

EARS OF THE **PEOPLE**

A photograph of two people playing traditional West African instruments. On the left, a man in a red polo shirt is seated and playing a kora, a 21-stringed harp-lute. He has a joyful expression with his eyes closed. On the right, a woman in a blue patterned dress and headwrap is playing a balafon, a wooden xylophone. She is also smiling. The background is a simple, rustic structure with corrugated metal walls.

**EKONTING SONGS
FROM SENEGAL AND THE GAMBIA**

A man in a red polo shirt is seated and playing a kora, a traditional West African stringed instrument. He is smiling and looking down at the instrument. To his right, a woman wearing a blue patterned dress and a matching headwrap is smiling and looking towards the man. The background is a simple, rustic structure with corrugated metal walls.

EARS OF THE **PEOPLE**

**EKONTING SONGS
FROM SENEGAL AND THE GAMBIA**



- 1. MUSA DIATTA**, “Watu Enining bee Kaolo” (“The Time Has Come to Rest”) (Paul “Agoyo” Diedhiou) 3:04
- 2. ABDOULAYE DIALLO**, “Ami Kolle / Salymane / Alassane” (Abdoulaye Diallo) 3:24
- 3. SIJAM BUKAN**, “Mamba Sambou” (Jules “Ekona” Diatta) 1:59
- 4. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA**, “Colobane Yolooli” (“Our Colobane”) (Adama Sambou) 2:06
- 5. SIJAM BUKAN**, “Diego” (Jules “Ekona” Diatta) 3:02
- 6. JEAN KANGABEN DJIBALEN**, “Elenbeja” (Jean “Kangaben” Djibalen) 2:33
- 7. ESUKOLAAL**, “Bapaalaay” (“Friendship”) (Joël Bassene) 3:23
- 8. ELISA DIEDHIOU**, “Aline Siteo” (Elisa Diedhiou) 2:33
- 9. SIJAM BUKAN**, “Sijam Bukan” (“Ears of the People”) (Jules “Eknoa” Diatta) 2:22
- 10. DANIEL LAEMOU-AHUMA JATTA**, “Kunaare kati Gambi” (“Women of Gambia”) (arr. Daniel Laemou-Ahuma Jatta) 2:23
- 11. BOUBA DIEDHIOU**, “Aduna Esore” (“The World is Dispersed”) (Bouba Diedhiou) 2:32
- 12. ELISA DIEDHIOU**, “Adiatta Ubonketom” (“Adiatta Pray for Me”) (Elisa Diedhiou) 2:42
- 13. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA**, “Ajeme” (Adama Sambou) 3:18
- 14. MUSA DIATTA**, “Celestine” (Musa Diatta) 3:00
- 15. DANIEL LAEMOU-AHUMA JATTA**, “Aliinom” (“My Sister”) (arr. Daniel Laemou-Ahuma Jatta) 1:06
- 16. ESUKOLAAL**, “Koniye” (arr. Joël Bassene) 2:48
- 17. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA**, “Ahan Bokin” (“Elder of the Shrine”) (Adama Sambou) 3:56
- 18. SIJAM BUKAN**, “Asum Bunuk” (“Good Palm Wine Collector”) (Jules “Ekona” Diatta) 3:00
- 19. BOUBA DIEDHIOU**, “Kanyalen Rosalie” (Bouba Diedhiou) 2:29
- 20. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA**, “Aguene Diambone” (Adama Sambou) 8:02
- 21. MUSA DIATTA**, “Aliinom (Ballanta)” (“My Sister”) (Musa Diatta) 2:50
- 22. ESUKOLAAL**, “Asunge” (“Graceful Woman”) (Joël Bassene) 1:54
- 23. ABDOULAYE DIALLO**, “Inje Mama Oomei?” (“My Mother, Where Are You?”) (Abdoulaye Diallo) 1:23
- 24. JEAN KANGABEN DJIBALEN**, “Madu” (Jean “Kangaben” Djibalen) 8:37
- 25. ABDOULAYE DIALLO**, “Ayinga Bañiil Dane Dibuke Ban” (“Ayinga Bañiil Is Already Born”) (Abdoulaye Diallo) 3:07

FOREWORD

Who am I and what made me involved in the search for the history of the New World gourd banjo? Yes, I am an African and a Jola, born and raised in Mandinary village, The Gambia. Because The Gambia at that time did not have a university, I obtained a scholarship from an African American family in the United States in the early 1970s to pursue a degree in business administration at Friendship Junior College in Rock Hill, South Carolina.

That is where I first heard the word *banjo* from fellow students, mostly African American. When we gathered to amuse ourselves with TV music programs that sometimes played banjo music, they asked if I had ever played the African gourd banjo. As the question kept being asked, I asked what the

African American gourd banjo looked like originally. When I finally understood how African Americans had constructed and played gourd banjos, I knew it had some similarities to the lutes I had heard growing up in the Senegambian region.

My father, Alee Gomis Buelaw Jatta, was a rice farmer and an herbal traditional medicine man. In the evening, after working all day, he played the *akonting* and sang. He taught me the songs “Aliinom” and “Senegambia” about how we were one before colonialism. It was “social networking” in the traditional way.

He told me a story, which I also heard from many elderly Jolas, that when young men tapped palm wine near the Atlantic coast, they should not play *akonting* too late at night because that’s when devils—who liked the sweet *akonting* music—would come

to kidnap them. When they saw a big, strong light coming from the ocean, they would say it's the devil's eye. They talked the same way about slave traders, which may explain how the akonting came to the Americas with enslaved people.

Accordingly, I knew right away that there was a connection between the New World gourd banjo and the Jola akonting. Research by Dena Epstein and Pete Seeger provided powerful theoretical explanations and models. Terms like *banza*, Banjul, *bangee*, Sambo, and juba further strengthened the connection between the New World gourd banjo and some of the Senegambian languages and musical cultures. I learned that many of the enslaved Africans who worked in Caribbean sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantations came from the Senegambian region.

Although my introduction to the

New World gourd banjo was in 1974, I did not start to research the history and origin of the New World gourd banjo until the 1990s, when I knew I could contribute to existing scholarship. At first, the task was not easy—both academically and financially. But when I believe in something, I don't easily give up. Today, with the support of many goodwill researchers and the contributions of all the akonting players of the region, many scholars now study the Senegambian akonting lute—some of whom now conclusively accept it as one of the fathers of the banjo. The music you hear on this album is from the powerful akonting players of the Senegambian region.

Daniel Laemou-Ahuma Jatta, MBA
Founder and director, Akonting Center
for Senegambian Folk Music
Bijilo and Mandinary, The Gambia

LINER NOTES

Scott Linford

Few people outside Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau had heard of the *ekonting* (also spelled *akonting*) prior to 2000. That was the year Daniel Laemou-Ahuma Jatta and his collaborator Ulf Jägfors brought the instrument to the annual Banjo Collectors' Gathering in Massachusetts and demonstrated its uncanny similarity to early American and Caribbean banjos. As Jatta describes, he became convinced that the two instruments were historically related over the course of many years of research, leading to his founding the Akonting Center for Senegambian Folk Music in the 2000s.

Scholars have long explored similarities between American banjos and the large family of plucked lutes found throughout West Africa, such as the Mandinka *ngoni*, Wolof *xalam*, and Gnawa *gimbri*. Jatta and others have shown particularly strong links between early gourd banjos and the *ekonting*—played primarily by people of the Jola ethnic group. Both instrument types are made of halved gourds covered with animal skin; both have necks that pass fully through the gourd; both have strings that stop at different distances along the neck; and both accompany casual social danc-

ing. The most striking similarity may be between the *ekonting* playing technique and the “clawhammer” or “stroke” style of banjo. Both entail curling the right hand halfway into a fist, striking the longest strings with the fingernail of the index or middle finger in a downward motion, and plucking the shortest strings with the thumb. That’s an unusual way of playing a stringed instrument and convincingly links the two instruments (though Jatta always makes clear that the *ekonting* is not the *only* African antecedent of the banjo).

The significance of that connection is profound. Enslaved Africans endured a traumatic sea voyage to the New World and then faced a barbarous plantation system designed to destroy all traces of African religion, language, and culture. The system separated parents and children, effaced family names, and nearly extinguished languages. In much of the American South, it was illegal for enslaved Africans to dance or play drums. Yet through it all, people continued to build instruments that combined African aesthetics with American and Caribbean materials. They moved their hands just as their forebears did, grasping a piece of their past and storing it away in their flesh and bone. That’s a powerful testament to this music’s vitality, and to the fact that Black people in the Americas considered it important enough to safeguard.

While that transatlantic legacy has become part of the ekonting's international profile thanks to Jatta and subsequent researchers, the instrument has its own significance within the Jola culture of Senegal and The Gambia. Jolas do not think of the ekonting primarily as the “root” or “ancestor” of the American banjo. They play the ekonting for casual entertainment, to facilitate courtship between young men and women, to enliven the festive atmosphere of village wrestling matches, and to recount local stories. Taken together, the 25 tracks on this album tell of the region's colonial and post-colonial history, and of contemporary Senegambian culture. There are love songs, dance songs, wrestling songs, story songs, and songs about migration, conflict, death, and spirits. Some of the songs are traditional and others are original compositions. Some are classic in style and others more innovative; some are solo performances and others ensemble pieces. The track notes describe how each musician and each song have their own stories.

This album showcases nine ekonting players, whom I came to know while conducting ethnographic research at Jatta's Akonting Center in The Gambia and, later, in the southern Casamance region of Senegal. During that time, several ekonting players suggested creating an album to “show the strength of our culture to the world,”

as Joël Bassene once put it. During the winter and summer of 2019, we recorded in village squares, adobe houses, and improvised studios where the sounds of traffic and on-lookers can sometimes be heard. Producing this album means stepping into the role of cultural mediator, a responsibility I have tried to fulfill with as much collaboration and consultation as possible. Along with writing these liner notes, decisions about audio recording, mixing, and editing affect how the music is presented and heard. For example, louder drums and idiophones often overpower the relatively quiet ekonting in live settings, so I used dedicated microphones to make the ekonting audible on this album. In some cases, I cut recordings to shorter lengths to select the best musical cycles, which performers anticipated in their performances. In the case of Jean Kangaben's masterpiece “Madu,” I combined two different live takes to get the complete song. Any inaccuracies in these liner notes and shortcomings in audio presentation are solely my own.

The ekonting players on the album have embraced the project as an opportunity to share their music with the world and to expand the instrument's ability to transmit personal and communal stories. There are many other excellent ekonting players (and many, many more songs) who might have been included on this

album—meaning that much work remains in documenting and celebrating the ekonting’s local and transatlantic importance.

THE EKONTING IN JOLA CULTURE

The Jola homeland traces the watershed of the Casamance River in the area of southern Senegal sandwiched between The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. The Casamance region is a borderlands—and therefore a meeting ground—between three nations, more than a dozen ethnic groups, three colonial histories (British, French, and Portuguese), major religions (Islam, Christianity, and several indigenous religions), and more than 20 languages. It lies between the rainforest belt of Central Africa and the drier Sahel further north. The Casamance River itself is a *soupu kanja* of freshwater springs and the salty sea, a brackish confluence that connects mainland Africa to the Atlantic Ocean, the great causeway to the African diaspora. Describing ekonting players singing in their fishing boats, one musician remembered the way that “sound floats on the water”—and indeed the people of the Casamance are attuned to musics from the Caribbean, United States, Europe, and elsewhere in Africa.

The Jola are the most numerous of the many ethnic groups who live in the western Casamance. As the local saying goes, Jolas were created to

farm rice. Each Jola village is encircled by a mosaic of rice fields that are the workplace and inheritance of Jola families. Rice is a granular manifestation of the earth’s fertility, sustenance for humans and spirits alike, holding its own life force akin to people and animals. Jolas make offerings of rice and fermented palm sap to spirit shrines called *bokin*, completing a metaphysical circuit that binds humans, the natural world, and the world of spirits in copresence. Every village adjoins a sacred forest that only initiated Jola adults may enter, where the physical and spiritual worlds interpenetrate with special intensity. Along with their traditional religion (sometimes called the Awasena Path), many Jolas are also Christians or Muslims, with high degrees of tolerance and overlap.

Since the early 1980s, sporadic separatist violence has afflicted the Casamance, claiming over 5,000 lives and displacing some 25,000 people. The sources of the conflict include quarrels over national borders drawn when the French colonial regime ceded Senegalese independence in 1960, the ongoing presence of extractive multinational corporations in the Casamance, and cultural and political differences between northern and southern Senegal. Although the region has been overwhelmingly safe and peaceful for a decade, the violence has directly or indirectly touched

Musa Diatta



many Casamançais people. Some of the songs on this album speak to the personal consequences of the conflict.

Most ekonting players build their own instruments using supplies readily at hand, working within a local aesthetic and material system. They make the resonator from a large gourd bisected and topped with tightly stretched animal skin, usually that of a goat or bush deer. They tie the instruments' three strings directly to a long, cylindrical neck made of bamboo-like reed. Ekonting players today string their instruments with nylon fishing line, but many remember when their fathers strung them with braided palm roots. The bridge is carved from lightweight ceiba wood—also used to make dugout canoes. The creativity of the builder determines the decoration: perhaps one or more sound holes in geometric shapes; perhaps a scruffy ring of fur on the skin head; perhaps a strand of colorful beads wrapped around the neck; perhaps a design drawn in Sharpie marker around the bridge.

For Jolas, music-making is much more than a collection of pleasing sounds. It's what the philosopher Achille Mbembe calls a way of “belonging to the world, being in the world and inhabiting it.” In music, Jolas experience themselves both as custodians of the deep cultural history of their communities and as participants in global

culture at large, simultaneously and without contradiction. The ekonting players on this album share their songs in hopes of sharing something of themselves, as the sounds of their voices float down the river and across the sea.

TRACK NOTES

1. MUSA DIATTA

“Watu Erining bee Kaolo”
 (“The Time Has Come to Rest”)

Musa Diatta, ekonting, vocals

Musa Diatta is the kind of guy who bellows out your name, laughs, and thumps you on the back a little harder than you expect every time he greets you. He is a nimble ekonting player, hewing closely to the traditional style and mingling his voice artfully with the instrument. Resounding with a deep, mellow tone, his ekonting is a rough-and-ready instrument that is burnished to a satin sheen where his fingers have pressed against the neck during many years of use. “I learned to play from my father, and my grandfather played too. That’s the Jola culture,” he explains. He has already begun teaching his five children to carry on the family tradition.

Composed by Paul “Agoyo” Diedhiou, this song has become a traditional standard, well-known enough that many Jolas can join in singing without hesitation. The lyrics describe a typical setting for playing ekonting: at the end of a hard day’s work in the rice fields, perhaps while gathered

around a clay pot of palm wine and relishing the cooling evening breeze. *Jakum mbuinoor* (“don’t think of anything”), Diatta sings: relax and put your mind at ease.

Watu erining bee kaolo
Jijaw jijenleen Mustafa Sambou
Mantee niyapula ekonting

Ee Adiatta, ee Agoyo
Ee Adiatta, ee jakum mbuinoor

*The time has come to rest
Go get Mustafa Sambou
Maybe he’ll bring his ekonting*

*Yes Adiatta, yes Agoyo
Yes Adiatta, yes don’t think of anything*



Abdoulaye Diallo

2. ABDOULAYE DIALLO, “Ami Kolle / Salymane / Alassane”

Abdoulaye Diallo, ekonting, vocals

Abdoulaye Diallo is an ethnic Fula who speaks fluent Jola, plays ekonting with uncommon dexterity, and is equally knowledgeable about the Quran and the Jola indigenous religion. As he puts it, “Here in the Casamance, we are together. It doesn’t matter if you are Catholic, Muslim, or animist. We talk to each other, we marry each other, you know? It’s like that.” At age 71, Diallo lives with his wife and singing partner Maimouna in the city of Ziguinchor, where they care for the five children of his deceased sister-in-law. Before they married, he told her that he would likely never make much money. She told him, “That’s alright, I prefer you to money anyway.”

This track is a quick medley of three songs. The first two are love songs, the most common theme in traditional ekonting performances. Young men compose and sing songs like this in the context of courtship. Flanked by a group of friends providing moral and musical support, a hopeful suitor might sing and dance his way to a young woman’s home. Or, he might play for her at a *hufuleto*, a moonlight ball where young women and men take turns trading handkerchiefs and dancing in

the middle of a circle when their “name”—a personalized melody—is played on a cow’s horn. Or, as Diallo does here, he might continue playing her song well into old age to remember the everlasting thrill of young love.

The third song in the medley refers to Alassane Diouf, a young man accused of belonging to the Casamançais separatist militia. He hid in the forest to avoid arrest until the allegations proved false. Connecting these three songs in a medley shows how ekonting players move seamlessly between personal and political storytelling, reporting matter of factly on the relationships and events that shape everyday life. As in this song, lyrics often allude to events rather than spelling them out directly. As Diallo puts it, “Every song has a significance. There is the song, but then there is the story behind the song.” His airy voice floats above exceptionally precise ekonting work, using advanced techniques such as hammer-ons, pull-offs, and rhythmic hesitation.

Inje nijukuti ni saboni
Ami Kolle
Ekondoor ejonjon

Salymane, Emit ekaane noromb
Añiil a ko taate
Saly o Saly Salymane

Alassane o ana atumaali
Alassane o du katoma Emite
Dioufa Dioufa uma jatu añiilaya

If I don't see you, my heart weeps
Ami Kolle
Her beautiful neck

Salymane, may God give you many years of life
The child is here
Saly oh Saly Salymane

Alassane someone accuses you
Alassane leave it to God
Dioufa Dioufa you have no children here

3. SIJAM BUKAN “Mamba Sambou”

Jules “Ekona” Diatta, ekonting, vocals; Prosper Diatta, percussion; David Manga, tumba; Gilbert Sambou, Marie-Claude Sarr, and Diankelle Senghor, uleau, vocals

Ekonting player Jules Diatta earned the nickname “Ekona” (meaning “wrestler”) from his youthful wrestling prowess, which brought him all the way to national wrestling competitions in Dakar. Today, he lives in the adobe house where he grew up in the village of Mlomp. He farms rice, harvests palm wine, and leads the ensemble Sijam Bukan, meaning “Ears of the People.” The group is a flexible collection of friends and neighbors: Ekona sings lead vocals and plays ekonting, David Manga plays *tumba* drums, Prosper Diatta taps spoons on an iron pot, Marie-Claude Sarr and Diankelle Senghor clap palm leaf stems called *uleau*, and Gilbert Sambou leads a chorus of singers and dancers sucked in by his contagious enthusiasm.

Music accompanies every stage of a Jola wrestling match. Young wrestlers strut their way to the center of the village backed by a parade of supporters singing their praises. There, they join a ring of other wrestlers dancing around the large slit log drum called *bombolong* or *ekonkon*,

which is the word for both wrestling itself and the accompanying dance. (It also shares the common linguistic root *kon*, meaning “to knock” or “to strike,” with the *ekonting*.) Stomping up clouds of dust, they brandish swords, spears, and flags to ramp up their excitement. After the match ends, *ekonting* players from different neighborhoods may face off in competitions of their own. They do so at their own risk: the loser’s *ekonting* may be smashed to pieces by the superior player.

This song, “Mamba Sambou” is typical of wrestling songs: short and lively, with pithy lyrics using vocables (such as *oh*, *ay*, and *ee*) that make it easy for the whole crowd to join in. Other songs use stock phrases like *ekondoorool mang* (“his neck is made of iron”) or *busoolool bugoliit tetam* (“his back never touches the ground”). In this case, Sijam Bukan alternates between the name of their wrestling champ, Mamba Sambou, and the leader of their ensemble.

O e o Mamba Sambou

O e o Ekona Diatta

Oh ay oh Mamba Sambou

Oh ay oh Ekona Diatta

4. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA

“Colobane Yolooli” (“Our Colobane”)

Adama Sambou, ekonting, vocals; Sadibou Bâ, tumba; Elario Biougue, shaker; Bouki Diatta, bell, vocals; Louise Sagna, vocals

“You won’t find another *ekonting* player like me,” Adama Sambou says. He is perhaps the most technically skillful *ekonting* player in the Casamance, capable of playing with astounding velocity and clarity. He has toured Europe with the interethnic ensemble Keloumak and performs on this album with members of Ejam Kasa, one of the first professional folkloric troupes based around Jola music. Sambou is also a prolific composer, filling notebook after notebook with original song lyrics in the music room of his home in Ziguinchor.

This song honors Sambou’s neighborhood of lower Colobane and its champion wrestler Djibuul (meaning “to lift up,” a key wrestling move). Sambou trades verses in call and response with neighbors Louise Sagna and Bouki Diatta, backed by Elario Biougue playing the *kasengkaseng* shaker. Sadibou Bâ imitates the signature rhythm of the huge bombolong slit log drum on the more portable *tumba*, a locally made version of Cuban *tumbadoras* or *congas*, which Jolas enthusiastically adopted during the Cuban music craze that

swept Senegal in the 1960s. They sing *elobaay ekedu* (“the words die here”): you can talk as much trash as you want during a wrestling match but any animosity between competing neighborhoods must end there. The song concludes with drumming and clapping as Sambou encourages dancing by shouting *oomei?* (“where are you?”) and *ejaw!* (“go!”).

Kayoñooli, Colobane kupulo
Colobane detam yolooli
A wa, o ee elobaay ekedu

O we iyo, kati kulembo da asungute
Djibuul ya o e, ajake aĩnorool we o we

*Our team, we came to Colobane
Our lower Colobane
A wa, oh yes the words die here*

*Oh ay eyo, he loves the lithe ladies
Djibuul ya oh ay, his beautiful girlfriend, way oh
way*

5. SIJAM BUKAN

“Diego”

Jules “Ekona” Diatta, ekonting, vocals; Prosper Diatta, percussion; David Manga, tumba; Gilbert Sambou, Marie-Claude Sarr, and Diankelle Senghor, uleau, vocals

Jolas have adapted for other sports the longstanding tradition of wrestling songs. On this track, Sijam Bukan cheers on Mlomp’s local soccer star Diego Diatta. Rhythmic patterns are rarely chosen at random in Jola music. Instead, percussionists draw from an established repertoire, each pattern suggesting a certain dance, a specific religious or social event, or a region of the Casamance (and perhaps even a particular village). This soccer song was created for an away game in another village and, fittingly, Sijam Bukan plays a rhythm called *bugarabu* typical of the Jola-Fogny region north of the river rather than drawing from their own Jola-Kasa repertoire from the southern bank.

O e o Diego ukaan atension
Baabe lesindo

*Oh ay oh Diego, be careful
This isn’t our home*

Members of Sijam
Bukan with group
leader Ekona
Diatta (left)



6. JEAN KANGABEN DJIBALEN

“Elenbeja”

Jean Kangaben Djibalen, ekonting, vocals

Ekonting legend Jeandum Djibalen is better known by his nickname “Kangaben,” meaning “open your mouth.” Born in 1959 near Oussouye, Kangaben was one of the first ekonting players to professionalize the instrument and take it beyond the rice fields and rural villages of the Casamance. At the height of his career, he played with the Senegalese Orchestre National in Dakar and became the first ekonting player to file an intellectual property copyright for his famous story-song “Madu” (included later on this album). In the past decade, Kangaben became blind and no longer performs publicly. Living in a rustic house near his daughter, he remains an amiable host and a respected fixture in the village.

This recording captures something of Kangaben’s musical charisma, though his finger speed and strength are not what they once were. He sets this song to the *elenbeja* rhythm, which accompanies an energetic dance in which women playfully shake what their mamas gave them.

O Sambalukungen o e aliinom e
Ya o e nikonom हुकेनूला जिकौ बो

A o e Diambon
Aliinom e Diambon oomei
A o e nikonom हुकेनूला जिकौ बो

A o e Sambou kulliinom
A o e aliinom e
A o e nikonom हुकेनूला जिकौ बो

*Oh Sambalukungen oh ay my sister ay
Yah oh ay I told her, let that butt go there*

*Ah oh ay Diambon
My sister ay Diambon where are you?
I told him, let that butt go*

*Ah oh ay Sambou my sisters
Ah oh ay my sister ay
I told him, let that butt go*

7. ESUKOLAAL

“Bapaalaay” (“Friendship”)

Joël Bassene, vocals, bottle; Dominique “Adiatta” Diatta, ekonting, vocals; Elisa Diedhiou, vocals; Malick Diedhiou, djembe; Scott Linford, ekonting, vocals

The band Esukolaal (“Our Village”) is a collaboration of Joël Bassene, Dominique “Adiatta” Diatta, and Elisa Diedhiou. Diedhiou and Adiatta are part of a young generation honing in on a Casamançais pop style that blends local traditional musics with reggae, cabo, salsa, and other international genres. Bassene leads a variety band that plays everything from Carlos Santana to Césaria Évora in the tourist hotels along the coast. For this talented trio, the future of Jola music lies not in preserving old sounds like artifacts in a museum, but rather in innovating, revitalizing, celebrating what is distinctive and beautiful in Jola music by setting it in harmony with the sounds of the world. Bassene’s composition “Bapaalaay” (“Friendship”) speaks to two of the group’s goals: to encourage peaceful understanding between the different factions perpetuating the Casamance conflict; and to reach out to the African diaspora and beyond for musical inspiration. On this track, Malick Diedhiou joins the trio on *djembe* and I play *ekonting* in unison with Adiatta.

Bapaalaay, Emite ekaane bapaalaay
Baabo napurulo ahuna puro gagram

Jiemore nisumuul jikaan bapaalaay
O ay o way, o ay o ay

*Friendship, Emite made friendship
He came from here, the other one came from the
other side*

*They met and agreed to make friendship
Oh aye oh aye, oh aye oh aye*



8. ELISA DIEDHIU

“Aline Siteo”

Elisa Diedhiou, ekonting, vocals

Diedhiou is one of few women to play ekonting, and the first to pursue a living as a professional ekonting player. She has diligently developed her craft by seeking lessons and repertoire from acclaimed players in the Casamance, including several maestros featured on this album. About being a woman ekonting player, she laughs and says, “People look at me like I’m crazy. A woman with an ekonting! But when I go to Mlomp or Oussouye, lots of people come to see me play and all the old ladies say ‘Bravo! Bravo!’”

Diatta here lifts her voice in prayer to Aline Siteo Diatta—an influential rain priestess and religious reformer killed by French colonizers in the 1940s—and to the Jola creator Ata Emit. Although there has been little violence in the Casamance for decades, a true return to *kasumay* (“peace”) would mean reuniting relationships and creating opportunities to sustainably earn a living.

I a o Adiatta ejukotool
Elisa ejukutool o e ma
Bouba Dioumaye bukun kai?

Añiil ajoola tan dutokool burok dahase
Mama Aline Siteo
Ubonket wulaw kasumay kulanuul bo Casamance
kuwañaal

Ata Emit aranbenool anubaj
da kasumay
Di burokolaal duyokale
Aha añiil asukaten

*Ee ah oh Adiatta, I didn't see her
Elisa, I didn't see her oh ay ma
Bouba Dioumaye where is he?*

*The Jola child does nothing but work
Mama Aline Siteo
We pray that peace returns to the Casamance*

*Ata Emit return us to peace
And to our work farming rice
Aha the poor child*

9. SIJAM BUKAN

“Sijam Bukan” (“Ears of the People”)

Jules “Ekona” Diatta, ekonting, vocals; Prosper Diatta, percussion; David Manga, tumba; Gilbert Sambou, Marie-Claude Sarr, and Diankelle Senghor, uleau, vocals

What does it mean to be a village music ensemble in the Casamance? Sijam Bukan performs at many kinds of events: perhaps a wedding party or wrestling match in their home village of Mlomp, a naming ceremony in nearby Elinkine, a politician’s visit in Ziguinchor, a holiday at a tourist hotel in Cap Skirring, or an annual cultural festival after the rice harvest. They make little money for their efforts. A high-paying gig at a tourist hotel might net \$50 for the entire ensemble of 8 to 12 people, from which they must pay for their own transportation and meals. This lack of viable economic opportunities is a major source of frustration for musicians in the Casamance.

This track features Sijam Bukan’s signature song, composed for a festival in which they competed against other folkloric music and dance troupes from across the Casamance. With a thrilling escalation of rhythmic density, it is based on the *kangaña* rhythm, which accompanies a gentle, swaying dance interspersed with virtuosic individual dancing.

Sijam Bukan nisaaful
Sambu ayilat jigom
Jakum di yaka, analul jonjon

Jilo solo buul
Kayla uifoli jinaña orkes
Jukun ohuyo olooli
Jililo bale sume

*Ears of the People I greet you
Sambou doesn’t know how to dance
You must not clap for him, he’s no good*

*Say what you want
Play the drums, we’ll dance to the orchestra
Don’t break them
The drums are speaking but it’s good*

10. DANIEL LAEMOU-AHUMA JATTA

“Kunaare kati Gambi”
 (“Women of Gambia”)

Daniel Laemou-Ahuma Jatta, ekonting, vocals

Daniel Laemou-Ahuma Jatta is the Gambian researcher who first brought the ekonting to the world’s attention. Jatta fondly remembers his father playing ekonting after long days working in the rice fields or tapping palm wine. His voracious appetite for education took him first to a Catholic high school in Banjul, then to college in South Carolina, and eventually to Stockholm University in Sweden, where he lived and worked as an accountant for two decades. He subsequently founded the Akonting Center for Senegambian Folk Music in The Gambia, where he has hosted musicians and scholars from Europe and the United States. After several years giving lectures, performances, and workshops in Europe, Jatta has now retired to The Gambia to continue his work with the Center.

Jatta plays “Kunaare kati Gambi” (“Women of Gambia”) to honor the contributions women have made to Gambian society. It is based on a melody taught to him by his father, with slightly revised lyrics.

Inje Gambia kunaare Gambi disaaful
Inje Gambia kunaare Gambi disaaful
Bukuru jirambene bañiilabo kujaw kajanka
Kunaare Gambi disaaful

*My Gambia, women of Gambia I greet you
My Gambia, women of Gambia I greet you
You helped the children go to school
Women of Gambia I greet you*

1.1. BOUBA DIEDHIOU

“Aduna Esore”

(“The World is Dispersed”)

Bouba Diedhiou, ekonting, vocals

The spry and quick-witted Bouba Diedhou is a talented ekonting player from the village of Youtou. In addition to his work as a tiler, he frequently plays ekonting for live radio broadcasts in Ziguinchor and Oussouye. He composed “Aduna Esore” (“The World Is Dispersed”) after a chilling personal experience in 1998. He had crossed from Senegal into Guinea-Bissau seeking work when he received word of an outbreak of violence along the border. A friend advised him to seek shelter with the Senegalese embassy, but Diedhiou was determined to return home to his family. “Can the embassy stop bullets?” he demanded. “No. If I have to die, I would rather die in my village.” During the harrowing journey back to Youtou, he witnessed an explosion at a gas station. “Do you know what happens when a bomb hits gasoline?” he asks. “It went BOOM! People were dying like flies.” He heard children crying out frantic questions, which he now uses in his lyrics: “Where is my sister? Where is my mother?” Diedhiou finally reached Youtou only to find it completely deserted. He had no way to contact his family and

did not know what had happened to them. Thankfully, the villagers eventually returned; they had been hiding in the forest to wait out the violence, and all his family was safe and well.

Aliin oomei, o ye mama
lyo ndeysaan, aduna esore

lyo ndeysaan, aliinom ejukutool
lyo ndeysaan, atiom ejukutool
lyo ndeysaan, inyaom ejukutool

lyo ndeysaan, Africa esore
lyo ndeysaan, Casamance esore
lyo ndeysaan, aduna esore

*Where is my sister? And my mother?
Yes, it's true, the world is dispersed*

*Yes, it's true, I did not see my sister
Yes, it's true, I did not see my brother
Yes, it's true, I did not see my mother*

*Yes, it's true, Africa is dispersed
Yes, it's true, Casamance is dispersed
Yes, it's true, the world is dispersed*



12. ELISA DIEDHIOU

“Adiatta Ubonketom”

(“Adiatta Pray for Me”)

Elisa Diedhiou, ekonting, vocals

Of her full-throated voice, Diedhiou says, “It’s a gift! My mother and my grandmother both sang like that. You know, I was born during the war in Casamance. There was all this violence. Sometimes when all you could hear was the sound of rifles—*boom boom boom*—during that I would sing. And my papa, he would whack me and say, ‘Stop that, they might hear you!’ But my mother would say, ‘No no, let her sing. Someday she might be a singer. You can only do what God has given you.’”

In this original composition, Diedhiou reflects on the hardships she has faced, including the premature death of her husband. She appeals to her mother (whom she calls Adiatta) for protection from the malevolent spirits that plague her.

Inje o, inje o, mama o, inje o e
Kone kumo kenom
Adiatta ubonketom

Cerie umbaam dakonom buinoor
Dajaw bai? Dajaw dabetenom

*Me oh, me oh, mama oh, me oh ay
They are coming to get me
Adiatta pray for me*

*My darling makes me worry
Where did he go? He has left me*

13. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA

“Ajeme”

Adama Sambou, ekonting, vocals; Sadibou Bâ, tumba; Elario Biougue, shaker; Bouki Diatta, bell, vocals; Louise Sagna, vocals

This composition by Sambou tells the tale of Ajeme, a wrestling champion from the coastal village of Diembering. As the story goes, a group of French officers visited Diembering during World War II to forcibly conscript Senegalese men into the army. They ordered the villagers to bring them Ajeme, but none dared oppose the mighty wrestler. So, the French commandant cleverly offered Ajeme a gift: two shiny silver bracelets. Flattered, Ajeme accepted and put them on—but the bracelets were handcuffs and the commandant led Ajeme off to war. Although the song relates a disturbing story of colonial violence, it unflinchingly drives the members of Ejam Kasa to fits of hearty, knee-slapping laughter. It is a musical parable about the inevitable outcome of brains versus brawn, a warning about accepting gifts from those in power, and a painful history put to work for a shared chuckle among friends.

In this performance, Sambou trades lyrics in call and response with the other musicians. Midway through the performance, Sambou takes

an ekonting solo, creating melorhythmic patterns that likewise respond to the two-toned beats of the tumba drums.

Ajeme sijul ebaay
Sembe o ye
Commandant aletenut du kiletam
Bu nukaane buyaben anaare

*Ajeme has calves like a bull
Strength o ye
The commandant, if he's not there
Now you will not marry a woman*

Adama Sambou (center)
with members of Ejam
Kasa and young fans



14. MUSA DIATTA

“Celestine”

Musa Diatta, ekonting, vocals

Diatta composed this lovely, lilting melody for a childhood crush. It’s a courtship song at its core, but it also speaks to migration, an important theme in contemporary Jola life. Movement from the Casamance to Dakar for work or education has become an expected rite of passage for young Jolas, especially young women. While the African population in general has shifted dramatically from rural to urban, young Jola migrants frequently elect to return to their villages in the Casamance. Still, the consequences of “rural exodus” are a frequent topic of conversation in Jola villages.

Diatta begins by singing that Celestine is “going to Senegal.” This may seem odd considering that Diatta was already in Senegal when he composed the song, but in fact it is common for Casamançais people to say they are “going to Senegal” when they travel to Senegalese destinations north of The Gambia. This reflects the strong sense of regional identity in the Casamance, which was administered differently than northern Senegal during the period of French colonization and remains culturally distinct in many ways. Under-

standably, Diatta’s lyrics and vocal tone suggest a melancholic mood at Celestine’s departure to points north.

O i yetu Senegal
O i o Celestine
Mama nahangnool echen
Ajiro tindaume, koniye blengarool

Ukaton ayo marse, ajiro i o
Kullinom kono nauswe katonool yome
Ajiro ajonjon, ajiro tindaume
Koniye blengarool

*Oh ee she’s going to Senegal
Oh ee oh Celestine
Mother gave her a necklace
The beautiful girl, she caught the bus*

*We went to the market, girl ee oh
My sisters told me to sigh and let her go
Pretty girl, beautiful girl
She caught the bus*

15. DANIEL LAEMOU-AHUMA JATTA

“Aliinom” (“My Sister”)

Daniel Laemou-Ahuma Jatta, ekonting, vocals

Jatta’s father told him that “Aliinom” (“My Sister”) is one of the oldest ekonting songs. Today, it’s played with minor variations throughout the Casamance. The ekonting part at first appears to be a simple repeating rhythmic pattern but, in fact, it follows the same notes as the vocal melody, albeit in different octaves.

Dasinga Bambara

A i o aliinom

A i o enya

O i o aliinom

She married a Bambara

Ah ee oh my sister

Ah ee oh mother

Oh ee oh my sister

16. ESUKOLAAL

“Koriye”

Elisa Diedhiou, vocals, clapping; Joël Bassene,

vocals, bottle, clapping; Dominique “Adiatta”

Diatta, ekonting, vocals; Malick Diedhiou, djembe,

clapping; Scott Linford, ekonting

Esukolaal here plays a different version of the same song, demonstrating how individual players can take the same core melodic material in different directions. At the end of the recording, Elisa Diedhiou spontaneously breaks into dance as the two ekontings continue playing in unison. She, Joël Bassene, and Malick Diedhiou each clap out a different rhythmic pattern, which dovetails into an exciting master pattern based on the interlocking rhythm typically played by Jola women on palm stem clappers called *uleau*.

Koriye koriye jajaw Ndakararu

O i ye

The bus, the bus went to Dakar

Oh ee yay

17. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA

“Ahan Bokin” (“Elder of the Shrine”)

Adama Sambou, ekonting, vocals; Sadibou Bâ, tumba; Elario Biougue, shaker; Bouki Diatta, bell, vocals; Louise Sagna, vocals

Sambou composed “Ahan Bokin” (“Elder of the Shrine”) in homage to the *ayi* (“king,” or primary rain priest) in his natal village of Oussouye. The *ayi* holds a position of tremendous spiritual importance, caring for dozens of shrines in the village and the sacred forest by nourishing them with offerings of rice and palm wine. As Sambou describes, “If the *ayi* rides in your canoe, it becomes his canoe. If he rides in your car, it becomes his car. If he enters your house, it becomes his house.” The very earth he treads becomes his property. Because of this Midas-like touch, in practice the *ayi* cannot leave the village and must be careful in how he interacts with others to avoid upsetting relationships in his community. The *ayi* is thus the most powerful person in the village—but also the most restricted.

O ahan boekin o ee
Aye etanito ewoto alunlum mooy
Mata wa da nini

Nita ewoto, akila kiyò
Nita busaana, akila kibo

*Oh elder of the shrine oh yes
He doesn't get into white people's cars
Because he is sacred*

*On a car, it belongs to him
On a canoe, it belongs to him*

18. SIJAM BUKAN

“Asum Bunuk”

(“Good Palm Wine Collector”)

Jules “Ekona” Diatta, ekonting, vocals; Prosper Diatta, percussion; David Manga, tumba; Gilbert Sambou, Marie-Claude Sarr, and Diankelle Senghor, uleau, vocals

Seka nahangooli kawa

Asum bunuk o we

Seka is better than us at collecting palm sap

A good palm wine collector oh way

As elsewhere in West Africa, palm wine is the Jola alcoholic drink of choice, a sweet and slightly grassy inebriant not far in flavor from lemonade spiked with liquor. But, more than that, it is a primary medium through which Jolas enact their relationship with the world of spirits. Jola men climb palmyra trees and hang hollow gourds or plastic bottles beneath taps struck into the trunk. As the milky palm sap called *kawa* collects, it carries with it the spiritual life force of the tree—leafy proliferation in liquid form. This ferments into *bunuk* (palm wine) in the hot sun. In turn, this is poured out to shrine spirits as sustenance and supplication. While this song praises a palm wine collector named Seka, Ekona Diatta is himself a prolific harvester of the pungent and spiritually potent beverage.

Esukolaal group



19. BOUBA DIEDHIOU

“Kanyalen Rosalie”

Bouba Diedhiou, ekonting, vocals

Diedhiou composed this song for an ailing young girl named Rosalie. When a Jola child dies young, a small notch of flesh may sometimes be cut from the ear of the corpse. If the mother then gives birth to another child with a matching irregularity on their ear, she will know that the baby is in fact the same child, returned. It is in this sense that Rosalie is “dying again,” evidence that her mother may be afflicted by malevolent spirits and needs to undergo a protective ritual transformation called *kanyalen*.

Malegen Rosalie nambokotool

Aketua mati inyayool

We i o ujuro yerambenool

We i o nati beloole

It's true Rosalie is dying again

Maybe it's because of her mother

Way ee oh girls help her get well

Way ee oh take her in your arms

20. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA

“Aguene Diambone”

Adama Sambou, ekonting, vocals; Elario Biougue, shaker; Bouki Diatta, bell, vocals

Jolas and Serers are “joking cousins.” Members of these two ethnic groups owe each other a special debt of hospitality and may also insult each other lightheartedly with tacit agreement that no one may take serious offense. In this song, Sambou relates the famous legend of how this interethnic relationship came to be. Long ago, there were two sisters named Aguene and Diambone. Aguene married a Jola palm wine collector, and Diambone married a Serer fisherman. As neighbors, they would share the fruits of their two harvests. One day, the two couples decided to take a trip in the Serer’s canoe.

The boat broke in half in the middle of the Casamance River, and Diambone and the Serer swam to the northern shore while the Jola repaired the boat midstream. Aguene and the Jola then decided to stay among the wine palms on the southern shore while Diambone and the Serer continued north to their eventual homeland. Many years later, the two couples met again and their children played together happily, calling each other cousins. All together, they entered the sacred forest and offered palm wine libations to Emite to ratify their special bond. In storytelling style, Sambou alternates between singing in Jola and speaking in French.

2.1. MUSA DIATTA

“Aliinom (Ballanta)” (“My Sister”)

Musa Diatta, ekonting, vocals

In this song, Diatta demonstrates a technique modeled after the way musicians of the Ballanta ethnic group play the *kusunde*, a long-necked lute very similar to the ekonting. He plays a repeating figure on the ekonting while simultaneously tapping percussively on the instrument’s skin head, improvising vocal melodies as he sings the names of his sisters and other relatives.

Working out relationships between ethnic groups and living amicably amid difference are part and parcel of life in the Casamance. Bainouk, Ballanta, Fula, Mandinka, Manjak, Papel, and Serer are the most prominent of several other ethnic groups living side by side with the Jola. Some of these ethnic groups play instruments that are almost identical to the ekonting. The word Jola itself is in fact an umbrella term for a cluster of as many as 30 different ethnic subgroups, each with their own variation on related dialects, customs, and musical traditions. Some of these Jola subgroups play the ekonting and some do not. The ekonting tradition is strongest in the Jola-Kasa cluster in the southwest Casamance and northwest Guinea-Bissau.

Bouba Diedhiou



22. ESUKOLAAL

“Asunge” (“Graceful Woman”)

*Elisa Diedhiou, vocals; Joël Bassene, vocals, bottle;
Dominique “Adiatta” Diatta, ekonting, vocals; Malick
Diedhiou, djembe; Scott Linford, ekonting*

In this composition by Joël Bassene, Adiatta and I begin playing ekonting in unison with a repetitive pattern based on the signature *ekonkon* wrestling rhythm. In the second half of the song, I continue the same pattern while Adiatta shifts to mirror the vocal melody on the ekonting, creating a dense polyphonic texture. The lyrics, sung by Elisa Diedhiou, come in two parts as well. The first half praises an *asunge*, a perfect dream girl who sings and dances with grace and agility. But in the second half, the narrator visits the *asunge*'s house only to find that she's ditched him for someone else. A classic tale of love at first sight gone wrong—and *Emite ehase*, “only God knows why.”

O asunge dabile
Jijaw jijuker huken jahoala
Huken jahatta asunge a e
Eniil esansuman
Asunge nagalom ayisen boola asunge

O e dabetenom
Bata asunga nijene
Ijukutool a ye
O Emite ehase

*Oh asunge has arrived
Look at her butt shake
The asunge's butt ah ay
What a great body
The asunge showed me her house*

*Oh ay she tossed me aside
I went to asunge's house
I didn't see her ah yay
Oh God knows*

23. ABDOULAYE DIALLO

“Inje Mama Oomei?”

(“My Mother, Where Are You?”)

Abdoulaye Diallo, ekonting, vocals

In this song, Diallo recalls his solitary boyhood from the perspective of advanced age, his plaintive voice and sparse ekonting accompaniment evoking the loneliness of a young boy calling for his mother. His parents divorced when he was four years old, and his three brothers left for Dakar to study the Quran. His father traveled frequently for work and his new stepmother paid him little attention. Young Diallo was frequently on his own and at loose ends.

Inje mama oomei
Inje mama ejukutool
Mama Ndiaye a o e
Mama Ndiaye ejukutool
Awa Diatta o e

*My mother, where are you?
My mother, I didn't see her
Mama Ndiaye ah oh ay
Mama Ndiaye I didn't see her
Awa Diatta oh ay*

24. JEAN KANGABEN DJIBALEN

“Madu”

Jean Kangaben Djibalen, ekonting, vocals

“Madu” is Kangaben’s masterpiece. It’s a simple story at heart: Abofen meets Madu in a village market and falls in love; he follows her to Dakar; she betrays him with another man. A favorite of radio DJs in Casamance and Dakar alike, the song is instantly recognizable by its signature melodic pattern. Many ekonting players can recite the entire story verbatim by heart. Based on an actual star-crossed romance from his youth, Kangaben infuses the story with pathos, humor, and local references galore.

The song begins with a vocal chorus literally singing Madu’s praises: *mina jukeri suma ndeysaan*—just knowing she’s looking your direction overflows your heart. Then the story begins in earnest as Kangaben switches from singing to declamatory speech. Abofen meets Madu in the marketplace in Oussouye, and he goes to visit her the following day. He knocks on her door: *kon kon kon!* He pronounces his love and, after a moment’s thought, she reciprocates. He heads home and goes to bed thinking, “She said yes!”

Abofen returns a few days later, but Madu’s parents tell him that she’s decamped for Dakar.

Thus begins his long journey north, and audiences laugh as he stops in every town along the way to ask whether she's been seen. He rattles off village names as he passes by: Diembering, Oussouye, Karunat, Niambalang, Klean, Bafikan, Niassia, Brin, Ziguinchor, Bignona, Balengor, Kaolack. He stops to buy some bread in Mbour—a silly pun since the Jola word for bread, *gumboru*, sounds similar to the name of the town. Then it's back on the road to Rufisque and finally Dakar.

Abufen catches up with Madu at last, but they are interrupted before they can properly exchange greetings. Someone knocks on her door: *kon kon kon!* A young university student comes in and says something to Madu in French. Abofen doesn't understand and asks her what he said. "It's not your problem," she replies. He asks again what the man said. She responds, "It's none of your business." Abofen starts to realize something is rotten. He asks Madu a final time what the man said to her—and she tells him to fuck off. "Alright," he says. "I'm going home."

Fans of African American vernacular music will find familiarity in the complex timbre of Kangaben's voice and his way of speaking expressively over a repeating instrumental pattern, much as Black banjoists and blues guitarists often do. Many of the song's themes are reminiscent of the blues as well: travel, local geographic

references, and rural confusion in the big city, all filtered through the structuring metaphor of an ill-fated relationship between a man and a woman. Abofen's inability to understand French at the end of the story is a key plot point, and Madu's choice of a Francophone university student over Abofen—an uneducated rice farmer—is telling. From the vantage point of Kangaben's youth in Oussouye, Dakar is literally and figuratively distant: newly independent but still governed by an unintelligible colonial language, treacherous but alluring. Listening to this recording together with Kangaben and his ekonting protégé Joël Bassene, Bassene laughs and says, "She thought she could have two lives and two men: one in Casamance and one in Dakar."



Akila asuma ndeysaan
Inje timba nasuma sujuul
Hukeng asuma hubeben
Nome ekondorool ebet hulong
Mina juikeri suma ndeysaan
Akila asuma Madeline
Alomba suma nufaaña
Hukeng asuma hubeben
Ekondorool ebet hulong
Mama ujuma tonama ceri
O e o e ya yo we e o ceri ndeysaan
Abofen nayab ejonjon (x4)

*She's a nice young girl, it's true
I love her nice big calves
She has a nice big butt
She has lines around her neck
When she looks at you, it's good, oh yes
She's a nice young girl, Madeline
She looks good walking in front of you
She has a nice big butt
She has lines around her neck
Mama when you look her direction, darling
Oh ay oh ay ya yo way eyo darling it's true
Abofen married a beautiful girl (x4)*

25. ABDOULAYE DIALLO

“Ayinga Bañiil Dane Dibuke Ban”
 (“Ayinga Bañiil Is Already Born”)

Abdoulaye Diallo, ekonting, vocals

As early as the 1950s, French anthropologist Louis-Vincent Thomas predicted that the *bukut*—the Jola men’s initiation ceremony, a central life cycle event and an occasion for several days of ebullient music-making—would cease to be celebrated within a generation. Senegal was a French colony at the time, and Thomas lamented that Jola culture was changing quickly in the face of colonial education and assimilation to European values. But he was wrong: Jolas continue to celebrate the *bukut* today with greater frequency than ever.

In the early 1990s, a European doctor visiting the Jola village of Enampor described his delight in the sweet melodies of the ekonting. He, too, lamented that fewer and fewer young Jolas were playing the instrument. And he was right: when I visited Enampor in 2015, I found only a single dilapidated ekonting that no one knew how to play. Joël Bassene’s father Bassene Bassene, now deceased, was probably the last to play ekonting in Enampor. As Joël puts it, “Traditional Jola music is still alive, but it’s in the process of dying little

by little because so many instruments are leaving, so many songs are being forgotten, so many dances are disappearing. I think it's a problem of resources that is killing Jola music. You know, a people without a culture is nothing." Even so, it is not uncommon to find young ekonting players in other villages.

So, the long advance of globalization in the Casamance has had uneven consequences. Some musical traditions are stronger than ever, while others teeter on the brink. This final song from Abdoulaye Diallo addresses the future of the ekonting in metaphorical terms. On the surface, it speaks to his experience as a young man dealing with his family's neglect. Referring to himself by his nickname, Diallo sings *Ayinga Bañiil dane dibuke ban* ("Ayinga Bañiil is already born")—that is, he is already here, and it is too late to abdicate familial responsibility and abandon him. Diallo's identification with the ekonting is so strong that he says the song is also about the instrument. "The ekonting is already born," he explains. "It is our responsibility to take care of it." What does the future hold for the ekonting? Will it be thrown out, abandoned, slowly forgotten as in the song's lyrics? Will it live on through its traditional connections to courtship, wrestling, and social dancing, social roles that remain as vital as ever? Will it see a renaissance through the efforts of

Esukolaal, Ejam Kasa, Elisa Diedhiou, and others to professionalize and innovate the instrument?
Emite ehase, only God knows.

Jimojenom di nabo ni nanom
Jibetenom bukurool jiyoke
Ayinga Bañiil najaw Kouba Loum

Jimojenom di nabo ni nanom
Jibetenom bukurool jiyoke
Ayinga Bañiil dane dibuke ban

Wo we a ha
Efuru bujom dinanom
Midi neeri ni dinanom
Katin kuringe dinanom
Tanotan ujuko ma dinanom

Aima kanoma nigeleen
Inje watanot tanowan
Mata kanut di chansi

*If you forget me, I will remain alone
If you abandon me, you will wear yourself out
Ayinga Bañiil went to Kouba Loum*

*If you forget me, I will remain alone
If you abandon me, you will wear yourself out
Ayinga Bañiil is already born*

*Wo way ah ha
When I leave in the morning, I am alone
At midday, I am alone
When evening comes, I am alone
Anywhere you see me, I am alone*

*But who threw me out?
I accuse no one
Because to each their own destiny*

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Ekontings built by
Dominique "Adiatta" Diatta

ABOUT SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In this way, we continue the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding among peoples through the production, documentation, preservation, and dissemination of sound.

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- 1. MUSA DIATTA**, "Watu Ering bee Kaolo" ("The Time Has Come to Rest") 3:04
| **2. ABDOULAYE DIALLO**, "Ami Kollo / Salymane / Alassane" 3:24 |
3. SIJAM BUKAN, "Mamba Sambou" 1:59 | **4. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA**, "Colobane Yolooli" ("Our Colobane") 2:06 | **5. SIJAM BUKAN**, "Diego" 3:02 | **6. JEAN KANGABEN DJIBALEN**, "Elenbeja" 2:33 |
7. ESUKOLAAL, "Bapaalaay" ("Friendship") 3:23 | **8. ELISA DIEDHIU**, "Aline Siteo" 2:33 | **9. SIJAM BUKAN**, "Sijam Bukan" ("Ears of the People") 2:22 | **10. DANIEL LAEMOU-AHUMA JATTA**, "Kunaare kati Gambi" ("Women of Gambia") 2:23 | **11. BOUBA DIEDHIU**, "Aduna Esore" ("The World is Dispersed") 2:32 | **12. ELISA DIEDHIU**, "Adiatta Ubonketom" ("Adiatta Pray for Me") 2:42 | **13. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA**, "Ajeme" 3:18 | **14. MUSA DIATTA**, "Celestine" 3:00 | **15. DANIEL LAEMOU-AHUMA JATTA**, "Aliinom" ("My Sister") 1:06 | **16. ESUKOLAAL**, "Koriye" 2:48 | **17. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA**, "Ahan Bokin" ("Elder of the Shrine") 3:56 | **18. SIJAM BUKAN**, "Asum Bunuk" ("Good Palm Wine Collector") 3:00 | **19. BOUBA DIEDHIU**, "Kanyalen Rosalle" 2:29
| **20. ADAMA SAMBOU AND EJAM KASA**, "Aguene Diambone" 8:02 |
21. MUSA DIATTA, "Aliinom (Ballanta)" ("My Sister") 2:50 |
22. ESUKOLAAL, "Asunge" ("Graceful Woman") 1:54 | **23. ABDOULAYE DIALLO**, "Inje Mama Oomei?" ("My Mother, Where Are You?") 1:23 |
24. JEAN KANGABEN DJIBALEN, "Madu" 8:37 |
25. ABDOULAYE DIALLO, "Ayinga Bafiil Dane Dibuke Ban" ("Ayinga Bafiil Is Already Born") 3:07

Produced by Scott Linford



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Ears of the People is a collection of sublime contemporary recordings of the ekonting, a three-stringed gourd lute played by Jola people in The Gambia and the Casamance region of Senegal. The nine tradition-bearers featured on the album share stories of love, heartache, conflict, spirituality, and all that is unique and beautiful in Jola culture over the rolling lilt of the instrument. An important forebear of the American banjo, the ekonting drives lively dancing and brings these stories to life. These songs, rarely heard outside Senegambia, are a living tapestry of the Jola people and a unique interweaving of human voices and stringed instruments.

