
Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (Malawi) No 1201rev

1 Basic information

Official name as proposed by the State Party

Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL)

Location

Mulanje and Phalombe districts
Malawi

Brief description

Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL) encompasses the mountain range located in southern Malawi, with the imposing Mount Mulanje – one of the largest inselbergs in the world – in its centre, and its immediate surroundings. A place believed to be inhabited by gods, spirits, and the ancestors, it carries cultural meanings embedded in or embodied by the geological and hydrological features of its natural environment, and its ecosystems. Said to be imbued with spiritual powers, Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL) has been created and its sacredness sustained by cultural practices and a belief system shared by the Yao, Mang'anja and Lhomwe people.

Category of property

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

In terms of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (2024), paragraph 47, it has also been nominated as a *cultural landscape*.

Included in the Tentative List

17 May 2000 as "Mulanje Mountain Biosphere Reserve"

Background

The World Heritage Committee has examined the nomination of Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape, Malawi, at its 38th session (Doha, Qatar, 2014) and adopted the following decision 38 COM 8B.18:

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Documents WHC 14/38.COM/8B and WHC-14/38.COM/INF.8B1,
2. Defers the examination of the nomination of **Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape, Malawi**, to the World Heritage List in order to allow the State Party, with the advice of ICOMOS, IUCN and the World Heritage Centre, if requested, to:

- a) Strengthen the justification of criterion (vi) and explore the applicability of criterion (iii) to illustrate in more detail how spiritual traditions as well as traditional management approaches for cultural and natural resources might be said to be of Outstanding Universal Value and illustrate the tangible attributes these are associated to,
- b) Identify in relation to the identified attributes of Outstanding Universal Value the information sources of authenticity,
- c) Augment the comparative analysis, in particular at a regional level, to highlight the specific aspects of cultural guardianship at Mount Mulanje that would demonstrate Outstanding Universal Value;

3. Considers that, if such studies suggest that a robust case could be made to justify the Outstanding Universal Value of the site, then the State Party should also:

- a) Initiate documentation and conservation activities for tangible cultural heritage resources, in particular those subject to regular visitation,
- b) Analyse and describe the traditional management mechanisms and establish closer ties between the three official management agencies and community elders in view of integrating the traditional and spiritual management practices in the overall property management,
- c) Promote a more active role of the Department for Culture in the management of the property, including – if necessary – additional financial resources and training to enable staff to fully commit to this responsibility,
- d) Explore options of extending the buffer zone towards the east,
- e) Prohibit mining activity in the property and carry out an impact study on any new project that may affect the integrity of the site prior to any new nomination;

4. Also considers that any revised 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) Developing a training program and a system of licensing for local guides to ensure consistent quality standards in guiding services,
- b) Exploring the qualities of Mount Mulanje with regard to natural heritage criteria as initially envisaged in the tentative list entry.

Consultations and technical evaluation mission

Desk reviews have been provided by ICOMOS International Scientific Committees, members and independent experts.

Comments on the natural values of this nominated property, their conservation and their management were received from IUCN in March 2025 and have been incorporated into the relevant sections of this report.

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the nominated property from 12 to 21 August 2024.

Additional information received by ICOMOS

A letter was sent to the State Party on 20 September 2024 requesting further information about the cultural landscape, tangible expressions of intangible cultural heritage,

integrity, regional status, comparative analysis, protection, land ownership/land uses, threats, and management.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 11 November 2024.

An interim report was provided to the State Party on 19 December 2024, summarising the issues identified by the ICOMOS World Heritage Panel.

Further information was requested in the interim report on: maps, buffer zone, threats: mining and tourism, and development projects.

Additional information was received from the State Party on 28 February 2025.

All additional information received has been incorporated into the relevant sections of this evaluation report.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report
12 March 2025

2 Description of the nominated property

Note: The nomination dossier and additional information contain detailed descriptions of this property, its history and its state of conservation. Due to limitations on the length of evaluation reports, this report provides only a short summary of the most relevant aspects.

Description and history

Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL) encompasses the mountain range located in the southern part of Malawi, with two distinct mountains – Mulanje to the south and Michesi to the north – and their immediate surroundings. The geology of this vast granite massif, its hydrology and ecosystems define the nominated cultural landscape, which has been created and is sustained by cultural practices and a belief system shared by the local Yao, Mang'anja and Lhomwe people.

Mount Mulanje, among the largest inselbergs in the world, includes many ridges, forested ravines and gullies with streams and water pools, and culminates in numerous peaks, the highest of which, Sapitwa, reaches 3,002 metres above sea level. Mount Michesi, which rises to about 2,300 metres above sea level, is partially separated from Mulanje by a saddle. The mountain range stands above the surrounding Chiradzulu plains, dotted with villages amidst the cultivated land. Its hydrological system includes both perennial and seasonal rivers, which provide water for the local communities and sustain the ecosystems. The area is rich in biodiversity with a high level of endemism. It is located within the broad belt of Miombo woodlands, with the critically endangered Mulanje Cedar (IUCN Red List of Threatened Species) found in the nominated property. It is also part of the Afromontane Regional Centre of Endemism and features several taxa considered endangered and threatened due to anthropogenic pressures and climate change.

The nominated property, defined by the State Party as a continuing and associative cultural landscape, represents a place imbued with spiritual powers, inhabited by gods, spirits, and the ancestors. Within it, cultural values are attached to the natural features, embedded in or embodied by them. Accordingly, hills, water pools, caves, waterfalls, and rapids, associated with invisible entities, represent places of veneration. The numerous shrines of the spirits, sacred caves or sacrificial sites include the Dziwe la Nkhalamba pool, the Likulezi firebreak, the holy cave of Nambirira, and the Machemba rock shelter.

The Dziwe la Nkhalamba pool is believed to be the graveyard linked to the spirits of the Batwa predecessors, or the place where witches and wizards play. It is strongly associated with rainmaking practices.

The Machemba rock shelter is covered with geometric rock art paintings dated to the Stone Age. It is believed to be inhabited by ancestors who intercede for the present communities in exchange for offerings of beer deposited in clay pots.

Religious services held nowadays in the holy cave of Nambirira testify to the enduring sacredness of this space.

Remains of pottery sherds found at the Likulezi firebreak constitute evidence of sacrificial deposits.

The nominated cultural landscape has gained a mystical status among the local population as a dangerous place, where people disappear and strange things happen, often related to harsh weather conditions. The Sapitwa peak is greatly associated with such stories, being seen by some as out of bounds for spiritual reasons. It is also believed that between the Mulanje and Michesi mountains moves Napolo, a serpentine creature that causes severe weather conditions and disasters, like landslides or floods.

The places where mystical occurrences happen or ritual practices take place are not necessarily constant or associated with one geographical location or a specific feature.

The sacred places, spirit shrines and other physical features with spiritual associations found within the nominated property are all commonplace in terms of ritual practices in the context of Malawi, and Southern Africa more generally, where African spirituality has been ordinarily practiced since pre-colonial times. However, the accumulation of sacred sites within Mulanje and the still living traditions and widely used spiritual practices are said to make the nominated property a particularly salient example of a sacred cultural landscape. Moreover, the sacredness and power of Mount Mulanje and its surroundings is said to be recognised well beyond the boundaries of the nominated property and Malawi. The mystic qualities of the area and its powerful healing potential related to herbal medicines found among the flora of the area has earned it a reputation that stretches across Southern and Eastern Africa, even if the biochemical-pharmaceutical qualities of only a small

fraction of the medicines have been tested so far. Research is needed to identify valuable indigenous knowledge that could be patented.

The spiritual power of Mount Mulanje can be harnessed by diviners and spiritual healers that have the ability to connect to the spirits. In present-day Malawi, African traditional religions coexist with Christianity and Islam. The introduction of dogmatic religions has led partly to merging of the African cosmological conceptions with religious doctrines but also contributed to the demise of some local traditional spiritual practices, deemed today by some as outdated or associated with witchcraft.

Limited archaeological investigations have been undertaken within the area. However, it has been attested that people were present around the place from at least the Middle Stone Age through Late Stone Age to Iron Age. The first inhabitants of the area were the Batwa hunter-gatherers who are believed to have found refuge on Mount Mulanje after the iron-making agriculturalists arrived to present-day Malawi around the 3rd century CE. The Batwa were possibly still living in the area in the 17th-18th century. They are remembered today as spirits who live on the mountain and the predecessors of current communities. The later 19th-century colonial history of the area is marked particularly by the presence around Mulanje of the Christian missionaries who aimed to suppress slave trade in the region. Two forts within the nominated property – Lister (national monument) and Anderson (preserved as a mound with scattered bricks) – testify to this history. Simultaneously, first cotton, tobacco and coffee plantations developed around Mulanje, later replaced mostly by tea estates which are still a significant feature of the landscape today. Among the oldest in Africa, the tea estates that spread in the southern part of the nominated property symbolise the period of change from the era of slavery to paid labour in the region.

The body of ethnographic and anthropological work specifically focused on the Mount Mulanje area remains limited. The intangible cultural heritage associated with the mountain can be linked to three cultural groups – the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe.

The Mang'anja, who might have been linked to the early iron making agricultural communities, arrived in the area probably with the 14th- 15th-century migration from Central Africa. They used to be involved in blacksmithing and are now predominantly subsistence farmers.

The Yao originated from northern Mozambique. They started moving to the area of Mulanje from the mid-18th century. They used to exist in groups without a centralised organisation. Having been introduced to Islam, they are today predominantly Muslim. Accordingly, some of their practices have evolved under the influence of the religion. Known for their weaving and basket-making, they have been historically involved in trade and commerce.

The Lhomwe migrated to the area from Mozambique at the end of the 19th century; some of them settled among

the Yao and the Mang'anja, others were employed at the plantations. Involved today in agriculture and fishing, the Lhomwe are also known for their pottery-making.

In present-day Malawi, the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people are socially and economically marginalised.

The cultural practices and beliefs of these groups have interacted with and influenced one another over time, leading partly to some hybridisation or interchange. Their intangible heritage rooted in African spirituality is key to understanding the nominated cultural landscape. It is tied to the physical features of the place as well as the climatological phenomena and botanical diversity. Based on the sacred associations between the natural world and the spirit world, the three groups developed a belief system that has created and sustains the nominated cultural landscape through cultural practices rooted in the human-nature relationship such as rainmaking, ancestor worship, spiritual healing and traditional medicine as well as rites of passage. In exchange, the sacred landscape provides the people with resources (water, food, medicine) that need to be managed sustainably and judiciously.

The sacredness of the landscape is effectively maintained through the practices and beliefs associated with the natural environment, which can be said to constitute in that sense a traditional management system, one that is produced and transmitted from generation to generation. Based on a social contract between the local communities, their Chiefs, Elders, spiritual practitioners and herbalists, the system embraces a set of rules that determine the code of conduct of the community and regulate the norms and behaviours within it based on established spiritual practices and taboos. The herbalists and spiritual leaders are the custodians of this traditional management system, watching over its preservation and transmission of knowledge together with the local community Chiefs, who lead the people. Given the close, spiritually-rooted relationship between the people and their environment, this traditional management system is specifically geared towards the sacredness of the "natural world".

There is paucity of literature regarding the protective nature of spiritual relations between traditional resource users in Mulanje and nature. A comprehensive survey of cultural practices and customs related to the nominated property is yet to be prepared. It could possibly reveal more details about the specific associations between the people and the sacred space of the mountain. However, this type of knowledge is deeply ingrained in the way of life of the local communities and sense of themselves, and may not necessarily be shared openly outside the community. Therefore, it is impossible to provide a full range of practices that govern land-use management in the area and regulate human activity thus contributing to nature conservation.

A substantial amount of research and documentation is also still missing to fill in the gaps in the understanding of

the history of the area and the socio-cultural aspects of the nominated cultural landscape related to the presence of the Yao, Lhomwe and Mang'anja populations around Mount Mulanje, including: documentation of plant usage by Mulanje herbalists; oral history of social life around Mulanje; archaeological excavation at appropriate sites to reflect change of mountain usage over time during different environmental conditions; and a comprehensive ethnographic study of the different local communities and their relation to the mountain, taking into account aspects of continuity and change in the fields of religion, herbalism and economic life.

In the additional information provided in November 2024, the State Party reiterated that the belief system of the local communities evolved with time through cultural interactions, but these changes are difficult to track, except for the most obvious, like the changes in the use of "cultural objects", the disappearance of certain practices from the nominated property (e.g., initiation camps, offerings at the Dziwe la Nkhalamba sacred pool) or change of place of certain rituals. The most detrimental has been the introduction of dogmatic religions, which tend to occupy the same cultural spaces. Nonetheless, the attitude of the communities to the sacredness of the landscape has not changed. It has also been highlighted that African traditional religions drop and take elements as the practitioners see fit, as there are no written prescripts for the beliefs. Research to track the evolution of the practices has not been conducted yet.

Baseline research on the traditional management system of Mount Mulanje has been done following recommendations made in 2014 by the World Heritage Committee and ICOMOS. This resulted in identifying, mapping, and documenting some cultural practices. The State Party hopes to intensify research and documentation of the intangible heritage of the area, which is included as a recommendation in the Cultural Heritage Resource Management Plan (CHRMP) for the nominated property.

Further information was also provided on the tangible expressions of intangible cultural heritage, which relate to natural features such as rivers, mountain peaks, natural water pools. At times, instead of one specific location, the whole area of Mount Mulanje can be associated with a ritual or sacrifice, as is the case of rainmaking practices or traditional healing.

In the additional information provided in February 2025, the State Party confirmed the land area of the nominated property to be of 89,549.18 ha (the figures provided in the nomination dossier were inconsistent). No buffer zone has been proposed for the nominated property.

State of conservation

The nominated cultural landscape, while tangibly embodied in the natural features of the Mount Mulanje Forest Reserve (MMFR) and its immediate surroundings, gets its meaning and significance from the intangible cultural heritage of the local communities. Conservation

efforts thus far have been focused on the biodiversity of the area. Research and monitoring, and reforestation initiatives have been ongoing since the establishment of the Mount Mulanje Conservation Trust (MMCT) in 2000. Despite these efforts, the forest coverage of the nominated property is depleting, the plains at the foot of the mountain range having lost vegetation significantly due to encroachment and land clearing for agriculture. The spread of tea estates in the south and the introduction of plantations of exotic tree species (such as pine and eucalyptus) have changed the landscape and led to the degradation of part of the indigenous flora.

The nominated property is vulnerable to veld fires caused by illegal charcoal burners, hunters, and vandals. The degradation due to fires is particularly visible on the eastern and western sides of Mount Mulanje, where the population density is the highest and where farms are spreading.

The intangible cultural heritage that sustains the existence of the nominated cultural landscape is in a vulnerable state. It requires adequate inventorying and documenting as a matter of urgency. Gradual decline in transmission of traditional knowledge and respect for community values is being observed, exacerbated by the socio-cultural changes engendered by Western-style education and economic system, as well as the introduction of dogmatic religions. Today, the belief system based on African spirituality, while amalgamated with elements of other religions, is still considered relevant by the local communities, even if its adherents are often disparaged by other believers. Yet, younger generations attracted by modernity are losing interest in pursuing the more traditional way of life and developing knowledge around the intangible cultural heritage of their communities. Research on the evolution of the cultural practices and beliefs related to the nominated cultural landscape is urgently needed to better understand the causes of changes to the traditions and the potential impact they might have on the preservation of the sacred space of Mount Mulanje.

Furthermore, in terms of preservation of the cultural landscape, more research is needed on the places and natural features in which spiritual and cultural meanings are embedded within the nominated property, including the assessment of their state of conservation. Among the places of cultural/spiritual value which are already known to be at risk of degradation are the Machemba rock shelter with its rock art and Dziwe la Nkhalamba pool with its shrine.

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation of the nominated property is satisfying but ecologically fragile. The related cultural values and associations need attention to prevent their dilution and disappearance.

Factors affecting the nominated property

Based on the information provided by the State Party and the observations of the ICOMOS technical evaluation mission, ICOMOS considers that the main factors affecting the nominated property are anthropogenic and environmental. They impact negatively both the natural environment of the nominated property and the associated intangible cultural expressions.

The key dynamic that gives rise to multiple threats appears to be population growth. It leads to encroachment on the area of the nominated property and unsustainable exploitation of its natural resources. Despite law enforcement and local community initiatives, the increased pressure for land has resulted in the deforestation of the southern slopes of the mountain and changes in ecosystems. Combined with the introduction of invasive species, the degradation is substantial. Deforestation is also a result of harvesting of wood to produce charcoal, illegal tree felling, ring-barking and man-made wildfires. While controls have been put in place by the authorities and the communities actively help with patrols and monitoring, management regimes in the country are said to be open to abuse. Pollution of rivers within the nominated property by the dumping of waste has also been observed. A need to develop a comprehensive waste management plan for local villages has been identified.

Another major threat is potential mining. Substantial deposits of bauxite and other minerals are located within the nominated property. Prospects of future exploration have not been clearly denied by the State Party, despite apparent strong opposition from the local communities and conservation bodies. Mining is not only a threat to biodiversity but also to the traditional lifeways. Rare earth elements have recently been found on the mountain in the area of Chambe Basin and Lichenya Plateau (eastern side of the nominated property), which prompted an ongoing Environmental and Social Impact Assessment. A mining licence has been recommended though its issuance is said to depend on the results of the said assessment.

Preservation of the cultural practices and beliefs that constitute the foundation of the traditional management system in the nominated property is threatened by the progressing westernisation of the society. Traditional knowledge is at risk of disappearing, all the more so that it is not protected by contemporary legal mechanisms, nor is it recorded in writing. While elements of Christianity and Islam have been integrated into the local belief system over the years, today the two religions are seen as a factor contributing to the decline of traditional practices. There is no formal legal protection of the intangible cultural heritage of the local communities, nor any programmes that would seek to integrate it with development plans, whether on local or national levels. To the contrary, the Witchcraft Act of 1911 apparently negatively affects the traditional healers, diviners and herbalists who feel stigmatised.

Catastrophic floods, rockslides and other natural disasters indirectly affect the nominated cultural landscape too, by dislocating communities and destroying their livelihoods. Phalombe District has a disaster preparedness plan. Given climate change, the risk of disasters is high and a mitigation plan will need to be prepared for Mulanje District as well.

Among new infrastructure developments within the nominated property, a sports arena is under construction in Likhubula (western side of the nominated property). It is unclear whether Heritage, Environmental and Social Impact Assessments have been conducted for this project.

Currently, tourism mostly represents a threat to the sites considered sacred. Waste left by visitors may become a problem as the numbers of tourists increase.

In the additional information submitted in November 2024, the State Party undertook to review its laws to include legal recognition and protection of the cultural practices and traditional beliefs, and work towards economic upliftment of their practitioners on whom the transmission of knowledge depends.

The State Party also admitted that exploration of minerals has taken place in the landscape, but no mining licence has been given to any company at this stage. It has been explained that the Department of Forestry regulates entry into the MMFR. Therefore, anyone even with a permit to extract or mine minerals or other resources, needs to conform to the regulations of the Forestry Act, which governs the MMFR, and the related policies, which do not allow mining. The traditional management system does not protect the nominated landscape from mining activities, there is therefore no guarantee that mining would not take place in the nominated property beyond the boundaries of the MMFR. The State Party believes that an inscription of the nominated property on the World Heritage List is the only way to keep future extractive industry activities away from Mount Mulanje.

In the additional information of February 2025, the State Party further informed that it revised the Mines and Minerals Act of 2019 in 2023 and adopted the Environmental Management Act of 2017. The Environmental Management and Assessment Regulations was also introduced in 2024 and the Guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment of 1997 revised in 2023. Within this refreshed framework, no mining license can be obtained and no mining activity can be carried out in the nominated property without relevant impact assessment studies and consultations with the affected communities to ensure that activities of mining companies align with community interests. The Malawi Mining Regulatory Authority (MMRA) and Malawi Environmental Protection Authority (MEPA) were established to ensure adherence of mining operations to environmental standards and license conditions.

Moreover, the State Party is working towards gazetting the nominated property to declare it a national monument, which would result in creating a no-go zone for mining in the Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL).

The State Party further informed of several development projects related to tourism planned within the boundaries of the nominated property. A visitor reception and information centre proposed next to the Likhubula Forest offices is at the conceptualisation stage; no impact studies have yet been commissioned. The Integrated Cable Car Resort on Mount Mulanje project includes installing within the MMFR a cable car (using the old cable system installed in the early 1970s) and constructing a mountain inn, a restaurant, an interpretation centre, an eco-lodge, a health spa and a wellness centre. The project has not undergone impact studies. The map provided by the State Party further suggests that the Lichenya Education Research Centre is being planned/constructed (no details provided) in the southwestern part of the nominated property.

Among ongoing infrastructure development projects, the upgrading of the Muloza-Chiringa Road, which constitutes the eastern boundary of the nominated property, to bitumen surface is underway. It underwent Environmental and Social Impact Assessment.

The State Party further suggested that zoning will be introduced to guide further tourism development, with a specific zone outside the nominated property established for tourism-related infrastructure.

ICOMOS welcomes the initiative of the State Party to declare the nominated property a national monument, which would be a no-go zone for mining. Simultaneously, ICOMOS notes that an official government report issued for the period 2020-2021 by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs as a function of the Malawi Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (MWEITI) includes a list of licenses granted for the period 2020-2021. ICOMOS further notes that, in 2024, a Mining Development Agreement was apparently signed for the Songwe Hill Rare Earths Project, with mining to commence in 2025. ICOMOS considers that no mining is acceptable within a World Heritage property or its immediate vicinity. It reiterates its recommendation from 2014 for the State Party to immediately revoke any mining exploration licenses granted and declare the long-term intention of the government to not initiate mining activities in the nominated property.

ICOMOS further considers that the planned tourism development projects could have a detrimental effect on the nominated property. The Integrated Cable Car Resort project, which is part of the Malawi National Tourism Investment Masterplan 2022-2042 developed with financial support from the African Development Bank, includes, besides major construction, development of activities such as hiking, rock-climbing and off-road cycling in the nominated property.

ICOMOS considers that given the state of conservation of the nominated area and the existing threats to both biodiversity and cultural heritage, tourism – existing and proposed – should be considered as an actual and potential threat both to cultural heritage and to the environmental integrity of the nominated property. Considering the nature of the nominated property (sacred cultural landscape), recreation should be restricted to minimal-impact activities.

ICOMOS also considers that Environmental, Social and Heritage Impact Assessments must be carried out on any project planned within the area of the nominated property and its surroundings, including the ongoing construction of the sports arena.

ICOMOS further considers that the controls and practical mechanisms in place to manage the population encroachment on the nominated property should be strengthened. The observed population growth has led to an ever-greater reliance on the woodlands and indigenous forest trees. Creating alternative economic opportunities to subsistence farming that would enable the local communities to sustain their livelihoods should be considered by the State Party as one of the means of protecting the nominated property. However, employment generation through activities such as tourism should be carefully planned, in order not to add new threats without any guarantee that existing threats will be mitigated.

Formal recognition of the relevance of the intangible cultural heritage of the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people, and support for the traditional mechanisms of land management by incorporating them in the development plans at the district level could further indicate the understanding by the government of the important role that the traditional management system plays.

ICOMOS considers that the state of conservation is satisfactory, but that the nominated property is ecologically and culturally fragile. The factors affecting the nominated property are serious and are not managed adequately at this stage. Concerted effort of the State Party in close collaboration with the local communities is needed to mitigate the harmful effects of mostly man-made threats. These efforts should go beyond mitigating the effects, in order to address the causes. Extractive industries must be prohibited from the area of the nominated property and its surroundings, and minimal-impact tourism development planned. All development projects must be subjected to Heritage, Environmental and Social Impact Assessments.

3 Proposed justification for inscription

Proposed justification

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

- The nominated cultural landscape has been created and sustained by the local cultural practices and a belief system which have developed around the sacredness of the area, the natural features and the ecosystems of which are imbued with spiritual powers. It is said to be a potent symbol of Southern and Central African cultural values and belief systems that developed on the basis of African cosmologies.
- The traditional management system that sustains the sacredness of the nominated property represents an exceptional value-based model of stewardship centred on African traditional spirituality. It is defined by codes of conduct, restrictions, and obligations towards access to the sacred spaces and utilisation of natural resources, thus safeguarding the natural environment of Mount Mulanje, which in turn provides people with food, livelihoods and medicinal plants with healing properties.
- Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL) as a place of power gives life and takes it away, while providing healing and constituting the resting place for the spirits of generations of people who have found spiritual home in the area. The power of the mountain is well known through much of Southern Africa and beyond, reaching as far as East Africa and the Horn of Africa.

Based on the nomination dossier, and according to the State Party, the key attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value can be grouped as follows: intangible cultural heritage of the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people (including cultural practices, beliefs and spiritual ceremonies related to different stages of life, rites of passage, or specific life circumstances, as well as healing); tangible cultural heritage (archaeological sites and architectural heritage that testifies to the occupation and development of the area at different points in time and to specific historical events); biodiversity of the nominated property.

ICOMOS considers that the sacred landscape of Mount Mulanje is "seated in culture". It has not changed in terms of its biophysical features and has also not been extensively shaped by the communities living on the lower slopes of the mountain. The beliefs have shaped the understanding of the place and have given cultural meaning to the mountain, but have not shaped the landscape as such. Villages, farming practices and physical representations of the sacred landscape have been incorporated in the form of shrines and sacred spaces, but its biophysical essence has not changed. Archaeological and ethnographic evidence seems to suggest that the people benefited from the landscape for centuries for their needs, attaching spiritual significance to the natural features of their environment and

associating them with their gods, spirits, and the ancestors. The indigenous spirituality and refrain from damage to the Mulanje landscape emanate from these beliefs. Whilst the cultural groups of Mulanje hold rituals and venerate the sacred spaces of the landscape, it is not evident whether their practices and knowledge systems have shaped the Mount Mulanje cultural landscape.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property should be seen as an associative cultural landscape rather than an organically evolved continuing cultural landscape.

Comparative analysis

The comparative analysis has been developed around the qualitative assessment of similar properties using thematic (long-standing cultural traditions and practices; spirituality and sacredness; sustainable interaction between humans and their environment; traditional management systems) and typological (cultural landscape) parameters. Chronological and geographical frameworks have not been restricted. Properties throughout the world inscribed on the World Heritage List, included in the Tentative Lists of States Parties as well as other properties have been analysed.

The State Party divided the comparative analysis into two levels – regional and international, comparing the nominated property to a large number of properties, not all of which could be considered relevant. In each case, a brief description of the comparator is provided by the State Party, but it is often not evident or clearly articulated what distinguishes the nominated property to consider it exceptional, besides being simply different. Among the properties not mentioned by the State Party, but which could be considered close comparators, is Bassari Country: Bassari, Fula and Bedik Cultural Landscapes (Senegal, 2012, criteria (iii), (v), and (vi)).

ICOMOS considers that the difficulty in articulating the exceptional character of the nominated property amongst its comparators lies in the fact that the value-based model of stewardship, as practised in the nominated property, is a typical way of managing sacred cultural landscapes/natural sites known throughout sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. Therefore, while singular differences in practices or traditions may be noted, the notion of spirituality and sacredness that gives meaning to the landscape is broadly the same across the many comparators.

However, ICOMOS considers that while the nominated property is part of a wider phenomenon that spans the continent and, in various forms, is also present on a global scale, Mount Mulanje nevertheless represents a particular example, known beyond its boundaries and those of the country, as an area of great power and healing potency recognisable in its healers and medicinal plants. Malawian healers operating in the nominated property and the plants they use are widely believed to be stronger and more potent, making the nominated cultural landscape exceptional and outstanding among other comparators.

Although the proposed comparative analysis does not consider this aspect, it is discussed by the State Party elsewhere in the nomination dossier. In the additional information shared in November 2024, the State Party also provided bibliographical references to confirm the status and reputation of Mount Mulanje outside Malawi, attesting to the supranational significance of the place and its powerful associations.

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

Criteria under which inscription is proposed

The property is nominated on the basis of criteria (iii) 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 is an outstanding example of an African traditional system of management of cultural and natural resources, based on the cultural practices and beliefs developed around the sacredness of the natural environment and particularly its specific features (i.e., geological formations, water sources, hills, trees). It provides insights into a distinctive interaction between people and their land, informed by African cosmologies and grounded in mutual beneficence. The system is rooted in the intangible heritage of the local communities that has created the cultural landscape of Mount Mulanje and sustains it through spiritually-rooted codes of conduct, obligations, and controls related to the behaviour of the community towards its environment.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property is distinguished by the profound spiritual significance that permeates its physical environment: the imposing inselberg of Mount Mulanje, the rock shelters, water pools and other features of the landscape which reflect in an exceptional way the spiritual association that the local people have to this area. The nominated cultural landscape can be said to have been created and sustained through living traditions that constitute an exceptional traditional management system based on the values people attach to the sacredness of their natural environment which they protect. The place provides people with resources that should be managed sustainably and judiciously.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is demonstrated.

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 Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL) has been created and is sustained by the living traditions of the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people, and their spiritual

practices linked to the natural environment and ecosystems of the nominated property. The varied natural features of the Mulanje Mountain and its surrounding landscape, such as geomorphological forms, water sources, natural phenomena and biodiversity, embody elements of the spiritual world inhabited by gods, spirits and the ancestors.

ICOMOS considers that the spiritual associations that make the nominated property a sacred space sustained through the traditional spiritual practices of the local communities can be considered of outstanding universal significance. While the belief system based on African cosmologies, and expressed through the relationship of people to natural places and resources, is characteristic of spiritual traditions common across Southern Africa and beyond, the specific case of the nominated property stands out. The spiritual power of the nominated property is renowned in the region, invoked by both by local populations and outsiders, and the mountain itself is respected beyond the borders of Malawi as a place that gives life and provides healing. This confirms the outstanding nature of the spiritual association which is at the heart of this cultural landscape. The cultural understanding and relationship of the people to the mountain is shaped by the close interaction of traditional beliefs with the physical environment and natural phenomena. In this context, the mountain and the beliefs about it are inseparable and should be seen in a holistic manner as an associative cultural landscape that serves as a repository of the intangible cultural heritage of the local communities.

ICOMOS considers that this criterion is demonstrated.

ICOMOS considers that the attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value are the cultural practices and beliefs of the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people that are specifically associated with the area of the nominated property both physically and metaphysically and which sustain its sacredness (e.g., related to ancestor worship, rites of passage or rainmaking), as well as tangible features of the natural environment and ecosystems of the nominated cultural landscape through which this sacredness is expressed and in which cultural meanings are embedded, such as in geological formations, water ponds and rivers, rock shelters, caves, the mountain itself.

ICOMOS does not consider that the archaeological sites and architectural heritage preserved within the boundaries of the nominated property, as identified by the State Party, convey the proposed Outstanding Universal Value. They are less strongly associated with the nominated property but do provide some information on the socio-historical background of the creation of the cultural landscape, and grounds for claims of spiritual continuity between the contemporary Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people and their spiritual predecessors – the Batwa people.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets criteria (iii) and (vi).

Integrity and authenticity

Integrity

The integrity of the nominated property is based on the wholeness and intactness of the Mulanje sacred cultural landscape to which spiritual values are attached by the local communities.

The nominated property includes the mountain range of Mulanje and Michesi as well as the surrounding area, which is deemed to have spiritual powers and is inhabited by ancestral spirits and gods. The intangible aspects of the nominated cultural landscape (the cultural practices related to beliefs associated with nature) do not have physical boundaries. The nominated property lacks adequate mapping and documentation of the full spectrum of spiritual expressions of the Yao, Mang'anja and Lhomwe which are linked to the Mulanje landscape. However, this intangible cultural heritage finds its expression in the associated tangible elements of the natural environment of the area, and specifically the natural features of the Mount Mulanje Forest Reserve (MMFR) and the surrounding area. Accordingly, the boundaries of the nominated property include geological formations (caves, ravines, hills), hydrological system (water ponds, rivers) and elements of the ecosystem (biodiversity) to which cultural values are attached or which embody these values, as well as places where cultural practices are taking place.

Some cultural practices, including traditional healing, divination, initiation ceremonies, traditional dances, and other related cultural expressions of the Yao, Mang'anja and Lhomwe people are not necessarily tangibly linked to the proposed cultural landscape and can thus be practiced beyond the proposed boundaries of the nominated property. Similarly, singular *mpoza* trees that serve as individual "shrines" associated with family units, as opposed to *mpoza* trees of the traditional leaders that serve the community, have been left outside the boundaries of the nominated property as they do not form part of the collective expression of the sacredness of the place.

The integrity of the nominated sacred landscape is threatened by numerous factors mostly resulting from the socio-economic situation of the local communities but also political decisions. Gradual encroachment on the area, introduction of commercial plantations, and the related deforestation, all led to the reduction in size of the forest cover, and the transformation of the landscape and its ecosystems. The tea estates, part of a broader historical context of the nominated property and a source of alternative economic prospects for the local populations, have also contributed negatively over the years to the degradation of part of the indigenous flora. Harvesting of firewood and illegal charcoal processing

further gradually decimate vegetation within the nominated property.

Mining and the planned development of tourism infrastructure represent major threats that should be prevented before damage to the environment is done and negative effects of the political decisions are felt by the local communities.

Despite these threats, ICOMOS considers that the integrity of the nominated property has been demonstrated. However, without effective management of factors negatively affecting the nominated property, which are of serious nature, the integrity of the proposed cultural landscape may be compromised.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the nominated property is based on the use and function, traditions and management systems, as well as forms of intangible heritage that sustains the nominated cultural landscape.

Evaluating the credibility and truthfulness of the intangible heritage associated with the nominated property is challenging due to a lack of proper documentation and historical research on its origins, and the evolution it underwent over the years. Moreover, the cultural practices include rituals and ceremonies that may be private or taboo and relate to the sacredness that exists outside the physical realm. The practices, beliefs, and traditions are not formally documented in written form but are instead preserved through observances and oral tradition. The preservation of traditional knowledge is passed down through generations. This transmission underpins its authenticity. At the same time, African traditional religions tend to evolve, the practitioners adapting the elements as required. The lack of proper documentation of the traditions and practices related to the traditional management of the nominated property and the lack of understanding of why certain practices have been abandoned while others maintained, makes it difficult to assess the impact of change on the nominated cultural landscape; it is therefore difficult to make informed decisions about how to manage this change and what to preserve. Notwithstanding these changes, the attitude of the communities to the sacredness of the landscape remains unchanged.

Documenting the traditional management system is an urgent need, considering the emerging intergenerational gap among the traditional custodians and the gradual decline in affinity with indigenous knowledge and practices due to the introduction of other religions and modern lifestyle. However, ICOMOS considers that the documentation alone will not be sufficient to maintain the cultural values of the nominated property, as the sacredness is entrenched in the landscape through the association with the beliefs and the practices of the communities, which must therefore be sustained. Moreover, while the spiritual connection of the people to the landscape endures despite challenges, the belief

system and traditional management alone are not able to protect the nominated property from the negative impacts of activities resulting from the contemporary economic and social needs of the people. The latter therefore also need to be addressed.

ICOMOS considers that the authenticity of the nominated property has been demonstrated but the State Party should prioritise research and documentation of the spiritual beliefs and cultural practices that are directly associated with the sacred dimension of the cultural landscape, to inform appropriate management and protection of the intangible cultural heritage and thus contribute to the preservation of the authenticity of the nominated property. Keeping the intangible heritage of the local communities alive should be prioritised.

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the conditions of integrity and authenticity of the nominated property have been met.

Boundaries

The proposed boundaries of the nominated property follow the circular road that runs around mounts Mulanje and Michesi connecting the Mulanje and Phalombe districts. It includes the area of the MMFR and follows the boundary of Mount Mulanje Biosphere Reserve, inclusive of its transition and buffer zones.

As the inventory of the intangible cultural heritage of the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people living in the area is not available, it did not inform the perimeter of the nominated property.

The State Party did not propose a buffer zone. The road encircling the nominated property has been said to represent a clear limit and provide a fire barrier. The land uses and the related bylaws outside the nominated property have been considered by the State Party a sufficient "natural" buffering mechanism.

The exact number of inhabitants within the nominated property is not known. However, there are 139 village communities within seven kilometres from the MMFR limit, and the villages are densely populated.

In the additional information of February 2025, the State Party sent several maps presenting the boundaries of the nominated property. A map of land uses within and around the nominated cultural landscape was also shared to argue against the need to create a buffer zone. While the opinion that no buffer zone is required was reiterated, the State Party expressed willingness to consider creating one if it was deemed necessary. The process of establishing a buffer zone and enforcing the relevant regulations would take at least two years and require entering into negotiated contractual agreements with land users.

ICOMOS considers that current challenges in controlling the encroachment of farming into the nominated property, as well as the high risk of fires caused by human activity,

suggest that the existing protection within the nominated property and the "natural" buffering mechanism outside of it are insufficient. Moreover, the current land uses and private ownership of land do not necessarily prevent the immediate surroundings of the nominated property from developments that could potentially have negative impacts (e.g., expansion of commercial farming that would produce pollution and noise). Given the already expected population growth within the nominated property that will need to be controlled, the density of the surrounding areas will add to the developmental pressures. Furthermore, the planned development of tourism in the area, if not done with caution, may potentially lead to cultural dilution and eventually cultural disintegration affecting the already fragile intangible cultural heritage of the populations inhabiting the villages within and around the nominated property. Therefore, ICOMOS considers that a formal buffer zone with specific regulations should be created as an additional layer of protection to the nominated property. This buffer zone should support the proposed Outstanding Universal Value by including the areas immediately surrounding it, which are inhabited by the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people who have communal affinity and historical and cultural connection to the nominated cultural landscape. The relevant regulations should additionally protect the livelihoods and lifeways of the communities whose beliefs and cultural practices give meaning to the nominated property.

Evaluation of the proposed justification for inscription

In summary, ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of the property for the World Heritage List. ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets criteria (iii) and (vi) and that the conditions of integrity and authenticity have been met but both are vulnerable and require urgent attention.

4 Conservation measures and monitoring

Documentation

A basic inventory of archaeological and architectural heritage located within the nominated property is available, but complete community-based inventories of intangible heritage associated with the nominated cultural landscape are missing. The places and natural features in which spiritual and cultural meanings are embedded also require more up-to-date research and documenting, including the assessment of their state of conservation.

The National Archives of Malawi contain a number of documents, including reports on forest conservation, geological surveys, and archival photographs.

The existing inventories and documentation are held by the Department of Museums and Monuments at the Ministry of Local Government, Unity and Culture; the Department of Forestry at the Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change, including its Phalombe

and Mulanje district offices; as well as the Mount Mulanje Conservation Trust (MMCT).

In the additional information of November 2024, the State Party confirmed that more research on and documentation of the intangible heritage is required. Video documentation of tangible expressions of intangible cultural heritage associated with the proposed values (i.e., natural features imbued with cultural meanings), as well as research reports are available. Understanding changes to the traditional management system needs attention as it is unclear why certain cultural practices have disappeared while others remain pertinent.

ICOMOS considers that it is unclear what documentation is available on the geological formations, hydrological systems, and biodiversity within the nominated property, all of which constitute attributes of the nominated cultural landscape.

ICOMOS considers that detailed baseline documentation of all the attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, including the tangible elements of the environment with which intangible cultural heritage is associated, and the practices and traditions that sustain sacredness of the landscape and thus directly or indirectly contribute to land management and nature conservation needs to be in place. The current research and documentation are incomplete and not always adequate or up-to-date. The baseline documentation should become the basis for any future management and conservation arrangements and serve the purpose of monitoring and disaster risk preparedness.

Conservation measures

There are numerous conservation programmes in place within the nominated property. Most initiatives are coordinated by the MMCT working in partnership with government agencies, district commissioners, non-profit organisations, as well as local communities and tea estate owners. This work is done under the umbrella of the Mulanje Mountain Biodiversity Conservation Project. Community conservation groups formed at the level of traditional authority areas support the conservation efforts, promoting a culture of stewardship and increasing public understanding of the need to preserve the nominated cultural landscape. While focused on conservation of the natural environment and biodiversity, these programmes also ensure that traditional healers, diviners, herbalists and spiritualists have access to resources from the nominated property, thereby indirectly contributing to the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage. Conservation efforts have been bolstered recently by the involvement of We Forest and the African Parks, whose objectives align closely with those of the MMCT.

ICOMOS considers that the focus of the conservation measures is on the natural aspects of the nominated property, while deterioration of the features of the landscape associated with the intangible cultural heritage, such as sacred sites, shrines, shelters, lacks relevant response. There is an urgent need for the preparation of an

inventory of such sites and an assessment of their state of conservation which would constitute the basis for an appropriate conservation plan. Regular maintenance and monitoring of these sites should be scheduled.

Monitoring

There is no baseline data for monitoring of changes in the state of natural and cultural resources in the nominated property.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change has the mandate to implement and monitor activities related to biodiversity and ecosystems protection within the nominated property, while the Ministry of Local Government, Unity and Culture monitors the state of conservation of cultural heritage assets. Periodically, reports are published on the encroachment on protected areas (every two years), invasive species (every five years), state of endemic and endangered species (every five years) and conservation of cultural and heritage assets (every five years).

It is unclear to ICOMOS what data is gathered to inform the monitoring reports and how it is gathered. It is further not well understood against what it is compared since there is no baseline data established to inform interventions.

ICOMOS considers that the existing monitoring system is largely geared towards the biodiversity of the Mount Mulanje Forest Reserve (MMFR) and not the elements of the natural environment, such as rivers or geological formations, which are seen as carrying special sacred meaning to the local communities and are thus the attributes of the nominated cultural landscape.

Moreover, key identified threats, such as fires or pollution, are not addressed in the current monitoring system.

It further appears that there is no monitoring of the changes within the intangible cultural heritage, and more specifically of the practices and activities on which the preservation of key values of the nominated property depends. Special indicators should be developed based on identified threats to the preservation of the intangible cultural expressions that are attributes of the nominated property and form the basis of the traditional management system, and appropriate actions should be designed to respond to possible negative impacts.

ICOMOS also considers that while monitoring is said to be undertaken in cooperation with the local communities, the modalities of this cooperation are not explained.

ICOMOS considers that detailed baseline documentation of all the attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value and the assessment of their state of conservation is urgently needed. It should inform future conservation initiatives and inform management arrangements. Conservation measures should include physical features of the natural environment with embedded cultural values. ICOMOS also considers that the monitoring system

should be further developed to encompass all the attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value and address key threats identified by the State Party. It is advisable that the monitoring system is conceived for easy integration of its outcomes into the Periodic Reporting questionnaire.

5 Protection and management

Legal protection

The Mount Mulanje Forest Reserve (MMFR) has been established in 1927. It is governed through the Forestry Act of 1997 (amendment of 2019) and the National Forest Policy of 1996 (under review). This legal framework ensures conservation and sustainable use of forest resources and protects the water catchment function of the Reserve. The Department of Forestry under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change is responsible for the implementation of the legal framework in relation to the natural environment of the nominated property. Recognising customary rights, this legal framework also allows for community-based natural resources management.

Supporting legislation includes the Environmental Management Act of 2017, Land Act of 2022 and National Parks and Wildlife Act of 2015. Several associated policies are in place.

Since 2000, the area of the MMFR with its outskirts has been designated a Global Biosphere Reserve under the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme and is protected through the Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves approved in 1995. It includes a core zone, a buffer zone, and a transitional zone. The primary objective of this designation is to conserve the ecosystem, ensuring sustainable use of its resources.

The protection of cultural heritage resources around Mount Mulanje is the responsibility of the Department of Museums and Monuments in the Ministry of Local Government, Unity and Culture, under the provisions of the Monuments and Relics Act of 1990, the Museums Act of 1989, and the Local Government Act of 2010 which empowers local communities to undertake measures to protect their cultural heritage.

There is no intangible heritage legislation at the national level. The traditional management system of the local communities is central in supporting the existence of the cultural landscape of Mount Mulanje. It is enforced through traditional custodianship based on the knowledge-practice-belief nexus. It has ensured a continuous use and preservation of the symbolic and cosmological significance of the nominated cultural landscape. The system provides codified and regulated protocols that inform the sustainable use and management of natural and cultural resources (through for e.g., refraining from felling sacred trees, passing down

mythical stories that emphasise the importance of moderation in resource collection), sustained by a wider frame of religious beliefs that define the roles and obligations and regulate behaviours of the community members. The practices, beliefs, and traditions are not documented in written form, but traditional courts exist to prosecute individuals who violate them.

In the additional information provided in November 2024, the State Party explained that the traditional management system fills the gaps in protection where other statutory mechanisms do not exist.

In the additional information sent in February 2025, the State Party further clarified that the sacred sites within the nominated property are protected through the traditional management system. The State Party will additionally develop, in collaboration with the local communities, visitor management plans and guidelines to control tourism activities, in order to minimise harm to the sacred sites, including introducing measures to restrict access to some of them. Any decisions regarding the use of sacred spaces within the nominated property will require consultations with and consent from the traditional custodians.

The State Party also clarified that Heritage Impact Assessment is included in the Environmental Management Act of 2017. Moreover, heritage law is currently under review and the new bill will include an article requiring Environmental and Social Impact Assessment to be conducted for any project within World Heritage properties.

ICOMOS considers that the current statutory legal framework refers mostly to the area of the MMFR and is focused primarily on the natural environment. It is not clear what protection regimes apply to the area on account of the Global Biosphere Reserve designation. It is also not clear whether the sacred sites, caves or water pools with embedded cultural meanings are seen as cultural assets or not, and under which ministerial control they fall. It appears that they benefit solely from the traditional protection mechanisms rooted in the intangible cultural heritage of the local communities, which itself can be said to be vulnerable as it is not protected by any legislation.

ICOMOS further considers that the effectiveness of the protection measures relies on the collaborative efforts of government departments responsible for enforcing protective legislation, in conjunction with district commissioners and traditional custodians. While the traditional management system contributes to the protection of the natural environment within the nominated property, including outside the boundary of the MMFR, it appears to be insufficient in the face of growing population needs. This has led to the overharvesting of natural resources, encroachment of agriculture and the related deforestation.

Management system

The Department of Forestry is responsible for biodiversity conservation and protection of watersheds within the MMFR. Its staff members are spread across a number of forest stations and assisted by community members.

The Department collaborates with the Mount Mulanje Conservation Trust (MMCT), which is an independent, non-governmental endowment trust established in 2000 and funded by the Global Environmental Facility through the World Bank. The MMCT focuses on biodiversity conservation, research, and environmental education as well as sustainable management of natural resources in the MMFR. It directs the financial assistance of donors to the activities undertaken by local communities. The MMCT is governed by representatives of the government sectors, local traditional leadership, businesses, and civil society. The Mount Mulanje Local Forest Management Board has been established to enable varied actors to participate in the management of the MMFR. Community representatives, traditional leaders from both Mulanje and Phalombe districts are included on the Board.

Cultural heritage resources located within the nominated property are managed by the Department of Museums and Monuments. A cultural officer has been appointed to serve as a site manager for the nominated cultural landscape. More staff specialising in conservation of cultural heritage sites will be deployed once the visitor reception and information centre is built.

A range of other government ministries are involved in varied aspects of the nominated property, including water management, energy-related issues, or land governance.

The local communities, as the customary custodians of the nominated property, are taught from a young age about the sacredness of the area and the need to protect it. The local Chiefs who operate under the framework of the National Cultural Policy lead their village communities in recognising the significance of the traditional knowledge and actively transmitting it, by maintaining the spiritual links between people and their environment through rituals and taboos. The spirit mediums or traditional healers constitute a direct connection between the communities and the spiritual world. They are organised in zones at the level of traditional authority areas, in chapters and associations at the district level, and, at the national level, they form the Malawi Traditional Healers Umbrella Organisation. Only registered healers who subscribe to an established code of conduct are allowed to practice their trade in the area. They actively collaborate with government institutions in delivering services to the public.

In the spirit of participatory management, some communities in the northern, southern, and eastern fringes of the MMFR have entered into Forestry Resources Co-Management agreements with the Department of Forestry. These agreements regulate access to the forest and control activities in it, including gathering of plants. Traditional cultural practices and

beliefs that constitute the traditional management system of the local communities are, however, yet to be integrated into these agreements.

The nominated property is located within the Mulanje and Phalombe districts, and several traditional authority areas. At the district level, environmental management is implemented and overseen by District Councils with authorisation from the Department of Forestry. The district offices work in conjunction with community conservation groups that are based at the traditional authority area level.

The Mulanje District Council prepared the District Development Plan (2018-2022). Both Mulanje and Phalombe districts also possess District Environmental Action Plans. It is unclear, however, whether and how the nominated cultural landscape with its proposed boundaries have been integrated into these planning documents. The intangible heritage has not been acknowledged in them.

The integration of the customary legal system and the formal legal framework has not been completed. During the preparation of the nomination dossier, issues have been raised by community members with regard to the role the local communities should play in the management of the nominated property.

An administrative framework for the management of the nominated property is being currently developed. Within it, the work of government departments responsible for biodiversity and for cultural resources, currently managed separately, will be organised in a collaborative manner. The Department of Forestry is presently leading the process of developing a public-private partnership at the MMFR, which should eventually also include government agencies responsible for cultural heritage and other aspects.

Currently there are two separate management plans. The MMFR Integrated Conservation Management Plan (2020-2030) addresses conservation of biodiversity and use of natural resources and supports adaptation to climate change. The Cultural Heritage Resources Management Plan (2024-2028, CHRMP) defines management of cultural resources. It envisages the creation of a Site Management Committee inclusive of all stakeholders to manage the nominated property. Roles and responsibilities will be established. The key objectives of the CHRMP are to: improve the governance of the nominated property by integrating the traditional and the formal management systems; enhance the conservation of cultural heritage resources within the nominated property and develop a risk preparedness plan; strengthen the local human and financial capacity; develop a research agenda and an interpretation and presentation plan; promote sustainable development through tourism; enhance community engagement through partnerships and establishing a beneficiation model; and enhance the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage. The implementation of the CHRMP is

the responsibility of the Department of Museums and Monuments.

Eventually, an Integrated Resources Management Plan that would combine the two existing management plans will be prepared. It will be driven by the government departments, the MMCT, and the traditional custodians/traditional authorities.

At present, there is insufficient human and financial capacity within the governance system. The financial resources for the operations come from the budgets of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Climate Change, and the Ministry of Local Government, Unity and Culture. In the past, a large portion of the funds required for management were fundraised through the MMCT.

The land within the MMFR is owned and managed by the State. The land surrounding it is divided between private and community ownership.

ICOMOS requested a map from the State Party to confirm land ownership in the nominated property and the surrounding area. It has not been provided. However, in the additional information of November 2024, the State Party informed that the Monuments and Relics Act of 1990 (section 15) provides for management of monuments and sites on privately owned land. Once the nominated property is inscribed on the World Heritage List, the State shall enter into agreements with private owners to ensure preservation of the nominated property.

ICOMOS also sought information on the cooperative arrangements that have been put in place to coordinate the work of the different institutions and authorities at the district and traditional authority area levels. The answer was inconclusive.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property requires a multi-sectoral governance structure based on the collaboration between different departments, non-governmental organisations, and local communities, at different levels (national, district, as well as traditional authority areas). It appears that currently, while there are some agreements between the parties in place in relation to the co-management of the MMFR and its natural resources, the modalities of cooperation between the different stakeholders in relation to the entire nominated property, and in particular towards its cultural values, is not well established, and the roles and responsibilities of the different interest groups are not specified or agreed on.

ICOMOS also considers that the management efforts seem to be focused on the natural environment of the nominated property. Its sacredness is seemingly left solely in the hands of its traditional custodians, who face mounting challenges, both economic and socio-cultural. The State Party should ensure institutional support for the preservation of the cultural practices of the local Yao, Lhomwe and Mang'anja communities that constitute the traditional management system and are required to sustain the sacred landscape of Mount Mulanje. Since

these practices and beliefs convey the proposed Outstanding Universal Value of the nominated property, the focus of management should be balanced between preservation of natural environment which sustains the communities and which is believed to be imbued with spiritual powers, and safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage of the people which created and sustains the nominated cultural landscape. Accordingly, the State Party should put efforts in developing initiatives supporting the local communities and thus maintaining their association with the nominated property.

ICOMOS further considers that the nominated property requires a stable and sustainable source of funds instead of over relying on non-governmental organisations. The human resources also require strengthening, in terms of numbers and onsite expertise which is currently inadequate to the needs.

It is unclear to ICOMOS what the timeframe for the preparation of the Integrated Resources Management Plan is. The existing management plans focus on natural and cultural aspects of the nominated property separately. It will be important to have both dimensions integrated administratively and strategically to manage the nominated property effectively, especially considering conflicting sectoral legal frameworks.

Visitor management

There are no visitor facilities at the nominated property. Signage is limited and no maps or information brochures are available.

An Info-Mulanje Centre operates in Chitakale, run jointly by the Department of Tourism and the MMCT. It provides basic information and reservation services. Cottages scattered across the nominated property are available for overnight accommodation, alongside lodges and other housing around the MMFR. The Tourism Association of Mount Mulanje and the Mount Mulanje Tour Guide & Porters Association help coordinate the tourism industry locally.

There is no visitor management plan developed for the nominated property. The MMCT is currently formulating a tourism strategy, the primary objective of which will be to generate opportunities for job creation and stimulating economic growth and development around Mount Mulanje.

In the additional information shared in February 2025, the State Party informed about a number of projects that are being currently conceptualised to develop tourism in the area. They include a major development (the Integrated Cable Car Resort on Mount Mulanje) near Likhubula village, which would require considerable changes to the infrastructure. Impact assessments appear not to have been carried out to date.

ICOMOS considers that given the nature of the nominated property (sacred cultural landscape) and its ecological vulnerability, minimal-impact tourism should be

recommended for the nominated property. Any new tourism development project within the nominated cultural landscape or its surroundings should be preceded by Heritage, Environmental and Social Impact Assessments to ensure that there are no negative impacts on the cultural and natural resources, and that potential adverse social impacts are eliminated.

Visitor statistics for Mount Mulanje indicate a considerable number of visitors to the area, but there are no studies to assess the cultural and ecological impacts of increasing tourism on the nominated property.

Community involvement

During the nomination process, local communities raised issues of future access to the nominated property in the event of an inscription, as they are dependent on forest resources. Concerns around the governance and inclusion of local communities in the management of the nominated property have also been indicated.

Currently, community representatives and traditional leaders sit on the Mount Mulanje Local Forest Management Board, which provides strategic guidance to the MMCT. Management arrangements for the nominated property are yet to be made.

The State Party indicated the need to prepare a community engagement framework for the nominated cultural landscape.

In the additional information provided in November 2024, the State Party reiterated that local communities were consulted, and that written consent was received from the leaders. The private landowners were informed about the nomination process and made aware of the implications of a potential inscription on the World Heritage List. Their attitude to the nomination is, however, not clear to ICOMOS.

Effectiveness of the protection and management of the nominated property

In summary, ICOMOS considers that the current measures of protection of the nominated property are insufficient and need to be strengthened. ICOMOS also considers that since the proposed Outstanding Universal Value is related to the cultural practices and beliefs associated with the nominated cultural landscape, the focus of protection and management should be balanced between preserving the natural environment which carries cultural meanings and the intangible cultural heritage of the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people that underpins the sacred nature of the nominated cultural landscape, and which is vulnerable to change and dilution, even disappearance. ICOMOS also considers that the management system that is being developed should be based on a multi-sectoral governance structure and be inclusive of the local communities as traditional custodians. Tourism in the area should be developed with caution, and any environmental and social impacts must be mitigated so as not to further weaken the already vulnerable nominated cultural landscape.

6 Conclusion

The Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL), located in the southern part of Malawi, has been created and is sustained by cultural practices and beliefs shared by the Yao, Mang'anja and Lhomwe people. It is marked by the imposing Mulanje Mountain, one of the largest inselbergs in the world, which rises above the surrounding plains dotted with villages. The area, with its intricate geology, hydrology and ecosystems, is believed to be imbued with spiritual powers.

ICOMOS appreciates the work done by the State Party in response to the key recommendations raised by the World Heritage Committee in 2014, especially those related to the description of the traditional management mechanisms. The commitment of the State Party to intensify research and documentation of the intangible heritage of the local communities is acknowledged.

The proposed comparative analysis, although extensive, is not well focused. ICOMOS nevertheless considers that the information provided in other sections of the nomination dossier and in the additional information are sufficient to justify consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets criteria (iii) and (vi) as an associative cultural landscape. The conditions of integrity and authenticity have been met, but the nominated cultural landscape is vulnerable, both in its natural and cultural dimensions, and ICOMOS notes that these are at risk if urgent attention is not given. The pressure arising from population growth and the critical threats posed by planned tourism development must be addressed effectively and any negative impact mitigated. Minimal-impact tourism should be developed in the nominated property. Mining activity must be categorically prohibited.

A formal buffer zone with specific regulations should be created to support the protection of the nominated property. It should include the areas immediately surrounding the nominated cultural landscape, which are inhabited by the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people who have communal affinity and a historical and cultural connection to the nominated property. The relevant regulations should, among others, provide protection of the livelihoods and lifeways of the communities whose beliefs and cultural practices give meaning to the nominated property.

Greater commitment of the State Party is required to the preservation of the cultural aspects of the nominated cultural landscape; the documentation of the intangible cultural heritage is incomplete, and the deterioration of the associated tangible features requires a relevant response.

The protection and management efforts need to be extended from the natural environment of the nominated property to its sacredness, which currently depends solely

on its traditional custodians, who face mounting challenges of economic and socio-cultural nature.

Given the variety of stakeholders, the nominated property requires a multi-sectoral governance structure, in which the implication of the local communities as traditional custodians of the sacred landscape in decision-making processes should be carefully defined. The integration of the natural and cultural aspects of the nominated property under one Integrated Resources Management Plan should ensure a holistic approach to the protection and management of the nominated property as a cultural landscape.

7 Recommendations

Recommendations with respect to inscription

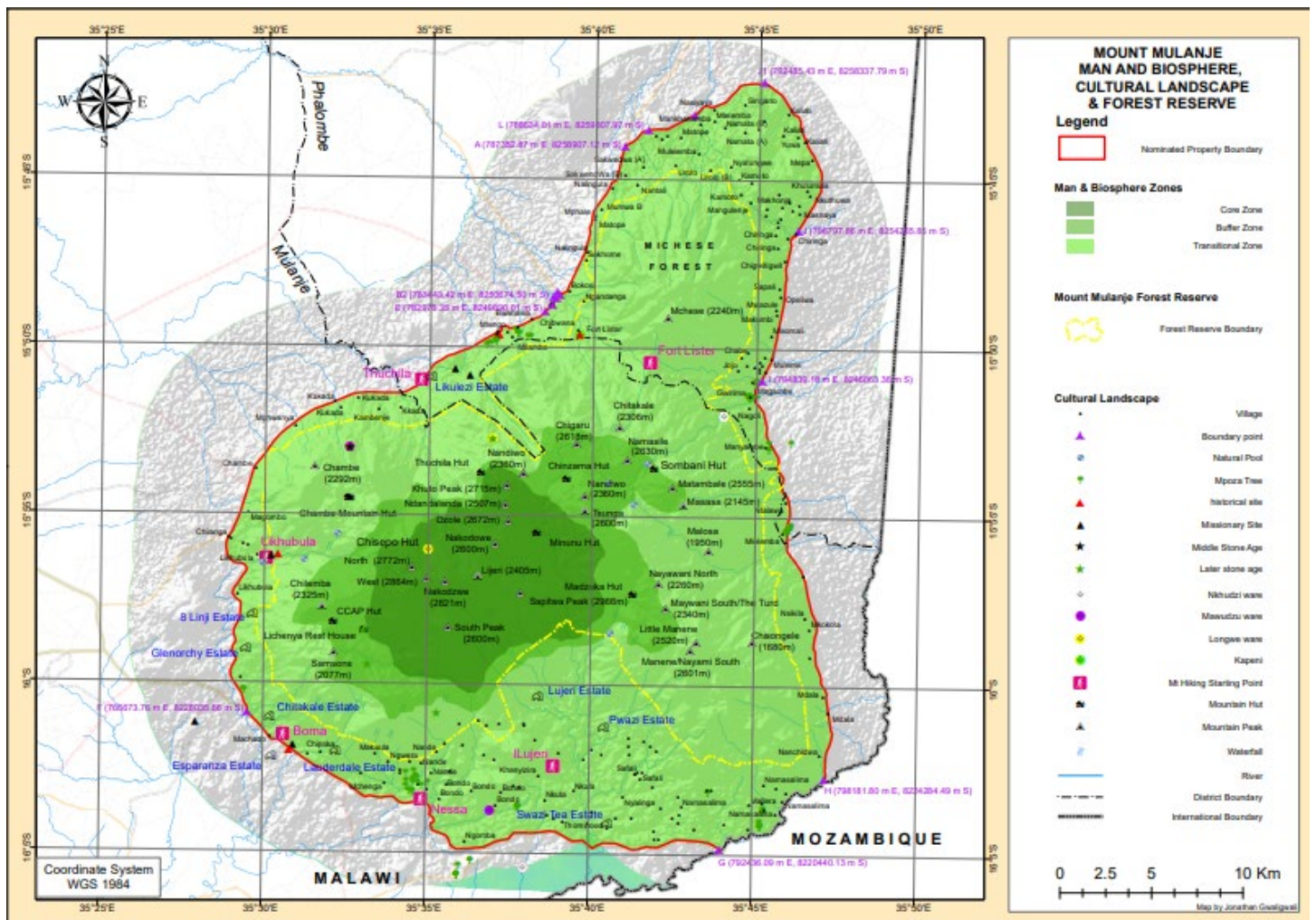
ICOMOS recommends that the nomination of the Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL), Malawi, be **referred back** to the State Party to allow it to:

- Create a buffer zone around the nominated property and complete the required arrangements for the enforcement of buffer zone regulations,
- Complete the declaration process of the nominated property as a national monument to ensure that a no-go zone for mining is created within the Mount Mulanje Cultural Landscape (MMCL),
- Finalise the administrative framework for the management of the nominated property, with clearly defined cooperation modalities between different actors and interest groups, and particularly the inclusion of the local communities in the governance structure;

Additional recommendations

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

- a) Undertaking community-based inventories of intangible cultural heritage and developing research to track the evolution of the cultural practices that sustain the associative cultural landscape,
- b) Preparing an inventory of sites and natural features to which cultural meanings are attached, and assessing their state of conservation to inform the development of an appropriate conservation programme and management arrangements,
- c) Informing the World Heritage Centre of the intention to undertake or authorise all major projects which may affect the proposed Outstanding Universal Value of the nominated property, in line with paragraph 172 of *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*,
- d) Developing and implementing Heritage Impact Assessments as well as Social and Environmental Impact Assessments for all planned and ongoing development proposals (such as the visitor reception and information centre, the Lichenya Education Research Centre, and the sports arena),
- e) Restricting tourism development within the nominated property and its surroundings to minimal-impact projects and activities,
- f) Prohibiting extractive industries from the area of the nominated property and its surroundings,
- g) Strengthening protection of the nominated property, especially the measures to sustain the intangible cultural heritage of the Mang'anja, Yao and Lhomwe people, by ensuring institutional support for the preservation of their cultural and spiritual practices that constitute the traditional management system and are required for the sacred landscape of Mount Mulanje to exist, and by developing initiatives supporting the livelihoods and lifeways of local communities in order to maintain their association with the nominated property,
- h) Completing integration of the customary and formal legal systems,
- i) Preparing and implementing the Integrated Resources Management Plan that would combine the management of natural and cultural aspects of the nominated property,
- j) Developing further the monitoring system to encompass all the attributes of the proposed Outstanding Universal Value, including the cultural and spiritual practices and beliefs on which the preservation of the cultural values of the nominated property depends, and addressing key threats,
- k) Exploring the qualities of Mount Mulanje in light of natural heritage criteria as initially envisaged in the Tentative List entry.



Revised map showing the boundaries of the nominated property (February 2025)