

---

## Thimlich Ohinga Archaeological Site (Republic of Kenya) No 1450rev

---

### Official name as proposed by the State Party

Thimlich Ohinga Archaeological Site

### Location

Migori County  
Kenya

### Brief description

Located 46km northwest of Migori Town in the Lake Victoria region, Thimlich Ohinga archaeological site reflects a cultural tradition of massive dry stone walled fortifications developed by pastoral communities that persisted from 16<sup>th</sup> – mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Nyanza Region of the Lake Victoria basin. Thimlich Ohinga is the largest and best preserved dry-stone wall traditional enclosure in the region. It comprises a complex of enclosures that accommodated homesteads, livestock, and craft industries. The main *Ohinga* is referred to as Kochieng, while the others are Kakuku, Koketch and Koluoch. Each of the *Ohingni* has internal enclosures as well as smaller extensions adjacent to them, which accommodated homesteads, livestock and craft industries. The *Ohinga* appear to have served primarily as security for livestock and communities but they also defined social units and relationships linked to lineage based systems.

### Category of property

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

## 1 Basic data

### Included in the Tentative List

12 February 2010

### International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the Nomination

2010

### Date received by the World Heritage Centre

24 January 2014

1 February 2018

### Background

This is a referred back nomination (39 COM, Bonn, 2015). The World Heritage Committee adopted the following decision (39 COM 8B.8):

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Documents WHC-15/39.COM/8B and WHC-15/39.COM/INF.8B1,
2. Refers the nomination of the Thimlich Ohinga Cultural Landscape, Kenya, back to the State Party to allow it to reconsider the focus of the nomination of this property, including the possibility of nominating it as a site and an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement;
3. Considers that such a new nomination would need to include an augmented comparative analysis;
4. Also considers that a new nomination would need to be considered by an expert mission to the site;
5. Recommends that the State Party give consideration to the following:
  - a. Increasing the boundary of the property to include the plot to the south-east as well as the buffer zone;
  - b. Conducting archaeological research in and around the nominated property to substantiate some of the site interpretations as well as to determine the extent of archaeological evidence of the wider settlement;
  - c. Defining and putting in place formal agreements with land owners and also provide legal protection that includes clear management and permitted uses in the buffer zone;
  - d. Providing maintenance and other conservation practices to ensure the continued stability of the walls;
6. Recommends the State Party to consider inviting ICOMOS to work on the preparation of a proposal for a revised nomination in accordance with the recommendations of the World Heritage Committee, within the framework of the Upstream Process.

In accordance with this decision, ICOMOS was invited by the State Party to undertake an Advisory Mission and provided upstream advice on research, documentation, mapping and comparative analysis. The State Party resubmitted a revised nomination dossier on 1 February 2018. This has provided a substantial revision of the sections on history, comparative analysis and justification for Outstanding Universal Value and sets Thimlich Ohinga into its wider context.

### Consultations

ICOMOS consulted its International Scientific Committee on Cultural Landscapes, and on Archaeological Heritage Management, and several independent experts.

### Technical Evaluation Mission

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the property from 8 to 15 September 2014.

### Additional information received by ICOMOS

In the context of its 2014 evaluation, ICOMOS sent a letter to the State Party on 8 September 2014 requesting further information about maps, comparative analysis, development and restoration projects, excavations, statement of authenticity, tourism, management and protection, bibliography and community involvement. The State Party provided additional information on 17 December 2014.

Following decision 39 COM 8B.8 in 2015 ICOMOS undertook an Advisory Mission at the request of the State Party. This suggested that the State Party follows the recommendations of the World Heritage Committee and realigns the nomination of Thimlich Ohinga from the

previous focus on a cultural landscape towards its consideration as a traditional settlement for people and livestock; to establish a longer term research programme on the large number of similar traditional settlements in the Lake Victoria region; to document the outlying Ohingni in close proximity to the Thimlich Ohinga to illustrate the extent of the traditional way of life, to extend the eastern boundary of the previous nomination to include the relevant attributes outside the walled enclosure; to also extend the buffer zone to enclose all the *Ohingni* in use by contemporary communities in the vicinity of Thimlich Ohinga, including by means of extending land use agreements and including local and regional authorities in the land use management agreements and to, last but not least, significantly augment the comparative analysis presented to illustrate the relationship between Thimlich Ohinga and other *Ohingni* in the Lake Victoria region including their capacity to represent the traditional settlement forms of agro-pastoral communities.

A revised nomination was received on 1 February 2018.

#### **Date of ICOMOS approval of this report**

14 March 2018

## **2 The property**

### **Description**

The term *Thimlich* is derived from a local Luo word referring to a scary jungle. *Ohinga* (*Ohingni*-plural) on the other hand, is a form of earth/stone built settlement or enclosure found in large numbers within the Lake Victoria region. Thimlich Ohinga is the largest surviving complex and was probably founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. It represents a tradition of massive dry-stone building/construction by the early pastoral communities of the Lake Victoria Basin.

The nominated property comprises four larger *Ohingni*, all of which have extensions. The main *Ohinga* is referred to as *K'Ochieng'*, while the others are *K'Akuku*, *K'Oketch* and *K'Olouch*. Each of the *Ohingni* consists of a large enclosure with internal features including smaller enclosures, low walls and house depressions, as well as smaller extensions adjacent to them. There is also an industrial and iron working site referred to as the blacksmith enclosure. The overall size of the property proposed comprises 21 hectares, which are surrounded by a buffer zone of 33 hectares.

The dry stone wall enclosures are constructed in a three-phase design. Walls have an outer and inner phase of neatly arranged stones of all shapes and sizes and a middle phase consisting of smaller stones. The middle held together the stones in the inner and outer phases of the walls. Due to lack of distinct shapes of the rocks used, the walls do not exhibit clear coursing. Stones were placed in an interlocking system that enhanced overall stability without the use of any mortar or cement. The walls range from 1.5m to 4.5m in height, with an average thickness of 1m.

The Thimlich Ohinga archaeological site illustrates interior enclosure structures of various kinds. These include small enclosures, including cattle kraals or pens and garden fences, depressions and corridors. The kraals are larger and usually located at the centre of the structures, while the pens are extensions to the outer walls. The depressions, identified as house pits, are circular with an average diameter of 5m in conformity with the shape of the *Ohinga*. One such depression is at *K'Ochieng'* enclosure and is associated with food preparation and storage. These depressions may also have been used for other functions, including threshing grain, fire pits or for drying grain.

Between the enclosures are passageways and corridors lined with low walls of stone. Some of these have been reconstructed during the ongoing conservation work at the property. A designated industrial area lies just outside the northern wall of the main enclosure. Here iron smelting and working took place, as indicated by the presence of a furnace area containing smooth stones that could have acquired that texture as a result of being used as anvils. Pieces of *tuyere* litter the area and there is also a mound of iron slag, refuse and pottery.

*K'Ochieng'*, as the largest *Ohinga* in the property, consists of an outer compound wall which is approximately 140m in diameter from the north to the south and retains dry stone structures which are 2.5m to 4.2m high. There are three gateways, one to the west and two to the east. These are in the form of passage-type doors. The outer wall of the enclosure appears has undergone modification during the site's occupation. The extant structure is not circular in plan. However, it is possible to identify the joint where an extension has been added to the north-eastern section.

Archaeological excavations at the site have yielded faunal, ceramic and lithic materials. Ceramics associated with the site are mainly cord rouletted. The cord roulette decorative motif is principally Nilotic while iron working is associated with the Bantu groups. The site, therefore, represents an early interaction between two main groups. These materials have been used to explain the dynamics of settlement patterns in the region.

### **History and development**

As fortified settlements were common features during the early periods of occupation in the present day western Kenya and Lake Victoria regions, the history of Thimlich Ohinga has to be set into a wider study of how these settlements developed. The extensive history provided in the revised nomination dossier is based on analysis of available oral historical, historical linguistic, documentary, archaeological and genetic evidence and all attest to considerable population interaction, inter-marriage and mobility in the area during pre-colonial and colonial eras.

Thimlich Ohinga archaeological site was first inhabited around 500 years ago. It was built for security reasons and likely had its own governance connected to broader

regional power structures. Today, the area around the site is predominantly inhabited by self-identifying Luo people, whose language Dholuo belongs to the Western Nilotic branch of the Nilo-Saharan language phylum. The Luo attribute significance to the property and because of this relation, Thimlich Ohinga has often been considered a historic Luo site. However, historical research and oral tradition attest to a diversity of occupants and interaction of different peoples.

Successive occupation by different groups has been the norm in the Lake Victoria Basin and likewise the history of Thimlich Ohinga is characterized by periodic occupation and out-migration until the site was finally abandoned in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to oral tradition, the earliest inhabitants are said to have been Bantu groups including the Wagire and Kamageta. The Nilotic groups which passed through the area consisted of the Kabuoch-Kachieng, Kadem, Kaler, Kanyamwa and Karungu. However, these groups later split and moved in different directions. Both the Bantu and Nilotic groups seem to have adopted similar strategies in establishing their settlements with dry stone walls, indicating that the period of construction and occupation of the site is likely to be between 1590 and 1680, when such groups are known to have settled in the eastern Lake Victoria region. These dates also correspond with charcoal samples from excavations at Thimlich Ohinga, which gives dates ranging from 1650 to 1900 CE.

In the 1680s, the Nilotic Kabuoch-Kachieng group moved into the area, expanded the existing structures and built others further uphill. The site was then occupied by the Kanyamkago people as they expanded their territory southwards. They eventually established themselves across River Kuja some 20km away, and Thimlich Ohinga became occupied by the Kadem people, another group that was also expanding southwards from their Raguda settlements in the present day Karubgu region. For reasons that are not clear, the Kadem people later handed over the site to the Kanyamwa who remained there until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While not living on the site after this period, they continued to use it for various other purposes, mostly farming and grazing.

Archaeological research has been conducted at Thimlich Ohinga site for several decades. Radiocarbon dates from charcoal samples returned a date of between 1650 AD and 1900 AD. In 2017, excavations were conducted on previously excavated trenches to recover samples for dating and to determine the functions of the existing features and the use of space within the fortifications. Excavations were also conducted in other enclosures outside the Thimlich Ohinga to substantiate some of the site interpretations as well as to determine the extent of archaeological evidence of the wider settlement. Analysis of sediments from different enclosures at Thimlich has identified sediments distinctive of livestock enclosures, and thus of pastoral settlements. The iron smelting sites have also provided evidence of interaction between pastoral communities, hunter-gatherers and iron using farmers.

### 3 Justification for inscription, integrity and authenticity

#### Comparative analysis

In its consideration of the previous submission of the Thimlich Ohinga Cultural Landscape nomination in 2015, the World Heritage Committee requested that a new nomination would need to be submitted with an augmented Comparative Analysis. The comparative analysis in the previous dossier submitted in 2014 had mainly compared the nominated property with other fortified settlements, and included consideration of World Heritage listed properties such as Great Zimbabwe National Monument [Zimbabwe, 1986, (i), (iii) and (vi)], and other settlements such as the City Walls in Xingcheng and Xi'an (China) and the Western Stone Forts of Ireland. It focused on the form and design of the fortifications, the stone building techniques, drainage systems and towers. The State Party at the time also provided comparisons with African cultural landscapes inscribed on the World Heritage List.

The ICOMOS Advisory mission recommended to refocus the comparative analysis in line with the recommended focus of the new nomination on similar settlement remains at a local and regional level, which may also have the potential to illustrate comparable physical features and the life of pastoral communities.

The revised comparative analysis presented in the 2018 nomination as requested emphasizes the southern and eastern African context of drystone wall settlements and compares examples from Neolithic agro-pastoral communities from the early second millennium BCE until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century CE. Among the compared examples are Molokwane, Marothodi and Tswenyane-Kaditshwene in South Africa, various sites in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe centred around Nyanga and several others reaching across Eastern Africa from Sudan and Ethiopia to Botswana and South Africa, while also considering selected examples from West Africa such as Kofyar in Nigeria or the massive stone walled enclosures at Ruins of Loropéni, Burkina Faso [2009, (iii)]. The analysis also demonstrates clearly that Thimlich Ohinga is the best preserved example of dry stone enclosures that are widespread in the Nyanza region.

ICOMOS considers that this augmented comparative analysis demonstrates that Thimlich Ohinga is by far the best preserved complex when compared to known archaeological sites of similar physical characteristics in the Nyanza region. In terms of comparisons with other stone built enclosures in southern and western Africa, it is demonstrated that Thimlich Ohinga unlike the large earthwork sites associated with early kingdoms in the Great Lakes region, and most probably also the capital sites of the Zimbabwe empire and Mutapa Kingdom in Southern Africa, that reflect an hierarchical system, the remains are more representative of a lineage based system that relied on more heterarchical structures of pastoral societies.

Thimlich Ohinga hence can be considered an exceptional example of a dry-stone settlement, based on a complex organization system of communal occupation, craft industries and livestock that reflects a particular phase in the development of pastoral communities in the Lake Victoria basin of western Kenya from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

---

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:

- Thimlich Ohinga exhibits a sophisticated system of dry-stone wall masonry which created meticulously arranged three-phased undressed stone walls which have remained structurally stable over centuries withstanding the various vagaries of nature. The site is the largest and best preserved dry-stone wall settlement in the region.
- The archaeological settlement was a major centre of cultural interaction and provides testimony to important episodes in the migration movements and settlement process of the Lake Victoria Basin and sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.
- The dry-stone enclosures in Thimlich Ohinga document a specific concept of sustainable land use which served different socio-economic and linguistic groups through time. Its sustainability was insured through the continuous transmission of maintenance tradition and knowledge of the traditional masonry techniques through apprenticeship.
- The property is a rare feat of well-developed stone architecture of pure dry stone building.

ICOMOS considers that the justification provided by the State Party is appropriate and that the additional historical, anthropological and archaeological data provided in the revised nomination dossier substantiates the above claims. Thimlich Ohinga is indeed an exceptional testimony of settlement patterns and spatial community relations in the Lake Victoria basin, which documents the successive occupation by different people from various linguistic origins. It gives reference to habitation patterns, livestock cultivation and craft practices prevalent in these communal settlements. It further illustrates a specific typology of dry-stone wall construction in a three-phased approach.

### **Integrity and authenticity**

#### **Integrity**

According to the State Party, the nominated property contains all the elements necessary to express the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. It includes the stone walls with their low entrances, the structural support features known as buttresses, low water/sludge drainage

vents from the inner livestock enclosures (kraals), the three-phase wall design, the inner and outer enclosures, industrial site and house pits.

ICOMOS considers that in line with the refocused nomination, which, following ICOMOS' recommendation in its previous evaluation, emphasizes the *Ohinga's* archaeological evidence and its qualities as a traditional dry-stone settlement and unique dry-stone wall construction technology, the integrity is better demonstrated than in the previous nomination. However, the boundary extension towards the south-east requested by the World Heritage Committee in its decision 39 COM 8B.8 was not undertaken although the State Party indicated plans to purchase the relevant property. ICOMOS considers that property ownership should not be a prerogative to World Heritage inscription and considers that the boundary extension remains necessary to fully ensure integrity of the property.

#### **Authenticity**

The State Party considers that the original fabric of the structures has been conserved and that the most recent repairs have applied the original techniques of construction, ensuring that the property retains its character in design and material. The protective apparatus of the complex has been maintained as found.

ICOMOS notes that today, what used to be ruins are now fully restored, and that documentation of the restorations is not available. Some walls have been added to demarcate the boundary between the archaeological site and the forest, but this new work is not easily distinguishable from the stone structures. ICOMOS considered in its previous evaluation report that because some of the restoration work could possibly have been executed overzealously, the authenticity of some stone structures may have been compromised. However, the State Party has provided further information that these works were undertaken post 1981 with qualified supervision and documentation by the National Museums of Kenya, utilizing indigenous methods in line with the traditional masonry techniques which were trained to younger apprentices as part of the conservation project.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the archaeological structures and settlement patterns are sufficiently preserved and illustrate authenticity in material, form and design, workmanship, location and setting and to some extent traditional management techniques and associated rituals. ICOMOS therefore concludes that authenticity has been demonstrated.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that while the conditions of authenticity has been demonstrated, the full demonstration of the conditions of integrity remain dependant on the boundary extension requested by the World Heritage Committee in Decision 39 COM 8B.8.

---

### Criteria under which inscription is proposed

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

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 Thimlich Ohinga is a living testimony and the best preserved example of a unique cultural tradition of stone wall fortification. It is located in a landscape of successive occupation and displacement and by different linguistic groups that build upon what their predecessors left behind. The site functioned as a centre where all inhabitants were related to each other in one way or another and constituted a context for micro social relations. The settlement is linked to spiritual practices, in which the walls are attributed a link to ancestral spirits which prevented their destruction or prohibited access.

ICOMOS confirms that Thimlich Ohinga provides an exceptional testimony to communal settlement traditions in the Lake Victoria Basin. It illustrates shared communal settlement, livestock cultivation and craft industry patterns, utilized and practiced by several successive inhabitant groups of different linguistic origin. The archaeological evidence testified not only to the communities' spatial organization but also to an elaborate system of interrelations between the different Ohingni within proximity to each other. It therefore allows to understand and further research community interaction patterns between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in the region.

---

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 is justified by the State Party on the grounds that Thimlich Ohinga illustrates an outstanding example of undressed dry-stone construction typology characterized by a three-phase building technology using stones of irregular shapes, which is not known to exist elsewhere in Easter Africa. The three phases were built concurrently in an outer and inner phase which were joined together in the middle by a third phase consisting of significantly smaller stones which pressed down the ends of the stones of the outer and inner phases.

ICOMOS considers that the dry stone wall construction typology illustrates a rather sophisticated interlocking system, which explains the good state of conservation of the enclosure walls, which are retained at heights of up to 4.2 metres.

The settlements further provide an impressive reference of spatial planning and settlement types in the wider Lake Victoria Basin, at a period in history characterized by increased human mobility as a result of social, economic and environmental pressures that affected human populations in the region. The construction at Thimlich Ohinga marks an important episode in the migration and settlement of the Lake Victoria Basin and sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

---

ICOMOS considers that this criterion 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 Thimlich Ohinga is an outstanding traditional settlement representing a land use and diversified subsistence system over several centuries.

ICOMOS considers that while the argument is in general appropriate, the plan and land use typology applied is better recognized in the previous criterion (iv). ICOMOS nevertheless considers that Thimlich Ohinga as the best preserved *Ohinga* constitutes a representative and outstanding example of Ohingni, a distinctive form of pastoral settlement that persisted for several centuries in the Lake Victoria basin.

---

ICOMOS considers that this criterion has been justified.

---

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets criteria (iii), (iv) and (v) and while the condition of authenticity is demonstrated, full demonstration of the conditions of integrity remain depending on the boundary extension requested by the World Heritage Committee in decision 39 COM 8B.8.

### Description of the attributes

The attributes which express the Outstanding Universal Value of the property include the dry-stone wall enclosures in their specific three-phase construction typology as well as the internal small enclosure structures, including cattle kraals or pens and garden fences, depressions and corridors.

The spatial relationships of the settlements, both internally, towards each other and within the wider landscape are essential to illustrate the specific spatial use patterns of the traditional *Ohingni* settlements, which were situated in their historic surroundings of dense jungle vegetation.

## 4 Factors affecting the property

The nominated property is affected by the following factors:

- Human and animal activities: There is occasional illegal grazing, collection of firewood and harvesting of sisal which grows naturally within the nominated property. There is also encroachment of wildlife as this is the only dense thicketed area with vegetation in the local area. Animals such as monkeys occasionally climb on the walls, although this does not seem to have had much impact on their stability or state of conservation.
- Environmental pressures: Trees growing near the walls are potential threats to their stability, but these are removed periodically.
- Tourism: Use of undesignated footpaths has caused conservation pressures in the past, but is now controlled.

---

ICOMOS considers that the main threats to the property are human and animal activities and tourism. Identified pressures are currently well managed.

---

## 5 Protection, conservation and management

### Boundaries of the nominated property and buffer zone

The boundary of the nominated property coincides with the gazetted boundary of Thimlich Ohinga national monument. This boundary is clearly demarcated by a barbed wire fence and encloses all the stone structures the State Party has identified in order to convey the values of the settlement. Because of the archaeological potential of features located on the south side of the property where the fence comes near to the entrance to Koketch, ICOMOS considered in its previous evaluation that the area currently within the south-east buffer zone should be included in the property boundary. This recommendation was reiterated by the World Heritage Committee in its decision 39 COM 8B.8. ICOMOS notes that the State Party has initiated processes towards the acquisition of the concerned property by signing a sale agreement, however as public ownership is not a prerequisite for World Heritage designation, the boundary should be extended to allow for full protection of all attributes of the property.

The size of the buffer zone has been significantly increased since the property's first submission encompassing now 33 hectares instead of previously 7.135 hectares. However, the map submitted indicates that it has not been formally demarcated which suggests that what is presented is an approximation of what the buffer zone will be. It is now bordered by two roads on the west and north (-east), and extends towards the small Kodongo Ohinga in the south.

ICOMOS notes that this extension has been made in merely the south-eastern direction of the property, while ICOMOS had previously requested extensions in several directions, including to the north and east to cover at least small strips on the respective other sides of the road. Formal agreements and legal mechanisms need to be put in place to make the protection of the buffer zone effective.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the boundaries of the nominated property remain to be extended and that the buffer zone, though adequately extended in southern direction needs to be further adjusted in all other directions. Legal protection mechanisms require to be put in place for this extended buffer zone.

---

### Ownership

The property is owned by the National Museums of Kenya, which is a state corporation with headquarters in Nairobi. Parts of the buffer zone are privately owned.

### Protection

The nominated property is protected by the National Museums and Heritage Act, Cap 216 of 2006 and is managed by the National Museums of Kenya. The site was gazetted and declared a national monument on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1981 and confirmed as a national monument on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1982 under the then Antiquities and Monuments Act, Cap 215 which was repealed and replaced with the National Museums and Heritage Act in 2006. The latter Act consolidates the laws relating to national museums and heritage; provides for the establishment, control, management and development of national museums; and the identification, protection, conservation and transmission of the cultural and natural heritage of Kenya.

The Act allows the Minister in respect of a protected area, to prohibit or restrict by notice in the Kenya Gazette access, development, agriculture or livestock use or any other activity, which is liable to damage a monument or object of archaeological or palaeontological interest. The Minister may also direct or authorize the National Museums of Kenya to take such steps that are necessary or desirable for the maintenance of the protected area. The National Museums of Kenya may formulate necessary by-laws for controlling access, with or without payment, and enforce laws for the conduct of visitors in the protected area.

Thimlich Ohinga is also protected through other Kenyan laws. These include the Government Land Act Cap 280 of 2010 which make further provision for regulating, leasing and disposal of Government land; and the Environmental Management and Coordination Act 1999, which provides for the establishment of appropriate legal and institutional frameworks for the management of the environment and for matters connected to it. There is also the Wildlife (Conservation and Management) Act Cap 376 of 1985 that handles the protection, conservation and management of wildlife in Kenya. In addition, the Forests Act of 2005 provides for the establishment, development

and sustainable management, including conservation and rational utilization of forest resources and for the socio-economic development of the country.

ICOMOS considers that the legal protection system for the property is adequate. It is further strengthened by traditional rules and taboos maintained by community elders, which assist in the protection of the property and its surrounding flora and fauna.

The buffer zone protection was aimed to be achieved by formalized agreements with private land owners, requested by the World Heritage Committee in its decision 39 COM 8B.8, which recommends to define and put in place formal agreements with land owners and also provide legal protection that includes clear management and permitted uses in the buffer zone. These land use agreements have been finalized and officially signed. Merely the indication in the nominations that the buffer zone is yet to be demarcated raises concerns as to the effectiveness of its protection.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the legal protection and the protective measures for the property and buffer zone are adequate but that the formal demarcation of the buffer zone needs to be finalized.

---

### **Conservation**

According to the State Party, archaeological research at the site can be traced from early field survey reports, studies of the structures and in archaeological investigations conducted by the National Museums of Kenya, especially since the 1990s. The property was included in the World Monuments Fund Watch list for the periods 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. In 2007, a systematic archaeological study was carried out by the National Museums of Kenya to determine the content and possible functions of some of the features found within or in association with the large stone-walled enclosures. Excavations were conducted on four of the small circular stone-walled enclosures and two house depressions within two of the four major enclosures.

In its previous evaluation, ICOMOS considered that relatively little archaeological research had been conducted on the property and that little of the excavated material has been subjected to systematic analysis. In consequence, the World Heritage Committee recommended to the State Party to conduct further archaeological research in and around the property to substantiate some of the site interpretations as well as determine the archaeological evidence of the wider settlement. In response, the State Party established a medium-term research plan for archaeological excavations and already conducted some excavations in the past two years. It also reinterpreted earlier excavations that had not been fully considered in the previous nomination dossier. A report of these latest findings was provided to ICOMOS during its Advisory Mission, which occurred as part of the advice initiative. ICOMOS considers that the documentation is now far more substantial but that it would be desirable to create a single

database to document all relevant archaeological finds, conservation works as well the related corpus of oral traditions associated with Thimlich Ohinga.

Fencing of Thimlich Ohinga property by the National Museums of Kenya was completed in 2000. This was followed by a detailed condition survey of Thimlich Ohinga Cultural Landscape undertaken by the National Museums of Kenya the same year. In 2001-2003 major restoration of several walls of Thimlich Ohinga was undertaken. In 2007 to 2008 the Ministry of State for National Heritage through the National Museums of Kenya funded restoration of the walls and excavation works in the Koketch enclosure, the industrial area and the blacksmith enclosure.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that state of conservation of the stone structures within the nominated property is good, although the documentation of conservation works and associated oral traditions could be strengthened.

---

### **Management**

Management structures and processes, including traditional management processes

The agency responsible for the daily management of the site is the National Museums of Kenya, which is a state corporation established by an act of parliament, the National Museums and Heritage Act, Cap 216, 2006. Four on site staff and one caretaker have been assigned as the in-situ management team for the property.

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

Based on a strategic plan and vision for 2030 of the National Tourism Policy and a Nyany and Western Kenya Tourism Development Plan developed by the Tourism Trust Fund, the State Party has presented its plans for a controlled tourism development while conserving cultural and environmental values. While at a theoretical level the aims of this emphasize sustainability, it will need to be observed in practice how the anticipated significant visitor increase will affect the property. Plans are underway to develop a picnic site, a camping site and an eco-lodge as additional visitor infrastructures.

The State Party has also presented a new management plan for the property, which was adopted in 2017 and guides site management until 2027. This Thimlich Ohinga Traditional Settlement Management Plan aims at harmonizing conservation activities on site, empower professionals working with the property, both in terms of capacity-building and participative decision-making and in this context seeks to specifically involve local community members as resource persons.

## Involvement of the local communities

There are a few hundred people residing immediately adjacent to the property. The nominated property serves as a meeting venue for the community where issues affecting them are deliberated. It also remains a location for community rituals, in particular in times of crisis.

ICOMOS notes that, in the wider area, the local communities comprise a population of approximately 5,000-10,000 people. Based on the observations of the technical evaluation mission that visited the nominated property, ICOMOS considers that although the local communities were not involved in the preparation of the nomination, they have subsequently become actively involved in the conservation of Thimlich Ohinga, and the current community relations are good. Community support for Thimlich Ohinga is indicated through the establishment of Friends of Thimlich Ohinga community-based organisation in 2013, consisting of 49 members who pay a membership fee.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the management system for the property is adequate.

---

## 6 Monitoring

Monitoring has been undertaken by the National Museum of Kenya. Traditional rules and taboos established by the community elders also contribute to site protection and monitoring processes. The following key indicators have been presented for measuring the state of conservation of the property:

- Condition survey: assessments of wall condition and vegetation growth
- Photographs
- Status of fence: Inspection of barbed wire and poles used to construct the fence

ICOMOS considers that the set of indicators proposed by the State Party is rather generic and that the establishment of a more precise monitoring system with agreed upon indicators, methods of assessment and responsibilities would ensure continuity across several monitoring cycles.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the indicators presented should become the basis of a more elaborate monitoring system including methods of indicator assessment and responsibilities.

---

## 7 Conclusions

Thimlich Ohinga was first nominated as a cultural landscape in 2014 and referred back by the World Heritage Committee at its 39<sup>th</sup> session in 2015. The World Heritage Committee recommended at that time to refocus the justification of the nomination towards the

traditional settlement characteristics of the property, to augment the comparative analysis and conduct archaeological research towards this end, to extend both the property boundaries and the buffer zone and to ensure adequate legal protection including of private properties in the buffer zone.

In its 2018 nomination dossier, the State Party addressed most of the above mentioned World Heritage Committee requests. In particular, the extensive additional documentation relating to a history of the site and its wider areas, additional archaeological research that illuminates the use of the site and the augmented comparative analysis that has been focused on sites in eastern, southern and west Africa allow a better understanding of exceptionality of the property. In ICOMOS' view, Thimlich Ohinga is the best preserved example of the *Ohingni* a distinctive form of pastoral settlements which predominantly developed in the Lake Victoria Basin using specific typology of dry-stone wall construction in a three-phased approach.

It represents an exceptional testimony to settlement patterns and spatial community relations in the region, at a period in history characterized by increased human mobility as a result of increased social, economic and environmental pressures that affected human populations in the region. The construction at Thimlich Ohinga thus marks an important episode in the migration and settlement of the Lake Victoria Basin in particular and sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

The property demonstrates criteria (iii), (iv) and (v) as well as the qualifying condition of authenticity. In terms of integrity, it has been noted that the requested property extension is still pending, although a sales agreement has been reached with the property owner. ICOMOS considers that since public ownership is not a prerequisite to World Heritage inscription, the boundary should be extended as requested, even before the acquisition is legally finalized. Also with respect to boundaries, ICOMOS notes that while the buffer zone has been extended to cover additional land towards the south of the site but not towards the other direction, where it continues to cover only a narrow street corridor. ICOMOS considers that the buffer zone boundaries still require to be extended. Both extensions need to be undertaken within the year 2018.

Conservation efforts, the management system and the newly released management plan as well as the legal protection of the site are adequate and ICOMOS acknowledges the support of the local community towards maintenance and management of the property. Merely the monitoring system and data collection of archaeological excavations and monitoring exercises could be improved, which is recommended below.



## 8 Recommendations

### Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that Thimlich Ohinga Archaeological Site, Kenya, be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criteria (iii), (iv) and (v)**.

### Recommended Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

#### Brief synthesis

Located 46km northwest of Migori Town in the Lake Victoria region, Thimlich Ohinga archaeological site is a dry-stone walled settlement, based on a complex organization system of communal occupation, craft industries and livestock that reflects a cultural tradition developed by pastoral communities in the Nyanza region of the Lake Victoria basin that persisted from 16<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Thimlich Ohinga is the largest and best preserved of these massive dry-stone walled enclosures. The *Ohinga* appear to have served primarily as security for communities and livestock, but they also defined social units and relationships linked to lineage based systems.

The property comprises four larger *Ohingni*, all of which have extensions. The main *Ohinga* is referred to as Kochieng, while the others are Kakuku, Koketch and Koluoch. The dry stone wall enclosures are constructed in a three-phase design with separately built up outer and inner phases, held together by the middle phase. Stones were placed in an interlocking system that enhanced overall stability without use of any mortar or cement. The walls are built of neatly arranged stones of various sizes and without mortar, ranging from 1.5m to 4.5m in height, with an average thickness of 1m.

Thimlich Ohinga is an exceptional testimony of settlement patterns and spatial community relations in the Lake Victoria Basin, which documents the successive occupation by different people from various linguistic origins during an important episode in the migration and settlement of the Lake Victoria Basin between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It also gives reference to habitation patterns, livestock cultivation and craft practices prevalent in communal settlements at this time.

**Criterion (iii):** Thimlich Ohinga provides an exceptional testimony to settlement traditions in the Lake Victoria Basin. It illustrates shared communal settlement, livestock cultivation and craft industry patterns, utilized and practiced by several successive inhabitant groups of different linguistic origin. The archaeological evidence testified not only to the communities' spatial organization but also to an elaborate system of interrelations between the different *Ohingni* within proximity to each other. It therefore allows to understand and further research community interaction patterns between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in the region.

**Criterion (iv):** The settlements of Thimlich Ohinga provide an impressive reference to spatial planning and settlement types in the wider Lake Victoria Basin, at a period in history characterized by increased human mobility as a result of social, economic and environmental pressures that affected human populations in the region. The massive stone walled enclosures at Thimlich Ohinga mark an important episode in the migration and settlement of the Lake Victoria Basin and sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

Thimlich Ohinga also illustrates an outstanding example of undressed dry-stone construction typology characterized by a three-phase building technology using stones of irregular shapes in two phases joined together by a third middle phase.

**Criterion (v):** Thimlich Ohinga, as the best preserved example of *Ohingni* constitutes a representative and outstanding example of *Ohingni*, a distinctive form of pastoral settlement that persisted in the Lake Victoria basin from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

#### Integrity

The property includes the *Ohingni* with their stone walls and low entrances, the structural support features known as buttresses, low water/sludge drainage vents from the inner livestock enclosures (*kraals*), the three-phase wall design, the inner and outer enclosures, industrial site and house pits.

To ensure the full protection of the archaeological remains, the entire property area, including the suggested extension toward a yet private land in the south, will need to be considered in an integrated management approach. This also applies to the property's immediate setting, where visual integrity depends on the conservation of the surrounding vegetation to retain the traditional atmosphere of the jungle-protected settlement.

#### Authenticity

Maintenance work of the structures was carried out over the centuries using traditional materials and techniques. Several subsequent periods of occupation and repair did not interfere with the design or workmanship of the structures. After their abandonment, the *Ohingni* became ruins. In the past decades, these ruins have now been largely restored, and selected walls have been added to demarcate the boundary between the archaeological site and the forest. This new work is not always easily distinguishable from the historic stone structures. Future conservation measures should be undertaken based on minimum intervention approaches and should continue to train younger apprentices in traditional maintenance techniques.

#### Management and protection requirements

The property is protected by the National Museums and Heritage Act, Cap 216 of 2006 and is managed by the National Museums of Kenya. The legal protection is

further strengthened by traditional rules and taboos maintained by community elders, which assist in the protection of the property and its surrounding flora and fauna. The archaeological potential of features located on the south side of the property requires the extension of the property boundary towards this direction, in line with the recommendation by the World Heritage Committee in its decision 39 COM 8B.8. Likewise, the buffer zone, though adequately extended in southern direction needs to be further adjusted in all other directions.

A new management plan for the property has been adopted in 2017 and guides site management until 2027. The management authorities plan to develop controlled tourism while conserving cultural and environmental values. Plans are underway to develop a picnic site, a camping site and an eco-lodge as additional visitor infrastructure. While at a theoretical levels the aims of this emphasize sustainability, it will need to be observed in practice how the anticipated new infrastructure and significant visitor increase will affect the property. It will be essential that any tourism or infrastructure project in the boundaries or the wider setting of the property will be evaluated by a comprehensive Heritage Impact Assessment before permissions are granted.

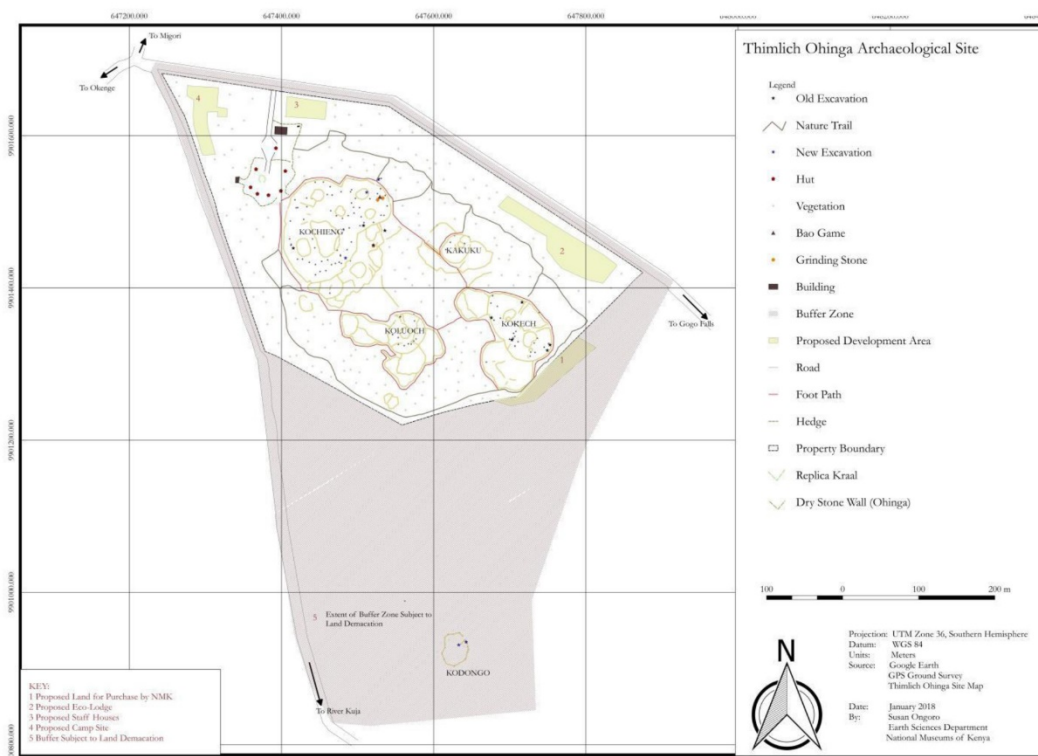
The property serves as a meeting venue for the community and remains a location for community rituals, in particular in times of crisis. These as well as the community-based maintenance strategies need to be continued to retain the strong involvement and attachment of the local communities.

#### **Additional recommendations**

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

- a) Expanding the property boundary at the south-eastern end of the property near the entrance of Koketch in line with the World Heritage Committee request in decision 39 COM 8B.8,
- b) Defining and legally approving the exact demarcation of the extended buffer zone,
- c) Establishing a single database to compile documentation regarding archaeological excavation results, conservation activities and associated oral traditions,
- d) Establishing a monitoring system based on further detailed, precise indicators, assessment methods and responsibilities and define how the monitoring exercise results can also feed into the above database,
- e) Undertaking comprehensive Heritage Impact Assessments for any infrastructure developed in and around the property, before permissions for these are granted,

- f) Submitting to the World Heritage Centre by 1 December 2019, a report on the implementation of the above-mentioned recommendations for examination by the World Heritage Committee at its 44<sup>th</sup> session in 2020.



Map showing the revised boundaries of the nominated property



Main entrance to K'Ochieng' enclosure



Kraal at K'Akuku enclosure