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► **To cite this version:**

Cheikh Tidiane Lo. Heritage Making and Urban Memories: An Ethnographic Study of the City of St-Louis in Sénégal. CIST2018 - Représenter les territoires / Representing territories, Collège international des sciences territoriales (CIST), Mar 2018, Rouen, France. pp.496-501. hal-01854416

HAL Id: hal-01854416

<https://hal.science/hal-01854416>

Submitted on 6 Aug 2018

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Heritage Making and Urban Memories: An Ethnographic Study of the City of St-Louis in Senegal

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ABSTRACT

In light of local community's involvement and urban dynamics, this paper sheds light on the cultural management of St-Louis Island, a former French colonial settlement. This ethnographic study comes from a field project undertaken since 2014. Put on the Unesco World Heritage List (WHL) in 2000, St-Louis has undergone deep demographic and urban changes, unfavorable to the colonial architecture, which is at the core of the heritage safeguarding initiative, and to the local inhabitants, tourists and visitors. This series of problems facing the preservation programme could be explained and resolved if issues of memory and community involvement were taken more seriously, rather than letting bureaucratic concern to protect the built heritage prevail. We argue that there is a discrepancy between the need of memory affirmation, community identity politics, and the selection of the colonial legacy as embodied in the architectural fabric of ancient buildings. If this discordance is taken into account, conflicts and memory disputes besetting the preservation project could be conciliated by according greater attention to the current needs of local communities and the stake of preserving the colonial remnants.

KEYWORDS

Colonial heritage, Collective identity, Memory dispute, Urban dynamics

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cette communication, nous présentons la gestion patrimoniale de l'île de St-Louis, ancien comptoir colonial français du Sénégal sous le prisme de la marginalisation des populations locales dans les processus urbains. Cette analyse ethnographique est le fruit d'un travail de terrain entrepris depuis 2014. Inscrite sur la liste mondiale du patrimoine de l'Unesco en 2000, l'île de St-Louis est l'objet de profondes mutations démographiques et urbaines, défavorables à la fois à l'architecture coloniale – qui est au coeur des efforts de sauvegarde du patrimoine –, aux habitants, et aux visiteurs ou touristes. Cette problématique à laquelle le projet de préservation est confronté pourrait être tirée au clair si la question des mémoires et de l'implication des populations locales étaient au centre des préoccupations, plutôt que le souci bureaucratique de faire respecter le cadre réglementaire du projet patrimonial tout court. Nous arguons qu'il existe un déphasage entre les besoins d'affirmation mémorielle et identitaire des populations locales et le tri de la mémoire coloniale symbolisée dans le tissu architectural des bâtiments. Nous montrons comment une prise en charge de cette discordance pourrait concilier les différends mémoriels, les besoins actuels et l'enjeu de la préservation des résidus du passé colonial.

MOTS CLÉS

Patrimoine colonial, identité collective, mémoire conflictuelle, dynamique urbaine

INTRODUCTION

This paper offers an ethnographic study of heritage experiences, what I call "heritage ontology", at the community level in St-Louis, Senegal. By ontology, I mean the lived experiences

of a textual or abstract reality. Heritage, being constructed through discourse and text, nevertheless, exerts its effects on people and generates responses from them. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: why and how does the colonial legacy manifest itself in St-Louis? To what extent do postcolonial people's aspirations for modernity, in light of/despite the existing poverty, facilitate or hinder heritage conservation policies? Moving from a less epistemological approach to a more ontological consideration of heritage, this study participates in the debates around the legitimacy of preserving colonial legacies in an ex-colony. It unravels the multivocality of heritage ontologies characteristic of heritage sites in general, and postcolonial contexts, in particular.

My focus on multivocality attends to visitors, discourses, memories, nostalgia, and how they shape heritage dynamics in a postcolonial context (Sinou, 2003; Ouallet, 2005; Dimesie, 2013; Konate, 2012). All that is outlined above boils down to showing processes of heritage inscription, interpretation, and conservation. I will argue that there is a much more complex interaction around listed heritage than usually defined and idealised in official heritage narratives of governments and specialised institutions like Unesco. Despite official attempts at codifying heritage, it escapes bureaucratic control, and becomes a performative tool in the hands of actors, and stakeholders, who subjectivise how they choose to engage with it, rendering the heritage futures unpredictable and evasive. The values local people attach to heritage are often different from, although not necessarily less important than, values ascribed by historians, archeologists, government officials, and tourism developers. I suggest that an understanding of this performative quality of heritage, its diffuseness, is needed to alleviate less favored communities who are often left behind by institutional measures, but also to constantly redirect pre-conceived policy towards aspects outside the bureaucratic loop.

1. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on fieldwork sessions held in different periods of the year, from 2014 to 2016. Narratives, archives, newspapers, and direct participant observation facilitated the data collection. Arguably, doing fieldwork in a place you are familiar with, where you have spent some time to get acquainted with the physical layout, the language, as well as the cultural norms of the people, is an asset for the ethnographer. One should, however, acknowledge that problems of unconscious biases and excess of subjective projections may often impinge on the final analysis. St Louis is my second home. I have spent five years as an undergraduate and graduate student, shopping in its markets, visiting its most attractive places, fostering friendships with some local inhabitants. I cashed in on this pre-knowledge as a form of social capital to speed up or short-circuit one classical ethnographic phase: the period of establishing rapport. I had still to refer to new individuals and groups, in the bureaucratic apparatuses or ordinary spaces. But, it was quite an easy move, with few exceptions.

2. SPATIAL SETTING

Located in the North-West of Senegal, the colonial town of St-Louis is an island divided into three strands of land by a river that runs into the Atlantic Ocean. During the colonial period, St-Louis played a considerable role in the exertion of the colonial power over religious and political leaders of Senegal and from the broader Occidental French Africa¹. With independence, the colonial buildings that housed offices and served as dwellings for colonial administrators and officers were gradually conceded to local authorities and the ruling elite. After the

¹ Translated from French, *Afrique occidentale française*.

complete transfer of the capital from St-Louis to Dakar in 1960, a considerable number of local indigenous people appropriated those historic buildings due to the rampant urbanisation and population growth. In view of its historic importance, both within West Africa and for France, Unesco listed the whole island as world heritage site under the title of Outstanding Universal Value in 2000. Through commerce, slave trades, and racial mixing, the island had become a cosmopolitan space since the 17th century (Konate, 2012; Samb, 1998).

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Since the 1970s, local authorities, and actors interested in the built heritage have been raising people's awareness about the alarming proportions of the colonial architectural destruction (around 20% of the buildings falling apart, 30% needing serious repair). After its inscription on the WHL, the municipality, in partnership with State's agencies, international cooperations, such as French Development Aid Programmes (DAP), the French local Architecture School, efforts were made to establish a conservation database to help inhabitants respect heritage preservation instructions.

A report published in 1973 by the Ministry for Urbanism and Habitation signals serious concerns from local authorities regarding the built legacies' increased degradation in St-Louis (Toulier, 2003). It outlines a set of restoration plans envisaged by the national government, in partnership with local institutions, for the island of St-Louis. Unlike what occurred in many parts of independent Africa, the Senegalese young nation did not display tremendous aversion toward the colonial iconography and edifices, under the presidency of Leopold Sedar Senghor (1960-1981). His vision and philosophy partly explain the attachment and peaceful relation that characterised French and Senegalese nations, including his contribution to the creation of the *Francophonie* (an international organisation uniting French-speaking countries around the world) in 1970. With this regard, Boucoum and Toulier write: "after independence, the first President Leopold Sedar Senghor, with the movement of Negritude, developed a culturally-oriented vision for the Senegalese heritage, without breaking off with the *Francophonie*" (2013: 9). In this context of diplomatic relationship, Senegalese ruling elites, mostly educated in French schools and universities, seemed to be favorable and tolerant with respect to colonial symbols left by France (Marshall, 2008).

One of the most active institutions that claim credit for the preservation efforts is the Center of Research and Documentation (CRDS, ex-Institut français d'Afrique noire/IFAN). During the colonial period, it acted as a museum and an archive for Senegal and Mauritania. Miss Fall, the current Director, shared her version of early initiatives undertaken by the cultural institution since the 1970s. According to Fall, the CRDS was primarily oriented to the collection and valorisation of popular artefacts. In 1995, it was decided to reframe its mission statement to focus on architectural and heritage preservation (see the "St-Louis Machine" conservation project; funded by French cooperation and inventorying industrial remains and infrastructures such as bridges, water supply plants, towers...). In 1998, the municipal authority of St-Louis held several general assemblies on various sectors, including tourism, leading to plans, with the CRDS, for the revalorisation of the island. The top priorities, the Director identified, were all elements of tangible heritage.

I investigate how gentrification, as derived from the heritage added value, operates in St-Louis, bearing in mind that there are context-specific aspects that would merit further scrutiny. Gentrification is associated with the rise of price in real estate after the island's inscription

on the WHL, together with many homeless families that turn into backstreet squatters of abandoned colonial houses. It is hard for an ethnographer to fathom whether a particular family is illegally occupying a given house as squatters because it is a matter of dignity to reveal that. The only way I could learn about this has been from narratives of long-term residents who possess sufficient knowledge about histories of houses and who owns what.

Relying on these secondhand accounts, I found that several families today on the island moved to abandoned ancient colonial houses as a temporary shelter. This phenomenon seems to have increased since the island's inscription because real estate value has tripled according to Sow, a heritage scholar at the local university whom I interviewed in 2014. Based on the definition I quoted above, gentrification is associated with man-led activities. However, natural factors also contributed to moving people out of their homes or compel them to construct in height. It is the case for example in the Langue de Barbarie, one of the buffer zones of the heritage, a strand of land on the Northern side of the main island which is today threatened with disappearance because the water is advancing inwardly. Due to the shrinking of the land, many people had to move out of their original homes into uninhabited houses on the main island, while more economically powerful fishermen build four-story houses, transgressing the height limit of heritage restrictions.

Cases of squatting is recurrent. Mrs. Camara, a mixed race female entrepreneur, who left her native country France in 2007 to settle in St-Louis, has created a Facebook page, "Entr'vue"². She once posted a photo of a low-income family that lives as squatters in a derelict house on the brink of downfall. She commented the picture: "a family has been occupying the lieu for some months because they did not have a place for shelter. In spite of some individuals' calls for help, the horizon is becoming more and more bleak for this family who kneels, haplessly and lost, in this abyss of death" (Camara, 2015). A father experiencing similar things expresses his situation in a way that captures the prevalent mood of these desperate family squatters: "We want to move, but we don't have means. No authority has come to see us".

How does this affect the heritage conservation policy? If it is clear that there exist several families who illegally inhabit derelict colonial houses in need of repair, how can they renovate something on which they cannot claim ownership? I met Mr. Gueye, a native of St-Louis who works in Dakar, whose family is still living in St-Louis. Through our conversation, he learned that I was studying heritage issues in his native town. Of the ideas he shared with me, one stood out. Many living on the island without legal papers to prove ownership of their homes are actually descendants of people who used to work with the white colonial owner; they took over the house after the employer died or moved back to France after the Senegalese independence in 1960. These types of occupants are hesitant to invest money in rebuilding their houses for fear of a possible return of the original owner, as it already happened.

So beyond the romanticisation of heritage, as it transpires through some people's narratives, the communities' experience of the impact of heritage policies are not always rose and positive. Heritage authorities and experts have emphasised the need to uphold the heritage list, which they characterise as a gift, a recognition to be preserved, yet some of them seem to ignore or downplay why communities are not responding to their invitation. Part of the reasons for this inefficiency springs from a simplification of the socio-cultural realities determining people's rapport and relationship with heritage site.

2 www.facebook.com/entrevuesaintlouis

There are also cases of successful renovation. Yves Lamour, a French who settled on the island, bought old colonial buildings with a view to restoring them. For him, St-Louis “is a bit of French patrimony on an African soil”. When interviewed by a journalist (2012), he said: “les gens s’aperçoivent du patrimoine. Le classement de l’Unesco a fait du bien. Donc, les gens s’en rendent compte. Il faut attacher de l’importance à la réfection des balcons et des façades en particulier”³. As the journalist puts it, Lamour’s goal has been to “awaken the slumbering French colonial heritage of St Louis”. His discourse is tinted with a certain patriotism, a duty to enliven his bygone ancestors’ legacy on the African continent.

Jean-Jacques Bancal, metis of white French and black African parents, emphasised that cultural blending, double-identity animate him. He aspire to restore at least 20% of the built legacies, estimated to 500 buildings and monuments, as well as other mobile materials that index colonial past: “je suis très lié à St-Louis car elle fait partie de mes racines”⁴. One of the striking efforts he undertook in 2006 was his purchase of the ship Bou el Mogdad, which ensured the transit of goods, mails, and people between St-Louis and other coastal towns along River Senegal from 1950 to 1970.

Alternative forms of preservation are noticed through festivals, open-door events, and aware campaigns conducted by youths association. The Fanal Festival and the International Jazz Festival are unique platforms appropriated by communities to express their identities and refresh their memories to come to terms with their sense of belonging in the heritage space.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Far-fetched comparisons may not help us resolve the puzzle of heritage conservation in St-Louis, but I tend to believe that there are common problems besetting tangible heritage management worldwide, particularly in postcolonial developing countries in Africa. And such commonalities can be sources from which to learn to better comprehend local issues. Colonial heritage, generally found in urban settings, confront several obstacles linked with poverty, urban expansion, rural exodus, and gentrification. The lifestyle of first inhabitants often differ from newcomers who left rural areas to settle in postcolonial heritage sites, and this creates a discordance of value between heritage experts, stakeholders, and those incoming communities.

In St-Louis newcomers invade urban centres with more acute economic preoccupation than the preservation of heritage, leading to a serious neglect of the conservation guidelines. In addition to this discrepancy of value, poverty, and precarious ownership, lack of involvement of communities plays out in the degradation of the lived environment as well. Indifference to heritage preservation needs stems also from “a lasting legacy of colonialism” (Pwiti & Ndoro, 1999). Many inhabitants do not see the value of preserving the remenants of an oppressive colonial system, considering its symbols as againts national glory. This memory resistance is much visible among certain local scholars in St-Louis (Diarra, 2012). For these reasons, as Low argues, “understanding the cultural dynamics of a place so that specific individuals and their histories and values are sustained at or near the heritage site, across generation,

3 “People can see the heritage. The UNESCO’s classification has been good. So, people have realised that. We need to give importance to balconies and, more precisely, to facades” [online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=irhaKx1jvSU&hd=1].

4 “I am very attached to Saint Louis, for it is part of my roots”, interview by Rosen Le Roux (12/2011) [online: www.saintlouisdusenegal.com/jbancal2011.php].

and overtime” (2003) is crucial to ensure a more sustainable and integrated management of heritage sites.

This presentation on the social life of heritage helped us to unpack the complexities of urbanisation, interpretative frameworks, memories, and power relations on the ground (Joy, 2012; Turgeon, 2003). Postcolonial urban logics, characterised by hybridity, obscures the heritage policy founded upon the dual colonial urban planning of centre vs periphery. Most communities, grappling with poverty, family disputes, and informal economies, argue, reject, or simply ignore *top-down* conservation regulation. Also, the unwarranted ownership of most dwellers renders the heritage policy implementation daunting for heritage bureaucracy, besides being undercut by political abuses, lack of technical expertise to carry out its mission adequately. The selected colonial heritage display, dominant in official discourse, becomes thus overshadowed by unharnessed everyday practices and gentrification.

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