

Interviewee	Interviewer	Monastery	Date of interview	Keywords
Sister Laetitia (1914-2003)	Toos de Boer	Franciscans of Oudenbosch	March 12, 1983	Deaf education; Native Sisters; Kenya; Luo language; Mumias; Nyang'oma; Paramaribo; Society for the Deaf; Suriname

Sister Laetitia belonged to the Franciscans of Oudenbosch Monastery. Her mission in Kenya lasted from 1963 to 1981. On her mission, she was a teacher at a deaf school in Nyang'oma. Before she went on mission, she was educated in Sint Michielsgestel. Before she went to Kenya, she did a mission in Paramaribo (Suriname).

Audio 1

- They talked about her time in Paramaribo (ten years), what she has done there and how she ended up in Kenya
- She was asked by her superior to help in Kenya to found a deaf school
- Big contrast in deaf education between Suriname and Kenya
 - o Suriname didn't receive support/funding
 - o Kenya received funding and support of 'Society for the Deaf'¹ (and government?)
- Classes were blended; later, boys and girls were separated
- Children were taught in English. The Society for the Deaf (KSDC) recommended Luo but that was not achievable
- Two native Sisters joined the team. Laetitia taught them how to teach. Later, the government funded these studies.
- The government of Kenya supports the education for special needs. Not only for physically disabled students but also for students with mental disabilities.

When Laetitia arrived in Kenya, nothing for deaf education was provided. In Nairobi and Kinshasa, there were units in regular schools but there wasn't a specific deaf school or institute. The KSDC was asked to found a deaf school. Therefore, Laetitia came to Kenya. As a consequence of malaria pills with quinine and lack of information, children (age 3-4) became deaf.

We started a small school with one group and 5 children. Now (1983), there are 14 groups, a kindergarten and a big technical school. When we left, there were approximately 230 students/scholars. The Father helped us to recruit new children and bring them to the school.

In 1966, we founded a technical school to give these children an opportunity for future work. At the same time, Mumias (a village nearby where Sisters from Bergen had a mission) did alike. We agreed that they would teach the girls (e.g. sewing) while we take all the boys in the technical school. However, the boys from Mumias learnt a native language and they must learn English before they could start. The technical school was built for 72 boys (too small) and far away for many students (i.e. high travel costs and far away from their family), so we aimed to build technical schools in every county.

¹ Probably the Kenya Society for Deaf Children (KSDC)

At some point, our congregation merged with the congregation of Uganda. Because the Catholicism is more 'developed'. Now, two Brothers from Uganda work in Kenya and that goes well.

Q: Can you tell something about religion lessons?

A: We taught Catholic religion lessons even though not all children were raised with Catholicism.

A: Children who prepared for communion/baptism were taught separately because children were not forced to become Catholic.

A: I always taught them with the use of signs and role play. Not everyone could do that (e.g. the pastor)

A: Now, the native Sister took over

Q: Could you provide an overview of facilities of the deaf institute from when you started and how it's developed over the years?

A: We started without a plan or specific system. We took over the system from St. Michielsgestel where they didn't work with syllabi

A: When working with deaf children, you have to adjust information to the child

A: When the mathematics teachers arrived, we needed to develop a system

i) These syllabi are approved by the government

Q: What innovations have you experienced in education?

A: We did not agree...We always handled the oral method which entails lipreading and talking. However, there are children who cannot speak at all. Under influence of Sweden and the US, we now use the total communication method in which we speak and sign

A: It's better to split the school in two groups

i) Total deaf children who are taught in the total communication method

ii) Hearing residues children who can learn to speak

iii) If we offer total communication in general, all children will use signs because that is easier for them (less demanding). They won't learn to speak anymore but that is more important (in contact with hearing people).

A: In the future, I hope there are separate schools in every county

A: Children start here when they are 3-4 years old and stay here until they are 15. Then they will go to the sewing school in Mumias or our technical school.

i) Children who face problems in learning may go to the agricultural school

- Hearing aids come from Europe and were provided by the congregation and the government. These aids stay in school so outside, children don't have hearing aids
- We mostly communicate by lip reading, sometimes in written notes

Q: Can you point out a specific problem that isn't solved in Kenya (yet)?

A: Yes. There isn't really a plan for deaf children with learning problems. They seem to have no future prospects.

Audio 2

- At the moment, there are 3 Dutch Sisters and 6 African Sisters at the institute

Q: Can you tell us something about the vocation(?) amongst the deaf? Are there deaf girls who aim for a monastic life?

A: Not really. We cannot prepare them either. Their level of education isn't sufficient. There's no demand for it either. Blind Sisters are welcome. The blind are easier to handle and to shape than the deaf.

- When working in deaf education by myself, I was in touch with the Sisters from Bergen
 - We saw each other
 - They were in touch with a tutor in Nairobi (from UK) who visited them
 - We made a syllabus for school
- Some sports were practiced with hearing children too
- Every three months, Memisa Medicus Mundi provided a package with clothes and medications

Laetitia left Kenya and her perception of the future of the deaf school

- Hard to leave but it was a good choice. An African Sister functions as head of the primary school and I didn't want to bother her. It is their country and their kids. They will solve it.
- We want to keep the primary school IN our mission. If the government takes over, it becomes a secondary school and that's not suitable for most deaf children.

Looking back at life and education of the deaf

Q: How many students are there in Suriname and Kenya?

A: Approximately 600. Almost half of them ended with a well paid job

A: It's harder for girls. They get babies and stay on the 'dola'. Kenyan girls hardly find a husband. We organize reunions to help men and women to meet but it hardly works in Kenya

Q: Do you expect future innovations?

A: More and smaller schools in all counties. Separate schools for total deaf people on the one side and hard of hearing students on the other side

A: More kindergartens to make sure that children start at a young age. Especially the speech therapy needs to start as early as possible

Q: Something else that we didn't talk about yet? Perhaps about the parents

A: Parents need to be convinced to send their children to school as early as possible. Even though there is a waiting list nowadays (1983)

There are 23 small deaf schools in Kenya

Experiences in Kenya

Q: Were you in touch with deaf education (organizations?) in other countries?

A: Yes. We received journals from US and UK.

A: The tutor from UK often came by to share 'things'

A: During holidays we went to St. Michielsgestel for 2-3 weeks to get instructed and learn the latest news and information about materials and instruments

A: People who studied in the US came over to share knowledge

Q: What is your vision about teaching methods in the future?

A: At the moment, the oral method (speech and lipreading) is used. For other children, the total communication method (sign and lipreading) might be better. General preference is the oral method because hearing people are able to understand deaf people. However, for deaf children amongst each other, total communication might be better.

A: One potential problem is that children completely gather together to sign with each other and they forget how to lipread. For this reason, we won't encourage signing. St. Michielsgestel doesn't support it either but they are looking at how to implement total communication. All countries struggle with this topic. It's always developing and never perfect in deaf education

A: It is really hard to train deaf people to speak. It takes a lot of time to find a sufficient method. In the past, they used signs but now (1983) they use the oral method. However, the results aren't always good so they keep trying to apply other methods.

Q: Did you gather documentations?

A: I didn't write in a diary but I kept documentation. Everything is still there. In Kenya there still is a lot of information, for example the syllabus

i) This is special because not many countries used syllabi

ii) In other countries like Uganda and Tanzania, Dutch missionaries had deaf schools too but the education was much more simplistic. The schools were small and rather poor since there was no governmental support/funding. Without (financial) help it is not possible to grow.