

## Using ethnography to understand the workplace

### Understanding the social and cultural context of formalistic procedures in African utility companies

Researchers studying the Water Authority of Togo in the early 1990s, a high-performing company at the time, found that most employees welcomed the fact that there was a voluminous manual of procedures (Henry 1991). Employees agreed with management that these detailed procedures improved relations between colleagues and between superiors and subordinates.

A short time later, the chief executive officer of the Cameroon Electricity Company decided that his company should draft similar procedures to address a long-standing issue of lack of staff empowerment (d'Iribarne and Henry 2007). Feeling apprehensive, employees were constantly coming to their superiors to obtain authorization for what they were going to do. To address this situation, an impressive manual, comprising a dozen large binders, was written in just a few months. The manual described what everyone should do and how it should be done (detailed questions to be asked, rules of good behavior, the procedures and content for management checks, and so on).

Some foreign experts were puzzled: they thought these procedures amounted to micromanagement. However, employees strongly backed the detailed manuals: "They put them at ease," explained a supervisor. Detailed procedures provide a comprehensive

framework within a large organization, similar to what can occur in a smaller organization through case-by-case agreement with the superior. Eventually, other utility companies in Africa followed suit, adopting similar manuals. Manuals of detailed procedures seemed to improve workplace performance, observers believed.

Why were these manuals—which might be seen to be intrusive in other environments—valuable for the companies? As this Report argues, context matters. The manuals correspond to the written rules that are used in traditional associations in many West and Central African communities, the *tontines* (Henry, Tchenté, and Guillaume-Dieumegard 1991). They prescribe, with the same sense of minutia, the conduct to be observed for everything from dealing with lateness, to the right to make jokes, to the organization of meals.

In Cameroon and Togo, as elsewhere in the world, the success of collective enterprises depends on managing tensions between personal interests and group goals. Observation of the particular culturally informed strategies for managing these conflicts helped shape the business manuals. On-the-ground investigation found that employees constantly and subtly sounded out the underlying intentions and interests of the people around them (Smith 2008; Godong 2011). People feared greed and "bad faith guided by personal interests." Conversely, each person was examined to see if he or she was acting as a "true friend." In that context, acting as a true friend meant participating in the duty of mutual aid. Refusals could be viewed as a sign of

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underlying nastiness of character. Many people were questioning whether business decisions were motivated by duties of mutual assistance or by the disinterested application of a rule. Professional situations were reexamined in light of the personal relationships among the parties involved. At the same time, people feared acting in ways that might elicit suspicion. “People are afraid of anyone saying, ‘There’s the nasty guy,’” explained a director. “They think that it might bring trouble down on their own head or on the family.”

The approach of formalizing procedures, enforced by a regular audit, was seen as a way to reassure others that what each person does was not motivated by his or her own personal interests, their friends’ interests, or bad intentions, but by what the company expects. Formal procedures reassured people and made them more responsible.

### Ethnography can be a powerful tool for understanding the ways in which social and cultural context shapes decision making, choices, and interpersonal relations.

This brief account shows the value of careful ethnographic observation. In the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1994), “thick description”—or a detailed understanding of the social and cultural context surrounding decisions and actions—was necessary to understanding how employees interpreted their interpersonal relations and organizational procedures (d’Iribarne 2002; Booth and Cammack 2013).

Although valuable, thick descriptions have limitations. A danger with some forms of thick description is that they can leave out the ways in which political and economic power, in addition to cultural meanings, also shape individual choice and behavior (Asad 1993). Approaches to thick

description can also sometimes treat individual lives as abstractions, almost like characters in literary texts (Clifford and Marcus 1986). But wielded appropriately, ethnography can be a powerful tool for understanding the ways in which social and cultural context shapes decision making, choices, and interpersonal relations.

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