

# Function and Ideology of Myths among the Senoufo of the Region of Bagoué: between Cosmogony, Community Ethics, and Collective Memory

Daouda Fofana

Oral Literature, University Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire  
Email: fofdaouda04@yahoo.fr

**How to cite this paper:** Fofana, D. (2026). Function and Ideology of Myths among the Senoufo of the Region of Bagoué: between Cosmogony, Community Ethics, and Collective Memory. *Advances in Literary Study*, 14, 33-42.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2026.141003>

**Received:** August 18, 2025

**Accepted:** November 29, 2025

**Published:** December 2, 2025

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.  
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

Among the Senoufo group of the region of Bagoué, myth is much more than a simple narrative. It is a fundamental vector of cultural transmission, social regulation, and ideological expression. This article explores the multiple functions of myth in terms of education, social, and religious aspects in connection with the initiatory institution of Poro and community rituals. Moreover, it highlights the ideology conveyed by these stories, based on cosmic order, the authority of ancestors and a community ethic centered on solidarity and interdependence. Thus, myth emerges as a dynamic cultural matrix, guaranteeing the continuity and cohesion of the Senoufo group over time.

## Keywords

Senoufo Myth, Cosmogony, Community Ethic, Ideology, Oral Tradition

---

## 1. Introduction

In traditional African societies, myth occupies a central place in the structuring of knowledge, memory, and social relationships. A true matrix of meaning, myth acts as a narrative and symbolic device that allows communities to express their origins, legitimize their practices, and transmit their fundamental values. In northern Côte d'Ivoire, for the Senoufo group of the Bagoué, known for their rich cultural heritage, myths constitute ideological and functional foundations that permeate both initiatory institutions and daily rituals.

The Senoufo mythical universe is distinguished by a strong symbolic coherence. It integrates cosmogonic narratives explaining the creation of the world, etiologi-

cal narratives justifying the origin of customs, and heroic tales glorifying exemplary figures. These stories are not mere fiction. They actively participate in the training of the individual, the regulation of social behaviors, and the preservation of collective identity. Through them, a vision of the world, a cosmogony, is established, structured around a community ethic and a sacred relationship with ancestral memory.

However, a question arises: how do Senoufo myths, in their narrative diversity, fulfill essential functions while conveying an ideology specific to Bagoué society? This reflection is based on an ethno-literary and functional approach that aims to explore the typology of myths, to identify their social functions and to reveal the ideologies they underlie.

## 2. Study Area and Methodology

This study was conducted in the region of Bagoué in northern Côte d'Ivoire. The region of Bagoué is located between latitude 9°00 and 9°31 North and longitudes 6°00 and 6°29 West and comprises 3 departments that are Boundiali, Kouto and Tengrela. The region is extended over a surface area of 10.668 km<sup>2</sup>. The population of the region of Bagoué is estimated to be 515,890 inhabitants with 265,229 males and 250,661 females (RGPH, 2021). The indigenous ethnic group of the region is the Senoufo, who represent 75% of the population. This ethnic group of Senoufo is linked to their tradition, which is the practice of Poro. In fact, the Poro is a male initiation society through which boys pass to become adult and responsible men in Senoufo society.

The study was conducted in two phases to collect sufficient information and account for bias. The first step consisted of a literature review, and the second step involved a questionnaire survey in the field with initiated people. The data were collected from 2022 to 2024 in each department of the region of Bagoué. Thus, in each department of the region, 5 villages of Senoufo, where the "Poro" is well adopted, were selected for the study. In each village, 2 trainers, 3 former initiated persons to Poro, 4 new initiated people and 2 owners of sacred woodland, a total of 11 persons were interviewed. In this study, 55 initiated people were questioned.

## 3. Typology of Myths among the Senoufo Group of the Region of Bagoué

The mythological narratives of the Senoufo of Bagoué are characterized by great formal and thematic diversity. This richness reflects the complexity of their symbolic thought and the ritual organization that structures their society. Classifying these myths allows us to better understand the multiple functions they fulfill. A typology adapted to their cultural context allows us to identify three broad categories: cosmogonic myths, etiological myths, and heroic or initiatory myths. These narratives, far from being fixed, are constantly updated in rites, the words of elders, and oral performances. According to Zahan (1979), the Senoufo mythical word

is not limited to telling the past. It establishes a way of belonging to a world and being in the world. This plural word, transmitted in the sacred spaces called “Poro” or in community vigils, establishes a conception of reality in constant interaction with the sacred, the social and the symbolic.

### 3.1. Cosmogonic Myths: Origins of the World and Beings

The Senoufo cosmogonic myths trace the origins of the universe, humankind, and invisible forces. At the heart of these stories is “Koulotiolo”, the Supreme Creator, often associated with a female entity, “Nyéléni”, an ambivalent figure of fertility and power. The world, according to these myths, might emerge from a primordial word, from chaos organized by higher spiritual principles.

These stories explain the arrangement of the cosmos according to which the earth, the sky, the waters, and human beings are created according to a sacred order that rites must maintain. They also introduce moral categories: good, evil, transgression, often embodied by symbolic figures (the serpent, fire, water). [Calame-Griaule \(2006\)](#) indicates that in African societies, these cosmogonic stories are closely linked to ritual practices and the spatial organization of the village, which is found among the Senoufo in the orientation of altars and sacred spaces.

### 3.2. Etiological Myths: Explanation of Cultural Realities

Senoufo etiological myths explain the origins of cultural elements that are the birth of totemic clans, the institution of the Poro, the emergence of certain plants or agricultural practices, and dietary prohibitions. These stories provide symbolic legitimacy for local norms and customs. For example, the prohibition of consuming certain species of animals is explained by a story in which a totemic ancestor saves a group of humans. Similarly, the stages of Poro initiation are all associated with mythical events, recalled at each phase of the ritual. [Konan \(2012\)](#) emphasizes that “etiological myths are instruments of social regulation, because they encode the memory of prohibitions and ancient alliances between men and invisible forces”.

### 3.3. Heroic and Initiatory Myths

Heroic myths feature exemplary figures that are hunters, warriors, diviners, or founders of lineages. These characters, often endowed with supernatural powers, embody the virtues valued by Senoufo society (bravery, wisdom, self-control, and loyalty to ancestors). These stories are closely linked to initiatory education. During the Poro, young initiates hear the story of a hero or ancestor, whose trials symbolize the stages of the transition to adulthood. These stories are performed through songs, masks, and ritual dances. According to [Paulme \(1967\)](#), the African heroic myth does not aim to deify a man, but to propose a model figure that reinforces the community ideal.

## 4. The Functions of Myths in Senoufo Society

Myths among the Senoufo of Bagoué are not solely imaginary or symbolic. They

constitute living instruments of social regulation, cultural education, and spiritual expression. Myths are recited in specific contexts (rites, vigils, initiation sessions) and fulfill educational, normative, social, and religious functions. In this sense, they are part of a system of representations and practices that make myth an “operational tool” at the service of society. *Zempléni (1972)* noted that “myth in traditional African societies mediates between the natural order and the social order. It explains, guides, warns and connects individuals to their community and their cosmic environment”. To the Senoufo, this mediation unfolds in several directions that are analyzed below.

#### **4.1. Educational Function and Initiation into Community Life**

Among the Senoufo of Bagoué, education is not limited to the transmission of practical or academic knowledge. It is part of a holistic perspective in which the individual is trained to become a full member of the society through a long initiation process based on oral tradition, rites, and mythical symbols. This traditional education is primarily driven by the institution of the Poro which is the central pillar of community life and cultural sustainability.

Senoufo myths play a fundamental role in the education of young people. In the initiation schools of Poro, mythical stories are transmitted as coded teachings on the origin of the world, the role of the individual, the place of the collective, and the tests necessary for maturity.

Thus, each myth becomes an educational tool that permits youth to learn the values of discipline, solidarity, respect for elders, and self-control. These virtues are embodied in the mythical figures (heroes, sages, spirits). According to *Zahan (1979)*, “Senoufo initiatory education relies on mythical, allusive, and coded language to convey profound moral truths”. The myth is not a simple narrative but an educational performance.

##### **4.1.1. The Poro as a School of Life**

Initiation of Poro is reserved for males and to a lesser extent for females, particularly elderly and menopausal women. It is the most structured educational space in the Senoufo society. Initiation prepares young people to assume their future roles in the community by transmitting to them ancestral values, rules of conduct, self-control, solidarity, loyalty, justice, and honor (*Zahan, 1970*).

The education provided in the Poro is spiritual, moral, and social. Through progressive initiation cycles, young people are confronted with symbolic and physical challenges that allow them to discover the world of ancestors, spirits, and the invisible laws that govern the Senoufo universe (*Kouadio, 2018*). This process helps to create a strong bond between the individual and the community, thus strengthening group cohesion.

##### **4.1.2. Transmission of Traditional Knowledge**

The knowledge transmitted within the Poro includes both mythological knowledge and practical skills (agriculture, music, ritual dance, crafts, and traditional medi-

cine). This form of pedagogy is based on observation, repetition, memorization, and symbolization. Knowledge is transmitted by elders, holders of the sacred words and guarantors of tradition (Yéo, 2012).

Myths, tales, proverbs, and initiation songs are used as powerful educational tools. They not only teach the history of the people, but also rules of conduct in interpersonal relationships, family responsibilities, and attitudes to be adopted toward nature and the sacred (Dieterlen, 1991).

#### **4.1.3. Social Integration and Identity Building**

Initiation into community life aims to make everyone a fully integrated social being. Through Poro, the youth becomes mature. It teaches how to speak in public, respect elders, and be helpful. This training is a school of traditional citizenship, where individual responsibility is always linked to collective interest (Kouadio, 2018). New initiates are identified by visible signs, such as tattoos, body markings, specific clothing, and initiatory names. According to Zahan (1970), these elements allow the young initiate to feel part of a lineage, a village, a people. They foster a strong sense of identity, essential in a society based on interdependence.

#### **4.1.4. Conflict Prevention and Social Stabilization**

Initiation also instills the values of peace, dialogue, and emotional control. By teaching young people respect for elders' authority, resolving disputes according to traditional procedures, and avoiding humiliating others, Poro helps prevent social tensions. Thus, it plays a peacemaking role within the community (Yéo, 2012). This educational system preserves social balance because it prepares future leaders, heads of families, notables, and mediators to act according to collective ethics. Initiation thus becomes a regulatory mechanism that ensures generational stability and the continuity of social institutions (Dieterlen, 1991).

The educational functions of the Poro among the Senoufo of Bagoué go beyond individual training. They are part of a collective project of social and spiritual construction. Initiation, based on cosmogonic myths and ancestral values, allows each generation to anchor itself in a symbolic order that guarantees community unity and stability. In this way, the Senoufo transmits not only knowledge, but also a way of life based on harmony, responsibility, and memory.

### **4.2. Social Function: Cohesion, Norms, and Behavioral Control**

Myths also contribute to social organization. They justify clan structures, age hierarchies, sexual division of labor, and ritual roles. By recounting the origins of taboos, totems, or alliances, they establish collective benchmarks and strengthen solidarity. They also play a role in symbolic control. When an individual violates a norm, an explanatory myth is often invoked to symbolically denounce the transgression. This indirect pedagogy allows for non-violent correction while maintaining community harmony. Paulme (1967) explains that "in African societies, myth functions as an implicit code of ethics, always available to be activated according to the circumstances of social life".

### **4.3. Spiritual and Religious Function: Connection with Invisible Forces**

On a spiritual level, Senoufo myths express the relationship between the living being, the dead, and invisible forces. They structure offering rituals, invocations, and divinatory practices. Through myth, ancestors still speak, spirits guide, and deities interact with humans.

Each religious ceremony or phase of the Poro is accompanied by a specific mythical narrative, often sung or mimed through masks. This narrative serves to invoke sacred memories and ensure continuity between the visible world and the afterlife. According to Yéo (2015), “for the Senoufo, myth is ritual speech; it articulates memory, sacredness, and the permanence of ancestral ties”.

## **5. The Ideology Conveyed by Senoufo Myths: Between Cosmic Order, Ancestral Authority, and Community Ethics**

Among the Senoufo of Bagoué, education is not limited to the transmission of practical or academic knowledge. It is part of a holistic perspective in which the individual is trained to become a full member of society through a long initiation process based on oral tradition, rites, and mythical symbols. This traditional education is essentially driven by the institution of the Poro, the central pivot of community life and cultural continuity.

Myths, beyond their narrative or explanatory function, are vectors of ideology. Among the Senoufo of Bagoué, they crystallize a worldview based on harmony between human beings, the permanence of ancestors, and the preeminence of the group over the individual. Through their symbolic content and ritual recitation, they convey an ideology of order, hierarchy and stability, while legitimizing the sociopolitical and spiritual structures in place.

As Ricoeur (1969) points out, “the myth states the foundation, but in stating this foundation, it establishes a legitimacy”. In the Senoufo context, this legitimacy concerns both the cosmic order and the social order. By analyzing the ideological charge of mythical narratives, we thus gain a more detailed understanding of the logic of power, transmission and values in society.

### **5.1. Cosmic Order as a Model of Social Stability in the Cosmogonic Myths of the Senoufo of Bagoué**

Among traditional African peoples, cosmogonic myths play a fundamental role in structuring society. These creation stories not only explain the origin of the world but also constitute symbolic and normative references that regulate social, political, and spiritual behavior. In northern Côte d’Ivoire, particularly in the region of Bagoué, cosmogonic myths are deeply rooted in cultural practices, particularly through Poro rites, initiation stories, and sacred songs. They outline a world architecture in which each element of humanity, nature, and spirit occupies a precise place, guaranteeing harmony and social stability.

Thus, understanding the cosmic order as it is formulated in Senoufo cosmogonic narratives allows us to grasp the foundations on which social organization rests. This work aims to analyze the way in which the Senoufo of Bagoué draw inspiration from the mythical world to build and maintain the stability of their society.

### 5.1.1. Main Creation Stories

In the region of Bagoué, between the Senoufo, creation stories feature “Koulotiolo”, the supreme entity, as the creator of the sky, the earth, and all living beings. According to oral tradition, the world was born from a cosmic egg containing the primordial elements such as water, fire, earth, and air. This initial germ was opened under divine impulse to give birth to the ordered universe (Kouadio, 2018).

The mythical ancestors, sent by “Koulotiolo”, shaped the earth and established the first laws of coexistence. These stories are transmitted during initiation ceremonies and through symbolic tales in which natural elements, such as trees, rivers, and mountains, are endowed with a soul and a spiritual function (Zahan, 1970).

#### 1) The Symbolism of Universal Order

In Senoufo cosmogony, the world order is conceived as hierarchical, circular, and complementary. The sky represents the world of invisible forces and ancestors, the earth that of the living, and the subsoil that of the dead and spirits. This tripartite structure reflects a balance that must be preserved to ensure the survival of the community (Dieterlen, 1991).

Each natural element is perceived as a link in a sacred chain, and rituals aim to maintain or restore this cosmic harmony. Social disorder is often interpreted as a reflection of an imbalance in the invisible world, hence the need for a social life based on the principles of order and equity transmitted by myths (Yéo, 2012).

#### 2) Cosmic Order as an Archetype of Social Order

The Senoufo social order is based on a strict distribution of roles, functions, and responsibilities, whose origins can be found in traditional cosmology. The creation myth provides a structuring model for the organization of castes, lineages, and institutions. It serves as a normative framework that legitimizes social hierarchies and rules of conduct. Thus, each group of blacksmiths, farmers, and initiates to Poro occupies a specific place in the society, echoing the orderly arrangement of the cosmos (Kouadio, 2018). Respect for this order becomes a collective imperative guaranteeing peace, solidarity, and social balance.

#### 3) Distribution of Social Roles Inspired by Cosmogony

Social organization is strictly regulated by structures inherited from the cosmic model among the Senoufo of Bagoué. The different castes of blacksmiths (Koulotigui), farmers, hunters, and griots are considered embodiments of the complementary forces of the world. Each group plays an essential role in the balance of society, echoing the constituent elements of the universe (Kouadio, 2018).

The Poro system, an educational and initiatory institution, plays a major role in the distribution and recognition of these roles. It introduces young people to

the knowledge of cosmic and social laws, preparing them to assume their responsibilities with wisdom and respect (Yéo, 2012).

#### **4) The Sacralization of Social Norms**

Rules of conduct, taboos, and traditional laws are based on cosmogonic narratives. They are not only social or legal, but also spiritual. For example, breaking a norm can be perceived as an attack on the divine order, potentially leading to supernatural sanctions (Zahan, 1970).

Traditional justice, administered by elders, is therefore a reactivation of the will of the ancestors and “Koulotiolo”. It aims to restore broken harmony, not to punish in a purely repressive sense. This justice is therefore restorative, respectful of cosmic balance, and deeply rooted in mythical tradition (Dieterlen, 1991).

### **5.1.2. Social Stability and Community Sustainability through Myths**

Cosmogonic myths are not simply narratives of the past. They are alive and continually reactivated through rituals, songs, proverbs, and institutions such as the Poro, which plays a fundamental role in transmitting values (Yéo, 2012). By reaffirming the original order established by divine forces, Senoufo cultural practices consolidate social cohesion and strengthen community resilience in the case of crises and changes. Respecting the balances inherited from myth becomes a means of ensuring stability in the present, while preparing future generations to perpetuate social harmony.

#### **1) Myth as a Tool for Social Cohesion**

Cosmogonic narratives are central to Senoufo collective identity. Passed down within the family, at funerals, or during Poro rites, they recall the foundations of society and strengthen bonds between individuals. Myth serves as a link between generations, teaching respect, hospitality, solidarity, and obedience to social rules (Kouadio, 2018).

The Poro, as a living extension of myth, structures community life, transmits fundamental values, and ensures the continuity of traditional knowledge. It introduces young people to social and spiritual responsibility, thus ensuring the reproduction of cosmic order in daily life (Yéo, 2012).

#### **2) Cultural Resilience and Stability in the Face of Change**

In a contemporary world marked by urbanization, individualism, and socio-economic upheaval, Senoufo myths continue to play a role in social regulation. Faced with modern uncertainties, they provide communities with solid symbolic reference points. By relying on mythical narratives, the Senoufo group preserves its unity, stability, and identity (Zahan, 1970). Thus, the use of myths in conflict resolution, family crisis management, and reconciliation rites demonstrates that these narratives retain remarkable social effectiveness. They help re-anchor individuals in a system of collective values where order and balance take precedence over personal interests (Dieterlen, 1991).

The cosmic order as described in Senoufo cosmogonic myths, constitutes a powerful model of social organization. It is beyond a symbolic representation of the world and can be considered a concrete guide for the management of society.

Through social roles, rules of conduct, initiation rites, and traditional justice, the Senoufo of Bagoué translate the principles of an orderly and harmonious world into their daily lives. This constant connection to myth guarantees sustainable stability, based on respect for the balances inherited from their ancestors. In this respect, myths are not from the past. They are a living pillar of social stability.

### 5.2. The Authority of Ancestors as a Foundation of Legitimacy

Ancestors are omnipresent in Senoufo myths. Whether they are creators, heroes, founders, or intercessors, they embody an indisputable moral and spiritual authority. The recitation of the myth is often an act of recalling or summoning this authority.

This ideological presence of ancestors serves to legitimize the patriarchal order, lineage hierarchies, and the mechanisms of power transmission in the Poro or chiefdoms. By returning to the “words of the elders”, the myth reinforces the value of tradition and makes it difficult to question established structures. Diabaté (2013) explains that “in Senoufo initiation stories, the hero only becomes great if he aligns himself with the laws of the ancestors. This is an ideology of fidelity rather than transgression”.

### 5.3. A Community Ethic Based on Interdependence

Finally, Senoufo myths convey an ethic of solidarity. Individual destiny has value only if it is inscribed within that of the group. Heroism is not a personal feat, but rather sacrifice or devotion to the clan, the lineage, or the community.

The stories show that those who transgress the collective order (lies, pride, individualism) are punished or marginalized, while those who respect the common rule are rewarded with social recognition and ancestral blessings. Yéo (2015) showed that “the Senoufo myth instills a morality of shared responsibility, where each being is the guardian of a social and cosmic balance”.

## 6. Conclusion

Among the Senoufo of Bagoué, myth goes beyond mere narrative or folkloric contexts to reveal itself as a social institution, a vehicle of values, a shared memory, and an instrument of ideological legitimacy. Through cosmogonic narratives, ancestral figures, initiation codes, and ethical models, myth structures worldview, frame of collective practices, and guides individual behavior.

The educational function of myth is manifested in the Poro initiation rites, where it prepares young people to integrate the fundamental values of the society. The social function lies in the ability to strengthen group cohesion, remind norms, and channel tensions. The religious function is revealed in the articulation with invisible forces and ancestors, ensuring continuity between generations and between the visible and invisible planets.

Beyond all these, Senoufo myths convey an ideology of order, balance, and fidelity to the ancestral model. They affirm a community ethic based on interde-

pendence, discipline, and the preservation of the sacred bond between man, nature, and the cosmos.

Overall, myths are a living matrix of Senoufo thought, a crucible of identity, and a key to interpreting reality. Their study invites us to rethink tradition not as a frozen past, but as a dynamic resource for understanding, regulation, and transmission.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

### References

- Calame-Griaule, G. (2006). *Contes dogon du Mali*. Karthala-Langues O', 243 p.
- Diabaté, A. (2013). *Mythe, pouvoir et transmission chez les peuples mandé et sénoufo*. Université Alassane Ouattara.
- Dieterlen, G. (1991). *Essai sur la religion bambara*. Éditions du CNRS.
- Konan, R. A. (2012). *Ecriture et enracinement dans le roman négro-africain francophone*. Thèse de doctorat, Université de Strasbourg (France), 466 p.
- Kouadio, K. J. (2018). *Mythes et rites chez les Sénoufos de Côte d'Ivoire*. NEA.
- Paulme, D. (1967). *La mère dévorante: Essai sur la fonction maternelle*. Gallimard.
- RGPH (2021). *Recensement général de la population et de l'habitat: Résultats globaux définitifs*.
- Ricoeur, P. (1969). *Le conflit des interprétations*. Seuil.
- Yéo, K. (2015). Pensée symbolique et mémoire collective chez les Sénoufos de la Bagoué. *Revue Ivoirienne d'Anthropologie*, 12, 45-63.
- Yéo, N. (2012). *La sagesse du Poro*. Éditions du Nord.
- Zahan, D. (1970). *Systèmes religieux africains*. Payot.
- Zahan, D. (1979). *La religion africaine: Tradition et changement*. Payot.
- Zempléni, A. (1972). Rituels et mythes africains: Fonctions sociales et symboliques. *L'Homme*, 12, 27-44.