

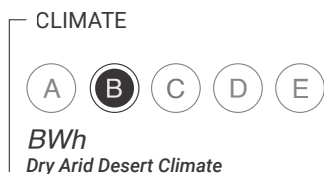


Water, through Words and Evils: The Case of Saint-Louis

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Island of Saint-Louis, Senegal

Certain cultures portray the sacredness of water in rituals performed daily and to mark different stages of life. Water has been revered the home of protective spirits, according to myths and legends, such as those of the Serer people in Senegal. This spiritual connection between water and people, which has favored its preservation, has been undermined with the emergence of industrialization and urbanization. This shift in perception has led to water being viewed primarily as a commodity. The Island of Saint-Louis is faced with a paradox of benefits and challenges due to its colonial cultural heritage and unique deltaic condition. This article discusses the vulnerability of the site and its water heritage along with the opportunities it could bring for sustainable development of the island.



< Fig. 1 The person drowning in this Covid-19 exposition is metaphorical in depicting water as a source of death, conflict, war and tension (Source: Abdoulaye Touré, 2021, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

Water from the ocean, the sea, the stream, the canal, the lake, the river, the backwater, the oasis, the pond, the retention basin, the source of groundwater, the drilling, the well. Water from the mist, the clouds, the dew, the rain, hail, snow. They envelop us, surround us, overwhelm us. They are underground, on the earth, in the atmosphere.

Beware of the water of the tornado, the storm, the river overflowing its bed, the raging ocean, Katerina, the tsunami and the heavy downpour!

Water from the water tower, from the reservoir, from the cistern, from the tap, from the barrel, from the canary, from the basin, from the can, from the goatskin, from the calabash, from the bottle, from the pot, from the glass, from cups, even inner tubes and the famous 'mbuus' or polluting plastic bags! So many sources, so many receptacles, so many cultures.

- From the author's fieldnotes

Introduction

Concerning the relationship between water and people, as well as the cultural significance of water in our society, it is important to acknowledge the various ways in which water is utilized and valued. These uses and virtues are of great importance at events in all stages of life: birth, baptism, circumcision in certain ethnic groups, marriage and death (fig. 1). The rituals performed in these circumstances attest to the importance and sanctity of potable water as well as water mixed with roots, millet, salt, rice, cotton or other products.

Both spiritually and temporally, water is inseparable from life and has always had the authority to confer power. The establishment of

towns and villages have always depended on the existence of water sources. Myths and legends abound on this subject. All the custodians and protectors of their settlements inhabit the waters: Mame Coumba Bang, Mame Coumba Castelle, Mame Coumba Lamba, Mama Ngédj, Mama Ndagne Sangamar (or Sangomar), Mame Mindiss, Leuk Daour Mbaye, among others (Margoles 2007). The priests and priestesses, intercessors between spirits and people, are vested with mystical powers conferred on them by purificatory practices either offerings of milk, wine, blood and other forms of libation. The Serer people from Senegal integrated water into their beliefs, customs and traditions, passed on through generations. *Zamzam* (holy water in Arabic), *saafara* (magic potion to drink or apply to the body), *sangatt* (bath recommended by a marabout or priest) and *tuurs* or *diuur* (totems or evil spirits) are all linked to the sacredness of water according the Serer. A fairly common practice among them, which corroborates this belief, is to pour water at the doors of houses early in the morning as an expression of hope for a peaceful day. Another water-related characteristic of Serer people is found in the town of Joal-Fadiouth, where the maternal line of the Diaxanoor descends from the goddess of the sea, and that of the Fendior descends from the goddess of the rain.

Water Needs and Threats

From time immemorial, the spiritual relationship between water and people has favored water's preservation. Traditional societies ensured that water use was limited to strictly domestic or agricultural needs. It is the same today in rural areas where traditions are still alive, especially where resources have become scarce. Unfortunately, industrialization and urbanization have completely changed this relationship. Water



^ Fig. 2 Aerial view of Saint-Louis Island showing the Languede Barbarie and its vulnerability to the threat of sea-level rise (Source: Google Earth, 2023).

has ceased to be an element of cosmology in which the elements of nature take on a sacred character because they are essential to life; it has simply become a commodity.

Urban and industrial cultivation require significant amounts of water. Wells and other water sources have given way to large-scale hydraulic installations which facilitate access to water in larger quantities and higher quality. The phenomenon of standpipes, which once stored water and lined the streets of cities, and often initiated disputes between the women who came to collect the resource, has faded with the development of urban hydraulics that allow the installation of taps in most homes. This has to a large extent contributed to the improvement of the well-being of the population but also greatly increased their water consumption. In this context, one cares more about the availability of water than about its preservation. As soon as the bill is paid, we are inclined to believe that

water must be available. As long as it continues to flow, most consumers will certainly care very little about its preservation. However, hydraulics specialists continue to sound the alarm about problems of water scarcity. At a time when some people travel for miles on foot, in a cart, on a bicycle or on the back of a donkey to fetch the precious treasure, we in urban agglomerations only have a lever to turn or a button to push to see water flow. If we had more trouble getting it, would we abuse it so much?

The Island of Saint-Louis, a Vulnerable Site

The Island of Saint-Louis, designated as a World Heritage Site in 2000, is an agglomeration of about 300,000 inhabitants. Built on the sandy banks of the mouth of the Senegal River and the Atlantic Ocean, it is made up of a succession of islands and backwaters. Established as a colonial shipping hub, the island became the politi-



^ Fig. 3 Houses destroyed by erosion along the coast of the Island of Saint-Louis (Source: Abdoulaye Toure, 2021).



cal capital of French West Africa because of the affluent activities of European traders traveling up the river in search of slaves, gold, leather and other commodities. It received its World Heritage status for its colonial history in the development and diffusion of cultural syntheses, its urban form as well as the beaches, quays and the Faidherbe Bridge which has become the emblem of the city (UNESCO n.d.). Although there have been attempts to implement a safeguarding and valorization plan for this UNESCO-designated property (Coly 2009, UNESCO n.d), there remains a lack of proper sustainable management of this rich cultural and natural, tangible and intangible heritage (Sine 2020)

One of the main consequences of this omnipresence of water is the amphibious character of the site. More than 20 per cent of the communal area is made up of water. Two-thirds of its living area is liable to flooding during periods of heavy rainfall and yet, ironically, the merging of the river and the ocean has created a magnificent environment (fig. 2). This deltaic condition gives it the status of an exceptional site, being perceived as both a weakness and a strength. It has been nicknamed the “African Venice.”

The situation of the Island of Saint-Louis exposes it to multiple environmental hazards directly linked to water: the river, the delta and the Atlantic Ocean (Delft University of Technology 2021). The site has a very low morphology, separated from the ocean by a sandy strip, the *Lingue de Barbarie*. There is an annual decline in the dune by 1 to 2 meters. If this trend is maintained and nothing is done to stop its progression process, the disappearance of the *Lingue de Barbarie*, which was once a thin sandy peninsula but has recently become an island, would expose the mainland to direct contact with the Atlantic Ocean. Consequently, the disappearance of the Island of Saint-Louis will inevitably follow due



^ Fig. 4 Inland advancement of the sea, threatening everyday human life (Source: Abdoulaye Toure, 2021).

to the inland advancement of the sea.

In addition to maritime hazards, the island is exposed to other climatic phenomena such as outcrop of the water table, floods and capillary rise, with immediate or delayed consequences. All these put Saint-Louis at the confluence of all major climate vulnerabilities, explaining why, from year to year, this city records considerable damage to dwellings, equipment and infrastructures, and sometimes the loss of human lives (figs. 3 and 4).

Conclusion

There have been several interventions to preserve this heritage site, especially in the time of climate change and associated risks, with

a focus on institutional capacity building. In 2012 the Tourism Development Program for Saint-Louis and its region (PDT/SL), financed by the State of Senegal and the French Development Agency (AFD), was signed as an emblem of economic, social and environmental impact and as part of a new paradigm of local development of the city, anchored in the national policy of sustainable territorial development. This initiative is structured to enable the municipality of Saint-Louis and its region to be more resilient, not only in the economic sectors of fisheries and tourism, but also with environmental enhancements such as improved air quality as a result of a better transportation system, more sustainable waste management, requalified green public spaces for the entire local population, and the preservation of public and private

cultural and historical heritage for future generations (EnQuete+ 2020).

As part of the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape, the Island of Saint-Louis was presented as a case of how an extensive conservation and development program can bring together different stakeholders to improve the state of conservation of the historic city (UNESCO 2021). And yet still, particularly in Saint-Louis, there is a significant gap between the investments and expected results. International collaboration can foster an exchange of good practices but also direct water cities to refrain from bad examples (Delft University of Technology 2021).

Today, we are fortunate to have running water and we should make sure we deserve it, recognizing its real value and making a personal investment in what it represents. The UN 2023 Water Conference caught the interest of the international community and was a call to action and for better awareness of our individual and collective responsibilities. Water is not life; it gives life to life. Most of the great civilizations, for instance pharaonic Egypt on the banks of the Nile, were aquatic. To give history the opportunity to run its course, as previous generations have done for us, it is the duty of each and everyone to safeguard water for future generations and to preserve life on our planet. In the words of a popular saying, "We only know the value of water when the well is dry."

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