



COI QUERY

Country of Origin	The Gambia
Question(s)	<p>Information on the so-called Jonggo (Jungo, Jong) people. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information on whether it is a caste, on its origin, ethnic group and social condition of the people defined as Jonggo• Documented cases of people defined as Jonggo being forced to work as domestic servants• Documented cases of descendants of the Jonggo being forced to do the same job as their parents• Information on the social treatment of the Jonggo people, (including access to healthcare, education etc.), in particular in Diabugu Batapa (2014-2019)
Date of completion	19 February 2019
Query Code	Q6
Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)	

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The information provided in this response has been researched, evaluated and processed with utmost care within a limited time frame. All sources used are referenced. A quality review has been performed in line with the above mentioned methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive neither conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

The information in the response does not necessarily reflect the opinion of EASO and makes no political statement whatsoever.

The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision making authorities. The answer was finalised on 19 February 2019. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.



COI QUERY RESPONSE

Information on the so-called Jongo (or Jungo, Jong)¹ people, in particular: on whether it is a caste, on its origin, on the ethnic group and social condition of people defined as Jongo

The Mandinka-English dictionary, published by Peace Corps The Gambia in 1995, translates the word 'Joŋo' as 'slave',² clarifying that the pronunciation of the character 'ŋ' is the same as in the English words 'ring' and 'sing'.³

Detailed information on the origin, ethnic group and social condition of the people defined as Jongo could not be retrieved among all sources consulted within the time constrain.

However, all the following sources consulted mention the term Jongo (slave) in correlation with the Mandinka people (also called Malinke, Mandinke, Mandingo, Maninka, Manding, Mandenka).⁴

Traditionally, the Mandinka society was divided into three classes: the freeborn (called 'foro'), the artisan (called 'nyamalo') and the slave (called 'jongo').⁵

The Gambian society, and other West African countries, usually made a distinction between two categories of slaves: those who were 'captives, criminals, and debtors or bought into slavery and those slaves resident for two or more generations in a single community'.⁶

In an article published in 2005, Alice Bellagamba, Professor of Political Anthropology and African Studies at the University of Milano Bicocca, explained that, although the Mandinka term Jongo refers only to the category of slaves who were 'captured or bought', the boundary between these two types of slaves was not well defined. She further noted that 'European observers equated this distinction with another one, more familiar to their own experience of slavery, that is, the difference between the slaves meant to be sold and domestic slaves'.⁷

According to a PhD Thesis published in 2015, the caste system that characterised the pre-colonial Mandinka society has remained an important feature in terms of social status even after the independence in 1965. The author, the historian Cajetan Ifeanyi Nnaocha, stated:

¹ For ease of reference, the spelling variation 'Jongo' will be used throughout this document.

² Peace Corps The Gambia, Mandinka – English Dictionary, 1995, [url](#) p. 34

³ Peace Corps The Gambia, Mandinka – English Dictionary, 1995, [url](#) p. i

⁴ For ease of reference, the spelling variation 'Mandinka' will be used throughout this document. The Mandinka is currently the largest ethnic group in The Gambia. For more information, see: EASO, Country of Origin Information Report - The Gambia Country Focus, 13 December 2017, [url](#) p. 16

⁵ Quinn C. A., Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia, Longman London 1972, [url](#) p. 15; Jesup L., The Mandinka Balafon: An Introduction with Notation for Teaching, Volume 2, Xylo Publications 1983, [url](#) p. 12; Hughes A., Perfect D., Historical dictionary of The Gambia, Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2008, [url](#) p. 141

⁶ Quinn C. A., Mandingo Kingdoms of the Senegambia, Longman London 1972, [url](#) p. 15

⁷ Bellagamba A., Emancipation in the colonial archive. British officers, slave owners and slaves in the Protectorate of the Gambia, Canadian Journal of African Studies, 39(1), pp. 5-41, 2005, [url](#) pp. 35-36



‘At the top of the leader is the royal family lineage; the middle caste consist of people performing specialist functions such as the smiths, leader workers, potters, praise singers/griots (traditional historian) and the lower caste, the slaves or Jongo.’⁸

In the aforementioned 2005 article, Professor Bellagamba explained that remainders of ancient slavery bonds typical of the Gambian society could be observed in historical settlement of jula families in the Upper River, as well as in some clerical centres. Bellagamba noted:

‘Contemporary jonyaa - which is the Mandinka word commonly translated as slavery - is a voluntary allegiance stemming from the reciprocal recollection of former master-slave relationships. Its significance is very different from the one attached to the word jonyaa in the late nineteenth century, on the eve of colonisation. By then, the jongo was "the one you sell or you buy," a human being completely in the hands of his or her masters. Presently, the verb songma, which means "to accept," is commonly used to describe the still existing slave/master relationships.’⁹

In 2017, Professor Bellagamba, noted that, although slavery was officially declared illegal, there are different opinions among Gambians on whether the abolition of slavery was actually effective. The academic observed:

‘The British administration of the Gambia River declared the institution of slavery illegal only in 1930, though the slave trade had been banned in 1894 and 1906. Was the abolition of slavery effective? Gambians have differing opinions on this point. Some follow the Islamic definition of slavery that they have learned by listening to Friday Mosque sermons and by chatting with learned Muslims: the slave is the man (or the woman) that you capture or buy. This is the strict meaning of the Mandinka word jongo, which translates as “slavery” in English. However, there is a broader use of the same word, which points to all the conditions that in the twentieth century, and to some extent still today, have brought people into tight and enduring personal dependence and subordination: “They say it is finished, but it is not.”’¹⁰

Documented cases of people defined as Jongo being forced to work as domestic servants; documented cases of descendants of the Jongo people being forced to do the same job as their parents; information on the social treatment of the Jongo people (including access to healthcare, education etc.), in particular in Diabugu Batapa (2014-2019)

Although specific reference to the term ‘Jongo’ could not be found, media sources consulted below report on a ‘caste system crisis’¹¹ unfolding within the Serahule¹² communities in the Upper River Region, including in the village of Diabugu, as of January 2019.

⁸ Cajetan I. N., Impact assessment of the British colonial economic activities in The Gambia (1816-1994), St. Clements University British West Indies, PhD Thesis, September 2015, [url](#), p. 44

⁹ Bellagamba A., Emancipation in the colonial archive. British officers, slave owners and slaves in the Protectorate of the Gambia, Canadian Journal of African Studies, 39(1), pp. 5-41, 2005, [url](#) pp. 33-34

¹⁰ Bellagamba A., The Postslavery Gambia River: Silences, Memories, Signposts, in African Slaves, African Masters. Politics, Memories, Social Life, Trenton NJ. Africa World Press, Harriet Tubman Series on the Africa Diaspora, pp. 201-218, 2017, [url](#) p. 1

¹¹ The Point, Rawdatul Majaalis resolves Diabugu Batapa caste system crisis, 29 January 2019, [url](#)

¹² Serahule (also known as Serahuli, Sarakole, Soninke) is one of the main ethnic groups in The Gambia. EASO, Country of Origin Information Report - The Gambia Country Focus, 13 December 2017, [url](#) p. 16



According to Gambian local media, the caste system is still prevalent in some parts of the country, in particular in the Upper River Region, where some communities are still divided between so-called freeborn and slaves.¹³

During 2018, the media reported instances of tension between the freeborn (also called by some sources as 'nobles')¹⁴ and the slaves (called by some sources as 'commehs'),¹⁵ within the Serahule communities in particular. In some cases, violence erupted in villages such as Diabugu Batapa and Garawol, resulting in the injury of 'many youth'.¹⁶

In August 2018, five people were wounded during violent clashes between members of the Serahule community in the village of Koina, in the Upper River Region. Gambian newspaper The Point¹⁷ informed that the fight started when some individual made remarks against some members of the community regarded as slaves.¹⁸

The newspaper Foroyaa¹⁹ reported that, on 2 November 2018, violence broke out in the village of Diabugu, when some members of the freeborn caste tried to stop a man considered to be a slave from attending the Friday prayers ceremony. Interviewed by Foroyaa, the victim stated that he was attacked because of his refusal to accept being a slave. The man further added: 'They [are] demanded that I accept being a "slave", otherwise they will kill me'.²⁰

The same source further informed that the Police confirmed the incident was triggered by a caste dispute, and that five people had been arrested in relation to the attack.²¹ Interviewed by Foroyaa, the brother of the victim of the attack stated that his family along with other members of the Diabugu community insist in accepting their slave status, otherwise they would be denied access to water supply, access to the mosques, to village ceremonies and other community activities. He also added: 'We have been subjected to all forms of inhumane and degrading treatments from those who claim to be the 'nobles'[...]'.²²

A few days after the aforementioned incident, on 7 November 2018, a follow up article by Foroyaa informed that the Gambia Police Force (GPF) had deployed some 'reinforcements' in the village of Diabugu to keep peace and order following the fights. According to this source, the Diabugu police

¹³ The Point, 5 wounded in URR tribal clash, 31 August 2018, [url](#); Gambia Times, A Conversation with the Ultimate Sovereign Gambian, Muhammed Bai Drammeh, 5 December 2018, [url](#); Foroyaa, Violent Clashes Break Out In Diabugu, 5 November 2018, [url](#); The Point, URR local authorities urged to address caste system, 23 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁴ The Point, 5 wounded in URR tribal clash, 31 August 2018, [url](#); Foroyaa, Violent Clashes Break Out In Diabugu, 5 November 2018, [url](#)

¹⁵ Gambia Times, A Conversation with the Ultimate Sovereign Gambian, Muhammed Bai Drammeh, 5 December 2018, [url](#)

¹⁶ The Point, URR local authorities urged to address caste system, 23 January 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷ The Point is a Gambian newspaper founded in 1991; it covers issues on democracy, human rights, politics, economics, business and development. For more information, see: The Point, About the newspaper, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁸ The Point, 5 wounded in URR tribal clash, 31 August 2018, [url](#)

¹⁹ Foroyaa is one of the most important newspapers in The Gambia, covering politics, legal affairs, agriculture, health issues and arts. It was founded in 1987 by the political party People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS). For more information, see: EASO, Country of Origin Information Report - The Gambia Country Focus, December 2017, p. 49 [url](#); Senghore, A. A., Democracy, human rights and governance in The Gambia, Cenmedra 2018, p. 110 [url](#)

²⁰ Foroyaa, Violent Clashes Break Out In Diabugu, 5 November 2018, [url](#)

²¹ Foroyaa, Violent Clashes Break Out In Diabugu, 5 November 2018, [url](#)

²² Foroyaa, Violent Clashes Break Out In Diabugu, 5 November 2018, [url](#)



station officer stated that the police were struggling to maintain the peace, especially because members of the so-called freeborn blamed the police of taking the defense of the so-called slaves. According to the police station officer, representatives of the freeborn had presented the following five conditions:

1. 'human remains of slaves will not be buried at the village's cemetery;
2. they will not be allowed to pray in the village mosque;
3. they will not be allowed to attend any social activity within the village
4. they will not be allowed to use public water supply facilities such as taps and finally,
5. the Police Station be relocated from the village, because they no longer need their services.'²³

Following a dialogue between the two parties, an agreement was reached to end the tension outside court, according to Foroyaa. The representative of the so-called 'freeborn' referred to the newspaper that the agreement had been signed by both parties, accepting some conditions, including the ban for the so-called slaves to enter the main mosque. However, the same source reported that the representative of the so-called slave caste denied signing the agreement and would proceed to court.²⁴

On 16 November 2018, a man was killed during another violent fight over a caste dispute in the village of Garawol, in the Upper River Region.²⁵ The man suspected of committing this murder,²⁶ is a member of the so-called slave caste of Garawol. Following the murder, the compound of the murder suspect was set on fire, however the cause of the fire remained unknown.²⁷

In January 2019, The Point informed that an Islamic association called Rawdatul Majaalis claimed to have solved the caste system dispute in the village of Diabugu Batapa, by advising the community to follow the Islamic religious principles, which in the in the present day 'does not recommend anyone as slave'.²⁸

During a visit in the Upper River Region, in January 2019, the director general of the State Intelligence Service (SIS) urged the local authorities to address the issues of the caste dispute within the region before it escalates. He further added that an SIS command would be set up in the Upper River Region 'to ensure that peace and stability continue to prevail in the area and the region at large'.²⁹

In a letter addressed to the Gambia President Adama Barrow and published on The Gambia Times on 30 November 2018, Basamba Drammeh, a Gambian political and human rights activist based in the US, urged the President Barrow to intervene and put an end to the practice of slavery 'before the country gets marred in violence and becomes the laughingstock of the international community'. Drammeh, who stated to be himself a descendant of the 'old Soninke / Sarahule nobility that was the high social class of the ancient Ghana kingdom and empire', mentioned reports of a

²³ Foroyaa, Police Reinforce Security to Calm Diabugu Caste Scuffles, 7 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁴ Foroyaa, Diabugu Caste Clash: Dialogue commences, 8 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁵ Foroyaa, Violent Caste Scuffle Leaves One Dead In Garawol, 16 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁶ Foroyaa, In The Caste Issue In URR: Samba Nana Trawalleh Appears Before Magistrate Jabang, 28 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁷ Foroyaa, PIU withdrawn from Garawol in the midst of uneasy calm, 19 November 2018, [url](#)

²⁸ The Point, Rawdatul Majaalis resolves Diabugu Batapa caste system crisis, 29 January 2019, [url](#)

²⁹ The Point, URR local authorities urged to address caste system, 23 January 2019, [url](#)



possible link between the turmoil occurring in the Upper River Region and a so-called Gambana movement.³⁰

Among all sources consulted, scarce information could be found on the Gambana movement. Some Malian media outlets mentioned the 'Gambana Association' as anti-slavery entity present in Mali and other countries in the region, and committed to putting an end to slavery practices.³¹ According to the Gambia Times, the Gambana is a 'radical' Serahule movement fighting to end slavery across all Serahule communities in West Africa. The movement is reportedly financed by and comprised of mainly members of the 'slave caste' within the Serahule community.³²

In the aforementioned letter, Basamba Drammeh further added:

'Mister President, a lot could be said on the topic of human bondage. I urge you, my beloved President, along with your government and the people of The Gambia to proactively stand upright unfledged, by the Constitution of our country in defense of the rights of the downtrodden. Reports of violence and police involvements in Gambia, linked to the Gambana movement of liberation have circulated in social media.

There appear to be a concerted effort to unite all Soninke movements of liberation of Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, and our Gambia, aimed at the systematic end of slavery. As a result of the Soninke "slave" revolt in Mali³³ some insurgents have been reportedly deprived of the farm lands passed down to all by their forbearers.

Now is the time for the Gambian government to get involved and put an end to this shameful practice before the country gets marred in violence and becomes the laughingstock of the international community.

Gambana and other Soninke groups of liberation are ready to fight by all means necessary, not excluding armed strife, against anyone offender, according to those who monitor them closely, in order to de facto recover their God-given liberties, the inalienable rights endowed anyone at birth.'³⁴

Basamba Drammeh hand-delivered this letter to President Adama Barrow on 24 September 2018, at the margin of the United Nation General Assembly meeting in New York. Interviewed by The Gambia Times, Drammeh stated that the slave caste among the Serahule communities has long suffered all

³⁰ Gambia Times, Slavery Based on Caste System is "Ancestral, Barbaric and Shameful" Says Basamba Drammeh, 30 November 2018, [url](#)

³¹ InfoMatin, Pratique de l'Esclavage: une réalité dans certaines localités au Mali, 30 July 2018, [url](#); Maliactu.net, Mali: Agissements du mouvement «Gambana» dans la région de Kayes: Une autre source de crise pour le Mali? 13 September 2018, [url](#); Maliweb, Droits de l'Homme: Sale temps pour les esclaves en Pays Soninké, 26 October 2018, [url](#)

³² Gambia Times, Standing with Conviction and Courage Under Fire, 30 November 2018, [url](#)

³³ Some media have reported on an anti-slavery movement in Mali trying to oppose the old traditional practice which is still ingrained in the Malian culture. For more information, see: Washington Times, Malian slaves risk lives to end centuries-old institution, see hope in Trump, 13 January 2019, [url](#); The Guardian, Families in Mali splintered by slavery as culture and conflict converge, 3 April 2013, [url](#)

³⁴ Gambia Times, Slavery Based on Caste System is "Ancestral, Barbaric and Shameful" Says Basamba Drammeh, 30 November 2018, [url](#)



forms of discrimination, adding that ‘the progressives and young generation will not take lying down without a fight to end its complete obliteration from their communities’.³⁵

Slavery in The Gambia

Article 20 of the Constitution of The Gambia contains provisions prohibiting all forms of slavery and forced labour.³⁶ According to the 2018 US Department of State report, however, the government did not enforce these laws effectively.³⁷

As of 2018, an estimated number of 11 000 people in The Gambia were subjected to modern slavery, according to The Walk Free Foundation, which publishes the Global Slavery Index.³⁸

The 2018 USDOS Trafficking in Persons Report stated that, although significant efforts are being made, the Gambian government ‘does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking’. Within the country, mostly women and – to a lesser extent – boys are being forced into sex trafficking, forced labour as street vendors and domestic servants.³⁹

³⁵ Gambia Times, Standing with Conviction and Courage Under Fire, 30 November 2018, [url](#)

³⁶ Gambia, Constitution, 1997, Reprinted 2012, Art. 20, [url](#)

³⁷ USDOS, 2017 Human rights reports: The Gambia, 20 April 2018, [url](#)

³⁸ Walk Free Foundation, Global slavery Index, Gambia, Data 2018, [url](#). Modern slavery is defined by this source as follows: ‘modern slavery covers a set of specific legal concepts including forced labour, debt bondage, forced marriage, slavery and slavery-like practices, and human trafficking’. For more information, see: Global slavery Index, Methodology – Overview, n.d., [url](#)

³⁹ USDOS, 2018 Trafficking in Persons Report - The Gambia, 28 June 2018, [url](#)



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