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### Deafness among the Negev Bedouin: an interdisciplinary dialogue on deafness, marginality and context

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## Chapter 2:

# **The Social Construction of Deafness in a Bedouin Shared Signing Community<sup>1</sup>**

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### *Abstract*

Among the Al-Sayyid Arab-Bedouin, the use of an indigenous sign language is widespread and provides the foundation of a signing community shared by hearing and deaf people. Cases with comparable high incidences of deafness have in recent years stimulated debates in diverse academic disciplines. Lacking an accurate term, they are regularly referred to as “Martha’s Vineyard situations” and have often been oversimplified and romanticized. This article provides an in-depth analysis of a Bedouin shared-signing community and advocates closer investigation of both facilitating and disabling social practices, which would also allow better examination of comparable cases. This article concentrates on the shared use of sign language, the asymmetry it entails, and the manifold forms of translation and mediation that take place. Whereas most hearing Al-Sayyid persons have access to both spoken and signed modes of communication, deaf people’s communication remains largely restricted to the signed mode (hence, the asymmetry). However, in contrast to the common reduction of deafness to the disabling absence of speech or need for translation, deaf people’s need for translation is not unusual among the Al-Sayyid; local communication patterns involve many different forms of translation between different spoken languages, written languages, discourses, and social domains. Additionally, ample translators are readily available. Moreover, the common familiarity with deaf people and sign language facilitates the production and sharing of a unique experiential knowledge, grounded in daily experiences and practices. In this context, deafness is not easily subjugated to its medical model. However, encounters

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in *Medical Anthropology*. 27(3):283-313. 2008.

with the medical and educational establishment present a series of challenges that may severely exacerbate deaf people's structure of opportunities. Finally, I consider the attempts made so far to classify comparable cases; unfortunately, these mostly attempt to classify deaf communities rather than the broader category of signing communities. I thus maintain that the term "shared signing community" most accurately captures what these cases have in common: the pervasive use of signing by both hearing and deaf.

## INTRODUCTION

'Awaad,<sup>2</sup> a deaf man reaching his forties, recalls his first (and last) school experience.

"When the school here was opened, we all went. I marched with my brothers to the hut that was placed on the top of the hill. We were excited and the whole way we talked ['Awaad's hands reveal they were signing]. We wondered how the teacher would be, he wasn't from here. He was brought from afar."

Pausing, 'Awaad rearranges the pillows he was resting on and then invests his elbow as well as his enthusiasm into them, and signed "Then I stopped going. The teacher sent me home."

'Awaad's elderly mother, who was present, said doubtingly, "Is that a teacher? And he doesn't even know one can speak with his hands? Here every one knows."

'Awaad has long since married one of the Sheikh's daughters and they have five children. His hearing wife and children communicate with him in the local sign language, the same language that 'Awaad, his hearing parents, and his siblings have used to communicate with since he was a young child. Like many other Al-Sayyid<sup>3</sup> of his age, 'Awaad makes a living from driving heavy mechanical equipment; he is known as a skillful driver. He can read and write

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<sup>2</sup> To conceal people's identities, personal details have been slightly altered and pseudonyms are used for all individuals.

<sup>3</sup> In my unpublished Master's thesis (Kisch 2000) and in Kisch (2004), I have used the pseudonym Abu-Shara for the descent group's name. However, Sandler et al. (2005) have revealed the actual name while they among others refer to my work; consequently, I have ceased to use this pseudonym.

only a little—whatever he managed to pick up from his brothers when they would return from school.

'Awaad's elderly mother, who never attended school herself, recognizes and, more significantly, has the experiential knowledge that a visual-spatial mode of communication can express the full complexity of human experience and serve as a vehicle to impart knowledge. This understanding can hardly be overestimated, bearing in mind that the recognition of sign language as a genuine language was disputed within scholarly linguistics until the late 1960s. This shared experiential knowledge constitutes a unique linguistic community, shaped as it is by an indigenous sign language shared by hearing and deaf people.

Whereas hearing signers also share spoken language, deaf signers' communication remains largely restricted to the signed mode. Hence, although both hearing and deaf people constitute this shared signing community, the asymmetry between deaf and hearing signers among the Al-Sayyid should not be overlooked. This article focuses on this aspect of the Al-Sayyid shared-signing community and explores the communicative patterns that challenge the reduction of deafness to a disadvantaged absence of speech.

I argue that the multiplicity of lifeworlds and languages, which comprise this social reality, result in a complex communication web that requires many translations. Translation is not only taking place between spoken and signed languages but also between different spoken languages, written languages, discourses, and social domains. Thus, deaf people's need for translation—in their case, of spoken language into sign—is not unusual. This communication web facilitates but does not solely determine the status of deaf people and the relationship between deaf and hearing individuals.

I use the term community to indicate a linguistic speech community<sup>4</sup>—in this case, a signing community. Unlike most signing communities, the Al-Sayyid shared-signing community is not a “capital D” Deaf signing community; in fact, it is not a deaf community as such. The capitalized “Deaf” was introduced by Woodward (1972) to mark cultural identity as distinct

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<sup>4</sup>I here draw on the common extension of Hymes' (1974) definition of speech community. The term was originally designed to contrast with the written mode of language. However, it can be appropriately extended to the signed mode (Senghas & Monaghan 2002).

from the physiological condition of impaired hearing. The concepts of Deaf culture, Deaf community and Deaf identity are widely used within the sociolinguist literature on deafness. In their thorough review of this literature, Senghas and Monaghan (2002) discussed the ways the deaf/Deaf distinction has been employed and the possibilities to surmount its binary. The term “Deafhood,” which was introduced by Ladd (2003), underscores a d/Deaf sense of being. As an analytical category of subjectivity rather than labeling identities, I find it particularly useful for imagining a range of shapes such a sense of being may take. A growing body of literature revealing the “many ways to be Deaf,” well demonstrated in an anthology by this title (Monaghan et al. 2003), provides ample examples indicating that deaf people’s experiences, identities, lifestyles, and languages, are historically and culturally constructed. It is to this literature this article hopes to contribute.

One early and well-known example of this diversity was the case of Martha’s Vineyard (Groce 1985; Lane et al. 2000), documented by Groce’s revealing title “Everyone here spoke sign language.” A number of academic debates in diverse disciplines have inspired a growing interest in what is often depicted as Martha’s Vineyard situations or look-alikes. These range from debates concerned with the circumstances under which Deaf communities or identities evolve (e.g., Schein 1992; Bahan and Nash 1995; Woll and Ladd 2003; Monaghan 2003), the study of disablement and non-medical models of disability (e.g., Scheer and Groce 1988; Oliver 1990; Ingstad and Whyte 1995), endangered languages (Nyst 2007; Nonaka 2004), and the emergence of new sign languages as a prism to the origins of human language and its structure (e.g. Senghas 2005).

Rather than directly engaging with all the above debates, this article provides an in-depth analysis of a Bedouin shared-signing community and advocates closer examination of both facilitating and disabling social practices, which would allow better examination of comparable cases.

So far, a number of comparable signing communities have been documented. Like the former Martha’s Vineyard and present-day Al-Sayyid, all involve communities where high rates of deafness occur, an indigenous sign language is shared by many hearing people, and a relative lack of disablement has been observed. Additionally, most of these studies do not reveal a dominant sense of Deafhood or Deaf alliance. These cases include a Mayan village in Yucatan (Johnson 1991; Shuman 1980a, 1980b), Desa Kolok in Bali (Branson et al. 1996, 1999), Ban Khor in Thailand (Woodward 2003; Nonaka

2004), and Adamorobe in Ghana (Nyst 2007). A full comparison of those cases would exceed the scope of this article; however, in the concluding discussion I will briefly discuss these cases and the attempts that have been made to encompass them in broader classifications. I maintain that existing attempts are insufficient and are actually set up to classify sign languages or Deaf communities. They subsequently impose the logic of these typologies on the above cases, overlooking many of their unique social features. Lacking any other inclusive label for those comparable cases, I tentatively use the term shared signing communities.

While I will return to this literature in the concluding discussion, there are two common assumptions that need to be mentioned to account for the following introduction on the Negev-Bedouin. Occasionally romanticized terms such as “natural integration” of the disabled, ascribed to so-called simple or traditional societies are evoked; I wish to join Ingstad and Whyte (1995) in rejecting the usefulness of such notions. In addition, isolation is often assumed to endorse the existence of these shared signing communities. Washabaugh (1979) suggested referring to several cases, comparable to Al-Sayyid, as “isolated deaf communities.” Similarly, Lane et al. (1996), drawing largely on the case of Martha’s Vineyard, suggested that geographical isolation is essential for communities to be what they term assimilative. Moreover, in a recent linguistic study on the structure of the Al-Sayyid sign language, Sandler et al. (2005) referred to Al-Sayyid and its sign language as isolated. Sandler et al. failed to mention significant language contact and bilingualism.<sup>5</sup> Below I demonstrate that referring to Bedouin communities in the Negev as isolated would be inappropriate even if, at large, they are socially, economically, and geographically marginalized.

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<sup>5</sup> At least one of Sandler et al.’s (2005) informants, who they consider second-generation signers, is bilingual, and the remaining have either siblings or children who are users of ISL. Although this would only strengthen their findings concerning the independence of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, their failure to mention these contacts results in misleading impressions such as in Senghas’s (2005:464) statement that ISL is not used locally. I have in the past presented my reservations concerning the portrayal of the Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language as isolated, by indicating various forms of language contact, such as common bilingualism among deaf signers, lexical borrowing, and the existence of regional dialects or accent differentiation (Kisch 2006).

## RESEARCH SETTING

### **The Negev-Bedouin**

The native Arab inhabitants of the Negev, commonly referred to as Bedouins, are former nomads. The Negev-Bedouin population of about 170,000, which constitutes 25 percent of the population of the Negev subdistrict, mostly lives apart from its Jewish inhabitants. Very few women are involved in wage labor and most men are enrolled in the lower strata of the Israeli labor market. Poverty and unemployment rates are among the highest in Israel. Sixty percent of the Bedouin population is under the age of 16, fertility rates are among the highest in the country, and polygyny and kin-endogamy are common.

During the past decades, following the establishment of the state of Israel, the Negev-Bedouin people have undergone drastic economic, social, and political upheavals that have profoundly restructured their social organization. Nearly half of the Bedouin population resides in semi-urban townships established by the state in its effort to settle the Bedouin in a way that would minimize the use of land resources. The remaining Bedouin settlements are formally unrecognized by the state and thus lack basic infrastructure (i.e., roads, water, electricity, and sewage).

As citizens of Israel, the Arab-Bedouin benefit from national health insurance and fall under the compulsory schooling law. However, neglect and discrimination have led to severely inadequate health, education, and welfare services and facilities for most Arab-Bedouin. For instance, while state authorities are investing in reducing congenital diseases among the Bedouin population, Supreme Court intervention is repeatedly necessary to instruct state authorities to establish health clinics in Bedouin villages or to connect schools or residences to the water system.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the use of existing services remains subject to physical access obstacles and language barriers.

Within contemporary Bedouin society, the socioeconomic gap is widening, and there are considerable differences in education, lifestyle, and gender segregation. Among the Al-Sayyid, illiteracy rates are high among women and elderly men. Meanwhile, in recent years, several younger men

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<sup>6</sup> e.g., Israel High Court of Justice (HCJ), 2000, verdict #4540, HCJ, 2001 verdict #3586 and HCJ, 2004 verdict#786.

have obtained academic professional education mostly by studying law, pharmacology, or medicine abroad.

Kin-endogamy is the most prevailing form of marriage among the Negev-Bedouin, and is accountable for most cases of congenital deafness. Consequently, exceptionally high rates of deafness occur within distinctive large descent groups. The highest rates occur among the Al-Sayyid—the community in question here. Thus, the extent to which deaf people are disabled varies significantly between different groups within the Negev-Bedouin society.

### **Al-Sayyid**

Al-Sayyid is the name of a large descent group that inhabits one of the many formally unrecognized Bedouin settlements in the Negev. All inhabitants are kin related and are named after their common ancestor Al-Sayyid, who migrated to the Negev nearly 200 years ago. An exceptionally high incidence of deafness among the Al-Sayyid was identified by genetic research as non-syndromic, autosomal, recessive deafness ascribed to intermarriage (Scott et al. 1995, 1998). While the expected rate of congenital deafness is approximately 1 to 1.77 per 1000, among the Al-Sayyid it is above 30 per 1000. The Al-Sayyid consists of some 3,700 people, about 120 of whom are deaf.<sup>8</sup> Deafness first occurred in the lineage's fourth generation. The first deaf descendant was a woman born in the 1920s. She and her three deaf brothers have all passed away in recent years. However, some of the first deaf descendants (also of the fourth generation) in other Al-Sayyid clans are still alive. The current young descendants among the Al-Sayyid belong to the sixth to eighth generations from their common ancestor; among them are deaf

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<sup>7</sup> The precise number of cases of profound early onset nonsyndromic hearing loss in Israel is unknown but it is expected to be approximately 1 in 1,000 children. This rate is higher among the Arab-Palestinian population due to consanguinity in Arab villages (Jaber et al. 1998). Shahin et al. (2002) established that prelingual hereditary hearing impairment occurs in the Palestinian population at a frequency of approximately 1.7 per 1,000.

<sup>8</sup> The estimate made by Sandler et al. 2005 is rather overstated; Al-Sayyid deaf descendants in all generations would hardly reach 150. It seems this overestimation is related to inadequacies in their genealogical recording.

descendants belonging to all five major clans, representing the five sons of the common ancestor.

Thus, over the past 80 years, a local indigenous sign language has evolved. Many lexicalized signs bear evidence for the historical depth of this sign language. For instance, the sign for adult woman or mother is based on the iconic representation of a burqa (a traditional form of veiling) no longer practiced. Similarly, the sign for butter derives from the iconic representation of the churning of milk, rarely seen nowadays, for in most households butter is purchased rather than produced. While most of the younger generations who have attended deaf schools were also exposed to Israeli Sign Language (ISL) and occasionally use it among themselves, the local sign language is widely used by all generations to communicate.

Not all hearing Al-Sayyid master the local sign language; in fact, they sign with varying degrees of fluency. Some might use local signs only to accompany spoken Arabic (thus using signed Arabic),<sup>9</sup> while others might be capable of a simple chat in sign language but prefer translation for more intensive communication. Nonetheless, the familiarity of hearing people with sign language is in itself extremely significant for the experience of deafness as a condition calling for the use of signed language (as opposed to a spoken medium of communication) is community wide. Even if one is not a fluent signer, familiarity with the local sign language still contains a basic recognition and practical knowledge that sign language is a language.

Indeed, referring to deaf people as Atrash “mute” (in the sense of speechless), is more commonly used than the term indicating the lack of hearing Akhras, “deaf.” The local sign language is regularly referred to as the “language (of the) mute” in expressions such as, “He speaks better mute than me.” It is also commonly referred to as collectively belonging to the community by its hearing members, who easily distinguish it from other sign languages. Thus, when observing Israeli Sign Language (ISL) or Jordanian Sign Language (LIU) on television, hearing people would often comment, “This is not at all like our signs.”

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<sup>9</sup> When signing Arabic, the structure and concepts of spoken Arabic are maintained, but words are accompanied or replaced by signs borrowed from the lexicon of a sign language. This would be the case for any manual coding of spoken language; comparably in the United States, signed English normally draws signs from American Sign Language.

In Al-Sayyid, endogamous marriages are not merely responsible for local high deafness rates, they also account for a dense social network in which both hearing and deaf people are embedded. Most deaf people, elsewhere as in Al-Sayyid, grow up in families of predominantly hearing people.<sup>10</sup> Unlike many other deaf individuals growing up with hearing parents and siblings, deaf people in Al-Sayyid are from a young age familiar with other deaf children and adults. Hearing people among the Al-Sayyid are also likely to have several deaf people among their immediate family or household members, in-laws, peers, or neighbors. Consequently, all hearing and deaf people are exposed to the viability of fluent communication in sign language and to assimilated, well-integrated deaf figures in the community. It is this familiarity with deaf people and signing that constitutes the valuable experiential knowledge shared by this community.

There is no evidence that additional characteristics are perceived as inherently attached to deafness, nor is deafness subjugated to its medical model.<sup>11</sup> While perceptions and attitudes are important for the understanding of deafness and disablement, the daily practices associated with deafness should not be overlooked. I shall therefore emphasize the social arrangements and practices related to deafness among the Al-Sayyid and communicative patterns in particular.

The deaf in Al-Sayyid do not constitute a distinct social group nor does deafness make for social marginalization or isolation. Until recently, deaf people expressed little preference to associate distinctively with other deaf people. However, the younger generation, which has been attending deaf schools, is increasingly informed by an emerging sense of Deafhood. Elsewhere (Kisch 2007a) I explore this process among the Negev Bedouin and its gendered nature.

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<sup>10</sup> Most genetic mutations responsible for deafness are recessive. Therefore, 90 percent of deaf children are born into hearing families (Lane et al. 1996).

<sup>11</sup> “The medical model of deafness is one based on deficit theory and holds that deafness is the pathological absence of hearing and that such a hearing-impaired individual is therefore disabled because of faulty hearing” (Senghas & Monaghan 2002:77). The medical models of deafness are a major source of perceptions and practices disabling deaf people.

Many hearing children were enrolled in school when, in the 1960s, a local village school was opened in Al-Sayyid.<sup>12</sup> Only in the 1980s were the deaf children enrolled in the Israeli education system and began to attend a Jewish school for the deaf in the nearby district city of Beersheba. After 1967,<sup>13</sup> one father from Al-Sayyid arranged for three of his children to attend a school for the deaf in the West Bank.<sup>14</sup> Recently, the deaf school in Beersheba has closed down and since 1997, most deaf Bedouin children have been assigned to newly opened classes for the deaf in a growing number of local Bedouin schools.

Aside from the education system, which separates deaf and hearing, no social events, roles, or activities in the community are reserved for deaf people due to their deafness. It is for the purpose of observing the embedded social roles, daily practices, and events that anthropological fieldwork and participant observation was employed for this study.

## **Fieldwork**

I first became acquainted with people from among the Al-Sayyid in the winter of 1995, after which I often visited the village and started to conduct research. My first block of intensive fieldwork (i.e., residing with a family in the community) was five months during the spring and summer of 1996. Ever since, I remained in close contact with a number of families and regularly visited and conducted additional fieldwork of one to two months each summer. In 2004–2005, I conducted multisited research during 16 months of fieldwork throughout the Negev. My primary host family remained among the Al-Sayyid. I briefly elaborate on this household setting, its members, and my exchange with them to illustrate two points. First, this allows me to illustrate the typically dense social-kin network, which exposes most Al-Sayyid to the

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<sup>12</sup> Before that, very few children received a formal education; mostly sons of Sheikh's were sent to Ottoman or British mandatory schools (Abu-Saad 1997).

<sup>13</sup> After Israel's occupation of the West Bank following the 1967 war, contacts with its Palestinian population were resumed.

<sup>14</sup> This was a school with a strong oralist (vs. sign) policy. Nevertheless, it seems that during the time the Al-Sayyid siblings spent there, they were exposed to LIU, a version of which was most likely used among some of the deaf students. However, since both children and parents were unhappy with the distance from home, this arrangement did not last long.

local sign language. Second, since translation stands central to my core argument, I wish to present the role of translation in my relationship and exchange with my hosts.

When on fieldwork I resided with Umm-Bassam (literally, “mother of Bassam”) and the extended household of her husband Abu-Bassam and his other wives. Here, as a woman, I was comfortably surrounded by a number of women; the patriarch’s three (later four) wives, his elder daughters who had not yet married, and the wife of the eldest son, Bassam. The guidance and patience of these women were essential to my ongoing process of learning and the negotiation of my expected and possible range of conduct in this gender-segregated society. As most women’s command of Hebrew is limited, their company also had a major role in the improvement of my spoken Arabic in the local dialect. This setting was consciously chosen to allow training in the local sign language and to avoid exposure to communication in ISL only.

Umm-Bassam, Abu-Bassam’s first wife, has four deaf offspring. Abu-Bassam’s deaf mother resided nearby (until her death in 2003). She was the eldest deaf woman among the Al-Sayyid. The majority of the compound’s residents are competent signers. The elder deaf grandmother, the hearing partners of Umm-Bassam’s deaf son and daughter, and the rest of the hearing members of this extended household exclusively use the local sign language for signed communication.

Umm-Bassam is a fluent signer; before the birth of her own deaf children she had learned to sign, both from the deaf cousins she grew up with and from her mother-in-law. The second wife does not sign very fluently, although one of her father’s wives was a deaf woman. She could, however, effectively communicate with the deaf members of the household. The third wife, Aziza, is a competent signer. She grew up as a neighbor of her deaf uncle and often looked after her nephews, several of whom are deaf. Bassam, a young deaf man and Umm-Bassam’s eldest son, lives on the same compound with his wife and family. His wife learned much sign language from her husband but was also previously exposed to sign language, as her father married a deaf woman when she was still young. A few years after my first fieldwork block, Abu-Bassam married a fourth wife, as an exchange bride to one of his daughters. This young woman had several deaf siblings and is also a fluent signer.

Further, I wish to employ the frame of this dense social-kin network to advance the underlying premise of my argument concerning translation. When I initially started my fieldwork, I had some familiarity with ISL, which

most of the Al-Sayyid children are exposed to at school. My mother (and father) tongue is Dutch, but I received my high school education in Hebrew and chose Arabic as an additional language in my high school curriculum. Thus, although I could communicate from the onset at a basic level and did not need to employ a translator, my first major project was to improve my competence in the locally spoken Arabic dialect<sup>15</sup> and to learn the indigenous sign language.

I had many interlocutors, teachers, and mentors. Some of the children were especially keen on teaching me new words, writing them down in my notebook or pointing out new expressions (both in Arabic and in sign language). In return, I was able to assist them with homework or television subtitles in English or Hebrew. I was often asked to read and translate documents, make bureaucratic inquiries, or accompany people for their affairs in town to translate and mediate between the various social worlds I moved between as a foreign woman. I, too, needed far more than the occasional straightforward and contextual translation; conducting anthropological fieldwork is essentially about translation and mediation in a deeper sense. This was one of the key forms of exchange that took place between my hosts and me. Practices of translations and mediation are essential to the understanding of the detailed ethnographic accounts that follow next and constitute the core of my analysis.

## ASYMMETRY AND THE DIALECTICAL COMMUNICATION WEB

The local sign language is shared by hearing and deaf people. As discussed earlier, although hearing members might sign with varying degrees of fluency, hearing people's familiarity with sign language is in itself extremely significant. Yet, even if we suspend the issue of fluency, it still remains that most hearing Al-Sayyid have access to both spoken and signed modes of communication, while deaf people's communication remains largely signed. This asymmetry could have made primarily deaf people dependent on the

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<sup>15</sup> By the time I started this research, my command of Arabic was a rather awkward blend of the formal (classical) Arabic because I had only studied years previously in high school, and the various Palestinian and Egyptian spoken dialects I had been exposed to or used in the years since.

translation of spoken language, on mediation, and on developing alternative channels of indirect access to information. But it did not.

This asymmetry should be understood in light of a given dialectical communication web that is comprised of a multiplex of languages, language modes, and domains, many of which need to be translated and mediated to various members of the community. The local sign language is the first language of all deaf members of the community and of many hearing individuals who were raised by a deaf parent or sibling. Younger deaf people (who have attended the deaf school) are also fluent in ISL, yet only few are (even partially) literate in Hebrew or Arabic. Arabic is the first language for most hearing members of the community; many can also communicate in the local sign language. Some hearing women and most hearing men also speak Hebrew. The majority of hearing young men and women are at least partially literate in Arabic, fewer also in Hebrew, and even fewer can speak or read English.

The languages, language modes, and domains involved are therefore numerous and overlapping. The languages involved are Hebrew, Arabic, the local sign language, ISL, to a certain extent English,<sup>16</sup> and marginally LIU.<sup>17</sup> Language modes are signed, spoken, and written. Language domains, representing discourses not shared by all, include gendered discourses, religious discourses, medical discourses, and others. Members of the community are located at diverse overlaps of these communication domains and are therefore in a position to translate or mediate for different people in different situations, while in other situations they rely on mediation and translation by others.

Thus, I argue that the reliance on translation and mediation is a common practice and not restricted to deaf people. This complex communication web makes it impossible to reduce hierarchy to a single resource or axis: hearing-deaf, speaking-signing, men-women, adult-child, literate-illiterate, et cetera.

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<sup>16</sup> Exposure to English began during the British mandate period. Today it is studied at school, broadly introduced by television, and is often related to consumption (such as labels of products and instructions of equipment).

<sup>17</sup> Exposure to LIU has become widespread since the introduction of electric generators and satellite television. This has made it possible to watch Jordanian channels in which quite a number of programs are broadcast with simultaneous translation to LIU.

Many of the asymmetries involved are themselves dialectical. The following ethnographic cases reveal the complexity at stake.

### **The Confrontation: An Extended Case**

Among the Al-Sayyid, families are large and many people reside in shared households and courtyards. Social gatherings with many participants frequently occur spontaneously. Commonly, such gatherings include deaf and hearing, using both signed and spoken communication. This case study illustrates the complexity of translation practices that often take place. Deaf people are not coddled, and signed communication is fully exploited for both its qualities and shortcomings, as is spoken communication.

I will not extensively elaborate on the nature of the dispute reported below nor the detailed content of the exchange. Rather, I will attempt to highlight the nature of the exchange as such, illustrating the code and mode switching and blending, the altering primacy of sign and speech, and the constant translations and mediations.

It has been a few weeks now since Maysha has left her husband and returned to her natal home with her baby daughter. This is an approved response by women to disputes with their husband or his kin. Eventually, the husband (or his delegates) usually comes to demand her return. It is on this occasion that a woman's grievances and claims can be presented and supported by her kin, to be negotiated or resolved. Maysha's husband, Suheib, came while her father was absent. Maysha did not come to welcome him at the shiq (the men's hosting space); he soon left. The next day Suhieb came again and waited with Maysha's elder deaf brother, Bassam, for Maysha's father to return. Suheib and Bassam know each other well; they were classmates at the school for the deaf in Beersheba. Now they sit together, but say little. Suheib addresses Bassam in ISL, attempting to exclude some of the others present; Bassam does not collaborate. Suheib sends one of the children to call me, hoping he can recruit me to his side. However, while I am crossing the domestic compound toward the shiq, Abu-Bassam already approaches and the "show" is about to begin.

The members of the extended family living in the compound gather on the grounds in front of Umm-Bassam's entrance. (Umm-Bassam is Abu-Bassam's first wife, and mother of 13 children, including Bassam and Maysha). After a while, Maysha also appears and sits in the doorway with the baby in her arms. The audience is mostly hearing, but most of what is

being communicated is signed. Besides Suheib himself, both of Maysha's deaf brothers and her younger deaf sister are present. Maysha's father, Abu-Bassam, stands in the middle, with the rest sitting and squatting around. Suheib drags a chair from the courtyard on which to sit. His younger brother, who accompanied him, sits at his feet.

Abu-Bassam takes the lead, for his daughter's grievances have become his own. The dispute is now between families. What further exacerbates the conflict is that Abu Bassam has personally been implicated; his integrity has been questioned. Some of Suheib's relatives had suggested that what Abu-Bassam is actually after (and the reason Maysha is under his roof now) is his daughter's social security allowance. Abu-Bassam needs to assert that the only way Suheib can take his wife home is when he will take better care of her. For his part, Suheib has to insist on his wife's immediate return, but at the same time to endure, remain calm, and appease his opponents.

Abu-Bassam does not sit as he signs and speaks, but is performing, moving around and turning about. Addressing himself to Suheib he signs fluently, accompanying his assertions with a mix of speech consisting of single words or occasional sentences. At other times he speaks fluently, using some signs to accompany his Arabic. The following exchange takes place:

Voicing over with partial speech Abu-Bassam signs, "Each month I slaughter two [heads of sheep] to feed [my family]. Your [father], he butchers only one [sheep] a year and still he cries about it!"

Laughter passes through the audience. Although evening is falling, all present can see or hear the exchange. Suheib looks restrained, lights a cigarette, and responds dismissively.

Having been countered by Suheib's indifference, Abu-Bassam now insults Suheib in speech, unaccompanied by sign. Maysha smiles in the dim light, and looks at her elder deaf brother Bassam. Bassam, realizing he has missed something, immediately looks at Maysha for translation. Maysha translates the insults discreetly. However, all present are aware that the smallest remark left unsigned will be translated to Suheib by his escort younger brother.

Resuming the floor, Abu-Bassam reproaches Suheib, again in sign language. Not all can follow it, however, because he is directly facing Suheib, voicing only fragments of speech. Those sitting opposite Suheib cannot see Suheib's or Abu-Bassam's signing; Abu-Bassam's back is blocking their view.

Abu-Bassam's third wife, Aziza, who can see both Abu-Bassam and Suheib, promptly translates the exchange into speech. She speaks, of

course, without removing her gaze from Abu-Bassam so that she doesn't miss the fine details.

In the midst of Abu-Bassam's next accusations, Suheib abruptly turns his eyes away from Abu-Bassam, fixes a fierce gaze on his wife Maysha, and then angrily signs to her "Is this what you told them? Did I ever say such a thing? What are you up to?!"

Maysha lowers her eyes, ignoring her husband's direct, signed reproach. She thus breaks off his address, just as Abu-Basaam's statements were rudely interrupted a few minutes earlier. Abu Bassam was cut off the very moment Suheib looked away, and the eyes of the entire audience turned with Suheib's gaze to Maysha.

Pointing to his daughter, Abu-Bassam regains the floor and addresses Suheib, "A mother has to feed her child, and she sits hungry!" He speaks and signs brusquely, then signing at Suheib, "Shame on you, miser!"

Suheib, signing calmly, provokes Abu-Bassam by mentioning the social security money.

Abu-Bassam is furious, "Do I put the money in my pocket? How come? Does she not eat? Wash? She has an [social security] allowance and with it I buy everything she needs!" He points at the drying laundry and at an empty can of milk powder that is dumped in a corner.

As the discussion goes on, Abu-Bassam continues demanding that Suheib take better care of his family. When he feels he is repeating himself, he threatens to break up the marriage and then pretends to send Suheib away. But at this point the display is so clearly a show that Abu-Bassam then resumes a more fatherly tone.

This provides only a small segment of that evening's drama. The social situation, the constant simultaneous translations, the multiple language use, and the mediations or manipulations are not uncommon. They occur in many daily interactions, illustrating the situated nature of the structural and practical hierarchies that frame daily social communications, and illustrates the practices that bypass and negotiate these constraints.

However, this particular tense encounter was characterized by several exceptional features. Normally, Suheib does not need to be accompanied by a translator when visiting in the village; he can randomly rely on any of the many potential translators to be found in the village. But this time, he needed to ensure that he had a reliable translator. Abu-Bassam, accompanying his speaking and signing with an expressive performance, was also out of the ordinary. Abu-Bassam is a fluent signer and does not normally sign his speech

or overvoice his signing. He resorted to dramatic acting out since the substance was not directed only at Suheib; additionally, he was encircled by his audience. The exchange was essentially public and designed to confront and discomfort Suheib, while vindicating himself and his daughter.

Throughout, primacy was given alternately to sign or to speech, fully exploiting each mode's advantages and disadvantages. Suheib was disadvantaged whenever things were left unsigned, yet his brother conveyed translation promptly. Abu-Bassam was disadvantaged whenever Suheib simply looked away, not attending to his show.

Obviously, Suheib was in the unfavorable position here, not as a result of his deafness but as a young husband confronted by his wife's allies who accused him of misconduct. Aware of his unfavorable position, Suheib arranges to be accompanied by his brother to serve as a language broker. The remaining deaf people present did not require any more translation than do those hearing when various people sign simultaneously or out of their sight.

Suheib's situation highlights the significance of the potential translators. His brother could follow both speech and sign (but not ISL). In some cases, ISL may be used, just as Hebrew could be used, to prevent someone present from understanding. Often, deaf people have preferred translators. Aziza often voiced the signed parts of conversations into speech for some of the hearing family members. Maysha had long been her brother Bassam's preferred translator. She was a skilled signer and close in age to both Bassam and their older deaf sister and eventually married their schoolmate. When she learned her first Hebrew words, Maysha was assisted by her deaf siblings, who also taught her some of the school (ISL) signs.

The need for translation can indicate situational dependency, but the existence of a preferred translator indicates the possibility of being particular in choosing one. Indeed, the need for translation creates an asymmetry. In the confrontation portrayed above, the asymmetry resulted largely from Suheib's dependence on his own younger brother's translation. In much the same manner, some of the hearing people in the community need translation to sign; Abu-Bassam, who is illiterate, depends on his children when confronted with written documents, and Maysha was expected to allow her father to mediate her demands. Yet, in other situations, Abu-Bassam, Suheib, or Maysha might be in the position to mediate and translate for someone else. And as suggested in the next case, Abu-Bassam may need mediation to gain access to women's discourse.

## Gender Asymmetry and Mediation

Although gender constitutes a rather different social category than deafness, among the Al-Sayyid—as often is the case in gender-segregated societies—it also involves practices of translation and mediation. These are instructive in demonstrating the range of communicative practices at work, as well as to illustrating the dialectical nature of some of the hierarchies involved; social asymmetries are often irreducible to one-dimensional hierarchies.<sup>18</sup> Seemingly fixed hierarchies are reversed when considering men’s reliance on translation and mediation given their restricted access to women’s discourse; yet, this need for translation does not result in social subordination.

As the following case will demonstrate, women have broader access to men’s discourse than men have to that of women. However, given the dominant patriarchal order, this asymmetry cannot be seen as socially subordinating men. Nevertheless, women are exposed to men’s discourse, owing to their frequent social transparency<sup>19</sup> and by means of information conveyed by sons to their mothers.

Khalil (10 years old), the youngest sons of the first wife in my host family, often competes with his one-year-older deaf brother, Nuri, to join their father on his visits. One day, when Khalil and Nuri had yet another struggle on this matter, Khalil loses and stays home. Later on, he asks me to help him with his homework. After completing his homework, we are warming up in the empty shiq.

“So why were you so eager to join your father?” I ask.

“It’s very interesting to visit people, to see who comes and goes, and all the arguments,” he says excitedly.

I know that at his age, he would not be expected to participate or say much and that he would receive little attention, even if it became late and he fell asleep in a corner.

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<sup>18</sup> I borrow here from Louis Dumont (1980) who uses the term dialectical hierarchy; although his concern is more conceptual, he also uses gender to demonstrate dialectical hierarchies.

<sup>19</sup> Women often assumed the status of non-participant and silent observers of men’s gatherings when they engage in tasks such as serving them tea or food. An elaborate illustration of the separate social worlds of Bedouin men and women can be found in Abu-Lughod (1988, 1985).

I therefore ask, "But isn't it tiresome to just sit there the whole evening? What do you need this for?"

He looks at me, puzzled with my ignorance, and says, as if it was more than obvious, "How do you mean, I can tell it all to my mother!"

While women have access to men's discourse, men are rarely exposed to women's discourse. Women's conversations fall silent upon the arrival of a man. Daughters, as opposed to sons, are taught from a young age not to disclose whatever they have learned from women's conversation. Hence, women have better access to men's discourse than men have to that of women. Of course, this does not imply that men are subordinate to women. Men's need to seek translation and mediation of the content of women's discourse is thus comparable to deaf people not having direct access to spoken language. An example follows.

Dhiab and Watha have been married for over three years but have no children. Lately they have turned to the hospital's fertility clinic. Abu-Dhiab (Dhiab's father) has given them a ride to the hospital a few times and is aware of the treatment they are receiving but has a hard time figuring it out. He is, however, very attentive to any signs: the frequency his daughter-in-law goes to the local clinic and her persistence in her daily prayer and fasting (women do not fast or pray during menstruation).

Watha and Dhiab live in the same courtyard as Dhiab's parents. Watha is on good terms with her sister-in-law and father-in-law's co-wives and most of them are kept informed. However, Abu-Dhiab does not manage to obtain any information from them. As he testifies, "She went for another test, I wasn't told a thing. It's been for a while that I'm guessing."

On one of the following feast days, an old aunt comes for a visit. She is an elderly woman, pleasant but authoritative. Abu-Dhiab takes notice of her opinion, and treats her with special respect. This particular night he insists on driving her home himself, and waits patiently although she had announced her departure a few times already. In the car, assuming that she has been updated during the evening, Abu-Dhiab finally conveys his doubts and guesses to the elderly aunt, and she clarifies some of the indications he could not decipher.

Like many other Bedouin men, Abu-Dhiab needs mediation to women's discourse. Furthermore, as for other men and women from his generation, he cannot read or write and requires mediation to written modes of language. Abu-Dhiab often sends for one of his daughters to read his documents; of his

20 children she is the only one, so far, who completed high school. When facing a document in Hebrew, his oldest son Dhiab, a young deaf man, may assist him as well. Dhiab did not complete a high school education but he did attend the Jewish-Hebrew School for the deaf in Beersheba and can read some Hebrew.

The previously mentioned contest between Khalil and Nuri discloses another aspect of the asymmetry between deaf and hearing children that results from the role of passive participation in the socialization of children. One should not conclude that this implies exclusion because much of the daily communication is signed or translated in many ways and routes. Children gain valuable social knowledge from their observations, as they are often passive witnesses to adult communication. Additionally, Bedouin children at an early age recognize that their observations can be translated into social capital, to be spent or withheld. They thus learn to whom they may disclose what. Children often are alert observers, messengers, and watchful “scouts” sent by other adults, mainly women. However, they are not expected to make any comments, ask questions, or call for any attention. Deaf children are often preferred scouts to collect signed communication, and as other children, they announce approaching guests and other events they eyewitness in neighboring households or in the male hosting spaces. Not only verbal communication is significant and reported, but signed communication is just as valuable. As the previous cases demonstrate, deaf children contribute and fully participate in this race to deliver news, mainly as daughters and sons to their own mothers.

Channels of mediation are shaped by gendered and generational asymmetries as well as by the asymmetry between hearing (speaking and signing) and deaf (signing). The intersection of social structure, networks, and the communication web compose the position of all community members. Furthermore, hearing and deaf men and women are also differentially affected by the provision of services, intervention programs, and the discourses they employ.

### **Permeability, “the Inequalities of Languages,” and Disablements**

It would be too convenient to confine my analysis to the asymmetries discussed in the previous sections. In recent years, it has become increasingly evident that the local communication web is permeable to several more

global, structural, and authoritative discourse asymmetries. Encounters with the medical and pedagogical discourses introduce such asymmetries. These processes must be highlighted, even if only briefly, as they significantly restructure the shared lives of deaf and hearing among the Al-Sayyid.

I suggest that encounters with the medical and pedagogical establishment and discourses are marked by what Talal Asad called “the inequality of languages” (1986:156), referring to the permeability of respective languages in relation to dominant forms of discourse. While Asad used the concept to address the constraint of “cultural translation” in ethnographic work, I find the notion useful in a broader context as well. It is relevant to the encounters between marginal minorities and dominant establishments in general and to the authority of professional discourse versus lay discourse in particular.

From the 1980s onward and until recently, deaf Bedouin children were sent to a school for the deaf in Beersheba, where they were taught to read and write Hebrew. The entire school staff was Jewish and Hebrew speaking,<sup>20</sup> and the language of instruction was signed Hebrew.<sup>21</sup> Only few pupils achieved full literacy in any language. This school belonged to the Special Education division,<sup>22</sup> and the curriculum severely restricted its pupils’ future opportunities. Most of the school staff was unaware either of the social realities of their students’ lives or of their harsh sociopolitical conditions. Following the concern expressed by parents from different Bedouin families throughout the Negev about their deaf children’s exclusively Hebrew education, classes for deaf children were subsequently opened in primary schools in three Bedouin townships, and the larger Hebrew school for the Deaf in Beersheba was closed. The staff in these new classes is Arabic speaking and indeed more familiar with their students’ general sociocultural environment. Yet so far, little specialized training has been introduced other than a basic course in ISL, the signs of which are now mainly used to accompany spoken and written Arabic. The staff is mostly unaware or dismissive of the favorable linguistic setting of the signing communities from which some of their students come. Based on ignorance and prejudices, many

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<sup>20</sup> For several years, a single Arabic-speaking teacher was employed, part-time, to introduce the students to Arabic language.

<sup>21</sup> Signed Hebrew is Hebrew accompanied or coded by signs (borrowed from ISL).

<sup>22</sup> This also meant that its curriculum did not meet the standard academic level.

of the teachers assume that all deaf children suffer isolation and neglect at the hands of their stigmatized families.

Because of the authority ascribed to educational staff and establishment, many parents attribute a higher status to signs used at school. Not unlike the hierarchy between “high” (classic) literary Arabic<sup>23</sup> language and “low” (colloquial) languages, the local sign language is often, even locally, underrated. One typical remark was made by a hearing-yet-signing parent of a deaf student: “The school’s language is the language of knowledge. It is a literary classical language, and much better than our popular local signs.”

Educational arrangements present a series of challenges to an already existing social world shared by deaf and hearing. Elsewhere (Kisch 2007a), I argue that existing poor educational opportunities provide deaf children with different and restricted vocational options and life trajectories. Most saliently, the position of deaf people erodes as a result of the unequal access to written modes of language.

The story of 'Awaad, presented in the opening of this essay demonstrates how access to new resources (such as literacy) might become an axis of erosion in the status of deaf people. As long as deaf people can draw on a variety of resources, they occupy viable positions in society. When deaf people are equally able to provide translation and mediation, their need for translation of spoken communication need not result in disablement or cause social isolation.

Medicalization is another force reshaping deaf people’s position in the community. The medicalization of deafness has occurred through two major developments: a genetic intervention program attempting to reduce the occurrence of deafness in the community and the introduction of audiometry. When deafness is reduced to an undesirable trait, encounters with the medical services become a source of stigmatizing narratives and practices. Elsewhere (Kisch 2000, 2004), I have elaborated on the local accounts regarding the origins of deafness. I have argued that such local accounts portray implicit yet complex negotiations of the extent to which deafness is perceived as a problem that calls for intervention. The pursuit of a cure or prevention of

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<sup>23</sup> Arabic is a diglossic language; i.e., it exhibits a strict distribution of formal vs. informal usage (Ferguson 1996). These different registers are often considered to establish bilingualism.

deafness was not common among the Al-Sayyid and none of the local accounts of deafness is reserved to explain deafness. Hence, there are no local myths to account for the origin of deafness; not of a particular individual's deafness, nor of the high occurrence of deafness. Increasingly, the genetic explanations and prescriptions are in various ways incorporated and translated into local discourse, but people remain far more invested in seeking possible marriage unions than in the avoidance of one specific "genetic risk." Nevertheless, the language of "genes," "risk," and "defects" is gradually infusing local discourse.

The local experiential knowledge of both deaf and hearing members of the community is challenged by the authoritative knowledge claimed by pedagogical and medical discourse. As Washabaugh usefully pointed out, the force of negative attitudes is felt when they are "woven into the institutional organization of deaf people's families, schools, and communities" (1981b:241). Thus, not only the authority of these discourses is at play here, but the ways they reshape and deteriorate deaf people's structure of opportunities is also involved.

## DISCUSSION

### Comparable Cases

A number of studies have reported cases comparable to the Al-Sayyid shared-signing community. In this section, I will outline several of the similarities and differences between these cases. Such an overview will reveal some of the challenges faced by the attempts to classify these cases and will facilitate the examination of those classification offered so far. In all cases— involving village communities where high rates of deafness occur—an indigenous sign language is shared by many hearing people and relative lack of or reduced disablement has been observed. Other objects of comparison are marriage patterns, the effects of the introduction of formal education, and other interventions that single-out deaf people. Most diverse and debatable are the various manifestations of deaf alliance.

The most evident similarity is that all studies concern social groups, among which a high incidence of deafness is related to endogamy and, thus, likely to involve a fairly dense social network. During the second half of the 19th century, the rate of deafness on the eastern and central part of the island of Martha's Vineyard was between 2 and 4 percent (Groce 1985; Lane et al.

2000). The Vineyarders shared common ancestry and village endogamy was common (Groce 1985). Among the last eight generations of the Balinese village of Desa Kolok, 2 percent are deaf (Branson et al. 1996; Hinnant 2000). In Adamorobe, it seems a stable rate of deafness of 2 percent has persisted for several centuries now (Nyst 2007). In several villages of the Thai Ban Khor community, 1 percent of the population is deaf (Woodward 2003; Nonaka 2004). All these rates are significantly higher than the expected rate of 0.1 percent of congenital deafness in the general population. The study of a Mayan village in Yucatan, Mexico, reported that 3 to 4 percent of the villagers were deaf and that village endogamy was common (Johnson 1991). However, the total population concerned in the Mayan case is very small, deafness lacks significant generational depth, and all deaf individuals belong to only four nuclear families in the village (Shuman 1980a, 1980b; Johnson 1991). Taking this into consideration, Al-Sayyid, with about 3 percent of its population deaf, represents the highest rates among contemporary cases.

These numbers alone do not designate a shared signing community. The most significant similarity between these cases is that an indigenous sign language evolved, and fluency in sign language is widespread among the hearing members of the community. Although little information is provided with regard to the actual diverse degrees of fluency, it is this common familiarity with sign language that allows me to label all these cases as shared signing communities. It is also significant that none of the cases report stigma attached to signing. Apparently, in all cases, people's understandings of deafness are grounded in daily experiences and practices. It seems that as I have argued for the case of Al-Sayyid, the high rates of deafness and the dense social (kin) network facilitate the production and sharing of this unique experiential knowledge.

Another prominent point of resemblance is the impact of education in these communities. In most cases, education involved separation among deaf and hearing and differential access to literacy. When deaf schools were attended, they also introduced deaf students from shared signing communities to deaf students from elsewhere and often exposed them to national sign languages and Deaf communities associated with them.

Nonetheless, in Desa Kolok and Al-Sayyid, the provision of education most evidently contributed to the unequal opportunities for deaf children compared with hearing children. In Desa Kolok, the first local school (established in the 1950s), was not attended by deaf children; it seems that

only by the 1990s some deaf children from Desa Kolok started attending the regional school for the deaf (Branson et al. 1996). Branson et al. (1996) reported that this situation raised concerns among the villagers. Similar concern among the Al-Sayyid parents highlights their conviction that deaf, just as hearing, children would benefit from education and can achieve literacy. In both settings, literacy became increasingly important, yet deaf students enjoy only meager opportunities to achieve it when compared with their hearing peers.

At the time Johnson's study was carried out at a Yucatec Mayan village, deaf children did not attend school. Still, the author insisted that because of the nature of the local economy and the generally poor level of education this did not limit their access to economic or social resources (Johnson 1991). In contrast, the Vineyard's deaf children obtained free education sooner than their hearing peers, yet they had to leave the island to attend the nearest school for the deaf, thus introducing them to the developing American Deaf community and joining them to its establishment (Groce 1985; Lane et al. 2000). Interestingly, Groce (1985:57) mentioned that many of her informants erroneously considered the manual alphabet to be somehow more "real" sign language. This reveals the oppressive potential of pedagogical authority discussed earlier with regards to the situation in the Negev.

Marriage patterns expose further differences. In the studies by Groce (1985) and Branson et al. (1996, 1999), the majority of deaf people were married to hearing partners. And, as among the Al-Sayyid, there is no evidence that any stigma is attached to hearing people for having a deaf partner. In the Yucatec Mayan case, the situation was quite different because deaf people are reported to face severe difficulty in finding marriage partners (Johnson 1991; Shuman 1980a, 1980b). Not one of the deaf women was married (Johnson 1991). In the village of Adamorobe (Ghana), it is mostly deaf men rather than deaf women who face difficulties in finding marriage partners (Nyst 2007).

In this respect, it is also important to note that in Al-Sayyid, unlike Martha's Vineyard and Desa Kolok, deaf-deaf marriage has occurred only very recently. The one deaf-deaf marriage so far was initiated by a young deaf man from outside the community who married his classmate who happened to be from Al-Sayyid (for more details on this significant development, see Kisch 2007a). However, in Martha's Vineyard and Desa Kolok, deaf-deaf marriages were common—accounting for about a third of the cases (Groce 1985;

Branson et al. 1999)—and pre-existed the encounter with deaf schools and deaf individuals from other communities.

Finally, the cases differ most with respect to such questions of deaf alliances and an emergent sense of Deafhood. The manifestations of deaf alignment are not only most debatable but also seem to be most dynamic. A correlation between deaf education and deaf alignment is not evident in all cases. Johnson (1991) reported that deaf men tended to associate with other deaf men more than with hearing members of the community. Additionally, both Johnson (1991) and Woodward (2003) reported that deaf people did not show any interest in associating with deaf people in neighboring villages.

Desa Kolok presents the most distinctive evidence of in-group deaf alignments,<sup>24</sup> which do not stem from contact with pre-existing Deaf associations. Branson et al. (1999) stated that while in Desa Kolok there is a clear Deaf community, and the deaf are perceived to constitute a subcommunity within the village, they are fully integrated into village life (Branson et al. 1996, 1999). However, Hinnant (2000) listed several pivotal village activities and organizations in which deaf people do not participate. Furthermore, several other activities have become associated with deafness. Deaf people share various social roles; they are in charge of the water system and have their separate dance troupe (Hinnant 2000, Branson et al. 1999). From the data provided by the studies of the Balinese case, I also infer that deaf men and women are not equally involved in such activities.

During my first years of research among the Al-Sayyid, I noted that deaf people very rarely maintained regular contact with deaf people outside their kin-based community, although there are several other Bedouin communities in the Negev where deafness is common. This was even more striking given that some young deaf adults had deaf schoolmates from throughout the Negev. Yet they did not maintain contact with them. It is only more recently that such contacts have occurred. Several deaf men, most of whom have attended a deaf boarding school in the center of Israel, occasionally attend activities in the deaf club in the nearby city. Deaf schools, along with deaf clubs, are often referred to as the two constitutive sites of “Deaf culture” (Ladd 2003; Senghas & Monaghan 2002). Both in Al-Sayyid and on Martha’s Vineyard, the developments in deaf education are allied with an emergent

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<sup>24</sup> Goffman (1963) introduced the terms in-group and out-group alignments.

sense of Deafhood. Interestingly, such developments in the Negev differ significantly between young deaf Bedouin women and men (Kisch 2007a).

In all these cases comparable to Al-Sayyid, the changing structures of opportunities in the field of education, employment, and marriage pose a severe challenge to the shared signing community. Similar challenges are introduced by discourse and practices such as medicalization on the one hand, and notions of Deafhood on the other. All reveal the complex dynamic under which such unique social realities are found.

A comprehensive comparison of the different cases documented so far is beyond the scope of this article and would easily provide for a separate expanded article. Moreover, in some cases only preliminary or chiefly linguistic studies have been published, providing little data concerning medical interventions, gender differences, and the extent to which deafness serves as a postulate for social alignment as a distinct social group. Such data would contribute to our understanding of the circumstances under which Deaf communities evolve, as studied by Schein (1992), Bahan and Nash (1995), and others. Such data would also contribute to our understanding of the diverse social conditions that facilitate the emergence of sign languages and the possible role of both deaf and hearing signers in the emergence and transmission of particular sign languages.

Further research into medical interventions might reveal not only the early phases of disabling processes but also less familiar modes of its contestations. For instance, among the Negev-Bedouin it seems, at least for the time being, that hearing and deaf members of shared signing communities such as Al-Sayyid are more resilient to medical authority and question it in different ways than other Negev-Bedouin. In the debate on the formation of Deaf communities, oppression and alienation are often perceived to be “the motor that drives the Deaf community” (Schein 1992:204). In the context of this debate, shared signing communities are often examined as an absence (of a Deaf community) or in search of embryonic deaf communities. However, shared signing communities are seldom isolated; in several of the shared signing communities, processes are underway that increase deaf people’s engagement in already existing Deaf communities with which they are increasingly involved. Additionally, we should avoid overlooking the other factors and processes that maintain or alter a particular shared signing community and the extent to which they may both facilitate and restrict different manifestations of Deafhood. Branson et al. (1999) rightfully pointed

out that it is often assumed that a Deaf community must exist for sign language to emerge. I believe it is largely this line of inquiry that inspired and dominates the existing classification attempts discussed in the following section. This dominant concern with the genesis of Deaf communities often results in too little attention to the role of hearing signers and the interaction between deaf and hearing members of the community.

## **Classifications**

As mentioned earlier, a number of attempts have been made to classify the above-cited cases comparable with the Al-Sayyid signing community. The available typologies (according to attributes) and taxonomies (according to genesis) vary from efforts to classify sign languages to attempts to group whole societies according to their acceptance or adaptation to deaf people. However, these lines are not always consistently followed. I will briefly review and comment on these models in order to clarify why I did not employ any of their suggested classifications. Composing an alternative and more inclusive model to classify signing communities would be beyond the scope of this article.

Confusingly, the cases of shared signing communities are often classified within the range of d/Deaf communities. Senghas and Monaghan (2002) accurately commented that Martha's Vineyard may best be seen as "a community with deaf members, rather than a Deaf community or community of deaf individuals." This comment applies for all the above cases. While they could be classified as a unique type of signing community, they are not a type of deaf community. It seems these classification projects are strongly inspired by the telling absence of a Deaf community; thus, they implicitly wish to understand the actual absence of a distinct deaf community despite abundant deaf people and the existence of a sign language.

Woodward (2003) offered a typology of sign languages and distinguished among indigenous sign languages, original sign languages, and modern sign languages. However, the author also intermittently classified the communities related to these languages. For instance, Woodward wrote: "In indigenous signing communities, deaf people are well integrated into the village community" (2003; 296). The remaining models available do not classify sign languages or signing communities but rather, attempt to classify deaf

communities or even societies at large. Washabaugh's (1979) early distinction between isolated deaf communities, developing communities, and bilingual deaf communities clearly referred to a supposed evolution toward the last category. Bahan and Nash (1995) suggested a distinction between assimilating communities and suppressing communities. Lane et al. (1996, 2000) suggested assimilating societies versus differentiating societies.

Lane et al. also proposed three essential ingredients for a community to be what they term assimilative: "several generations of Deaf people (which assures the transmission of language and culture); a relatively high incidence of Deaf people (which motivate hearing people to learn the signed language); and geographic isolation encouraging intermarriage (which perpetuates the deaf population) and face to face communication" (1996:206). While intermarriage might be considered an essential ingredient here, it is worth noting that the exercise of endogamy is more often the result of complex social structures and practices than of geographic isolation. However, in a later article, Lane et al. (2000) refined the earlier reference to intermarriage and the prevalence of deafness; they suggest that different genetic patterning contributes to the spread of sign language into the hearing environment. Recessive genetic patterning (joint with kin-endogamy) undeniably contributes to the blending of deaf and hearing people. Yet one cannot attribute the different social realities deterministically to a genetic pattern.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, Woll and Ladd (2003) have suggested a less-static model by considering the multidimensional characteristics of Deaf communities. Based on three major dimensions,<sup>26</sup> they draw a space within which they place three examples of deaf communities: single communities, integrated communities, and oppositional communities. In addition to recognizing

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<sup>25</sup> Given the recessive deafness among the Al-Sayid, it indeed displays a generally scattered pattern. Only four deaf parents have deaf children, all have hearing partners and both deaf and hearing children. Two of these deaf parents create a generational depth of three successive generations of deafness; a deaf grandfather who has deaf and hearing children; one of his deaf sons has deaf children as well. These cases then, display a pattern similar to dominant deafness. Persistent intermarriage will increase the occurrence of such generational continuity.

<sup>26</sup> The three dimensions suggested by Woll and Ladd (2003) are: the axis of attitudes to deaf people, the size of the deaf population, and the life choices available for deaf people.

internal variation between some of the cases mentioned here,<sup>27</sup> they make an important contribution by taking into consideration the degree to which deaf and hearing people's life choices differ. Nonetheless, I reject the notion that what is at stake are d/Deaf communities.

This notion is a major obstacle to applying all above-mentioned classifications; shared signing communities clearly exemplify that signing communities do not necessarily neatly coincide with d=Deaf communities. I have also rejected the notion of isolated communities, or so-called traditional or simple societies, because I have argued that it is precisely the complexity of social structure and arrangement that plays a significant role in shaping the unique social reality among the Al-Sayyid.

I do not suggest that the communication patterns examined here fully account for the uniqueness of other shared signing communities, nor does it solely determine the relationship between deaf and hearing among the Al-Sayyid. However, I do wish to advocate closer examination of daily practices and, specifically, interactional patterns. Social arrangements shared by deaf and hearing as well as those that single out or target deaf people need to be explored. Attitude statements do not always correspond with actual social practices and interaction. Examining the impact of practices rather than merely attitudes and representations may refine the implicit assumptions in some of the above classifications, which assume some kind of "natural" adaptation, shared cultural ideology, or benevolent choices<sup>28</sup> made by a hearing community to accept deaf people. I doubt the usefulness of such terms; rather, I suggest the need to explore the extent to which social practices in shared signing communities facilitate or confine deaf people's experience.

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<sup>27</sup> Woll and Ladd's (2003) reference to my earlier work on the Bedouin case includes several inaccuracies. In contrast to their indications, deaf Bedouin children are not better educated than their hearing peers, Al-Sayyid deaf women are not exclusively married as second wives, and in Kisch (2000), I provide different demographic data and avoid the term tribe in reference to Al-Sayyid.

<sup>28</sup> e.g., Woodward (2003) refers to the ways in which "Deaf and hearing people in Ban Khor have chosen to respond" to the high incidence of deafness (2003:290).

## CONCLUSION

Linguistic communities do not simply share a language; they also share knowledge of its patterns of use (Hymes 1974:51). It is not surprising then that Deaf signing communities have been observed to have distinct rules for attention getting, turn taking, polite discourse, joking, name giving, and other behaviors related to language (Lane 1992). However, among the Al-Sayyid, such signing practices do not mark Deaf culture or single out deaf people but are shared by both hearing and deaf signers.

A decade has passed since I first conducted research among the Al-Sayyid, and many changes have taken place. A new generation of children has been born and many of those who were still school pupils when I began my fieldwork are parenting young children now. Different intervention programs have been launched and expired, changes have been introduced in the structure of the education system, a father's committee has been established, and new campaigns were initiated (several having actual consequences), while others have disintegrated. Furthermore, the economic and political situation has also posed new challenges. These processes all provide indispensable context and raise many new intriguing questions.

It was not the aim of this article to offer a comprehensive analysis of all these dynamics. I restricted my discussion to a particular aspect of the unique social reality concerning disablement and deafness among the Al-Sayyid; namely, the shared use of sign language, the asymmetry it entails, and the manifold forms of translation and mediation taking place. I have argued that the Al-Sayyid shared-signing community presents several accommodating circumstances. Both deaf and hearing people grow up familiar with deafness and sign language so that deafness is experienced as manageable and is not stigmatized or assumed to have other consequences than the need for a different communication mode. In this context, the accumulated experiential knowledge of both deaf and hearing people means that deafness is not easily subjugated to its medical model.

At the same time, a sign language shared by many hearing people does not erase the asymmetry I have underscored. Despite hearing people's familiarity with sign language, it still remains the case that deaf people need mediation of what is being spoken. It is this asymmetry I attempt to address, not by rendering it irrelevant because it does indeed pose a challenge. However, the asymmetry occurs within a larger context of similar

asymmetries and mediations. I do not suggest this is the only constitutive factor or that similar social dynamics constitute deafness in comparable cases. Calling attention to this dialectical communication web and the social complexity it entails in itself implies there cannot be one single factor.

I have attempted to delineate a communication web comprised of numerous language modes and domains that involve constant translation and development of alternative channels of communication and indirect access to information. Individuals' access and situational position vis-a-vis these communication resources, I claim, challenge hierarchical frameworks. Consequently, reliance on translation and mediation is not exclusive to deaf people among the Al-Sayyid. Participation and access to this structure provides a valuable basis on which members further extend their social resources and networks, allowing for their participation in society at large and its multiple lifeworlds.

However, social processes that may marginalize and exacerbate the position of deaf people were also evident. Local experiential knowledge and practices are challenged by the authoritative knowledge claimed by pedagogical and medical establishment. These processes not only introduce stigmatizing narratives but also create differential life trajectories, changing and restricting deaf people's structure of opportunities.

Deaf people live in various lifeworlds, as do others among the Al-Sayyid. Altogether, they inhabit the margins of Israeli society. Yet, unlike many other deaf people in the Negev, for many deaf among the Al-Sayyid, deafness did not result in disablement. These deaf people became capable members of their community, well equipped with social networks and resources to cope with social challenges within the community and beyond. However, if deafness preconditions their access to other economic and social resources (such as literacy), they might also lose the means that enable them to participate in a complex communication web with mutual mediations and translations.