

Cultural Heritage and Local Development: Case of Dida (Southwestern of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire)

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Abstract

Established between the 15th and 18th centuries in the region corresponding to present-day Côte d'Ivoire, the Dida community constitutes an exceptional contributor to the enrichment of Ivorian cultural heritage. Its language and traditional attire, on the one hand, together with its craftsmanship and long-standing social practices, on the other, have significantly enhanced the cultural identity of the country over time. Nevertheless, this body of knowledge and cultural wealth is currently under serious threat of disappearance, despite its potential as a driver of development. The objective of this paper is to highlight the contribution of Dida cultural heritage to sustainable and inclusive local development. The methodology combines documentary research and field surveys, complemented by participation in a cultural festival. This integrated approach made it possible to document the breadth of Dida cultural heritage and to analyze its role in fostering local and inclusive development.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, cultural promotion, cultural valorization, local development, Dida

Introduction

Côte d'Ivoire possesses a wide range of cultural heritage that could serve as a vital component of its human and social development, provided that such heritage is effectively integrated into the country's sustainable development strategies. In this perspective, Preiswerk (1980) argued that "sustainable development should not be understood exclusively in terms of growth and production, but rather as a process of overall social change."

As elsewhere in the world, Ivorian communities have been influenced by European technologies and practices. Nevertheless, each continues to maintain distinctive traditional cultural expressions. Indeed, centuries of European expansion have not eradicated the resilience of certain societies that remain deeply attached to their cultural values. Within the Dida community, for example, ancestral cultural practices persist and constitute a strong marker of identity. These practices hold considerable potential to contribute to sustainable and inclusive local development.

As highlighted in the Guide for Local Action: Culture (2015), "heritage, diversity, and creativity make cultural heritage one of the key factors in community development, shaping its economic, social, educational, historical, environmental, and tourism dimensions." In this light, the central research question emerges: How can Dida cultural heritage contribute to local development?

Addressing this question constitutes the primary objective of this study, namely to demonstrate the contribution of the Dida cultural legacy to sustainable and inclusive local development. To this end, we first present the theoretical and methodological framework, followed by the results, and finally the discussion.

Methods

Meaning of keys words or concepts

The key concepts underpinning this study are cultural heritage, promotion, valorization, and local development. Defining these notions provides the necessary conceptual clarity to both frame the research and ensure a more accurate understanding of its objectives.

- **Cultural Heritage**

Heritage implies the intention to transmit goods and values to future generations (Benhamou & Thesmar, 2011). In its broadest sense, it constitutes both a product and a process, providing societies with a set of resources inherited from the past, created in the present, and preserved for the benefit of future generations (UNESCO, 2014). Accordingly, the notion of cultural heritage encompasses the tangible and intangible cultural

knowledge of the Dida community, transmitted from one generation to the next.

From this perspective, cultural heritage, when subjected to processes of valorization, should be capable of contributing to the local development of Didaland. This heritage includes dialects that are gradually disappearing, as well as traditional dances, songs, oral narratives, and artisanal know-how passed down over centuries. Safeguarding these elements is essential, as they constitute defining features of Dida society and represent valuable resources for sustainable and inclusive development.

- **Cultural Promoting/Cultural Promotion**

With regard to the notion of cultural promotion, it can be understood as a form of cultural mediation (Schmutz, 2019). According to Schmutz (2019), cultural promotion or mediation emerges from a lack of dialogue between the public and the cultural object. Its primary objective is to foster relationships by facilitating encounters, communication, exchanges, and interpretive processes. In this perspective, Dida cultural promotion may be defined as the creation of a framework that enables interaction, dialogue, and interpretation around Dida cultural heritage, thereby ensuring its accessibility and relevance to both local communities and wider audiences.

- **Cultural Valorization**

In his translation of *Totem and Taboo* published by Freud in 1924, Samuel Jankélévitch, as cited by Laloi (2020), defines valuation as “the act of granting greater importance to something.” In a related sense, Robin (2017) explains that the notion of valorization encompasses the instruments employed to highlight innovation namely, the results of scientific research, regardless of their form or disciplinary origin. For her, the concept inherently contains the idea of value, understood as the outcome of estimation and evaluation.

From a perspective of general interest, the valorization of Dida cultural heritage may thus be seen as aligning with inclusive local priorities such as cultural education, the democratization of cultural access, and the contribution of heritage to the construction of active citizenship.

- **Local development**

Emerging in the 1960s, the concept of local development rests on the principle that the mobilization of local potential whether natural, social, or individual resources can drive socio-economic dynamics (Tesson, 2007). According to Vachon (1993), local development is both “a way of thinking” and “a dynamic process fueled by action-oriented attitudes and behaviors,” as well as “a strategy in which the actors are the beneficiaries.” Drawing on

these definitions, local development can be understood as a process centered on the construction and consolidation of local dynamics, aimed at significantly enhancing collective well-being and social cohesion.

Within this framework, the present study seeks to demonstrate the contribution of cultural heritage to the local development of Didaland, where ancestral traditions are enriched by external influences and, in turn, generate innovative practices.

Geographical and human scope of the study

The geographic scope of this study corresponds to the Dida cultural area, located in the southwest of Côte d'Ivoire, specifically within the Lôh-Djiboua region (Gneto, 2018). This region comprises three departments Divo, Guitry, and Lakota (see Map 1). The surveys were conducted in the department of Divo, which serves as the regional capital (Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2011, p. 2). Covering an area of 8,900 km², Divo is bordered by the department of Oumé to the north, Lakota to the west, Tiassalé to the east, and Fresco and Guitry to the south.

The Dida people, native to this area, belong to the larger Krou ethnolinguistic group, one of the four major groups in Côte d'Ivoire (Gneto, 2018). Oral traditions and historical accounts suggest that the Dida trace their origins to present-day Liberia, shaped by west–east migratory movements during the 17th century, a period marked by warfare and territorial conquest (Amani & Binin, 2017). Like the fifteen ethnic subgroups that constitute the Krou, among which the Bété, Bakwé, Godié, Krou, and Wê are prominent (Allou, 2014), the Dida are traditionally farmers, hunters, fishermen, healers, and basket weavers.

According to oral tradition, the Godié, a subgroup of the Néyo people, split into smaller communities due to divergent subsistence preferences: while some prioritized fishing, others favored hunting. Those who chose hunting separated from the Godié and moved into the dense forests, where they established new settlements. Over time, they formed a large community that later fragmented into several forest villages. One group left Lokoda and eventually settled in a valley. There, the elders proclaimed “Akoda” meaning “Let us remain here” which evolved into “Lokoda” and ultimately “Lakota.” In the same process, another settlement named Djibé meaning “the place of the panther” was founded, and its inhabitants became known as the Djibao, from which the name “Divo” is derived.

It is within this cultural and historical landscape that the present study was conducted.

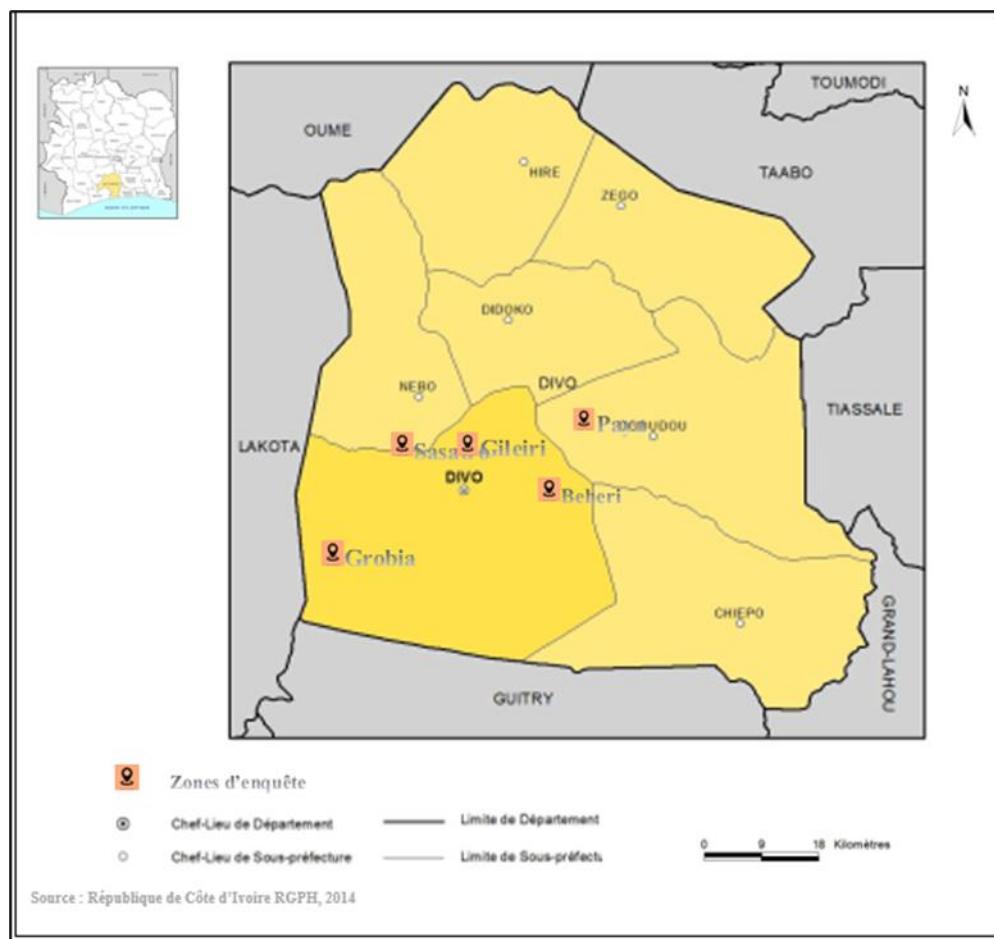


Figure 1: Location of the study area

Methodology Approach

To conduct this study, data were collected through documentary research, direct observation, and oral surveys in the field. The documentary research focused on written sources relating to the settlement history of the Krou peoples in general and the Dida in particular, as well as their environment and cultural heritage. It also included documentation on traditional methods of conserving natural forest resources developed by local societies. This body of information provided the basis for defining the research problem and framing the theoretical foundations of the study.

Direct observation was carried out on the entirety of Dida cultural heritage within the study area. This method contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the heritage practices and cultural expressions of the indigenous communities.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with village chiefs, land chiefs, leaders of local cultural associations, and senior

community members in the selected localities. This approach yielded valuable insights into the meaning, functions, and perceived usefulness of endogenous practices and cultural artifacts.

The surveys were conducted both in the town of Divo during the 2020, 2021, and 2022 editions of the Djaka Festival and in the villages of Baheri, Gileiri, Grabia, Paya, and Sasatro (see Map 1). In total, 67 individuals were interviewed. However, only 12 informants are referenced in the results section, selected on the basis of the scientific relevance and depth of their contributions.

Results

The definition of cultural heritage depends on the types of objects under consideration, as well as the institutional, social, or geographical context. According to Hougou (2005), “Heritage represents a legacy from the past, the crystallization of elements resulting from a process of historical selection and transmitted between generations, which is rooted in the need to reproduce the foundational elements of biological and social life.” From this perspective, heritage can be understood as a set of inherited or bequeathed cultural expressions that form the basis of human societies’ existence.

Heritage is commonly categorized into two main types: tangible heritage which includes furniture, buildings, artifacts, natural sites, monuments, and submerged objects and intangible cultural heritage (ICH), encompassing cultural practices, traditions, and know-how (UNESCO, 2009).

In this section, the focus is on the various forms of cultural heritage present in Didaland. The analysis will concentrate on three specific categories of heritage within this cultural area of Côte d’Ivoire.

Dida material culture

Material culture refers to the physical dimension of culture, encompassing the objects and architectural elements present within a society. It includes all human-made artifacts considered from social and cultural perspectives (Julien & Rosselin, 2005). In Côte d’Ivoire, the Dida have long demonstrated cultural knowledge through the production of various objects that serve daily life needs. These include ceramics, whose traditional production and use have largely disappeared, basketry, and, most notably, raffia weaving, which remains a defining element of Dida cultural identity (Goéti Bi, 2019).

Raffia weaving enables the creation of a wide range of artisanal products and derivatives (Kouassi, 2011). These encompass loincloths (large Bibido and small Gnougeli), clothing styles (Iwiwonda), ornaments (Blèsolè), fly swatters (Dogbossayé/Bligo), hoods (Ogbako), hunting nets

(Ességbli), fishing nets (Deda), tam-tams (Tokou), elongated seats (Ewolokpo), traditional house coverings (Papo), traditional frames (Sisré), and various basketry products (Védé gopé, Eguébé, Itéhoué) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Various products of Dida material culture

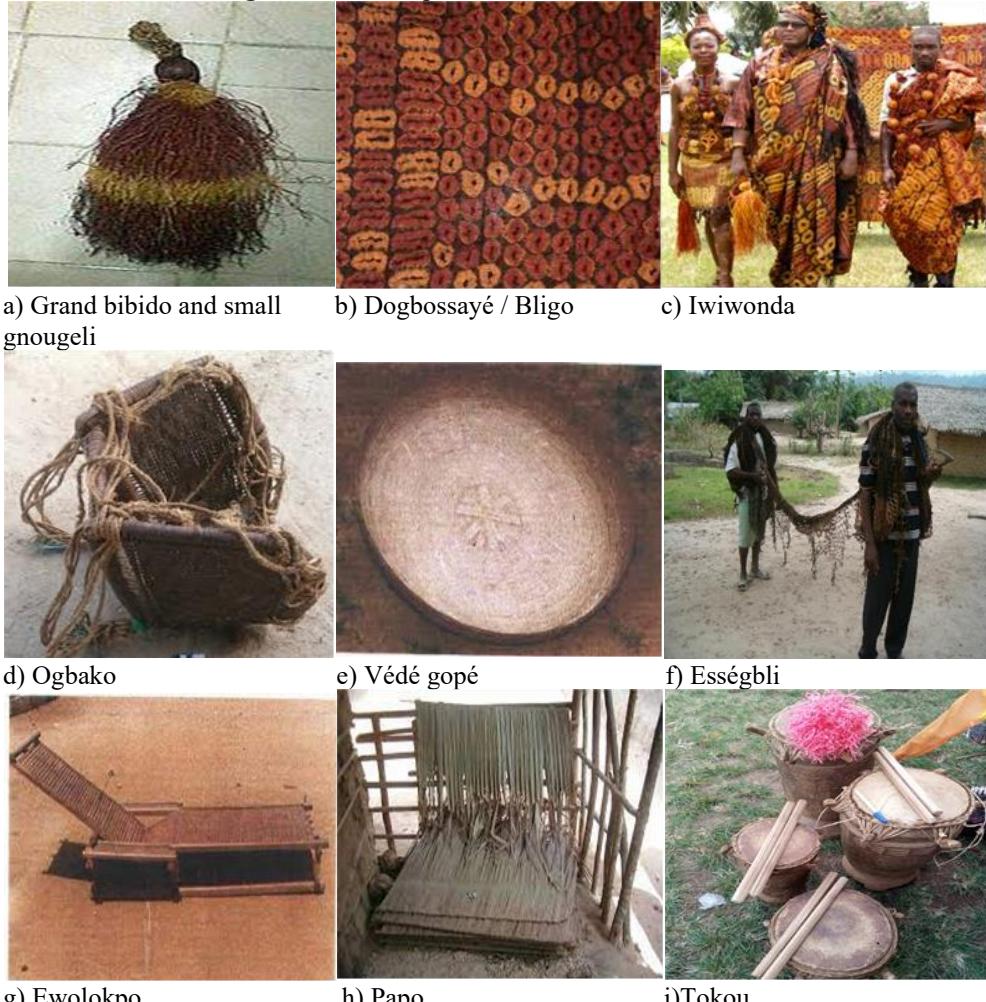


Photo credit: Touré Gninin Aïcha and Goéti Bi Irié Maxime

Dida's Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) represents the source of cultural diversity, and its preservation ensures the continuity of creativity (UNESCO, 2003). According to UNESCO (2012), ICH encompasses “*the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated with them, that communities, groups, and, where appropriate, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.*”

In the context of the Dida community, intangible heritage refers to various expressions of living culture, including, but not limited to:

- **Languages and dialects:** Dida Lakota (Lakoda) (*Dieko, Gabo*), Dida Yocoboué, among others;
- **Surnames:** Dago, Brida, Yalé, Draman, Lida, etc.;
- **Toponyms:** Bada, Braheri, Guitry, Hiré, Lakota, Lauzoua, Yokoboué, Zokoulilié, Zoukougbeu, and others;
- **Performing arts:** “Aloukou” dances, games, stories, and music (see Figure 3);
- **Culinary knowledge:** *Tchitcha, Afoufou, Aglou*, etc.;
- **Agricultural skills and practices:** *Iyadouke nigbê* (yam cultivation), *Essaka nigmê* (rice seed preparation), *Elaba nigbê* (banana planting), *Sôkloupè nigbê* (cassava planting), among others.

In addition to these elements, the natural heritage of Didaland constitutes another vital dimension, which will be discussed in the following section.

Figure 3: Selected images of cultural heritage expressions



a) Afoufou ou Aglou

b) Odopa

Photo credit: Touré Gninin Aïcha and Goéti Bi Irié Maxime

Dida's Natural Heritage

Natural heritage is considered an integral component of cultural heritage. It encompasses the natural features, geographical formations, and physical geography of a given area. It also includes designated zones that serve as habitats for endangered plant and animal species, as well as natural sites of scientific, conservation, or aesthetic value (UNESCO, 2009). Such heritage is of significant importance to human communities and should not be overlooked.

In Didaland, natural heritage comprises the local flora, waterways, faunal groups, and aquatic species, all of which are of communal interest. This study focuses primarily on the natural reserves within this cultural

space. For the Dida people, the creator of the universe is called Lago (God), who is considered the owner of all creation. Consequently, the Dida maintain a spiritual connection with nature (Azowa Kragbe & Touao, 2010).*

The preservation of forest reserves is ensured through the sacralization of elements within the forest environment (Amani & Binin, 2017). Any utilization of natural resources within these sacred spaces requires the performance of rituals to seek the permission of deities and to avert potential misfortune (Azowa Kragbe & Touao, 2010). Numerous sacred forests still exist in Didaland. Notably, out of 119 sacred forests in the department of Divo, the canton of Abohiri contains the largest, called Aboga, located in Gnehiri (Azowa Kragbe & Touao, 2010). Other significant sacred forests include Ogbohouga in Gniguédoukou and Togbolou in Zikidiès, among others.

These diverse categories of heritage collectively represent the cultural and natural wealth of Didaland. Their preservation is essential for the well-being of current and future generations.

Discussion

Challenging climatic conditions and planning constraints often render certain rural areas vulnerable, sometimes limiting the profitability of local production and complicating living conditions. Rural communities currently face economic difficulties, underemployment, and social and environmental precariousness, highlighting the need to explore new approaches for leveraging culturally specific resources. Such approaches could enhance the capacity of rural societies to utilize their cultural heritage for the sustainable development of their living environment.

However, the contribution of cultural heritage to local and national development does not appear to be a priority for public institutions. Adequate support systems to help local populations develop heritage-based activities and improve their skills are largely absent. Moreover, institutions responsible for promoting heritage struggle to fulfill their mediating role and to generate community engagement.

Each generation seems to maintain a distinct set of cultural values, leading to inevitable intergenerational conflicts over these values. As Garigue (1958) notes, *“conflicts of cultural value] are resolved and reborn with each generation, but are an intrinsic element of human life, because there is a constant phenomenon of imbalance in the functioning of all societies.”* This imbalance underscores the critical need for the preservation and conservation of cultural values within societies.

A central question arises: how can the values of cultural heritage be perpetuated in a society such as that of the Dida, which is undergoing rapid transformation? Culture only acquires meaning when its societal importance

is recognized. Accordingly, this section focuses on the individual, social, economic, and environmental benefits of Dida cultural heritage.

Culture offers numerous advantages, both for individuals and for the communities in which they live.

Individual or intrinsic benefits

Participation in cultural activities provides multiple benefits at the individual level. It can serve as a source of pleasure and inspiration, while offering opportunities for creative expression, the construction of personal identity, and the reinforcement or preservation of a sense of belonging within the community (Conference Board of Canada, August 2008). In line with this, UNESCO (1982), during a conference on cultural policies in Mexico, emphasized that :

Culture enables humans to engage in self-reflection. It is what defines us as distinctly human, rational, critical, and ethically responsible beings. Through culture, individuals discern values and make informed choices. It provides a medium for self-expression, self-awareness, and self-recognition, acknowledging that humans are an ongoing project. Culture encourages critical examination of one's achievements, a continuous search for new meanings, and the creation of works that transcend the individual (UNESCO, 1982).

These benefits are inherent to all cultures and provide opportunities for leisure, entertainment, and learning, as evidenced by the various editions of the Djaka Festival. The festival offers spectators a chance to both enjoy and learn through diverse activities, including songs, dances, traditional cuisine, and games. Participation in these cultural activities enables children and young people to expand their capacities for critical reflection, creativity, and social adaptation.

To economic and social plan

The social benefits of culture are closely linked to economic and societal development (Jeretic, 2009). Economically, the valorization of cultural heritage can foster both direct and indirect job creation. In Didaland, for example, the promotion of cultural heritage through the Djaka Festival stimulates innovation across various sectors, generating productivity gains, supporting regional development, strengthening community branding, and promoting local tourism.

The Djaka Festival is an annual cultural event where participants showcase a wide range of cultural activities. Each edition provides opportunities for the presentation and commercialization of new cultural

products. Consequently, an increasing variety of artisanal items such as bracelets, earrings, hair accessories, and key rings are offered for sale, reflecting the dynamism and creativity of the local community (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4 : New ranges of handcrafted clothing items



Photo credit: Touré Gninin Aïcha and Goéti Bi Irié Maxime

Typically, these products are sold by local artisans and represent both a significant source of income and a means of cultural promotion. The same applies to traditional cuisine. During the festival, cooks offer a variety of regional dishes to visitors, highlighting the gastronomic heritage of the Dida community.

Culture can thus serve as a driver of tourism development. Cultural products, knowledge, and skills including traditional dishes, artisanal techniques, handicrafts, and cultural events such as festivals or weddings have the potential to attract visitors to the regions where they are practiced. For instance, the Djaka Festival itself is a major catalyst for local development. Lasting seven days, the festival draws large crowds to the city of Divo, including residents from surrounding rural areas, tourists from Abidjan, and visitors from European countries. This influx of people stimulates local economic activity, benefiting sectors such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation. It also provides artisans with opportunities to enhance their skills and increase their income.

As noted by Jeretic (2009), “the different sectors of cultural activity present significant opportunities in low- and middle-income countries, as they can serve as channels for increasing exchanges with the rest of the world.” Innovation and creativity in the traditional textile sector, for example, enable the Dida people to showcase cultural values that extend beyond the borders of Côte d’Ivoire. d’Ivoire¹. Also, a good policy for the promotion and management of cultural assets can have enormous economic benefits for societies. The labeling of the dida loincloth by the Djaka festival platform makes it possible to develop and strengthen the feeling of cultural identity within the dida communities around this traditional product. And in turn, cultural identity constitutes one of the psychosocial formations that results from such a categorization (Geneviève Vinsonneau, 2002). It is undoubtedly in this sense that the report of UNESCO (2009) explains that *« in a society, culture can appear as an identity link. For example, the participation of individuals in the same cultural dynamics at the level of a country contributes to developing the awareness of belonging to the same people and is an important factor of integration, unity and national bond ».*

This is easily observed in Côte d’Ivoire where individuals from the same ethnic group find themselves in a locality far from their own, organize themselves into associations or mutuals, create and develop a link of cultural identity between them. Based on this observation, we can also affirm that culture is a factor of social cohesion, fraternity and reinforcement of citizenship. It therefore constitutes, in turn, an important channel for promoting peace and tolerance within the communities.

To environment plan

Since the 1990s, environmental concerns have emerged as a critical global issue. This led 178 United Nations member states to convene in Rio de Janeiro for the UN Conference on Environment and Development. The conference highlighted the human impact on climate change, giving rise to the annual Conference of the Parties, which focuses on climate action. It was emphasized that cultural practices and values can enable local communities to contribute effectively to contemporary environmental management strategies.

Raising awareness of the historical, cultural, and scientific significance of protected areas including sacred forests, classified forests, and nature reserves can contribute to:

- Maintaining soil fertility within local communities;

¹ - information collected from YALE Popou Marthe, 69 years old, Leader of the association « redynamisation de la culture Dida » (ARCULDI), Divo, 15/08/2021.

- Recycling rainwater through evapotranspiration and purifying the air via photosynthesis, which releases oxygen and absorbs carbon dioxide;
- Preserving and developing traditional knowledge related to medicinal practices;
- Safeguarding cultural identity, as sacred forests serve as key spaces for the expression and perpetuation of cultural practices for ethnic groups in Côte d'Ivoire;
- Promoting the production of cultural artifacts such as masks, drums, and flutes;
- Acting as natural barriers to mitigate water-related damage caused by heavy rainfall.

Conclusions

Côte d'Ivoire possesses a rich and diverse cultural heritage that could play a crucial role in its human and social development, provided it is effectively integrated into sustainable development strategies. Certain communities in the country, such as the Dida, remain deeply attached to their cultural values despite the influence of Western civilization. The cultural heritage of the Dida is multidimensional, and understanding its various facets is essential for its transmission and integration into contemporary society.

With the support of the state and heritage professionals, the Dida community should actively contribute to the valorization of their cultural heritage through a comprehensive management policy, while continuing efforts to document and inventory practices that have not yet been formally identified.

Acknowledgments

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The participation of Min-Dja in the 2020, 2021, and 2022 editions of the Djaka Festival provided an excellent framework for our field research, which led to the writing of the article entitled:

“On the Protection and Promotion of the Dida Cultural Heritage.”

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Appendix

Surnames and first names	Age	Occupation	Place and date
AGODIO Jean-Luc	66 years	Retired civil servant, General Secretary of the local coordination of Djaka festival	Divo, 12/08/2021
ATTEMENE Alexandre	45 years	General Secretary of the Chief of Brahéri	Divo 14/08/2021
BALI Azua Jacqueline	65 years	Housekeeper and Leader of the association <i>Zikô</i> of the women of the canton Abori in Divo	Divo, 13/08/2021
BOGA Henriette	68 years	Housekeeper and member of the association <i>Zikô</i> of the women of the canton Abori in Divo	Divo, 13/08/2021
DAGO Séki Elisabeth	53 years	Housekeeper and Leader of women	Godilehiri, 14/08/2021
DENOU Tayero Désiré	45 years	Planter and Leader of traditional group of games in Lagazé	Lagazé, 14/08/2021
DEGA Youé Valence,	77 years	Chief of Land and former deputy of the Chief of the village of Nébo	Divo, 14/08/2022
GRAH Léga Colette	75 years	Traditional musician artist of Dida group in Brahéri	Divo 14/08/2021
LOBOUET Yorokpa Nicolas	82 years	Former Chief of the village of Tiégbâ and former planter	Divo, 22/12/2020.
YALE Popouo Marthe	68 years	Leader of the association « redynamisation de la culture Dida » (ARCULDI)	Divo, 15/08/2021