

# The Importance of Heritage

With so many challenges confronting the African continent, why utilise precious resources on increasing Africa's presence on the World Heritage list? Themba Wakashe, director-general of the DAC, and Dr Webber Ndoro, director of the AWHF, explain the significance of heritage, and why it is well worth supporting.

In May 2006, Themba Wakashe, director-general of the DAC, presided over the launch of the African World Heritage Fund (AWHF), describing it as 'a trailblazing exercise'. The first of its kind, the aim of the fund was, and is, to increase the presence of Africa on the UNESCO World Heritage list, as the continent is sorely underrepresented despite numerous sites of enormous significance to humankind.

While there are at present some 890 sites worldwide inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, only 116 of these are in Africa. Given that the continent is currently believed to be the 'cradle of humankind', and is home to a vast number of sites of both cultural and biological significance, this is somewhat surprising. Both Mr Wakashe and Dr Ndoro attribute this to, among other things, a lack of awareness among both governments and communities about both the nature and potential usefulness of World Heritage sites. In addition, people tend to take natural and cultural heritage sites for granted, until such time as they are threatened – often too late. Moreover, says Mr Wakashe, many would-be African World Heritage sites are highly inaccessible, meaning that substantial investment in

infrastructure is necessary – roads must be built, and so on. In some cases, language also becomes a barrier to the recognition of a valuable site (see Africa Unknown).

Not only is Africa underrepresented to begin with, but, of its 116 recognised sites, twelve appear on the 31-strong list of sites in danger, which details those sites that are not being managed properly. 'So even though we have fewer sites, we have more sites that are being threatened with being thrown out because they're not being managed properly,' Ndoro says.

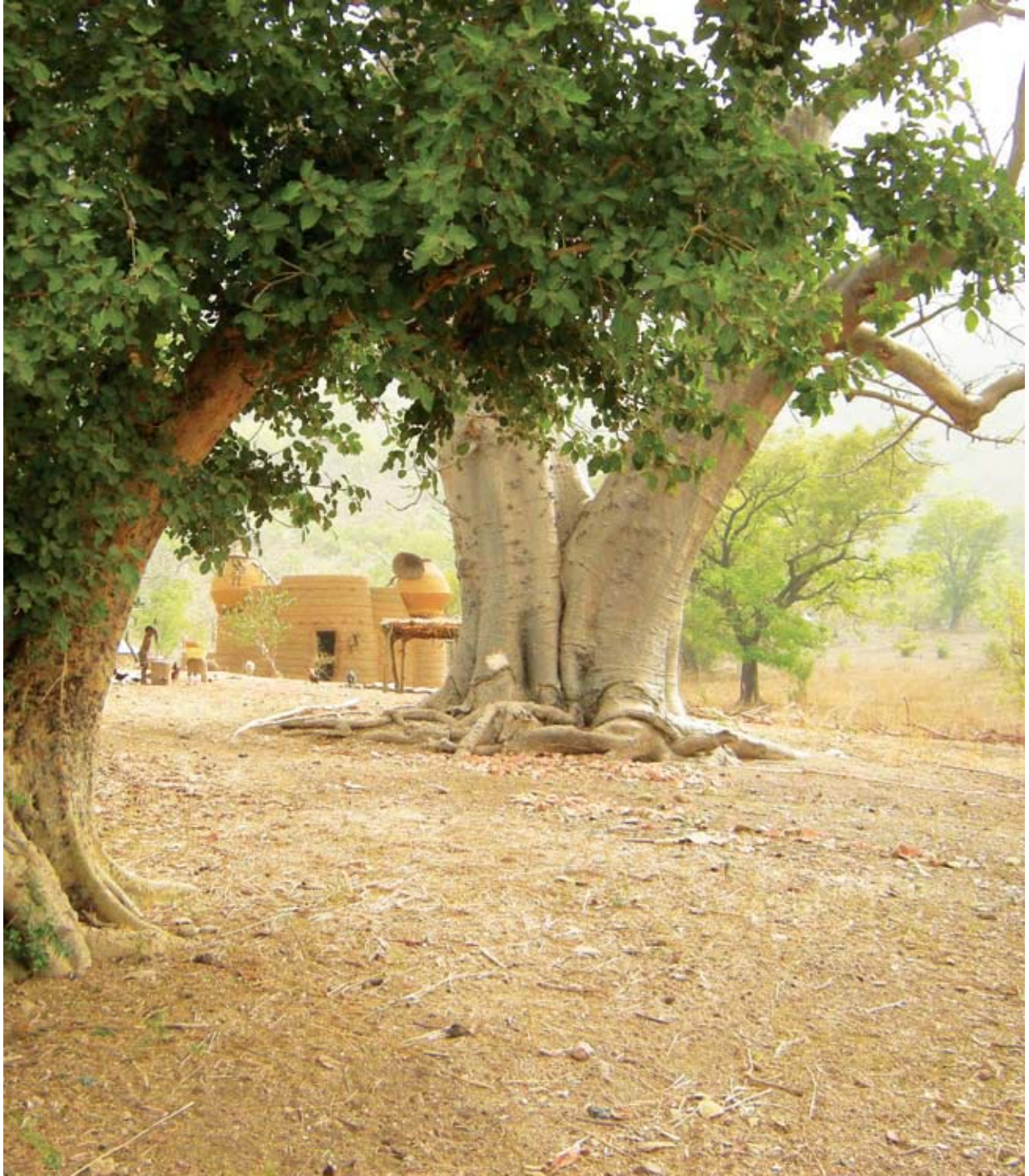
There is also a tendency to regard the recognition of such sites as 'merely' a question of prestige, and thus secondary to many critical issues facing African nations. Problems such as poverty, the AIDS crisis, and the need to ensure that all citizens have access to education are obviously of the highest priority and cannot be ignored. What Dr Ndoro and Mr Wakashe want to convey is that the development of the African presence on the UNESCO World Heritage list need not be seen as snatching desperately needed resources away from these areas; rather, if effected properly, this development can be utilised as a means to address these very same issues.





Koutammakou, the Land of the Batammariba - UNESCO World Heritage Site, Togo

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Thus the AWHF aims to increase Africa's presence on the list, both by supporting State Parties (those states in Africa that have signed the UNESCO convention regarding World Heritage Sites) in the identification, nomination and effective management of new sites, and by assisting in the rehabilitation of sites in danger. A further key objective is the utilisation of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites as a vehicle for development – 'to see whether we can use World Heritage Sites to alleviate poverty, for example, given the fact that quite a lot of these sites are in rural communities where we've got a lot of poverty; these sites could attract tourists, and that, in turn, could benefit local communities,' says Dr Ndoro.

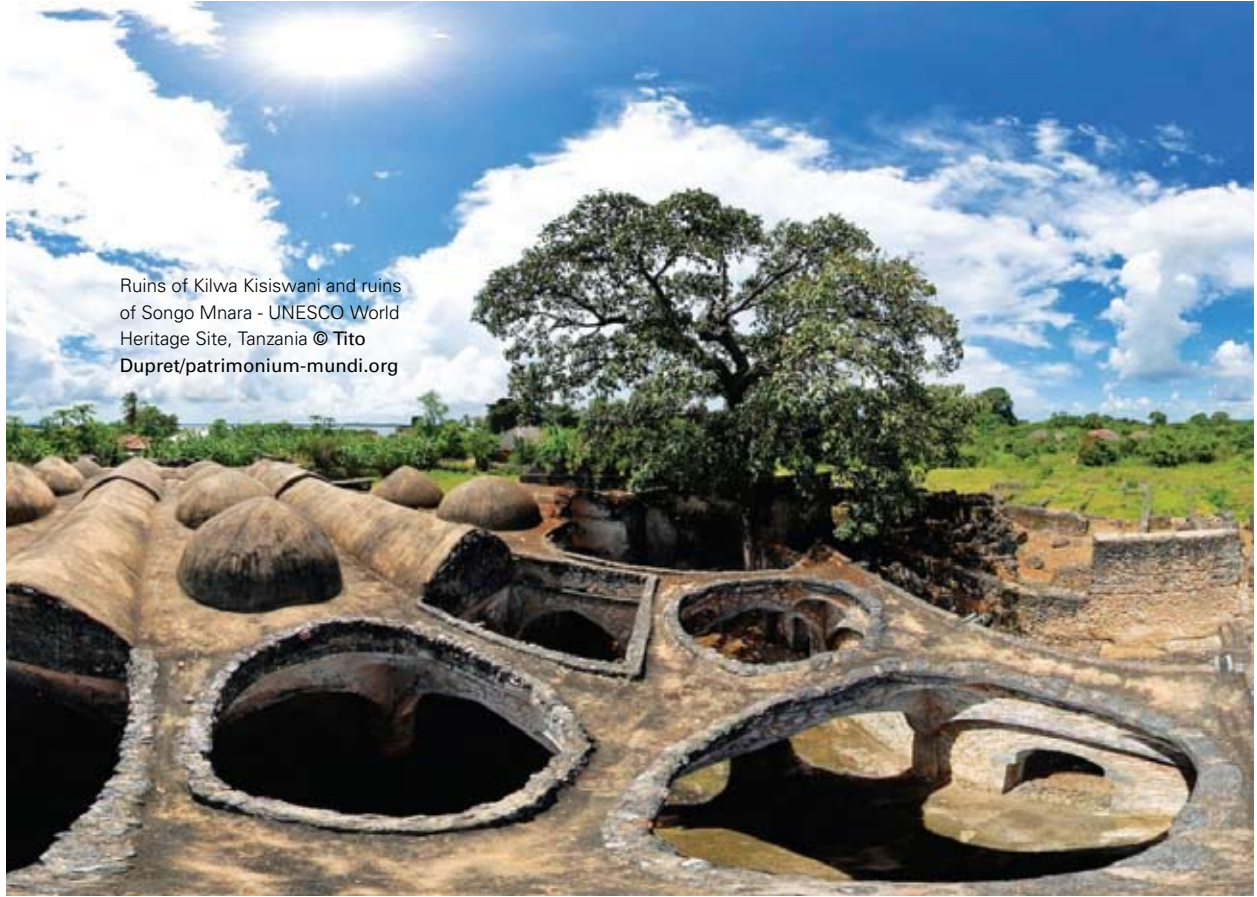
Clearly many of the issues surrounding development are of the highest priority for most

African states; however, to dismiss the value of recognising would-be African World Heritage Sites as merely a question of 'prestige' ignores the significance of their potential contribution to restoring the esteem and identity of many African communities. Heritage refers to the achievements of a culture, and – as both Mr Wakashe and Dr

Ndoro emphasize – are an important source of pride and identity. Through the reconnection, so to speak, of communities with their cultural heritage and the achievements of their ancestors, communities may begin to regain a sense of pride and identity eroded by oppressive regimes, colonisation and poverty.

As an example, Mr Wakashe points out that the discovery of the ancient city of Mapungubwe, which was kept secret for many years by the apartheid government, as its existence disproved many of the rationales used to justify white occupation and alleged superiority. Similarly, Mr Wakashe refers to the libraries of Timbuktu – a cultural treasure falsifying the belief that Africa has no written history. At its

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Ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani and ruins of Songo Mnara - UNESCO World Heritage Site, Tanzania © Tito Dupret/patrimonium-mundi.org



Rwenzori Mountains National Park - UNESCO World Heritage Site, Uganda © Tito Dupret/patrimonium-mundi.org



Rwenzori Mountains National Park - UNESCO  
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height, approximately between the 13th and 16th centuries, Timbuktu was home to a thriving industry in which books were written, imported and copied; the city housed works of unparalleled scholarly value, in addition to laying claim to some of the best scholars in the world. (In fact, when Malian Emperor Mansa Musa returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca with several Arab scholars, he was amazed to find that they were vastly less qualified than many of those of Timbuktu. Some were allegedly required to obtain further qualifications merely so that they could attend classes as students).

Thus it is hoped that, aside from the possible economic benefits of a developed tourism industry, an increase in the flow of visitors to Africa (added to the attention that UNESCO World Heritage status draws to the achievements of African cultures) would do much to dispel the sometimes crippling misconceptions that the world – and importantly, many Africans themselves – may hold about ‘Darkest Africa’.