

African Indigenous Knowledge, Leadership, and Environmental Care: A Case Study of the Traditional *Sénoufo* People of Côte d'Ivoire

Navigué Pierre Soro, *Bakke Graduate University*

Abstract: This paper presents the traditional Sénoufo knowledge of the environment and their stewardship methods, based on their ancestral beliefs in Côte d'Ivoire. Only in the last decade have we seen an increase in interest in African Indigenous Knowledge. However, access to African knowledge, worldviews, and approaches within Western forms of scholarship remains very limited, especially when considering environmental care. The current generation of Africans educated in schools following Western standards often lacks awareness of African Indigenous Knowledge and their environmental concerns. This lack of knowledge is particularly evident among the Sénoufo people of Côte d'Ivoire. An analysis will be conducted using the limited scholarship available, focusing on insights from studies of the traditional Sénoufo's stewardship practices. Additionally, this article will offer insights into how traditional Sénoufo knowledge informs leadership principles in environmental caretaking. This paper will demonstrate how the Sénoufo people possess extensive knowledge of their environment and implement a bottom-up leadership system, in contrast to the top-down model commonly adopted by many organizations led by Western-educated leaders. Indigenous leadership is often underestimated because current leaders in Africa with Western education tend to follow the top-down approach, unlike traditional indigenous leaders. Future research should explore leadership through the lens of the bottom-up model, an area that remains underexplored and unfamiliar to many leaders globally. This approach is rooted in Sénoufo tradition and still practiced in villages in northern Côte d'Ivoire. Building on these findings can further develop leadership research both domestically and globally.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge of environment, traditional Sénoufo leaders, Leadership models

Since the arrival of colonizers and missionaries, numerous academic and non-academics alike have written about the African continent. Given the continent's vast size – larger than the United States and Europe combined – and its immense diversity in languages (more than 700 languages), natural resources, and cultural practices, it is not only impractical to make generalizations about Africa, but it also fails to do justice to the vast knowledge and practices unique to the continent. According to Toyin Falola, “scholars of Africa often lament the fact that the most prestigious sites of production for African studies remain outside of Africa itself.”¹ As a solution, Falola suggests that “the flowering of institutions of higher learning [should occur] within Africa.”²

As a scholar born and raised in the Sénoufo tribe of northern Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa, I believe it is time to respond to Falola's call and start writing about my tribe. Thus, one of the scopes of this paper is to offer the reader an insider perspective into the knowledge and practices of the Sénoufo people. My

1. Toyin Falola, *Africanizing Knowledge: African Studies Across the Disciplines* (London: Routledge, 2017), 11.

2. Falola, *Africanizing Knowledge*, 11.

methodological approach to presenting and describing the indigenous leadership model of the Sénoufo people and how it is applied to the care of their environment will draw on my personal knowledge and experiences as a member of the Sénoufo tribe. The goal is to raise awareness, recognition, and understanding of the Sénoufo people's unique indigenous knowledge and leadership models in Côte d'Ivoire. I aim for this work to contribute to the growth and "flourishing of African scholarship" in the field of Organizational Leadership.

The Gap in Knowledge

Although a number of studies have been conducted in recent years on the Sénoufo people of Côte d'Ivoire,³ there remains an important gap that I would like to bring to the reader's attention. Very few of these studies provide an insider's perspective or offer a comprehensive understanding of the role of leadership within the indigenous community and how this is reflected in the Sénoufo people's worldview and practices of stewardship of the earth. This gap is also evident in how African leaders educated in Western institutions – or in African institutions that adopt Western models of knowledge – approach environmental issues. This article explores the knowledge and leadership qualities of African indigenous peoples regarding environmental stewardship, focusing on the traditional Sénoufo people of Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa. It will address three key questions: First, who are the Sénoufo people of Côte d'Ivoire? Second, what is their understanding of their environment? And third, what strategies do the Sénoufo use to protect and care for their environment? The analysis will employ two contrasting leadership models – top-down versus bottom-up – to better understand the Sénoufo people's decision-making processes related to environmental management. I believe that applying these models will clarify how the Sénoufo people approach environmental care.

Data on the Sénoufo worldview, practices, and customs were collected through interviews with key Sénoufo community members, providing information on the traditional structure of the Sénoufo society. Before we present the collected data, the following section provides details on the geographical and economic activities of the Sénoufo people.

The Sénoufo People of Côte d'Ivoire

According to the Ivorian Government, as of the 2021 census, the total Ivorian population is 29,389,150 inhabitants.⁴ The Sénoufo people are primarily farmers in the northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire,

3. For further reading, see: Nanan Kouamé Félix Kouadio, Tiémongo Silue, and Kouassi Josué Kouadio, "Lowland Agriculture and Women's Socioeconomic Integration: The Case of the Senufo People in the Korhogo Commune, Northern Côte d'Ivoire," *Georeview* 33, no. 2 (2023): 104–120; Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Constantine Petridis, "Senufo Unbound: Dynamics of Art and Identity in West Africa," *African Arts* 48, no. 1 (2015): 6–23; Marie Lorillard, « Expression d'une souffrance sociale en milieu rural Sénoufo et ethnoéthique », *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 33, no. 3 (2009) : 139–157; Marianne Lemaire, *Les Sillons de la souffrance : représentation du travail en pays Sénoufo (Côte d'Ivoire)* (Paris : CNRS Éditions et Éditions de la MSH, 2009); Audrey Fromageot, Philippe Cecchi, Florence Parent, and Yves Coppeters, « Ruptures économiques sans ruptures sociales : Le maraîchage et la santé des paysanneries Sénoufo entre résilience et vulnérabilité », *Annales de Géographie* 115, no. 647 (2006) : 49–68; Robert Launay, « Une image stéréotypée : les « caractères moraux » des Sénoufo dans le discours colonial et post-colonial », *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 39, no. 154 (1999) : 271–292.

4. Institut National de la Statistique, *Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat* [General Census of the Population and Housing] (Abidjan, Ministère du Plan et du Développement, 2021), <https://www.plan.gouv.ci/assets/fichier/RGPH2021-RESULTATS-GLOBAUX-VF.pdf>.

predominantly residing in the Poro, Bagoué, Tchologo, and Hambol regions.⁵ Sénoufo society has a population of about 2,771,464 inhabitants.⁶ The respective regional cities are Korhogo, Boundiali, Ferkéssédougou, and Katiola. Each region has its own dialect of the Sénoufo language, with many other subvariant dialects within the significant group. In my region of Korhogo, we have the Cebara, Kafigue, Koufoulo, Tanga, Kassèrè, and Tagbari dialects. Cebara is spoken mainly in Korhogo and nearby villages. Nafara is another subgroup in the Korhogo region with its own dialectical subvariants: Napié, Sinematiali, and Karakoro. Despite these variations in the Sénoufo language, the culture and beliefs remain consistent across all four regions of the society.

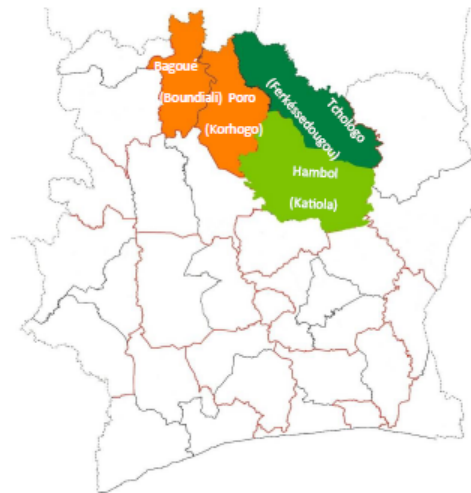


Figure 1: The Administrative Map of the Sénoufo People of Côte d'Ivoire

The next section will outline what the Indigenous Sénoufo people understand about their environment and how their spiritual beliefs influence their stewardship of it.

Sénoufo Environmental Knowledge

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “environment” has two meanings. The first meaning refers to the environment as the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates. In that context, it means “home, habitat, territory, domain, abode, or surroundings.”⁷ The second meaning refers to the environment as “the natural world, as a whole or in a particular geographical area, especially as affected by human activity”⁸ or “the setting or conditions in which a particular activity occurs.”⁹ For the purposes of this paper, all three potential meanings will be included in the term “environment” when it is being used in this paper. This is because, in Sénoufo society, all three meanings are interconnected. The environment is the habitat, located in a particular geographical area, and affected by human activity under specific conditions. However, despite this interconnectedness, not all three meanings are always applied in every situation; therefore, some discernment will be needed. Like all other African

5. See Figure 1.

6. Institut National de la Statistique, *Recensement général de la population*.

7. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “environment,” accessed March 23, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/environment_n?tab=meaning_and_use#5307111.

8. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “environment.”

9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “environment.”

societies, the traditional Sénoufo society is quite knowledgeable about its environment. The Sénoufo people possess what some theologians refer to as general revelation. Martijn Blaauw argues that “to reveal” is an epistemic term of appraisal.¹⁰ If a subject reveals a proposition to a receiver, then this implies that the receiver has accepted the information.¹¹ Therefore, I argue that God is “the subject” who revealed His creation to the Sénoufo.¹²

Creation represents God’s proposition to humanity, a proposition which includes the Sénoufo people of northern Côte d’Ivoire. In other words, my community, the Sénoufo, serve as the “receivers” of God’s proposition, and are conscious of the truth in the biblical passage of Genesis 1: “In the beginning, God created heaven and earth.”¹³ The Sénoufo people believe that God created the world, including the trees, plants, waters, and animals. This belief, part of Sénoufo knowledge, is reflected in Sénoufo art, as illustrated by the Batik painting in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Sénoufo Art¹⁴

This understanding of creation aligns with the following Bible passage:

And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems, which moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. Moreover, God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” And there was evening and morning – the fifth day. God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” Moreover, it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kind, the livestock according to their kind, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their

10. Martijn Blaauw, “The Nature of Divine Revelation,” *The Heythrop Journal* 50, no.1 (2009): 2–12, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2008.00435.x>

11. Blaauw, “The Nature of Divine Revelation.”

12. Genesis 1:1–2. All biblical references in this paper are taken from the New American Standard Bible (2020).

13. Genesis 1:1–2.

14. The picture in this figure is a Sénoufo Batik art painting purchased in Korhogo, the author’s hometown. Batik painting is a traditional textile art that has been practiced for centuries. It involves applying hot wax as a “resist” agent to create detailed, colourful patterns, with the wax preventing dye from penetrating certain areas of the fabric. The picture was taken by the author (Navigué Pierre Soro).

kind. Moreover, God saw that it was good.¹⁵

Another source of knowledge that can be derived from the Sénoufo people lies in their traditional medicine. The indigenous Sénoufo have extensive knowledge of which trees, leaves, and roots can treat ailments such as malaria, headaches, toothaches, and stomach problems. They also know which fruits are safe and beneficial for human consumption and which are toxic and pose health risks. This understanding aligns with the biblical account of God's creation, as verified among the Sénoufo people:

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden was the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.¹⁶

The indigenous Sénoufo people of Côte d'Ivoire are also knowledgeable about the specific trees within their environment that are regarded as the “tree of the knowledge of good,” which they can safely touch, and the “tree of evil,” which they are advised to avoid contact with. I recall my first encounter with one of these evil trees in my grandmother's peanut plantation during my upbringing. While weeding the peanut plants, I observed a taller plant characterized by a white trunk and beautiful fruits that were pleasing to look at. Like Eve, who “saw the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye,” I identified that tree in my grandmother's field as “good” and “pleasing to the eye.” As I reached out to touch one fruit from this lovely plant, I heard my grandmother calling out loudly: “My dear, please do not touch it! It is perilous.” She quickly approached me and gently explained, “This is not a good fruit to eat or touch. The liquid of this tree (which was as white as milk) is hazardous for your eyes.” She then added, “We call this in Sénoufo, *Yonpidiag*, meaning the thing that blows out your eyes like a bomb.” Softly she warned, “Never come close to or touch this plant or its fruit. Do you understand?” From that day, I regarded that tree as the forbidden tree of the Sénoufo people's garden.

With their knowledge of the environment, the Sénoufo also understand that they must “cultivate and care for” their surroundings. They believe it is their responsibility to protect their land, as the Bible states:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work and care for it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it, you will certainly die.”¹⁷

Hence, the Sénoufo approach to environmental care is rooted in their understanding of the spiritual world.

The Indigenous Sénoufo Spiritual World and Their Environment

The Sénoufo people not only possess extensive knowledge of their environment, but also hold beliefs in the spiritual realm, frequently relying on spirits in matters concerning both natural and spiritual environmental issues. In addition to their belief in a creator god called *Kolocolo*, they also recognize the

15. Genesis 1: 20–25.

16. Genesis 2: 8–9.

17. Genesis 2: 15–17.

existence of other spirits that oversee their living conditions within their environment.¹⁸ Anita Glaze describes the Sénoufo traditional culture and beliefs, particularly through their art, as follows:

Most Sénoufo art is commissioned by the membership of two gender-linked institutions constituting the foundations of Sénoufo traditional culture and matrilineal kinship structures. The Poro Society is an initiation society for young people of both genders and a village regulatory society under the control of male elders. Poro elders are responsible for critical ancestral rituals and the closely guarded secrets of defensive magic. The *Sandogo* Society is an organization of women representing specific matrilineage segments. According to the Sénoufo, this sacred institution was given by the creator god *Kolocolo* to facilitate communication between human society and the spiritual world. *Sandogo* members (*Sandobele*, singular, *Sando*) are said to be selected by the spirits, and their nomination is confirmed by divination. Each matrilineal house is represented by a woman, *Sando*, who is trained to serve as a spiritual mediator for their families; some are consecrated to this priestly role in early childhood. Not all *Sandogo* members become professional diviners who receive clients from outside family circles. In addition to the “matrilineal house” *Sando*, many women and men become *Sandogo* members as directed by controlling spirits through supernatural encounters and divination.¹⁹

The Role of the Spiritual Realm

The spiritual realm is employed to establish rules and regulations for the preservation and care of the natural environment in which they reside. Certain portions of the environment are designated as sacred, such as sacred forests, rivers, mountains (or hills), and specific portions of land. In Sénoufo society, certain areas are regarded as sacred and are therefore prohibited from activities such as hunting, fishing, cultivation, or tree cutting. These regulations are enacted following consultations with the family spirits, referred to as *Koyong Mandébélé* or *Tugubélé*.²⁰

Such sacred places may remain undisturbed for several years until the spirits, *Tugubélé*, grant permission for such activities, such as hunting, fishing, or the use of forest resources for specific purposes within designated timeframes. Beyond this period, entry by unauthorized people is prohibited. Those who try to enter secretly into these prohibited areas to hunt, fish, or cut a tree risk a curse upon themselves and their families. I remember as a child that the biggest fish, animals, and biodiversity were found in these sacred areas. Divination and specific messages from the spirit world regulate access and resource use, establishing norms and timeframes. In addition to the spiritual realm, the Sénoufo also believe in the existence of an alternate realm – the realm of the deceased – called *Kúbélé*.

The Role of the Realm of the Dead

The Sénoufo people also believe that their deceased ancestors (*Kúbélé*) oversee their well-being in the afterlife, known as *Kuség*, which translates to “realm of the dead.” When a Sénoufo elder is asked to perform an action contrary to customary practices, he may respond as follows: *Anh, anh, kubélé daa kaa tigi wolo nan*. Essentially, this means, “no and no, because if I do so, the dead (*Kúbélé*) will come upon

18. Roberta R. King, *Pathways in Christian Music Communication: The Case of the Senoufo of Côte D'Ivoire* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 51–57; Anita J. Glaze, “Call and Response: A Senoufo Female Caryatid Drum,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 19, no. 2 (1993): 118–133.

19. Glaze, “Call and Response,” 119.

20. King, *Pathways in Christian Music Communication*, 54–57.

us,” indicating that actions contrary to tradition may provoke the spirits of the deceased (*Kúbélé*) to become restless. As King observes, this reflects society’s profound respect and trepidation towards the spirit world, which is diligently appeased through divination and sacrifices.²¹ It is also customary to find offerings such as coins, cola nuts, and other items left in sacred sites.

For example, when a disaster occurs within a family, the elders typically consult a Sando to determine the cause of the misfortune. The deceased *Kúbélé* or the spirit *Túgubélé* may issue complaints, indicating that the tragedy resulted from the family’s failure to perform a necessary obligation. Such disasters are often believed to serve as calls for correction. In most cases, the issue is resolved by offering the appropriate sacrifice to the relevant spirits. In light of this, it can be argued that the spirit world plays a significant role in indigenous Sénoufo society. Now that we have discussed the role of the spirit realm in the Sénoufo understanding of their relationship with the environment, we will address the Sénoufo leadership model in the following sections.

The Indigenous Sénoufo Leadership Model

John Maxwell defines leadership as the capacity to influence others to follow one’s vision, asserting, “Leadership is influence. That’s it. Nothing more, nothing less.”²² In light of this perspective, an examination of the Sénoufo people’s environmental stewardship reveals their use of various leadership strategies aimed at influencing their community. The primary mechanisms through which they exercise this influence include their engagement with the spirit world, the transmission of cultural inheritance, and participatory approaches to community decision-making.

Leadership and the Realm of Spirits

Indigenous Sénoufo leaders engage with the spirit world as an integral aspect of their leadership practices. In significant decision-making processes, a village chief or family chief will consult with the spirits. This approach may be familiar to Christian readers; for instance, one might draw parallels to King Saul’s recourse to divination to ascertain the outcome of the impending war against his enemies, the Philistines:

Samuel was dead, and all Israel had mourned and buried him in Ramah, his city. Moreover, Saul had removed the mediums and spiritists from the land. So the Philistines assembled and came and camped in Shunem, and Saul gathered all Israel together and camped in Gilboa. When Saul saw the camp of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. So Saul inquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him, either in dreams, by the Urim, or by the prophets. Then Saul told his servants, “Find a woman who is a medium, so that I may go to her and inquire of her.” Moreover, his servants said to him, “Behold, there is a woman who is a medium at En-dor.” Then Saul disguised himself by putting on different clothes and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night; and he said, “Consult the spirit for me, please, and bring up for me *the one* whom I shall name for you.” But the woman said to him, “Behold, you know what Saul has done, that he has eliminated the mediums and spiritists from the land. Why are you then setting a trap for my life to bring about my death?” So Saul swore an oath to her by the LORD, saying, “As the LORD lives,

21. King, *Pathways in Christian Music Communication*, 54–57.

22. John Maxwell, “The Definition of Leadership: Influence,” in *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1993), 1.

no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.” Then the woman said, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” Moreover, he said, “Bring up Samuel for me.” When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out loudly, and the woman spoke to Saul, saying, “Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!” The King said to her, “Do not be afraid, but what do you see?” Moreover, the woman said to Saul, “I see a divine being coming up from the earth.” He said to her, “How does he appear?” Moreover, she said, “An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped in a robe.” Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and paid homage.²³

The parallels between King Saul and the traditional Sénoufo leaders are notably significant. Saul held a belief in the spirit world and its capacity to reveal the outcome of war. Similarly, the Sénoufo chiefs consult the realm of the spirits when confronted with significant decisions. The reader is told that Saul sought out a divination woman under the cover of night, accompanied by two men, and took care to disguise himself by donning different clothes to avoid recognition. Analogously, Sénoufo chiefs often consult with their spirits, accompanied by other men from their leadership circle, and it is customary for them to wear ceremonial garments, rather than everyday clothing during these proceedings.

Upon encountering the spirit of Samuel, Saul showed deference by bowing with his face to the ground in homage. This practice is paralleled by Sénoufo chiefs, who likewise bow and pay tribute to the spirits they consult, frequently removing their shoes before entering the diviner’s consultation room. Saul’s consultation involved eliciting the presence of Samuel’s spirit through a woman. As noted above, in the Sénoufo cultural context, the woman who fulfills this role of diviner is known as Sando.²⁴

This discussion demonstrates that indigenous Sénoufo leaders actively engage with and consult the spirit world, including the deceased (*Kubélé*), when making critical environmental decisions. However, the Sénoufo leadership model is not unique to them; it is a model also used in other African communities, such as the *Akan* people, particularly the *N’Zima* people of Côte d’Ivoire,²⁵ as well as the *Ashanti* people of Ghana.

The Sénoufo Matriarchal System

Traditional Sénoufo society is characterized by a matriarchal structure, in which children inherit from their maternal uncles. Throughout my upbringing, I often heard my father assert, “You belong to your maternal uncles. You are not from my family.” It took several years for me to fully understand the implications of this statement. My understanding was crystallized when my maternal uncle visited and asked my father’s permission for me to assist him in his small store in the village. My father’s acquiescence marked the beginning of my transition from my father to my maternal uncle.

While working in the shop, I frequently encountered clients who noted that the store would eventually be inherited by me. This observation meant that, in the event of my maternal uncle’s death, I would immediately assume ownership of his belongings and estate and manage his affairs as though he were still present. Furthermore, I would bear the responsibility of caring for his widow, and should she be young and capable of bearing children, it would become my duty to marry her and father her children.

While this discussion is not an endorsement of polygamy, it illustrates how the Sénoufo people

23. 2 Samuel 28: 3–14.

24. Anita Glaze, “Dialects of Gender in Senufo Masquerades,” *African Arts* 19, no. 3 (1986): 30–39; King, *Pathways in Christian Music Communication*, 56–57.

25. Diamoi Joaquim Agbroffi, « Ethnies et pratiques constitutionnelles chez les Akan matrilineaires (le cas des Nzima) », *Perspectives philosophiques* 10, no. 20A (décembre 2020) : 125–154.

ensure the continuity of their family businesses and lineages. In this cultural context, nephews manage natural resources in memory of their deceased uncles. When the nephews demonstrate effective business acumen, the businesses flourish, leading to the efficient use of resources and a positive impact on the environment.

If the nephew lacks his late uncle's business skills, he risks quickly losing his inheritance. However, the Sénoufo people's profound respect and intense fear of the deceased and the spirit world often motivates the nephew to manage his late uncle's estate in a fruitful manner. Given that his reputation within the Sénoufo community is at stake, he must manage inheritance effectively to earn respect. Therefore, it can be concluded that inheritance in Sénoufo society serves as an important mechanism of showcasing a nephew's leadership and management abilities.

According to Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, Sénoufo society is characterized by specific cultural dimensions, notably power-distance, collectivism, and a strong motivation for achievement and success.²⁶ Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov define power-distance as the level of power between a leader and their followers, indicating the leader's accessibility.²⁷ A lower power distance suggests followers find it easier to approach their leader, whereas a higher power distance indicates a more hierarchical relationship.

In collectivist societies such as the Sénoufo, individuals act in the group's interest, whereas individualistic cultures prioritize personal gain. In these collectivist frameworks, the community's welfare is the priority, and every member works to benefit the group. Furthermore, Jayson George categorizes Sénoufo society within a framework of shifting dynamics between shame and honour, and fear and power.²⁸ The Sénoufo people exhibit a strong commitment to environmental stewardship, which they attribute to ancestral teachings. Failure to uphold this responsibility can result in a tarnished reputation within the community and among family members, as there is a shared fear of displeasing their deceased ancestors (*Kúseg*). This context prompts a critical inquiry: who exercises decision-making authority within Sénoufo society – males or females? The subsequent section aims to clarify this question.

Gender and Decision-Making

The Sénoufo tribes are frequently described as male-dominated societies. From an external point of view, it may appear that Sénoufo society functions within a top-down (hierarchical) leadership model, in which the male figure, serving as husband and father, retains authority to make decisions regarding family matters. However, this analysis offers an alternative perspective on the traditional decision-making processes in Sénoufo culture. It is essential to acknowledge that while males often serve as spokesmen within the Sénoufo tribes, they are not the primary decision-makers in all matters. For example, a husband typically refrains from intervening in decisions regarding his wife's familial matters, especially those concerning inheritance.

Personal Family Observation

Based on my observations, my maternal uncle frequently informs his nephews and nieces about

26. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

27. Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*.

28. Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (San Bernardino, CA: Timē Press, 2014).

family issues. During my absence, another scenario occurred: my youngest maternal uncle approached my family to request permission for his children to live in our courtyard in *Korhogo* and attend high school. In response, my father remarked to my mother, “This is a matter of your family. I cannot say anything on this.” Although my mother expected her husband to take the initiative in settling the matter, my father could not make a decision without consulting her.

In traditional Sénoufo society, husbands are keenly aware of their place: they serve as providers and protectors, but they refrain from making decisions concerning their wives’ family matters. When a wife seeks her husband’s counsel, he tends to exercise caution in both his advice and how he expresses such advice. The guidance he provides is based on a deep understanding of the circumstances and requires considerable diplomatic skill to navigate family dynamics.

Matriarchal Leadership

Soro Zana Jean is a Sénoufo musician living in the village of Tarato in northern Côte d’Ivoire. He performs on a traditional xylophone (*Jégbag*), and also makes Sénoufo xylophones for a living. I interviewed him in 2024, and he described the matriarchal system as follows: “The maternal uncle is a child’s last resort in case of a problem. Whenever a child has issues, if the father cannot handle them, the maternal uncle must step in and resolve them.”²⁹ I inquired about the rationale behind this practice. He explained,

You know, back in the day, a man could always deny the paternity of a child. Do you think a woman can deny the motherhood of a child she is carrying or deny a child that she gave birth to? Everybody has seen her pregnancy; she gave birth to the child in the hands of some midwives who are witnesses. Therefore, a woman can never deny a child. Therefore, her family will always feel responsible for looking after that child. A woman’s brothers are obligated to look after their sisters’ children because they are the last rampart in the life of their nephews and nieces. [Thus,] a child belongs to his mother’s family, not his father’s.³⁰

Considering this explanation, it is understandable why the Sénoufo people have adopted a matriarchal system and, as a result, a leadership model that passes down inheritance and responsibility through the woman’s lineage.

The aforementioned matriarchal system also helps elucidate why the Sénoufo xylophone (*Jégbag*), is understood through a matriarchal leadership paradigm. Roberta King, in her book *Pathways to Christian Music Communication: The Case of the Senoufo People*, describes how the Sénoufo xylophone serves as a manifestation of female leadership within Sénoufo culture.³¹ King dedicated several years in the 1980s to ethnographic research among the Sénoufo people, studying their cultural practices and facilitating the development of music that resonates with their Christian beliefs and is grounded in biblical texts. Her initiative led to the incorporation of the local xylophone into church ritual. I interviewed King during a Zoom meeting, and she told me that she is recognized by the Sénoufo people and her missionary colleagues as the first Western missionary to participate in a Sénoufo dance (see Figure 3).³²

29. Interviewed via WhatsApp; recorded messages in *Sénoufo*, on March 19, 2024.

30. Interviewed via WhatsApp; recorded messages in *Sénoufo*, on March 19, 2024.

31. King, *Pathways to Christian Music Communication*.

32. Interview via Zoom on March 14, 2024. Figure 3 – Picture taken by Roberta King in the 1980s and used with her permission. I still recall her visit to the village of Dagba in 1988, when I was in fifth grade.



Figure 3: Roberta King – Sénoufo Dance Steps with Nongninin Leading the Way

During the same Zoom meeting, King made a significant observation about the Sénoufo xylophone (*jégbag*) and its representation of women’s leadership in Sénoufo society. She observed,

Do you know that I discovered that the Sénoufo Xylophone (*jégbag*) illustrates women’s Leadership in the Sénoufo society? The blade with the biggest tone and the loudest is called the mother blade, and the one next to it is the father blade, with the second biggest tone, followed by the children's blades.³³

This observation is shown in Figure 4.³⁴ The Sénoufo xylophone thus serves as a symbol of familial hierarchy in Sénoufo culture, with the mother as the family leader. This framework contrasts markedly with the prevailing structures seen in Western society.



Figure 4: The Sénoufo Xylophones

Soro Zana Jean’s characterization of the Sénoufo xylophone is the same as King’s,³⁵ and, when I inquired with her about the reason the Sénoufo refer to the most prominent blade as *Jénonw*, meaning “mother blade,” Zana Jean responded: “It is called *Jénonw* because it is the mother of all blades. It gives the tone and direction of the music and has the last word of the music.” In essence, the *Jénonw* is considered the leader and has the authority to dictate the musical expression. Following the *Jénonw* is the second most

33. Interview via Zoom on March 14, 2024.

34. Picture taken by Roberta King in the 1980s and used with her permission. Xylophone Players: Tuo Dotana and Late Soro Tenan Moïse.

35. Interview via Zoom on March 14, 2024.

prominent blade, referred to by King as the father blade.³⁶ In Sénoufo, the second most prominent blade is known as *Jébèw*, meaning “father.” Based on King's description and the insight of the local expert musician Zana Jean, it is reasonable to infer that the Sénoufo leadership is more female-led than it might initially appear. Nevertheless, the question remains why all Sénoufo chiefs are male.

Male Chieftaincy

Throughout my childhood, I never encountered a female chief in a Sénoufo village; all Sénoufo village chiefs are males (see Figures 5 and 6).³⁷ Does this imply that women have no role or are excluded from village affairs? Certainly not.



Figure 5: Two chiefs at the inaugural ceremony of the Tangafla village Health Center

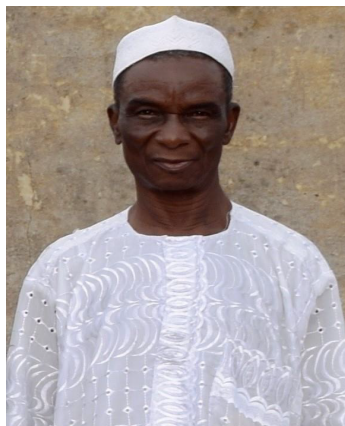


Figure 6: The Late Chief of the Village of Ogari

Reflecting on this topic and looking back at past experiences, I recall my grandfather, who served as the village Chief. I remember my grandfather spending hours in my grandmother's kitchen, discussing village matters with her. For instance, after an important meeting with his leadership team, my grandmother's kitchen served as his debriefing space. He would openly share his thoughts and feelings, especially if he felt frustrated with the decisions and outcomes of the meeting. I subsequently learned later

36. King, *Pathways in Christian Music Communication*, 51–57,

37. Dr. Päivi Soro, President of the SAREPTA Suisse Association, shakes hands with the cantonal Chief of *Niofoin* (on the right) and the Chief of *Tangafla* (on the left) after delivering her speech at the inauguration of the health center of *Tangafla* on December 7, 2019. Picture taken by the author.

that my maternal grandmother held the position of Chief in our village, Ogari.³⁸ However, because of her marriage to someone from a different village, Djougoublé, her cousin who resided in Ogari, assumed this role. My parents later disclosed to me that my grandfather frequently consulted his older cousin (my maternal grandmother) for significant decisions regarding village matters.

My father remembered a time when the male members of the family made a decision without consulting their elder sister. In response, my grandmother paid a special visit to her youngest cousin, the Chief, to seek clarification on their decision and to express her concerns about her lack of consultation. She disagreed with their course of action and refused to endorse it. In the days that followed, my grandfather organized another meeting, during which he relayed to the family the insights shared by their elder cousin (my grandmother). While the family members expressed discontent with her input, they recognized, albeit reluctantly, that their initial decision was ill-conceived.

Based on my observations of traditional Sénoufo society, males serve as the primary decision-makers and representatives within familial structures. However, it is essential to note that their authority in decision-making is contingent upon the input from other family leaders, community heads, group leaders, and women leaders. Although the Sénoufo chieftaincy may appear to be male-dominated due to established protocols and the deference afforded to chiefs, it is crucial to understand that decision-making in this cultural context is inherently collaborative. The paper will now move on to offer insights from an insider's perspective, particularly on environmental issues and the decision-making process.

Environmental Decisions Among Sénoufo Leaders

Susanne Dumbleton, in her book *African Leadership*, presents a compelling depiction of Wangari Maathai, a notable African female leader. Dumbleton characterizes Maathai as an “environmentalist, political activist, human rights champion, and international spokesperson for environmental justice.”³⁹ She also argues that Maathai adeptly “combines scientific expertise with traditional African respect for the land and compassion for individual persons. She was thus able to build a movement to preserve the land, foster citizen empowerment, and inspire activism to effect systemic change.”⁴⁰

Maathai, originally from Kenya in East Africa, embodies values that resonate with the Sénoufo people of Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa. The Sénoufo maintain a profound respect for the land and a commitment to individual compassion, which leads them to oppose land disputes and other environmental challenges. In instances where significant environmental issues arise, village chiefs convene representatives from various village headquarters, group leaders, and youth leaders from each village quarter. They present the matter at hand and solicit input by asking, “What are your opinions on this?” or “How do you think we should handle this situation?” The opinions of all individuals present at the meeting are valued by the chief.

Furthermore, Dumbleton explains that Maathai was taught at a very young age “to revere the earth as infused with divine presence.”⁴¹ Similarly, the traditional Sénoufo people teach their children to revere the land and the environment, recognizing it as their primary source of economic and medical sustenance. Environmental decisions within Sénoufo communities are thus approached with a collective mindset.

38. Picture of the late village Chief of Ogari in Figure 6, Coulibaly Wotchonzon Bêma (who died in October 2020). Picture taken by the author in 2019 before his death. Wotchonzon Bêma was the author's maternal granduncle.

39. Susanne Dumbleton, “Wangari Maathai: ‘We Can Never Give Up,’” in *African Leadership: Powerful Paradigms for the 21st Century*, ed. Rob Elkington et al. (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2023), 169–186.

40. Dumbleton, “Wangari Maathai.”

41. Dumbleton, “Wangari Maathai.”

Teamwork Among the Indigenous Sénoufo People

Since one of the aspects of this paper is understanding the relationship between environmental stewardship and leadership, it is essential that this paper also explains the practices of the Sénoufo people in caring for their environment. The Sénoufo organize themselves into groups or teams known as *gôlôbélé*, with each group (*gôlôw*) responsible for a project from inception to completion. For example, when the grass in the village grows excessively tall and needs mowing, the village chief convenes a meeting to plan the activity. A date for the work is chosen through a consensus among the members. On the designated day, all group members come together and collaboratively undertake the task of mowing the grass within the village.

A similar process is employed for community construction projects. The following illustration demonstrates how the Sénoufo engage in teamwork to manage their daily activities, including initiatives aimed at caring for the environment in their community (See Figure 7).⁴² A team of young people from a suburb of the village of Tangafla collaborated to build the storehouse for the village medical center. The next day, a different team from another village suburb joined their efforts, resulting in four distinct groups in the village.



Figure 7: Teamwork among the Indigenous Sénoufo People

These groups alternated daily, providing labour until the project was completed. Their primary motivation stemmed from a desire to show support for the medical center initiative, as they recognize that healthcare facilities in their village will contribute to improving the overall health environment. It is noteworthy that these groups collaborate on various communal projects within the village, as seen in the picture. The individuals are shown clearing the designated area necessary to construct the storehouse and storing the requisite construction materials for the center. In Sénoufo society, the process of decision-making follows established protocols, and the meeting structure is governed by distinct conventions.

The Traditional Sénoufo Meeting Structure

During a traditional Sénoufo assembly, individuals position themselves wherever a seat is available, typically near the Chief. Generally, the Chief occupies a throne, with other attendees seated around him in any available position. Occasionally, participants may sit in a circle during smaller gatherings

42. Picture taken by the author during the construction of the storage house of the SAREPTA Medical Center Project in 2017.

(see Figure 8). Alternatively, during larger gatherings in the village square, attendees are dispersed throughout the area (see Figure 9). Figures 8 and 9 illustrate the differences between a typical small group meeting and a large group meeting.⁴³ In all cases, the Chief is easily identifiable by his designated seat and often by his attire. Most traditional leaders wear a traditional cotton-weaved hat (see Figure 10).⁴⁴

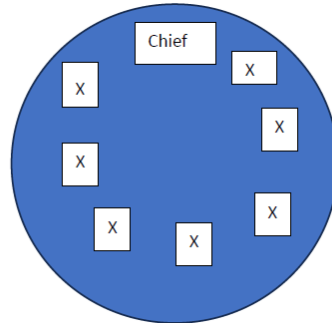


Figure 8: A Small Group Sénoufo Meeting Format

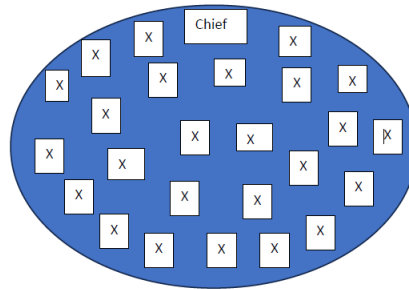


Figure 9: Large Group Sénoufo Meeting Format



Figure 10: Traditional Sénoufo Chief of the Village of Tangafila

43. Figures 8 and 9 have been conceptualized by the author.

44. Picture of Mr. Solo Ngolo Soro, Chief of the village of Tangafila, taken by Navigué Pierre Soro. The author's maternal grandaunt (who died in 2006) was married to this chief. The Cantonal Chief of Niofoin, the district head chief of Niofoin, accompanies the Chief of Tangafila to the inauguration speech stage.

The Decision-Making Process in Traditional Sénoufo Meetings

The meeting convenor provides a comprehensive overview of the matter, ensuring all attendees understand the scenario clearly. During the presentation, all participants listen carefully. Prior to commencing his address, the speaker mentions the name of the individual accompanying him or the youngest member of the group. This individual serves as a mediator between the speaker and the rest of the group by actively listening and responding to each statement with affirmations such as “Uhm hum,” which indicates, “Okay, I am listening.”

Upon conclusion of the presentation, the speaker states, “*pyé, mon si dii loho*,” which translates to, “That is the reason for calling for this meeting. You have heard the story; now, what shall we do?” The mediator then expresses gratitude to the speaker by stating, “*fo djomon nan*,” meaning “thank you for your speech.” Following this acknowledgment, he articulates his interpretation of the story or situation and asks clarifying questions about any ambiguous elements in the presentation.

Once the necessary clarifications have been provided, the mediator then calls upon another participant by stating, “*Dokaha mon si n dii loho*,” meaning, “Dokaha, you have heard.” By calling the individual’s name in conjunction with the statement, “You heard the speech or the speaker,” that participant is granted the opportunity to comment or inquire further. This procedure is then repeated as the mediator calls upon other participants who follow the established format. This structured approach thus facilitates the inclusion of all attendees, allowing them to voice their opinions or raise questions as needed before the Chief addresses the group.

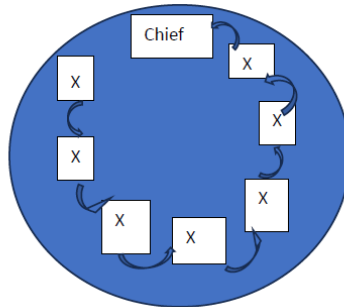


Figure 8: The Sénoufo Meeting Process in Decision-Making⁴⁵

The Last Speaker

I have observed that during many Sénoufo meetings, the Chief generally adopts a posture of silence, attentively listening to each participant who offers comments concerning the current situation. When inquiries are posed, he carefully considers the diverse responses provided by the attendees. When it is his turn to speak, he commonly begins with the phrase: *Yé mien, Yé fodjomon nan!*, which can be translated as “Thank you, everyone, for speaking or sharing your thoughts.”

Subsequently, he comments on the situation based on the insights shared by others, frequently prefacing his remarks with *Amin Dokaha gui djo n kwo, taa da ni ban solo déé nan yè*. This statement conveys the sentiment, “Like Dokaha already said, nothing can be better than that,” indicating his agreement that those contributions represent the most prudent course of action or decision to pursue. In the context of

45. Figure 11 was conceptualized by the author.

traditional Sénoufo society, the Chief systematically gathers all pertinent information and comments from the group. He is attentive to the dynamics of the discussion, observing the participants as they express their views. A wise Chief employs diplomatic skills to effectively communicate his stance and foster consensus within the assembly. In many cases, the chief will adhere to the majority opinion, provided that it aligns with what Sekgala refers to as “customary law” in South Africa.⁴⁶ According to Sekgala, a principal objective of the Traditional Leadership Governance Framework Act (TLGFA) in South Africa was to establish a national framework specifying the role and status of traditional leadership within the context of democratic governance.⁴⁷ However, he critiques the provincial laws for offering minimal guidance on the role of traditional leaders, often merely reiterating the terminology employed in the TLGFA. Consequently, the functions and responsibilities of traditional leaders remain inadequately defined.⁴⁸ In contrast, Côte d’Ivoire has a clearly defined legal framework regarding the roles of traditional leaders, and local traditional leaders are generally well informed about their areas of jurisdiction.

Handling Diverging Opinions

In Sénoufo society, opinions often diverge among group members, as individuals usually have different perspectives and strategies for dealing with various situations. When a member of the community shares their viewpoint, it is customary to conclude with the phrase: *wolèbélé ga kan dee djo le, wo da dii yaha tee nan!* which means, “This is my opinion, but we will see what the old people will say about this. We will see what they decide.” By calling upon the authority of the elders, especially the Chief, the speaker implies that their opinion reflects a personal interpretation of the situation. However, this perspective does not constitute the final decision; authority ultimately rests with the Chief and their advisory council. When it’s the Chief’s opportunity to contribute to the discussion and his opinion differs from those present, he will typically initiate by saying, *kapye si ye ga too djo amin ni amin yii dèè, mi ma ra yee pye ye gii yaha wo gii tcho amin*, which translates to “If you did not say this and that, I would plead with you to do this and that.” He would subsequently add, *mii songuru mi djo, yé gi wélé wo sienlourougori kan nanw man waa syé*, meaning, “I have expressed my opinion, now let us look together what is the best thing to do, and give the final decision to the message bearer.”

The Chief’s opinion within Sénoufo culture is passed down to community members through the phrase *mon sii wolèw djomon loho*, which translates to “you have heard the old man’s speech (or opinion).” When the majority of the group aligns with the Chief’s viewpoint, his opinion guides the decision. However, should there be a divergence of opinion, group members may implore the Chief to reconsider his decision. In such situations, a wise Sénoufo chief would typically yield to the majority perspective, provided that such a shift does not result in severe repercussions.

Conversely, when the matter pertains to customary beliefs that may conflict with ancestral traditions, the Chief possesses the authority to oppose the majority opinion without facing scrutiny. In such cases, the Chief may consult with the ancestors before reaching a definitive resolution. As expressed in the phrase *Ye gi yaha wo sa wolèbele yugo! Pe ga san dee djo lè wo daa did yaha tee nan*, which means, “Let

46. M. P. Sekgala, “The Role of Traditional Leaders in South Africa: Comparison Between the Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Bill, 2015 and the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 41 of 2003,” *Bangladesh E-Journal of Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2018): 80.

47. M.P. Sekgala, “The Role of Traditional Leaders,” 80.

48. Prince Chukwuneme Enwereji and Dominique Uwizeyimana, “Engaging Traditional Leaders in Municipal Governance: The Case of South African Municipalities,” *Indilinga-African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems* 19, no.1 (2020): 126–140. See also Sekgala, “The Role of Traditional Leaders,” 80.

me consult those before us and see what they decide. We will follow their counsel.” This underscores the cultural importance of ancestral guidance in decision-making.

This approach resonates with leadership practices observed in East African communities. Notably, Maathai’s three-stool leadership model appears to reflect principles similar to those found within Sénoufo society in Côte d’Ivoire. The three-stool model requires the leader (the chief) to gather the opinions of at least three individuals before reaching a final decision.

This emphasis on consultation and balance finds a parallel in other leadership frameworks that likewise employ the metaphor of a three-legged stool. Michael Armstrong, for example, introduces John Adair’s leadership model in his *Handbook of Management and Leadership for HR*,⁴⁹ illustrating its structure through the metaphor of a three-legged stool. Each leg represents a fundamental aspect of leadership: 1) Task Needs, 2) Individual Needs, and 3) Group Maintenance Needs.⁵⁰ This model emphasizes the necessity of balancing these elements to achieve effective leadership.

A comparable emphasis on balance and consultation can be observed in traditional Sénoufo leadership structures. In this context, the traditional Sénoufo Chief engages with various stakeholders in decision-making processes about significant environmental issues. Specifically, the Chief consults three key groups: 1) his notables, 2) the gods, and 3) his wife. In situations where consensus is not achieved, the Chief, along with his notables, typically arranges a subsequent meeting to reach a conclusive decision. Notably, this decision-making process often involves intergender consultation, in which men solicit women’s opinions during designated breaks in communal activities.

The Role of Women in the Decision-Making Process

Regarding the role of women in the decision-making process of the Sénoufo people, Zana Jean notes something important. In instances where consensus is unattainable, the meeting is suspended with the phrase “Let us give it time and think it over at night. The night provides wisdom.” This expression implies an individual contemplation of the issues. However, upon returning home, these men often discuss matters with their wives to solicit their opinions. Consequently, when they reconvene the following day after consulting their wives, they usually reach a resolution.

Complementing this observation, King likewise emphasizes the communal and consultative nature of traditional Sénoufo leadership.⁵¹ Together, these accounts suggest that consensus-building, broad consultation, and attentiveness to multiple voices – including those of woman – are central features of the Indigenous Sénoufo leadership model. My doctoral research,⁵² however, revealed a significant departure from these practices among the Sénoufo leaders who received a Western education. The next section will examine the more top-down approach to leadership adopted by Western-educated Sénoufo in leadership roles.

Top-Down or Bottom-Up Leadership Models

A central objective of my doctoral dissertation was to examine how leadership is understood and

49. Michael Armstrong, *Armstrong’s Handbook of Management and Leadership for HR: Developing Effective People Skills for Better Leadership and Management* (London: Kogan Page, 2016).

50. Armstrong, *Armstrong’s Handbook of Management*, 12.

51. King, *Pathways in Christian Music Communication*, 51–57.

52. Navigué Pierre Soro, “An Administrative Strategy for Employee Retention in Private Health Care Centers in Côte d’Ivoire: A Phenomenological Study” (PhD diss., Columbia International University, 2022).

perceived in private health care centers in Côte d'Ivoire. During my dissertation research, I interviewed thirty-four participants about their perceptions of the leadership styles exhibited by their workplace leaders.⁵³ Of particular interest was whether the consultative leadership practices characteristic of traditional Sénoufo society remained evident among contemporary leaders educated within Western academic systems. It is important to clarify that all leaders involved in this research were educated within Western academic systems. Moreover, many of their employees were not educated in the same Western systems or contexts. During the interviews, I asked participants the following question: "What are your perceptions of Ivorian healthcare administrators and workers [regarding] leadership issues related to staffing shortages in private centers?" In the following section, I will discuss the participants' responses, which reveal their perceptions of their leaders.

Western-Educated Sénoufo Leadership Style (Top-Down)

The responses revealed that many participants felt a need for greater attention and support from their leaders. A prevalent sentiment among the workforce was disappointment in the current leadership, as many felt that their leaders were indifferent to their well-being. In cases of conflict, employees expressed a desire for leaders to engage directly and address their concerns through meaningful dialogue. Unfortunately, such interactions did not occur.

Across all three research sites, employees reported instances in which leadership told frustrated employees they could leave the institution if they were dissatisfied with its operational practices. This dismissive attitude led to higher turnover and resignations. A significant number of employees resigned from these institutions when given the option.⁵⁴ One year after my research, two of the three leaders I interviewed also resigned as a result of the ongoing deterioration in workplace morale. Their top-down leadership approach failed to alleviate the frustrations of an increasingly discontented workforce.⁵⁵ The frustrations expressed by employees stand in sharp contrast to the leadership practices traditionally associated with Sénoufo society. Whereas the leaders in this study tended to make decision in a top-down manner with limited consultation, Indigenous Sénoufo leadership is structured around dialogue, consensus-building, and broad community participation. The following section examines this traditional model in greater detail.

The Bottom-Up Leadership of the Indigenous Sénoufo People

The decision-making framework of the Indigenous Sénoufo people, as previously delineated,

53. Soro, "An Administrative Strategy."

54. Soro, "An Administrative Strategy," 160–162.

55. Soro, "An Administrative Strategy." The broader findings of my doctoral research suggested that leaders within the private healthcare institutions studied generally favoured a top-down leadership style. Participants frequently described leaders as distant from employee concerns and reluctant to engage in collaborative decision-making. This leadership approach closely resembles what Hans Finzel characterizes as a traditional hierarchical model, rooted in military structures in which authority flows downward through the issuance of orders and directives. Summarizing this mentality, Finzel states: "I am in charge here, and the sooner you figure that out, the better!" By contrast, servant leadership and other participatory models were less evident within the institutions examined. These findings suggest that the leadership practices observed in this study may reflect broader organizational tendencies within the sector, and that a pressing need for this sector to explore alternative leadership models. This being said, a comparative analysis of leadership in Côte d'Ivoire falls beyond the scope of the present article. See Hans Finzel, "The Top-Down Attitude," in *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Miniseries, 1994), 23.

exemplifies a bottom-up leadership model, markedly distinct from the top-down leadership model just discussed (See Figure 12).⁵⁶ In communal gatherings, the chiefs foster an environment conducive to open dialogue, allowing each group member to share their opinions and perspectives, which are duly considered in the decision-making process. In case of disagreement, consultation with women – regarded as the backbone of Sénoufo society – is held, as their insights often illuminate pathways to consensus. When a resolution cannot be reached through dialogue, the consultation of spirits serves as a final recourse. In Sénoufo society, these spirits are the guardians (*tugubélé/mandébélé*) of the environment, and their guidance is sought on matters of environmental stewardship. This involves inquiries about the appropriate action to take and the sacrifices required to obtain their approval. In a manner analogous to the familial, tribal, or village chief, the guardians (*tugubélé/mandébélé*) also possess the right to offer the last words within the leadership structure of the Sénoufo people. This illustrates the operational dynamics of the bottom-up leadership model: decisions begin at the bottom level – where community members express their opinions – before being relayed upwards to the top to the chiefs and spirits, who take into consideration the majority opinions of the community and strive to find a consensus as the ultimate directive (see Figure 12). The following section will explain the role of divinatory practices within the leadership model of the Indigenous Sénoufo community, particularly concerning environmental stewardship.

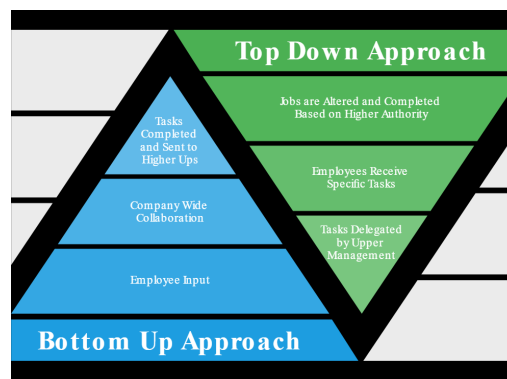


Figure 9: Bottom-Up Approach versus Top-Down Approach

Divinatory Practices within Leadership: The Bible and Sénoufo Worldview

From a Sénoufo perspective, divinatory practices constitute an important component of the broader leadership process, providing a means by which leaders seek guidance concerning community well-being, environmental stewardship, and collective decision-making. From a Christian perspective, however, the search for wisdom ultimately finds its fulfillment not through consultation with the spirit world, but through the Creator (*Kolocolo*) who has written His law upon the human heart:

For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD: “I will put My law within them and write it on their heart, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”⁵⁷

56. Kate Eby, “Which Management Style Is Right for You: Top-Down or Bottom-Up Approach?” *Smartsheet*, June 28, 2018, accessed March 22, 2024, <https://www.smartsheet.com/top-down-bottom-up-approach?srltid=AfmBOoq0OP1-P4nA4SAsUE-7UhPSX8XSqWSrg73GRYHFflpQU4n9xY39>.

57. Jeremiah 31:31.

I believe that, in alignment with this covenant as articulated for the “house of Israel,” the principles it embodies may also manifest among the Sénoufo people of northern Côte d’Ivoire through the transformative influence of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. If, as scripture indicates, God has “put His law within them and written it on their heart,” then this intrinsic moral compass can guide the *Sénoufo* people in their quest to encounter their Creator, steering them away from reliance on the spirit world and divination practices.

I have a strong personal conviction that the Sénoufo people will ultimately discover God, for “He has made everything appropriate in its time,” and “He has also set eternity in their heart, without *the possibility that* mankind will find out the work God has done from the beginning to the end.”⁵⁸ The Sénoufo people possess God’s general revelation, which encompasses both an understanding of the Creator and the marvels of His creation. Additionally, they possess innate leadership qualities designed to foster environmental stewardship.

The enduring strength of Sénoufo leadership lies, not only in its commitment to consultation and consensus-building, but also in its concern for communal well-being and environmental stewardship. From a Christian perspective, however, the future of this leadership tradition may depend upon how these longstanding practices are reconciled with a deeper knowledge of the Creator. An important question therefore arises: How long will this effective bottom-up leadership model practice endure among the Sénoufo People?

Threats to the Indigenous Sénoufo Leadership Model

The younger generations of the Sénoufo people are increasingly engaging with Western educational systems and relocating to urban centers in big cities, which starkly contrasts with the traditional rural setting where indigenous practices continue. It is not uncommon for many individuals of Sénoufo descent, raised in cities like Abidjan, Bouaké, or Korhogo, to encounter significant challenges during visits to their ancestral village.

Often, these individuals have difficulty understanding the indigenous language and, in many cases, are unable to communicate effectively. Consequently, the indigenous way of life remains largely unknown to the current generation of Sénoufo people, who were raised in city centers and have been educated within a Western framework. This paper has demonstrated that despite these difficulties, the Sénoufo people in rural communities continue to engage with their environment and their leaders employ traditional practices to navigate and address both communal and environmental challenges.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to shed light on the knowledge and leadership practices of the Indigenous Sénoufo people, particularly in relation to their environment. When juxtaposed with the biblical story of creation in Genesis, notable parallels emerge between the cultural practices of Sénoufo leaders and the teachings found within the biblical texts. As examined in this paper, the divination practices of King Saul resonate with those employed by the chiefs and traditional leaders of the Sénoufo community, suggesting that this community has indigenous leaders who possess the knowledge and leadership capabilities needed for environmental stewardship. The initial divine mandate given to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden – to cultivate and care for the environment – can be observed in the ongoing practices of Sénoufo society.

58. Ecclesiastes 3:11.

A noteworthy aspect of this discourse is the shared sense of urgency among Sénoufo leaders, akin to King Saul's desperation for clarity regarding the war with the Philistines. The Sénoufo tribes' fear of upsetting the ancestral spirits underscores the deep-rooted cultural beliefs that continue to influence their decision-making processes.

This paper has also demonstrated that the leadership model employed by the Indigenous Sénoufo is predominantly bottom-up. However, to an external observer, it may initially appear as a top-down structure, primarily because of the chief's authoritative role in concluding meeting discussions. A thorough understanding of this dynamic requires an insider perspective, revealing the matriarchal system's impact across all aspects of Sénoufo culture and belief systems. This impact is evident in their musical instruments, such as the *jégbag* and the drums, with the most prominent blade, in both tone and size, called *Jénonw* (the mother blade) or *Kpononw* (the mother drum).

Moreover, the practice of divination by the *Sandotchabélé* (women diviners) serves as a crucial mechanism for providing counsel on societal matters, affirming women's central role in Sénoufo society. The innate wisdom and knowledge provided by God and equally gained from their experiences – encompassing pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing – highlight the profound contribution women make to the community. Thus, it is not surprising that the Sénoufo male seeks the counsel of his wife when confronted with critical issues, particularly those pertaining to environmental care.

This paper aimed to demonstrate to younger generations of Africans, particularly the Sénoufo people, as well as Western audiences, that valuable leadership lessons can be derived from the Indigenous Sénoufo community and its leaders. It suggests that meaningful leadership lessons can be learned from Sénoufo leadership practices, especially those related to environmental care, which involve a consultative process that engages all levels of society before decisions are made. This approach exemplifies bottom-up leadership.

In recent years, this bottom-up model has garnered attention from major companies, multinational corporations, and prominent business leaders worldwide, who are increasingly advocating for its implementation. A leadership tradition that has long characterized Sénoufo society is now increasingly being rediscovered and celebrated by contemporary Western leaders, particularly in relation to corporate governance and environmental responsibility. This raises a critical point: irrespective of the strategies used to address environmental challenges, our efforts risk being ineffective if they do not incorporate the principles of the bottom-up leadership model. Therefore, it is imperative that we engage with and learn from the wisdom of Africa's indigenous leaders, particularly the example set by the Sénoufo community, which serves as a compelling blueprint for contemporary leadership in environmental stewardship (see Figure 13).⁵⁹

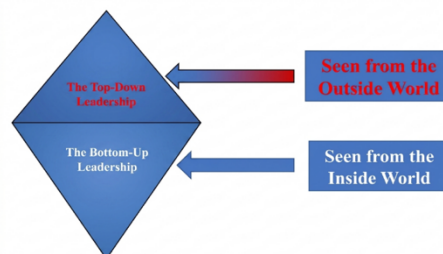


Figure 10: The Picture of Indigenous Sénoufo Society

59. Diagram conceptualized by the author.

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