

Rowing against the Tide of Civil Service Negotiations in Cameroon

Pointinini's Approach to Traffic Management

Idrissou Mounpe Chare

Institut de recherches en sciences sociales, University of Liege, Belgium
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Sciences for Development, University of Maroua, Cameroon
moupidriss@yahoo.fr

Abstract

Very few studies have focused on “reformers or innovators from within” in public services in Africa. To contribute to this debate, this article shows that pockets of integrity, probity and exemplarity do exist. It proposes a case study of innovation from within in the field of road safety, favoring a socio-anthropological approach and highlighting a citizen who can be described as a “street-level bureaucrat”, i.e. in direct contact with users. This is Pointinini, a police officer who, through his singularity in road traffic management in Yaoundé, opposes “the privatization of public services”, thus individually nurturing the image of his profession and personally challenging the image of a totally corrupt police force.

Keywords

Haggling, public services, road traffic, Pointinini, corruption




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Introduction

Public Services Criticized...;

Numerous texts have empirically analyzed the dysfunctions of public services in terms of privatization (Plane, 1996), the link between state and corruption (Blundo & Olivier de Sardan, 2007; Bayart, 2006, 1985), unfinished efforts in the fight against corruption (Mgba Ndjie, 2018), clientelism (Médard, 2007) or neo-patrimonialism (Awono, 2012). Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2007), for example, indicate that development and humanitarian rents lead to the spread of corruption and prevent the development of internal initiatives within African administrations and public services.

Cameroon is no exception. Whether “semi-authoritarian” (Ottaway, 2003), “clientelist” (Médard, 2007), “patrimonialist” (Médard, 1990) or even “neo-patrimonialist” (Awono, 2012; Médard, 1998), there is no shortage of adjectives to describe Yaoundé’s political system. For some observers, the ills from which the State of Cameroon suffers, like other sub-Saharan countries, are linked to its corrupt governance¹ (Bayart, 2006, 1985; Ela, 1998). Despite an institutional framework² to fight against corruption, it remains a scourge on the economy and hinders Cameroon’s development. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for 2021, Cameroon’s ranking has risen by two points since 2020, from 146th to 144th in the world. Compared to 1998-1999, when Cameroon topped the list of the world’s most corrupt countries, it may be illusory to think that corruption has declined. But the country is still one of the most corrupt in the world.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission (Conac) was set up by presidential decree no. 2006/088 of March 11, 2006 to fight against this practice, which is plaguing the state structures under construction (Belomo Essono, 2007). Each year, this body publishes a ranking of the most corrupt administrations in Cameroon. In the Conac’s 2020 annual report, the road transport sector is the most corrupt, with a percentage of denunciations of acts of corruption of 17.10%. It is followed by land affairs (14.60%), law enforcement (13.60%), finance (12.60%), justice (11.30%) and so on. The State suffered an overall financial loss of 17.611 billion CFA francs due to corruption and related offences (Conac, 2021). The forces of law and order always figure prominently, as officers of this administration are heavily involved in acts of corruption in road transportation. This is hardly surprising since:

The confusion of public and private is in fact the common denominator for a whole range of practices characteristic of the Cameroonian state and its operating logic, namely corruption, whether purely economic or linked to a social exchange, or clientelism, patronage, cronyism, nepotism, tribalism or prebendalism. (Awono, 2012, p. 44)

The results of a study coordinated by Titi Nwel and published by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation already showed that “corruption in the forces of law and order and in the army” starts as soon as you enter training school (Titi Nwel, 1999, p. 53). Today, corruption has become so complex that Ebélé Onana (2020) speaks of its mutualization, which refers to the networks (vertical and horizontal) of corruption formed by the corrupt and the corruptors. Ebélé Onana refers to certain mixed teams involving police and gendarmes to show how these spaces for the mutualization of corruption function. According to him:

These networks are made up of alliances forged by agents from the same department, or who share a common workspace, with a view to sharing profits. This is what can be observed in mixed police-gendarmerie-customs controls-agents from the Ministry of Transport-agents from the Ministry of Forests and Fauna (Ebélé Onana, 2020, p. 68).

1 Corruption is defined by article 134 of the Cameroon Penal Code and involves the solicitation and acceptance by a public or private agent of various advantages and favors in return for a service. It also includes the act of offering advantages of any kind with a view to obtaining a service or a good, as well as other related offences contributing to illicit enrichment.

2 National Anti-Corruption Commission (Conac), Superior State Audit (Consupe), Special Criminal Court (TCS), National Financial Investigation Agency (Anif), Audit Chamber and ordinary courts.

On the part of the authorities, police corruption is even sometimes acknowledged and deplored, as illustrated by this recent radio message from the General Commissioner for National Security (DGSN)³:

Following multiple complaints from users for police harassment, acts of denunciation of corruption on the public highway by the National Anti-Corruption Commission (Conac), I am honored to request that you, firstly, remind the various mixed stations of the instructions contained in message carried/fax No. 291/DGSN/CAB/SG/IG/DSCS/UC/SL/BEB dated June 19, 2023 formally prohibiting the withdrawal of identity documents, even expired ones, from users during controls; secondly, take all necessary measures to effectively combat corruption and various police harassment on the public highway, and report back to me on your diligence⁴.

This message underlines the importance of the facts indexed. It comes at a time when users are being threatened and extorted for not having a valid national identity card (CNI). Today, it is difficult to obtain one. In fact, the CNI, which is supposed to be issued within three months, is sometimes only obtained after two years. All the applicant has in his or her possession is the issuance receipt, which is supposed to be extended only once, for a total valid period of six months. However, during police or gendarmerie checks, users are obliged to pay if they do not have a CNI or receipt that is still valid. Aware of this unfair harassment, in June 2023 the DGSN first banned the questioning of citizens for this reason. However, this ban failed to materialize, as the standard practice persisted, and the DGSN is back at it again with this new message dated March 4, 2024.

In Cameroon, there is an entire popular semiology associated with corruption. In Cameroonian jargon, for example, “mbéré, gnièh” or “mange mil...” refers to a man in uniform, and more specifically to a policeman or gendarme. “Tchoco”, “mouiller la barbe”, “la bière”, “donner la bière” or “parler bien” are expressions that designate “giving cash”. This semiology contributes to the trivialization of corruption, now observed or experienced as an ordinary practice. Since the 1980s, it has been known that you cannot get anything done in Cameroon’s administration without “shoes” and “umbrellas”, to use the expression coined by popular humorist Dave K. Moctoi in his famous show, *L’homme bien de là-bas*.

Exemplary Cases that Stand Out but are Poorly Documented

Nevertheless, there are “reformers [or] innovators from within” in public services in Cameroon, as in sub-Saharan Africa. Very little work has been carried out on these often low-profile players. Ndongo and Klein describe the state of knowledge on social innovations in sub-Saharan Africa, for whom “research on this theme is still lying fallow” (2020, p. 57). In other contexts, work on innovations in public services has been summarized by Droege et al. (2009) and Gallouj and Djellal (2010). Theoretical or conceptual work has been carried out by authors such as Desmarchelier et al. (2020), Denis and Touati (2013), Djellal and Gallouj (2012, 2011), Becheikh et al. (2009), Aschhoff and Sofka (2009). Djellal and Gallouj, for example, while pointing out the weaknesses of the literature on this issue, set out to “examine how the main works carried out over two decades of research on innovation in services explicitly take into account (or can be extrapolated to take into account) innovation in public services”. They revisit the “four theoretical perspectives (assimilation, demarcation, inversion and integration)” on which “the field of ‘service innovation studies’ was established” (2012, p. 99). These works are characterized by their theoretical anchorage and economic perspectives. Among the few works devoted to innovation in public services in Africa, the emphasis is often placed, on the one hand, on innovations from outside and their disconnections or inconsistencies with local realities (Olivier de Sardan, 2022, 2021, 2015, 2014) or their extraversion (Ndongo & Klein, 2020); and, on the other hand, on sectors such as education or health (Olivier de Sardan et al., 2017 ; Olivier de Sardan & Ridde, 2014 ; Ridde, 2010 ; Bradol & Le Pape, 2009 ; Walker & Gilson, 2004).

³ He is Cameroon’s most senior police officer, equivalent to the Minister of Internal Affairs elsewhere.

⁴ Radio message no 416/DGSN/CAB/SG/IG/DSCS/UC/SL from the DGSN, dated March 4, 2024, intended for operational commanders of the Central Command of Mobile Intervention Groups (CCGMI) and regional delegates of the National Security.

This article proposes to rethink the way in which public services are viewed in Africa, moving away from analyses of their burdens or dysfunctions based on corruption, privatization or commodification. It also distances itself from purely theoretical and conceptual analyses by proposing an empirical case study of innovation from within in public and road safety, favouring a socio-anthropological approach and highlighting a citizen who can be described as a “street-level bureaucrat”, i.e. in direct contact with users (Lipsky, 1980). It is in line with the perspective promoted by Olivier de Sardan, who, in an article published in the *Global Africa* issue, calls for a renewal of the strategy of “relying on one’s own strengths” in the face of aid dependency, and for the promotion of contextual experts (Olivier de Sardan, 2022). Acknowledging that the analysis of “reformers from within” is still an undeveloped field, he points out that “there are exceptions among state agents, and here and there we sometimes come across reformers from within, who know the local contexts and want to change them realistically” (2022, pp. 97-98).

Pointinini’s Empirical Case

The case study we propose for Cameroon concerns the police, considered one of the most corrupt administrations, accused of haggling and racketeering. However, it would be unfair and hasty to assume that all police officers are equally corrupt. Some agents stand out for a certain integrity, exemplarity and probity in the course of their work. These are not “top-down” innovations, but innovations from the bottom up. This is the case of Pointinini, currently a police officer, who stands out for his positive practices in road traffic management in Yaoundé.⁵

For some years now, this police officer has been in charge of the team in charge of road traffic at the Coron crossroads⁶ in Yaoundé. Pointinini is known for his rigor, and makes his mark with his charisma and moral integrity, recognized by users. His behavior seems more educational, sensitizing and moralizing than repressive or corrupting. When a motorist is in breach of the law, he speaks to him with authority to draw his attention to his misbehavior. Very often, he demands that the offending driver return to the back of the prescribed line. But he never intimidates them into releasing them in exchange for “money”. He prefers to get them to acknowledge their act of incivility or deviation, so as to avoid them in future. Anyone who tries to bribe him (a common practice when dealing with the police) makes life difficult for himself. Pointinini will get irritated and the case will take another turn for attempted bribery. But, since “the reign of impunity” no longer facilitates anything, and “the context imposes coping strategies [...], you have to be atypical to live differently” (Ela, 1998, p. 277). In this context, where the norm has become the deviation, and the deviation the norm, as Hubert Mono Ndjana⁷ so aptly puts it, Pointinini’s behavior raises questions. How can his practice be considered an internal innovation? What are the driving forces behind this incorruptible behavior in an environment where corruption seems to be the rule? Is this an individual standard of practice, or a return to the orthodoxy of police ethics?

Pointinini’s method for road traffic management in Yaoundé shows that, even in a discredited public service, islands of integrity, probity and exemplarity exist. A detailed field survey is needed to identify and document them, make them more visible, and discuss their potential for replication. The aim here is to make this innovative practice more intelligible. From this case study, we want to show that beyond the technical or technological innovations often imported as “traveling models” (Olivier de Sardan, 2021; Olivier de Sardan & Vari-Lavoisier, 2022), “social innovations” (Ela, 1998) can spring from below or from outsiders.

5 This case is not unique. Colleagues at the Kinshasa School of Criminology have reported two similar cases in the city.

6 This crossroads remains one of the most congested in the city, on the vital axis linking Nsimalen international airport to downtown Yaoundé. Indiscipline, cunning, aggressiveness, resourcefulness and a “free pass” generally characterize the behavior of motorists at peak traffic times.

7 Famous Cameroonian philosopher, author of this formula about governance: “Our society is characterized by having discarded the norm and having normalized the deviation.” Interview given to Le Jour newspaper in March 2013.

Methodological Considerations

Methodologically, this contribution favors a qualitative approach based on a corpus of 17 free interviews. They were conducted with road users, Pointinini's colleagues (hierarchy and collaborators), and other people carrying out their daily activities around the Coron crossroads, his workstation area. We interviewed 06 motorists, 02 superiors, 03 colleagues, 02 other police officers in charge of traffic at other locations in the city of Yaoundé, and 03 shopkeepers and one street vendor operating around the Coron crossroads. The shopkeepers interviewed had been working there for at least ten years, and those who had been there long before Pointinini's appointment were given preference. These free interviews were supplemented by several repeated interviews with Pointinini himself, as well as a corpus of press releases and direct observations.⁸ The interviews were conducted between June 2022 and September 2023, while observation took place discontinuously between February 2022 and November 2023. The material collected during the interviews was processed and then subjected to content analysis to arrive at the results presented here.

The Pointinini Method of Road Traffic Management in Cameroon: Between Conflict and Silent Revolution

To better present the Pointinini method, we need to review the innovator's career, and describe his practice in detail.

Pointinini's Background

According to corroborating sources, in his music video entitled *La chaussure qui parle* (The Talking Shoe), Ivorian artist Abou Nidal promoted a shoe called "Pointinini". This shoe was characterized by its pointed, somewhat raised toe, or by its material, sometimes made of crocodile skin. In Cameroon, this expression has become widespread and is used to describe any pointed or upright men's shoe. The name was attributed by the public to a Cameroonian police officer in charge of road traffic in Yaoundé. It is hard to say who coined it, but it is certain that this police officer is mostly known to all by this nickname. If you look closely, he is named after his shoes, as he wears pointy, well-shined shoes on a daily basis. Who is Pointinini?

Pointinini, whose real first name is Fabrice, is a young Cameroonian born of a teacher father and a housewife mother. Now a 2nd-grade police officer, but hired in October 2002 as a 1st-grade police inspector, he joined the force through a direct competitive examination at BEPC (brevet d'études du premier cycle) level, the only civil service examination he has taken. Within the police force, he works for the public security directorate. On leaving the training school, he worked "first at the Nkoldongo police station,⁹ then at the Regional Grouping of Public Roads and Traffic of the Centre", where he currently works. He has been with this regional group since 2006, and has been in charge of traffic at the Coron crossroads for seventeen years. He holds the Force Publique medal. Physically, he is around 1.80 m tall. Always with a tight, serious expression on his face, his authority commands the respect of all road users.

A Commitment to Contradiction in a Silent Revolution?

Three key words define Pointinini on the public highway: "respect, rigor, seriousness". To succeed in his mission as a police officer, he has made it his duty to respect all users. His rigor imposes a certain objectivity in his interactions with users of the public highway, refusing to show favoritism. In return, his seriousness demands respect from all. With this attitude, he accomplishes his mission on the public highway, a real battlefield.

⁸ To better document Pointinini's practice, the production of a twenty-minute film is envisioned, if substantial funding can be found. Indeed, this was a strong recommendation from peers following the presentation of this innovation at the colloquium organized by LASDEL in March 2023.

⁹ Interview with Pointinini on March 24, 2023.

Three essential practices, described below, make up Pointinini's method. They are based on his knowledge of the context in which he operates.

Inflicting a deliberate loss of time on the unruly user

"The way I punish an unruly user or offender on the public highway is by wasting time, time-wasting".¹⁰ So, when a user violates the prescription to follow the authorized alignment, Pointinini can make him or her wait in one of two ways. Either he stands in front of the vehicle, preventing it from moving forward until he decides to release them. Or, in rare cases, he takes the vehicle's file or the driver's personal belongings. He will return them only when he considers that the user has learned from his incivism. If he does take the vehicle's file or the driver's personal belongings, the latter is obliged to pull over while Pointinini quietly continues his work. In the middle of the road, the driver cannot approach him, and if he does, Pointinini tells him to wait in his car. Only after wasting the driver's time will he hand over the parts. He claims that he has "already thrown a motorist's vehicle file into a Hysacam truck,¹¹ but only once. The driver had to pick up his file there".¹²

Demotion to the back of the line

The deviating motorist may be demoted to the tail of the prescribed rank by the police officer in charge of traffic. Generally, Pointinini reverses the offending motorist and accompanies him to the back of the authorized lane. To carry out these maneuvers, he places himself in front of the vehicle while demanding, with authoritative signs and words, that he back up to the end of the queue.

Self-prohibition of haggling or influence peddling

Pointinini distinguishes himself by refusing to take bribes: "Motorists frequently try to bribe me, but I never give in".¹³ By setting himself apart from the usual practices of his colleagues, he has set himself a course of action to raise awareness, educate and moralize road users.

Through his professional conduct, Pointinini is committed to challenging the trivialization of corrupt behavior. His practices place him at the heart of the "invention of the everyday" (De Certeau, 1990), in his reappropriation of the use of the public highway. His attitudes at work require drivers to make a civic effort to comply with the Highway Code when they are within his jurisdiction. Through his visible incorruptible behavior, he opposes "the privatization of public services" (Plane, 1996), individually nurturing the image of his profession. In his own way, he is initiating a silent revolution that can be perceived with greater attention, since such localized practices can go unnoticed or be perceived as news items or staged events.

Pointinini's Action Repertoire and Motivations

Pointinini's motivations and the driving forces behind his actions provide a clearer picture of the uniqueness of his practice.

Sources of Pointinini's chosen repertoire of actions

To better understand the driving forces behind this type of behavior in the Cameroonian environment, we need to place it within "singular paths" that foster the fulfillment of "personal identity" (Bajoit, 2019). There are three main ways of examining the practice that makes Pointinini one of the innovators from within: socialization, vocation and professional awareness. In conjunction with Bajoit's work, these three factors contribute to the analysis of Pointinini's practices as a demarcation, a strategy for escaping the widespread image of a racketeering police force,

10 Interview with Pointinini on March 28, 2023.

11 Cameroon's hygiene and salubrity company, responsible for collecting and treating household waste in towns and cities.

12 Interview with Pointinini on March 28, 2023.

13 Interview with Pointinini on March 24, 2023.

in order to fulfill himself as a subject and actor of his personal existence. This refusal of practical conformity inscribes Pointinini in “singular trajectories” (Bajoit, 2019, p. 97) and prevents him from “an identity malaise”¹⁴ (Bajoit, 2019, p. 191).

Primary socialization: “parent education”

Pointinini owes a great deal to the education he received from his parents, and more specifically from his teacher father. This upbringing had a considerable influence on his career and conduct, as he seems very attached to the values he received. He is full of praise for his father, who taught him rigorous values such as rigor and respect: “In a word, it is education and rigor that guide me in my work. It is the upbringing and rigor that my father gave us”.¹⁵ This account underlines the importance of (primary) socialization on personal paths, and clearly shows that part of Pointinini’s personality and social identity would have been built during this phase. As Riutort (2013, p. 63) puts it:

Primary socialization is the most decisive, since it provides children with their first social references, which will shape them throughout their lives and act as a “filter”: later experiences are understood in reference to the first ones, which have contributed to the lasting framing of the individual’s ways of thinking and acting.

Pointinini’s emphasis on his parents’ upbringing underlines the importance of socialization in his personal life. His personal existence, in which he now plays an active part, is rooted in what is most dear to him: education and rigor.

Vocation and dedication

Unemployment is endemic in Cameroon today, with a rate of 5.9% in 2021 (INS, 2022). However, this rate can mask the reality of the labor market, as it is accompanied by an increase in the population working in the informal sector, which rose from 56% in 1993 to 90% in 2017 (OIT, 2017), then to 86.6% in 2021 (INS, 2022). The scarcity of decent jobs undermines vocations and forces people to live “beyond scrapping” (Ela, 1998, p. 142). This situation shows that vocational work in Cameroon is being eroded. Certain dysfunctional behaviors in public administrations can be explained by the fact that certain agents find themselves there by default or “breaking and entering”, the stakes often being survival, sometimes in defiance of professional ethics. In the popular imagination, the civil service is the best guarantee, and once recruited, one can shine by absenteeism, by bargaining for public service, in this “reign of impunity” (Ela, 1998, p. 275). A young Cameroonian who joins a training school by direct competitive examination “for a price” engages in unorthodox practices to recoup his or her investment in the first few years on the job. This seems to be more common among gendarmes, police officers, tax officers, magistrates, customs officers, etc., where corruption is often a condition of access to training schools (Titi Nwel, 1999). This is clearly not the case for Pointinini who, on the contrary, declares that his profession is his vocation: “It was my destiny, that is all. And I absolutely love this job”.

Between professional conscience and respect for ethics

If they enter the profession out of a sense of vocation, professional conscience and respect for ethics guide their day-to-day practice. This is the case for Pointinini, who asserts: “My behavior is guided by professional conscience, ethics, rigor, that is all”.¹⁶

Education, vocation and conscientiousness are three key factors in driving change from within public administrations.

¹⁴ According to Bajoit, an identity malaise is a state of psychic suffering resulting from the exacerbation of existential tensions between the peripheral zones of identity, and which threatens the stability of the identity core.

¹⁵ Interview with Pointinini on March 14, 2023.

¹⁶ Interview with Pointinini on March 28, 2023.

Pointinini's Motivations and Rewards

From the Desire for Self-affirmation through Selfless Giving without a Counter-gift?

Pointinini made himself by giving the best of himself: “I have no role model in the police force. I made myself in the police force”.¹⁷ With this in mind, it seems worthwhile to analyze his desire for self-fulfillment by revisiting the concept of “gift and counter-gift” theorized in 1923 by Mauss (2007), and taken up and updated in numerous works (Mahieu, 2020; Caillé, 2004; Mayade-Claustre, 2002; Alter, 2002; Weber, 2000; Cam, 1994). Pointinini does not refuse spontaneous gifts or donations from users who admire his commitment to his profession: “I always remind them that if they want to give me gifts, they should do so of their own free will”.¹⁸ This free, disinterested, “pure and perfect” (Mahieu, 2020) gift can express recognition of dedication to work, and is made without humiliation or call for counter-gift (Dufy & Weber, 2023). It is akin to “a gift without a counter-gift” (Cam, 1994). In this context, the gift is linked to an immaterial utility (the good service rendered) and implies the personalization of the gift (Mahieu, 2020, p. 67). This personalization of the gift to Pointinini stems from the fact that while some users spontaneously offer him gifts (often in cash), others prepare to do so and may pass by the station several times before handing it over. If Pointinini is absent, these users keep the gift intended for Pointinini until they have the opportunity to meet him in person to hand it over. In the act of giving, Pointinini favors the autonomy of the donor towards the recipient, and the gift can be anonymous. On the other hand, he refuses to accept forced, bonded or coerced donations that would lend a transactional character to the work or service rendered, for which he receives a monthly salary. He is opposed to self-interested donations, which “are not purely symbolic or social, disinterested” (Alter, 2002, p. 270), to “impure donations” (Mahieu, 2020, p. 71), which are coerced for the donor and imposed by the recipient. The gifts Pointinini receives are neither forced on the donor nor sought by the recipient. The gift to Pointinini, on the other hand, is a matter of goodwill on the part of the donor, expressing his gratitude for the good work done by this civil servant.

Pointinini has given his time and energy in order to receive the training he needs to provide a service to road users. This work has a *quid pro quo* that can be called a “counter-gift” that goes beyond a simple salary. From this point of view, work is no longer a simple commodity to be exchanged from time to time, but a part of oneself that is invested in a relationship between civil servants and users. This effort in work gives rise to and motivates a “non-humiliating generosity”, as opposed to the “humiliating generosity” (Weber, 2007) that can be shown towards beggars. In studies of corruption, it is generally postulated that police or gendarmerie officers share their corrupt harvest with their bosses. Pointinini does not share his donations with either his hierarchy or his colleagues, because donors are free to give directly to whomever they wish. He thinks that these are personal gifts, especially as some users, when presenting him with a gift, often remind him that they have missed it several times. If these gifts were intended for the entire team at this police station, the donors would give them to any police officer, in Pointinini’s absence. He admits, however, that he has often “made a gesture to an employee to pay for a cab, a juice or other refreshment”.¹⁹ However, this is done out of a sense of generosity, and not in the spirit of sharing any benefits with anyone. Ultimately, the gift Pointinini wants or promotes is a reward for personal commitment to the work accomplished (Gaxie, 2005; Stark, 1990), compliance with the official norm in a context dominated by practical standards.

Self-confidence and a determination to earn a living through “clean money”?

Pointinini’s self-confidence is a way of “relying on one’s own strength” that stimulates him in his daily work. In Cameroon, there are popular expressions to describe wealth or accumulation, depending on whether it is considered licit or illicit. This is how we speak of “clean money” versus “dirty money”. “Clean money” is the fruit of work well done and deserved, synonymous with earning a living by the sweat of one’s brow. This is in contrast to “dirty money”, which is accumulated through

¹⁷ Interview with Pointinini on March 24, 2023.

¹⁸ Interview with Pointinini on March 28, 2023.

¹⁹ Interview with Pointinini on March 14, 2023.

compromising trajectories, activities or practices (embezzlement, corruption, theft, etc.). Some informants believe that Pointinini is motivated by a desire to live off “clean money”, which is why he refuses to impose any kind of coinage strategy on users. This is made clear in his speech when he declares that he has never given in to users’ attempts at bribery, but they may give him gifts on their own free will.

A desire to honor and pay tribute to his parents

The desire for self-affirmation is accompanied by a desire to pay tribute to his parents. In a process of “give and take”, his parents have given him a dignified upbringing. He owes it to them to reciprocate with honorable behavior. The Force Publique medal is part of this logic. It is the first honorary distinction awarded to a public servant at his request. Knowing that his parents hold him up as an example is a source of satisfaction for Pointinini, who carries out his professional and family missions with the certainty that his “parents today are extremely proud”²⁰ of him.

Pointinini has also received other symbolic rewards, such as encouragement from his superiors and recognition from his colleagues. Numerous testimonials from users confirm his position. In fact, he was named “best civil servant of the decade 2012-2022” by Camer Natal, a platform that serves as a “showcase for promoting Cameroon’s image”. On this platform, a post on Pointinini garnered an exceptional 3,799 positive comments, recognizing him for shared qualities such as cleanliness, availability, exemplarity and integrity.

Traffic and adoption of Pointinini’s method

Before analyzing the adoption of Pointinini’s method within the Cameroon police force, we need to place it in a historical context. Our interviews revealed that other police officers previously used Pointinini’s method to regulate road traffic in Yaoundé around 2000, distinguishing themselves both by their rigor and their methods. Three figures were selected.

“High Voltage” at the central post office

There is one called “Haute Tension”. He served towards Acropole, the bus station moved to Mvan was still there but there were too many traffic jams. When he said it was a Mvog-Mbi line for the central post office, it was a line everyone respected. Even if you are a minister, you respect him, because he used to say that Cameroonians are all the same, there is no one more Cameroonian than the others. He would get in front of your car and you could not get through, or you would have to hit him to get through. He was not one to be intimidated.²¹

This is the description we gathered from another police officer known to users in Yaoundé between the central post office, in the heart of the city, and the Mvog-Mbi crossroads. His rigor and equal treatment of road users set him apart. In a context where influence peddling is endemic, and where vehicles bearing the “Corps Administratif” (CA) registration often take priority, “Haute Tension” was ready to confront any situation to maintain order, because for him, all citizens are equal before the law. He called himself “Haute Tension” because of his courage to discipline all users without discrimination, and without allowing himself to be influenced or intimidated. He was ready to confront the “big fish or bôbôhs²²” of the Republic if they were not in a motorcade or in priority vehicles, hence his nickname “High Voltage”.

20 Interview with Pointinini on March 28, 2023.

21 Interview with a cab driver on February 26, 2023.

22 Cameroonian expressions referring to public authorities, influential men and women by virtue of their wealth or positions of power in society.

“Djobalard” at the Mvog-Mbi crossroads

Djobalard is also cited as a police officer who left his mark on his time and place of work. He was in charge of directing traffic at the Mvog-Mbi crossroads, not far from where Pointinini is stationed on a daily basis, an area always characterized by traffic jams. “There was another one at the Mvog-Mbi crossroads, we called him ‘Djobalard’, he liked to pull his pants up to his navel, and he worked well too.”²³ “Djobalard” is a nickname derived from his mode of dress, marked by the belt always at navel level. As with Pointinini, users gave him a nickname related to his clothing. He made his name through his determination and rigorous work ethic.

Alongside these two policemen, who are already enjoying their retirement, there is one commissioner still on duty in Yaoundé.

Police Inspector Baba

He is the boss who coordinates road traffic in Yaoundé. As a result, he crisscrosses the whole city and is well known for his good work. “If he finds you parked on the crosswalk, he would take your file and you would have to go and pay the fine. However, you can beg him and he may give you your file. He is very fast and patrols the whole town. Sometimes he behaves like he is in Mutenguéné,²⁴ because he often coaches police officers at crossroads. He would grab a policeman’s hand to show him or her how to direct traffic. Whenever he arrives at a clogged intersection, the police officers stationed there are made to suffer because they are working twice under his impetus. He forces them to work the way they were taught at school.”²⁵

Thus, his pedagogical approach is appreciated by road users. He does not allow himself to be bribed, he makes the offender pay the fine or he raises awareness by granting exceptional circumstances.

An analysis of the circulation of these grassroots innovations reveals their very low level of capitalization. In this context, replication of these hitherto isolated forms of behavior is unlikely. The lack of willingness to capitalize on such innovations within the police and the administration can be justified by five major observations: 1) their lack of documentation; 2) the non-involvement of these innovators in police officer training bodies; 3) the low verticality of individual innovations, except in the case of Commissaire Baba - these first three observations may partly explain the fact that Pointinini declares that he built himself, even though some of the methods used by his predecessors can also be found in his work - ; 4) the absence of a clear system or mechanism of specific positive sanctions in favor of police officers who particularly stand out for their good professional practices; 5) the absence of (or weak) political will to promote internal innovations on an equal footing with “top-down” innovations and imported “travel models”.

Criticisms

Pointinini’s method is not appreciated by everyone, some police officers consider it an exhibition. This is what emerges from this interview extract: “Pointinini wants to show that he works more than who? If he thinks he is working well, it is for himself and his family. Everyone knows how he got into the police force. People have done more than him before, but where are they?”²⁶ This extract suggests that respect for ethics or a return to orthodoxy is not well received by everyone. Habits die hard, Pointinini can be perceived as a dissident, a non-conformist. In this context, the message from the general delegate for national security, cited above, illustrates the persistence of acts of corruption, reflecting a certain resistance to change.

²³ Interview with a personal driver on April 12, 2023.

²⁴ Town in the South-West region home to the police training school for non-officer personnel.

²⁵ Interview with a cab driver on March 22, 2023

²⁶ Interview with a police officer stationed outside Coron on September 13, 2023. This perception of Pointinini’s method is reflected in certain interviews with cab drivers and street traders, who testify that some police officers criticize this work.

Conclusion

This article focused on a case study of innovation from below. It wanted to reverse the approach by distancing itself from work on corruption and “top-down” innovations to focus on a case that disavows habitual behaviors (criticized by users) in public services in Africa. This work made it possible to analyze laudable behavior from a subjectivist perspective (Bajoit, 2019) within the police. The objective here was not only to contribute to documenting innovations from within in state professions in Africa, but also to show that outsiders can be carriers of innovations and that they are also the actors of change and that this can come from the periphery.

This case clearly attests to the broadening and diversification of forms of innovation that should be documented, and challenges “the alleged inability of African societies to change based on their internal dynamics” (Ela, 1998, p. 70). It clearly shows that peripheral or lower-level actors innovate on a daily basis, but without scientific curiosity, these innovations would go unnoticed.

This putting into perspective of a singular behavior made it possible to reflect on the concepts of individual action and collective action (Birnbaum, 1991; Sommier, 2014), individual autonomy and collective action (Coton, 2011), of rational behavior (Ménard, 1994; Demeulenaere, 2003) or rationality (Boudon, 2009), but also of subjectivist behavior (Bajoit, 2019).

The data collected and analyzed allow certain conclusions. Thus, Pointinini joined the police out of love for this profession and not out of professional opportunism in a context where endemic unemployment does not very often leave a choice to the job seeker, sometimes ready to accept a downgrade. He fulfills his dream and does his job with dedication. He wants to inspire other citizens. He owes part of his professional career to this incorruptible attitude that is told on a daily basis. This practice cannot be understood outside of his personal trajectory and the preeminence of primary socialization on the construction of personality or social identity in the individual. This action, initially individual, has a collective scope in view of the echo it arouses, which clearly expresses a thirst for equity or social justice.

Internal innovations are mostly carried by peripheral actors, hence their low capacity for vertical circulation. They spread laterally without any real lasting impact on society, although they change perceptions. This poses the problem of their capitalization. Decision-makers seem to care little about this, being more interested in imported innovations, which sometimes bring rents. This lack of interest in endogenous innovations, as well as the illustrations provided above, clearly show that the fight against corruption remains an “unfinished effort” (Mgba Ndjie, 2018) in Cameroon. However, “the interaction of local and exogenous resources” (Ndongo & Klein, 2020, p. 73) could be constructive in the quest to improve public services in Africa. However, the inattention of politicians to innovations or reforms from below could, on the contrary, reinforce “subjugation and the forms of its validation” (Mbembe, 2020, p. 96).

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