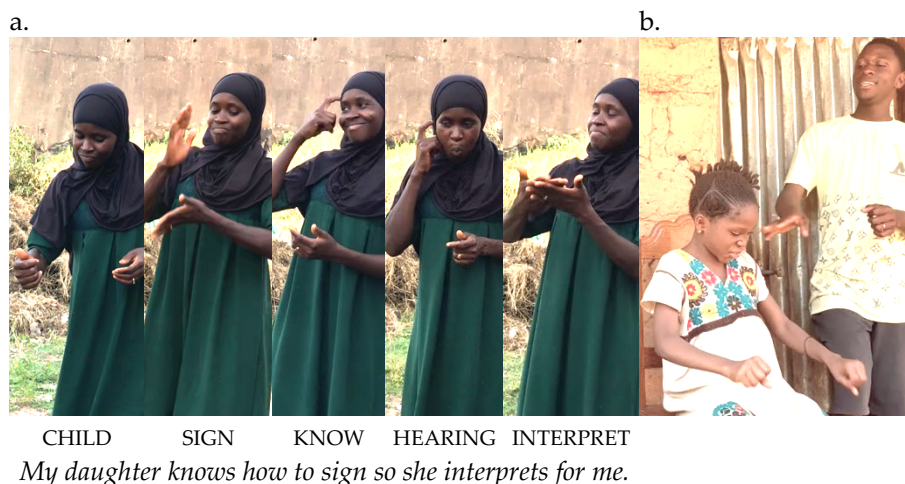
**Figure 47. LGG interpreters in an evangelical mass** attended by deaf believers (a, b), where one of them is wearing white gloves to cover her painted nails (b) in 2024

Informally, deaf people who can hear enough to perceive speech and/or speak themselves volunteer with confidence to interpret LGG in Creole and vice versa. Amaré has been doing it habitually, but there are others. On one Sunday in 2022, I witnessed a deaf man (who has a deaf sister and claims to hear well enough) interpreting the entire meeting to the hearing father of the deaf girl hosting the meeting that day. Similarly, in 2024, at the deaf man's funeral, Marta Morgado recorded another deaf man (who claimed to be able to hear reasonably) interpreting speeches by deaf people in LGG to Creole (in Figure 48a) and hearing people's speeches in Creole to LGG (in Figure 48b).



**Figure 48.** Deaf man (on the right) interpreting Amaré's speech in LGG into Creole (a) and a hearing man's speech in Creole into LGG (b) in 2024

Sometimes, deaf people resort to the hearing children of the family to help interpret some more challenging interactions with hearing people. These children of deaf parents are typically fluent in LGG. The deaf woman leading the women's group of the CJS told me in 2022 that her young daughter would sometimes interpret for her (Figure 49a). Also, in 2024, Marta witnessed a situation where the deaf women went to a deaf girl's house to talk to her father, who was supposedly mistreating her. Because they could not establish clear communication with him, they called a young girl with deaf parents and a deaf uncle (Figure 49b) to help out.



**Figure 49.** Deaf woman telling about her daughter interpreting for her (a) in 2022, and a hearing girl signing to her deaf uncle (b) in 2024

All in all, there are no professional LGG interpreters. Nonetheless, some hearing teachers have developed signing skills in both Bissau schools due to their regular contact with the deaf community to act as interpreters. To be more exact, one in each school in Bissau is recurrently taking on that role when needed. Hearing people interpreting religious masses do not seem to interpret in contexts outside the church. Other than these, a few hearing people within a deaf person's inner circle, such as kin or friends, also learn sign language and interpret in more informal contexts. However, these are still exceptions and are rarely heard of. Surprisingly, most experienced 'interpreters' are a few deaf people who have some hearing or lipreading and speech abilities and often volunteer to do so.

#### 2.5.5.5 *Language naming*

It is essential to understand that, in Portuguese, two terms coexist to designate 'sign'. In European Portuguese (spoken in Portugal), it is expressed by *gesto*, while in Brazilian Portuguese it is *senal*. Therefore, the national sign languages of Portugal and Brazil are named differently as *Língua Gestual Portuguesa* (LGP) and *Língua Brasileira de Sinais* (Libras).

In the five Portuguese-speaking African countries, different influences come to light. Portuguese people – deaf in the case of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, and hearing in Angola – may have been responsible for assigning a name to the local sign languages. As a consequence, their designation opted for the term *gesto*, as in *Língua Gestual Cabo-verdiana* (LGCV) (e.g., Pavão et al. 2018), *Língua Gestual de São Tomé e Príncipe* (LGSTP) (e.g., Carmo et al. 2014), and *Língua Gestual Angolana* (LGA) (e.g., Valdez & Manuel 2008). In contrast, in Mozambique, the name of its sign language was assigned in the presence of members of the Finnish Deaf Association within a project to empower the local deaf community (Martins & Morgado 2016, 137). Without the involvement of Portuguese and Brazilian deaf communities, the choice was for *senal* to name the *Língua de Sinais de Moçambique* (LSM) (e.g., Ngunga et al. 2013).

Only in 2005, when Marta Morgado and I first visited Bissau, awareness rose about the autochthonous sign language. At that point, hearing teachers believed deaf education should be based on LGP. They were probably oblivious that deaf students were already creating their own language. Furthermore, they may have considered applying LGP in deaf education as corresponding to the Portuguese language in use in the general education in Guinea-Bissau. Marta and Amaré often communicated in written Portuguese during that first teachers'

training. In one of these exchanges, he told her he did not see their signing as a language but as a basic array of traditional Guinean gestures.

With the primary purpose of distinguishing the sign language emerging in Guinea-Bissau from LGP, we felt it was essential to rush a name for it. I heard people saying *gestu* in Creole, though I would not know if LGP's name did not somehow influence them. We were very much biased ourselves by the name of our own sign language. I also admit that the haste in naming the new sign language during that first short visit did not give room to involve more community members. Hence, that sign language was named *Língua Gestual Guineense* (LGG) with the agreement of the three deaf adults present there, including Amaré Soares, when we informally printed the first collection of 220 signs.

When I returned in 2022, more aware of the importance of involving the community in the process of naming their sign language (c.f., Andersson 2001, 225; Guity 2022, 30), I sought to understand if the name had been adequately put. Deaf people said that, to them, it was SIGN GUINEA-BISSAU and, sometimes, LGG. Designating the language simply as SIGN<sup>24</sup> generally coincides with how deaf people call their sign languages worldwide (c.f., Woll et al. 2001, 16; Andersson 2001, 226).

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<sup>24</sup> When glossing the term that deaf people use to designate their sign language, one has to consider the distinction between 'gesture' and 'sign' if such a distinction exists in the corresponding spoken language. Then, on one side, there are the written/spoken terms that both signers and speakers use, and on the other side, there are those that scholars believe to be more effective in marking the linguistic status of the sign language. For instance, in twentieth-century France, deaf people would refer to their sign language as 'gestures' before it was officially named *Langue des Signes Française* in 1979 by two hearing scholars (Cantin et al. 2019, 150). Similarly, deaf Catalans would designate it as 'mime' before being named *Llengua de Signes Catalana* in the early 1990s (Jarque et al. 2019, 271).



Although Andersson (2001) criticises the use of abbreviations to designate sign languages, arguing that spoken languages do not use them, some deaf communities have become accustomed to using them, as is the case in Portugal.

Typically, sign languages are originally named by educators or scholars. Still, unless deaf people feel that the name is inappropriate and urge to change it, as were the cases in Iran (Guity 2022, 25–33) and Belgium (De Meulder & Haessene 2019), the ownership becomes too deep-seated to accept renaming it differently (e.g., Johnston 2003, 66, for British Sign Language [BSL], Australian Sign Language [Auslan] and New Zealand Sign Language [NZSL]).

Taking into account the dialectal variants *gesto* and *sinal* in Portuguese, I also wanted to confirm among hearing people what their preference was. I observed that *gestu* and *sinal* were used interchangeably in Creole. Of course, Guinean people, in general, as well as those related to the deaf, have frequent contact with the Portuguese language in the European and Brazilian variants.

Hearing teachers of the deaf presented me with different explanations. Some said that, in Creole, people say mostly *sinal*, clarifying that schooled people are likely to say *gestu* instead as an influence from European Portuguese. Others suggested that *sinal* would refer to the manual forms used by the hearing and *gestu* to those used by the deaf (which is how the difference would be interpreted in European Portuguese). According to Osvaldo Indi, the teacher–interpreter at the ENS, most hearing people say in Creole that deaf *papia gestu* (*papia* meaning ‘speak’) and that the LGG designation is already fully internalised by the deaf.



2.6 Portraying LGG

This final section of Chapter 2 summarises the main characteristics of LGG, the object of the linguistic analyses of Chapters 3 and 4. First, I present LGG's 'identity card' in Table 2, including the basic information about the language to join the other languages of the world.

The 'identity card', in Table 2, indicates LGG's designations (in signs, glosses, Portuguese and English translations), language codes (ISO code and glottocode), and geographic locations (regions and coordinates). It also refers to the fact that LGG is a language isolate, although it uses the LGP manual alphabet. The vitality scoring for LGG is further developed in Appendix 2.

Table 2. LGG's 'identity card' (c.f., Webster & Safar 2019)

|                        |                                                                                      |               |   |   |   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|---|---|---|
| Sign                   |  |               |   |   |   |
|                        | SIGN                                                                                 | GUINEA-BISSAU | L | G | G |
| Name                   | Língua Gestual Guineense – LGG<br>(Guinea-Bissau Sign Language)                      |               |   |   |   |
| ISO code               | ISO 639-3 lgs (since 23-01-2023)                                                     |               |   |   |   |
| Glottocode             | guin1260                                                                             |               |   |   |   |
| Language family        | Isolate (manual alphabet from Portuguese Sign language)                              |               |   |   |   |
| Country                | Guinea-Bissau                                                                        |               |   |   |   |
| Regions                | Bissau (larger deaf community),<br>Ingoré, Buba (smaller deaf groups)                |               |   |   |   |
| Geographic coordinates | 11.7723463 -15.16962                                                                 |               |   |   |   |

The sign language in Guinea-Bissau likely took off when deaf children and youngsters started to come together in increasing numbers in a school setting. Therefore, it is a school-based sign language, born in the school for the blind in Bissau in late 2003. Since then, most signers have orbited around the two leading deaf schools in Bissau as their privileged meeting spaces. However, a signed communication was probably used by deaf people already before that, as seen elsewhere (Nyst 2010a, 2013, 2015, in West Africa, in general; Orie 2012, 81; 2013, 244, in the city of Akure, in Nigeria; Lutalo-Kiingi & de Clerck 2015, 48, 51; Sorin-Barreteau 1996, 207, 212, in the Extreme North Cameroon). Because deaf people with diverse backgrounds – not only in Bissau but also in the rest of the country – were using similar signs, it seems safe to assume that the emerging sign language is locally based. Moreover, it could be the case that this locally-based sign language represents the primary source for the one boosted up by the school.

Even if deaf people have been exposed to other languages, both signed and spoken, LGG has been emerging without any significant outside influences. Therefore, at first sight, it remains very much autochthonous, or “indigenous”, as suggested by Woodward (2003), apparently by either recruiting gestures from the hearing community or creating new signs based on a robust culture-based iconicity. In this way, LGG conforms with one of the criteria for being assigned the status of sign language emergence proposed by Meir and colleagues (2010, 2), which is the inexistence of prior exposure to other sign languages.

Counting the number of signers is a task made easier by adding up school enrolments. Thus, looking at LGG as school-based, we get a figure of around 590 deaf students enrolled in Bissau in 2021/2022 (491 at the ENS, 97 at the Mariposa and two at Bengala Branca) and an approximate number of 212 identified over different years in six cities across the country: Ingoré, Bula, Bissorã, Buba, Bafatá, and Gabu. Of these, Ingoré and Buba seem to have the largest groups of deaf

students, with 60 each. Of course, of the 800 deaf people enrolled in schools, there should be many more who are no longer attending school or never did. Other than the number of sign language users based on school attendance records, statistical data from 2009 is provided for 1,702 deaf people in Guinea-Bissau (INE 2009f, 27). This may be less than the actual figure since it is far from the expected prevalence of deafness in West Africa, as exemplified by Tingang and colleagues for Cameroon (2020).

Albeit used by a vibrant deaf community, LGG remains circumscribed to the urban area of Bissau and far from the usual large numbers of macro-communities emerging from schools. Nonetheless, according to Dunbar's (1993) size patterns, the 500 threshold is the minimum for a group to be considered large, which in turn leads to long-term stability. Regarding the context of emergence concerning community growth and the lack of outside influences, the Nicaraguan case (e.g., Senghas & Coppola 2001) would undoubtedly be the most similar to LGG.

Children who started attending school in late 2003 are now in their thirties. Given that this young community usually gathers in large groups outside school, it tends to take in transversally those deaf youngsters with more independence to move around the city by themselves. Consequently, regular meetings include deaf people as young as late teenagers, precisely the age at which language change stabilises (Sankoff & Blondeau 2007). Based on the intensive and widespread use of sign language in such a macro-community, it may have become more established. Since the age group now mastering the sign language and leading the community meetings corresponds to the first generation of signers, research on LGG can be undertaken in real time to show how established it has become.