The African entrepreneurial spirit

This chapter shifts from the “vertical slice” (Nader 1980) of the implementation process to the perspective of civil servants’ everyday experiences. It takes a horizontal perspective and explores the interconnections between the spheres of work, private business enterprises and farming in order to understand the motives, desires and dilemmas of Malawian civil servants in the times of good governance and the free market.

The same World Bank report that identified “bad governance” as one of the causes of lagging African economic growth praised the potential of African entrepreneurship as one of the main forces stimulating economic growth. The report sketched a particularly favourable picture of the “dynamism of the informal sector”. The authors considered the informal sector as a “seedbed” for a capitalist free market economy that “thrives because of its responsiveness to market forces” (World Bank 1989: 135-147).

While I was spending time in government offices in Lilongwe and Zomba I could observe this African entrepreneurial spirit in practice. The offices were hubs of all kinds of commercial transactions, places where deals were being made, goods were being sold and merchandise was being traded over the desks. Virtually all civil servants I met in the course of my fieldwork were engaged in some kind of commercial activity – often informal and usually during working hours. Business was one of the buzzwords on everybody’s lips and, together with advances and allowances, formed “the Holy Trinity of the good civil servant”, as one of my friends pointed out sarcastically.
This was certainly not the kind of entrepreneurial spirit the authors of the World Bank report had in mind when they mentioned “public service employees seeking to supplement their official incomes” as an important group of entrepreneurs (World Bank 1989: 139). A World Bank study of the Malawian civil service in 1994 lamented Malawian civil servants’ poor performance. It stated:

Until about 1992, such indicators of low productivity as idleness, late arrival and early departure to and from the office, absenteeism and moonlighting were much less in evidence in Malawi compared to many other sub-Saharan African countries. However, there is increasing evidence that these negative attitudes to work are gaining ground. This new trend is confirmed in the recent management audit […]. The study revealed that slack time among the staff […] exceeds 30 per cent. Therefore, there may still be significant opportunities for improving the manning levels and productivity in the Malawian civil service (World Bank 1994b: 27).

And indeed, instead of discharging their official duties many a Malawian civil servant moonlighted and spent time in the garden to grow food. However, this display of African entrepreneurial spirit did not stimulate economic growth as predicted by the authors of the 1989 World Bank report. On the contrary, for most of my informants business had become a necessary means to fend off the effects of a severe economic crisis that had deepened since democratisation in 1994. Several devaluations of the Kwacha and a high inflation rate of about 30 per cent had eroded salaries. Jobs and privileges, once taken for granted, were threatened, as the previous chapter illustrates. For most civil servants business was a desperate attempt to keep alive a dream of modest wealth and material security. The scope of this dream was quite bourgeois: building a house, acquiring furniture, providing the children with a good education so that they can lead a better life and enjoy the amenities of “modern” or “civilized” urban life.

By the late 1990s, this dream had become increasingly difficult to realise and a government job did not command the same respect as it had in the past. Many of my informants complained about the loss of respect since democratisation; one complained that even “the vendors at the market look down on us civil servants and the little money we earn”. Instead of acting out Banda’s ideal of the diligent, obedient and loyal servant, many civil servants adopted the cunning and successful entrepreneur as a role model.

The high inflation rate, the general economic malaise and the civil service reform all contributed to a profound sense of insecurity among civil servants, a section of the population that had previously enjoyed the privilege of state employment and the security that came with it. The experience of crisis was a dominant feature of everyday life not only in Malawi but throughout Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s. Most parts of the continent had been in the grip of economic decline since the 1980s. Mbembe & Roitman, for example, sketch