

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The ancient <i>ksour</i> of Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt, and Oualata
<i>Location</i>	Adrar Region (Ouadane, Chiunguetti), Tagant Region (Tichitt), and Hodh Ech Chargui Region (Oualata)
<i>State Party</i>	Islamic Republic of Mauritania
<i>Date</i>	26 September 1995

Justification by State Party

The town played a very important role at the regional level in north-western Africa. Its roots go back seven centuries, resulting in urban ensembles that bear witness to the intensity of the changes linked with the heavy east-west and north-south trade across the Sahara. These towns located in the desert on the edges of the Maghreb were prosperous centres from which radiated an intense religious and cultural life.

Criterion ii

The ancient *ksour* are medieval towns with an original and decorative stone architecture. They are characteristic of the Saharan *ksar* settlements, well integrated into their environment. The urban fabric is dense and close-packed, with narrow, twisting lanes running between the blank outer walls of courtyard houses.

Criterion iv

These living historic villages are the last surviving evidence of an original and traditional mode of occupying space, very representative of nomadic culture and located in a desert environment. It was from this that cities evolved to become the brilliant homes of Islamic culture and thought.

The gradual abandonment of traditional caravan trade, local and regional conflicts, drought-famine-epidemic cycles, a post-colonial heritage that has resulted in political, administrative, and economic decision-making centres being transferred to new towns, and population migration are among the principal factors threatening the survival of these places.

Criterion v**Category of property**

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the four *ksour* are *groups of buildings*.

History and Description*History*

These four ancient towns are the only surviving places in Mauritania to have been inhabited since the Middle Ages. They were built originally to serve the caravan routes that began in the 11th century CE to cross the Sahara from north to south and from east to west. Sited on the outskirts of a fertile valley or oasis, their original function was to provide religious instruction, and so they developed around mosques, accompanied by houses for the teachers and students. Warehouses were built to safeguard their goods by traders, who needed accommodation for themselves, whilst inns were provided for those passing through on business. From these elements grew the characteristic form of settlement known as the *ksar* (plural *ksour*), with a stone architecture and an urban form suited to extreme climatic conditions.

According to tradition, *Ouadane* was founded by three holy men in 1141-42 (536) on the ruins of earlier settlements dating back to the 8th century CE, which had been destroyed or abandoned in savage local wars. It was to become the most important commercial centre of the west Saharan region. A bitter struggle between two clans in 1450 led to the destruction of the first mosque. The town centre moved a short way to the east and flourished again within its fortifications. It was very prosperous between the 14th and 18th centuries owing to its commercially strategic location. An attempt by Portuguese to set up a trading post failed in the 16th century,

but Moroccan incursions in the same century had more effect, and Ouadane declined as Chinguetti prospered. Following the arrival of French troops in 1909 the town developed an extra-mural settlement towards the east.

Chinguetti (lit. "the spring of the horses") was founded in the 12th century close to a small 7th century oasis settlement now submerged in sand. It grew up round its mosque, with two powerful clans occupying the sectors on either side. It became celebrated as the gathering point for pilgrims *en route* for Mecca. Chinguetti also benefited from the production and export of salt from Idjil, some kilometres to the north. Its zenith was attained in the 17th-19th centuries, principally because of its religious and scholarly eminence, which in turn help to augment its trading role. Like Ouadane, Chinguetti suffered from Moroccan raids, but not to the same extent. French troops built a fort on the northern edge of the town, and this led to its expansion in that direction. However, the attraction of mining developments at Zouérate-Nouadhibou, followed by the Sahara war (1975-79) led to the depopulation of both Chinguetti and Ouadane.

Tradition has it that seven towns lie superimposed at *Tichitt*, which is borne out by the *tell* (artificial mound) on which the present settlement is sited. In the 11th century it was one of the main towns of the vast Berber empire on the edges of the Sahara, and in the following century it became an Almoravid town, founded by members of the Chorfa clan. It lay on the outskirts of the Sudanese empires of the Niger region and profited from lying on the important trade route between Ouadane and Oualata, and it became of greater importance under Almohad rule in the 13th century because of its crucial situation on the salt route. It was fortified when it came under the control of the Oulad Bella tribe in the 16th century, but the 18th and 19th centuries saw savage clan wars during which part of Tichitt was destroyed by fire. Despite these setbacks it was one of the largest towns in the western Sahara at the end of the 19th century, with some six thousand inhabitants. With the decline in the importance of salt production at Idjil, however, it has declined during the 20th century.

Some sources claim that *Oualata* (whose Berber name means "shady place") was founded in the 5th century CE; others date it to the Arab conquest. Five main tribes live there, each in their own quarter of the town. Two important trade routes, one from Marrakech, Idjil, Chinguetti, and Tichitt and the other from Sijilmassa, Teghasa, and Taoudeni, converge there and provide the economic stimulus for the town's existence. It became celebrated when elite refugees from Tombouctou, 40 km to the east, settled there in 1446 to escape the Touareg invaders, and gave it a high intellectual renown. However, as the trans-Saharan routes moved towards the east and the intellectual families moved back to Tombouctou, the importance of Oualata diminished. It lost much of its autonomy with the arrival of Arab tribes in the 17th century, and drought and raids from the north put an end to its role as a provincial capital at the end of the 19th century.

Description

Study of the four towns reveals the coexistence of three types of urban fabric:

- the ancient homogenous form, characterized by dense occupation and the medina layout conforming with the topography, with narrow alleys and no public open spaces;
- the intermediate form, with settlement respecting the ancient form except in the larger size of the house-plots;
- the later form, characterized by large enclosures with one- or two-roomed houses, which is distinct from the older form of settlement pattern.

The plans of the ancient towns (*ksour*) start from the central mosque with its squat, square minaret. Houses and courtyards increase in size further from the mosque. The dwellings present continuous walls to the lanes, with loopholes, ventilation ducts, small windows at ground level, and low doorways as their only openings. The narrow, twisting lanes with their rocky or sandy surfaces create areas shaded from the sun. Each of the towns has certain main entrance axes, which may have served for the access of caravans or have led directly to palm groves or cemeteries. They all had defensive enceintes, now reduced to some fragments, which marked the boundaries between the old *ksar* and the newer quarters.

The buildings are constructed in stone, clay, and wood, and the openings in the exterior walls are often ornamented with applied stone decoration. The interiors are also decorated with painted clay ornamentation. Most of the houses are organized to suit the requirements of nomadic people, who used them as no more than storehouses for much of the year. Rooms do not have fixed uses assigned to them, serving different purposes according to the season or the time of day.

The mosques vary in detail, but all consist of a single square or rectangular prayer hall with a vaulted roof carried on thick columns. They are severe, without any form of decoration or flooring, and built entirely in local materials. At Ouadane the old mosque is ruined, only the column bases surviving; the plan of the new mosque

is closely modelled upon it. Because of their religious function, the *ksour* also have schools (*mahadras*), which are simple buildings consisting of rooms grouped round an open courtyard.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The historic quarters (*ksour*) of the four towns are in the course of being protected under Law No 72160 of 21 July 1972 concerned with the protection and conservation of the natural, prehistoric, historic, and archaeological heritage. The law provides for designation of monuments and sites of national importance.

Customary and religious (*charia*) law apply in the case of private properties.

Management

Ownership of properties in the *ksour* of Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt, and Oualata is partly public (religious monuments, public buildings such as schools, public open spaces, roads) and partly private (traditional dwelling houses).

In April 1993 the National Foundation for the Protection of Ancient Towns (*Fondation Nationale pour la Sauvegarde des Villes Anciennes* - FNSVA) was set up by Prime Ministerial Decree No 9301. Its objective is "the protection of the ancient towns of Chinguetti, Ouadane, Tichitt, and Oualata and the initiation, the coordination, and the implementation of programmes for the preservation of these towns." It comes under the Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement, and its Conseil d'Administration is composed of representatives of the four towns and relevant Government ministries. It is setting up its own specialist technical team, which will be responsible for authorizing all interventions of any kind in the four towns. A detailed survey is to be carried out on which future programmes will be based. Tax concessions are being made to encourage owners of ruined buildings to reconstruct them. It will also work with the town authorities in promoting the concept of respect for the traditional cultural heritage. Urban Development Plans and Detailed Management Plans (PAD) are being developed for each of the towns; these will be accompanied by minimum building and planning regulations. Buffer zones have been approved for each of the historic towns that are the subject of this nomination.

Each of the towns has its own voluntary association with the objective of preserving and restoring the respective *ksar*.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

A national cultural policy began in 1974 with the creation of the Institut Mauritanien de Recherche Scientifique. This body worked on the four towns in 1980, carrying out documentary research, creating a photographic and documentary archive, and surveying them from the air. This was phased with public awareness campaigns in the towns themselves.

At the 20th Session of the UNESCO General Conference in 1978 the decision was taken to undertake technical studies for the protection, preservation, and rehabilitation of the four towns, and to draw up an international campaign. This was approved by the Executive Committee in 1980 and the international campaign was launched in the following year. A number of expert missions have visited Mauritania in connection with this effort, and UNESCO has financed restoration and conservation work, on the mosques in particular.

Authenticity

These four historic towns have preserved their original form and materials to a remarkably high degree, not least because they had deteriorated and been gradually depopulated over a long period when no restoration work was carried out. When conservation and restoration began, in the 1980s, the techniques used were in full conformity with modern practice, as set out in the 1964 Venice Charter.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Mauritania in March 1996.

Qualities

The four *ksour* of Ouadane, Chinguetti, Tichitt, and Qualata are outstanding examples of a type of commercial and religious centre in the west Saharan region that represents the life of this geocultural region over many centuries.

Comparative analysis

These are not the only settlements of this type in the regions bordering the Saharan Desert. However, they are exceptional in that they have retained their urban fabric and their individual buildings, albeit partly in ruins, intact and with hardly any 19th or 20th century intrusions. They are also very fine examples of the insertion of human settlements into a very hostile environment.

ICOMOS observations

The conservation of these four historic towns is a new development, of the past decade. The FNSVA has been in existence for less than three years, and is just beginning its work. The programmes that it has in hand and the continuing involvement of UNESCO experts as part of the International Campaign are very encouraging. However, the ICOMOS mission reported that there is as yet little, if any, evidence of these programmes being put into practice. Concern was also expressed about the lack of any mechanisms at local level for the application of the protective legislation. It also commented that the level of degradation resulting from many years of neglect and abandonment would necessitate the implementation of a positive programme of restoration and conservation over at least a decade, given the limited resources available to the Mauritanian authorities.

ICOMOS is conscious of the cultural significance of these four historic towns. It is of the opinion, however, that the present nomination is premature, and that it should be resubmitted when more progress has been made in the rehabilitation of the four towns. The ICOMOS recommendation to the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee in June 1996 was therefore that consideration of the nomination should be deferred.

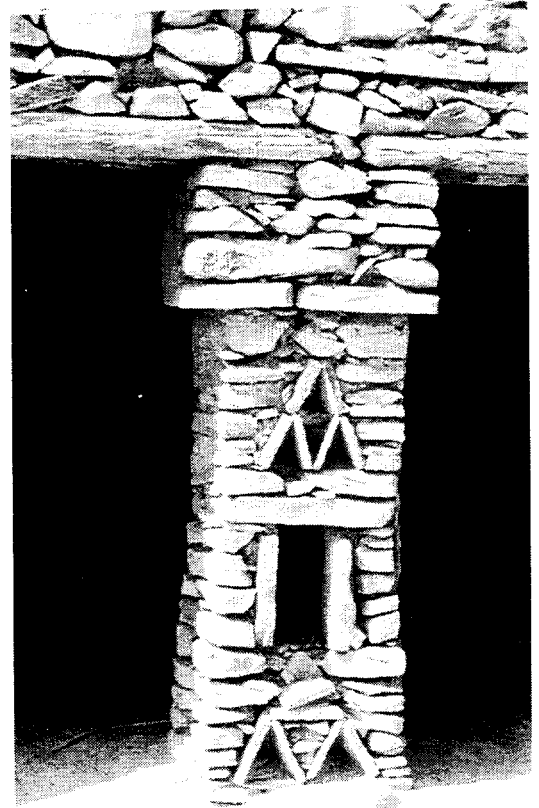
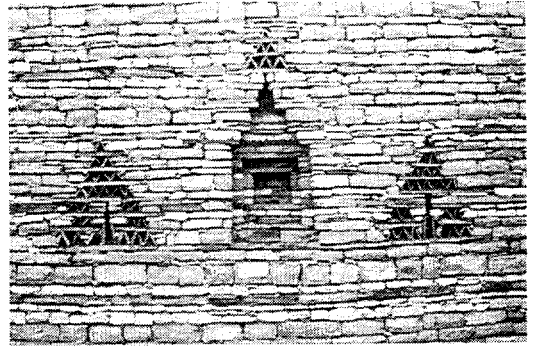
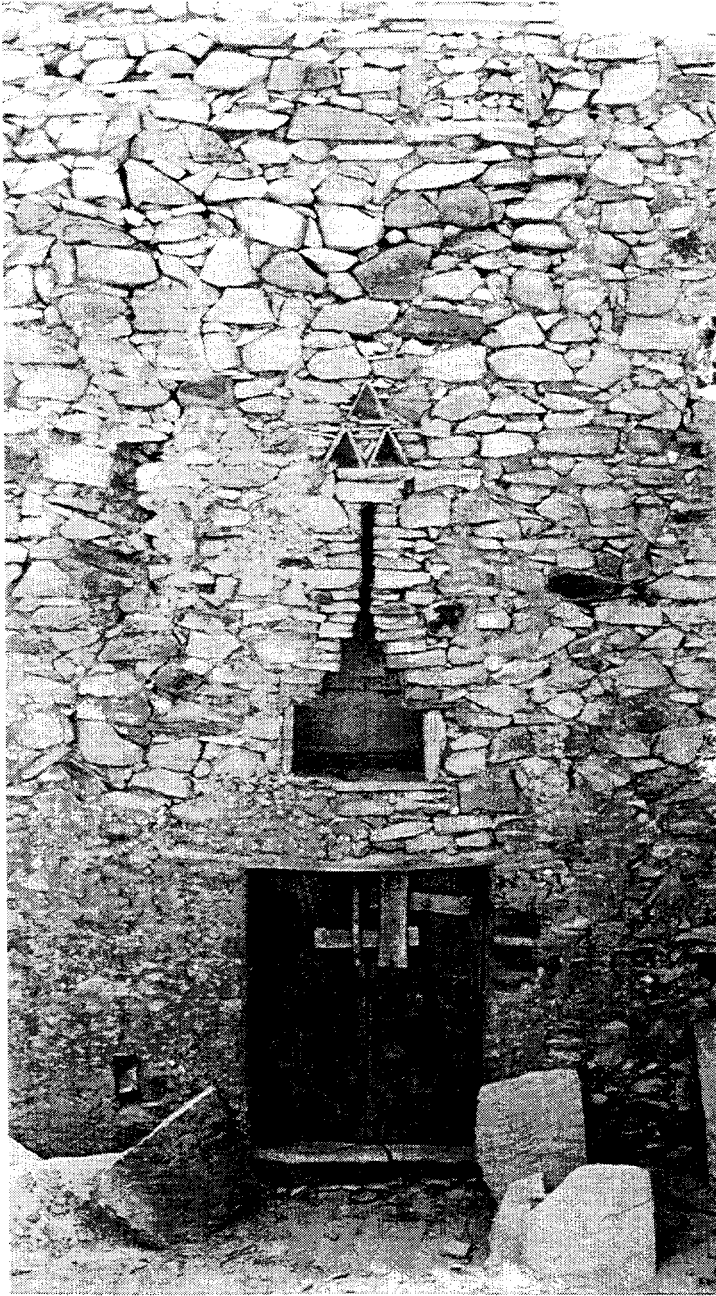
However, after having taken note of the ICOMOS evaluation, the Bureau was "convinced of the outstanding universal value of the proposed nomination" (Report of 20th Bureau Session, V.4.C). The Observer of Mauritania provided the Bureau with additional information, which he was requested to send to ICOMOS so that it might be taken into consideration in the preparation of a new evaluation, to be submitted to the extraordinary session of the Bureau in November 1996.

This material has been received by ICOMOS, and it will be considered by the Bureau of ICOMOS at its next meeting, which will take place after these printed evaluations have been completed. An oral report will therefore be made at the meeting of the Bureau in November 1996.

Recommendation

To be communicated orally to the Bureau at its meeting in November 1996.

ICOMOS, October 1996



Villes mauritaniennes : décorations en pierre
Mauritanian towns : stone decorations