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Cultural Taboos, "Mystical Practices" and Perceived Business Performances in the Informal Sector: An Exploration of Bayam-Sellams in African Local Markets

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to highlight the reality of unorthodox commercial practices in markets, by local vendors of the informal sector in Africa. An in-depth analysis of a sample of twenty-four (24) petty traders reveals that these traders use both common senses, by developing proximity to their market, and the mystical dimension of their cultural era, to achieve their commercial performance objectives. In so doing, they perceive this mystical dimension as being effective in attracting customers, building customer loyalty and making their business more competitive.

Keywords: mysticism, mystic business practices, taboos, buyam-sellam business performances**.**

INTRODUCTION

Research on taboos is not very popular amongst management and marketing researchers in Africa, though it has been part of public debate for decades. Demonstrations on the Mohammed cartoons, issues linked to religion or death, the surrogate mother controversy that endorses the commercialization of life, and certain adverts depicting sexual or mortal aspects against religious dogma have all sparked a great deal of controversy, sometimes with very violent reactions. Although this has altered marketing research on the subject, it is no less present in the corporate environment and practices (Sabri, Manceau et Pras, 2010).

It is through fields such as anthropology, sociology and psychoanalysis that the limited amount of marketing research has found its conceptual anchor for the phenomenon, particularly as a classification system for separating things from people. Therefore, things are considered taboo in societies when they appear abnormal and not among the established, non-socially accepted categories (Mary Douglass, 1966; Levy-Strauss, 1967).

Based on a synthesis of conclusions drawn from multidisciplinary approaches, Sabri, Manceau and Pras (2010) define taboo in terms of its cultural character and nature. This classification logic, which focuses on human-world relations, can also be applied to marketing-related activities such as trade and arbitration, products, communication and advertising execution.

However, research on the topics raised here very often concerns consumers and practices specific to large companies, other than in Africa. On this continent, however, the influence of tradition seems to play a significant role in the relationship between man and his social environment.

The weight and importance of traditions in business practices in Africa's very small informal businesses, particularly the taboo and mystical aspects, do not seem to have attracted the attention of researchers, even though some work has revealed their existence (Ndebi and Damadié, 2020; Bilguissou, 2016).

Actually, studies have been made on cultural values as a development tool (Dia, 1992), others on the marketing approach of the informal entrepreneur (Hernandez, 1995), many others on the marketing orientation of this entrepreneur (Méfoute et al. 2013, Sogbossi, 2010).
Positioning oneself within the defining characteristic of a taboo as of a dual nature; the forbidden and the sacred/profane, but which nonetheless remains a cultural production in the sense of Freud (1912) and especially Sabri et al.(2010), this article attempts to explore the existence and place occupied by irrational aspects (taboo and/or mystical) in the commercial approach of bayam-sellams in Cameroon, but also the perceived effectiveness of exploiting these aspects in the commercial performance of these actors.

The aim here is to show that business practices in the very small enterprise (VSE) sector of the informal economy are at the crossroads of managerial rationality and irrationality, and that the weight of irrational, cultural or cultic phenomena has a real impact on the perception that players have of the effectiveness of their business strategies.

Firstly, we attempt a rapid conceptual exploration of the cultural anchoring of taboo and mystical practices, in relation to the commercial practices of MSEs in the informal sector (1). Secondly, we briefly outline the methodological framework (2). Then, we examine the reality of mystical business practices and their perceived effect on the business performance of bayam-sellams in local markets in Cameroon (3). Finally, we discuss the contributions and limitations of the present study (4).

CULTURE, TABOO AND "MYSTICAL PRACTICES": CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION AND BUSINESS EFFICIENCY OF THE VERY SMALL ENTERPRISES (VSES) IN AFRICAN INFORMAL SECTOR

Culture As a Business Performance Factor in the African Informal Sector VSE

The importance of culture in business practices is not new to marketing research. However, the importance of culture in the marketing practices of VSEs has been studied even more in light of the need for proximity between the VSE and its customers, which is a key determinant of the company's survival (Cardwell, 1994). The proximity created by VSEs with their customers is a sine qua non for their commercial performance. The techniques used by large companies are inoperative and out of reach for VSEs, because large companies develop mass-market techniques even when they are customer-oriented. As for the small business, and especially the VSE, it develops, through its manager, relationships of proximity that are rooted in the values specific to the context (Méfouté et al, 2013), whether in the formal or informal sector.

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As far as the informal sector is concerned, its importance in the African economic environment is obvious, given the context and the very underdeveloped industrial fabric. There is a growing number of studies on the specific marketing practices of VSEs in this sector. Some analyses are based on reference to the large-scale enterprise model (Hermann, 1998), with more or less formal manifestations. One limit to this is the size and Western roots of the analysis. However, strong cultural contingencies rooted in social communitarianism require marketing practices to be socially in harmony with the prevailing culture. Thus, the vitality of the informal sector, backed by a communitarian culture, has led some to postulate hybrid-marketing practices that would find their relevance in the economic rationality and communitarian values of the players (Méfouté et al. 2013).

Some studies on marketing practices in VSEs in the informal sector focus on two marketing poles, namely transactional and relational, and conclude that informal VSEs adopt both orthodox and socially rooted marketing practices, which can be both transactional and relational. As for the commercial performance of VSEs, this is determined in the literature by inserting it into culture. According to Dia (1994), the success of informal VSEs lies in "their ability to reconcile the social and cultural values of Africa with the necessary economic efficiency".

Taoufik and Angelhard (1990) stated that, economic systems and processes in the informal sector are in "osmosis with the surrounding cultures". This means that the managers of informal VSEs, both in their personal management and in their approach to customers, draw inspiration from and exploit the data and realities linked to culture, in order to stand out from competitors and satisfy their customers.

Culture is therefore a variable deemed relevant to understanding, style and process of corporate leadership. This variable is all the more decisive when the size of the company is very small, even if the direction of its influence on performance is appreciated diversely. In some African studies, culture has been described as a factor that explains organizational failures rather than successes. For them, understanding the failures of African companies can only be achieved by specifically questioning how companies live (Michailof, 1986; Giri, 1992; Barbier, 1994).

To others, the rules of social life in almost all African societies are restrictive and undermine good corporate management. Studies that are more specific point to ethnicity as having a definite influence on organizational governance. Kamdem and Fouda Ongodo (2007) consider that the good or bad performance of companies in Cameroon, for example, can be traced back to their ethno-tribal management. However, these authors do not show which ethno-tribal factors or variables give meaning to performance. For example, which variables contribute to poor performance and which lead to performance in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, culture is both a brake and a lever on organizational performance. In such a context, it is impossible not to integrate cultural aspects into business practices.

The Taboo Concept

Although the concept of taboo is not widely used in marketing, it is a fruitful subject of research in anthropology, sociology and psychoanalysis. It is often linked to the forbidden, religious,

profane or impure. A synthesis of the literature by Sabri et al (2010) reveals five defining characteristics of taboo, three of which seem to be consensually recognized and perceived by the three disciplinary approaches cited: taboo as a cultural production, the contagious nature of taboo, the forbidden nature of taboo. Anthropologists and sociologists address the sacred or magical nature of taboo more, while the ambivalence of taboo has long been emphasized by psychoanalysis (Freud 1912).

In his psychoanalytical approach, Freud points out that taboo is a "cultural production", because it is culturally and historically situated (Freud 1912, p. 179). This means that an object or behaviour that is taboo in one society may not be so in another. It is a cultural phenomenon in the sense that it is recognized by the authorities in a group, and thus plays a role in regulating the behaviour of that group. Without being rationally justified, Cazeneuve (1971) believes that taboo is "a prohibition that is the rule in a given social group". According to Junod (1936, quoted by SABRI-ZAARAOUI, 2007), it's “every object, every act, every person that implies a danger for the individual or the community, and which must therefore be avoided" because it's marked by a kind of prohibition. The consideration of taboo as a cultural process in each society acknowledges its social and historical roots in that society. In Africa, for example among the Bassa of Cameroon, traditional leaders (notables) could make certain foods (vipers, dogs, etc.), certain places or certain ceremonies taboo for women or young people. Over time, some of these taboos disappear in what is known as the taboo destruction process (Wilson and West, 1981, 1995), while others are created. All this results from the proximity created between civilizations, which tend to experience singularities but not historical dynamics. Nevertheless, Freud (1927) notes that there are universal taboos, such as incest, cannibalism and murder, which aim to preserve the survival of the group and its continuity. So there's still something forbidden about them.

Another type of taboo is that based on a prohibition against certain behaviour. For example, committing a murder or violating an order, even involuntarily (Van Gennep, 1904; Frazer, 1911; Webster, 1942). Violating this prohibition is liable to social condemnation, considered as emanating from a superior force (Bergson, 1932; O'Reilly, 1948). The sociological approach, extending the behavioural dimension, introduces the conversational aspect of the concept, which restricts the freedom to discuss certain subjects for reasons of social, moral or religious propriety. Examples include the discourse on death in all societies (Gorer, 1965, Walter, 1991) or on sex in traditional African settings. Taboos can be absolute when they are both behavioural and conversational. The severity of sanctions in the event of transgression is therefore linked to the violation of one or both of these dimensions.

The third consensus dimension of taboo is its contagious nature, which is recognized by all the disciplinary approaches discussed in this section. For anthropologists, any ordinary object that is exposed to a taboo object in turn becomes taboo, just as a person who transgresses a taboo is tabooed and subject to the same prohibition (Frazer, 1911, Van Gennep, 1904). Following in the footsteps of anthropologists, sociologists (Durkheim, 1915) and psychoanalysts (Freud, 1912) explain that, the social cohesion of a group can be jeopardized by a member who has violated a taboo, because he or she becomes a "numinous symbol, impure and dangerous" (Cazeneuve, 1971). In this way, purification constitutes a veritable therapy for the group, especially when it involves a serious taboo such as homicide or incest in Africa.

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Alongside these defining characteristics, which have been consensually studied by anthropologists, not all have addressed sociologists and psychoanalysts, two others that have been identified: the sacred/magical nature of taboo, and its ambivalent nature.

The sacred or magical nature of taboo is mostly tackled by anthropologists and sociologists, and not by psychoanalysis. For anthropologists, taboo is essentially a religious observance. Indeed, for Reinach (1906), the ordinary meaning of the word taboo is "sacred". Sociologists, on the other hand, distinguish between religious taboos and magical taboos (Durkheim, 1915, Cazeneuve, 1971). Magical taboos erect prohibitions on profane objects. Some sociologists, however, believe that not all taboos are sacred, and Smith (1889) already said that taboos concerning women or men who had touched a dead person had no connection with the gods. Durkheim (1915) considers that not all taboos can be restricted to religious taboos, unlike Gurvitch (1939), who asserts that taboos are religious and sacred. In the final analysis, taboos have a psychological and spiritual dimension for the authors. It is sacred when it emanates from purely religious considerations, and magical when it does not. But the question is, is tradition sacred or magical?

As for the ambivalence of taboo, it arises from a strong desire to perform an act forbidden by an external authority of recognized legitimacy. According to Freud (1912), taboo is "a forbidden action for which there exists in the unconscious a strong inclination". For example, taboos relating to the treatment of enemies combine feelings of hostility and admiration. Two responses can thus result from affective ambivalence: refuge in the norm by respecting the unconscious rules laid down by the superego or satisfaction of one's drive by rebelling against the norms (Sabri et al. (2010).

From this non-exhaustive review of the literature, and based on the tri-disciplinary research mentioned above, we can conclude that taboo refers to something forbidden in behaviour or conversation, whether sacred or not, which is very often accepted in a given culture, and whose transgression is likely to result in sanctions commensurate with the seriousness perceived by society.

“Mystical Practices” A Definition for The Informal Sector

The study of taboo practices by VSEs can be situated in the vast field of business ethics, in the sense that the term taboo refers globally to the prohibition whose transgression by an individual requires sanctions of one or more kinds defined by the society to which he or she belongs. A taboo is a cultural phenomenon. It is nevertheless essential to clarify the demarcation made in this discussion, to indicate that taboo practices relating to the unfair behaviour of VSEs are not concerned. In fact, this category includes deceptive and aggressive practices.

Misleading practices include misleading or false information about marketed products, partial or unintelligible information about a product's main feature, information confusing the product with another, false credibility on the part of the company (it claims to have authorization, approval or certification, when in fact it does not, etc.).

Aggressive practices are the result of insistence or the use of physical or moral coercion, such as altering the customer's freedom of choice, hindering the exercise of a contractual right, or misleading consent. Unfair commercial practices, on the other hand, are very often verifiable and punishable by criminal penalties.

The infringement of a taboo in a context of commercial practice by a company has often been studied and concerns the offer of a taboo exchange, the promotion of taboo products, or even more often advertising provocation by exploiting a taboo theme (Manceau and Tissier-Debordes, 2006; Vezina and Paul, 1997, Pope, Voges and Brown, 2004; Belk, 2005). Sabri et al (2010), point out that there is virtually no research on consumer behaviour "when confronted with a taboo object, in order to explore the role of the influence of subjective norms on the acceptance of the taboo exchange or purchase, or on post-purchase consumption behaviour in different situational contexts". These authors highlight the lack of research into the reactions of consumers in general when confronted with a situation of behavioral or conversational prohibition. We complement this concern, to explore the transgression of the forbidden, through the practice of informal VSEs, and as this is a subject that has only been partially addressed in marketing to date. We stay with the mystical taboo (sacred or profane) to explore the existence of mystical practices by VSEs, and the perception that these microenterprises (or micro entrepreneurs) have of the effectiveness of factors in achieving their commercial and strategic objectives. In the African environment, a study that alludes to this in quick succession is that carried out by Bilguissou (2016). Who, studying marketing practices in the Cameroonian informal sector, examines the apprehension of retailers in this sector and finds that taboo practices are indeed evoked, including "those consisting of the belief in the existence of mystical practices (against competitors and customers) linked to witchcraft (51.35%), cults (45.32%), charms on customers (44.54%)" (p. 280). These figures suggest that taboo practices are truly present in the business strategies of informal sector operators, since practically half of all stakeholders believe this to be the case. The effectiveness of these practices on the performance of players has not been addressed, and it is important to also explore what influence perceived mystical taboos may have on customer attraction and loyalty, as well as on the leadership of the VSE in the informal sector. The evocation of taboos and their impact on consumer behaviour has already been studied in corporate communication practices (Manceau and Tissier-Debordes, 2006).

Mystical practice is the specific taboo used in this reflection to discuss one of the informal dimensions, in our view, of the exploitation of culture in the marketing practices of VSEs in a specific African context, and informal practices in general, and the perception of this dimension as a determinant of commercial performance. Originally, mysticism refers to the knowledge of mystery or a mystery, i.e., a belief in the efficacy of forces or influences that are imperceptible to the common senses, yet real (Morfaux L.M., 1980; P.230. https://www.cnrtl.fr). Practice, on the other hand, refers to a type of behaviour with several interconnected elements, ranging from forms of bodily and mental activity, things and their use, basic knowledge consisting of understanding, expertise, emotional states and motivations (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249; https://www.journals.openedition.org). Based on these two concepts, we define "mystical practice" as a behaviour or set of visible or invisible behaviours (prayer, spiritual) of an individual or group of individuals that have real effects on their beliefs, but which cannot be discerned by the common sense.

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METHODOLOGY

The field approach adopted here consisted in observing, so as to better understand them, the behaviours and attitudes of a group of bayam-sellams in local markets in the African environment. The qualitative aspect was chosen in particular as it enables the production and analysis of descriptive data such as written or spoken words and people's observational behaviour (Taylor and Bogdan (1984). It is a suitable approach here, given that we were exploring the meaning given to the scope of a social behavioural phenomenon in a natural environment. It did not require a large sample size, in keeping with Thiétart's (2003) distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches. Our aim here is to gain an insight into the effectiveness of the so-called irrational or supposedly irrational commercial practices of the bayam sellam in African local markets. The irrational side of business practices is often overlooked in research. In our opinion, this is done deliberately, so as not to test the scientific nature of the results that may emerge. However, people in their natural environment tend to exploit cultural aspects, not all of which are rational, to achieve objectives they can identify and quantify. As Wacheux (1996) points out, the choice of units of analysis is fundamental, as they delimit the space within which the study takes place. In fact, the units of analysis appear to be connected to the study and the questions it raises.

For the purposes of this study, we surveyed 24 bayam sellams, selected on the basis of a number of criteria in four local markets in the city of Douala, Cameroon: seven (07) in Nkololoun, five (05) in Bonamoussadi, seven (07) in ndogpassi and five (05) in cité-sic. These markets were chosen for reasons of proximity and opportunity for dialogue given by the local traders. This type of market is widespread in African cities and has the same characteristics in terms of actors (Ndebi, 2020). On the other hand, two important criteria were considered for the selection of the bayam sellams: experience in the trade and time spent in the current market (stability in the market).

Thus, an average of five (05) years in the trade and at least one (01) year's stability in the market were required to belong to our sampling.

We conducted interviews lasting an average of one hour in their workplace whenever possible, but very often in a somewhat discreet location given the sensitivity of the subject. We met some of them at home, mainly on weekends, and others in a small drinking establishment (of which there are several inside the market), during the rare breaks they often set aside for themselves. We usually waited until closing time, which is often around 5 p.m. local time, to talk to them. In a few rare cases, a bayam sellam agreed to respond to our request while she was selling. In this case, the interview lasted longer because of the multiple interruptions linked to her activities.
These interviews were preceded by several visits during which we observed that bayam sellams located side-by-side selling the same products had different, and in some cases disproportionate, connections. This could be better explained by a customer approach for those who had more affluence, or a much better merchandise layout. Nevertheless, our attention was drawn to a few recurring expressions in the corridors, such as *"humm! I can't believe this one, every day someone is always selling, even when the market is hard and dry"; "is it still the same business that I do myself, or it's something else"; "I don't understand, while I unpack bails once a week, this woman unpacks daily, whereas she doesn't do anything special compared to the rest of*

us". We have also observed the veracity of these observations ourselves on a number of occasions, during our repeated visits to the Nkololoun market in particular.

Néanmoins nous avons fait dans l'ensemble le tour des thèmes de discussion prévus chaque fois jusqu'à saturation.

Nonetheless, we worked our way through the planned discussion themes fully, to the point of saturation.

The interview guide was structured around four main themes.

- Identification of the bayam sellam.
- Knowledge and, if applicable, mystical practices observed or known about.
- Perception of the commercial effectiveness of these practices (indicators of effectiveness, recurrence, etc.)
- Perception of the link between practice and commercial effectiveness.

Table 1: Sample Presentation

Identification	Experience	Specialization	Lenth of stay in the market
Ernest, 35 years	5 years	Green Spices	3 years
Edwige, 38 years	10 years +	Fresh Food	6 years
Jacqueline, 30 years	10 years	Irish Potatoes	7 years
Marie Paule, 35 years	5 years	Spices	4 years
Cécile, 25 years	10 years	Fresh Fish	7 years
Sylvie, 35 years	5 years	Fresh Food	5 years
Pouga, 32 years	8 years	Fruits	8 years
Collette, 43 years	10 years +	Friperie	10 years
Michelle, 45 years	10 years +	Friperie	3 years
Simplice, 37 years	5 years	Fresh Food	1 year
Florian, 42 years	10 years +	Butcher	10 years
Joseph, 25 years	5 years	Fresh Fish	2 years
Jean -Jacques, 30 years	6 years	Eggs	6 years
Jean-Pierre, 40 years	8 years	Fresh Food	5 years
Chantal, 35 years	5 years	Green Spices	2 years
Ghislaine, 30 years	10 years	Fruits	5 years
Gabriel, 25 years	6 years	Fresh Food	3 years
Nadine, 27 years	10 years	Spices	6 years
Paul, 23 years	5 years	Roadside Book Vendor	4 years
Georgette, 30 years	5 years	Fresh Food	5 years
Emmanuel, 28 years	10 years	Oil	8 years
Georges, 32 yearss	7 years	Spices	7 years
Victorine, 36 years	5 years	Smoked Fish	3 years
Hamadou, 30 years	10 years +	Butcher	10 years +

We adopted content analysis as our method of data analysis, basing ourselves on the themes discussed and the verbal responses from the interviews. This method completes the active and direct observation made in the field.

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MAIN RESULTS

The Effectiveness of Mystical Practices in Local Markets in the Informal Sector

From the conversations with the bayam sellams from the markets in our sample, it can be observed that 21 of them, or 86%, answered in the affirmative to the question *"Do you think merchants do evil practices to sell?",* as against 3 who answered in the negative. According to the latter category, *"the real magic is work"* (Victorine, 36). Therefore, the presence of mystical practices seems to be a relatively well-known reality. While some people say they "hear these practices in the market", others are unequivocal. For Jean-Pierre (40), a fresh food vendor at the Cité-Sic market, "these practices are our daily lot here at the market".

Overall, six (06) major forms of common practice emerged from the interviews. These are: throwing money to the ground (25% of quotes), jujube in the purse (40%); prayer (40%); magic potions (25%), buried objects (30%), others (35%).

- The first customer's money thrown to the ground. This practice consists in asking the vendor's first customer not to hand over the money in hand, but to throw it to the ground, from where the latter will see to the amount from the first transaction of the day. This ritual assures and blesses the trader's day.
- Jujube in the wallet. Jujube also known as alakata pepper, is the fruit of a small wild plant. In this fruit, there are black spikes or seeds, which, according to the bayam sellams, has the power to protect against spiritual occurrences, such as the disappearance of money with no logical explanation, or even to bring good luck to those who possess it. This practice common, in local markets. Jujube is often found where the trader keeps money, and always in his *"poosa",* i.e., his purse or wallet. Most bayam sellams agreed to have jujube in their purse at all times, either whole or seeds. *"I put it in my poosa before I leave the house. I change the fruit when the one I had dries out,"* confides Nadine (27) a bayam sellam in business for about 10 years.
- Prayer: here, prayer is an act of faith that consists in presenting the problems we face to an invisible power, generally God, trusting that these problems will be resolved by this mystical power. They are usually Christian vendors of all denominations and Muslims. Prayer can be accompanied by actions and even "sacred" elements that materialises faith and mystical power. Salt, holy water and even anointed oil (among others) is often sprinkled in the business place (counter, bench, chair, etc.). This practice is done either in the morning, when the merchandise is being set up, or in the evening, when the business closes.
- Les The objects or "fetishes" are either "magic potions", "strange powders" or even "objects" that traders display, bury or sprinkle in the competitor's place or in their own place. The "sacred bench" is also a part of this category of mystical support observed by traders in local markets. It's a bench sacralised by incantations or other invocations that are said to protect the shopkeeper while at the same time attracting customers. For example, a vendor might say of her neighbour: *"Humm! This lady is so protective of her seat as though it were an egg, we will one day know the real story of that seat!!!*", to signify that her neighbour was so protective of her bench that it seems abnormal. The posture is one of defence against competitors' attacks or of capture when it is done in the competitor's place or both results at once.

- In the case of objects, for example, you'll often see bird feathers or objects wrapped in plastics, hanging over the front door of a store, constituting at first sight a scarecrow with real or supposed power.
- The pregnant woman as the first customer of the day. The comment that comes up every time we approached the pregnant woman as a customer, as suggested to us by direct observations and comments from the bayam sellams, was often something like this: *"Yes, every time a pregnant woman is my first customer and it doesn't matter how much she'll take, I'll sell that same day, what I often sell either in two days or three days, sometimes the whole week depending on the period!"* (Emmanuel, 28, 10 years in the field) or maybe *"it was my day because it was a pregnant woman who launched the day's business"* (Sylvie, 35, 5 years in the field).
- Under "others ", the practices cited include: pins in the purse, purification by bathing in village streams, refusing to greet neighbours at the market in the morning (as neighbours can draw our luck), sacrificing to the skulls of our ancestors, etc.

Following this belief in spirituality, as the key to performance and competitiveness, the bayam sellams of local markets also base their performance on rational aspects, which very often derive from common sense and experience. We have not noticed that some of them have undergone training in this area. We can thus note that what determines the choice of selling a product can be broken down into seven reasons: the level of business capital, advice, revelation, introduction to the basics of selling, the speed of product turnover, the level of profitability of the goods, the speciality of the moment.

We therefore realise that the low level of business capital, the recommendation of an acquaintance, initial introduction to the trade, the acceptance of the product by the market, the profitability of the product and market demand are all part of a logical business approach, whereas the reality is rather mystical. Some of these realities happen thanks to "novenas, spiritual fasts and prayers that I often do so that the spirit will guide me towards the merchandise I want to sell, so that I don't invest in a business that doesn't work out or that risks making me lose money, and often it works! (Georgette, 30 years old, fresh food seller, 5 years in the field).

Similarly, the decision to set up in a market isn't made by chance. Geographical proximity, commercial value (strong clientele), sponsorship and the existence of the associates all play a part in the decision to set up a market. At this level, the mystical aspect does not seem to be a determining factor.

The Perceptive of The Commercial Effectiveness of Mystical Practices in Local Markets in the Informal Sector

86% of traders interviewed, agreed that mystical practices have an impact on sales.

Bayam sellams consider these mystical practices as catalysts for business efficiency, and cite "attracting of customers" (13 occurrences), "building customer loyalty" (8 occurrences) and "other" (3 occurrences) as their main reasons for using these practices.) We can also point out that these practices are not only offensive, with the aim of achieving a tangible result such as attracting customers and securing their loyalty; they are also part of a competitive strategy that

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consists of eliminating the nearest competitor regardless of the type of competition that exists. *"In most cases, it's the charm effect that many shopkeepers use, either under their neighbour's counter in a mystical way to block her neighbor's sales chances and attract her customers, regardless of whether they sell the same merchandise or not, with the sole aim of boosting their sales"* (Victorine, 36; 5 years' experience, smoked fish vendor). Some of these practices are purely defensive, as they destroy and counteract the effect of competitors' attacks. For example: *"Holy water, blessed salt and prayers are all used to purify the shop or business place, to cancel out anything that might have been done to prevent me from selling"* (Edwige, 38; over 10 years' experience, fresh food seller). Some traders put the jujube in their purse either *"to keep their money safe in their purse to prevent anyone from mystically tapping into their earnings, or to prevent anyone from tapping into their blessing, or to protect themselves against any bad attacks, ward off evil spirits..."* Jean-Pierre, 40; 8 years in the field, fresh food vendor). We can also note this very pertinent reflection from Mama Michelle (45 years old, more than 15 years in the field, thrift shop vendor) *"some of us sprinkle powders or magic potions on our counters or those of our neighbours, bury mystical objects and sometimes bizarre plants either underneath our own counters in order to attract more customers than we used to. You know, when you are passing through the market, you often make spontaneous purchases, even though the products you buy are of little or no use to you, and you usually regret it afterwards!"* This last case is edifying because it leads us to a conclusion about the so-called mystical commercial practices of bayam sellams and, above all, about their commercial effectiveness. This observation is that the same practices can contribute to achieving offensive or defensive results, depending on the user's attitude towards the real motivations behind these practices and the words used to achieve them. The use and power of words are thus summoned here as what orients the sense of effectiveness of the practice. The perception of the effectiveness of mystical practices by bayam-sellams does not overshadow the reality of rational practices and their effectiveness. Thus, the objective of customer satisfaction and consequently customer loyalty are associated with normal acts such as communication, a good attitude towards customers to turn them into "assos", product quality, price discounts, hospitality, selling on credit, and honesty in measuring instruments. These practices, which can be described as rational, are also perceived by bayam-sellams as effective in attracting and retaining customers.

DISCUSSION and Conclusion

The present study is an extension of the numerous studies already carried out on the informal sector, on business practices in informal sector VSEs in Africa, and on the business performance of VSEs in this sector. This extension has enabled us to understand that in this sector, bayam-sellams adopt both rational, orthodox practices in their sales and marketing approach, and irrational practices, perceived as mystical and therefore culturally taboo. Some of these so-called mystical practices are rooted in local culture, while others emanate from foreign religious sources (Christianity, Islam among others).

The main mystical practices identified are the use of objects, rituals and prejudices. Among the objects used are: jujube, a local fruit; "charms", which can be magic powders; magic potions; pins; the sacred seat; holy water; blessed salt and so on. As far as rituals are concerned, the following have been observed: the throwing of money on the ground by the first customer; prayer, which is an act of faith; washing with water, which is a ritual for purification from negative forces in most African cultures. Beliefs in the efficacy of a ritual or behavior, based on

the fact that we have received information from lateral sources (relatives, friends, colleagues) which is supposed to have a certain impact on our objectives. The most cited preconception is of "the pregnant woman" as the first customer who would bring good luck for the day.

The first purpose of this research is to show that in the African informal sector, business practices are at the crossroads of managerial rationality and managerial irrationality, as expressed by business practices that are both taboo and mystical, and therefore highly culturally influenced.

The second aspect, in my view, concerns the perception of the effectiveness of irrational or unorthodox business practices on the commercial performance of these stakeholders, particularly in terms of two main indicators: winning over customers and safeguarding commercial success in terms of customer loyalty. Another indicator, however, concerns the defense against commercial or mystical attacks from competitors. In fact, some practices are defensive, while others are offensive. Some practices are both offensive and defensive, and the use of words is the determining factor in demarcation. In other words, the meaning of incantations guides the impact of the practice as intended by the incantator. One research proposal is that: commercial practices and their perceived effectiveness are influenced by people's spirituality.

Finally, the bayam sellams interviewed are aware of the relevance of rational sales and marketing practices and their impact on the performance indicators they often observe. However, none of the bayam sellams approached had any training in the field, but the seven main reasons cited for choosing a product to sell were business capital level, advice, enlightenment, basic sales orientation, product turnover rate, profitability level and current market specialization. Communication, the right attitude towards customers, a warm welcome, product quality, ethics and a low-price strategy all help to attract customers and build loyalty. In the African context, supply-side players mobilize both rational and spiritual cultural aspects in their commercial practices. This latter dimension of business practices has not been mentioned in research yet, or has been avoided by researchers. One relevant reason is that this dimension is neither easy to grasp nor easy to assess, and is therefore subjective. Cameroon being a multicultural country, restricting the study to the city of Douala alone poses a problem of representativeness, even if the region is highly cosmopolitan. The methodological approach is therefore a serious limitation to the relevance of the results. However, in our approach, we have put this limitation into perspective, given that it is a question of what is done and the perception of the effect of what is done on a certain number of results. One prospect would be to carry out the study on a large scale and define instruments for assessing and modelling this dimension in bayam sellam business practices. This would make it possible to specifically identify the weight of the mystical dimension in achieving the business performance objectives of these traders.

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