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Anxious Atmospheres:

Living in the Shadows of Coal

Charline Kopf

Once a traditional Lebou[1] fishing village, Bargny has evolved over the years into a growing industrial zone not far from Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Now the concentration of fine dust particles here exceeds Senegalese regulatory limits by four hundred times. Squeezed between different industries, Bargny's inhabitants anxiously face the impacts of a cement factory, coal plant, new mineral port and the opening of a steel mill. What does this industrial cohabitation entail for residents as well as for the natural and spiritual landscape?

To tease out how anxiety permeates life in Bargny, where I conducted fieldwork in 2024, I take the coal-powered plant, its dust and breakdowns as "affective infrastructure" (Bosworth 2021). I draw on Bosworth's twofold understanding of this concept, where, firstly, infrastructures generate affects such as anxiety, and secondly, in a more metaphorical sense, where affective infrastructure refers to the affects that shape social and political collective bodies including moments of defiance. In the first section, I examine the

[1] The Lebou are an ethnic group living around Dakar. They are primarily Lebou-Wolof-speaking, and are known for their strong tradition of fishing and for spiritual practices that blend Islamic beliefs with ancestral rituals.

atmosphere of anxiety produced by the coal plant and its ashes, emphasizing the sensorial materiality that creates feelings of breathlessness and sonic fear. In the second, I explore how this anxious atmosphere sparks more-than-human and spiritual constellations as a form of affective resistance to the power plant. Here, the residents have invoked the town's protective spirit, which is believed to have safeguarded them from external threats for centuries. Taken together, these dynamics make for an industrial cohabitation composed of atmospheric, infrastructural and spiritual convergences and divergences.

↑ ***The Bargny coal plant shrouded in a haze of dust.***
Photo: Charline Kopf, 2024.

Affective Infrastructure and Anticipatory Anxiety

Attending to residents' sensorial experiences helps us grasp the affects generated by the coal-powered plant, where intermittent noise and filthy air contribute to palpable stress and worry within the community. A growing body of literature examines how both human and more-than-human entities perceive and interact with infrastructures through their senses and embodied experiences (Schwenkel 2021), highlighting the discomfort of sweltering houses (Grealy and Lea 2021), the pervasive smell of toxic industries (Welcome 2021) or the mechanical noises that overshadow natural sounds (Bormpoudakis 2021). In Bargny, the power plant's alarming noises sometimes pierce the night, resonating especially loudly in the nearby neighbourhood. Residents now recognize these sounds as signals of a breakdown, though when the site first became

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

A group of children in the thick air of Bargny.
Photo: Charline Kopf, 2024.

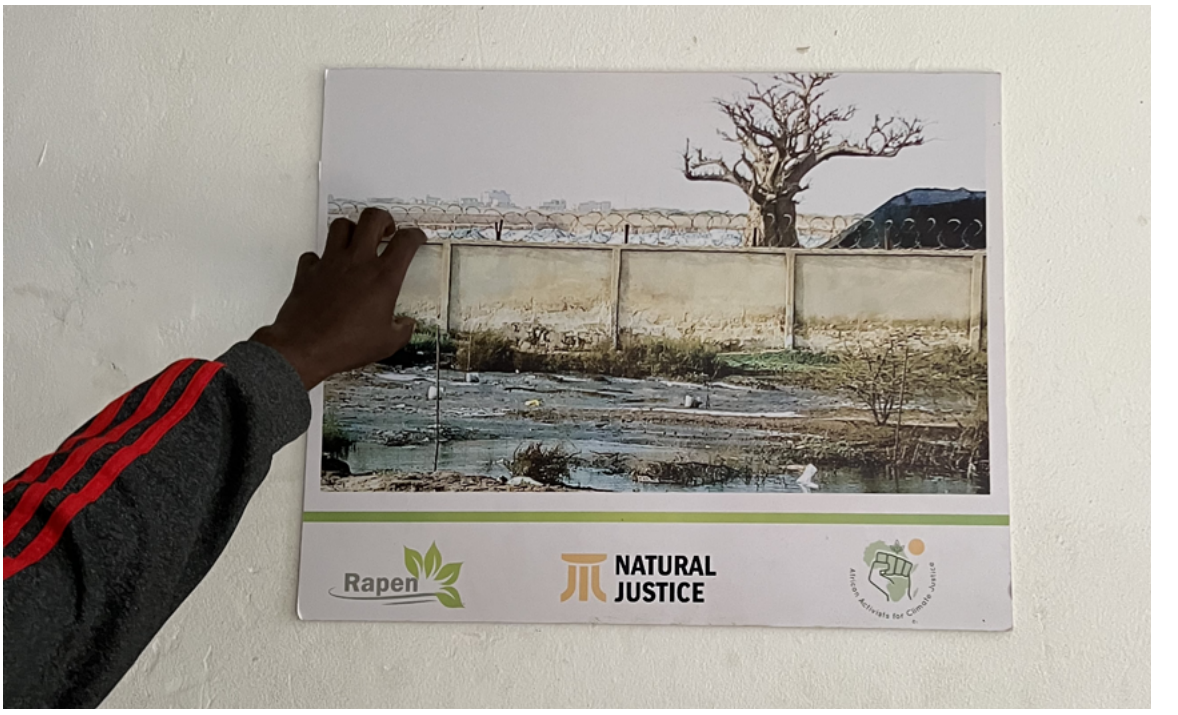
operational they were unaware of the cause. Anta[2], a community health worker in Bargny with whom I shared many lunches, vividly recalls the moment she heard such noises for the first time and saw a group of children running towards her: "We thought the world was collapsing. The children came rushing to us, shouting. It was awful. They were so frightened they cried, and weeks later they still had trouble sleeping." Even now, after years of exposure, the sudden night-time noises still interrupt sleep patterns, maintaining a low-level anxiety. This chronic disturbance points to how infrastructure embeds itself into everyday life, unsettling the body's natural rhythms and creating a form of anticipatory anxiety as residents remain on alert, waiting for the next breakdown or malfunction.

However, it is not just the noise pollution that is an issue; the air quality is also affected, blurring the boundaries between the environment, the body and infrastructure (Graeter 2020; Murphy 2008). On windy days, ash from the power plant becomes more noticeable, blending with the already dust-laden atmosphere from the nearby cement factory. Those with asthma are especially vulnerable at such times. Fatou, my sixteen-year-old neighbour, was absent from school for five days after suffering an asthma attack that caused her to faint. For people like her, the air becomes a medium of unpredictability, one that can trigger frightening symptoms. When she senses increased levels of dust, she uses her mask. Yet the inability to really foresee fluctuations in air quality creates a pervasive sense of vulnerability, where breathing – normally an unconscious act – is transformed into a site of bodily surveillance and management (Zee 2022).

These sensory assaults, from the auditory shock of the plant's breakdowns to the tactile invasion of polluted air, reveal how material infrastructures shape daily life and people's apprehensive perception of the slow ruination of their surroundings and indeed their bodies. The atmospheric cohabitation of humans, landscapes and the coal-powered plant generates a tangible anxiety – one that is anticipatory but rooted in past and ongoing sensorial disruptions. The infrastructure's presence, whether manifested through sound, air or ash, forces residents to maintain constant vigilance, staying attuned to environmental changes that could indicate danger.

Spiritual and Affective Cohabitation

Infrastructures are however not solely characterized by their "death-dealing" effects (Khalili 2021); rather, in their lethal consequences, they also foster the emergence of collaborative constellations that defy these effects. Almost every region in Senegal has a protective spirit. Environmentalist Adama explains that in Bargny theirs is called Mame N'Dogol. Its sacred site, a green patch with a water source, contrasts starkly with the grey and black of the adjacent power station. A vocal activist, Adama has protested the coal plant since its opening in 2008 and opposes plans for a new steel mill and mineral port. Beyond protests confronting pollution, he also joined a group led by a traditional Lebou priestess to invoke the spirit. Though he did not grow up believing in the Lebou spirit world, this experience changed his mind: "It's a [piece of our] heritage that we must preserve." Adama recounts how the sacred site was once surrounded by a baobab forest but has now seen almost all the trees vanish due to construction of the power plant. He felt apprehensive as the priestess made sacrifices,



Adama shows me how the sacred baobab has been imprisoned by the walls of the coal plant. Photo: Charline Kopf, 2024.

recited prayers and declared that the protector spirit would not cohabit with the power station, and was astonished by the result. "[Since then] the plant has always had issues," Adama explains as we sit in his office. "Built in 2008, it remained inactive until 2018, and nobody can explain its current breakdowns. The priestess's sacrifices have functioned so far." Here, the spirit's influence, summoned by the priestess, accounts for the sonic disruptions described earlier, ensuring the power plant remains impaired as they refuse to cohabit with it.

While industrial developments in Bargny erase the sacred landscape with the demise of the baobabs, the anticipatory anxiety around pollution also reawakens the sacred and gives rise to an affective infrastructure of defiance. Adama's words testify to a renewed interest in spiritual protection even by people who previously did not believe. The site of Mame N'Dogol provides a shared cultural resource for interpreting the threat faced by Bargny's inhabitants and for creating a common spiritual ground to resist. Here, infrastructural anxiety triggers allying constellations of human and non-human actors that collectively shape how residents act in response to environmental and health threats. These "new practical ontologies" which include divinities, nature and infrastructures (Jensen and Morita 2016: 618) blur the boundaries between material and spiritual realms, and have implications for how we think about capacities for resistance to infrastructural toxicity and pollution.

Yet, at the same time, the engineers of the power plant have also made sacrifices to the spirit by placing milk in specific locations to appease it and reverse the spell that has hindered the plant's operation. Consequently, divine protection for residents remains uncertain, as anyone can invoke the spirits for assistance and guidance. This relationship must thus be continuously negotiated through offerings, counter-offers,

and acts of care directed toward the spirits to ensure their assistance. Such interactions weave together infrastructure, the surrounding environment and atmosphere, resulting in intimate yet also precarious relationships between humans and spirits (see also Ishii 2017: 699).

Conclusion

The complex atmospheric and industrial cohabitation witnessed at Bargny reveals how intimate, local and spiritual histories shape our understanding of the Anthropocene, particularly highlighting the anxieties that accompany this era (Randle 2021). Experiences of the Anthropocene are variegated and "patchy," characterized by diverse forms of ruination, as theorized by Tsing, Mathews and Bubandt (2019). In this context, the relationship between residents and the power plant unfolds through multiple layers of interaction and disruption, from frightening noises and suffocating air that harm people's health to the invocation of spirits. Spiritual elements arise here as more-than-human acts of resistance but can be harnessed to different ends and by different actors. Together, these layers create an affective entanglement, demonstrating how infrastructure shapes not only the physical landscape but also the sensory, spiritual and emotional lives of the community.

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