

A bedded sandstone ridge that rises some 500 meters above the parched sands of Western Sahara, the Bandiagara Escarpment has served as a cultural crossroads for more than 2,000 years. The eroded remnants of a Precambrian massif, the 200-kilometer-long formation snakes its way across the landscape from southwest to northeast. The plateau atop the escarpment slopes down to the Bani and Niger Basins to the northwest. Beneath it is a scree field littered with sizable sandstone blocks that have broken off the cliff face, creating a network of natural pathways and lush pockets of vegetation nourished by groundwater and seasonal rains trapped and channeled by fissures in the rock. A steady line of dunes marks the edge of the scree, beyond which is the vast sandy Seno Plain, stretching over the horizon toward the Burkina Faso

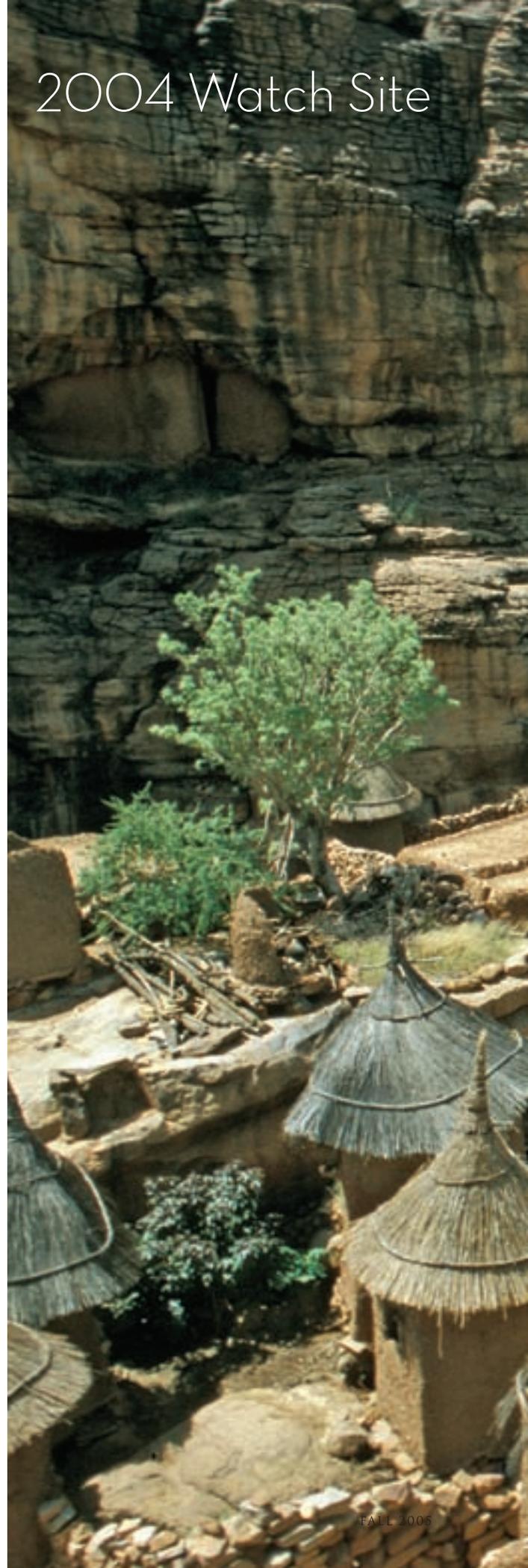
Culture at a Crossroads

**FOR MALI'S BANDIAGARA ESCARPMENT,
EXTRAORDINARY GEOLOGY AND HUMAN GENIUS
HAVE CONSPIRED TO CREATE ONE OF THE WORLD'S
GREAT CULTURAL LANDSCAPES.
FOR THE DOGON CLIFF-DWELLERS WHO LIVE THERE,
THE FUTURE HANGS IN THE BALANCE.**

by THIERRY JOFFROY AND LASSANA CISSÉ

border. Each twist, turn, and fold in the rock harbors a unique environment, not only in its flora and fauna, but in the cultural traditions and architectural forms that have developed there.

Considered one of West Africa's most impressive sites, the escarpment has witnessed nearly 100,000 years of human occupation. Among its more recent inhabitants have been the Toloy, a little-known people who took shelter in the numerous natural caves pocking the upper reaches of the cliff face sometime between the third and second centuries B.C. The eleventh century A.D. witnessed the arrival of the Tellem, a Sub-Saharan group who occupied the escarpment prior to the arrival of the Dogon in the fifteenth century A.D.







OPENING SPREAD: CAVES OVERLOOKING THE VILLAGE OF KOUNDOU KIKINI HARBOR SOME OF THE MOST REVERED SHRINES AND BURIAL CHAMBERS IN THE DOGON REGION. A VIEW OF THE SCREE COVERED SENO PLAIN, ABOVE, FROM THE VILLAGE OF BEGNEIMATOU.

Initially, the Dogon, like their predecessors, settled in easily defended sites along the escarpment and a few rocky outcroppings on the plateau. In time, however, hundreds of Dogon villages sprang up along the base of the cliff, each with numerous buildings of stone, earth, and thatch. Ancient cave dwellings and granaries of the Toloy and Tellem were subsequently appropriated for use as communal shrines and burial chambers.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when security in the area began to improve with the pacification of West Africa under French colonial rule, the Dogon expanded their range, establishing villages on the Seno Plain, which afforded more space and easier living conditions with its better access to water and arable land.

Today, 267 Dogon villages make up what has come to be known as the Pays Dogon (Dogon Country), a 400,000-hectare area that includes not only the escarpment but substantial portions of the Dogon Plateau and Seno Plain. The majority of hamlets, composed of stone and mud-and-thatch dwellings, are concentrated along the lower reaches of the rock face, barely discernible from the surrounding landscape.

Each village is strategically sited to make the most of its environment—its plan and the shape and orientation of its structures designed to capitalize on available shade and natural ventilation. While the layout of each village is dictated by the terrain, all contain a suite of key architectural elements: a *toguna*, or council house for village elders; a public square for town meetings, seasonal festivals, and performances; a hut where women stay during menstruation, when they are considered impure; a *ginna*, or elder's house for the patriarch of each village clan; burial grounds and chambers; altars, shrines, and temples dedicated to ancestors, the creator Ama, and a host of spirits that protect each village and its lineages and ensure the fertility of its soil; and lastly, a forge for the black art of smithing. Building walls are often adorned with geometric designs rendered in stucco relief while wooden doors, shutters, and support columns are ornately



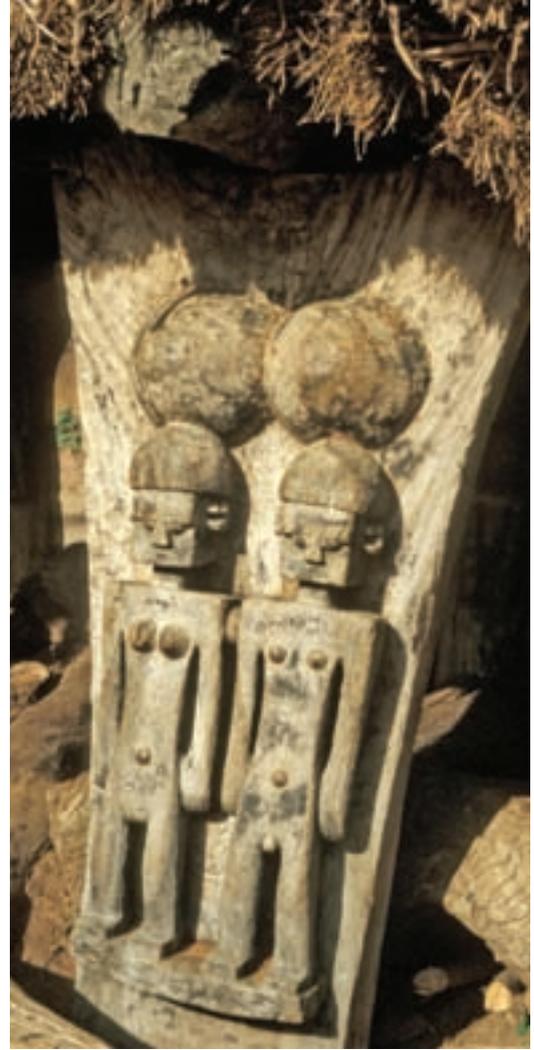
carved with animal motifs or images of the *Nommo*, one of four bisexual couples—children of Ama and primordial ancestors of the eight Dogon lineages.

The *toguna*, the first structure to be built in a village, is always placed next to the public square, which often doubles as a children’s playground. In large villages, there may be several *toguna*, one for each *nongu*, or neighborhood. Cemeteries and burial caves are considered particularly sacred, being portals to the realm of ancestors. As such, they are often sealed and jealously guarded. Also central to Dogon religion is a profound reverence for the nourishing Earth, the sole source of life and provider of food, building materials, and medicine. Various natural features—ponds, rivers, caves, and tunnels—found throughout Dogon Country are considered sacred and serve as focal points for specific rites.

For centuries, the Dogon had resisted the adoption of Islam, which had spread throughout much of Africa since it first took root on the continent in the tenth century A.D. Mali, under the leadership of Mansa Musa (r. 1307–1332), was the first African nation to make Islam the state religion, following the ruler’s pilgrimage to Mecca. By the early nineteenth century, however, Dogon living on the Seno Plain and those around the town of Bandiagara atop the plateau, began to embrace the religion, influenced by Fulani shepherds from Massina. A half-century later, during French colonial rule, missionaries introduced Christianity in the Dogon region. These “conversions” were in large part less than complete and there is considerable syncretism in the Dogon Country. It is common, for instance, for different religions to be practiced within the same structures. Mosques built in the area have been inspired by the traditional architectural forms of the *ginna*, totemic sanctuaries, and ancestor shrines.

Despite the French occupation of West Africa, the Dogon had witnessed little contact with the outside world until the mid-twentieth century—maintaining their traditions, including the five-day week, which they still keep today. Shortly after publication of the English

**A PILLAR SUPPORTING THE
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ENDE BEARS CARVED IMAGES
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BELOW, DOT THE LOWER CLIFF
FACE AT IRELI.**





edition of Marcel Griaule's 1948 book, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*, in the 1960s, however, the region began to attract adventure travelers from around the globe in ever-increasing numbers, creating demand for accommodations and infrastructure.

Since that time, the Dogon have been able to host small groups of travelers—mostly travelers with an appreciation for indigenous cultures, backpackers, and rock climbers lured to the escarpment's sheer sandstone cliffs. Some communities have set up camp grounds and offer guided tours of their villages and those of others. Several settlements have even built visitors' centers and small site museums, set up handicraft stores, and organize weekly performances of dances once done on a seasonal basis.

The advent of tourism has had a positive impact on the cliff-dwellers in spawning the revival of craft industries such as indigo dying that had once been on the wane and creating a sense of pride among the Dogon with regard to their culture. Yet, increased exposure to the outside world in recent decades has also resulted in the gradual erosion of age-old traditions. Moreover, only a few villages have been able to profit from tourism traffic, leading to jealousies and conflict within and between villages, which had not existed before.

Many visitors have been so moved by their experiences in Dogon Country that, some, in their desire to help the cliff-dwellers, have launched ambitious development projects aimed at providing basic education and health care and improving agricultural production. A number of these initiatives have actually succeeded, easing the often difficult living conditions of the Dogon, particularly during years of drought. The construction of small dams has allowed for better irrigation and the production of secondary crops, such as onions, in the wake of the millet harvest in October, while the availability of education has enabled some Dogon to find work elsewhere, moving into Mali's, and the world's, mainstream economy.

Unfortunately, many of the well-meaning organizations that have launched development projects in the Dogon area have done so with little regard to the cultural context, building schools and clinics that are out of sync with traditional architectural forms and thus visually pollute the very cultural landscape they are intended to help.

Aware of the escarpment's value as a natural and cultural treasure as well as its great potential for generating tourism revenue,

FACING PAGE: A DOGON LADDER PROVIDES ACCESS TO A MUDBRICK GRANARY IN THE VILLAGE OF ENDE. DANCERS IN THE VILLAGE OF TIRELI WEAR KANAGA MASKS, SYMBOLIZING THE FIRST ANCESTORS. A PROTESTANT CHURCH, BELOW, RECENTLY BUILT IN TELI VILLAGE, IS AT ODDS WITH TRADITIONAL DOGON ARCHITECTURE.



the Malian government, through its Ministry of Culture, nominated the site for UNESCO's World Heritage List, a designation the area received in 1989.

In 1993, the government established the Cultural Mission of Bandiagara, an umbrella organization charged with overseeing the preservation of the escarpment. Between 1995 and 1996, the Cultural Mission, aided by architects from the University of Konstanz, embarked on a cultural inventory of the Dogon area, underwritten by UNESCO's World Heritage Fund and a crucial first step toward the development of a management plan for the escarpment. Each village was surveyed and the conditions of its buildings were carefully noted. Sadly, many of the most important historic structures were found to be in varying states of decay or had been damaged and disfigured by inappropriate repairs, indicating a loss of the artisanal skills needed to maintain the buildings.

In concert with carrying out a conditions assessment, the mission set up a documentation center for the Dogon region in the town of Bandiagara and launched a public awareness campaign focusing on the historical importance of the area. It was crucial to spread as widely as possible an understanding, appreciation, and recognition of the site's World Heritage status and why the escarpment had achieved the designation. The mission also embarked on a series of pilot projects, including the rehabilitation of an encampment in the village of Songo, one of the most heavily visited settlements, and a network of hiking trails in the Sangha region.

When mission officials realized that far more would need to be done if the Dogon area was to be preserved—work that was well beyond the organization's capacity—they began reaching out to the international preservation community. Over the past decade, the mission has made great strides in forging partnerships with a variety of universities and NGOs, which have been able to provide technical assistance as well as financial resources to carry out work, among these CRATerre-ENSAG (the Research Center for Earthen Architecture) based at the National Superior School of Architecture in Grenoble, France. CRATerre, which nominated the Bandiagara Escarpment to WMF's 2004 list of *100 Most Endangered Sites*, has been instrumental in drafting a management plan for the area, as well as developing a training program to revive the artisanal skills necessary to undertake individual restoration projects. The organization is also aiding the Cultural Mission in identifying key questions, articulating a vision, and establishing a strategic framework to guide the work of the many actors involved. To do this, however, it has been necessary to involve all of the economic and social players in the area to adopt an attitude of respect for the value of the site and to establish incentives for preservation of the most significant elements of the villages, and, lastly, to improve legal protection for historic structures.

Following the inclusion of the Bandiagara Escarpment on the 2004 Watch list, Ameri-

**ONE OF THE OLDEST-KNOWN
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THE VILLAGE OF BONGO, BUILT WITHIN A
NATURAL GROTTO ON THE ESCARPMENT.**





IN FEBRUARY, A PLAQUE WAS UNVEILED IN THE VILLAGE OF TELI, WHERE THE WORLD MONUMENTS FUND AWARDED AN AMERICAN EXPRESS GRANT TO SUPPORT ARTISANAL TRAINING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE BANDIAGARA ESCARPMENT, INCLUDED ON WMF'S 2004 LIST OF 100 MOST ENDANGERED SITES. BAS RELIEFS ADORN A HOGON'S HOUSE IN THE VILLAGE OF TIRELI, ABOVE. A LADDER, LEFT, PROVIDES ACCESS TO TIRELI VILLAGE.

can Express, with WMF's urging, agreed to underwrite further development of the management plan for the area, which is nearing completion. Beyond the safeguarding and conserving of traditional buildings, the management plan calls for the regulation of any new construction through the establishment of strict building guidelines such as those that govern new development in historic districts around the globe.

To date, there has been no formal mechanism or protocol in place for evaluating development proposals—many of them government initiated—or guiding construction so that the cultural value of the Dogon region is protected. Adopting such guidelines in collaboration with all the local authorities and players in fields as varied as culture, environment, health, religion, construction, and tourism, will encourage the kind of development desired by all without negatively affecting the intrinsic value of the site.

The majority of Dogon are clearly in favor of preserving the natural and cultural richness of their environment as long as it does not impede them from obtaining better living conditions. Ideally, they should be able to reap the best of both worlds—benefiting from the fruits of the modern world all the while preserving their extraordinary cultural traditions.

This is precisely the challenge that must be met by the Cultural Mission of Bandiagara, as well as by all the public and private parties involved in the area. Some initiatives—such as those put forth in the management plan put together with the assistance of CRATerre and the World Monuments Fund—are clearly moving in this direction and demonstrate that such a vision is not utopian. On the contrary, it is perfectly realistic. ■