

Africa Unknown

Of the five Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, only two have entries on the World Heritage List, an omission which the African World Heritage Fund hopes soon to rectify. Two remarkable sites may soon be put forward for consideration: the Bijagós archipelago, and the historic centre of M'banza Kongo.

Celebrating heritage draws attention to the achievements of a people, according them a degree of respect; the suppression or enforced forgetting of past glory can be a powerful tool in the creation of inequality between groups – a tool which European colonists in Africa have often used to convince both themselves, and the people they oppressed, of European superiority.

Hence the African World Heritage Fund's work to increase Africa's presence on the World Heritage List, by tackling the many issues that prevent sites from being recognised by the world at large. Language, for example, can be critical. According to Dr Webber Ndoro, director of the African World Heritage Fund, Portuguese-speaking countries are particularly underrepresented, primarily because heritage specialists in those countries struggle to find information about compiling a tentative list and applying for nomination in their native tongue. Thus language becomes a barrier that prevents valuable sites from being granted the recognition and protection

afforded by World Heritage status; and the world is deprived of the opportunity to discover new facets of Africa's – often obscured – history and achievements.

'This is why we introduced language-specific training courses where the participants can interact amongst each other and with the trainers in their mother tongue,' explains Dr Ndoro. In partnership with Portuguese-speaking countries such as Brazil (IPHAN – Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional) the African World Heritage Fund is therefore implementing a tailor made capacity building programme for Portuguese speaking countries. An initial training course took place in Mozambique in 2009; this will be followed by a training course in Tchitundo Hulo (Namibe - Angola) this year, organized within the framework of the UNESCO Prehistory Programme.

Five countries in Africa are Portuguese-speaking: Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Cape Verde. At present, only two of these have entries on the World Heritage list: the Island





The Boloma Bijagós Reserve situated off the coast of Guinea Bissau © IUCN

of Mozambique, with its ancient fortifications and possibly the oldest building in the southern Hemisphere, the Chapel of Nossa Senhora de Baluarte; and Cape Verde's Cidade Velha ('old city') – as an important link in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, it was once one of the richest cities in the Portuguese empire.

Thus Angola, Guinea Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe are not represented. However, each of these countries has compiled – or in the case of São Tomé and Príncipe, is in the process of compiling – a tentative list of properties that they consider to be of 'outstanding universal value' to be considered by the State party for nomination as a World Heritage Site.

A site currently appearing on Angola's tentative list is the historic town of M'banza Kongo, capital of the Zaire province in Angola. Established as a town in the 13th century, it became the capital of the ancient Kongo Kingdom, which once extended across an area that today forms parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, and part of Angola.

Portuguese missionaries baptised King Nzinga Mbemba (renamed Afonso I) in the early 16th century, and the two nations began exchanging ambassadors soon after. During this time a cathedral was built, the ruins of which can still be found in the historic city.

In the latter part of the 16th century the kingdom was weakened by invasions from neighbouring groups, and came under the control of the Portuguese; M'banza Kongo was renamed São Salvador. In the century that followed, the Kongo kingdom was decimated by the slave trade, losing an estimated 13 million people. Kongo was eventually divided up by the French, Belgians and Portuguese at the infamous Berlin conference of 1885, at which several European nations met to portion out colonies in Africa, thereby hastening the colonisation of the continent.

Kongo nationalism and culture resurfaced in the 20th century; as greater knowledge and awareness of the nation's past status spread, calls for autonomy increased, culminating in the independence that the three countries now possess.

Today the remains of the capital of this once powerful kingdom can be seen in M'banza Kongo. The historic centre has been protected by law since 1957, and in 1995, the Ancient Residence of the Kongo kings was classified a National Monument by the Angolan government.

A second site waiting in the wings for possible World Heritage status – this time in recognition of its natural, rather than cultural, significance – lies off the coast of Guinea Bissau. The Boloma Bijagós Biosphere Reserve, an archipelago created by the ancient delta of the Rio Geba and the Rio Grande, is riddled with streams and rivers channelling nutrient-laden freshwater into the seas, leading many species to feed and reproduce in its waters. Thus the surrounding ocean is alive with fish, molluscs, crustaceans and marine turtles;



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The Island of Mozambique, with its ancient fortifications and possibly the oldest building in the Southern Hemisphere Cape Verde's Cidade Velha ('old city')

the region is also home to the Nile crocodile and hippopotami, and the largely forested islands shelter a multitude of primates.

Approximately 23 of the islands are inhabited by an ethnically-diverse population, a reminder of the region's colonial history. The archipelago once played an important role in trade along the West Coast, and built up a navy sufficiently powerful to fend off Portuguese invasion in 1535; the islands only fell to Portugal in the first half of the twentieth century.

At present, São Tomé and Príncipe has not yet established a tentative list of universally significant properties within their borders; they are still in the process of doing so. In a workshop conducted in January last year, they began by establishing a pre-inventory of a number of sites, also drafting a tentative listing of Roça Agostinho Neto. With every new listing, the ignorance and misconceptions surrounding 'Darkest Africa' moves faster towards becoming a thing of the past.