

Koutammakou (Togo)

No 1140

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: Togo

Name of property: Koutammakou the Land of the Batammariba

Location: Kara Region

Date received: 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*. In terms of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, paragraph 39, this is a *cultural landscape*.

Brief description:

The Koutammakou landscape in northeastern Togo (and extending over the border into neighbouring Benin) is home to the Batammariba whose remarkable tall, mud tower houses have come to be seen as a symbol of Togo. Within their landscape, nature is strongly associated with the rituals and beliefs of society, and there is a strong interrelationship between symbolism, function and traditional practices.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

Koutammakou is the name of a large area of semi-mountainous country in the north east of Togo along the border with Benin. It is inhabited by the Batammariba people whose culture, revolves around tall, mud tower houses called ‘Takienta’.

The beauty of these tower houses and their density has given them a high profile in west Africa where they have come to be almost as well known as the Dogon houses of the Bandiagara escarpment in Mali.

The Tammari culture extends over the border into Benin. Within Togo, the nominated site covers around 50,000 ha and joins the border between Togo and Benin for 15 km. The border thus cuts the overall cultural landscape area into two.

No Buffer Zone is suggested as the large site is defined by natural boundaries to the north and south, the Atakora mountains and the Keran River respectively, and an international boundary to the east.

The Koutammakou as an evolving living landscape exhibits all the facets of an agricultural society working in harmony with the landscape and where nature underpins beliefs, ritual and everyday life.

The Koutammakou landscape exhibits the following qualities:

- *The Takienta tower houses as architecture*
- *The Takienta tower-houses as a reflection of social structure*
- *Farmland & Forest*
- *Intangible associations between people and landscape*

These are dealt with separately:

The Takienta tower houses as architecture

Mud building traditions are widespread over West Africa and there are many dozens of different styles of building reflecting differing cultural, social or agricultural systems, and the underlying geology and physical features of different areas.

The Takienta tower-houses, because of their dramatic ‘coalesced’ form that gives them what may be perceived as aesthetic beauty, have come to be better known than most.

In many parts of Africa houses consist of a collection of separate buildings within an enclosure with each building becoming in effect a room of the homestead. In Koutammakou these separate buildings are joined to the surrounding mud wall. Furthermore the mud walls are built up in layers, which give them a pronounced effect of horizontal stripes. Some of the buildings have flat roofs; others are crowned with steeply pitched conical thatched roofs, which project above the surrounding walls. Many of the buildings have two stories. In the case of granaries their almost spherical form swells out above cylindrical bases. The separate rooms house domestic functions, kitchens, bedrooms, store rooms, and also provide space for granaries and animal shelters.

Because of their dramatic form, Takienta tower-houses have been widely photographed over the past 120 years. Some of these early photographs – not shown in the dossier – depict much larger complexes than exist today, with as many as twenty buildings making up homesteads compared with around eight now.

The Takienta tower-houses as a reflection of social structure

Takienta tower-houses reflect the social structure of the villages: they are built to meet the needs of those living in them today. The houses themselves may therefore not be of any great age. However their form, and the techniques used in their construction, reflect a long tradition – perhaps extending back at least to when the Batammariba people are thought to have arrived in northern Togo. Villages reflect clan allegiances with clans being associated with groups of houses, but also with ceremonial spaces, springs, rocks and sites reserved for initiation ceremonies. Within Koutammakou villages the houses are relatively widely dispersed. It is said that the distance between houses is determined by the flight of an arrow.

Just as houses are renewed, a completely new village may be created in response to needs of space or perhaps clan conflicts. New villages are modelled on the first village ‘Kuye’ created by divine intervention. To ensure that a new village is in harmony with its surroundings, a

sanctuary is first created for the 'Dibo' the natural forces of the landscape with whom the villagers must work. And lastly a central ritual Grand House of ceremonies is constructed with an altar and cemetery.

Farmland & Forest

Although there is strong collaboration between villagers in the way villages are laid out, each family unit functions independently as an agricultural unit: there are no communal fields or grazing. But the resources of land and forest are in effect shared between clans and social forces work to level out productivity.

The villages are situated between a chain of mountains, the Atakora, and the vast plains of central northern Togo, the plain of Keran. Overall the houses are positioned at the foot of hills in order to optimise the availability of agricultural land.

The land is fertile and the farmers practise mixed farming, growing grain and keeping animals – particularly cows for which the area is known. Some of the fields are terraces on the hills.

Intangible associations between people and landscape

The way a house is laid out has strong symbolic associations with the human body. For instance the door is seen as the mouth, the windows as eyes, the granary as the stomach, etc while the decoration on the walls is related to scarification on skin.

In the villages, Takienta houses alternate with forests and heaps of rocks, preserved for the spiritual associations with the Dibo, and revered as incarnations of the numerous divinities that make up the Tammari pantheon.

History

The Batammariba are linguistically associated with other people in the area such as the Gangan, Gurma, Moba, Bassar, Nawda, etc.

The origins of the Batammariba are somewhat uncertain. Archaeological investigations and oral history indicates that the Batammariba migrated to their present home from the north and northwest around Burkino Faso where they were living with the Mossi people sometime between the 16th and 18th centuries.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The dossier states that the Koutammakou area benefits from two types of protection: modern legal protection and traditional protection.

Modern legal protection is provided by registration under the Law for the protection of Cultural Heritage in Togo, 1990. For the site to be registered a decree has to be issued which identifies the qualities of the site. The decree was issued in October 2003. This identifies the site as consisting of both tangible and intangible elements. Listed are sacred rocks, forests, houses, fields, sources of building material, animals, both wild and domesticated, and intangible components such as beliefs, artisanal skills, songs, dances, traditional sports, etc.

As with many rural areas the nominated site is subject to pressures for change. The traditional land management practices need to be supported by an overall protective legal framework within which they can operate.

The dossier notes the following traditional practices – which thus cover not only technical processes but also social observances that impact on land management.

- Respect for ancestral spirits
- Observance of taboos and restrictions
- Absolute obeisance to elders, religious and clan chiefs
- Continuation of traditional rules reaffirmed through initiation ceremonies
- The careful proscribed roles every member of a clan has
- The perpetration of respect for tangible and intangible values associated with the landscape

All of these are beginning to have an associated material value, too, as more and more tourists visit the area drawn to it by its well-managed beauty.

Management structure:

Overall responsibility for management will lie with the Service de Conservation and Promotion du Koutammakou (SCPK) to which responsibilities will be delegated by the Department of Museums, Sites and Monuments in Lome. The management plan recommended the creation of this association and the timetable given for its formation is March 2004. The SCPK will be responsible for:

- Safeguarding the site – including regeneration of local species, the conservation of habitats, the protection of medicinal species
- Undertaking an inventory of tangible and intangible qualities
- Development of revenue making activities
- Providing information for visitors
- Organising cultural activities

The Management Plan also recommended the formation of a stakeholder Committee for the area to be established as a legal entity. Information was provided by the State Party in March 2004 that the necessary legal decree had been issued on 3rd March 2004. This sets out that the Committee will consist of representatives from National, prefectural and local level and will include heritage professional, representatives of the tourist industry, local Chiefs and a member of the Batammariba.

A management plan has been prepared jointly by the Department of Museums, Sites and Monuments in collaboration with CRATerre-EAG, the Department of Earth Studies at the University of Grenoble, France, as part of the Africa 2009 programme.

This plan is both aspirational and detailed. It sets out a Vision for the site and gives detailed recommendation with timescales for the establishment of structures, budgets and projects for promotion and cultural events.

Resources:

There is currently no budget for the site but the Management Plan sets out the need for defined spending and suggests how income might be raised from a shop and from payments by visitors for entering the site.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

Koutammakou is of outstanding universal value for the way it:

- Represents the way of life of local people in the Sahel region of West Africa, particularly those who have remained independent from the various empires which held sway in the area, such as the Lobi, Gourounsi and Rukuba peoples in mountainous areas between the Cote d'Ivoire and Cameroun.
- Shows how people live in harmony with the landscape respecting its qualities and imbuing it with spiritual values
- Displays the remarkable Takienta family houses – unique clusters of tall mud towers, which reflect a complete interaction between symbolism, function and techniques.
- Demonstrates willingness and persistence of the Batammariba people to conserve their independence and identity and work towards sustaining a living landscape

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS 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 only conservation history is one of traditional conservation which, as has been pointed out above, means renewal and re-building using traditional materials and processes rather than conserving objects, monuments and specific sites. It also means sustaining the overall dynamic relationship between people and place.

State of conservation:

The state of conservation of the built structures seems good; the natural environment has suffered from some over-exploitation. For instance, it is now getting very difficult to find sufficient timber for new houses close to the villages.

Risk analysis:

The following threats are identified in the dossier:

Development pressures

An increase in population is leading to increased pressure on land and other resources and there is no immediate way of countering this.

The government of Togo has been promoting the growing of cash crops. In some places this has led to an over intensification of cotton growing which has been detrimental to the production of food crops.

The introduction of new materials and demands for 'western' products are seen to be threatening to the traditional way of life.

Environmental change

As has already been mentioned pressure is being put on natural resources, particularly the forests, but also fish.

Natural catastrophes

Drought is one of the greatest threats. Termites seem not to affect traditional buildings but do affect modern ones.

Increases in tourism

Tourist numbers are low as only a few houses are registered. The tourists nevertheless bring considerable monetary benefit to the area but this is not without its disbenefits. Some tourists are too curious, and there is reported friction between guides and hosts, for instance.

All of these factors will come within the purview of the management plan.

Other factors are mentioned in the Management plan are:

The spread of Christianity, which is beginning to have an effect on local beliefs, and the introduction of new health medicines which is beginning to lead to an atrophying of traditional medicinal practice.

What could also have been added is the loss of traditional skills – both knowledge and practical skills. Sustaining the way of life of the site demands a continuation of traditional skills both for agriculture and for house building.

Authenticity and integrity

Authenticity:

The Koutammakou landscape is an authentic reflection of a distinctive way of life. No elements in the landscape are of any great age: rather the overall landscape reflects processes and practices that have persisted for many centuries.

Integrity:

The overall landscape of Koutammakou reflects every aspect of life of the Batammariba: it thus reflects a socio-economic-cultural system, which is contained in the nominated site – although the same system continues over the border into Benin. Thus the site does not represent the overall integrity of the system, rather it is part of it.

Comparative evaluation

The comparative analysis in the dossier is limited. It draws attention to the inscribed site of the Dogon people on the Bandiagara escarpment but concludes that there are major differences: the Dogon villages are compact and the social systems quite different.

The dossier say that there are similar cultures to those within the Koutammakou landscape within the region but suggests that nowhere else is there a totally integrated system covering religious, functional social and 'intelligent' techniques.

This is perhaps to overstate the case. There are many societies in West Africa, and over Africa more generally, that developed cultural systems that worked in harmony with the landscape, and where social and spiritual beliefs supported sustainable practices. Where the Koutammakou landscape is different is in the way the system of the Batammariba manifested itself in such dramatic houses in aesthetically pleasing landscapes. Its comparative remoteness also fostered a sense of independence and meant that the area remained largely outside the various empires that held sway. These two factors have led to a strong sense of identity and to value being placed on the landscape both by people who live there and those who now visit. Thus the identity has been reinforced.

The area is therefore now of interest as a landscape where traditional practices have persisted, in contrast to other areas where they may have atrophied, and where that landscape delivers an attractive and viable way of life.

Outstanding universal value

The Koutammakou area is of outstanding universal value for the following combination of cultural qualities:

- For the tradition of building Takienta – tall mud tower houses, only found in this small area of northern Togo and Benin
- For the way the area reflects ancient traditions of mountain peoples across west Africa who resisted incorporation in the various empires
- For the way the strong socio-economic-cultural systems of the Batammariba demonstrate a sustainable approach to land management and one that is based on spiritual respect for the landscape

General statement:

The site is nominated on the basis of *criteria i, iii, v and vi*.

Evaluation of criteria:

Criterion i: The nomination sites the creation of Takienta tower house as representative of collective creative genius and one that is renewed every generation. This is not how this criterion is usually applied – rather it is used to reflect the output of an individual rather than societies.

Criterion iii: The nomination sites Koutammakou as being representative of those mountain peoples in the sahel area of West Africa who have resisted incorporation into the various empires that held sway. This would include the

Dogon whose villages are already inscribed, and also the Sukur landscape in the Mandara mountains of Nigeria. There is insufficient comparative analysis to support this criterion.

Criterion v: The Koutammakou is certainly an outstanding example of a system of traditional settlement which is still living and dynamic, and subject to traditional systems and practices, and which reflects in particular the singular culture of the Batammariba.

Criterion vi: The Koutammakou is an eloquent testimony to the strength of spiritual association between people and landscape as manifested in the way the system of land management of the Batammariba is in harmony with the natural resources of their surroundings

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for the future

The Koutammakou is clearly a place where traditional regulations and practices are key to the sustainability of the property. These need to be sustained and the management plan aims to put measure in place appropriate measures. However, local management also needs to be supported at a national level. Although the site at the moment reflects traditional practices, there are nevertheless growing pressures which will work against its relatively self-contained status. Management needs to be proactive as well as reactive in order to optimise resources. Nevertheless sanctions do need to be in place as well to counter any major and unforeseen threats that may arise, and this is where protective legislation should support local management.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

That the property be inscribed on the World Heritage List as a *cultural landscape* and on the basis of **criteria v and vi**:

Criterion v: The Koutammakou is an outstanding example of a system of traditional settlement that is still living and dynamic, and subject to traditional and sustainable systems and practices, and which reflects the singular culture of the Batammariba, particularly the Takienta tower houses.

Criterion vi: The Koutammakou is an eloquent testimony to the strength of spiritual association between people and landscape, as manifested in the harmony between the Batammariba and their natural surroundings

ICOMOS, March 2004