

Researching African Tourism: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The following study deals with the transposition of Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" to a holiday resort in Senegal, Saly, visited in December and January 2000. It will be first shown that this place is bound to be a perfect example of heterotopia, since it remains most of the time in concordance with all the elements of the definition of the concept, and as a result satisfies most of its aspects. Secondly, this heterotopian view leads to developing concrete sociological implications.

Keywords: Senegal, Saly, tourism, heterotopia, globalization.

1. Introduction

I visited Saly as an outsider –first, because I was a tourist, but above all because I was staying in Joal which is about fifty kilometres south, a rather long way in Western Africa indeed. Reading the few words dedicated to Saly in a travel guide (Gloaguen 2000: 129-131) draws a clear distinction in your mind:

M'bour-Saly: 85 km south from Dakar, twin towns that are complementary yet very different from one another. M'bour is an African fishing town, and Saly the biggest tourist complex of the region. Please don't let it confuse you: go for a walk in the former, appropriately dressed; have a swim and sunbathe in the latter.

Such a plain description reduces Saly to the primary function of a holiday resort – lazy leisure –despite the close and culturally attractive presence of a typical Senegalese town. Saly is a seaside resort located on the "Little Coast"; there are very few websites about the town itself, but one of them presents it as the "Senegalese Côte d'Azur", with reference to the French Riviera (saly-senegal.com). Saly is still rapidly growing as many investors build second homes. It looks like a luxurious mushroom-town.

2. Analytical framework

2.1. White island

Saly is mainly popular with tourists, that is to say non-permanent people have their holidays while local people are working for them, are producing leisure or contributing to its production. To make it clearer, and this is a crucial fact, the white community is dominant, thus a reflection of such an unusual white density in such a narrow location can easily be noticed by observing buildings, wealthy-looking people that you cannot meet elsewhere in Senegal but in Dakar, and more generally the way of living (tennis, swimming-pool, and golf among other activities). For this reason and several others that will be detailed later on, Saly might be regarded as a heterotopia.

2.2. Heterotopia

It is however obvious that before going further, this key-term is to be explained. As Hetherington puts it (1997: 42) simply reminding a definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume VII, 2nd edition (1989), “the term heterotopia originally comes from the study of anatomy. It is used to refer to parts of the body that are either out of a place, missing, extra, or, like tumours, alien”. Foucault was the first to refer to heterotopian spaces in a lecture given to a group of architects in 1967, translated into English as *Of Other Spaces* (Foucault 1986: 24). In this lecture, Foucault connects heterotopia to utopia:

There are also [apart from “utopias”], probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places –places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society –which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.

Heterotopia are like small islands in contrast with the surroundings, strongly linked to the consequences of modernity, of which the most visible aspect is sure to be the so-called “globalization of the world”. For Hetherington (1997: viii), heterotopia are “places of Otherness, sites constituted in relation to other sites by their difference (...) Heterotopia organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them (...) Doing things in a different way is what modernity has always been about”. In a way, heterotopia may be a product of the modern world if Hetherington is to be followed. The use of synonyms could help understanding this new interpretation. Hetherington for example gives a similar meaning to “badlands”; besides the word heterotopia has been substituted with marginal space, paradoxical space or third space. It is useful to remember they all are “spaces in which an alternative social ordering is performed”. Therefore, heterotopia are closely connected with imagination since they are “different”, “marginal”, and even lead by another social order.

2.3. Salymagination

The problem is they are not completely imaginary for many examples of heterotopia can be given: the cemetery, the garden, etc... (Foucault 1986: 25-27). One could say they *seem* imaginary, and this is what makes the concept difficult to understand, since the word “seem” already implies an imaginative process. Once we are able to imagine what should be imaginary, then imagination becomes concrete, it takes a real shape, space is being made visible – this is what heterotopia is about. Foucault (1986: 27) argues in this way because an example is surely less abstract than imagining imagination:

The boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (...) but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.

Indeed, a fundamental point about heterotopia is that it exists because it is seen from outside, or the condition for heterotopia to exist is the presence of an “outside”, and by way of consequence it is always a close place defined by its boundaries. Therefore imagination has a great role to play, the outsiders regarding it as a sort of forbidden city, a small world where the rules are changed, a place of removed order that seems to them, obviously, *disorder*. As Hetherington (1997: 43) confirms it, heterotopias only exist in relation, that is, they are established by their difference in a relationship

between sites rather than their Otherness deriving from a site itself. (...) It is how such a relationship is seen from outside, from the standpoint of another perspective, that allows a space to be seen as heterotopic.

Here comes the idea of a “perceived” space, because the nature of interactions between a heterotopia and its close surroundings, just beyond the boundaries, rest on imagination. The heterotopia has a great influence upon the outside world, which receives a lot more than it gives. In other words, there is an efficient but unidirectional relationship between them. Heterotopia is a delimited area which spreads its influence all around it; on the contrary the surroundings are a kind of unlimited space acting as a receptor without being able to answer may resist to such an influence. This is about the power of perception, the capacity of imagining and representing a location to oneself.

3. Methodology

A strong hierarchy exists in most countries of black Africa. A correlation exists between the influence people may have upon each other and the colour of their skin. Broadly speaking, the darker your skin, the more dominated you will be. As a consequence, while doing interviews, you must take the social position of the person into account and think that what he or she is saying frequently depends on the politically correct way of thinking of the ethnic group he or she belongs to. Collecting information from different ethnic groups is a hard task and does not always bring elements full of sincerity, because people first regard you as a White and often say what you want to hear or what you were hypothetically thinking, whereas the truth is elsewhere.

Given this tremendously complex network of relationships, this high-divided social system, you cannot really choose the nature of your research techniques. You have to discover what is socially accepted in order to make people’s views less opaque. As a tourist staying only for three weeks, you will obviously use non-participative observation for you have no time to efficiently learn Wolof language.

4. Presentation of findings

4.1. Fortress

Saly is first defined by its difference. One could say that in the middle of nowhere – the density of people is extremely low around this site – a holiday resort is in violent contrast with its surroundings. Very close to Saly is M’bour, a traditional fishing-town. Moreover, as soon as you move away from the seaside and go just a little inland, you can find the exact opposite of what Saly is –hence it is better to establish comparisons than to describe the resort in itself. Saly is a reflection of how French imagine Senegal more than what Senegal is actually. In other words, the fact that Saly is not Senegalese at all makes it heterotopic. A first huge aberration can be stressed just by glancing at the astonishing contrast between two seascides – although they have not the same function, they radically express heterotopia. Besides, what is even more flagrant must be noticed in the way French have materially delimited the “Saly territory”. All along the road a high wall can be seen with flowers on its top, as if it meant “you cannot see but you can guess”, or “red flowers in a dry country makes you curious”. Now Saly is accurately closed like a fortress, as everyone would do to defend a place or secret activities. Its boundaries are both a warning and a symbol of great expectations – a will to keep something hidden, perhaps to materialize envy or ignorance. This is why the surroundings are not capable of influencing Saly, as it is protected and exists only by its difference. As Hetherington (1997: 64) puts it,

Boundaries are threshold spaces that demarcate one thing from another. (...) Boundaries are places of uncertainty and as such often play a very significant role in the processes of social ordering. Ambivalence is in large part about difference and the transgression of boundaries that separate this difference as it is represented in places, things or people.

4.2. Resistance

Consequently, accurate boundaries largely increase the impression and the perception of an ordered space. It is probably through heterotopian spaces that order is the most visible. Shields (1989: 31) uses the term social “spatialisation” to designate the ongoing social construction of the spatial at the level of the social imaginary (collective mythologies, presuppositions) as well as interventions in the landscape (for example, the built environment). Just by saying “Saly”, it arises pictures into black people’s minds. To quote Shields (1989: 46),

Spatialisation manifests itself in conversation topics in that images of places and regions are often cited and commented upon (i.e. discourses on space). It is a means to express ideas – an intellectual shorthand whereby spatial metaphors and place images can convey a complex set of associations without the speaker having to think deeply and to specify exactly which associations or images he or she intends.

Saly is socially constructed, thought as a “normal social order”. However, there should be a resistance if not a rebellion against this spatialised order, considering that French type buildings are like a mistake in this environment, otherwise houses of a future time would magically be put in this place. Saly is like the concrete manifestation of anachronism. Go only three miles away inland, and you will be in another world, Malikunda. People from Malikunda do not care about Saly because they have no interests in going there. It means, in a metaphysical approach, that the existence of Saly is to be proved. In Shields’ (1989: 47) words,

the manner in which spatialisation is most visible is in spatial practices and in the connotations people associate with places and regions in everyday talk.

This confirms the idea of a part of space hard to define because its existence seems illogical. Saly is a place “in a wrong place”, so to speak, akin to those plants that can grow on rocks. It is an anachronistic mushroom-town that appeared from nowhere, an obstacle to the natural state of evolution. This analysis might be connected with the notion of “liminality”, discussed in Van Gennep’s (1960) pioneering study of *Rites of passage* (1960). It refers to moments of discontinuity in the social fabric, in social space, and in history.

4.3. GloSalyzation

Nevertheless, what caused the construction of such a heterotopia? Actually heterotopia may be seen as one of the consequences of globalization, and that leads us to develop a crucial point. Because globalization affects space, or at least a visible aspect of globalization may be seen in space – and affecting space involves affecting people who live in. Is globalization creating in this particular location in Senegal a harmonious melting pot? Of course not, because added to a natural form of segregation is an absence of norms (anomie): the apparent order with its material boundaries may be a controlled disorder. The idea of a space organized through a social ordering may lure us. If globalization is linked to multiplicity, multiplicity in this case involves anomie, anomie is a form of disorder, that is to say individual interest is the only way to certainty. Rousseau’s (1993: 190-196) “general will” is becoming a

forgotten concept. As Bauman (2001: 128) puts it,

Unlike marching columns, swarms are *coordinated* without being *integrated*. (...) No command is given, no call to discipline is heard. If appeals are made, they are addressed to "individual interest" and understanding.

Shields argues that there is an ambiguity about the ontological status of the city – is it real or imagined? – "The notion of "the city", *the city itself, is a representation*" (King 1996: 227). We saw that Saly has no real existence among its black Senegalese surroundings. Does Saly really exist? For King (1996: 228-9),

Representations are argued to be complex formations of material, techniques and ideologies in which social practice is indissolubly linked to social thought and imagination. (...) Of course we realize that a totally accurate representation – a perfect copy – is impossible. (...) Like a still-life or *nature morte*, representations are arrangements of life – of *nature vivante*. (...) Representations are treacherous metaphors, summarizing the complexity of the city in an elegant model.

4.4. MetaphySalycally speaking

This leads us to say that Saly is a concept, a thought hard to materialize. One can "read" Saly and make its own representation of what Saly is, but cannot *explain* it to one another, or by a pale imitation of the reality. As a result there is not one Saly, one reality, but multiple representations, since "representation" is already a multiple concept, a vague metaphor conveying various meanings (see the allegory of the cave in Plato 1974: 168-172). The reality of a place does not even exist for Shields. The place in its reality cannot be separated from the *idea* of a place. Representation is a picture which is endeavouring to approach reality, but as a picture it is only killing life and reducing a rich dimension into a poor draft sheet. As King (1996: 230) suggests,

photographic "shooting" kills not the body but the life of things, leaving only representational carcasses. Perhaps this depressing observation is too nostalgic for a mythical golden age when reality was uncontaminated by representation. A time when things were things and thoughts were thoughts and the two never mixed. Yet this time when real and imaginary were perfectly separate probably never existed. Pure reality is an analytical construct which doesn't exist as far as social theory is concerned.

However this is the price to pay for everyone who wants to *conceive* a place.

4.5. Afro-Disneyland

There is something symbolical in Saly. The front gate is supposed to remind the tourist of a theme park, a world of magic and enchantment. This bright blue sign like an arch above the road is Disney-like, and the city-centre itself seems fake (great order, too few local people, etc...). Saly is "disneyfied" (Bryman 1999). Once again a gloomy concordance with the heterotopic idea is obvious, as Foucault (1986: 26) argues:

In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications.

Therefore the economic domination of northern countries, including the former colonies, lead to a process of assimilation which is bound to happen, no matter how strong the locality is, and despite

every kind of feelings linked to “the local” sense of community, shared values, common past or respect towards the sacred.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Saly is quite a reliable illustration of Foucault’s heterotopia. However this perception of an ordered space might include, paradoxically, a globalized segregation, and as a result a cognitive disorder. The travel guide (Gloaguen 2000: 131) already carried the seeds of such an idea: “Where to go out at night? You may not find what you want between the really African nightclubs in M’bour (often low-level, careful), and the sanitized ones in Saly like “The Rolls”, for example”.

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