

Enterprising culture or culturising entrepreneurship? How local re-interpretation of American management techniques reveals the socio-cultural context of enterprising: the Tunisian case of Poulina¹

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WORK IN PROGRESS

Do companies in developing countries can be modernised despite their culture, by fighting against it or simply by importing the so-called “universal” standards developed in the west? Or, on the contrary, do they show that there is good in each culture, even in terms of management and that these countries can be modernised by leveraging their culture?

Drawing upon the case of Poulina-a Tunisian company that has implemented American management techniques- this paper aims to improve our understanding of management modernisation’ challenges in developing countries. It advocates that it is incoherent to impose to developing countries to adopt a unique model of management. Such scheme does not respect the local cultural specificities and ignore the opportunities that they can bring. The case provides an illustration of the importance of providing local and legitimate meanings to the imported techniques to make their implementation successful in developing countries².

Introduction

Scholars who focus on management in developing countries are divided into two camps, which can be characterized as the organizational theorists and the culturalists. The former hold that the theoretical principles underlying and explaining organizational behaviour are universal. The culturalists argue that management practices in developing countries are rooted in local cultural values. However, we can note that when it comes to formulating recommendations for modernizing the functioning of firms in these countries, the gap between these two camps is not as large as it might at first appear (Leonard, 1987). Both continue to advocate the best practice, or “one best way”, approach.

Organizational scholars (Austin, 1990; Jaeger 1986; Kiggundu, 1989; Womack *et al.*, 1990) continue to take a one best-practice based approach, and even if some of them acknowledge the importance of culture, they do not consider it of prime interest. They argue that only Western management techniques may be able to improve performance in developing countries.³ The “culturalists” see the character of organizations within these countries as rooted in their larger political and social structures and come very close to saying that the

¹ A detailed version of the study referred to in this paper was published in French: *Poulina, un management tunisien* edited by the French Development Agency (AFD)

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³ The strongest exponent of the applicability of Western management techniques cited by Leonard 1986 is the example presented by Cornelius Dzakpasu. Dzakpasu cites the case of an African public company that was near bankruptcy and was rescued through the use of such methods. He states explicitly, though, this was feasible because the company was an “enclave”, i.e., it could be cut off from its environment. He does not tell how such isolation was achieved.

organizations are unreformable. They tend to stress the need for the transfer of the best-management practices. They look at culture as “something to which behaviours can be causally attributed”, basing their investigations on the determination of a scale of attitudes rather than on ethnographic studies (Hofstede, 1980). From this perspective, culture is an obstacle to modernization, and it is seen as self-evident that the persistent “traditional” aspects of life in such countries could only be obstacles to efficient production; it seemed obvious that such efficiency could be based only on the “rational” aspects of the organization. They are based on the assumption that replicating Western management, associated to the idea of modernity, in developing countries is the best means for enhancing firms' competitiveness. These assumptions are not universally valid in any society, but their applicability is even more limited in developing countries than in the West (Yousfi, 2007a).

However, many examples show that adopting the “best-management practices” is not sufficient for improving economic performance in developing countries. The management tools proposed by experts do not have the desired effects; they are often abandoned after the experts leave. Furthermore, when some companies record substantial technical and financial successes,⁴ the majority of observers, whose concern is seeing the developing countries become part of globalization, see in these cases only the results of universal methods. Few ask themselves about the concrete aspects that explain these singular successes and their effective achievement. This makes it impossible to distinguish what in so-called universal management methods is actually universal from what in fact reflects the unique features of the particular context in which they came into being.

Philippe d'Iribarne (1989) has directly challenged the one best-practice approach by showing that one can find evidence of differences in management practices within the so-called “developed countries”, which are largely an expression of different conceptions of the relations between the individual and society. They underlie the way members of organisations, belonging to a specific society give meaning to what they live daily: the hierarchical functioning of the organisation, with its procedures for decentralization, control and evaluation of performances; cooperation among the different departments, decision-making and the management of conflicts; the organisation of relationship with customers, the quality procedures, the setting up of codes of conduct, etc. They provide references according to which actors interpret situations and events, the taken-for-granted assumptions that form the basis for their judgement, and the categories they employ to describe their daily reality. Thus, words such as “partnership”, “cooperation” or “contract” may appear to be evident and clear but may, in fact, have different meanings from one culture to another. The meanings given to such words influence people's behaviour and expectations (Yousfi, 2006). These conceptions make the tradition/modernity dichotomy totally obsolete and lead within firms to different ways of making sense of a difficulty, collaboration, a sanction or a failure. Such characteristics are difficult to replicate elsewhere because of their embeddedness in a national culture.

However, unlike industrialized countries, the developing countries have not developed endogenous management traditions. Therefore, the challenge is how to balance general organizational theory and the local context in deciding how best to improve management practices. In this regard, d'Iribarne (2007) show that companies — whether subsidiaries of multinational groups or local companies — that succeeded in implementing imported management tools have sought to benefit from local cultures rather than suppress them. One

⁴ *L'Afrique des entreprises*, by the group of l'Agence française de Développement, La Documentation française, 1998.

of the most important success factors of these firms is their ability to develop a high quality of co-operation that is in contrast to common managerial practices in developing countries. They implemented working methods that respected locally accepted behaviours, allowing people to feel comfortable in their work.

In order to break away from a simple opposition between the two “traditional” and “the modern” in considering the challenges faced by emergent countries to modernise their management, we will analyse the case of Poulina. This successful company of over 70 subsidiaries (circa 6,000 employees) differs from other Tunisian companies by its use of strict regulations and employees’ appraisal using control and regulation systems directly inspired by the American management model. We will seek in this paper to demonstrate how the implementation of the “American management” in Poulina has relied both on the virtue of universal principles and on the quality of their adaptations to the local context. We will show that these adaptations are interestingly not in contrast to local cultural practices, but building on them.

Method and Data collection

Poulina is one of the most important private groups in North Africa. It is a result of a successful transformation of a small company of a \$ 20 000 investment to a group of 70 companies with \$ 700 million in investments, and from ten employees to currently 15 000 employees. Since its creation in 1967 by a few clairvoyants’ businessmen, the Poulina Group had performed all kinds of sectors, ranging from agriculture to project construction and tourism inside the country and abroad (Libya, Algeria, France, Martinique...). This has given the group an outstanding experience that is characterized by great complementarities between its different interfering parties and a high return on investment from available resources. The implementation of modern management tools-often qualified as “Americans” is said to have largely contributed to this success story.

In order to understand the dynamics behind this successful transformation, we used an ethnographic approach (Geertz 1973, d’Iribarne, 1996). This consisted of going into the field and conducting interviews to understand how the introduction of the imported management technique is within the representations of Tunisian employees of what constitutes a “good management”⁵. This approach allowed us to analyze how the respondents interpret the new tools as well as the way they implement them.

We will therefore employ the notion of culture specifically in terms of the framework of meaning in each society that shapes conceptions of the way people should be governed. In other words, this does not refer to culture in terms of customs and values or shared identities, but rather to implicit representations that underlie the practices and discourses of people in terms of organization and cooperation (d’Iribarne et al., 98). The merit of this kind of approach lies in its capacity to clarify the conditions for a “good” management in a Tunisian context and the way this affects the adaptation of imported tools implemented in Tunisian companies. One way of understanding this analysis is to look at discourse as a means of grasping underlying representations and taken for granted assumptions. According to which

⁵ Approximately 40 interviews were carried out in May and June 2004 with representatives of various hierarchical levels within the head office as well as two of its subsidiaries. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed literally. All the quotations below in inverted commas are comments made by the respondents. We deliberately gave a very broad place to the discourse of our interlocutors, so that to allow the readers to reach their representations of Poulina’s management, beyond the analysis which is proposed by it.

reference points or underlying images do people formulate comments and give opinions about the various changes introduced by the American tools?

Thus, the analysis focused on how interviewees used language to construct and convey their meaning of the new management tools introduced in Poulina. It included identifying interviewees' use of metaphors to suggest what a good management or a good cooperation is or should be like, their use of words, expressions, repetitions and their emphasis to express and distinguish desirable from undesirable motives and practices. The analysis also bore on the way actors commented upon their interactions with others and upon their use of the new tools. We focused on "images of references" that actors drew upon to make sense and that were constitutive of their action design.

Findings

Our respondents stress the implementation of the American management technique as a key factor in achieving the success of Poulina. Yet, on closer examination, the interviews shows that if the "American" tools have been successfully introduced, it is because they were re-interpreted in a "Tunisian" way meaningful for those who have to use them. First, we will present the modernization process as it was described by our interviewees. Second, we will analyse the adaptations of the new techniques to the Tunisian context. This will enable us to explain how culture interferes with the implementation of imported management tools.

1. The modernization process: A watchword: the "rigour"

"The most important asset of Poulina, it is the rigour in management secured by well locked procedures". Our respondents evoked the rigour in management as a key success factor to explain the performance of Poulina. This rigour is translated in strict rules. As a manager pointed out: *"We set the rule, we follow the rule and we take measures against the person who does not respect it"; "Here, the discipline is above all. Everyone must turn off his/her mobile in meetings, smoking is banned inside the buildings, everyone has to work on Saturdays in all the subsidiaries. As far as the discipline is concerned, Mr. Ben Ayed is intransigent"*.

At the same time, when our interlocutors speak about rigour, they evoke a certain number of preconditions, as "transparency": *"There are transparent systems, there are no privileges, there is no clientelism, all is clear"* - or the "accountability": *"We aim at making each one responsible and accountable for their work"*. To implement the values of rigour as well as transparency and accountability, the top management explains that they were greatly inspired by the American model:

"We are adopting the American management system which allows to make each employee responsible for his work and to see his objectives" comments a senior executive. The objective is to implement a "Performance culture" in order to reward people on the basis of their performances: *"People are judged on the basis of their achievements. If they couldn't fulfil their objectives, they are held responsible"* comment a manager.

A battery of tools was introduced at beginning of 90s (e.g., formalisation, regulation, management by objectives) set up a "modern" management system based on strict rules, transparency, and accountability. The access to modernity is described by our respondents in

terms of the acquisition of the most advanced management tools that could rationalize the functioning of Poulina :

*“One will be able, thanks to **this tool “HR ACCESS”**, to apply all the challenges of the human resources management. What we want to achieve is equity, we will be able to manage our company in a **more rational and more modern way**”* explains a manager.

Taking as a starting point the American organisational philosophy, a contractual logic was implemented in Poulina and did replace the traditional hierarchical structure. Each employee who integrates Poulina has a contract based on four elements: a job description which is discussed between him and his boss, the objectives to be achieved, a reporting system and a remuneration based on the reporting system and the objectives achieved. Our respondents emphasize the importance of a culture of “meritocracy” that allows the employees to be bound by clear, precise and measurable objectives on which they will be evaluated and rewarded:

“What is important here for each employee is to prove that he is trustworthy, there is a concern of the meritocracy, employees are held accountable for their results” highlight a manager.

At first sight, one could easily conclude that if Poulina Group was successful in setting up an effective management system, it is because it breaks with the traditional operation of the Tunisian companies by applying the American receipts of management. This would confirm the assumption according to which the only condition to modernize the management of companies in emergent countries is to trade off the local ways of doing against the so called “universal” effective management tools. However, this assumption is deeply questioned if we take a look at the comments made by our respondents describing how they concretely manage to introduce the new tools and how they motivate people who adhere to the new system.

The examination of Poulina’s management practices reveals through interviews that local adaptations of the techniques have taken place over the years, principally as a reaction to local practices in the business life, seen as “dysfunctional”. In this regard, an operator highlights: *“The strong point of Poulina is to have neutralized the dysfunctions of a family based model as it prevails in Tunisian companies. There is a memorandum prohibiting the recruitment of family members. The watchwords here are: rigour and discipline. Here, one manages the figures and not the feelings”*.

The rigour described in Poulina management system is said to mitigate the dysfunctions of a family based model by giving priority to the competence criteria over the relational one. The procedures implemented in Poulina are often presented as “solutions” to identified “dysfunctions”: *“We learn from any experience we go through whether at the head office or at the subsidies, the management at Poulina is to put “gardes fous” defense systems that protect us from making the same mistakes, if we have a good experience somewhere, we try to replicate it in the other subsidies”*

At the same time, some of our interviewees pointed out, that the rules are not always observed in a strict way: *“If we strictly observed all the rules translated into procedures, we will immediately stop working and close the company ”*, *“The rigour to me means that in general 80% of the procedures are observed... The procedures are observed, but there is always 20% a room for free interpretation and it is normal to smooth the functioning of the company”*. Correspondingly, other comments highlight that the effectiveness of Poulina management

would not only come from its strict procedures but also from the way people are applying these procedures: *“It is not obvious to transfer our system, it is not only one whole of procedures, it is also a system of people...”*; *“The Poulina culture is standard, it is translated in all the rules of working which are common to all the subsidiaries. Yet, there are some aspects that are specific to each subsidiary; sometimes the culture of the general manager would impregnate the management of the subsidiary company”*.

Therefore, a question remains: if it is not simply the importation of modern management tools that allow the success of Poulina, what are the dynamics at stake that could explain this successful transformation? To respond to this question and to break away from the opposition between the “modern” and the “the traditional” in conceiving the link between culture and management, we will examine the description made by our interlocutors of the concrete construction of Poulina management system.

2. People behind the procedures

The introduction of a “rational” and “modern” management as it was described by our interviews means that the employees of Poulina have to observe impersonal rules. They are supposed to do their work without consideration of any particularistic relationship with their colleague. This raises the following question: to what extent the introduction of the impersonal rules have overcome the interference of personal relationships that prevails in the functioning of other Tunisian companies?

In this regard, when asked about the risk of bureaucracy that a system of procedures as sophisticated as Poulina’s system could generate, one of our respondents highlights: *“There is no risk of bureaucracy because people can break with the rule if they achieve their objectives”*; Another manager points out: *“It is not easy to transfer our “System” because it is not just a set of procedures, it is also a “System” of people”*. These two quotes suggest that the word “System” as it is used in the accounts of our respondents is more than a simple set of neutral and objective procedures. To investigate the way Poulina’ employees make sense of the word “System”, we will examine in the following section the different ingredients that allow the reference to the procedures to combine with the personal relationships⁶.

Double hierarchy

The principle of double hierarchy means that there are two types of hierarchy: The “operational” hierarchy refers to the “operational” bosses as our respondents call them. They are based at Poulina’s head office and they are in charge of developing, conceiving and evaluating all the procedures needed for each department and for each company of the group. They are also responsible for controlling the operation of all the subsidiaries. The “functional” hierarchy is represented by the “functional” bosses who are in charge within the subsidiaries to implement the procedures emanating from the “operational bosses”. Yet, Poulina uses a double hierarchy, not in the sense of a matrix organisation, but as a tool to differentiate responsibilities and powers and thereby fight corruption and power abuse of members of the hierarchy. In fact, by looking more closely at the comments made by our respondents, it can be noticed that it is not so much a double hierarchy that is being exercised on the employees

⁶ It is worth noting that the interviews were made in Arabic and in French. The managers interviewed in this study used French and universal management vocabulary to describe the functioning of their group but when it comes to comment how concretely they implemented the “American model”, they switched instantly to Arabic and provided us with different insights.

but rather two hierarchies operating at distinct levels. The hierarchy called “functional” has as a main role which is to manage the social and relational aspects:

“The procedures come from the head office and our role is to find the suitable way to implement them” comments a functional boss.

“A subsidy’s manager is asked to manage the social aspects and this is vital to the company. It is important to perfectly master the social side of our work” stresses a senior executive.

The “functional bosses” has to implement the directives coming from the head office but also, and mainly, “to fix the problems” and to find the flexibility needed to make the system legitimate and acceptable:

“With regard to the work hours, a subsidy’s manager comments, I can sign to authorize my collaborator to leave earlier. I can allow some exemptions to the procedures if I trust my collaborators”.

The weakness at this level would be the risk of “drifts”. The hierarchy known as “operational” is supposed to keep her decision power: *“The operational boss intervenes to avoid the drifts”*. This hierarchy being distant is more capable of being rigorous. It is there “to adjust the shooting”, “to lock” and “to control”: *“The operational boss intervenes only to avoid mistakes, our work is to put pressure, we don’t sell, we don’t exploit, we just manage from a distance”* points out an operational boss.

Beside these two hierarchies, there is another unit called “audit” which is in charge of the “control of control” to make sure that there is no particularistic relationships or favouritism between the two hierarchies, which would reduce the effectiveness of their respective roles. *“When we want feed back or an account from a subsidy, we don’t do it directly, it is the audit that does it”* explains an operational boss. All these tasks - to decide, to manage the social aspects and to control – are held by the same authority in other Tunisian companies and deliberately separated at Poulina.

In addition, if the control of the operational or the audit is presented in a positive way, it is because it “helps” people to be protected from the “drifts”. The “operational” bosses are not only there to practise a cold and mechanical control, but also to help, to accompany and to support the employees in their work. The control’s constraints are accepted because of the supportive role given to them:

“There are two things in the procedure, explains an employee. A procedure is a law. First, there is the technical aspect of the law. A law must be respected but one should consider the procedure not only in its disciplining side. A procedure has also an educational aspect. We control with a procedure to help employees, to accompany them and to free them from the “arbitrary” power of management”.

This kind of reading helps the employees to make sense of control mechanisms and to ease the pressure of impersonal rules. To sum up, the separation of roles improves the clarification of the responsibilities and help to fight against the disorder that would prevail in other companies. It also helps to prevent from favouritism that the relational logic would generate. From this perspective, the principle of double hierarchy contributes to ensure the implementation of impersonal rules without falling into rigidity. At the same time, it allows to

benefit from the flexibility that allows personal relationships while neutralizing its arbitrary side.

The Coordinators: informal intervention

Beside the “operational” bosses, there is a group of people called “the coordinators” or “les sages”⁷. Each coordinator is controlling in an informal way five or six operational units and ensuring the reporting of their activities. The coordinators don’t have a hierarchical status in the Group and they maintain a close contact with the PDG. They are responsible for mediating the conflicts between the subsidiaries and the head office. As a coordinator explains to us: *“Sometimes, on of the operational bosses could mistake or could have a conflict with a subsidy, so I try to fix the problem... I have an arbitration role between the two (...). I should keep the power balance between the two hierarchies”*

In addition, the coordinators control the favouritism that may take place within the subsidiary companies: *“There were cases of favouritism or a clan against a person, comments a coordinator, one of my jobs, it is to take care that there is no favouritism, My role is not official, it is very informal, but when I go to a company, if I notice that there are people which gather against a person, I intervene”*.

The informal role of the coordinators gives them flexibility in their intervention. They are not obliged to conform to the procedures and free to fix the problems: *“When the role of coordinator was instituted, explains a coordinator, there was a difference, I remember, between a coordinator and an operational boss. When you are a coordinator, you should be diplomatic, you intervene as an adviser and you are not forced to conform to 100% with the procedures”*. In addition, as the coordinators have access to all the files, they take care of the coherence of Poulina’s strategy as well as its implementation at all levels : *“I have access to everything, affirms a coordinator, I supervise the human resources management, the recruitment process, the selection, the development of the productivity, the wages, the conflicts between the executives and their superiors (...). I intervene where an arbitration is needed, where I have a positive contribution to keep the of the Group’s functioning”*

This role assigned to the coordinators is complementarily with the roles separation analyzed previously. In Poulina’s System, the coordinators are presented as the guarantors of the homogeneity between roles that were carefully delimited and separated. Once again, this reveals the concern of Poulina’s management to smooth the rigidity that the impersonal rules could generate. The original positioning of the coordinators in Poulina’s System makes it possible to benefit from the flexibility that offers an informal intervention while neutralizing the risk of favouritism.

A good leader: a safeguard of the cohesion of the whole system

Interviewees at different levels of Poulina pointed the role played by the leadership of Ben Ayed⁸ as a key factor in making the implementation of Poulina’s System successful. He was personally involved in controlling the good application of the new procedures. He sets an example by following himself the discipline he imposes to all the employees:

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Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed is the founder and Poulina’s CEO.

“Here, the discipline is above all. Mr. Ben Ayed clocked in like everybody, he gives the example”

Therefore, if Poulina’s employees were ready to conform to rigorous rules that would be rejected in other companies, it is mainly thanks to the moral authority that Mr. Ben Ayed incarnates. It is the example coming from the top that makes credible the Poulina System and guarantees the adhesion of the personnel. The CEO scrupulously respects an ethical behaviour that allows him to fully give the example and to deserve the trust of his collaborators. As a subsidiary’s manager points out: *“One says: there is a system, one should respect it, we should be professional in our work. When there is a rule, one should respect ...and then if we ask people to respect them, without giving the example, this would not work, it is important that the top shows the path, people are often pushed by the top to adhere to any system...”*

However, even though the charisma of Ben Ayed as well as his moral authority play a big role in making Poulina’s employees adhere to his System, the transformation was possible only because the discourse was followed by tangible acts justifying the authenticity of his will. In this respect, Mr. Ben Ayed personally takes care of the procedures’ application. In Contrast with the functioning of other Tunisian companies marked by the prevalence of a clannish spirit, the respect showed by Poulina’s employees of the procedures is given a particular meaning. The fact that Mr. Ben Ayed himself observes the same rules helps Poulina’ employees to manage the difficult situation of being a subordinate. As an employee comments: *“I prefers to submit to the procedure rather than a boss who would dictates to me according to his mood what I have to do”*

Moreover, Mr. Ben Ayed is not only the guarantor of the cohesion of the whole system; he is also the only person that could allow breaking with the rule:

“The flexibility here would come only from Mr. Ben Ayed ... He validates the rules and he is the only person that have the possibility to give exemptions from the rules”; “Mr. Ben Ayed is always opened to discussion and, if there is a problem, one can go to see it directly”.

Once again, we can notice the same concern to balance between the compliance with the impersonal rules and the flexibility of the system guaranteed here by the CEO himself: *“The procedures should be applied but we can allow derogations if they are well advocated”.* The risk of bureaucracy which the formalism of the tools could generate is avoided thanks to the possibilities offered by the derogation. If the exemption allows the System’s flexibility the fact that it is centralized and ensured only by the CEO prevents from any kind of drifts.

We can notice that the exemption is formalized to avoid any risk of arbitrariness: *“Anybody who asks for an exemption should make a written request. Mr. Ben Ayed meets with the people concerned with the case to make a collective decision... There is a formal paper, everything is formalized, for example you can have a decision that says: the CEO and the executive committee authorize you to sell without consulting us but you should be informed afterwards”* explains an operational boss.

The exemption’s procedure neutralizes the negative aspects of particularistic relationships between superiors and subordinates in a way that it does not degenerate into favouritism. It also allows the flexibility necessary to avoid any risk of rigidity: *“For example, the system of the third automatic recall with Mr. Ben Ayed, it is something of important in the system. The fact that he is the only guarantor, i.e. it is him which can allow the exemptions, it is important*

(...). *The system in its operation, there is an aspect very formalized with the procedures and a flexibility which is guaranteed by Mr. Ben Ayed*” comments an executive officer.

The way the exemption is authorized shows one again the originality of the form of authority existing in Poulina. It combines a rational aspect and a charismatic one. The CEO has a very important role in the action’ control based on his charisma as well as his capacity to translate his discourse in tangible acts framed by quite precise rules. There are rules, people and a leader who guarantee by his charisma and his rigorous conformity with the rules, the coherence of the Poulina’s System. As one of our respondents points out: *“In fact, when you put a system, you put a leader and people, it is the leader who guides the people”*

3. When the management borrow the cultural metaphors

Poulina: a big family with written rules

Most of Tunisian companies are family owned which makes it hard to establish the separation between family ties and professional relationships (Zghal, 1989). Poulina opted for banning the recruitment of “close relations” of the shareholders so that to control the risk of a family co-optation behaviour and rely on competence.

“Since the creation of Poulina, we agreed upon preventing family members from being part of the group’employees, with some very rare exceptions, who were accepted on the basis of their exceptional competence and their potential to enhance the performance of the group” comments the CEO.

Similarly, our interviewees point out that Poulina did manage to get rid of “the paternalist management model” that is prevailing elsewhere and where the chief would be the single decision maker in the company. In this regard, the introduction of a “rational” decision-making process, with modern” and “objective” management tools is presented as the solution that mitigated the situations of confusion or arbitrariness that would prevail in other companies.

“There is no paternalism; it is a permanent dialogue... In Tunisia, the managers are omnipresent in the company, they are paternalist, they have a word to say on everything, they interfere even with the cleaner’s work, explains an executive officer. We don’t have this kind of behaviour in Poulina, we have a rational decision-making process, everything is structured in conformity with Poulina’s strategy”.

Yet, even though it is true that Poulina’s functioning is very different from the family based model, the Family’s metaphor remains present in the accounts of our respondents to describe the relationships between superiors and subordinates or between Poulina’s head office and its subsidiaries:

“Poulina is an organic group that could be compared to a big family with written rules” explains a director of a subsidiary company; *“Poulina is our mother”* comments an employee.

As an illustration, if a subsidiary shows economic or technical difficulties, everything will be done to support her in order to avoid her closure:

“We do not sell our subsidiary companies if they lose money, we will do our best to save their lives, to help them to survive, with the help of the head office, We wouldn’t adopt the position the position of a financial expert who would say “we should close the no profitable company”” (...). The vision of Poulina is not this. We would say “this company is important to us and we should absolutely put all our energy to save it”

One finds the positive image of the head office “caring father” who would accompany his companies and support them when they achieve good performance. *“The role of head office explains a coordinator is to push the companies to do their best, to advise them, but the last word is their word, if they achieve a good performance, we tell them “Sahiit⁹” if not we will ask them to be “careful”.* The head office could be also described in a more negative but legitimate way as an “authoritarian” father:

“If we notice drifts in one of our companies, we make a verbal pressure on the director for one year, then we would put the director under supervision, like a child under supervision, he will only signs papers until he adjust his behaviour, if not, he will step down” explains an operational boss.

Placing a director under supervision might be unacceptable in other contexts but in Poulina it is lived in a positive way because it is legitimated as a means of correcting or giving directions. Like a father who should educate his son, the head office that gave birth to the subsidiaries can put them under supervision if he needs to. The value of the metaphor here is in its capacity of easing and smoothing the submission to “impersonal” and “cold” rules: *“It is necessary to educate people on the general philosophy of Poulina, not only technically but also in terms of behaviour”*, explains a subsidiary’ director.

“You should gently educate your employees by saying to them that we are a big family, that everyone must contribute in achieving the big objective which is the survival of our company, This is could be achieved a meritocracy’ system” a director of subsidiary company notes.

Seen under this light, we can better our understanding of the educational character often lent to the procedures. In this respect, one of the executives taking part in the implementation of the evaluation procedures explains that he prefers to call the procedures’ manual a “user guide” so that the employees do not see it as a “constraint” but rather like an accompaniment to improve their performance. The penalizing aspect of the procedure “law” is better accepted when it is presented like a mean “of educating”:

“The procedure is a law, it must be applied. But this law is helping you to do good work”. He further adds: *“I do not like to say “manual of procedure” it recalls the public administration, I refer to it as “Coaching manual” or “User guide”...When you say “guide”, you show the educational aspect without scarifying the importance of respecting the law”*

*“There are two things in the procedure, explains an employee. A **procedure is a law**. First, there is the technical aspect of the law. A law must be respected but one should consider the procedure not only in its disciplining side. A procedure has also an **educational aspect**. We*

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Well done

control with a procedure to help employees, to accompany them and to free them from the “arbitrary” power of management”. Comments a senior executive.

While in the United States performance assessment is ultimately about achieving specific results, in Jordan the criterion would be the extent to which people “tried to do their best” rather than the outcomes of these efforts (Yousfi 2007 b). In France, the basis for any kind of evaluation refers to the rights and duties associated to a specific position (d’Iribarne, 89); the evaluation procedures take on meaning in Poulina within the Tunisian framework. The educational aspect given to the procedure as well as family’s metaphor help the employees who adhere to Poulina’s System to manage its formal constraints. The procedures were perceived as strong guiding principles to managers’ actions and thereby allow flexibility and enable employees to reconcile them with the Tunisian relational context. At the same time the rational and formal aspect of the system continues to act like a kind of anonymous antidote to the drifts that personal relationships could generate. It helps also to prevent form the excess of “bosses” who would act as overprotective father or those who would act as abusive fathers and dictators:

“For the directors who are too authoritarian, they always know that they are watched by the head office, seat there, they cannot abuse of their power” note an operational boss.

Therefore, it appears that the “Family”’s metaphor is the way people at Poulina gives legitimate meaning to the new system. Correspondingly, the “System” with its mechanical and procedural side, avoids the risk of excessive personalization of the relations. Once again, Poulina’s concern appears to be how to keep a delicate balance between a rigorous respect of the procedures and an expression of the personal bonds.

A craftsman is happier than a worker

Some of our respondents point out that there is an important turn over of the middle management in Poulina explained mainly by the work pressure. Another reason is the other Tunisian companies would offer three times the wages of Poulina to attract the most brilliant elements. For those who choose Poulina in spite of external temptations, they stressed the “autonomy” as a key motive to stay:

“Here, I can develop new projects all the time, explains an operational boss, and Mr. BA often gives me new responsibilities and new files”;

“What I like in Poulina, comments another manager, is that here people do their work seriously, and Mr. Abdelwaheb does not interfere with your work, when he delegates to you a responsibility, he gives you the total autonomy from the beginning to the end of the task, and this is important”.

By using the metaphor of the craftsman, employees respond to strict regulations, but in autonomous ways. Though they are in a relationship of subordination, they preserve their “dignity” and independence in the strategies they adopt to respond to strict rules. An **executive officer** explained:

“To work for the account of others is considered in Tunisia as degrading¹⁰. As soon as a one starts to succeed in his work, he is pushed by his circle to work for his own account. The term "zoufri", from the word “ouvrier¹¹” means in Tunisian dialect thug (...). That’s why; I think the craftsman is happier than a worker. The procedures help people to save their honour: they are working with autonomy like craftsmen, they are engaged, responsible, they do not have a “boss” who control them and who dictates to them what they have to do. At the same time, they can loose their “honour” if they do not achieve the written objectives”

“We are inspired by the model of a craftsman working for himself. SNA had sixty two employees, today they have fifty. The others became associated or subcontractors. The craftsman is happier than the worker because he has the feeling he is working for himself and not for an anonymous shareholder. For instance, we give our drivers the ownership of the vehicles so that they can feel free and then they do a better job for us. They refund their debt whenever they can. Thus, they manage the vehicles as good fathers and they do their best to deserve our trust ... the same things applies to our shops under Poulina labels, we give the propriety of the shop to the manager..., etc” explains the chairman.

The mobilization of ideal of the “happy craftsman” answers a desire of autonomy not easily obtained in a relation of traditional subordination. Working for its own account is seen as more rewarding than working for others. Working for others is perceived as dependence, even an obstacle to take initiative:

“Here, each one done his work, I defend my work as if I were chief chairman” explains another.

“In the steel construction, we subcontract many activities to our employees; we offer them the chance to work for their own account. During three or four years, they were satisfied with the Poulina’s volume of work and later on they started supply other companies”.

This entrepreneurial dynamics transformed Poulina into a laboratory of initiation to the small private production. On one hand, Poulina offers the autonomy to its employees to develop their capacities and even to set up their own businesses, on the other hand, Poulina guarantees trustworthy relationships with its former executives who became its subcontractors.

According to this same logic, as it would be asked from craftsmen, the subsidies’ directors are asked to develop their products and to create new ones.

“A director of a subsidy should be a good strategist, a good manager and an inspired creator to develop new products” explains the chairman.

Consequently, people can “run their horses alone” but under the careful watch of the head office. If they succeed, they preserve their freedom and are rewarded or better they become themselves autonomous craftsmen, fathers, creators and so on. Autonomy is offered to “a son” who proved he is reliable and who succeeded in creating and innovating. The only rule conditioning this autonomy is the achievement of objectives:

¹⁰ A metaphor of slavery is often to use to describe a situation of subordination.

¹¹ Worker

“The rule is that the degree of autonomy we give to a person in charge of a subsidy is closely related to the performance level of his business... The subsidy’ director is committed to achieve specific results, i.e., If a subsidy’ director want to do something because it believes in it very, very strongly and the head office doesn’t agree, we can warn him three or four times we give him a chance and we allow him to act by putting aside the procedures. But he will be asked for accounts and he must face all the consequences of what he does” a director of subsidiary company. The head office has always the authority that a father could have which is to control this autonomy in the event of drifts.

To sum up, more than a simple reincarnation of an old artisan model, it is the ideal of the autonomy of a craftsman that seems to give sense to the system of relations between subsidies and the head office or between the superiors and subordinates. This model makes it possible to articulate the autonomy needed to escape the “servile” submission to a boss or to an anonymous rule. Poulina is presented in its concrete organization like a set of SMEs gathered under the authority of a single guardian “the head office”. The challenge for the head office is to control the coherence of Poulina’s functioning while giving autonomy to its people. There is a deliberate construction of a system aiming at mitigating the drifts of paternalism while preserving the positive aspects of personal relationships as easy communication and proximity. The coherence of the “System” along with its dynamics of delegation and control, is expressed both in the freedom granted to the subsidiaries acting as autonomous and creative craftsmen, and in the framing of this freedom by formal procedures translating both the head office’ authority and care.

A system that saves honour

The effectiveness of the procedures introduced to rationalize the management of Poulina was allowed by an adequate taking into account of the cultural context. This dimension has significantly influenced the way in which the actors give meanings to the actions being held in their company. In other words, the appropriation of a new system wasn’t the result of just observing the rules, it was associated with a permanent interrogation on the relevance of these rules. The dynamics of the modernization process carried the print of the context in which the actors live. In this regard, our respondents often refer to Poulina’s system as a system which saves “the face” of people who adhere to it: *“One feels he is responsible, one does not act in the shadow of somebody else”*, explains an operational boss. Moreover, the system, by its formal aspect, allows an equal treatment to everyone - *“everyone is submitted to the same rule”*. Consequently, the employees could save their “honour” while being protected from the arbitrary power of the boss.

The control of the system replaces the hierarchical control of a boss. The employees feel more “safe” and feels that they are treated “with dignity” thanks to the objectivity offered by a formal procedure. The rationalization of the management is said to be the only way to ensure equal treatment of employees as well as protecting them from arbitrariness and confusion: *“With these tools, I will be able to treat everybody in the same way, there is more visibility and one be able to manage people on a case-by-case basis”* comments a subsidy’s manager. At the same time, they cannot do whatever they want because they are controlled by the procedure. The procedure is thus presented positively in the form of a mean of self-checking: *“In fact the systems control directly or indirectly, mention a manager, One would say that there is self-checking, it is not your boss who is behind you who supervises you but he has all the means to control you because everything appears in the system”*.

Yet, even though Poulina's management rules are highly influenced by the social regulation mechanisms that one could find in the Tunisian context like the metaphors of a "family" or "a craftsman", their implementation did neither take place spontaneously nor imposed by the top. As it was noticed above, Poulina's managers focused on strictly framing the action of those who are placed at positions where temptations of corruption or favouritism exist. For this purpose, rules were implemented to define the tasks of each one, to control the way in which they are carried out and to evaluate the achieved performance. These rules were subject to interpretations, corrections, adjustments before being adopted and integrated in Poulina's system. This innovative process did find a positive feedback from those who are concerned with only because it takes on meaning within their culture. The employees within Poulina were willing to adhere to the modernization process only because they felt treated in accordance with their ideal of a "trustworthy" work relationship. The Poulina system allowed, by its relational and procedural components to regulate the action of its employees in a way that respect their "honour" and facilitate their adhesion to Group's objectives.

"Procedures help people to save their honour. On one hand, they are committed, responsible, they don't have a boss behind them who dictates to them what to do. On the other hand, they can loose the "face" if they do not achieve the written objectives. ... If somebody says "no, I don't agree on something" We say to him "ok, go ahead, suggest something", if he doesn't succeed in proving he is right, he would end up submitting himself to the rule (...). The procedure make the relationship between the superiors and the subordinates impersonal, you don't have somebody behind you to tell you what you should do (...). The Muslims do not have an intermediary with God, there is no hierarchy, and they are not at ease with a chief who is behind them to control them. With a procedure, they self-check everything, they save their honour" note the chairman.

Conclusion

This case study provides another illustration of the success of imported management techniques in developing countries. Yet, the ways employees talk about the management practices of Poulina indicate that they make sense of them using the local Tunisian culture, not the meanings usually associated with these management practices in, for instance, Western Europe or the USA. The examination of Poulina's management practices reveals through interviews that local adaptations of the techniques have taken place over the years. These adaptations are interestingly not in contrast to local cultural practices, but building on them. It appears indeed that the essential aspects of the imported management tools (e.g., formalisation, regulation, objectives and performance) are re-interpreted in the local cultural context and thereby well accepted. They are re-interpreted in two ways. First, the management principles are not followed as rules, even if they constitute strict procedures. They become strong guiding principles to managers' actions and thereby allow flexibility and enable employees to reconcile them with the Tunisian relational context. Second, core aspects of the management techniques are re-interpreted in connection with cultural metaphors present in the Tunisian culture (e.g., the craftsman as an independent entrepreneur). For instance, by using the metaphor of the craftsman, employees respond to strict regulations, but in autonomous ways. Though they are in a relationship of subordination, they preserve their dignity and independence in the strategies they adopt to respond to the strict rules.

Thus, far from making a trade-off between "social ties" and "rational organization", the implementation of the procedures at Poulina succeeded because it echoed the way in which

Tunisian employees interpreted social ties. One can find the same procedures everywhere, but the way people give meaning to them may vary from one country to another, leading to different framings of their roles. The craftsman example or the metaphor of the family were mobilized by the employees as recognizable social organisation models existing in the Tunisian context to make sense of the imported tools.

Thus, this case challenges those for whom it is self evident that “traditional aspects” of culture can be nothing more than obstacles to “efficient” production. It shows that culture is not a backdrop on which universal tools can be placed. It is the “terrain”, “the grammar” that should be used for constructing and/or implementing them. The main lesson derived from this is that culture can therefore be seen as a resource for providing local and legitimate meanings to management techniques, as long as they can be re-interpreted in conformity with the local framework of meaning. Once culture is perceived as a producer of meaning, the temptation to attribute mechanical effects to it disappears. It is mostly by giving a specific meaning to management techniques that culture comes into play in the modernization process.

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