

Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove (Nigeria)

No 1118

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: Nigeria
Name of property: Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove
Location: Osogbo, Osun State
Date received: 2 February 2004
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, it could also be a *cultural landscape*.

Brief description:

The dense forest of the Osun Sacred Grove, on the outskirts of Osogbo, some of the last remnants of primary high forest in southern Nigeria, are the abode of Osun, the goddess of fertility, or the waters of life, one of the pantheon of Yoruba gods. Through the forest meanders the river Osun, and set within the forest sanctuary are shrines, sculptures and art works erected in honour of Osun and other Yoruba deities, many created in the past forty years by Suzanne Wenger and fellow New Sacred Art artists. The new work has revitalised the Grove, which is now seen as a symbol of identity for all Yoruba people.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The Osun sacred Grove covers 75 ha of ring-fenced forest alongside the Osun River on the outskirts of Osogbo town, about 100 km north-east of Ibadan in Western Nigeria. It is encircled by a buffer zone of 47 ha. Around 2 million people live in Osogbo, which is the capital of Osun State. The community of Osogbo is mainly Yoruba speaking.

The Grove in Yoruba cosmology is the domicile of Osun, the goddess of fertility, who was metamorphosed into a river as a result of a misunderstanding between her and another co-wife of Sango, the god of thunder and lightning. She inhabits the Grove alongside the meandering Osun River.

Within the Grove, one of the few remaining vestiges of high primary forest in southern Nigeria, ritual paths lead devotees to forty shrines, dedicated to Osun and other Yoruba deities, and to nine specific worship points beside the river.

Osun is the Yoruba impersonation of the 'waters of life' and the spiritual mother of the Osogbo township.

The Grove also symbolises a pact between Larooye, the founder of Osogbo, and Osun, that the goddess would give prosperity and protection to her people if they built a shrine to her and respected the spirit of the forest. The

Grove is the site of an annual procession in August, to re-establish these mystic bonds between the goddess and the people of the town.

All Yoruba towns once had Sacred Groves, areas of virgin forest reserved for the worship of the gods. Unlike other Yoruba towns whose sacred Groves have atrophied, or disappeared, the Osogbo Grove has, over the past forty years, been re-established as a central, living focus of the town. Shrines have been recreated, or created anew in sacred spaces, by an Austrian émigré, Suzanne Wenger, working with a group of local artists called New Sacred Art, under the patronage of the *Oba* (ruler) of Osogbo. This new art was to support and strengthen traditional religion, making manifest and tangible previously intangible aspects of the Yoruba gods, in a way that staked out the Grove and acted as a powerful force against encroachment of the sacred spaces. At the age of 88, Suzanne Wenger is creating what she regards as her last work in the Grove.

The revitalisation of the Grove at a time when Groves in other Yoruba towns were disappearing, has given the Osogbo Grove much more than local importance. It is now seen as a symbol of identity for all Yoruba people, including those of the African Diaspora, many of whom make pilgrimages to the annual festival.

The property exhibits the following cultural qualities:

- *The Grove with its five sacred spaces and nine worship points*
- *The river*
- *Forty shrines*
- *Two palaces*
- *Annual Osogbo festival*

These are dealt with in turn.

- *The Grove with its five sacred spaces and nine worship points:*

The Grove is a remnant of high primary rain forest, once typical of vast areas of southern West Africa, but now fast disappearing. It is one of the few remaining areas in Nigeria. The Grove has a mature, reasonably undisturbed, forest canopy, which supports a rich and diverse flora and fauna – including the endangered white-throated monkey. Some parts were cleared in the colonial period, and teak plantations and agriculture introduced, but these are now being re-established. 70% is considered to be primary forest.

The Grove is a highly sacred sanctuary where shrines, sculptures and artworks honour Osun and other Yoruba deities.

The Grove has five main sacred divisions, associated with different gods and cults. These five spaces are located either side of a path which transects the Grove from northwest to southeast. Three of these are long established while two are said to have been transferred from Osogbo town in the 1950s, when their existence was threatened by Christian and Islamic religious fundamentalism.

The five sacred spaces are *Oya*, dedicated to Oya, one of Sango's wives; *Oro*, the divine agency connected with winds; *Oruba*, a worship point connected with the Ifa

oracle; *Ifa* dedicated also to the *Ifa* oracle as well as medical herbalists; and *Epa* associated with the cult of hunting, marksmanship, and marshal arts.

➤ *The river:*

The Osun River meanders through the whole Grove and along its length are nine worship points.

The river is a forest river rising in the swampy grounds of Ekiti State to the east and then flowing west to join the Ogun River, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean near Lagos.

Throughout the Grove the broad river is overhung with forest trees. Its waters signify a relationship between nature, the spirits and human beings, reflecting the place given to water in the Yoruba cosmology as symbolising life. The river is thus seen as the 'waters of life' and is believed to have healing, protective and fertility powers.

The fish in the river are said to have been used by the goddess Osun as messengers of peace, blessings and favour at the time of the founding of Osogbo. The annual festival re-enacts this connection.

➤ *Forty shrines:*

Traditionally sacred trees, sacred stones, metal objects together with mud and wood sculptures, defined the various deities in the Grove. During the past forty years, new sculptures have been erected in the place of old ones and giant, immovable ones created in threatened spaces in the Grove by Suzanne Wenger and the New Sacred Art artists.

These sculptures are made from a variety of materials – stone, wood, iron, and cement. Some are freestanding; others are attached to shrine buildings. There are also wall paintings and decorative roofs made from palm fronds.

Of forty shrines, fifteen have been created partly or wholly by Suzanne Wenger. These include the largest works – sculptures in the Obatala shrine complex, the arch of the flying tortoise, shrine of the goddess *Iya Popo*, the Alajogun-Alajere-Obaluaya complex and the creative concept for the main Osun-Osogbo shrine. In many of the main works, Suzanne Wenger has been assisted by Adebisi Akanji who also created four other shrines. Other artists are Saka, Buraimon Gbadamosi, and Ojewole Amoo.

The new work evolved out of the need to repair existing shrines and a campaign to save the Grove from encroachment. Repair spontaneously developed into creative expression and the beginning of the New Sacred Art group of artists. In the past, carving was mostly of wood undertaken by a priest who was from one of the families (Gbenagbena) who had inherited this craft. Only some of the present artists are from Gbenagbena families: the creative process has now been liberated from previous taboos.

The new art not only follows tradition in carving trees to liberate their innate physical reflections of the gods, or moulding sculptures in mud, but has also created new art-forms that give physical manifestation to the gods in mineral rather than vegetable materials such as stone, cement and iron.

The expressionist sculptures are loosely based on human or animal forms but are much less constrained than their

forebears flowing out from a central core into the surrounding forest.

➤ *Two palaces:*

The first palace is part of the main Osun-Osogbo shrine. This is where traditionally Larooye and his people first settled.

The second palace is where Larooye moved to before the community established a new settlement outside the Grove. The Ogboni Cult house stands on the site of this second palace. The Ogboni society is an elitist society of men of influence who wield considerable economic and political power. They hold their meetings in the cult house once a week.

Both buildings are constructed of mud walls with tin roofs supported variously by mud and carved wood pillars. The three Ogboni buildings are constructed with sweeping roofs rising high over the entrances and supported on a cluster of slender carved wooden posts.

➤ *Annual Osogbo festival:*

The Osun-Osogbo festival is a twelve-day event held once a year at the end of July and the beginning of August. The Grove is seen as the repository of kingship, as well as the spiritual heart of the community. The festival invokes the spirits of the ancestor kings and rededicates the present *Oba* to Osun, as well as reaffirming and renewing the bonds between the deities represented in the Grove and the people of Osogbo.

The finale of the festival is a procession of the whole population of Osogbo from the town to the Grove, led by the votary maid Arugba and headed by the *Oba* and priests, all accompanied by drumming, singing and dancing. The procession winds its way first to the main Osun-Osogbo shrine and then to the river where a calabash of sacrifices is offered to the Osun goddess and prayers said for the prosperity of the community. Then with the *Ataoja* (king of Osogbo) seated, traditional chiefs, families and worshippers dance to pay homage to the *Oba* in turn. The *Oba* acknowledges their cheers and blesses his people, praying for their security and peace during the coming year.

History

The town of Osogbo is believed to have been founded around 400 years ago. It is part of the wider Yoruba community, divided into 16 kingdoms, which legend says were ruled by the children of Oduduwa, the mythic founder, whose abode at Ile-Ife, south-east of Osogbo, is still regarded as the spiritual home of the Yoruba people.

The earliest settlement seems to have been in the Osogbo Grove and included palaces and a market. When the population expanded the community moved outside the Grove and created a new town, which reflected spatially the arrangements within the Grove.

In the 1840s Osogbo became a refugee town for people fleeing the Fulani *Jihad*, as it moved south from what is now northern Nigeria. The Yorubas retreated further south into the forests and Osogbo, right at the northern edge of the forest, became an important centre for northern Yorubaland.

The Fulani attacks on Osogbo were repelled and, as a result, Osogbo has become a symbol of pride for all the Yorubas.

During the first half of the 20th century, the town of Osogbo expanded considerably. In 1914 British colonial rule began. As it was delivered under a system of indirect rule through traditional rulers, the authority of the *Oba* and priests were sustained. A greater change was brought about from the middle of the 19th century through the introduction of both Islam and Christianity. Islam became the religion of traders and ruling houses – as it gave contacts to northern trade routes and links to returning ex-slaves from Central and South America. For a while all three religions co-existed but as time went by it became less fashionable to be identified with the Ogboni and Osun cults.

By the 1950s the combined political and religious changes were having a marked detrimental effect on the Grove: customary responsibilities and sanctions were weakening, shrines were becoming neglected and traditional priests began to disappear. All this was exacerbated by a rise in the looting of statues and movable sculptures to feed an antiquities market. At around this time part of the Grove was acquired by the Department of Agriculture and Forestry for agricultural experiments. Trees were felled and teak plantations established; sculptures were reportedly stolen and hunting and fishing begun to be recorded – previously forbidden in the sacred Grove.

It was at this crucial point in the history of the Grove that Austrian born Suzanne Wenger moved to Osogbo and, with the encouragement of the *Oba* and the support from local people, formed the New Sacred Art movement to challenge land speculators, repel poachers, protect shrines and begin the long process of bringing the sacred place back to life through once again establishing it as the sacred heart of Osogbo.

The artists deliberately created large, heavy and fixed sculptures in iron, cement and mud, as opposed to the smaller traditional wooden ones, in order that their intimidatory architectural forms would help to protect the Grove and stop thefts. All the sculptures have been done in full respect for the spirit of the place, with inspiration from Yoruba mythology and in consultations with the gods in a traditional context.

The new work has made the Grove a symbol of identity for the Yoruba people. Many from the African Diaspora now undertake a pilgrimage to the annual festival.

In 1965 part of the Grove was declared a national monument. This was extended in 1992 so that now the whole 75 hectares are protected.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The 55 hectares of the Osun-Osogbo Grove are the property of the Federal Government of Nigeria. The core of the Grove was declared a national monument in 1965 and an extension made in 1993 so that all the nominated property is now protected.

No details are given as to what this protection covers. The Nigerian cultural Policy of 1988 states that ‘The State shall

preserve as Monuments old city walls and gates, sites, palaces, shrines, public buildings, promote buildings of historical significance and monumental sculptures’.

Management structure:

Under the Land Use Act of 1990 the Federal Government of Nigeria confers on State Government’s trusteeship of protected lands in urban areas. In the case of the Grove, this means that the Government of Osun State has responsibility at state level. There is also involvement at local level from the Osogbo and Olorunda local governments.

The sites are owned by the Federal and State governments while the local community is allowed to exercise its cultural rights. The community’s traditional responsibilities and cultural rights are exercised through the *Oba* of Osogbo and his Council, the Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council (OCHC).

The National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) now manage the Grove under the terms of a 1979 Decree, which vested it with custodianship of all monuments shrines and antiquities. This means that it employs the staff of the site who manages access and maintains the shrines.

Two NGOs, and the Osun Grove Support Group and the Adunni Olorisa Trust also offer support.

The NCMM employs on-site a curator, 27 security guards, 7 guides, 7 education officers, 3 masons, and 3 traditional artists, 3 carpenters and 22 administrators and provides specialised staff from its headquarters.

Under a technical assistance programme supported by the French government, through CRATerre-EAG, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments has established a Centre for Earth Technology with experts in earthen architecture and conservation. This centre runs training programmes and in future the Osun-Osogbo artists will be guided in best practice by this Centre.

A Management Plan has been drawn up and adopted by all the stakeholders, including the Osun State Government, three local governments, and the *Oba* of the Osogbo communities.

Although the Plan addresses the natural aspects of the site, how these are to be managed in order to sustain the spiritual qualities of the site is not spelt out in detail.

A Management Committee has been set up under the Chairmanship of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, and with a representative of the *Oba* as Vice-Chairman.

Resources:

The salaries of the 75 people employed on site are met by the NCMM. This represents an annual budget of US\$ 62,000. Entry fees generated on site are shared between the OCHC and the NCMM and used for conservation.

Major projects have to be funded separately from the NCMM budget.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

The Osun sacred Grove is the largest and now only remaining Yoruba Grove in West Africa, which still keeps its religious activities. The Grove stands as a symbol for the identity of the Yoruba peoples and their cultural traditions and history.

The Grove is now seen as the spiritual centre of the Yoruba divinatory and cosmological systems, which extended not only to several parts of West Africa but also to the African Diaspora.

The New Sacred Art movement has produced sculptures that are new manifestations of the Yoruba belief systems that should be seen as masterpieces of human creative genius.

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS evaluation mission visited the site in September 2004.

Conservation

Conservation history:

The conservation history of the site can be seen in two ways. First there is the conservation of the whole site: it has been rescued from dereliction and possible incorporation into the town and re-established as a sacred place over the past forty years. Sculptures have been recreated and the high forest re-established in those areas where it had been cut for plantations or agriculture. This is in itself a success story.

Secondly there is the detailed conservation work necessary to sustain what is there now: the need to maintain and restore sculptures and buildings and to put in place procedures to sustain the natural qualities of the forest through encouraging regeneration and renewal.

As many of the sculptures are comparatively new, the processes to conserve them are only now being addressed.

For the natural forest, a more detailed plan to sustain this is needed which links into the cultural use of the site. This should address not only problems with erosion of the riverbanks but the overall sustainability of the natural qualities of the Grove.

State of conservation:

Overall the current state of conservation is good, although some of the roofs of structures need attention – and this is acknowledged.

Management:

Although the Management Plan addresses a holistic conservation strategy including natural, cultural and spiritual qualities of the site, the management of the natural elements could be strengthened. It would be desirable of representatives from the Agency responsible for natural resources could be represented on the Management Committee and a fuller process for sustaining the natural values of the site integrated into management practices. The Osogbo Grove could become a very

remarkable example of the way a semi-natural eco-system, including rare species, is protected by its sacred status and the activities of the local population.

Given the very high profile of the Grove and the popularity of the Annual Festival, a more detailed cultural tourism strategy would be desirable, which sets out how to manage visitors in order to minimise their impact on the spiritual and sacred qualities of the Grove.

Risk analysis:

- Natural deterioration of the sculptures and buildings

The biggest threat to the site is lack of regular maintenance that then leads to major conservation problems with the sculptures. Given the nature of the materials used – cement, iron and mud –, potentially difficult and expensive conservation problems could be caused by lack of appropriate maintenance.

The nomination acknowledges that more regular maintenance is needed and advice on the specific techniques to repair the concrete, mud and iron sculptures. This has now been put in place.

- Infrastructural threats

The tarmac road that traverses the site together with the electrical wires are recognised as being undesirable. One of the objectives of the Management Plan is to create a new road outside the site and re-align the wires.

- Intangible beliefs

Beliefs that had atrophied forty years ago are now being revived, if not on a daily basis, but certainly through the annual Osogbo festival.

- Over-visiting

This is not mentioned in the nomination but given the new significance of the Grove and the popularity of the annual festival, the impact of feet on the paths and shrines needs to be addressed through a cultural tourism strategy in order that the optimum number of people is managed on the site.

- River pollution

Some pollution of the river is acknowledged from refuse from the town and villages and from washing activities. It is stated that the nutrient level is at the moment acceptable.

- Invasive plants

Some invasive plants are reported – but the species are not listed. It is stated that as these do not like shadow, and as the new forest grows, they will gradually die out.

Authenticity and integrity

Authenticity:

The authenticity of the Grove is related to its value as a sacred place. The sacred nature of places can only be continually reinforced if that sacredness is widely respected. Over the past forty years the new sculptures in the Grove have had the effect of reinforcing the special qualities of the Grove and giving it back its spiritual qualities that imbue it with high cultural value.

At the same time the new sculptures are part of a long and continuing tradition of sculptures created to reflect Yoruba cosmology. Although their form reflects a new stylistic departure, the works were not created to glorify the artists but rather through their giant size and intimidatory shapes to re-establish the sacredness of the Grove. The new sculptures have achieved their purpose and the Grove now has wider than local significance as a sacred place for the Yoruba people.

Integrity:

There is no concern about integrity as the nominated site encompasses almost the whole of the sacred grove and certainly all that has been restored over the past forty years.

Comparative evaluation

A century ago there were many sacred groves in Yorubaland: every town had one. Most of these groves have now been abandoned or have shrunk to quite small areas. Osun-Osogbo is the largest sacred grove to have survived and one that is still revered. More than that, the restoration by Suzanne Wenger and her fellow artists has given the group a new importance: it has become a sacred place for the whole of Yorubaland and a symbol of identity for the wider Yoruba Diaspora. The new art installed in the grove has also differentiated it from other groves: Osogbo is now unique in having a large component of 20th century sculpture created to reinforce the links between people and the Yoruba pantheon.

The Osogbo Grove is unique in West Africa; it is also difficult to find comparisons more widely of sites linked to traditional religions that have been newly adorned with sculpture that is entirely site and culture specific.

There are certainly no other sites on the World Heritage List that could stand comparison.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The Osun-Osogbo Grove has outstanding universal value for the following cultural qualities:

- The Grove is the last surviving, flourishing, sacred grove in Yorubaland which reflects the way Yoruba towns linked their establishment and growth to the spirits of the forest.
- The Grove's sculptures created by Suzanne Wenger and the New Sacred Artists reflect and were inspired by Yoruba cosmology.
- The Grove and its sculptures are now a symbol of Yoruba identity to Yoruba peoples all around the world.
- The Grove, as host to its annual festival, sustains the living cultural traditions of the Yoruba peoples.

Evaluation of criteria:

The property is nominated on the basis of the following criteria: i, ii, iii, v and vi:

Criterion i: The giant and intimidating sculptural forms, created by Suzanne Wenger and traditional artists of the New Sacred Art movement, and inspired by supernatural forces, constitutes a masterpiece of human creative genius.

The sculptures were introduced to sustain the sacred Grove rather than being objects in their own right, and for this reason this criterion is not considered to be appropriate.

Criterion ii: The absorption of Suzanne Wenger, an Austrian artist into the Yoruba community, her initiation into the cult of Obatala, and her liaison with a group of traditional artists, proved to be a fertile exchange of ideas that revived the sacred Osun Grove.

Criterion iii: The Osun Sacred Grove is the largest and perhaps the only remaining example of a once widespread phenomenon that used to characterise every Yoruba settlement. It now represents Yoruba sacred groves and their reflection of Yoruba cosmology.

Criterion v: This criterion, which usually is used for traditional settlement or land use, is not so relevant to this nomination.

Criterion vi: The Osun Grove is a tangible expression of Yoruba divinatory and cosmological systems; its annual festival is a living thriving and evolving response to Yoruba beliefs in the bond between people, their ruler and the Osun goddess.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for the future

The spiritual significance of the Grove relates strongly to the rain forest. Around 70% of this is natural, primary rain forest and there are plans to restore the remaining 30% through regeneration of the areas after removing plantations and stopping agricultural activities. It is clearly desirable that the equilibrium between the natural aspects of the Grove and people is conserved and strengthened to sustain the spiritual qualities of the site. It would be desirable if more specific policies and targets for this could be included in the management plan, and if representatives of Agencies dealing with natural properties were involved in the Management Committee.

As the Grove now has very high visitors number from within Nigeria, within the Region and from the wider Yoruba Diaspora, it would be desirable if a more detailed cultural tourism management plan could be put in place, based on the high value of the spiritual, symbolic and ritual qualities of the site.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the World Heritage Committee adopt the following draft decision:

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Document WHC-05/29.COM/8B,
2. Inscribes the property on the World Heritage List on the basis of ***criteria ii, iii and vi:***

Criterion ii: The absorption of Suzanne Wenger, an Austrian artist, into the Yoruba community, her

initiation into the cult of Obatala, and her liaison with a group of traditional artists, proved to be a fertile exchange of ideas that revived the sacred Osun Grove.

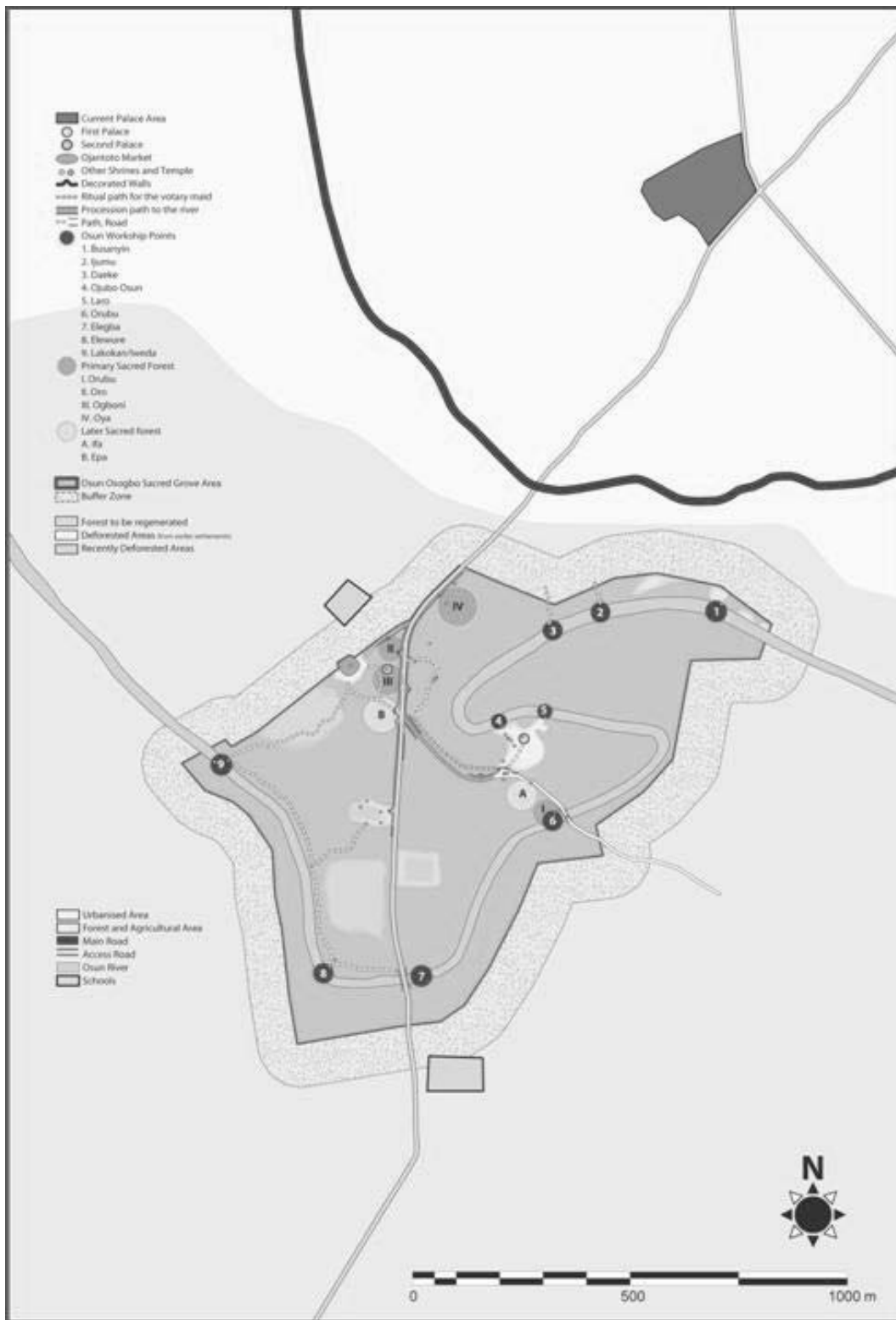
Criterion iii: The Osun Sacred Grove is the largest and perhaps the only remaining example of a once widespread phenomenon that used to characterise every Yoruba settlement. It now represents Yoruba sacred groves and their reflection of Yoruba cosmology.

Criterion vi: The Osun Grove is a tangible expression of Yoruba divinatory and cosmological systems; its annual festival is a living thriving and evolving response to Yoruba beliefs in the bond between people, their ruler and the Osun goddess.

3. Requests the State Party to consider how the management of the natural qualities of the Grove could be strengthened through being integrated into the management of the cultural qualities.

4. Further requests the State Party to consider putting in place a cultural tourism management plan to sustain the spiritual, symbolic and ritual qualities of the Grove in relation to the very large numbers of people visiting this site, particularly during the festival period.

ICOMOS, April 2005



Map showing the boundaries of the nominated property



The river Osun



The first palace: the site of first settlement