

# In search of the “ideal manager” in Africa: What it means to run an “African” business

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Can African managers comply with both the requirements of Western-style rationality – which strives for the preservation/maximisation of corporate interests and profit – and African cultural traditions based more on safeguarding “brotherhood,” “kindness,” “sharing,” and “generosity,” which provide the moral basis for the sustainable social contract of community life? What common ground is there between these two polarities that would make the reasonable and tailored practice of capitalism possible? In this paper, we show how capitalism has developed and operates in Africa, as well as the contradictions that still exist today in the definition of the role of African leaders, and which remain a challenge for the managers of tomorrow.

In this paper, we will be looking at the career paths of two director generals who successively headed up the *Office National Camerounais de Radio et de Télévision* (CRTV). Both ended up being prosecuted and jailed, having been charged with “misappropriation of public funds” (Biwole, 2019). The first ran the company for 16 years from 1988 to 2004 and the second – the first’s successor – for 12 years from 2004 to 2016. They were accused of various breaches of their obligations as managers relating, in particular, to acts of financial management. However, the two individuals appeared to have managed CRTV using diametrically opposed management methods: one, by upholding African traditions (being quick to “share” with and show “generosity” to the people around him), and the other, “in a Western style” (i.e. more “selfish” and rather acting to uphold the company’s interests). This provides food for thought about the ability of African managers to follow contradictory governance principles, the first formal and covering compliance with an entire set of “best management practices”, and the other, “based on customs” which stigmatises these “best practices” as being dangerous or even deadly and destructive for social ties and community life. <sup>(1)</sup>

## Location of the survey and methodology

The premises which house the senior management of CRTV (Cameroon Radio Television) are located in the country’s capital, Yaoundé, on a site near to the Presidency of the Republic. It is here that the majority of the organisation’s management teams are based and it is the sole centre for television broadcasting. Under Cameroonian law, the company is a government-funded administrative and commercial institution. In 2022, it had a budget of 26bn CFA francs (around €40m) which had to cover most of its operating, personnel (approximately 2,400 employees), production (news and programmes) and investment expenditure. It has a network of ten regional and five urban stations which extend nationwide and beyond (thanks to satellite broadcasting). In Cameroon’s political and institutional landscape, it is seen as – and this is usually the case in other similar African countries – the figurehead for “defending the government’s interests” and those of the incumbent politicians. This was true as from its creation in 1985 at a time when Cameroon was experiencing serious economic turmoil (Aerst et al., 2000), which soon became political with sustained protests against the central government (Bayart, 1986; Courade and Sindjoun, 1999; Sindjoun, 1994). These events would, in part, broadly dictate the company’s editorial position

<sup>(1)</sup> This article was translated by the Translation Center of the French Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty

as a propaganda mouthpiece for the government. This comes as no surprise for an organisation that has always received the majority of its resources (85%) from direct government subsidies.

So, it was in this company that we conducted 26 interviews between February and June 2020 divided between the cities of Yaoundé (the headquarters: 16), Douala (the country's economic capital: 6) and Bertoua (capital of the Eastern region: 4). The interviews were semi-structured and the participants were chosen on the basis of having experienced the managerial tenure of at least one of the managers, for their entire term of office. Out of these 26 interviews, 18 related to both managers, only three to Gervais Mendo Ze alone and five to Amadou Vamoullé alone. The interviews were held in French and lasted an average of 20 minutes. From the sample, only four interviewees were women and the average age was 50. Eight of the people are now retired, four had changed jobs and therefore 14 were still working at CRTV. The current director general, who was the country's most senior and respected journalist during the time the two held the same post, was not interviewed.

### *Evu*, a crucial notion for understanding management in the Cameroonian context

The management style adopted by Gervais Mendo Ze during his 16 years at the head of CRTV cannot be understood without invoking *evu*, a concept representing a "good life" which dominates the psyche of almost all the Bantu peoples of South Cameroon (and of Central Africa), those covered by the tropical forest (where the so-called "Fang-Beti-Pahouin" group are predominant both in numbers and culturally) and which stands out due to broad cultural and spiritual similarities as highlighted by a large number of works (Balandier, 1965, 1982; Labuthe-Tolra, 1981, 1984, 1999; Ombolo, 1986; Aubame, 2002).

*Evu* grounds itself in a religious system based on a lack of distinction between human and the divine, within the divine itself, between the living and the dead, and between good and evil. Laburthe-Tolra (1965) writes: "This question of the nature of Zambe [God] is very unclear". Indeed, it is impossible to say whether it is god the supreme creator or the "essential ancestor", a "Zambe" who appears "sometimes as immanent, sometimes as terribly transcendent" (ibid., p. 23), sometimes as "God", and sometimes as the "first man in the origins of the world" (Owono, 2011). From this comes a belief in the double nature of everything, in particular human nature which is considered to combine four elements: the body, bodily essence, the soul and spiritual essence" (ibid., p. 60). So, continues Owono, man, within the traditional "fang" vision, and exceptionally several animals, possess, in addition to a body and the life force connected with the body, another force of their own. The latter, unlike the former, is not totally connected with the body and matter. It can distance itself and act alone and therefore be seen as a

separate personality. Similarly, it can also perish when the body dies. This is what Laburthe-Tolra (1977) calls "bodily essence" or witch-substance.

According to Mallart-Guimera (1975), the resulting notion of *evu*, which may adopt any symbolic content, expresses very different – or sometimes contradictory – realities. *Evu* has an "indiscriminate character": it is "neither good nor bad but possibly both at the same time" (ibid., p. 36). Bopda (2003) states that "*evu* symbolises defection or deconstruction", whilst for others it is "absolute evil". He mentions the cost, always prohibitive, to be paid by a person whose boundless appetite makes them benefit from the productive efforts of other people without giving them their fair share in return (ibid., p. 177).

Bopda's definition puts *evu* in the sphere of consumption and "enjoyment". According to him, this dark side, hidden deep inside each person, functions with the following features: "In order to be legitimate, and as a result, non-corrupting, all enjoyment should be the culmination of a productive effort, or even suffering, by the person enjoying". Legitimacy calls for the counterbalancing and projective prerequisite of ensuring a productive effort. As a result, all enjoyment can only be, sooner or later, the mirror image of known suffering in producing the object which is the source of the enjoyment. This is the meaning of the "price to pay". You cannot enjoy something for free "without paying in one way or another sooner or later".

The ambivalence of *evu* means that, by definition, it is difficult, or even impossible, to know in advance what type of *evu* an individual is carrying. "Strong and good *evu*, able to bring happiness to its possessor, and strong and evil *evu*, which gives the power to do harm" (Owono, 2011). This means that there is uncertainty, chronic insecurity, about being around humans. The same individual may be good or bad, or switch between good and bad. They can do as much harm as good.

Positive *evu* is associated with prosperous and continual material accumulation. Automatically (according to Warnier, 1993; Bernaut and Tonda, 2000), *evu* involves sharing and generosity as the person who has more than others must redistribute large portions to their acquaintances. It is irrelevant whether their wealth is their own or belongs to a third party, whether it was acquired through work or by predation, as long as it passes through hands, those hands must earmark part of it for the required social redistribution.

In light of the foregoing, an ideal "good *evu*" is the polar opposite of modern capitalism's ideal manager who is assumed to act according to the company's "selfish and rational" interests (Chatenay, 2004). These special metaphysics mean that Africans (Cameroonians in the case at hand) consider all individuals who hold or handle positions and funds in which they accumulate as being required to redistribute, "to give food", to their acquaintances, to embody the moral, spiritual and functional justification of the positive *evu* which they seem to be carrying (Godong, 2011).

Born in the forest area of Fang-Beti-Pahouin and raised with these values, Gervais Mendo Ze, the first of the managers who was covered by our study, epitomised, so to speak, “good *evu*”. This director general’s entire life was devoted to representing, on a daily basis, the positive *evu* of someone who “does good for people”, who gives them food (Godong, 2011). Food distribution symbolises sharing, solidarity and generosity: “You have to eat with others”, you have to “give food to your own”, “not be stingy”, and, most importantly “do not eat alone” as “food” is the social incarnation of the basis for pleasure and sensory satisfaction, the starting point for any relationship based on an equal footing and acknowledgment of the other’s humanity. Relations with the world and the notions of all forms of sociability are built around food. Offering food becomes pivotal at the same time as refusing it becomes a cardinal curse (*ibid.*).

So, carrying, in spite of himself, this *écriture d’âme* [cultural influence of these values], Gervais Mendo Ze was to use the entire company he managed to build and justify his positive *evu*. He was to make it “his thing” so as to pick out the resources and redistribute them. In the same country and several decades earlier, Alain Henry (1998) had already flagged up a comparable moral economy in the national electricity corporation (SONEL); he showed that, from a social viewpoint, it is important to treat others not only as if they are “friends” but also “brothers” with whom you share everything.

## The figure of the “Big Man”

Having first appeared in the works of the American anthropologist Marshall D. Sahlins (1963) on the peoples of Polynesia, the metaphorical figure of the “Big Man” has been frequently used by political science researchers who have demonstrated how important he is. To date, management researchers have not taken sufficient account of this and it has been too rarely applied to managers of African companies. As we shall see, the concept has a very close dialectical relationship with the *evu* cosmogony of the peoples of the South Cameroonian forest.

The Big Man is a key figure in the social sphere. His position provides him with access to extraordinary resources and capabilities as regards accumulation and redistribution. In the African context, a figure such as Gervais Mendo Ze would appear to almost perfectly enshrine the profile established by Sahlins, namely a central position, a reputation for generosity and the ability to redistribute with extreme benevolence.

English-language literature defines Big Man rule as “a form of autocratic rule that is highly personali[s]ed and restrained little by modern institutions” (Anthony, 2006, p. 160). Deriving from a mix of precolonial standards, postcolonial institutions, weak states, economic opportunities and social redistribution expectations, Big Man rule lays down a relationship of clientelism between the boss and their employees and the latter consider the company – especially if it is public – as an entity that should primarily provide them with resources and opportunities.

For their part, French-language authors approach the figure of the Big Man from the standpoint of patrimonialism or neopatrimonialism. These monikers which, according to Jean-François Médard (1991), represent the real root of the “paradox of the African state”, that is a state is both “strong and weak”: strong in that it is authoritarian and broadly based on arbitrary action and violence applied outside any legal framework; and weak in that it is unable, despite its ability to do harm, to achieve the actual policy targets it sets itself, in particular those in the public interest.

An arbitrary nature is in fact one of the major features of the Big Man, especially when he manages a company. He is constantly combining the company’s interests with his own personal ones and those of his “clientele”, willingly exercises his strength and arbitrary action to illegally gather resources, but mitigates this strength and arbitrary action by being “kind”, benevolent and “brotherly” with his fellows. Taking the analytical categories used by Hyden (2006), the company entrusted to the Big Man becomes a “purely personal” affair and the manager’s power becomes his private property. This culminates in pure predation as the Big Man has no compunction in using his public position as a stipend from which he removes the resources which he uses for his personal gain and which he distributes to his clientele (Médard, 1991 and 2000).

## When a manager with negative *evu* takes over from one with positive *evu*

As much as Gervais Mendo Ze was unanimously referred to as “humane”, “receptive”, “close to the people”, “a manager who listens” and “truly implicated in the teams’ daily work”, his successor Amadou Vamouké, who subsequently remained at the head of the company for 11 years, was judged for his “coldness”, “austerity”, “distance”, “lack of sensitivity” and, very often, for his “selfishness” which in the *evu* psyche is clearly that of malice as the malicious person eats alone or does not want to give food to others or allow them to eat.

A former editorialist at CRTV wrote:

“Amadou Vamouké was a fairly solitary man who was less spontaneously generous than his predecessor Gervais Mendo Ze. He was quite cold even when interacting directly with others. When you met him, he remained quite unanimated which meant, in particular, that his waiting room was always empty”.

So nobody went to see him because there was nothing to expect from it. This is confirmed by one of his former associates:

“Vamouké is a highly rational person [who is too calculating whereas a generous person should not be calculating], who shows no particular restiveness in relation to money. One of the things he discovered, namely the fact that the former director general handed out money to people without restraint, he put an end to because it was deeply shocking to him” [if he is shocked than he is not a true Big Man].

Therefore, as soon as he arrived, he began to send out strong signs, in particular by asking the board of directors to cut his salary in half. Such an action was unheard of in Cameroon. He was really focused on rationalisation which meant making life complicated for people. From the outset, he looked to transform both financial and human resources management. He wanted to dismantle these “sovereign” functions which was far from an easy task as they represented the two main redistribution channels.

So the new director general instigated a controversial strategy to upgrade management with an eye to reducing and regulating the company’s expenditure. He wanted to bolster the predictability of operational targets, clearly identify human resources management tools and introduce a general framework for responsibility and accountability. This strategy led to him phasing out almost all the methods employed by the former system such as the “special cash budget” for the director general’s private office to pay for day-to-day expenses. When talking about this “black” budget, the new director general told one of our sources:

“I don’t need it; put this money back into the company’s accounts!” [Sacrilege! Rather than redistributing – like Mendo Ze – he behaved like a selfish person who refuses to give anything to others and, above all, he decided to deprive them of food].

According to his former secretary, he considered:

“[...] that he was not there to hand out favours [food] to people and that, in any case, his expenses had to be accounted for. This meant that things were difficult, including for us. Even to have a bottle of water [threat of famine, thirst], the director general believed that the expenses had to be compliant with procedures [despised rationalism]. Therefore, overnight, there was a complete overhaul of the company’s mores and practices”.

The new director general’s own employees soon began to call him a “Japanese handbrake” which stops the car, prevents it from moving and puts an end to the normal progress of things. In other words, the person who gives nothing or, at least refuses to give left, right and centre, will come out on the side of negative *evu*. This is demonstrated by the following account:

“It wasn’t easy to go into his office and get him to agree to an expense; it wasn’t easy [pure selfishness, a malicious person]. When you came to see him for a certain reason which would incur expenses for the company, he tended to make the discussion highly technical about what should be done and always tried to find a reason to give you less money than you had asked for” [threat of going hungry].

## Adopting “Western-style” management was an unforgivable error

The new director general “considered that we had had a permissive system for far too long [under exclusive Big Man rule], which had made people lose any notion of the nature and amount of expenses to be incurred for the company”.

In an almost messianic role of righter of wrongs, Amadou Vamouké began to seek out superfluous and unnecessary expenses, “which didn’t make him any friends, far from it”. So, according to a top manager who still works for the company:

“When Vamouké arrived, all those who received money during the time of Mendo Ze lost out [therefore they were people who were now hungry, who no longer had enough to eat] and were obviously frustrated. So with Vamouké, there were two types of frustrated people: those who had been in Mendo Ze’s circle and who had lost their benefits, and those who hoped to be part of a circle to be created by the new director general, though this never happened because the director general didn’t follow through. He was therefore caught in the crossfire. People no longer ate and everyone was angry” [a company of famished people opposite a director general who ate alone].

Interviewees’ accounts align concerning another aspect of the managerial strategy that the new boss wanted to introduce:

“He tried to establish a connection between positions, the profile of the incumbents and people’s motivation, and their commitment to performing well in these positions” [attempt at rationalisation].

This led, as soon as he took up his position, to the use of calls for applications for the company’s main managerial roles, an approach that was once again unprecedented for the time and context. However, although innovative, the approach was hampered by the realities of an environment that was out of step with this type of model as explained by a member of the board of directors:

“You can only have a call for applications if a principle of general governance is that competency is key to identifying, hiring and managing human resources. But, with a culture as “clientelist” as ours [therefore, where the general rule is to give food to people, to everyone, including incompetents], not only will you be prevented from completing the process but, even if you do complete it, it will nevertheless be tainted by a strong suspicion of manipulation. This was one of Vamouké’s worst mistakes as, ultimately, the pressure on him was so fierce [to remain within the bounds of “generosity”], to maintain the former patrimonial system where positions are given and not earned, that he himself ended up being embroiled in various manipulations of positions which destroyed the whole process he was initially aiming for to improve this specific aspect within the company”.

The new manager was faced with the challenge of setting out and establishing impersonal rules for the company’s daily management. Despite the pronouncements and attempts to salvage appearances, there was ultimately considerable doubt as to the partiality of these rules and their “mean-spiritedness”, at the centre of the functions that many attribute to the company, i.e. being the venue for the fair allocation of “food”. Vamouké was therefore criticised for not having even understood how to manage such an organisation, which is closer in reality to a “ministry” [therefore, a place where you “eat” without necessarily working] than to a “real company” [where things are produced, where people are rational and where they do not necessarily “eat” any old way].

The same manager, who still works at the company, explained later in our interview:

“CRTV is first and foremost the government, its interests and its operating methods. It’s like another ministry. It bears no resemblance to a company, it’s a ministry; nobody asks you to produce results in the economic sense of the term [no need for rationalism]. Everyone keeps an eye on CRTV, on the way it operates [so, everyone expects their share of food]: the Presidency of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the Ministry for Communication and other power brokers. It’s complicated. Vamouké made the mistake of not really taking this into account [so, by not sharing], of thinking that being rational was enough to ensure that everything would be okay; he was wrong” [he did not understand and answer to the requirements of positive *evu*].

The new director general greatly underestimated the pressures that would come to bear on him, simply as a result of the position he held. The following are the words of a retired technical manager:

“When you’re director general of CRTV, you have to help people, give money to people, all the time. These are ‘total social phenomena’ which are such that you try to resist but they become binding on you to such an extent that you have no other choice but to give in”.

This analysis is not only limited to the South Cameroonian forest. It also applies to other African regions south of the Sahara where the same expectations manifest themselves in the same manner, for instance in Côte d’Ivoire, if we are to believe the experience recounted by Zadi Kessy (2008) as manager of the *Société Ivoirienne des Eaux*. He says that by positioning yourself as the person who refuses to give people food, you obviously face “reprisals” from your circle.

With mysterious *evu*, any person, even a subordinate, can do harm, either in the formal order of the visible world or by dark manoeuvres in the obscure world of “malice”, “witchcraft” and the “night”. In this parallel world, the smallest in the order of power and material accumulation are potentially the strongest, the most powerful, the most harmful and destructive, with the uncontrollable power of negative *evu*. They are therefore to be feared by the Big Man.

The figure of the Big Man and the expectation of his generosity is therefore inherent to any position of grandeur. In fact, you do not accept the position without wearing its straightjacket: Vamouké was a poor fit for the system, a man who – if truth be told – should not have been there because his way of doing things and, above all, the way in which he perceived his position as manager, was very far removed from what is generally considered normal in the country. He upset many interests [food], both inside and outside the company’s scope. This is explained by a former journalist:

“In which country can you manage a public company without looking to hire the children, friends and mistresses of those in your orbit? In which country?” [implication: the reprisals against him, with his imprisonment, were totally deserved, or at least legitimate in a system in which he failed to understand that the rule was not to manage but to give food to as many people as possible].

As another member of the board of directors recounts:

“Amadou Vamouké was a victim of his pretentiousness in wanting to rationalise things which are not, and which do not ask to be, rational. They only want to continue, not to produce any result”.

He was even more the victim of this pretentiousness as, “ultimately”, as one of his close associates who worked in his private office said, “he had no choice other than to resort to the practices which he himself had loudly denounced and for which he criticised his predecessor, Gervais Mendo Ze”.

So, at the end of the day, nobody completely escapes from the rigours of *evu*.

## Was Amadou Vamouké a “wizard”?

As we have just seen with Amadou Vamouké, unlike positive *evu* which is related to infinite generosity (Gervais Mendo Ze), negative *evu* is antisocial and “malicious”. This *evu* is carried by a “man of the night”, a “wizard” who possesses – by a mysterious or even mystic higher force – unlimited and indiscriminate capacity to harm.

This wizard “eats people” in the night using killing methods that fall outside the scope of mere mortals. This malicious and merciless *evu*, in that it attacks both the people in its orbit and those it does not know indifferently, is individualist by its very nature as its isolation and solitude are the very sign of its desire to destroy others.

Neutral people, who do not carry *evu*, are laypersons who do not have access to knowledge of magic and practices of the same dimension and, who, accordingly, are exposed to the manoeuvring and manipulation of possessors of *evu*. These people may be refused food or, worse still, be “eaten” themselves. Mallart-Guimera explains: “according to popular beliefs, non-possessors of *evu* are among the favourite victims of possessors of asocial *evu*, which pursues them relentlessly and in such a way that they cannot notice the bullying of which they are victim nor recognise the perpetrators” (p. 52).

In many sub-Saharan African countries, there has been a significant resurgence in beliefs based on the phenomenon of “witchcraft” (Chabal and Daloz, 1998). The phenomenon has widely spread to relations in the workplace. According to Peter Geschiere (1995 and 2000), it is not at all surprising that the minds of Africans, who are now nevertheless part of liberal globalisation, remain firmly anchored in their traditions. This author states that, broadly speaking, the discourse surrounding witchcraft provides both rich and poor with a preferred dialect for attempting to interpret modern changes. These are seen as both enigmatic and fascinating because they open up new horizons, but also as disappointing because very few people really have access to these new opportunities. “The conceptual link between ‘witchcraft’ and ‘modernity’ is being covered by academic studies due to the urgent need to better understand why this relationship is so persuasive for

the population. Having a better understanding of the impact of the tendency to explain modern changes – and the resulting inequalities – by occult forces therefore becomes a major issue” (2000, p. 19).

## A look back at Gervais Mendo Ze's positive *evu* and his generosity

Gervais Mendo Ze enshrined, almost to the extreme, the figure and expectations built up around the African manager as a person who, more than others, must be in a position “to help”.

“He was a deeply generous person who could hand out money – and a lot of it – for no particular reason. Every morning people lined up in front of his gate to explain various problems to him which he settled there and then” (Former company executive).

“He was someone who could give a substantial amount to someone that he didn't know at all; he had the habit of giving money. There are many stories about him leaving 500 French franc tips in restaurants when he visited Paris at the time! He really couldn't help himself” (Former communications manager with the company).

“Gervais Mendo Ze is a person who built his managerial position as if he was the head of a family [who provides food for the others], someone who, as a result, was very generous. He was constantly moved by certain things” (Cameroonian journalist).

“He always carried bundles of cash everywhere he went and he handed out money left, right and centre” (A former associate).

This behaviour can be classified as “emotional management” based on feelings. It implies that he really wanted to do good for people and not necessarily for the company – in this case, the company must be used for the director general's propensity to help people. He considered himself to be something of an emissary, a messiah who had come to accomplish a special task to relieve humanity of its suffering.

The issue is clearly that he could not automatically come up with the unlimited resources required by the position of the Big Man without taking them from the company he managed to the detriment of the latter. A close observer of this era explains:

“He had transformed CRTV into a sort of counter from where he really did whatever he wanted which was, incidentally, seen as a good thing at the time”.

Below is an anecdote in this respect, as told by a neighbour:

“I remember one day when I met by chance in the lift one of my colleagues, who was a sales representative with one of the capital's urban channels. She was carrying the week's advertising revenue in cash and told me that she was first taking it to the director general! Imagine that, the bank was elsewhere and normally she should have gone directly to the bank to pay the cash in!”

According to an executive, this incident was part of a pattern:

“At the time, there was a lot of money in the director general's office, a lot of cash” [cash is a key means for the manager to carry out their regular social work].

And there are many stories to substantiate this legend:

“One day, he called me into his office for a work session and, as an aside, I told him that my grandmother had died. Then, without missing a beat, he leaned back in his chair whilst I was talking to him, put his hand in his pocket, discreetly counted out a few banknotes and gave them to me”.

“In the company, people were always on the lookout for him in the corridors. Everyone knew that he couldn't go anywhere without leaving money. So people were always following him wherever he went. And when he came across four or five people in a corner, it was certain that he would give them a few banknotes”.

As a result, obviously, as explains an employee who still works for CRTV, the “Mendo Ze style” went against the precautions required for sound management:

“When something had to be done, he took the money within his reach, and did what he had to do with no regard for procedures”.

This is why, for instance:

“He gave regular bonuses for reasons that he alone identified without complying with the organisation's rules [...] He identified himself so closely with his position that he struggled to separate what belonged to the company from what didn't”.

## A manager eaten up by affection and devoured by his court

The Big Man's generosity extended to hiring and human resources management.

“He very regularly, or almost systematically, carried out fanciful ‘family’ recruitment; not family in the sense of his own family but in respect of the closeness that certain people could invoke in relation to him. He hired a large number of children and relatives of his friends, people who sang in his choir, who attended his church, a multitude of people who were his friends and acquaintances, and who he wanted to help by really presenting himself as the Son of the Virgin Mary. He was irrational and he hated reason and rationalism”.

“People were appointed to management positions with no rhyme or reason, mainly on the basis of the friendship, closeness and affection shown to the director general. [...] Mendo Ze was a man who liked to be surrounded, flattered and loved. To exist alongside him and reap the benefits, you had to constantly celebrate him, praise him. He wanted to have everyone but obviously this was impossible. He therefore contented himself with a group of associates whose lives he controlled. This was how it was. He needed to see them when he arrived at work, in the evening for dinner in his home, at the weekend in the village and, for the luckiest, on assignments abroad. Together they made up a community; the cleverest benefited from this whilst the others were happy with the small amount of transient glory this gave them. Of course, this was all funded by the company's resources which he considered, to some extent rightly, to be his own”.

This led to many absurd situations:

“He had real trouble with prioritising. For him, it wasn't necessarily the company's actual needs that counted but the quality of his relationships with the people concerned by these issues. So, if two managers were causing problems for him, he would first deal with those

caused by the person he felt the closest to, without any consideration for the nature or seriousness of the problems that actually needed to be settled. As a result, there were sometimes absurd decisions: there were two of us in the same office and we both needed chairs but he bought one for one person but not for the other. [...] There was no logic to his management style and this created a lot of frustration. [...] Broadly speaking, he handled everything according to his personal feelings and it was on this sole basis that he allotted the company's resources. This meant that the production expenses for television programmes were very poorly allocated. It wasn't that he didn't know how much it cost to produce real programmes but, if things were not done for his own benefit and glory, then he wasn't interested. Basically, Mendo Ze used national television to serve Biya [the President of the Republic] and to serve himself" (Former news manager).

Consequently:

"CRTV soon found itself with more than 2,000 employees, half of whom served no purpose".

"This was a heavy burden for his successor because, when you take over from such a manager, what should you do? Do you go so far as to sack all these people to bring the company back into line with the risk of creating a serious social, or even political, crisis? How can we talk about performance levels in these circumstances?"

The situation was even more difficult to handle as the newly appointed director general also hired people he knew, to assemble his own court. This was not necessarily because he wanted to but because the social pressure to do so was strong and his own friends and relatives also expected favours from him. This results in an endless race as the whole country, the entire system, is like this.

## Agency theory and its application to Africa

The appointment of the manager of a public company in Cameroon – and elsewhere in Africa – is by means of an unequivocal decision from the President of the Republic using "discretionary power" (Chauvet, 2009). In most cases, this appointment is seen as a "gift" from the holder of the supreme power to reward – and, therefore, to "give food" to – their friends and relatives under patrimonial arrangements flagged up by Médard (1986). This means that, as they have not shown any particular merit or specific skills to take up this privileged position, in order to deserve this "reward", the manager of a public company or organisation is not really expected to "work" and obtain results but rather to redistribute this "food" that they themselves may have gathered, more or less unduly. This is part of "community solidarity": the perpetuation of this expectation is ultimately greater than it may initially appear. In Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and even Mozambique, this has been widely highlighted by previous works. In a note to the reader on the work of Marcel Zadi Kessy which was published in 1998, Alain Henry (1999) already commented on this persistent aspect, by quoting the author who claims that a person who refuses to abide by these rules is "put in the prisoner's dock by their fellows and runs the

risk of marginalisation and exclusion, or even reprisals [...] that, usually, make them fall into line" (Zadi Kessy, p. 19).

In the case at hand, the director general of CRTV is therefore the representative, the agent of the country's highest authority, as well as being the agent for the population of "brothers" and "friends" who consider themselves to be more or less hired due to him holding this position.

In the first definition of an agency relationship that he puts forward, S. A. Ross (1973) states that: "We will say that an agency relationship has arisen between two (or more) parties when one, designated as the agent, acts for, on behalf of, or as representative for the other, designated the principal, in a particular domain of decision problems". This means that the director general of a public company in Cameroon is both an agent in their relations with the President of the Republic whose roadmap they implement as well as being an agent for the social group to which they are connected. This is why, for instance, they have no choice but to continue with the expansive human resources policy, consisting of never-ending hiring, even if everything points to a different approach being required. So, Amadou Vamouké was criticised for wanting to roll out a hiring system based on skills and calls for applications that he could not stick to in any case as numerous stakeholders underline the fact that "the pressure was too great".

To Alain Henry who wondered: "*Peut-on redresser une entreprise africaine en respectant la parole des ancêtres ?*" (1988), we would reply in the negative based on our case study of Vamouké: an African company cannot be reorganised without respecting the words of the forefathers. In spite of his strong assertion that "Africa is failing because of its management", Bourgoin (1984) is ultimately less inflammatory in his recommendations. In his opinion, despite the destabilising nature of certain of its cultural traits which are the most inconsistent with capitalism and the introduction of "best management practices", heritage, the cultural context, should nevertheless be taken into account rather than denied or ignored. In addition, far from renouncing their identities, African executives should, on the contrary, draw on them bearing in mind that no recipe or model can be displaced from one country to the other for the simple reason that people, even if they resemble each other, are different. Hernandez (2022) concurs with this and goes so far as to designate this 21<sup>st</sup> century as potentially Africa's century and, therefore, that there will be a dramatic transformation of its capitalism and management practices.

Gervais Mendo Ze had mapped out a route that Vamouké wanted to get off, unfortunately for him. Not only because his reforms and "modern management" were neither understood nor accepted by his teams and the rest of the company, but also because he himself became embroiled in the practices which characterised the "old era" from which he claimed to be freeing the company.

The “words of the forefathers”, channelled by this *evu*, therefore become a solid underlying structure which gives birth, meaning and consistency to everything. These are “timeless” words, as emphasised by Henry (*ibid.*, p. 89), and which, accordingly, are passed down through the generations. Among other reasons for which it is important to take account of what Iribarne (1998) calls the “framework of meaning”, is this system of values which, according to Hofstede (1994, p. 24), makes individuals prefer “certain states of affairs over others”. Values, he continues, define good vs evil, clean vs dirty, beautiful vs ugly, natural vs unnatural, normal vs abnormal, logical vs paradoxical and rational vs irrational. This is a system of representations that identifies Gervais Mendo Ze as the preferential figure of African management who allows for a more harmonious, but much more paradoxical, link between the capitalistic entity and the African company.

One of the non-negligible limits of this paper is that it is striving to establish a general rule for “African” management or for “African companies” based not only on a specific case, but on a public company. In the majority of sub-Saharan African countries, in particular French-speaking ones, the dominant features found at CRTV are likely to manifest themselves – based on the same physiognomy – as mentioned, notably, in Henry’s prior works on the subject. Nevertheless, it is obvious that not all companies – including those that are state-owned – are managed in this way. Most Western companies with operations on the continent attempt, insofar as possible, to abide by the universally accepted principles of good corporate governance.

As established by a large number of works (especially Godong, 2011 on the Americans of AES having taken over the business of the former *Société nationale d’électricité du Cameroun* and the French Bolloré Group controlling the country’s railways), there is a bitter struggle to reach an acceptable balance between the Western/rational side of management and its “African” side which is primarily focused on the “affection economy”. Even with strategies in which immense effort is made to lay down new governance rules, resistance to them remains high.

The two very different figures of Gervais Mendo Ze and Amadou Vamouké demonstrate the difficult pursuit by Africans, African companies and Africa-based foreign firms to come up with an ideal of what a “good manager” or “good management” should be. When we questioned them, both managers and experts replied that the right balance is “between the two styles”.

“I think we need a combination of both; you can’t be decisive in this respect and say that such and such a method should be used. You cannot be totally in a ‘village chief’ mindset nor totally in a rational frame of mind. It’s not easy in the context of CRTV. There are times when the company got away with it because, thanks to informal management methods, Mendo Ze opened a hidden door or window when the main door had been closed. If things blocked in one place, he went the other way. It’s the result that counts. With Vamouké’s rational method, if you get closed in in one place, you will stay there and say that ‘this has been laid down by law’. That’s no good because, again, it’s the result that counts. That’s why I say that you need

a combination of both by from time to time stepping down from your pedestal of straight-laced manager and getting your hands dirty. Because, and it has to be said, things work a bit like that in this country” (Incumbent senior executive).

Similarly, a member of the board of directors states: “There is no ideal profile for managing this company. As things stand, we cannot do things rationally at CRTV. Because, not only are there no standards, neither governmental nor in-house, concerning what ‘sound management’ that complies with universal principles should be – and therefore, relating to any ‘performance levels’ – there is, in this company, a tradition of clientelism that is so firmly anchored that it is impossible to dismantle it in a short period of time and get results. It is not the individuals who are at fault, otherwise Vamouké would have been the best possible manager. But we need to reassess CRTV’s social utility and introduce more objective assessment criteria such as the hourly cost of a broadcast programme. If we do that then we are starting to address the problem. In that case, you can take any company and have it managed by anyone. So, the managers and the resources do exist. But the problem lies in all the rest that needs managing. These organisations see themselves as ministries and their managers mimic to the point of travesty the members of the government (they have a private office, bodyguards and concealed finances, etc.). There is scope for reforming public entities but, every day, we wonder how to do it, where to start and, ultimately, nobody ever does anything”.

At Cameroon’s finance ministry, there is a unit called the “Technical commission for monitoring and overhauling public companies” (CTR) which is tasked with overseeing the overall development of these entities with regard to performance levels, governance and finances. Its recommendations are only issued *ex post* and often too late. In addition, the Cameroonian authorities do not appear to necessarily act on them to promote or sanction managers. As seen in the case of CRTV, the selection and appointment of managers, and even their roadmap and the appraisal of their work, is still an unreadable black box.

In early 2020, a scandal at the African Development Bank again led to the indictment of “clientelist” management. The head of the bank, the Nigerian Akinwumi Adesina was ultimately cleared after an internal inquiry, but this fresh scandal demonstrates the extent to which this issue is sensitive, including in such an institution which is renowned for the supposed soundness of its board of directors and its professionalism, but in which the employees felt obliged to report a large number of suspicious practices by their “boss”: crossover between the bank’s interests and his private ones, preferential treatment for “Nigerian brothers”, suspicions of “corruption”.<sup>(2)</sup>

<sup>(2)</sup> Joan Tilouine and Yassin Ciyow: “A la Banque africaine de développement, le président Adesina contesté par des employés”, *Le Monde*, published on 5 April 2020.



## CONCLUSION

Despite the never completed “transplant” of the state (Bayart, 1996) and its continued inability to rationalise peripheral companies, the times are changing, both under the pressure of capitalist rules imposed by globalisation and the emergence, at local level, of an increasing demand for better managers who are able to more effectively meet targets for the production of both public and market goods.

“Increasingly, at local level, managers like Mendo Ze are being challenged and regularly arrested and jailed, as managers who are stricter, more rigorous and who perform better are receiving much more acclaim” (A Cameroonian journalist).

Cameroonian society is at this indecisive tipping point, lurching between the persistent pessimism felt by many – like Kamdem (2000), that “the modern company is a reality far removed from traditional African cultures” – and the optimism of a few fanatics who consider, on the contrary, that the continent certainly has future possibilities offered by international capitalism. It is nevertheless both exaggerated and presumptuous to predict the imminent disappearance of the Big Man who still has a bright future – especially in public companies – despite international recommendations for “good governance” which many hope will be one of the measures, if not the main measure, which tomorrow’s Africa can implement to find its way in the competitive environment of nations.

As the fault lines erode between protectionism and openness, between local approaches to conducting business and integration in the global system of trade in goods, services and capital, overly-specific strategies and representations tend to be replaced by more universalist methods. In *Les cinq capitalismes*, Bruno Amable posits that there are “grammars” and therefore different business practices depending on geographical and cultural areas. However, in the list he puts forward, there is no mention of Africa and Africans, who are implicitly considered as hardly being part of history and the dominant dynamics. It is down to the women and men who manage the continent’s companies to come up with – as flows of foreign direct investment increase – a way of correlating the socio-anthropological expectations of local populations with the longstanding rules that have led to material and cultural prosperity in other parts of the world.

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