

Coffee Plantations (Cuba)

No 1008

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Archaeological landscape of the first coffee plantations in the south-east of Cuba
<i>Location</i>	Santiago and Guantanamo Provinces, South-Eastern Region
<i>State Party</i>	Cuba
<i>Date</i>	15 September 1999

Justification by State Party

The material culture which survives from the magnificent coffee estates from the early years of the 19th century in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra, lying to the east and west of Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo, represents the most valuable testimony to the human struggle against nature by the French and Haitian plantation owners and their labour force, to the unique cultural expressions that developed in this region, and to the sweat and blood of the African slaves who increased the wealth of their masters.

It is necessary to add to the unquestionable architectural and archaeological values of the region the landscape itself, in which paradisaical nature combines with the work of man. The most outstanding aspect is the perfect way in which the different elements mingle with one another: the plantation owners made wise use of rivers, streams, and springs, of the rugged topography and woodland, and of fruit trees both to satisfy their own needs and to increase the spirituality of the landscape.

In spite of the world crises which have resulted in the abandonment of many coffee estates and the hardships resulting from the wars of independence, almost all the sites proposed have retained elements of the residences and/or the production processes, which provide evidence about the use of elaborate and exceptional construction methods and materials. These demonstrate the functional basis of the system, designed to save time and ensure working efficiency.

The authenticity of the surviving material evidence from the 19th and 20th centuries is not in question, whether in terms of design, or construction, or of manpower aspects. Some of the early structures have now been incorporated into peasant houses, but these are light constructions of little cultural value which were capable of re-use to house contemporary families.

[**Note** The State Party does not make any proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers this property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List.]

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a group of *sites*. It also conforms with the definition of a cultural landscape, as set out in paragraph 39.ii of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

History and Description

History

Coffee production was established in the island of Saint-Domingue (Hispaniola) by French settlers in the 18th century. The uprisings from 1790 onwards, culminating in the establishment of the independent state of Haiti in 1804, resulted in the flight of French plantation owners, accompanied by many of their African slaves, to the neighbouring island of Cuba, then under Spanish rule. They were granted lands in the south-eastern part of the island in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra, at that time largely not settled and eminently suitable for coffee growing because of its climate and natural forest cover.

They quickly established coffee plantations (*cafetales*) over a very large area, introducing and improving the techniques and layouts developed in Haiti and elsewhere. They were to be joined by other coffee planters, from Metropolitan France and elsewhere (Catalans, English, Germans, and North Americans, as well as *criollos* from other parts of the region), throughout the 19th century. There was extensive physical and cultural intermingling with the *criollo* population, of Spanish ethnic origin, in the region, and a vigorous multi-ethnic culture developed.

The plantation owners created an elaborate infrastructure of roads and water management in this difficult physical environment, in order to service their enterprises. Much of this survives to the present day, in the form of mountain roads and bridges.

From the late 19th century onwards coffee production began in other parts of Latin America, such as Brazil, Colombia, and Costa Rica. New techniques were introduced, based on developed agricultural systems, and the early plantations in eastern Cuba found themselves unable to compete in the growing world markets. They gradually closed down, and now only a handful survive in production using the traditional techniques in the region.

Description

The nominated property consists of an area of 81,475ha (but see below, under "Management"), within which the remains of 171 historic coffee plantations have been identified, in varying states of preservation. They are to be found on the steep and rugged slopes of mountain valleys in this region of the Sierra Maestra.

The traditional plantation consists of a number of basic elements. Its centre is the residence of the owner, surrounded

by much more modest accommodation for the slaves, both domestic and agricultural. The owner's house always dominates the main industrial element, the terraced drying floor (*secadero*), on which the coffee beans were spread and steeped in water (using the so-called "wet pulping" method) in preparation for subsequent processing. There is also a group of buildings for production processes, including mills for the separation of the coffee beans from the dried fruit and roasting. On the larger plantations are to be found workshops for working wood and metal, and sometimes lime-kilns (as at San Luis de Jacas).

The plantations are linked by clearly defined roads, fully metalled within the boundaries of the plantations themselves. Outside the plantations the roads are less well prepared, but they were clearly adequate for the transport of coffee by mule from the plantations to Santiago de Cuba for further treatment and shipment abroad. They also served as means of communication between the plantations themselves, since there was a strong community spirit among the French planters. Sturdy stone bridges were built to span the many mountain streams, notably the still extent Carmen bridge, and many others built in wood may well have existed, though have not survived. Elaborate channels, often built as arcaded aqueducts (as at San Luis de Jacas), and sluices conduct water from natural streams and springs for irrigation and process purposes, and many of the plantations that have been studied have large stone-built cisterns for water storage.

Coffee trees require shade, and so they were planted under the cover of the natural forest trees. In addition, cleared areas were interplanted with coffee and fruit trees, such as citrus fruits, guava, and other tropical fruits, which provided a source of food for the plantation owners and their slaves. The occurrence of concentrations of fruit trees is one of the most useful indicators of the presence of the remains of an early plantation in the immediate vicinity. There were plots attached to the houses, in which vegetables and other crops could be raised for the use of the owners' households. In some cases there were also flower gardens in the French style for the relaxation of the plantation owners and their families: one of these has been restored at San Juan de Escocia. There is evidence that basic crops such as maize were also grown in cleared fields around the plantations, but these have been swallowed up by the vigorous forest cover of the region.

The owners' houses were substantial structures, the general style of which is thought to have originated in the Basque region of France, but adapted to the requirements of a tropical climate. Constructed largely in wood, on stone foundations, and with shingled roofs, they had rooms for living and sleeping, often decorated according to prevailing fashions. A number were equipped with fireplaces (eg Jaguey) and rudimentary sanitary facilities. They were usually surrounded by a ditch of some kind, for protective purposes. Their kitchens were sited in separate structures, close to the main house. A characteristic plantation owner's house has been fully restored at La Isabelica and furnished with contemporary materials.

Less is known about the houses or huts of the slaves. Evidence in the form of postholes and beaten floors indicates that these were flimsy structures of wood and branches, probably roofed with branches and leaves. Scanty finds from archaeological excavations give an indication of the very low standard of living of these workers.

For the most part, however, the elements that make up this nomination are no more than ruins in dense woodland that is very difficult of access. What survives is normally that part constructed in durable materials such as stone and, less frequently, brick. The *secaderos* are immediately recognizable, in the form of large sunken areas surrounded by low walls and linked with cisterns or water channels. Clever use is made of the natural topography so as to minimize physical labour in the production process and facilitate water handling: this is well illustrated at Tres Arroyos.

Apart from the observations made during survey and excavation of some fifty of these sites, most of the information about their original form and the way of life in the plantations comes from the accounts of French and other travellers in the region, from inventories and wills in the rich Cuban and French archives, and from scientific and industrial treatises, especially from the earlier 19th century.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The whole system of coffee plantations (*cafetales*) that make up this nomination is protected as a National Monument under the provisions of the 1977 Law No 1 on the Protection of the Cultural Heritage. All activities that may have an impact of any kind on a property on the National Cultural Heritage Register require the sanction of the National Monuments Commission of the Ministry of Culture. The law provides for consultation between this Ministry and other relevant ministries and government agencies. The coffee plantations were specifically designated by Resolution No 99, promulgated in December 1991.

That part of the nominated area lying within the province of Santiago de Cuba forms part of the Sierra Maestra Grand National Park, created by Law No 27 of January 1980; this established several biosphere reserves which in a number of cases contain *cafetales*. Law No 81 on the Environment, promulgated in July 1997, also applies to the nominated area. Both these statutes provide additional legislative protection for the property.

Management

Overall ownership of the nominated property is vested in the Cuban State, represented by various ministries and agencies.

At the national level, protection and conservation are the responsibility of the National Monuments Commission. This is delegated to the Provincial Cultural Heritage Centres in the provinces of Guantanamo and Santiago de Cuba, with the participation also of the City Curator's Office in Santiago.

The area proposed covers 81,475ha, extending over the two provinces. However, the specific areas of cultural interest are a group of "polygons" defined as a result of systematic field survey. Those in Santiago de Cuba Province (Gran Piedra, Dos Palmas, and Contramaestre) fall within the Sierra Maestra Grand National Park and so are directly managed according to the regulations governing that designated national park. Those in Guantamano Province (Guantanamo, Yateras, and El Salvador) are situated within the Nipe-Sagua-Baracoa mountain ridge area, which has special protection under regional planning regulations.

Tourism development plans are in existence for both provinces and a number of detailed studies have been carried out, notably for Gran Piedra and Felicidad de Yateras. The former has identified six centres for controlled tourist development, linked by defined footpaths (motorized transport in any form is impossible in this area). There is already a modest hotel at Gran Piedra and limited additional facilities are planned at the other centres. However, it should be stressed that the majority of the cultural properties in this nomination are very inaccessible and at virtually no risk from tourist or other forms of intrusion.

There is a series of plans at different administrative levels for the proposed property. They cover economic development, soil use, and similar concerns and are aimed at improving the socio-economic status of the region, whilst at the same time protecting its intrinsic cultural and environmental values. Overall coordination is the responsibility of the National Commission of the Sierra Maestra National Park.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

It was not until the 1940s that the cultural significance of the *cafetales* in eastern Cuba was first examined by a multidisciplinary team from Santiago de Cuba, the Humboldt Group. They initiated a systematic survey of the region, with the objective of producing plans of the remains of the plantations and the roads linking them. In 1960 a member of this group was responsible for starting the restoration of the La Isabelica plantation, which is now a museum.

This work expanded in the 1980s, with the involvement of the Santiago City Curator's Office, the Universidad de Oriente (Architecture Faculty), the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Bacanao National Park. Archaeological work was begun in 1991 at Tres Arroyos by the Universidad de Burdeos, to be joined in due course by other scientific and government bodies. Further restoration projects include the restoration of the Ti Arriba plantation, by the Santiago City Curator's Office. This agency has three working groups who carry out conservation and survey projects in both provinces. It also runs a field training school and assistance in obtaining financing and materials for conservation projects.

The current state of conservation of the 171 *cafetales* in the nomination is considered by the State Party to be good or average in 55% of the cases and poor in 45%. Since most are no more than archaeological sites, the evaluation of "poor" implies for the most part invasion by vegetation, which is causing structural damage, and general deterioration resulting from environmental conditions.

Authenticity

Apart from the restored buildings (La Isabelica, Ti Arriba) and the garden at San Juan de Escocia, where every care has been taken to ensure that authentic materials and techniques are based on meticulous site survey and archival research, the authenticity of the ruined *cafetales* is total.

Of the roads linking the plantations, some are still in use and so have to some extent undergone a measure of upgrading. However, most are no more than tracks or footpaths, used infrequently by local inhabitants or rambblers.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the property in October 1999.

Qualities

The *cafetales* of eastern Cuba represent the remains of an exceptional historic agricultural industry, installed in a remarkably short period in an area of virgin forest. Because of their inaccessibility, resulting from the rugged topography and the heavy forest cover, very considerable traces of the many plantations established in the 19th and early 20th century, now superseded by more modern techniques of production elsewhere in the world, survive and yield unique evidence of this historic industry.

Comparative analysis

The form of coffee production represented by this nomination originated in what is now Haiti, from whence it was brought to Cuba by displaced French plantation owners. Few traces of this type of exploitation remain in Haiti, and certainly not on the massive scale of the remains in eastern Cuba. With the growth of coffee production elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin American region, early forms of production have been obliterated by the application of modern forms of coffee culture. The Cuban group may therefore be considered to be unique in its extent and the completeness of the remains and of the archival material available for their interpretation.

ICOMOS comments

This is an imaginative nomination, illustrative of early European agriculture and technology in the New World. Whilst they are currently well protected, future economic or political changes might well constitute a threat, from uncontrolled tourism or exploitation of the natural resources of the region.

ICOMOS had an initial reservation relating to precisely what was being proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List. A group of "polygons" in the provinces of Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo were defined within a much larger area of more than 800km². The nomination dossier commented that this "coincides with the proposed buffer zone," adding that "it was considered that both areas coincide, as we take into account that in drawing the plan for every polygon ... the buffer zone was included."

Strict adherence to past procedure would insist that only the "polygons" be inscribed on the World Heritage List, with the boundaries of the 800km² area constituting those of the buffer zone. However, in this case there appeared to ICOMOS to be justification for inscribing the entire area without a buffer zone as such. The "polygons" are in effect search areas within which the remains of *cafetales* have been identified; their boundaries are therefore arbitrary, and without historical or contemporary administrative significance. It is also not inconceivable that, as research continues, more remains will be discovered outside the existing "polygons."

Given the strong legislative protection in force in the region, and in particular in the Sierra Maestra Grand National Park, it therefore appeared to ICOMOS that it would be desirable for the entire area to be inscribed on the List, without a

buffer zone. Revised maps were subsequently submitted to ICOMOS which complied fully with its proposals regarding the revision of the boundaries of the nominated property.

Brief description

The remains of the 19th century coffee plantations in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra are unique evidence of a pioneer form of agriculture in a difficult terrain. They throw considerable light on the economic, social, and technological history of the Caribbean and Latin American region.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii and iv*:

Criterion iii The remains of the 19th and early 20th century coffee plantations in eastern Cuba are unique and eloquent testimony to a form of agricultural exploitation of virgin forest, the traces of which have disappeared elsewhere in the world.

Criterion iv The production of coffee in eastern Cuba during the 19th and early 20th centuries resulted in the creation of a unique cultural landscape, illustrating a significant stage in the development of this form of agriculture.

ICOMOS, September 2000