

Deafness and a Village Sign Language Community in Meghalaya

Dr. Melissa G. Wallang

Associate Professor in Linguistics

NERIE-NCERT, Umiam-793103

melissancert@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

There are many deaf communities reported around the world such as the Martha Vineyard (Groce, 1985), the Yacatec Mayan village (Johnson, 1994) and the Desa Kolok (Branson, et.al., 1996) that coexist with the hearing community. Similarly, in Meghalaya, one of the states in the north eastern region of India lay a small village known as *Massar village*. This paper tries to document the incidence of deafness in one particular family of that village and tries to investigate the language that is in operation amongst them. It tries to investigate two levels of language, that is, at the lexical level and at the grammatical level.

The figures and images are given in Appendix at the end of the paper.

Located deep (fig1.1¹) in the valleys of the *East Khasi* hills of Meghalaya, *Massar* neighbours *Wahkhen* on the east and *Pomlum* in the west. It has only one hundred and eight households, three lower primary schools and one upper primary government school. The tarmac roads within the village are spotless and well-maintained while the road that led us there was littered with potholes, winding its snaky way down the steep slope and gradually easing into broom farms, ginger plantations and orchards. Once we reach there, there is hardly a sound that resembles the hustle and bustle of a modern village, except for the occasional bus that passes by boorishly and the scruffy dogs announcing our arrival. An unusual but pleasant peace hangs over the village as people gather in the three village churches of different denominations. The language spoken by the *Massar* community members is a dialectical variant of the *Khasi*² language having a subject-object-verb structural pattern with minimal inflections on the verbs. The village has access to satellite television and enjoys considerable mobile network coverage, however inconsistent transmission it may be.

What is genuinely interesting about this village, however, is the unusually high number of deaf inhabitants who are connected to one particular family or clan known as *Nongsteng*. As part of the local lore, it is believed that the great grandmother, (L) *Shilot Nongsteng* had sent

¹ ¹ <https://maps.google.com>

² *Khasi* belongs to the Mon Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language spoken by the *Khasis* and Jaintia tribes in the state of Meghalaya. *Khasi* does not have a script of its own and it was a Welsh missionary in 1842 who started writing *Khasi* in the Roman script.

her husband to the 'border bazaar' to buy some fish and he brought back *Ka Syiem Dohkha* ('*The King of Fishes*' literal translation). They didn't know that the *Nongsteng* clan had its origins from this particular fish and the spirits of their forefathers lived on in these fish. The fish was therefore sacred to the clan and no member should ever kill or eat it. *Shilot* and her five daughters ate the fish for dinner and a curse befell them the next morning. They all became deaf and passed it on to four generations of the female bloodline. Till today, the children of the female line are mostly deaf while the progeny of the males are all hearing.

Sharti, like the other members of this family, refused to talk about it openly. She informed that many non-governmental agencies, medical doctors and the local media had visited the village for their own purposes in the past. She recalled that when the media came, the headman of the village invited her family to talk to the media but she declined as she was embarrassed by her disability, and she felt that such visits were neither beneficial to her nor her family members. She even expressed her negativity towards our discussions and she frankly asked me what I wanted from her and her family. It was only after a series of discussions and debates regarding the importance of documenting their home language for educational purposes and linguistic analysis, that she felt more at ease talking about the deafness of the present generation in her family.

She recounted the last time she asked her mother about the incident of deafness; she was scolded at and forbidden from ever talking about it. Being a devout Christian, she felt uneasy discussing it because she believed God would be unhappy with her if these events were not true. She described the deafness in her family as *Kolka* deafness, a term she learnt from her mother to describe people who can hear only at close range, as that of two people sitting next to each other. Her mother calls such deaf individuals as *Kolka* and this term has come to be a household term used by the family and some villagers. Hence, the term is now used to refer to people with hard of hearing, however to what degree of hearing loss is unknown as most of the family members have not had any hearing test done.

2. Data Collection

The process of data collection initiated with casual conversations in one of their homes over a cup of tea. It was in such an informal setting that I could gather information on the family history. In a tiny house, we would all be sitting on the floor talking about the daily life and activities. The older generations were questioning as to the objective of the meeting as it was important for them to understand the purpose of sharing such information about their family. In order to bring out the family tree, names of family members were collected and drawn in a tree format which was verified and validated by the members, although all members were not present.

It was a tedious task to cull out a flow chart as time was limited and hence several meetings were arranged with the family members that included the elderly, the middle aged and the young ones who were studying in school. There were occasions when they offered to

prepare food after travelling all the way from the city. I was fortunate to have the cooperation of the hearing individuals from the family, the headman and the members of the family residing in the same village. During these meetings, it could be seen that the members of the family were comfortable signing with the native signer³ from Shillong (the state capital), particularly the younger generations who are well expose to the standard variety. One of the great granddaughters⁴ from the family was also accompanying us to these meetings as well.

Personal interviews of selected educated members of the family were conducted. In order to have a clearer understanding of the language used by the members of this family, a list of words comprising of basic words (Swadesh word list) used in daily communication, kinship terms, food items, and words related to work/activities relevant to their socio-cultural context was prepared to elicit the signs from them. The word list which was prepared in English had to be translated into *Khasi* as most of them could not understand the English language. In these meetings, the members talked about their own family branch and the generations before and after them. It was not possible to conduct video recording in an organized setting as the older generations were camera shy.

3. The Family Tree



³ Healingson Syiemlieh, an earmould technician from Ferrando Speech & Hearing Centre a member of the Meghalaya Deaf association

⁴ Happylina Buhphang PhD scholar in Linguistics and English Language Teaching

At present, the total number of Late *Shilot's lineage*⁵ (family tree in fig. 3.1) is more than one hundred, of which seventy nine are profoundly deaf and twenty one have acquired deafness at a later age and can still speak the local language⁶ with some difficulty. They converse with hearing people by lip-reading and it is often difficult for passersby to discern that they are deaf. Around fifty two members of the family still reside in *Massar*, and a few family members have migrated to neighbouring villages such as *Pomlum*, *Umthli*, *Pynter* and *Lyngkyrdem* and only one family resides in Shillong. There are cases where a mother has ten children and out of them, only one child can hear.

While interviewing *Nishalin*⁷, one of the clan members, she remarked that the children in the family usually fall sick at a young age and acquire deafness thereafter. She narrated her own experience of having jaundice and being taken to the doctor in the morning, and by the time she returned in the evening, she could no longer hear her mother call her. She had suddenly become deaf but not totally. Her mother also has a mild case of deafness which she had acquired at a much later age. When asked how they communicate within the family, she replied, *'Through lip-reading, gestures and signs, but the signs are not similar to the sign used in Shillong or in the special schools. Sometimes we'd move our hands and feet to act out and talk loudly'*.

4. Social and Educational Background

Members of this family also have the same rights and obligations as anyone in the village. They participate in all social activities of the village. On discussing their roles in the village, *Sharti* informed that her family members do take part in the local functions such as the youth week festival, community cleaning drive, etc., they attend village meetings and *Sharti* being *Kolka* (hard of hearing) herself acts as the interpreter to her family members. Their social lives are similarly to their hearing counterparts where they take part in church, school activities, funerals⁸, etc. *Sharti* describes that in funerals, like other women, they participate by helping with the preparation of food and the men with the preparation of the grave, etc. However, the hearing majority does not assign them any major responsibilities in church events and other local functions.

The harmonious relationship that this family has with the hearing community is further supported by the feedback received from the headman and the hearing members of the family. Both male and female members of the family are actively engaged in broom cultivation, including the children but most of the children from this family drop out of school between class 3 and class 8. Only 6 children have reached the secondary level (classes 9 and 10) and

⁵ The complete family tree cannot be obtained as we could only document those family members whom we have met.

⁶ The local language is a dialectical variant of *Khasi* (an Austro-Asiatic language). *Khasi* is the official language of the state of Meghalaya

⁷ One of Sharti's daughter

⁸ 3 day ritual that is practiced by the *Khasis* wherein apart from family members, community members visit the family for three days to show their support till the day of the final ritual

only one child had successfully completed the board examination of class 10. One Head teacher from one of the schools in the village pointed out that these children are quite skilled in many subject areas and in some cases they out-perform their hearing peers.

Interaction also exists between those children from this family and the urban deaf community in Shillong who are studying in special schools. There are other members like *Rishanskhem*, who have moved to the urban Shillong, to work as daily labourers. He is more exposed to Shillong Sign language (ShSL)⁹ and with the support of the Deaf Association he is gradually learning to communicate in Shillong Sign language. He is able to lip-read and speak in *Khasi*.

During a field visit¹⁰ through one of the training programmes (Fig 4.1) which I had organised, the trainees and a native signer interacted with the family members. The family members were invited by the headman to assemble in the local school community hall located at the centre of the village. Around 40 members of the family were present; some could talk but couldn't hear much, and most do not hear at all. Healingson Syiemlieh¹¹ who also accompanied us in this programme, tried to sign with them but most of them could not understand. The *Nongsteng* family rarely used signing with the hearing community. They also expressed their desire to learn the standard sign language variety used in schools as they felt that it was necessary for the younger generation.

Following the state educational norms, government schools in the village adopt the mother tongue as the medium of instruction till the primary level (classes I to V) and English from upper primary level onwards. However, English as a subject is introduced from the nursery level. Some of the deaf children go to a special school¹² and learn ShSL (see section 6 for details) there, but they revert to the signs commonly used in the village when they return.

The Director of the special school reveals that most of the family members have a case of progressive deafness, but the present generation consists mostly of those who have been deaf since birth. There are six children from this family studying in the special school and a dialogue with these children shows that basic noun signs such as WORK (Fig 5.1 and Fig 5.2), BABY (Fig 5.2 and Fig 5.3), etc. are different from the signs that they have learned in school.

⁹ Shillong Sign Language (ShSL) is a language used by the deaf community in Meghalaya which emerged from the residential schools located in the state.

¹⁰ I would like to acknowledge Wandashisha Warjri, a schoolteacher, and the Headman (the local Chief) from the village for providing support while visiting the village and for Wanda's assistance during the study.

¹¹ A profoundly deaf, a sign language instructor who works in one of the special schools in Shillong.

¹² Ferrando Speech and Hearing Centre (FSHC), Umiam located in Ri-Bhoi District. Missionary Sisters from this school often visit the village to invite students to join their school. Quite often the sisters also distribute hearing aids to the community members; however, during the visits we were told that they do not like to use them, and some boys said that they keep losing them.

Nishalin, one of the family members, was also present and she translated and interpreted the signs and speech to her family members. *Nishalin* could understand the Sign language used in the special school as she had received training there. She had trained more than 10 members of her family but they don't usually use the signs as they are more comfortable using their own signs. Hence, like other children studying in the special school, she also ceases to use the school variety when she is at home. Hearing children from this family also use the gestural and sign-supported speech like other members of the family while in conversation with them. However, deaf children have acquired the gestures and signs from the adult members and amongst themselves they communicate in signs. For this reason, it will be invigorating to find out more about the communication system used by other family members of the *Nongsteng* clan who have migrated from *Massar* and residing in the neighbouring villages. An in-depth investigation into the signs used by the *Nongsteng* clan can contribute to newer insights into the nature and evolvement of human language.

Marvellous, one of the girls studying in class 10 in FSHC, has taught her mother the basic signs learned from school and it was possible to conduct casual conversations through her. It is also interesting to observe the communication process amongst them when they talk in *Khasi* language; with minimal sounds produced they could understand each other with no miscommunication. Most of the children who are studying in the special school cannot understand *Khasi* language at all. *Marvellous* said she used to understand *Khasi* earlier and after more than 9 years of schooling she has forgotten most of the words. Hence, she now resorts to communication in sign with her mother.

6. Massar Signs and ShSL

ShSL, a language commonly used by the deaf community in the state of Meghalaya, exhibits features similar to those of other sign languages. In particular, the sublexical structure and the morphosyntactic patterns resemble those of Indian Sign Language (ISL). For instance, ShSL word order is subject-object-verb, which is similar to ISL. Verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and adjectives (excluding color adjectives) are all sentence final. As in any other language, ShSL also creates signs in a variety of ways, such as borrowing, fingerspelling, and compounding (Wallang, 2014). Brentari (2001) points out "that sign languages change and stabilize themselves within their own language grammars. Each sign language community has its own cultural history embodied by values and practices that influences language change and innovation, but each language is also used by a minority linguistic community. New words in sign languages are created by language internal means, such as lexicalization of productive classifier forms; language contact with other sign languages and language contact with the surrounding spoken language community" (p.ix). An example of influence from the socio-cultural aspects of the surrounding speech community is the sign THANK YOU (Fig 6.1) which differs from the sign commonly used by the urban deaf community (Fig 6.2).

As mentioned earlier, this paper tries to highlight the occurrence of deafness in one family in a small village. Due to many constraints, at present this paper is limited to the study

of lexical variants. It was found that the signs used by the family are simply a type of gestural elements that accompanies speech (*Khasi*). However, although at this point it may appear to be only gestural, for example, the sign FINISH (Fig 6.3 and Fig 6.4) yet there are lexical signs found to vary extensively from the standardized signs used in the schools and the urban deaf community.

Observing the signs used by the family members, it is found that most signs are related to their own socio-cultural context and their worldview, such as the sign WORK (fig 6.5) which relates to the work of broom cultivation. The sign BAG (fig 6.7) iconically represents the bag usually carried by women and men in the village, which is different from the sign (Fig 6.8) used in urban settings. Signs like ROAD (fig 6.9 and Fig 6.10), HEADMAN (fig 6.11 and fig 6.12), RAIN (fig 6.13 and Fig 6.14) and TEACHER (fig 6.15 and fig 6.16) depict their worldview and experiences within their immediate environment.

Another example, Shillong (the capital city of Meghalaya) in their local language is known as *Laban*. When referring to LABAN, they will not produce the standard sign SHILLONG (fig 6.18 and fig 6.19) but it will be produced using the index finger pointing at a distance which they also use for the sign FAR. Similarly, the sign HELP (Fig 6.20 and 6.21) is also produced using the same handshape with a fast movement. The sign STORY characterized the oral traditions (used by older generations in telling folktales in the *Khasi* community). Hence, the sign is produced with an ‘H’ handshape; location-mouth; movement: downwards unlike the ShSL sign as shown below (fig 6.22 and fig 6.23).

The sign HOUSE (fig 6.23), although similar to ShSL (fig 6.24) in most of the phonological features, it still differs either in terms of place or movement, and all signs occur in parallel with the spoken language. Similarly, signs like THIN (Fig 6.25 and fig 6.26), ROUND (Fig 6.27 and fig 6.28), SHORT (Fig 6.29 and figure 6.30), TALL (Fig 6.31 and fig 6.32), have phonological similarities, but they differ either in terms of its location or movement. For example, THIN (fig 6.25) in ShSL/ISL has the phonological features¹³ of HS: Index finger (fO); MOV: Downwards (macro) Spiral (micro) and NMA: frowning face that occurs in neutral space. However, the sign THIN (Fig 6.25) for the *Nongsteng* family is simply produced using the index finger in front of the signer. Many signs exhibit common phonological parameters, yet depict the early stages of phonologization. Hence, there appears to be no systematic phonological pattern being followed. Hence, their sign system does not conform to the phonological or morphological rules of ShSL or ISL. Like any other sign languages, these signs indicate that the language used by the *Nongsteng* family also makes use of classifier handshapes to describe and provide information about the shape, size, location of nouns and referents incorporated in the nouns.

¹³ HS: Handshape, MOV: Movement (macro movement and micro movement), LOC: Location and NMA: Non-manual activity/ facial expressions

From the set of word list collected, 80 % of the signs used by the *Nongsteng* family varies from the urban sign language community and appears to be native as they are intelligible amongst themselves, and the younger generation also acquires these signs from the older members of the family, particularly those who are not enrolled in the special school.

However, influences of ShSL and ISL can also be seen where the family members have assimilated these signs into their vocabulary such as the sign for MOTHER, FATHER, MEAT, NAME, AGE, the numerals, etc., having the same phonological features. *Trena*, one of the informants, narrates that she has learnt these signs from her special school, and has been using these signs with the family members. Since the older generation has dropped out from school at an early age and was not educated in the English language, fingerspellings based on the English alphabet are completely foreign to them. Till date most of the lexical items collected show no evidence of fingerspellings being used by them and hence no initialized signs were found.

At present, it is safe to say that the sign language used by them is a sign-supported speech which is simply used in tandem with the spoken local language. But since it has withstood the test of time through generations it may have different structural elements which are unique to its location in space and time. It is interesting to see that the older generations continue to use these signs despite their children having learnt the standard variety and the children similarly continuing to use the signs understood by their elders when they return from school.

However, further linguistic analysis is still required, and it has been challenging to gather the family in one place for data collection. More time is needed to examine the language use amongst the younger generation and it is the hope of this author that this paper may serve as a basis for further research into the unique signs of this community that carries their identity, traditional knowledge, culture and history. It would be interesting to observe the dynamics involved in acquiring sign language for the younger generation as they would have to negotiate with influences from other standardized sign languages as well.

As part of the wider effort of the state to create a more inclusive society whereby communication barriers and misunderstandings between the deaf and the hearing community can be addressed and broken down, the unique home languages of smaller communities deserve to be respected. In order to provide better services in terms of access to language and education, and a wider dissemination of knowledge and awareness, the office of the State's Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities has initiated the *Meghalaya Sign Language Corpus* (a web-based application) project in which the author is also involved. Integration of such lexical variants as used by this community in the larger lexicon would further strengthen, widen and enrich the language of the larger deaf community in general.

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Appendix

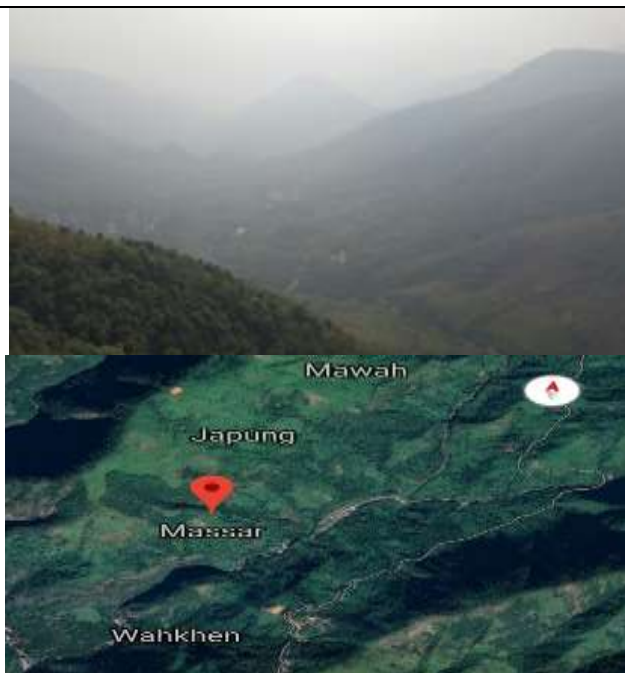


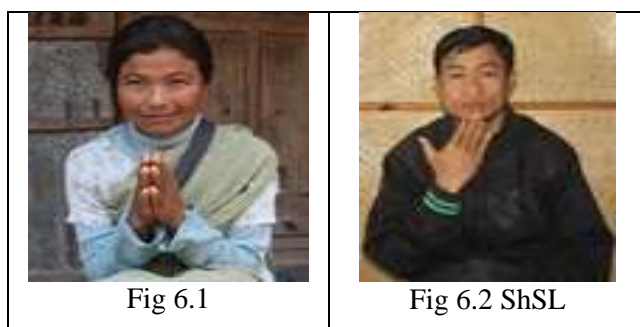
Fig. 1.11 A shot of the Massar Village (Google map)



Fig 4.1 Field visit with the teachers to the village



Fig 5.1 Children at the special school (Ferrando Speech & Hearing Centre, Umniuh Khwan, Meghalaya)



		
<p>Fig 6.18</p>	<p>Fig 6.20</p>	<p>Fig 6.22</p>
		
	<p>Fig 6.21 ShSL</p>	<p>Fig 6.23 ShSl</p>
		
<p>Fig 6.23</p>	<p>Fig 6.24 ShSL</p>	
		
<p>Fig 6.25</p>	<p>Fig 6.26 ShSL</p>	



Fig 6.27



Fig 6.28 ShSL



Fig 6.29



Fig 6.30 ShSL



Fig 6.31



Fig 6.32 ShSL