
Mbanza Kongo, vestiges of the capital of the former Kingdom of Kongo (Angola)

No 1511

Official name as proposed by the State Party

Mbanza Kongo, vestiges of the capital of the former Kingdom of Kongo

Location

Zaire province
Angola

Brief description

The town of Mbanza Kongo was the political and spiritual capital of the Kingdom of Kongo, one of the largest constituted states in Southern Africa from the 14th to the 19th century. Located on a plateau at an altitude of 570 metres, it was prosperous when the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century. The Portuguese found Mbanza Kongo to be a large-scale urban centre, built using local materials, to which they added stone buildings constructed using Western methods, including several churches. The town then saw the expansion of the Christian faith, with the Westernisation of local elites, without however renouncing its culture. The Kingdom of Kongo was at the centre of the principal slave trade route, by which enslaved people were transported to the Americas and the Caribbean. The town still contains built remains and archaeological traces of a past marked by customary practices, colonialism and religion, and thus represents a major place of remembrance, with a wealth of intangible heritage elements. The vestiges of the city that are nominated cover its political and religious centre.

Category of property

In terms of categories of cultural property set out in Article I of the World Heritage Convention of 1972, this is a *group of buildings*.

1 Basic data

Included in the Tentative List

22 November 1996

International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the Nomination

2008

Date received by the World Heritage Centre

30 January 2016

Background

This is a new nomination.

Consultations

ICOMOS has consulted its International Scientific Committees on Historic Towns and Villages and on Shared Built Heritage and several independent experts.

Technical Evaluation Mission

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the property from 21 to 26 July 2016.

Additional information received by ICOMOS

A request for additional information was set to the State Party on 27 September 2016, referring to the boundaries of the property, the ownership, protection and conservation of the property, and the management system and management plan for the property. The State Party replied on 14 November 2016 and provided additional information, which has been taken into account in this evaluation.

An Interim Report was sent by ICOMOS to the State Party on 20 December 2016, concerning the total area of the property, its Outstanding Universal Value and its attributes, its position in a historic centre and its immediate setting. ICOMOS suggested to the State Party that it should reduce the area inside the boundaries of the property and the buffer zone, and reconsider the property name and the property's Statement of Outstanding Universal Value. On 23 February 2017, the State Party sent a fully revised nomination dossier and the additional information requested, all of which have also been taken into account in this evaluation.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report

10 March 2017

2 The property

Description

In north-western Angola, near the mouth of the Congo River, the province of Zaire is located in a dry savannah area with occasional shale and limestone plateaux of moderate altitude. The town of Mbanza Kongo occupies the summit of one such plateau, at an altitude of 570 metres above sea level. The hillsides, falling away steeply to the east and south along the Lueji River, and gently sloping to the west and north, give rise to a distinctive morphology, which was instrumental in the town becoming the cradle of the kings of Kongo.

The nominated area covers the vestiges of the political and religious centre of the town, located in the *Sagrada Esperança* district, close to the airstrip built by the Portuguese, which is immediately adjacent and runs from south-east to north-west. Two avenues pass through the centre, linked by parallel and perpendicular streets that form the present-day orthogonal pattern. Water for the city came from twelve natural springs around the peninsula,

which are associated with the historic prosperity of the royal town. Two springs are in the nominated area.

One of the essential characteristics of Mbanza Kongo is its historic dimension: it has existed for some eight centuries, and this is attested by archive sources and by archaeological remains for periods predating the arrival of the Europeans in the 15th century. Up to now, later periods have not been documented by archaeological findings.

The vestiges can be divided into two categories: firstly those that are linked to the defunct Kingdom, and are thus mainly archaeological and intangible; secondly those that date from the colonial period (which sometimes overlap with the first group, as the sites are intricately entwined) and form the built framework of the property, accompanied by various traces of traditional dwellings.

An archaeological review of Mbanza Kongo was compiled in the 1960s, and, although sketchy, it is invaluable. Little use has been made of its findings up to now. The current rediscovery of the capital of the Kingdom of Kongo is, however, linked to one of the most wide-ranging and ambitious archaeological projects in Sub-Saharan Africa. The remains that have been discovered, and those still potentially to be discovered, provide access to the everyday lives of the people and elites, to civil and religious buildings that have vanished or are in ruins, and to traces of Portuguese fortifications, all of which have established the morphology of Mbanza Kongo over a period running from the 15th to the first half of the 20th century.

The archaeological site of *Madungu* consists of a ditch used as a waste dump near to native dwellings. The dig has produced various items from the 15th-17th centuries (Portuguese ceramics, utensils, organic remains) enabling the retracing of the economic exchanges of the Kingdom of Kongo, with Europe in particular.

The main archaeological site, *Tadi dya Bukikwa* ("inverted stone" or "that which has not yet revealed its contents" in the Kikongo language), corresponds in all probability to the Jesuit college described in 1624 by the Portuguese cleric Mattheus Cardoso – author of a Kikongo translation of the catechism in the same year.

Sungilu and *Mpindi a Tadi* ("stone signal") are places linked to the funeral ceremonies of the kings. The first is associated with the washing of the body and the second, dated to the 17th century, was used for the embalming of the kings' mortal remains.

Lumbu ("residence") is located on the site of the old royal palace, whose structure seems to date back further than 1660. The artefacts found during the digs originate from places such as Venice, Holland and Bohemia, confirming the oral tradition suggesting that this was a royal area, and thus highly prestigious.

The new Royal Palace, built in 1901 in the political and spiritual area of *Lumbu*, refurbished in 1980, has become the Museum of the Kongo kings. It embodies the traditional construction techniques used in this region. Nearby are the House of the king's secretary and the Precinct of the Sacred Tree (*Yala Nkuwu*), in whose shade the sovereigns delivered justice. It is in the *Lumbu* that the present-day customary court (*Mbanzi a Nkanu*), one of the expressions of the intangible heritage of the Kongo community, holds its proceedings.

At the site of the Catholic mission, close to the new cathedral, a set of stone structures from the 19th and 20th centuries has been unearthed.

The built heritage of Mbanza Kongo bears witness to a long history, marked by violent clashes and destruction (the town was captured and reduced to ruins in 1568-1571; defeat of Ambuila in 1665). The vestiges go back as far as the 16th century, but they are richer for the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Kulumbimbi is the Cathedral of the Holy Saviour, the first episcopal seat in Africa south of the Equator, and it forms the heart of the identity of the Kingdom of Kongo, as the cemetery of the sovereigns is located within its bounds, and several other tombs of notable and noble persons (directly buried in the earth) have also been found. The vestiges of this important Catholic cathedral, built of small local rubble, date back to the second half of the 16th century.

The presence of Christianity is attested from 1491 onwards, and convents of the missionary orders, Catholic and later Protestant, were established over the following two centuries (the Capuchins in 1645-1648). Today several more recent churches remain: the new Cathedral (Nossa Senhora da Conceição, 1901), the Baptist evangelical church (sanctuary built in 1889, cemetery, school, dormitory, dispensary) and the Franciscan sisters' complex (school, convent and Church of St. Anthony, built from 1933 onwards). There are also traces of colonial architecture (Portuguese fort, municipal administration buildings).

Some dwellings conserve the characteristic traits of the typical 19th-20th century Kongo house (*Nzo*). Built on rubble foundations, with earthen or brick walls (the brick may be sun-dried or fired); they are long houses with two main rooms under a pitched roof (originally covered with straw). Colonial elements were added (verandas, pillars), and later industrial elements (corrugated metal sheet) replaced the local materials.

History and development

Mbanza Kongo is believed to have been founded in the 13th century on a site with ideal natural defences (access is only possible from the north-east). On the plateau, a sacred wood was the space used for traditional ritual ceremonies and the site of the royal cemetery (at this time it was already known as *Kulumbimbi*, from *Nkulu*: "ancestor", and *Mbimbi*:

"dangerous place"). In the south of the area marked out by the twelve springs, the royal house was located within a fence with a circumference of 1000 metres, around which were arranged the dwellings of the dignitaries and a public square (*Mbazi*) where justice was delivered, ceremonies were held and troops were reviewed. The site was defended by a palisade.

The Kingdom quickly became prosperous. Its political and religious authority covered a vast area of territory, divided into provinces, each of which had a governor. By the end of the 15th century, the territory extended from the Atlantic Ocean, in the west, to the River Kwango in the east, the River Kwanza in the south, and the River Ogooué in the north, in what is today the Republic of Gabon. Its influence however extended beyond this area to other neighbouring peoples (Loango to the north, Kasanje to the south), in territories located in present-day Gabon, Angola and Democratic Republic of the Congo. Its prosperity stemmed from an economy based on agriculture, mining and craftsmanship, and from a stable monetary system (the unit of currency was a shell, the *nzimbu*), controlled by a power structure that acted wisely.

As soon as the Portuguese reached the mouth of the River Congo in 1482 and witnessed the urban layout of Mbanza Kongo, which they compared with Evora in Portugal, diplomatic relations were established. The king *Nzinga Nkuwu* converted to Catholicism in 1491, taking the name of Joao I, while maintaining traditional religious practices. His son *Mvemba Nzinga* (Afonso I) reached an agreement with the King of Portugal, Manuel I, to receive missionaries, to develop trade, to send young people to Europe to be educated, and to allow slave trading activities. Initially, this trade enabled him to strengthen his capital, where a number of schools were built and, between the 16th and 17th centuries, twelve churches. The Cathedral of the Holy Saviour was consecrated in 1596, shortly after the town was renamed *São Salvador*. It was surrounded by the royal palace, the district of the Portuguese settlers, and the College of the Jesuits. The Kingdom had particularly close relations with the Vatican. In 1518, Pope Leo X appointed Don Enrique, son of the king Afonso I, bishop of Utica and apostolic vicar of Mbanza Kongo. In 1608, the Pope gave accreditation in Rome to the first ambassador of a Sub-Saharan African state to the Vatican. The first catechism in the Kikongo language was published in 1624, making Mbanza Kongo into the hub of efforts to spread Christianity in Central and Southern Africa. At that time, the Kingdom was at the heart of a vast intercontinental network.

However, relations between the Kingdom and the Portuguese went sour as a result of the slave trade. Several texts were enacted by sovereigns from the early 16th century onwards to prevent the rise of the slave trade, which was robbing the territory of its vital forces, and condemning it to decline. Weakened, Mbanza Kongo was invaded in 1568 by the Jagas, a neighbouring people, and was not able to restore its king

until one century later, with the arrival of the Capuchins. It then fell foul of the ambitions of the Portuguese, and the Kongo king, Antonio I (*Nvita Nkanga*), was defeated and killed by them at the Battle of Ambuila in 1665. It has been estimated that between 1600 and 1852, 3 million slaves were transported to Brazil alone from the coasts of Kongo-Angola that is an average of 12,000 slaves per year. Some authors claim that the figure was closer to 20,000 slaves per year. The slaves were transported by three routes: in the north, Loango, dominated by French slave traders; in the south, Luanda, in the hands of the Portuguese; in the centre, Mpinda, a route that was used less frequently because of the Kingdom's hostility to this kind of trade. Seriously weakened by depopulation, the Kingdom declined into internal wars, instrumentalised by the colonial power and the religious authorities while the town, half-ruined, was reborn in a different, more western, form at the end of the 19th century. It was at this time that the small fort was built, along with the new cathedral, the Baptist church, and the second royal palace, which bears witness to a symbolic authority that was perpetuated right up to the death of the last sovereign, Antonio III, in 1957.

3 Justification for inscription, integrity and authenticity

Comparative analysis

In the revised nomination dossier, the State Party bases its argument on three key points.

The Kingdom of Kongo was one of the greatest constituted states in the history of Africa, because of its control of its economy and currency. Its sovereigns succeeded in maintaining political, administrative and spiritual control over a territory of 2.5 million square kilometres, from a town whose urban development was remarkable. As a place of royal residence, the town can be compared with other properties inscribed on the World Heritage List. The Tombs of Buganda Kings at Kasubi (Uganda, 2001, criteria (i), (iii), (iv) and (vi)) are in fact a former palace transformed into a royal burial ground. The site has tangible and intangible attributes similar to those of Mbanza Kongo, particularly the presence of the spirit *Ngo*, but it is more recent (1884). The Royal Hill of Ambohimanga (Madagascar, 2001, criteria (iii), (iv) and (vi)) included until 1794 (when power was transferred to Tananarive) the town and the tombs of the kings, and various holy places (wood, spring, lake, place of worship). Although it remained the centre of authority for a shorter period, it too is a place that still today embodies identity. The Sacred Natural Landscapes of Muramvya, Mpotsa and Nkiko-Mugamba (Burundi, Tentative List), former itinerant capitals and cemeteries of the Burundi kings, are similar in terms of their attributes (rituals, sacred trees), but in this case several towns took on the role of centre of the Kingdom in the course of history, whereas the town of Mbanza Kongo was unique and powerful.

Mbanza Kongo was a diplomatic capital between tropical Africa and Europe, an important site for the universalist Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Islam) and an exceptional centre for the Catholic religion on the African continent. The nomination file compares its action to those of other places linked to Christianity: Lalibela in Ethiopia (Rock-Hewn Churches, Lalibela, 1978, criteria (i), (ii) and (iii)) and Cidade Velha in Cabo Verde (Cidade Velha, Historic Centre of Ribeira Grande, 2009, criteria (ii), (iii) and (vi)), the platform for the spread of Christianity in Senegambia. Mbanza Kongo is different in that, for the first time outside Europe, Christianity was accepted as the state religion, because of the conversion of the kings, and this primacy was recognised at the Vatican. Mbanza Kongo was not the first place with which the Portuguese made contact in Africa. Elmina (Forts and Castles, Volta, Greater Accra, Central and Western Regions, Ghana, 1979, criterion (vi)) was founded by an expedition in 1482, but the Kingdom of Kongo maintained the closest relations with Portugal in terms of the transmission of knowledge and techniques over the longest period.

The Kingdom of Kongo was subjected to a strategy of encirclement, exhaustion and transformation into a reservoir of enslaved people, at the instigation of Portugal, which closely resembles that adopted in Western Africa and the islands of Cabo Verde from 1460 onwards. Paradoxically, the conversion of the kings to Catholicism facilitated this approach. The coast of Kongo was thus the area through which passed the largest number group of enslaved men and women for transportation to South America, where they participated in the creation and construction of cities, and the boom in the colonial economy. As a result, their imprint is omnipresent in the culture, language and intangible traditions they passed on to their descendants. The State Party refers to their strong presence in São Salvador de Bahia (Historic Centre of Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, 1985, criteria (iv) and (vi)).

ICOMOS considers that the comparison with Portuguese colonial towns in America does not work to the advantage of the nominated property, which is more modest in scope and composite in nature. Unlike the towns referred to, which were points of arrival for the enslaved people, it is not even known whether slaves were brought to Mbanza Kongo or whether they were collected elsewhere in the Kingdom.

The example of the Orthodox holy city of Lalibela is inappropriate, as its eleven Medieval monolithic churches (13th century), hewn out of the rock, and still venerated by pilgrims, have no equivalent, because of their aesthetic quality (criterion (i)) and their symbolic dimension as substitutes for the Holy Land (criterion (ii)). Criterion (iii), which could have formed the basis for a degree of comparison, refers to the testimony they bear to the Medieval and post-Medieval civilisation of Ethiopia, and not to the spread of the religion.

Similarly, Cidade Velha, the oldest town founded by the Europeans in the tropics, named in 1462 and previously uninhabited, is different in some ways from Mbanza

Kongo, because of its attributes (insular situation, and its intact urban plan, fortress and two churches). It is similar in terms of values: its role in the origin and development of the transatlantic slave trade (criteria (iii) and (vi)). However, as it was a port of transit for the slave trading fleets, a society that was mixed, in racial and cultural terms, developed there, which is quite different from the less heterogeneous society in Mbanza Kongo.

To conclude, ICOMOS considers that characterising Mbanza Kongo as the historic manifestation of one of the most prosperous and enduring African states is appropriate. The comparison with other kingdoms based on rituals and a relationship with nature of the same intensity is relevant. Mbanza Kongo bears testimony to imported Christianity, on which the slave trade has left a shadow but without leaving any material trace that has been attested up to now *intra muros*.

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

Justification of Outstanding Universal Value

The nominated property is considered by the State Party to be of Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural property for the following reasons:

- The town of Mbanza Kongo was the capital of one of the largest states in Southern Africa, which was prosperous since the 14th century.
- The arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century transformed the town, to which were added a colonial orthogonal street layout, fortifications and several religious buildings.
- The Europeans (Portuguese, Dutch, French) turned the Kingdom of Kongo into the largest reservoir of enslaved people ever known to humanity.
- The Kongo slaves transported to the Caribbean and to the Americas (primarily South America) took with them their cultural expressions and their beliefs, which have left a distinctive imprint on the countries that received them.
- Mbanza Kongo remains a place of remembrance for the populations of tropical Africa that share the Kongo culture.

ICOMOS considers that this justification is partly based on archaeological artefacts, which contribute to the history of one of the most ancient towns of equatorial Southern Africa. The tangible aspect of the heart of the town with its main structures (royal palaces, churches, tombs, sacred tree, excavated shelters) consists of the power, prerogatives and influence of the powerful Kingdom of Kongo. Not all the aspects of the history of this Kingdom are however illustrated by the property, as up to now no traces of the slave trade have been found.

Integrity and authenticity

Integrity

The historic town of Mbanza Kongo, located on an isolated plateau, has retained several of its original morphological characteristics.

On the plateau, a set of vestiges from the pre-colonial society that reflect the multi-secular existence of the kingdom is concentrated in a limited perimeter, comprising the court of the Kongo kings and the traditional ritual area (*Lumbu*), the customary court area and its holy tree, and two of the twelve original rock water springs, of which ten remain (the springs are in the buffer zone). The state of these vestiges is globally satisfactory, but there are problems and some are serious, such as the insalubrity of the springs.

In addition to the first cathedral (*Kulumbimbi*), and then the numerous churches and military and civil buildings left by the Portuguese, a part of the colonial town is also visible. This town, whose materials are more enduring and recent, is in a satisfactory state of integrity: churches (St. Anthony, Our Lady of the Conception) and convents (Franciscan) bear witness to exchanges between Mbanza Kongo and Christianity. Several excavations have been started in order to exploit the archaeological potential of the rich subsurface.

ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity of the elements constituting the property are acceptable. The property illustrates political and religious functions as they were exercised in the past in the heart of the Kingdom.

The conditions of visual integrity of the property are fragile. The town has undergone substantial modifications, particularly at the end of the colonial period. It was destroyed several times, which explains the limitations of the remaining vestiges. Although major efforts have been made over the last ten years, the conditions of visual integrity were recently still adversely affected by telecommunications antennae (they are currently being dismantled). In the buffer zone, the airstrip built by the Portuguese during the inter-war years remains a problem. The demolition of this airstrip, which is now virtually disused, has been confirmed by the State Party and a new airport site has been chosen, outside the town. ICOMOS considers that this dismantling and demolition are essential to reinforce the property's conditions of integrity.

Authenticity

Authenticity relates to the ability of the overall property to convey its value clearly and truthfully. All the key attributes together can be said to convey their associations with the political and religious history of Mbanza Kongo clearly through their fabric, supported by extensive archival sources and archaeological material, as well as traditional knowledge.

The authenticity of the property lies in the fact that its sacred and symbolic function has been maintained ever since its foundation. The former capital of the Kingdom of Kongo is today the seat of political, cultural and administrative power in the province of Zaire. The guardians of the tradition transmit the prestige that underpinned the kings of the past: the customary court, which ensures that conflicts are managed correctly, has been reinstated after four decades of war, as a cultural and political link with a living tradition. The occupation of the urban space has been known since the 16th century, as recorded in the accounts of Portuguese travellers at the time. A certain degree of continuity has been maintained in the historic urban fabric, despite the orthogonal street layout imposed by the Europeans, although the main street has retained its long-established trace. The numerous churches and convents have contributed to stability, and more unusually the passing centuries have not affected the royal area, which is still clearly identifiable as the spiritual centre of the community.

In view of this, ICOMOS considers that the conditions of authenticity of the elements constituting the property have been met.

ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity and authenticity have been met, but recommends that the State Party implement the suggested actions, so as to reinforce the property's conditions of integrity.

Criteria under which inscription is proposed

The property is nominated for inscription on the basis of cultural criteria (iii), (v) and (vi).

Criterion (iii): *bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared*;

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the nominated property bears witness to a great Kingdom whose presence has been continuous down all the ages of this part of the African continent. Its capital has conserved the ritual and symbolic powers embodied by the brotherhood of the Leopard *Ngo*, while it became the gateway for the entry and dissemination of Christianity on the continent, and also the most extensive reservoir of the slave trade, whose victims spread their beliefs and culture on the other side of the Atlantic. Mbanza Kongo is thus a place of remembrance both for the Kongo peoples of Africa and their Afro-descendants.

ICOMOS considers that the contribution of the Kingdom of Kongo to the history of the African continent is attested and undeniable, thanks to the documentation available over five centuries (from 1483 to the present day) and the archaeology. After the arrival of the Portuguese, the Kingdom adopted Christianity, while conserving elements of pre-existing Kongo customs. The vestiges of Mbanza Kongo thus evoke the political and symbolic importance of the Kingdom in its territory, and its role as a gateway for the entry of Christendom into

the African continent. Not all the aspects of the history of the Kingdom are however illustrated by the property as it stands today, because up to now no vestiges attesting to the slave trade have been found within the bounds of the nominated property.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion has been justified.

Criterion (iv): *be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;*

This criterion was not put forward by the State Party but was considered by ICOMOS to be appropriate.

ICOMOS considers that the political and religious centre of Mbanza Kongo is an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble that illustrates, as nowhere else can in sub-Saharan Africa, the profound changes that emanated from the introduction of Christianity and the arrival of the Portuguese into Central Africa in the 15th century, events that influenced, not only religion but also trade, learning and contact between Central Africa and Europe, particularly Italy and Portugal.

The city was at the heart of a vast Kingdom that in turn was linked to a vast intercontinental network. The Cathedral had recently been built when in 1608, the Pope accredited in Rome the first ambassador of a sub-Saharan African state to the Vatican. A Jesuit college with a library was founded in 1621 and operated until 1678 and reflects the status given to Mbanza Kongo as a seat of learning. It is the place where in 1624 the first catechism was written in the Kikongo language to be used to spread Christianity across the Kingdom. Later buildings reflect not only the continuity of Christianity but also the influence of Portugal in the 19th century. The nominated area illustrates clearly this crucial stage in the history of central Africa.

ICOMOS considers that criterion (iv) has been justified.

Criterion (v): *be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that Mbanza Kongo attained, before contact with the Portuguese, a degree of social accomplishment and urban refinement attested by the Portuguese mariners, who compared it to Evora. This example of success is linked to the skilful use of the foundation myth (in the 13th century) by the royal family, which spanned the centuries ensuring an unfailing link with the past. This harmony has constituted a unifying factor for the vast expanse of Kongo territory. The territory became vulnerable as the result of an irreversible change caused

by the arrival of Europeans and the slave trade that ensued.

ICOMOS considers that the use of the territory by the local traditional society has been documented ever since the drawing of Mbanza Kongo made by the Dutch traveller Olfert Dapper, in his *Description of Africa* (1668). On the founding site that has remained unchanged, the place itself has undergone many changes. The construction debris found on the plateau by Portuguese town planners when the town was modernised in the 20th century proved the pre-colonial antiquity of the site, and that the new town was built on the remains of the old royal town. However, the spatial evolution of the town, and the interaction of the traditional society with its environment are hard to visualise, because of a lack of precise information covering the whole process of its development down the ages across the plateau. Moreover, what is being nominated is only the core of the city and not the overall urban settlement on its promontory.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion has not been justified.

Criterion (vi): *be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the word “Kongo” is one of the terms most widely used by Afro-descendants to designate places or rites associated with their origins, particularly in the Caribbean and South America. More generally, many terms from the Kikongo language have crossed the Atlantic, and now designate dishes, cultural activities, etc. Furthermore, the same language remains a factor of unity and identity in the former area of influence of the Kingdom of Kongo (Angola, Gabon, Democratic Republic of the Congo) where the customary authorities use it to maintain traditions.

ICOMOS agrees that Afro-descendants still refer in their everyday lives to the original traces imprinted on the languages they currently use (Spanish, Portuguese, Creole). A more detailed analysis of these cultural interactions would however be necessary to determine the substance and extent of the phenomenon. Furthermore, the tangible and intangible attributes of the property can be linked to the entity constituted by the Kingdom of Kongo, to its monarchs, to the dominant social group and to the aristocracy, and to the more modest populations, and finally to the manifestations that perpetuate remembrance today: the sacred tree (*Yala Nkuwu*) and the customary court (*Mbanzi a Nkanu*). Although similar testimonies exist in other traditional groups in Black Africa, this heritage contributes to the specificity of Mbanza Kongo, but it remains weakened by the scarcity of tangible attributes that justify it, and particularly the attested trace of the slave trade, which

makes it difficult to forge a link with the intangible elements of the property.

In addition, it would need to be shown how this linguistic association might be seen as of outstanding universal significance as well as being directly and tangibly related to the property. Currently, this has not been demonstrated.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion has not been justified.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity and authenticity have been met, and that criteria (iii) and (iv) have been justified.

Description of the attributes

The nominated property primarily reflects the political, symbolic, ritual and religious attributes of the capital of one of the greatest states of Africa from the 13th to the 19th century. These attributes include the royal domain, the royal residence (*Lumbu*), the customary court and the holy tree (*Yala Nkuwu*), associated with the justice rendered by the sovereigns, the royal cemetery, and the royal funeral places (*Sungilu*, for the purification of the remains of the kings; *Mpindi a Tadi* for their embalming). After the arrival of the Portuguese in 15th century, another series of built and archaeological attributes represents social life and Christian life in the Kingdom (*Madungu* and the new cathedral concession). Succeeding the Cathedral of the Holy Saviour (*Kulumbimbi*), which is the most ancient of the Catholic remains (end of 16th century) and the College of the Jesuits (*Tadi dya Bukikwa*, 17th century), a series of buildings were erected, after the renaissance of the town at the end of the 19th century: the new Our Lady of Conception cathedral, the Baptist evangelical church, the Church of St. Anthony, the missions of the Franciscan sisters.

4 Factors affecting the property

The population of Mbanza Kongo rose from 5,000 inhabitants in 1997 to 50,000 in 2007, and then to 173,850 in 2014. Population pressure has led to a housebuilding boom, which could threaten vestiges in the subsurface, particularly in the buffer zone. ICOMOS notes that a swift increase in housing density could become a source of social pressure and a threat to the stability of traditional practices.

Specific problems have been noted on the hillsides and on the rainwater run-off passages. The plateau hillsides are being deforested to enable the construction of houses. Earth is being removed close to the property and in its buffer zone in order to make fired clay bricks used for the walls of traditional houses. All these factors are contributing to erosion, the creation of ravines, and in some cases rock falls on the slopes as a result of the torrential rainfall that frequently occurs in this region.

Inappropriate anthropic practices have begun to affect the ecosystem, seriously impacting the original rock water springs, which are poorly equipped and poorly maintained (six of them are in very poor condition). There are no paths enabling access to the springs, which surround the buffer zone. The lack of a drainage system makes it impossible to cope with any flooding. The drinking water supply system is inadequate. With no sewer system or refuse collection system, the town is suffering from the effects of pollution.

ICOMOS recommends that the infrastructures (drinking water, drainage, electricity, sewers, refuse treatment) should be constructed or extended as a matter of urgency, to attenuate the effects of demographic pressure, soil erosion and pollution by anthropic uses.

The historic zone where the vestiges are concentrated, just next to the administrative district, is not affected by such strong development constraints as the rest of the plateau. The telecommunications antennae located less than 100 metres from the former Jesuit College (*Tadi dya Bukikwa*) are an eyesore that is incompatible with the sacred nature of the setting. ICOMOS notes that the dismantling of the antennae has begun, and should be completed in 2018.

The airstrip is located next to the historic zone, and may cover archaeological remains that will need to be protected in the future. It seems almost certain that damage was caused when the airstrip was laid, but the area concerned is relatively limited. The airstrip is a major visual obstacle for the coherence of the heritage. The State Party has committed itself to removing the airstrip in 2019. Regular commercial flights have been suspended, only occasional charter flights are authorised, and a new airport is planned 30 km from Mbanza Kongo.

ICOMOS considers that the telecommunications antennae and the airstrip detract from the integrity of the property.

The current number of visitors, most of whom are local or regional, is low (508 in 2010 at the Museum of the Kings of Kongo, 892 in 2014). Adapting the historic town to enable more intense tourism levels is another major challenge. The authorities are considering installing signing and establishing a monument circuit, extending and modernising the museum, protecting the archaeological sites, building an interpretation centre, raising the level of cultural activities, reinforcing the health network, and providing local and trunk roads. Hotel accommodation is available, but limited (44 hotel rooms, plus about a hundred in boarding houses, about 300 rooms planned). ICOMOS recommends the establishment of a tourism management strategy.

There is no proven seismic risk (level 1) in this region. The properties are on the edge of the thalweg through which the River Lueji flows, but the historic zone high on the plateau cannot be attained if the river floods its banks. A

plan for the management of natural disaster risks, including an ecological plan for the plateau slopes, is currently being drawn up.

ICOMOS considers that the threats to the property are demographic pressure, soil erosion, pollution from anthropic uses, the weakness of the infrastructures (drinking water supply, drainage, electricity, sewers, refuse treatment), the presence of telecommunications antennae (inside the property boundaries) and the airstrip (in the buffer zone).

5 Protection, conservation and management

Boundaries of the nominated property and buffer zone

Mbanza Kongo is situated at the top of a hill, which lies along a NNW-SSE axis. The State Party has redefined the boundaries of the property, which now covers an area of 89.29 hectares (initially 923.85 hectares). In the nominated property zone, there are 11,332 inhabitants (2014), that is 127 per hectare, which is a very high density. The population however live mainly on the edges of the historic centre. The zone containing the vestiges is less densely populated.

The buffer zone is situated to the west and north towards the summit of the plateau, and to the east and south towards the scarp slopes of the River Lueji. Its surface area is 622.16 ha (initially 2,631.88 ha). In the buffer zone, the number of inhabitants recorded is 84,091 (2014).

The boundaries of the buffer zone coincide with the location of the springs, and ensure global visibility of the property and its landscape. The nominated property boundaries include, to the south, the administrative town, and, to the north, the historic buildings and vestiges unearthed in the probable area of residence of the elites.

ICOMOS considers that the boundaries of the nominated property and of its buffer zone are adequate.

Ownership

The ownership of the public buildings is governed by a Law of July 1990 and is the responsibility of the local administration. The municipality owns the archaeological sites and historic buildings, except for those, which are the property of the Church or religious communities.

Protection

The heritage of Mbanza Kongo is protected by a series of legal texts (Angolan constitution of 2010, laws and decrees concerning the historic, cultural and artistic heritage). An executive decree of July 2014 defines the boundaries of the property and its buffer zone; a decree of January 2015 granted the "historic centre of Mbanza Kongo" national cultural heritage status and listed the protected places; a presidential decree of

September 2015 created a "Historic Centre Participative Management Committee".

In addition to these specific texts, the site is covered by the general urbanism and land use rules (Law of June 2004), which establish a no-building zone extending for a minimum of 50 metres from the outer limits of the protected monuments.

Despite the fact that the country's political stabilisation is relatively recent following a war of independence and civil war (2008), a substantial legal arsenal has been introduced. Mbanza Kongo is protected by specific and targeted legal provisions.

ICOMOS considers that the legal protection in place is globally adequate.

Conservation

A substantial documentary corpus has already been compiled by referring to the Portuguese national archives in Lisbon, including correspondence between the Kongo kings and the Portuguese crown since the 16th century. It is however necessary to make a more systematic survey of sources, and a historiographic review of references to the Kingdom of Kongo in scholarly literature. Information about the rich oral tradition, which is still alive today, could be collected in order to contribute to museography in the future. ICOMOS therefore considers that more research is needed to enrich the written and oral documentation.

The current state of conservation of the elements of the nominated property – analysed separately – is said by the State Party to be generally good. There are however some cases in which the state of conservation is inadequate, and several programmes of works are necessary.

The former cathedral (*Kulumbimbi*) is largely in ruins (about one-third of the original structure is still standing). The masonry of the walls has stood the test of time, but their bases and summits are threatened by precipitation and encroaching vegetation. The flaking off the rendering, the barring of the wall stones, and the crumbling of the mortar must be stabilised to prevent collapse. A five-year consolidation plan is being considered. Restored in 1991, the Palace of the Kongo Kings is in a good state of conservation and requires only routine maintenance, but its museography is outdated (no preventive conservation of objects, no exhibition about the monarchy). The archaeological site *Tadi dya Bukikwa* is protected by a fence, but stagnating rainwater threatens its continuing existence, and fragments of the wall are falling away. A consolidation plan is scheduled within the next two years. The Church of Saint Anthony and the mission church are in a satisfactory condition, but are affected by water infiltration. The House of the King's Secretary, which has been altered, must be restored to its original state. The new Cathedral of Our Lady of the Conception is in a precarious condition, and it too is to be restored to its original state within the next five years. One of the tombs in the Cemetery of the kings has also been damaged. The

places in which the remains of the deceased kings were prepared, and most importantly the springs (in the buffer zone) are in a poor state of conservation.

The National Cultural Heritage Institute provides a reference framework for conducting work to preserve the built structure and the archaeological sites.

In January 2015, a mission from the *Consorzio Aureo-Conservazione e Restauro* (Rome) set out in detail the restorations that were necessary. Several excavations have taken place: July 2010, December 2011, September-October 2013, January, February and April-July 2014. From 8 to 20 November 2015, an archaeological mission (from Portugal and Belgium) produced a synthesis of the earlier research, and carried out an archaeometric analysis of the ceramic artefacts unearthed, in order to determine their dates.

The municipality is following up the dossiers of buildings to be restored. But the State Party recognises the practical need to train the teams who are to conduct the preliminary studies, identify the construction techniques and supervise the worksites. While the principles of the restoration process are accepted by the State Party, there is no specific reference to the implementation of these urgent works. A five-year intervention programme is set out in the Management Plan 2016-2020; but ICOMOS recommends that details should be provided about the actions to be taken, the persons in charge and the funding.

ICOMOS recommends that the documentary research should continue, and that detailed information should be provided about the actions, persons in charge and funding of the conservation intervention programme.

Management

Management structures and processes,
including traditional management processes

The implementation of the legal provisions is the task of the Participative Management Committee, which coordinates the action of the entities in charge of managing the site: the Ministry of Culture (National Cultural Heritage Institute), the Governorate of Zaire Province, the Municipality of Mbanza Kongo, and the Traditional authorities unit. The Committee is led by governor, with the assistance of a scientific committee and a technical bureau responsible for scheduling and the everyday management of the site.

The implementation of the national, provincial, municipal and customary planning tools is also integrated in the Strategic Development Plan for the Town of Mbanza Kongo. Itself integrated in the National Development Plan 2013-2017 and the Provincial Development Plan of Zaire 2013-2017, this strategic plan is intended to ensure that inhabitants have access to vital infrastructures (water, energy) and basic services (health, housing), while at the same time ensuring the conservation of the properties and their landscape. To this end, the customary authorities act

as the guardians of a living tangible and intangible heritage, primarily with regard to sacred areas and places.

The civil protection services ensure surveillance of several zones of the town considered to be vulnerable to natural risks in the district of *Sagrada Esperança*, close to the heritage elements of the nominated property, where buildings considered to be at risk are inspected periodically. Any emergency interventions (to preserve the heritage, emergency exits, etc.) are the responsibility of these services. ICOMOS notes that no figures are stated for the number of personnel in charge of these actions.

Policy framework: management plans and arrangements, including visitor management and presentation

A "Historic Centre Urban Regulation Plan" (PREGU) is currently being prepared. It will control the volumes of residential properties, public buildings and commercial buildings (maximum of three storeys in the property zone and the buffer zone), circulations, pavements, the areas of land parcels in housing developments, and facades on to the street (maximum of 15 metres), materials (stone and fired brick), the renovation of existing properties, architectural decor, renderings and colours, windows and doors, and urban furniture. Air conditioners and antennae must not be visible from the street. A cadastral register of properties must be drawn up to enable the application of the plan, and a governor's decree requires that a building permit must be obtained (provincial decree of August 2013).

A "Historic Centre Management Plan" or documented management plan, has also been drawn up for the period 2016-2020. The plan aims to ensure the security of the natural and cultural elements of the nominated property, by protecting it against vandalism and external threats, by closing the existing airport and dismantling the telecommunications antennae. An archaeological surveillance brigade has been formed; the awareness of the local population is being raised with regard to restoration principles; local craftspeople are encouraged to contribute to the effort; children at school and students are informed about the property's Value. This plan is to be applied by a team of specialists forming part of the Participative Management Committee, but ICOMOS notes that no details are provided about the composition of the team.

The State Party is offering to fund this public policy by creating a Heritage Foundation, to be stimulated by tax incentives, but no details are given about the setting up of the Foundation.

Finally, a tourism development policy aims to coordinate visits to Mbanza Kongo with nearby places of interest (e.g. the rock art caves of Nzau Evua). It is suggested that a tourism route could be established between the town and Mpinda, in the Soyo municipality. Mpinda is the port where Diego Cão landed in 1482. The first baptism in the region took place there in 1491, and subsequently large numbers

of slaves were shipped from the port. The Catholic mission at Mpinda is open for visits. A tourism route of this type could clearly be established. Similarly, a link could be established with schools in order to generate social cohesion.

ICOMOS recommends that a tourism management strategy should be established, defining amongst other things signing, circuits and interpretation tools.

Involvement of the local communities

The decentralisation of cultural policies is intended to encourage the involvement of the local elites. The local inhabitants are still relatively unaware of the value of the property, but the customary authorities – who are active vectors of transmission and are respected by the population – are committed to the task of managing and protecting the property, because of its sacred power.

ICOMOS considers that a participative management structure has been set up. The participation of the customary authorities is a significant indicator of local involvement. There is a convergence of national, provincial and local efforts, but the technical coordination of conservation actions has not yet been described in detail. ICOMOS recommends that the State Party should confirm that the transversal management system is functioning, while specifying the human and material resources made available to those in charge of the system. A spreadsheet, with explanations, of the staffing requirement, of training actions, and of the planned funding, is necessary.

6 Monitoring

A set of five key indicators has been defined for the monitoring of the property on a multi-annual basis (three to five years), with regard to conservation (monuments and excavated sites), the monitoring of site frequentation, and the monitoring of the ravines around the plateau and the twelve rock water springs.

More details must be provided about the monitoring framework as defined. The monitoring must be conducted by the ministry, the province, and the customary authorities, under the coordination of the Participative Management Committee which meets in Mbanza Kongo. The Committee is considering recruiting several employees, thus involving local civil society. However, no monitoring exercise of the property, considered as a topographic, architectural and archaeological ensemble, has been carried out.

Lastly, a SWOT analysis has been conducted to determine the strategic tools needed for the safeguarding of the site in a medium-term perspective. Alongside some positive points, this analysis points to dangers and urgent issues: vestiges located beneath recent buildings, demography, airport, water distribution, sanitation, erosion, stubble burning, hotel infrastructure, road traffic,

cultural property trafficking, low level of learning of the Kikongo language.

ICOMOS notes that there is an operational coordination body, but that the executive directives do not cover all fields. The monitoring of constructions and building work in the zone of the nominated property and the buffer zone must go beyond the stage of collecting data at municipal level.

ICOMOS considers that the existence of an official body to coordinate monitoring and prepare environmental and building standards are advantages. However, the monitoring policy must be deepened by the use of precise indicators, and by executive directives.

7 Conclusions

Mbanza Kongo possesses a set of monuments, archaeological remains and intangible elements linked to the history of a major Kingdom in Sub-Saharan Africa, whose existence is attested from the 14th to the 19th century, thus dating back to the pre-colonial era and then to the period of Portuguese domination. The heritage is located in the heart of a historic zone, which came into being around the palace and the royal attributes. It constitutes a point of reference and a place of remembrance for the whole Kikongo culture, which is present not only in Angola, but also in the neighbouring countries. The former capital of the Kongo kings bears witness to the control of a vast territory by this power, which was political, symbolic, economic and spiritual, and then to the spread of Christianity in the central and southern part of the continent, as a result of the sovereigns' early acceptance of the Christian religion from 1491.

Although the slave trade was carried out on a large scale in the zone of influence of the Kongo Kingdom, resulting in the deportation of millions of slaves to South America and the Caribbean, where they spread the culture, language and rituals that originated in Kongo, no material vestige has yet been found in the nominated area that bears witness to the slave trade.

The current nomination reflects the political and religious influence of the Kongo Kingdom through the remains of influential structures at the heart of its capital city. As the long-lasting Kingdom of Kongo was one of the great Kingdom of Central Africa that flourished between the 15th and the 19th centuries, ICOMOS considers that further nominations might be explored to see whether other places and dimensions of this Kingdom could have the potential to be inscribed on the World Heritage List, to reflect for example its involvement in the Slave Trade or its extensive trading activities.

ICOMOS also considers that if in the future on the basis of further research and investigation, sufficient material might be revealed to allow a better understanding of the scope

and form of the wider city of Mbanza Kongo, a major extension of the current property might be envisaged.

In order to take forward both these possible options, ICOMOS recommends that a Research strategy should be developed that might also consider partnerships with other countries that were once part of the Kongo Kingdom.

In the short-term, the removal of the airport is the highest priority for the property. As a local tradition mentions the possibility of a royal grove under the tarmac (of King Alfonso's mother buried in the Church of St Michael), any removal of the runway would need to be accompanied by detailed archaeological investigations.

8 Recommendations

Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that Mbanza Kongo, vestiges of the capital of the former Kingdom of Kongo, Angola, be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criteria (iii) and (iv)**.

Recommended Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

Brief synthesis

The town of Mbanza Kongo was the political and spiritual capital of the Kingdom of Kongo, one of the largest constituted states of Southern Africa, which was active from the 14th to the 19th century. Located on a plateau at an altitude of 570 metres, it was prosperous when the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century. To the large existing urban conurbation built in local materials, the Portuguese added and substituted stone buildings constructed in accordance with European construction methods, including several churches. The town then experienced the expansion of Christianity with the Westernisation of the local elites, without however renouncing its culture. In its built structure and archaeological vestiges, the town retains the traces of its customary, colonial and religious past, of which it is an eminent place of remembrance. The Kingdom of Kongo was at the centre of the most important route for the trade in enslaved persons, who were deported to the Americas and the Caribbean. No material vestige attesting to the slave trade has been found up to now.

Criterion (iii): The contribution of the Kingdom of Kongo to the history of the African continent is attested and undeniable, thanks to the documentation available covering five centuries (from 1483 to the present day) and to the archaeological findings. Its capital has retained the ritual and symbolic powers embodied in the brotherhood of the Leopard *Ngo*. After the arrival of the Portuguese, the Kingdom adopted Christianity, while however retaining elements of pre-existing Kongo customs. The vestiges of Mbanza Kongo thus evoke the political and symbolic importance of the Kingdom in its

territory and its role as a gateway enabling the Christian world to enter the African continent.

Criterion (iv): The political and religious centre of Mbanza Kongo is an outstanding example of an architectural ensemble that illustrates, as nowhere else can in sub-Saharan Africa, the profound changes that emanated from the introduction of Christianity and the arrival of the Portuguese into Central Africa in the 15th century, events that influenced, not only religion but also trade, learning and contact between Central Africa and Europe, particularly Italy and Portugal. The Cathedral was standing when in 1608, the Pope accredited in Rome the first ambassador of a sub-Saharan African state to the Vatican. The Jesuit College reflects the status given to Mbanza Kongo as a seat of learning and is the place where in 1624 the first catechism was written in the Kikongo language to be used to spread Christianity across the Kingdom. The city was at the heart of the vast Kongo Kingdom that in turn was linked to a vast intercontinental network.

Integrity

All the attributes that express the property's Outstanding Universal Value are included inside the property boundaries. The property illustrates the political and religious functions as they were exercised in the heart of the former Kingdom of Kongo. The property includes a set of vestiges that evoke pre-colonial society, and the survival of the Kingdom over several centuries, and the many churches and the military and civil buildings left by the Portuguese. The state of these vestiges is generally satisfactory, but there are problems, some of which are serious, such as the insalubrity of the springs. Several excavations have begun to exploit the archaeological potential of a rich subsurface.

The conditions of visual integrity of the property are fragile, particularly because of the presence of telecommunications antennae (currently being dismantled) and the airstrip, located in the buffer zone, built by the Portuguese in the interwar years. The demolition of the airstrip, which is hardly used nowadays, has been confirmed by the State Party, and a new airport site has been chosen outside the town.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the property stems from the fact that since its foundation it has continuously maintained its sacred and symbolic function. The guardians of the tradition transmit the prestige on which the earlier kings relied: the customary court, which manages conflicts, has been reinstated after four decades of war, as a cultural and political link with a living tradition. The occupation of the urban space has been known since the 16th century, as reflected in the accounts written by Portuguese travellers. A certain degree of continuity has been maintained in this historic urban fabric, despite the orthogonal street pattern introduced by the Europeans, although the main street has retained its ancient trace. The many churches and convents contributed to stability,

and it is quite remarkable that the passing of centuries has not led to any encroachment on the royal space, which is still clearly identifiable as the spiritual centre of the community.

Management and protection requirements

Since the Angolan constitution was established in 2010, the heritage of Mbanza Kongo has been preserved by a set of legal texts that delineate the boundaries of the property and its buffer zone (executive decree of July 2014), and lists the protected places (decree of January 2015).

A participative management committee was set up by presidential decree in September 2015. The committee coordinates the action of the entities in charge of managing the site (Ministry of Culture, Governorate of Zaire province, Municipality, Customary authorities). The participation of the customary authorities is a significant indicator of local involvement. Two urban infrastructure development plans (water, energy, etc.) are scheduled to end in 2017; they must be extended. The Management Plan 2016-2020 has defined tools to ensure the property's security and enhance its appearance. Conservation and restoration measures, particularly for the former cathedral (*Kulumbimbi*), have been scheduled over the next five years. The National Cultural Heritage institute provides a frame of reference for these works, for their technical coordination and for funding. Documentary, archaeological and historic research about the property must however be continued and extended. A tourism management strategy will have to be developed. The civil protection services ensure the surveillance of the property. An urban regulation plan for the historic centre of Mbanza Kongo is also in preparation, while a provincial decree of August 2013 makes a prior building permit compulsory for any intervention inside the property boundaries and in the buffer zone.

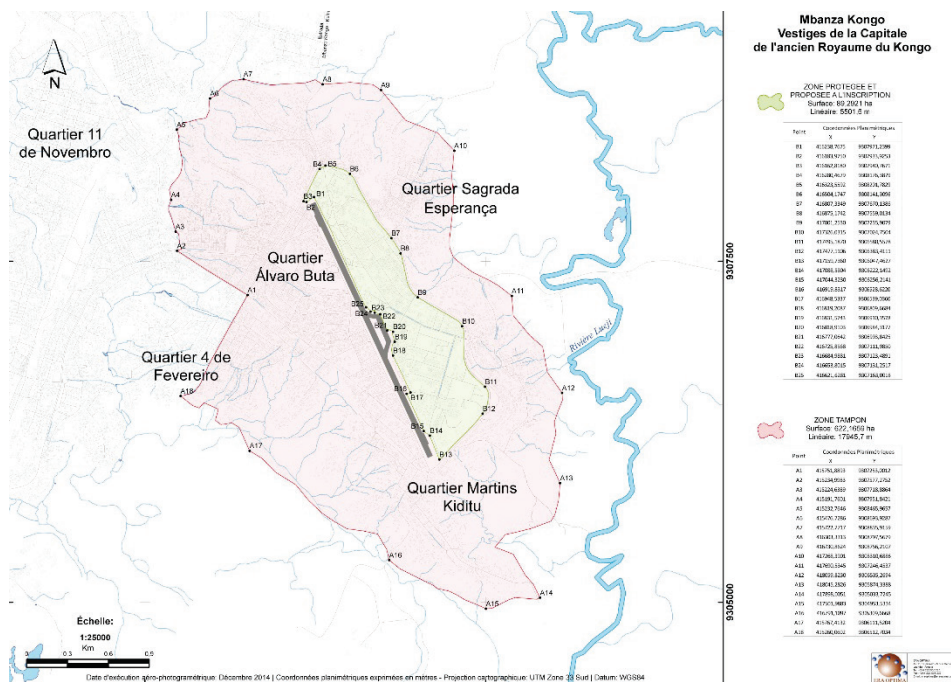
Additional recommendations

ICOMOS recommends that the State Party gives consideration to the following:

- a) Completing the dismantling of the telecommunications antennae as announced,
- b) Removing the airport runway as announced, and undertake detailed archaeological investigations to identify the location of graves, former churches and other remains linked to the historic centre,
- c) Confirming that the transversal management system is functioning, specifying the human and material resources made available to those in charge of the system,
- d) Providing details of actions, persons responsible, and funding of the conservation intervention system,

- e) Finalising the urbanism regulations (PREGU) as announced,
- f) Devising a tourism management strategy,
- g) Drawing up specific monitoring indicators based on Outstanding Universal Value,
- h) Submitting to the World Heritage Centre and to ICOMOS by 1st December 2019 a report on the implementation of the recommendations set out above;

ICOMOS further recommends to foster collaboration with other countries on research into sites in the former Kongo Kingdom to explore whether other places and dimensions of this Kingdom could have the potential to be inscribed on the World Heritage List, to reflect for example its involvement in the Slave Trade or its extensive trading activities.



Map showing the revised boundaries of the nominated property



View of the plateau of Mbanza Kongo



Kulumbimbi – Cathedral of the Holy Saviour



Yala Nkuwu The Sacred Tree



Overall view of the Tadi dya Bukikwa site