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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CULTURAL PRACTICES AND KNOW-HOW OF THE SENUFO OF NORTHERN KÉNÉDOUGOU (BURKINA FASO): CURRENT THREATS, DEVELOPMENTS AND SAFEGUARDING MEASURES

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ABSTRACT

Cette contribution a pour objet d'analyser les pratiques culturelles et les savoir-faire des Sénoufo du Kénédougou nord (Burkina Faso) dans un contexte de profondes recompositions sociales, économiques, religieuses et symboliques. Elle repose sur l'hypothèse que le patrimoine immatériel sénoufo – rites initiatiques, techniques agropastorales, artisanat, musique, danse, organisation lignagère, systèmes d'alliances et de médiation – reste un socle de cohésion sociale et un outil de régulation des rapports collectifs, tout en étant confronté à des menaces multiples. Elles tiennent notamment à la scolarisation formelle peu articulée aux savoirs endogènes, à l'urbanisation, à la mobilité des populations, à l'influence des médias de masse, aux recompositions religieuses, ainsi qu'aux effets conjugués de l'économie marchande et de la précarité. L'étude s'appuie sur une démarche qualitative fondée sur l'anthropologie culturelle et l'observation de terrain à partir d'entretiens réalisés auprès de détenteurs de savoirs, d'anciens, d'initiés, d'artisans, de musiciens, de jeunes et d'acteurs institutionnels locaux. Elle présente tout d'abord un panorama des pratiques culturelles et des savoir-faire majeurs chez les Sénoufo du Kénédougou nord, puis met en lumière les dynamiques de mutation et les modalités d'appropriation par les jeunes générations, avant d'identifier quelques stratégies communautaires et institutionnelles de sauvegarde.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of cultural heritage in Africa has long concentrated on its most visible and most readily recognisable forms, such as masks, monuments, ritual objects and major popular festivals. Yet this approach gives only a partial account of the reality of African cultural legacies, the essence of which very often unfolds in the ordinariness of social practices, in repeated gestures, in embodied knowledge and in discreet forms of transmission. For the Senufo of northern Kénédougou, cultural heritage manifests itself not so much as a collection of objects that can be exhibited, but rather as a system of relationships, norms and practices that organise collective life on a daily basis. It finds expression in agricultural activities, ritual speech, modes of socialisation, dances, conflict-resolution mechanisms and the upbringing of children. From this perspective, Senufo cultural practices and know-how cannot be regarded as mere survivals of the past. On the contrary, they constitute a mode of social organisation, a language of collective memory and a principle of social cohesion. They contribute to the reproduction of values, to the regulation of relations between generations and to the transmission of the symbolic landmarks that give meaning to communal life. Intangible heritage thus proves to be a dynamic reality, constantly reinterpreted through lived experience, the constraints of the present and the demands of transmission.

It is therefore not a matter of passive conservation, but of continuous re-creation, embedded in social usages and historical contexts. The aim of this contribution is therefore to identify the salient features of the Senufo cultural foundation in northern Kénédougou by examining the transformations it currently faces. It seeks to identify the values, practices and know-how that ensure its internal coherence, as well as the factors of fragilisation linked to educational, religious, economic, media-related and territorial change. The analysis also endeavours to account for the strategies of adaptation, reinterpretation and safeguarding developed within the community, in order to show that Senufo heritage, far from being doomed to disappear, remains a space of negotiation between continuity and change.

Theoretical framework and geographical and socio-cultural context: Studying the cultural practices and know-how of the Senufo of northern Kénédougou requires approaching them both through a theoretical framework capable of capturing their social and symbolic logic and through a geographical and socio-cultural contextualisation that situates their concrete manifestations. On the one hand, the aim is to understand these practices as meaningful social facts; on the other, it is to relocate them within a specific space shaped by particular historical, economic and cultural dynamics.

This section thus lays the analytical foundations for understanding the field under study.

Theoretical framework: cultural anthropology: This research falls within the field of cultural anthropology, which studies social facts not as isolated realities but as systems of meaning integrated into collective life. From this perspective, Senufo cultural practices are analysed as social constructions that are transmitted, learned and reinterpreted over successive generations. They are not a matter of mere habit or routine; they express a particular way of ordering the world, of structuring social relations and of giving meaning to shared experience. Cultural anthropology therefore provides an appropriate framework for analysing the rites, know-how, systems of alliance, forms of sociability, artistic productions and modes of transmission of the Senufo. It makes it possible to grasp the links between culture and social organisation, between values and behaviour, and between symbolic representations and concrete practices. From this standpoint, everyday gestures, ritual speech, dances, and agricultural or craft techniques are regarded as so many social languages through which the identity of the group is expressed.

This theoretical framework also makes it possible to conceive of culture as a set of factors in permanent interaction with its environment. Senufo practices are not static but are transformed through contact with economic, religious, educational and media-related change. Cultural anthropology thus helps to understand both continuities and reconfigurations, while avoiding the reduction of tradition to a vestige of the past or of modernity to a radical rupture. Finally, the anthropological approach sheds light on the relational dimension of intangible heritage. Cultural knowledge exists only insofar as it is shared, transmitted and recognised within a community. Its study therefore requires observation of the actors, contexts, interactions and transmission mechanisms that ensure its survival. It is from this perspective that Senufo practices may be read as a living heritage, rooted in collective memory yet always open to the transformations of the present.

Administrative and economic framework: Kénédougou is one of the most important areas of western Burkina Faso, by virtue of its administrative organisation, its demographic weight and its economic activities. The province belongs to the Guiriko region, whose capital is Bobo-Dioulasso, while its provincial capital is Orodara. Within this area, northern Kénédougou comprises several localities, including Zanfara, Karna, Séfina, Séguédougou, Kourouma, Morlaba, N'gorguerla, Dingasso, Famberla, Sikorola, Kodona and N'Dorola. The last of these communes occupies a particular position owing to its status as cantonal capital and to the presence of numerous administrative services and institutional relays. From an economic standpoint, northern Kénédougou is an essentially agricultural region. Its principal activity remains cotton production, which for several decades has shaped relationships to land, labour and the market. Alongside this cash crop is a diversified subsistence agriculture intended for household consumption and food security. Since the 1970s, the establishment and expansion of orchards, particularly of mango, cashew and orange trees, have profoundly altered the rural landscape and encouraged the diversification of incomes.
These economic developments have brought about significant upheavals in social organisation. Land-use planning, the growing commodification of agricultural activities and the shift towards cash crops have changed rhythms of life, forms of labour and relations between generations. They have also intensified contact with commercial circuits, seasonal mobility and patterns of dependence on market fluctuations. In this context, cultural practices cannot be grasped independently of the material conditions that sustain, transform or weaken them. The administrative and economic framework of northern Kénédougou thus shows that Senufo cultural practices are embedded in a changing space in which local dynamics remain closely bound up with the transformation of agriculture, the expansion of cash crops and the evolving relationship between tradition and the contemporary economy. This reality gives full significance to the analysis of intangible heritage, not as an abstract set of customs, but as a living dimension of social existence, closely linked to the conditions under which daily life is produced and reproduced.

Cultural diversity and ethnic composition: Northern Kénédougou is characterised by great ethno-cultural diversity, which makes it a genuine site of coexistence, interaction and circulation of social practices. The Senufo form the majority, but they live alongside other significant population groups, including the Bolon, the Marka, the Fulani and the Minianka. This plurality does not amount to a mere juxtaposition of groups; it generates a complex social space characterised by relations of exchange, neighbourliness, complementarity and, at times, competition. Within this setting, cultural diversity finds expression in languages, types of dwelling, economic activities, ways of gathering together, family structures and symbolic points of reference. Daily contact between groups leads to reciprocal borrowings, pragmatic adjustments and forms of cohabitation founded on negotiation. Such contact may also give rise to tensions, notably over access to land, natural resources and local responsibilities, and over positions of symbolic or social authority. This configuration invites us not to regard Senufo practices as self-enclosed realities, but as cultural forms integrated into a broader relational space. Local identity is thus forged through interaction with the Other, by way of continuous processes of adaptation, distinction and self-affirmation. In other words, the Senufo culture of northern Kénédougou can only be fully understood through the dynamics of coexistence and reconfiguration that structure the entire social fabric.

Intangible heritage as a foundation of cohesion: Senufo intangible heritage consists of a coherent set of practices, knowledge and representations that organise and structure collective life. It includes, in particular, initiation rites and systems of lineage organisation that ensure the transmission of social values and norms. It also encompasses agricultural knowledge and agro-pastoral techniques that enable the community to adapt to its environment. To these may be added craft activities, notably wood carving, smithing, weaving, pottery and dyeing, all of which are manifestations of know-how passed down from generation to generation. Music and dance likewise occupy an essential place, as they accompany the major moments of social and ritual life. Finally, systems of alliance, mediation and conflict regulation, notably joking relationships, help to preserve social equilibrium and to strengthen community cohesion. These elements are not folklore in any superficial sense. They form a genuine social infrastructure. Taking up B. Malinowski's idea, R. Delège reminds us that cultural institutions respond to fundamental social needs and organise the continuity of the group (2006). Among the Senufo, this organising function is particularly evident in the way inherited practices simultaneously ensure

the transmission of values, the stabilisation of hierarchies and the regulation of tensions.

Working hypothesis: The analysis of the data in this research rests upon a central hypothesis built around two ideas. On the one hand, Senufo intangible heritage remains a foundation of social cohesion. It provides frameworks for regulating tensions, organising power, transmitting norms and structuring interpersonal and intergenerational relations. On the other hand, this foundation is now weakened by multiple threats: economic, social, religious, educational and media-related. These transformations do not necessarily lead to the abrupt disappearance of practices, but they do alter their forms, uses and meanings.

METHODOLOGY

This research falls within cultural anthropology and is based on a qualitative inquiry conducted among various social actors, notably elders, initiates, artisans, musicians, young people, teachers and local institutional officials. It employs a range of data-collection tools: semi-structured interviews, life histories, participant observation in ritual, agricultural and festive contexts, and exchanges with associative and administrative actors. Particular prominence was also given to discourses concerning the transmission, loss and reinvention of traditions. This approach makes it possible to grasp cultural practices not as isolated objects but as total social facts in the Maussian sense, that is to say, as realities that simultaneously involve several dimensions of collective life. Total social facts thus 'set in motion the whole of society: they are at once juridical, economic, religious and even aesthetic' (M. Mauss, 1973, p. 274).

Senufo know-how and cultural practices: Senufo cultural practices and know-how are not mere habits inherited from the past. They form a genuine system of thought and action that organises daily life, structures social relations and gives meaning to individual and collective behaviour. Through them, Senufo society manifests its distinctive relationship to the world and its way of transmitting norms and maintaining the equilibrium of the group. These practices rest upon a set of values that guide conduct and regulate relations between individuals. Among these values, two appear particularly decisive: modesty, which underpins an ethic of restraint and respect, and respect for hierarchy, which organises each person's place within the community. The study of these values allows a better understanding of the internal coherence of the Senufo world and of the social function of its know-how.

Structuring values: Senufo practices are rooted in a set of values that organise social life and interpersonal relations. As stated in the introduction to Section 3, modesty and respect for hierarchy are the two that appear particularly decisive.

Modesty as an ethical foundation: Modesty is a cardinal value in Senufo culture. It manifests itself first in the relationship to filiation and paternal authority. As long as the father is alive, the child remains under his guardianship, irrespective of age, social status or material means. When he acquires a possession, he may present it by saying, according to a formula reported in the field by one of our informants: 'The elders acquired this thing on credit for me.' This formula expresses both respect for the elders and a rejection of ostentatious individual appropriation. Modesty is also observable in forms of solidarity. When a Senufo wishes to help someone, he often does so through an intermediary. He may say, for example: 'Take these five francs and give them to such-and-such a person so that he may drink some water.' This manner of speaking avoids any display of generosity and preserves the dignity of the recipient. The gift is not shown; it is inscribed within a moral economy of restraint. Finally, this modesty manifests itself in the relationship to spiritual and cultural knowledge. Those who possess knowledge are not in the habit of boasting of it. When asked for help, such a person may reply: 'I shall also consult the elders', even though he already has the solution. This attitude protects the symbolic authority of the elders while maintaining the effective circulation of knowledge.

Respect for hierarchical orders: Another fundamental mechanism of social cohesion among the Senufo is the collective management of speech, information and decision-making power. This is very clearly illustrated by the protocol for receiving a stranger bearing news. When a visitor is received in the family compound, all the sons of the family may be gathered together. The eldest questions the visitor and passes the information on to the next-eldest brother, who in turn passes it on down to the youngest; the message then travels back up to the eldest and to the head of the family. This circuit of transmission appears simple, yet it reveals a subtle social organisation: everyone is included in the process while the hierarchy of age is respected. What we have here is a kind of relational democracy, founded not upon egalitarian abstraction but upon ordered participation. This way of circulating information enables everyone to feel involved in the decision without calling into question the authority of the eldest. It is a mechanism of socialisation into collective responsibility.

Thus, within this community, respect for the hierarchy of age and of speech is not confined to a normative constraint; it is a principle of collective organisation that guarantees the orderly circulation of information and the participation of all members in decision-making. The eldest questions the visitor, passes the information on to the younger brothers and sees it travel back up to the head of the family; the practice illustrates a structured social logic that includes all age groups while maintaining the authority of the elders. This social configuration belongs to the long tradition of studies of Senufo kinship, which show how the hierarchy of ages distributes roles and responsibilities within the compound, making the eldest a pivot of mediation between the outside world and the group, as may be observed in Béridogo, B. (1982). Moreover, analysis of communication arrangements among the Senufo reveals that speech is codified both spatially and relationally; channels of transmission are not spontaneous but are organised according to precise social rules, which confers a practical and normative rationality upon the procedure for receiving and relaying the message. This organisation can also be understood in the light of the Maussian notion of the 'total social fact' mentioned above. Indeed, the reception of a visitor simultaneously engages economic, political, religious and moral dimensions, such that the transmission of information forms part of an integrated set of social obligations and prestations. More generally, customary arrangements in West Africa show that customary hierarchy does not exclude participation; rather, it orders and legitimises it in accordance with collective responsibility and

the preservation of social equilibrium. They transform the circulation of speech into a mechanism of socialisation into domestic and communal citizenship.

Other components of intangible heritage: The practices set out above are articulated with a set of complementary pillars that structure Senufo intangible heritage and ensure social cohesion. Initiation rites constitute, first and foremost, schools of moral and social formation. They transmit the values of the group, lineage history, prohibitions and rules of conduct, and they construct the individual's belonging to the collective. Initiation is not merely a ritual ordeal but a social 'curriculum' in which one learns the duties, names, gestures and narratives that make up the memory of the lineage (E. Mori Traoré, 2016). Lineage organisation and systems of alliance, in turn, play a central role in the mediation and pacification of social relations. Alliance and joking kinship (an institution widespread in West Africa) function as a codified mechanism for easing tensions and maintaining inter-group cooperation; they permit ritualised verbal confrontations without severing the social bond and facilitate the informal settlement of disputes (A. Sissao, 2002). When mobilised, these lineage-based arrangements constitute more effective mediation procedures than purely legal proceedings, since they rest upon reciprocal obligations sanctioned by memory and ritual. Agro-pastoral knowledge embodies another dimension: that of a fine-grained and practical reading of the environment. Among the Senufo, the land is not merely an economic resource; it is a relational being that entails ritual obligations, rights of use and seasonal prohibitions. Agricultural calendars, fallowing practices, seed knowledge and rites for the protection of fields bear witness to an ecology of knowledge grounded in experience handed down from one generation to the next.

Craftsmanship employs specialised techniques and know-how transmitted from generation to generation: smithing, weaving, dyeing, wood carving and pottery. These crafts produce not only utilitarian objects but also markers of status, supports of memory (masks, ritual objects) and vehicles of aesthetic and cosmological transmission. The materiality of objects thus serves to anchor the symbolic referents of the group in everyday life. Finally, music and dance organise collective presence and embody the social order. In funerary, initiatory or festive contexts, musical repertoires and choreographies enact social roles, mark lineage continuity and enable the remobilisation of solidarities. Language and mediation lie at the heart of ritual performance, which renders social organisation legible and tangible and reproduces community cohesion through bodily participation (Holas, 1956). In sum, rites, lineages, agro-pastoral knowledge, crafts and the performing arts weave an interdependent network in which each component nourishes and legitimises the others, thereby forming an intangible heritage that is at once functional and symbolic, and scarcely separable from forms of social regulation and community resilience (Mauss, 1925).

Changes, threats and transformations of the cultural foundation: Today, the Senufo cultural foundation appears as an object under strain. Its components nonetheless remain persistent and resilient, yet they are overwhelmed by social, economic and symbolic dynamics that are transforming their forms and uses. The analysis of these changes must therefore distinguish between continuity and transformation, identifying the factors that weaken the mechanisms of transmission as well as the processes of adaptation and reconfiguration that enable their survival. This section first examines the socio-economic transformations bearing upon knowledge and practices, then the symbolic and media-related changes, before assessing the forms of creative appropriation and community responses.

Socio-economic transformations: The Senufo cultural foundation is not disappearing; it is, however, subject to considerable strain arising from contemporary socio-economic reconfigurations. Firstly, the disconnection between formal schooling and endogenous knowledge weakens traditional modes of transmission. As numerous studies of rural education have emphasised, the state school gives priority to the written word, the French language and abstract content that lends itself poorly to immediate connections with local agro-pastoral and ritual knowledge (Brock-Utne, 2000). School calendars encroach upon periods of community learning and reduce opportunities for intergenerational transmission; consequently, ritual knowledge tends to be classified as peripheral 'customs', gradually losing its essence. Secondly, urbanisation and economic mobility accelerate the fragmentation of communities and the erosion of spaces of ritual co-presence. Seasonal migration and the rural exodus lead to the dispersal of lineages and a reduction in the material opportunities to participate in collective rituals. As Jean-François Bayart has shown for West African societies, the rise of mobility and of monetised economies produces new temporal priorities and trade-offs in favour of immediately profitable activities, to the detriment of lengthy, unremunerated apprenticeships (J.-F. Bayart, 1993). This dynamic manifests itself concretely in the mass departure of young people for urban centres or areas of agricultural employment, at the cost of reduced availability for initiatory sequences and inherited craft activities.

Thirdly, economic precariousness mutilates transmission by altering the logics of long-term investment. Young people are often compelled to favour seasonal employment, petty trade or migration routes that offer immediate remuneration, rather than investing in craft or ritual apprenticeships whose social value is not easily converted into monetary income. Consequently, the continuity of certain technical skills (smithing, weaving, pottery) and of certain aspects of initiation is threatened by disaffection and by the material impossibility of their transmission. Finally, these socio-economic transformations operate in synergy with other factors (religious reconfigurations, the media) and thus produce cumulative effects of cultural disaffiliation. It is therefore necessary to devise safeguarding strategies that address both living conditions (incomes, employment, appropriate educational infrastructure) and the institutional recognition of endogenous knowledge.

Media-related transformations: Mass media and social networks are profoundly transforming social imaginaries. By disseminating models of success, bodily distinction and consumption originating elsewhere, they alter local criteria of valorisation and may create, particularly among young people, a distancing from endogenous practices, which are henceforth seen as 'outdated', 'rural' or 'backward'. This dynamic accords with analyses of television reception in West Africa, which show that media images do not merely inform; they reconfigure aspirations, self-representations and symbolic hierarchies. From this standpoint, media modernity does not simply produce new tastes; it also introduces competition between regimes of cultural legitimacy.

Religious reconfigurations likewise play a decisive role. The spread of certain Christian or Muslim movements is often accompanied by a discourse that disqualifies ancient rituals, which come to be regarded as 'pagan' or 'diabolical' practices, or as incompatible with faith. Yet, as several studies of religious reconfigurations in Africa have shown, these transformations amount not to a simple substitution, but to a shifting of the boundaries between the legitimate and the illegitimate within social space. Among the Senufo, this development weakens the position of ritual masters, diviners and all those who possess ritual knowledge. Intangible heritage thus becomes a space of symbolic confrontation, in which the maintenance, rejection and requalification of traditions are subject to permanent negotiation.

Internal changes and creative appropriations: It would nevertheless be reductive to interpret these transformations as a simple disappearance of traditions. Like other African societies, Senufo societies demonstrate a capacity for adaptation that finds expression in internal changes and creative appropriations. Tradition, far from being static, reinvents itself in the face of current pressures, and the anthropology of ritual allows this to be envisaged as a process of re-elaboration rather than elimination. Initiation rites are thus sometimes shortened, simplified or reorganised. Certain elements are dropped, while others are reworked to accommodate material imperatives, school calendars, the requirements of paid work or religious rules. These adjustments do not necessarily signify a break with the heritage, but rather a continuous negotiation between collective memory and present conditions. Indeed, recent research on contemporary forms of ritualisation shows that societies, as they change, do not cease to ritualise: they invent new framings, new mediations and new ways of making belonging visible.

Similarly, certain ritual music and dances are recontextualised in festivals, on urban stages or in audiovisual productions. This circulation beyond the original setting does not necessarily amount to betrayal; it may also constitute a strategy of visibility, recognition and survival. By entering new media circuits, these expressive forms acquire new audiences and new functions, while retaining part of their identity-bearing significance. One thus observes a dynamic process of heritagisation, in which insertion into a wider public sphere makes it possible to keep alive repertoires that local transmission alone would find it more difficult to sustain.

Safeguarding methods: The safeguarding of Senufo intangible heritage is neither a nostalgic gesture nor a mere symbolic celebration. It requires concrete, continuous and shared actions capable of combining intergenerational transmission, institutional recognition and community appropriation. From this perspective, local, associative and public initiatives constitute the primary levers for preserving and revalorising inherited knowledge.

Community and associative action: At the local level, several dynamics contribute to the reactivation of heritage. Certain rituals and ceremonies are still performed by elders, sometimes adapted to contemporary constraints, which confirms the view advanced by M. Godelier (2007) that societies do not preserve their legacies as relics, but transform them in order to endow them with renewed social efficacy [to be completed: author, work, page]. In the same vein, as P. Bourdieu and J.-C. Passeron (1970) remind us, cultural practices remain alive only if they are reinvested in concrete and recognised social contexts; otherwise, they become fixed as signs of distinction devoid of collective use. Alongside these customary mediations, cultural associations, often led by young people, organise events to promote heritage, such as the N'Dorola Massako Festival, launched in 2022, and the Nanergué Culture Festival (FESCUNA), now in its third edition. These initiatives go beyond mere entertainment; they are sites of transmission, visibility and the reaffirmation of identity. They bear out the view of A. Appadurai (2001), according to whom cultural forms live through their circulation, their reinterpretation and their capacity to be reterritorialised within new contexts of reception. This means that a local festival, when it sets in motion dance, music, the words of the elders and the involvement of the young, does not mechanically reproduce the past; it puts the past back into circulation within a socially organised present.

The Burkinabè State has, moreover, established the Day of Customs and Traditions, celebrated each year on 15 May, which provides an additional symbolic framework for the revalorisation of cultural references. Instituted by decree in 2024, this day seeks to reaffirm the secular character of the State, to offer adherents of traditional religion a framework for promoting ancestral values and practices, and to foster fraternal communion among the various groups of the population. This institutional recognition means that traditions are no longer conceived as survivals of the past, but are once again becoming living resources for building social bonds.

Moving beyond the tradition/modernity opposition: It is necessary to move beyond the sterile opposition between tradition and modernity that has long structured representations of social change in Africa and that today tends to obscure the complexity of actual cultural dynamics. According to Balandier (1985), modernity cannot be reduced to a radical rupture with inherited forms; rather, it generates reconfigurations, rearrangements and hybridisations that transform social relations without abolishing them. From this perspective, tradition should not be envisaged as a residue of the past, but rather as a set of practices constantly reinterpreted in the present according to logics of adaptation and social reinvestment. The aim, therefore, is neither to return to a mythologised past nor to sacrifice local practices in the name of an abstract model of development. On the contrary, it is to recognise that Senufo know-how contains resources useful for meeting contemporary challenges, beginning with that of conflict management. Customary mediations, joking alliances and lineage-based mediations are all endogenous mechanisms for preventing and resolving tensions, whose effectiveness rests upon the social legitimacy of the actors involved and upon the collective recognition of the norms they embody. Several studies of endogenous conflict-management mechanisms in West Africa have shown that these practices make it possible to contain violence, restore dialogue and avoid the excessive judicialisation of disputes.

Senufo knowledge likewise constitutes a valuable resource for reflecting on the relationship with the environment. Agro-pastoral practices, rules governing land use and ritual prescriptions associated with agricultural cycles reflect a relational vision of nature, in which space is not simply a reserve of resources but an inhabited, structured and morally regulated environment.

This way of inhabiting the environment accords with UNESCO's analyses (2015) of endogenous knowledge, which emphasise its contribution to the social and ecological sustainability of local communities. From this perspective, modernisation should not lead to the marginalisation of peasant knowledge, but rather to its recognition as forms of rationality adapted to specific contexts. Finally, the Senufo values of solidarity, restraint and ordered participation can nourish a more democratic and inclusive mode of transmission. Far from being incompatible with contemporary demands, they can help to refound intergenerational relations, strengthen community cohesion and promote a citizenship anchored in local practices. It is in this sense that the simplistic alternative between conservation and rupture can be transcended: Senufo know-how is valuable not only as heritage, but as a resource for the future.

Judicious use of digital technology and economic recognition: Digital technology can serve as a safeguarding tool, provided that it is conceived not as a mere technical medium but as a space of co-construction between institutions, researchers and the communities that hold the heritage. The 2003 UNESCO Convention recalls that intangible cultural heritage is first and foremost a living heritage, constantly recreated by the communities that bear it, which means that any digitisation initiative must respect their central role in defining, recording and disseminating their cultural expressions. In this logic, audiovisual archives co-produced with communities, local promotion platforms and participatory documentation schemes appear to be relevant tools for transmission, provided that they do not dispossess the groups concerned of control over their own representations.

The literature on audiovisual archives indeed shows that their value lies not only in their material preservation, but also in the conditions of their legibility, accessibility and contextualisation. As reflection on heritage audiovisual archives emphasises, preserving such media entails preserving not only their content but also the metadata and interpretative frameworks that give them meaning over time. For Senufo societies, the digitisation of rites, music, dances or oral narratives will have real significance only if it is accompanied by contextualisation work carried out with the knowledge holders themselves. The aim, then, is not to digitise for the sake of preservation, but to create new conditions for the circulation of knowledge, compatible with the social rules of the community and with the rights of the bearers of tradition.

This requirement is linked to the question of the economic and material recognition of knowledge holders. According to UNESCO, the safeguarding of digital and intangible heritage requires sustainable strategies, partnerships and resources, failing which actions remain vulnerable and unevenly distributed. Studies devoted to the transmission of traditional know-how likewise emphasise that any form of knowledge survives only if there are economic conditions enabling its learning, its practice and its social reproduction. In other words, symbolic valorisation is not enough: ritual masters, artisans, musicians and elders must also receive concrete recognition, whether financial, institutional or statutory, so that the long duration of initiation and training remains possible.
Ultimately, the safeguarding of Senufo heritage in the digital age can be effective only if it combines two complementary requirements. On the one hand, it must preserve the cultural sovereignty of communities over their own expressions; on the other, it must guarantee knowledge holders conditions of life and transmission that make their role viable over time. Only on this condition will digital technology cease to be a mere tool of capture and become a lever of cultural continuity, and only then can intangible heritage be transmitted without being devitalised.

CONCLUSION

The cultural practices of the Senufo of northern Kénédougou derive from a set of strong values, foremost among which are modesty, respect for hierarchy, community cohesion and a sense of collective participation. They do not constitute a mere fixed inheritance, but a living heritage, constantly reactivated in daily life through rites, know-how, forms of sociability and mechanisms of social regulation. Today, however, this heritage faces profound changes resulting from economic transformations, religious reconfigurations, formal schooling, urbanisation and the growing influence of the media. These dynamics do not necessarily entail the disappearance of traditional practices, but they do transform their forms, uses and meanings. They therefore invite us to conceive of tradition not as a fixed essence but as a social reality in motion, capable of reformulating itself in the present. The task, then, is not only to preserve a heritage, but also to create the conditions for its continuity and transmission. For any reflection on the cultural future of Senufo societies, the challenge is to preserve this heritage without ossifying it, to open it to the world without dissolving it, and to transform threats into resources for reinvention. It is in this articulation between memory, adaptation and creativity that the possibility of a safeguarding at once critical, realistic and faithful to the group's own dynamics resides.

Oral sources

Surname	First names	Status	Age and village of origin	Date and place of interview
OUATTARA	Nabéré	Lecturer-researcher	45 years old, from Séguédougou, a village in the department of N'Dorola	20/12/2025 in Dédougou (Burkina Faso),
DAGNON	Seydou	Educational adviser, Ministry of National Education	47 years old, from Dionkélé, a village in the department of N'Dorola	15 /12/2025 in Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso)
SESSOUMA	Bakary	Farmer	57 years old, from N'Dorola	10/04/2026 in N'Dorola

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