

# My Jóola Shirt; History and Context

Dr.Serge Sagna

## Introduction

This shirt is made from a traditional fabric produced in a small community of Jóola/Diola people from the Casamance area of Southernwestern Senegal. The design of the shirt follows a specific structure, common among these Jóola people. The area where this group of Jóola people come from is a former small kingdom of ten villages called *Mof-Ávvi*, a name which roughly translates 'the land of the king'.

Traditional fabrics were and still are at the center of the life in this community of around 13,000 people. The importance of traditional fabrics in everyday life and in rituals is still paramount. Unfortunately weaving is a disappearing practice. Aspects of weaving among the Jóola of *Mof-Ávvi* have been documented and deposited to my archive (under development) at the SOAS Endangered Languages Archive.

## Fabric design

<b>Name of design:</b>	<b>Ehondor elep yaa gakkil</b>
ehondor	= neck
elep	= unsure about the meaning/etymology of this word
yaa	= of
Gakkil	= line

The name of this specific design roughly translates = "Neck of *elep* with a line". The phrase *yaa gakkil* 'of/having a line' describes the pattern of the fabric, which is made up of 10 or 12 lines of white threads followed two black lines. The structure of the pattern is as follows: 10 or 12 white thread + 2 black threads + 10 or 12 white thread + 2 black threads and so on. The black threads in the pattern make up the *gakkil* 'thread'.

There are many other fabric designs among the Jóola of *Mof-Ávvi* and they all have different names. Examples include *guot sitallab* 'pigeons feet' and *búsol épus* 'back of a caterpillar'. I am not aware of any research on the weaving tradition and fabric designs among the Jóola of *Mof-Ávvi*.

## Materials

The traditional fabrics of the Jóola of *Mof-Ávvi* are made from cotton. Women would pick cotton from plants and make threads which they would give to weavers to make ribbons of different designs. Later, the ribbons are given back to the women, who sew them together to make sarongs of different size. Sarongs are eventually dyed in indigo with small white spots in different places. Nowadays, the threads can be bought from any market in the nearest city. Weaving used to be practiced in all ten villages of *Mof-Ávvi*. Today, there are probably less than five active weavers left in the community. However, it is possible to buy similar fabrics

made by other ethnic groups and dye them in the traditional indigo colours to resemble the original ones.

## **Cultural information**

Traditional fabric is at the heart of the life of Jóola people of Mof-Ávvi. Historically, the sarongs were very difficult to acquire and had much prestige. Many people only managed to own one or two traditional fabrics in their lifetime. These fabrics still have a lot of prestige due to their function in society and use in everyday life.

Newborns are carried on their mothers' back with these traditional sarongs. A man or a woman could wear a sarong around his/her waist as clothing. The newest sarongs used to be worn in formal occasions, and to date, they (especially the indigo ones) are the required dressing during the most important religious ceremonies in the kingdom. Traditional fabrics are also essential for funeral rituals. When a person dies, they are believed to be on the way to the world of ancestors. It is therefore paramount that the person is buried with a traditional fabric/wrapper, preferably one dyed in indigo, which is believed to be the standard dressing in the ancestral world.

Thus, wearing a shirt made of a traditional fabric, especially outside the homeland of the Jóola people has significance beyond a simple expression of one's origin or identity.

## **Details of acquisition garment**

This garment was made from the traditional Jóola fabric bought from a market in Ziguinchor by the owner's (Serge Sagna) mother between 2005 and 2006. The design is the traditional *ehondor elep yaa gakkil* the "Neck of *elep* with a line" described above. The shirt was made by a tailor in Dakar, Senegal. The style of the shirt is fashionable in Senegal. The patterns on the neck, the arms and the pockets were remade in 2015 to replace older ones. This shirt was worn during several occasions including cultural events in Senegal and in formal occasions like hosting radio shows. It was also worn at a few international academic conferences in Western Europe.