

Tomb of Askia (Mali)

No 1139

1. BASIC DATA

<i>State Party:</i>	Mali
<i>Name of property:</i>	Tomb of Askia
<i>Location:</i>	Gao Region
<i>Date received:</i>	24 January 2003

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 *site*.

Brief description:

The dramatic pyramidal structure of Le Tombeau des Askia built by Askia Mohamed the Emperor of Songhai in 1495 in his capital Gao, is testimony to the power and riches of the Empire that flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries through its control of the trans Saharan trade.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

Le Tombeau des Askia is the central commanding feature of the Great Mosque of Gao, which dominates the northern end of the town of Gao situated next to the River Niger. The Tomb was built by Askia Mohamed when Gao became the capital of the Songhai Empire and after he had returned from Mecca and made Islam the official religion of the Empire.

The nominated site consists of the tomb and mosque surrounded by a wall, which in turn is set within a large open walled enclosure. Beyond the outer walls are town roads and houses. The site is surrounded on all sides by a small buffer zone. This is divided into two areas: protection and priority protection. The latter covers the area to the west between the tomb and the river and part of the area to the north.

The town surrounding the site still consists largely of traditional mud walled, flat roofed houses within courtyards laid out in a regular, rectilinear plan. The mosque and the surrounding old town of Gao are together one of the great sites in central Mali, and appear as a seemingly tiny oasis at the southern end of the Sahara desert.

The site covers 4.25 ha. The surrounding buffer zone is 82 ha.

The site consists of the following:

- *The pyramidal tomb*
- *Two flat roofed mosque buildings*

- *The mosque cemetery*
- *The open air assembly ground*

The pyramidal tomb

The large stepped, pyramidal tomb some 17 metres in height is constructed of mud bricks faced with mud plaster. At its base it measures 17 by 15 metres. Gnarled scaffolding timbers project out from the face of the tomb and allow easy access for re-plastering. On the east side is a winding external stair leading to the summit.

The forest of scaffolding timbers, and the sculpted lines of the building, which have developed over centuries of re-plastering, combine to create a unique architectural piece.

Two flat roofed mosque buildings

On the east side of the tomb is a large flat-roofed prayer hall for men, approximately 50 metres by 15 metres. The roof, of timber poles covered with mud, is supported by 69 stout, square, closely spaced, plastered mud-brick pillars arranged in four rows. The middle of the easternmost wall of the sanctuary is punctured by a double-niched mihrab, a distinctive feature of West African Islamic architecture.

The building is part of the wall surrounding the tomb.

On the west side is a similar, but smaller, prayer hall for women.

The mosque cemetery

Outside the inner wall surrounding the tomb and mosque is a large cemetery dating from the time of Askia, with many inscribed stone stelae. It continued in use until the end of the 1980s.

The open-air assembly ground

The whole of the east side of the larger enclosure, amounting to about one hectare, is an open space used for collective prayers on the occasion of the festival of Tabaski. It has also been regularly used since the 15th century for other cultural uses, such as local marriages where Islamic ceremonies were intertwined with earlier 'animist' traditions associated with a white stone 'Tondi kara'.

History

Gao is one of the ancient towns of Africa south of the Sahara. Probably founded at the end of the 7th century, by the 11th century it appears in Arab chronicles as Kaw Kaw. In 1137 it became the capital of the Songhai Empire.

The construction of the tomb is attributed to Mohamed Aoubacar Sylla, nephew of Sonni Ali Ber who reigned from 1464 to 1492 and extended the limits of the Songhai Empire through numerous battles against nomadic Tuaregs, Peuls and Mossi who were harassing the edges of the Empire. On the death of Sonni Ali Ber, his nephew Mohamed Aoubacar Sylla, known as Askia Mohamed, inaugurated the Askia dynasty.

Askia Mohamed continued the expansionist policies of his uncle and extended the Empire to the Atlantic coast in the west, to Air in the north (now in Niger) and south to the limits of the forest. The prosperity of the Empire was based on control of the trans-Saharan routes to the north,

of routes from the forest in the south, and of the gold and salt trade that plied them. The Empire was a successor to the earlier empires of Ghana and Mali, which similarly prospered through control of the valuable trade routes.

It is said that Askia Mohamed on passing through Egypt on his pilgrimage to Mecca was much impressed by the Pyramids and decided on his return to construct a pyramidal tomb. However the tomb could also be said to be part of a very long Saharan tradition of prominent ancestral tumuli or tomb mounds erected over graves from as early as the first millennium BC. This style could also have been influenced by square, three-stepped stairway minarets of the Ibadite zawiyas, or holy shrines, of the Mzab region of southern Algeria, a link perhaps strengthened by numerous Ibadi scholars hosted by Askia Mohamed.

During the reign of Askia Mohamed, the Songhai Empire became, with Tombouctou, the intellectual and religious centre of West Africa, developing strong cultural and commercial links with North Africa, Europe and the Middle East.

Internal strife and the growing importance of sea routes to West Africa in the 16th century led to the gradual decline of the Empire. By the mid 19th century it had become a village of three to four hundred houses with only one remaining monument: the Tomb of Askia.

There is debate over whether Askia Mohamed was interred in the tomb when he died in 1529. The general belief in Gao is that his body is not there and he was buried away from the site altogether.

The tomb seems always to have been used as part of the mosque – it is said that its name *Askia Djira*, literally the Mosque of Askia, was one by which it was known until the colonial era.

In the 1960s the men's prayer hall was judged to be too small and was enlarged. Two new rows of columns were constructed alongside the four original rows. In 1975 the building was further enlarged to absorb the mihrab, originally isolated in the courtyard. All this work was done using traditional techniques and materials and blends well with the original.

The largest change to the site is the construction in 1999 of a large cement boundary wall. This was apparently necessary to keep control of uses within the site.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The site is public property.

The site was listed on the national inventory of Mali, 1954 in October 2003. This is the principle means for protecting cultural sites in Mali and brings sites under the control of various laws including the 1985 Law for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage.

In order for the proposed Buffer Zone to be effective, it needs to be confirmed by municipal decree and this was put in place in February 2004. If the Buffer Zone is not only to protect the site but also its setting through

sustaining the 'harmony between the tomb and its urban setting' of traditional Soudan-Sahelian urban housing, an aim of the Management Plan, stronger proactive measures will also be needed. The means to achieve these appear to be the Urbanisation Plan for Gao and its environs, which needs to be amended to specifically protect the Tomb and the character of its surroundings. The State Party has indicated that this will be achieved during 2004.

A re-drafting of the urbanisation plan for the whole of the town of Gao is in the course of preparation by the Direction Régionale de l'Urbanisme. The current plan was approved 20 years ago and has been revised every five years.

Management structure:

The management of the site is under the supervision of an Association set up by the Prefect of Gao in 2002. This consists of representatives of all the key stakeholders including the Imam, the Muezzin, and representatives of the Regional Agency for Arts and Culture in Gao, and the Regional and Local Commissions for Safeguarding Cultural Heritage.

The Association has no statutory basis but has strong moral authority by virtue of the involvement of the Imam, and the Chief of Songhai.

A Management Plan has been prepared under the Direction of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage in Mali in collaboration with two experts from CRATerre-EAG, the Centre for Earth Studies at the University of Grenoble, France, as part of the Africa 2009 Programme. This was finalised in 2002. It covers economic social and cultural aspects of the town of Gao and aims to coordinate the work of all the stakeholders. The creation of the plan has been an involving process for local communities and key decision makers who were consulted in a series of meetings in the courtyard of the tomb.

The plan is an aspirational document that aims to:

- Assure the legal protection of the site and maintain the harmony with the urban fabric of Gao
- Work to sustain the traditional maintenance and improve the conservation of the site
- Promote an understanding of the site to visitors and through education programmes
- Put in place a management structure to deliver the plan

Resources:

There is no formal budget for the management of the site. Nevertheless it is stated that generous donations are usually found to carry out necessary work. The population of Gao see it as their duty to help in work on the maintenance of the site.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

The tomb of Askia is:

- An exemplar of Soudan-Sahelian architecture
- A reflection of the riches of the Songhai Empire

- Closely associated with the identity of the town of Gao and its key festivals
- A testimony to the presence of Islam in the territory of Songhai
- Reflects interchange between civilisations of Berber Arabs, Ancient Egypt and Songhai.
- Symbolises the fusion between Islam and earlier animist traditions
- Testimony to a huge range of 'ethnic' groups involved in its construction

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS evaluation mission visited the site in August 2003.

ICOMOS has also consulted its International Scientific Committee on the Study and Conservation of Earthen Architecture.

Conservation

Conservation history:

The tomb has undergone regular replastering since it was first constructed. This has probably altered significantly the shape of the building but also added to its singular appearance.

In recent years new materials have begun to be used for some aspects of the buildings such as metal for doors, cement to face steps, and metal as replacement for the ceramic projecting rainwater spouts. Cement first appeared on the steps in 1961-2. These alterations are however reversible and will be reversed as set out in the Management Plan. At the same time efforts are being put into identifying sources of plants and trees that match the original materials used.

State of conservation:

The state of conservation of the monument is good – apart from the inappropriate materials mentioned above which can be reversed.

Risk analysis:

The following are mentioned in the dossier:

Urban change / pressure:

The greatest threat to the site is from erosion of its traditional urban setting through development. Several parts of the buffer zone are said to be owned by 'speculators'. The legal definition of the buffer zone and monitoring its role through the Urban Plan will be crucial to sustaining the traditional urban character of the setting of the tomb.

Tourist pressure:

The numbers of peoples visiting the site is controlled and visitor numbers are not considered to be a problem from the point of view of damaging the fabric.

It is said that *environmental factors* and *natural catastrophes* are not a problem.

Authenticity and integrity

Authenticity:

The monument is not unaltered since the time of its construction. However it is an example of a building that has gradually been altered through the forces of traditional maintenance and repair, and has been enhanced using local building traditions, initiated from within the local community. It therefore has authenticity in respect of its reflection of a strong and persistent local culture of mud architecture, which needs regular maintenance and repair.

There are minor losses of authenticity related to the adoption of new materials for steps and gutter spouts: these are reversible and their reversal is an aim of the management plan.

Integrity:

The site has strong integrity in that all the components of the mosque building are still in place and it is still related visually, socially and culturally (including the persistence of local architectural traditions) to the surrounding town.

Comparative evaluation

The nomination offers comparators for the building within the area of West Africa ruled by the Empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai. It stresses that the Tomb is part of an extensive tradition of monumental mud buildings including the Mosque of Djenne, rebuilt 1907, the mosque of Agadez, rebuilt between 1905 and 1907 and the earlier mosques of Sankore and Djingaraiber in Timbuktu of 1300 and 1325 respectively. (The towns of Djenne and Timbuktu were both inscribed on the World Heritage list in 1988).

It does not mention the extension of this tradition east to the cities of Kano, Zaria and Sokoto in what is now northern Nigeria.

The nomination stresses the individual importance of the tomb of Askia as being connected to its pyramidal form, which distinguishes it from other mosques and minarets, and it relates this form to the Egyptian and the Arab-Berber cultures of north Africa.

However the pyramidal form is evident in other buildings, notably the mosque of Agadez; Gao is more truncated but this could be because it was originally higher. It could be argued that the whole of the Islamic building traditions of West Africa have links with North Africa. What singles out the tomb and mosque of Gao from other structures would seem to be its association with Askia Mohamed and the power and wealth of the Empire of Songhai.

Although Timbuktu flourished under the Songhai Empire, many of its buildings were first built under the Empire of Mali. Gao was the capital of Songhai and the mosque and tomb are associated with Askia Mohamed under whom Songhai achieved its greatest prosperity.

Outstanding universal value

The tomb of Askia has outstanding universal value for:

- Its reflection of the once great wealth and influence of the Songhai Empire which controlled the trans-Saharan salt and gold trade as a successor to the Empire of Mali
- Its association with Askia Mohamed under whom the Songhai Empire achieved its greatest influence
- Its architectural form of tomb/minaret, prayer halls, cemetery and assembly ground which together have survived as an entity and are still in use
- As an exemplar of the monumental mud building traditions of the West African sahel
- For its strong links with the traditional housing in its urban setting

General statement:

The tomb of Askia has been nominated on the basis of *criteria ii, iii, iv and vi*.

Evaluation of criteria:

Criterion ii: The tomb of Askia reflects the way Islam was adopted in west Africa, and how local building traditions absorbed influences from North Africa to meet Islamic needs and in the process created a unique architectural form across the west African sahel as a whole, of which the tomb of Askia is a fine example.

Criterion iii: The tomb of Askia is an important vestige of the Empire of Songhai, which once dominated the sahel lands of West Africa and controlled the lucrative trans-Saharan trade.

Criterion iv: The tomb of Askia reflects the distinctive architectural tradition of the West African sahel and in particular exemplifies the way buildings evolve over centuries through regular, traditional, maintenance practices.

Criterion vi: The nomination stresses the link between the tomb and local ceremonies and rituals connected with worship, marriages and death and the perpetuation of ancient animist traditions. It would however be difficult to justify this association as being of outstanding universal value.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for the future

Since the Nomination was submitted the tomb of Askia is has been protected by national Malian law and the buffer zone has been officially recognised by municipal statute. The State Party has furthermore indicated that use of the site and its buffer zone will be regulated through prescriptions within the local Gao urban plan.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

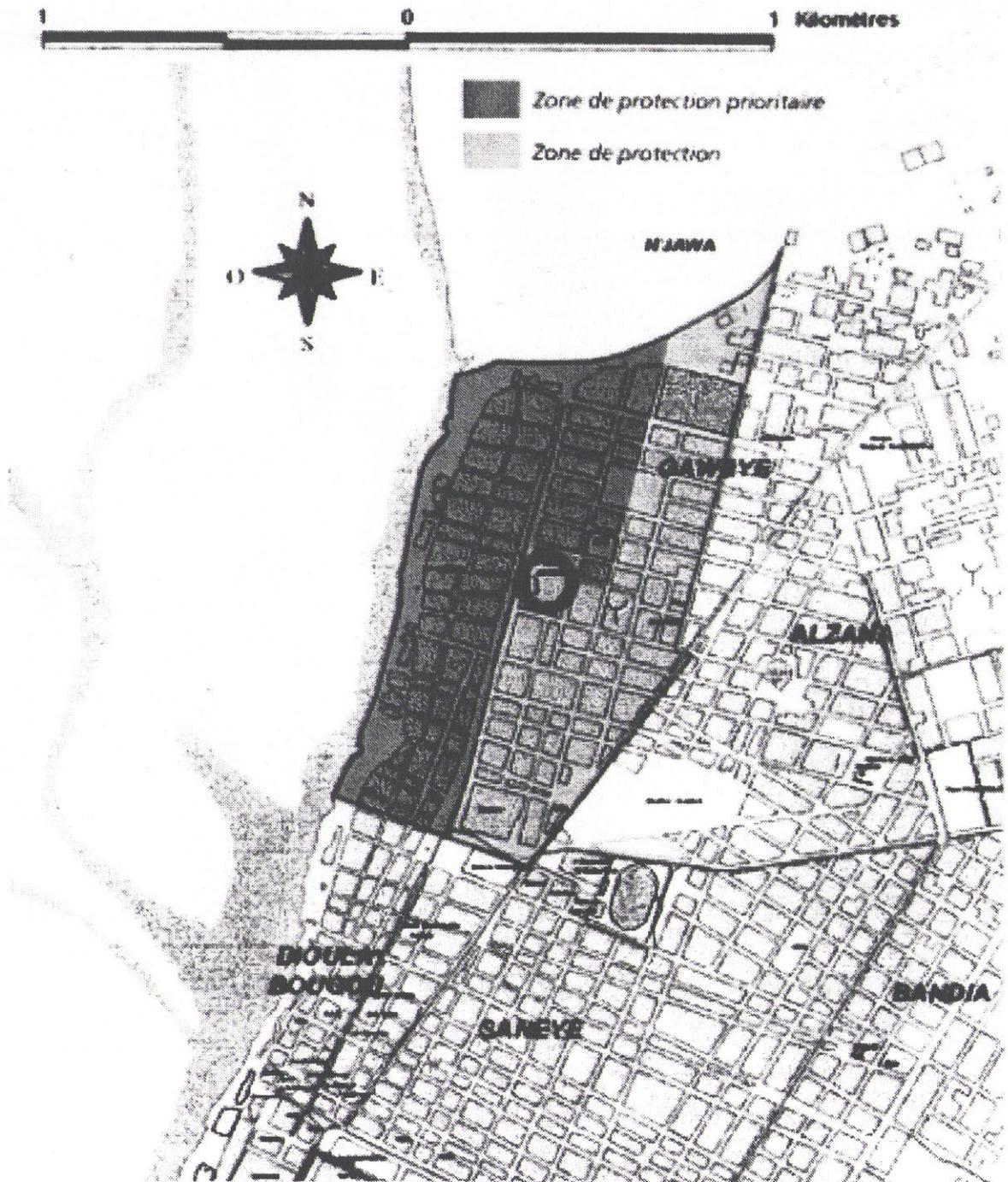
That the property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii, iii and iv*:

Criterion ii: The Tomb of Askia reflects the way local building traditions in response to Islamic needs absorbed influences from North Africa to create a unique architectural style across the West African sahel.

Criterion iii: The tomb of Askia is an important vestige of the Empire of Songhai, which once dominated the sahel lands of West Africa and controlled the lucrative trans-Saharan trade.

Criterion iv: The tomb of Askia reflects the distinctive architectural tradition of the West African sahel and in particular exemplifies the way buildings evolve over centuries through regular, traditional, maintenance practices.

ICOMOS, March 2004



Map showing the buffer zone of the nominated property
Plan de délimitation de la zone tampon du bien proposé pour inscription