



# Cultural Imprints in Africa and their Impact on Business Life

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*“Africa provides a comprehensive and contiguous time line of human development going back at least 7 million years. Africa, which developed the world’s oldest human civilization, [...] is the home of the first tools, astronomy, jewellery, fishing, mathematics, crops, art, use of pigments, cutting and other pointed instruments and animal domestication. In short, Africa gave the world human civilization.” (Pan-African Perspective, n.d.).*

## Abstract

Successful investing and trade require knowledge primarily about the culture in the “target country” or the “target culture”. From the past, managers and investors have learned that knowledge about culture and manners, the so-called *business etiquette*, can be converted into hard cash. However, intercultural trainings, which are supposed

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to prepare business people for the African market and the culture of potential counterparts, are a questionable undertaking. This chapter presents alternative perspectives that are considered central to the success of a business or project on this continent.

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## 8.1 Africa for Managers—Questionable “How to” Approaches for Intercultural Communication

Successful investing and trade require knowledge primarily about the culture in the “target country” or the “target culture”. From the past, managers and investors have learned that knowledge about culture and manners, the so-called *Business Etiquette*, can be converted into hard cash. Particularly the experiences in the Asian markets with customs and ways of life perceived as very foreign have sensitized managers to this. From the booming field of intercultural training, there are now also those who are expected to prepare business people for the African market and the culture of potential counterparts. This is a questionable undertaking, as will be shown in the following. Based on this, alternative perspectives will be presented, which are considered central to the success of a business or project on this continent.

Hardly any company or so-called sending organizations (such as GIZ, BMZ or diplomatic service etc.) send specialists and executives abroad unprepared today. To avoid a possibly costly “Clash of Civilisations” or a “Culture Shock”, great effort is made from role-playing to case studies and multi-day training courses. The concern: Own employees could step into cultural faux pas in the target country and thus possibly complicate business or endanger cooperation. Culture is understood here synonymously with “manners”, as a kind of foreign language that the learner can acquire and then apply successfully.

The most popular approach on the European market is that of the Dutch authors Fons Trompenaars and Jan Geert Hofstede. Both understand culture as a measurable and comparable, almost completed national unit, from which members of a nation cannot escape. Culture is understood as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 2001 p. 4), or more directly: “Culture is to society what personality is to an individual” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 10). According to Hofstede’s main work “*Culture’s Consequences—International Differences in Work Related Values*” from 1980, culture can be represented and compared using six pairs of opposites. These are:

1. Power Distance: This measures how strongly individuals accept and expect the unequal distribution of power. In nations where power distance is low, flat hierarchies prevail, superiors are accessible, their decisions can be criticized.
2. Individualism/Collectivism: This measures how much individual rights and interests are protected and how the individual is valued in relation to society/community. Is the group or the individual more important? Is there a strong sense of community or is it more a nation of individualists?

3. Masculinity/Femininity: According to Hofstede, national cultures can also be more feminine (caring, cooperative and modest) or more masculine (confident and competitive).
4. Uncertainty Avoidance: According to Hofstede, national cultures also differ in their handling of uncertainty, or the avoidance of the same. Uncertainty avoidance, according to Hofstede, is expressed through increased written laws, guidelines, safety measures. The members are more emotional and nervous.
5. Long-term versus short-term orientation: Only later included in the Hofstede canon, this indicator measures whether and to what extent a society/nation plans ahead in time.
6. Indulgence and Restraint: This is intended to measure the role of leisure and idleness versus self-control.

Hofstede's understanding of culture and the methodology with which he subsequently measured cultures using these pairs have received massive criticism (for example McSweeney, 2002, pp. 89–119).

The topics of time and family are good examples to illustrate the inadequacies of this approach. Hofstede's ideas and especially the clear division into different pairs of opposites, along which he measures and compares cultures, are unsurpassed in their reach and popularity. The Hofstede Centre he founded has made part of the dataset available online, so that cultures can be compared in the browser or via an app. A random sample from this online available Hofstede dataset about some African countries of different regions and types shows that the biggest differences to German culture lie in long-term orientation and individualism. The IHK Mittlerer Niederrhein, based on this, elaborates in long, so-called cultural profiles about the uncertainties and problems Germans would have to expect in African business cultures. In statements like "Tanzanians, if at all, only have a vague concept of time" or "As everywhere in Africa, only an indirect, rather vague communication style is considered polite" (IHK Niederrhein, n.d.), the IHK members are supposed to prepare for their stay abroad. Various publications, also originating from the field of management consulting, adopt Hofstede's terminology. According to them, the biggest problem between Germans and Africans is the different handling of time and appointments. In addition, there would be a different prioritization between private and professional. Africans, therefore, saw appointments more as a guideline that did not necessarily have to be adhered to, but only gave a rough temporal orientation. This would meet with great incomprehension among the Germans, who insist on punctuality and reliability. The same applies to the different communication style. While the Germans wanted to get to the point to be discussed immediately at a business meeting, Africans preferred to talk about their families and the weather first. Only when a certain basis of trust had been established would the topics considered essential from a German perspective be addressed. Family plays a much larger role in general, which means that part of private life is shifted into the profession and vice versa. African indulgence would meet German restraint, which would be reflected in the prioritization, especially

in family matters. It is already clearly recognizable here how superficial and ultimately little purposeful such a deterministic and latently racist fixation of cultural standards in a country can be.

While these supposedly very practical analyses seem to be well suited for the already tight time budget for preparing business contacts and meetings, they are full of pitfalls. They may be useful as aids to thought, to become aware at all of dimensions that exist in interpersonal communication. However, there are much more helpful approaches from communication science for this.

Ethnologists and social scientists hardly know Hofstede at all. The basic assumption of culture-comparative management research that “culture is measurable, can be represented in certain categories and can be operationalized for concrete instructions for action” (Hüsken, 2006, p. 65), is fundamentally rejected. It has been considered refuted in cultural studies since the early 1960s. Culture is therefore by no means a kind of national programming (as Hofstede puts it) that one can prepare for. Nor is the assumption of a static, homogeneous national character either accurate or helpful. In fact, people in Africa, like everywhere in the world, differ less along national borders than along their level of education; their age; whether they live in the country or in the city; whether they can actively participate in social and political life and individually feel that they have an influence on social developments, etc. Ethnology today rather assumes a coexistence of cultures in an individual, which can thus draw from a continuum of reactions and attitudes as well as speech acts. An East German chairman of a traditional costume association, for example, may have more in common in terms of his value orientation with a randomly chosen African than with a 35-year-old North German event manager. In addition, the national cultures depicted by Hofstede as static do indeed change. Migration, technology, trips abroad and also exchange semesters increase awareness of a kind of global standard everywhere in the world and create a global popular culture. Against this background, it can be extremely counterproductive to assume that the business contact sitting in front of you only responds to a certain approach or form of communication. In conclusion, it can be summarized that the idea of national cultures persists stubbornly because of its marketability, but is scientifically without any foundation. Hansen writes about this: “He [Hofstede’s approach] sins against all the progress that has been made since the sixties, and this piece of work has taught the incorrigible, who thought the concept of culture was nonsense. Those psychologists, sociologists and economists who only trust empirical analyses were convinced by Hofstede’s statistics that culture consists of hard facts that can be measured and weighed” (Hansen, 2000, p. 285).

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## 8.2 Demographic Influences on Culture in Business

The Western perception of culture in Africa is, to put it mildly, relatively limited. The continent, which comprises 54 countries, is often understood as a kind of monolithic cultural unit. Even more common and equally incorrect, however, is the cultural division

of the continent into North and Sub-Saharan Africa. The characterization of the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya against violent rulers in 2011 as the “Arab Spring” speaks volumes. Why was this not understood as an “African Spring”, even though it was clearly also uprisings against post-colonial authoritarianism, against the concentration of power and wealth, and against corruption (Johnson, 2015)? Viewing Africa from the perspective of cultural influences and accurately representing it also requires taking off the European glasses.

Outside of academic discourses, culture is mostly defined extensionally, that is, by listing what culture encompasses. These are usually ethnicities, religion, languages, art, etc. From these relatively easy to obtain “culture data”, quite reliable conclusions can be drawn about cultural influences and differences to business life in Europe.

In Africa, about 2138 different, distinct languages and idioms are spoken (the difficult distinction between language and dialects often makes a reliable count difficult). The continent is thus by far the most linguistically diversified on earth. They can be divided into four groups, albeit methodically inadequate, but for lack of a better alternative, according to Joseph Greenberg (1963): Afro-Asiatic with about 350 languages and 350 million speakers in North Africa and Western Asia. Niger-Congo with about 1400 languages and 370 million speakers in West, Central, and South Africa, Nilo-Saharan with about 200 languages and 35 million speakers from Sudan to Mali. Finally, Khoisan, the smallest group, with 28 languages and 355 thousand speakers mainly in western South Africa. Consequently, with a few exceptions, there is no country on the continent where the average inhabitant does not speak at least two to three different languages. This has a not to be neglected relevance in everyday work. Offices and companies where people work together who do not communicate in their mother tongue are more the norm than the exotic exception. Often English, French, Arabic, Portuguese, or Afrikaans are used as a lingua franca. At the same time, it also means that expression and forms of expression in professional life are often experienced as inadequate. This also affects the spelling in the auxiliary language/lingua franca. This situation also contains certain other dynamics. Understandably, employees of the same mother tongue find it enjoyable to converse with other colleagues with the same mother tongue. This can be bonding, but also reinforcing for bullying, mutinies, and other unpleasant developments. Ethnic conflicts often run along language borders, which can flare up in working life.

While the classification to certain mother tongues seems simple, the ethnic affiliation just mentioned is much more difficult and also delicate in comparison. Ethnicities are not present in nature, just like human races they are socially constructed, i.e. determined by humans. They overlap and overlay each other, they are difficult to distinguish at the edges and moreover easy to instrumentalize. In social research, this is referred to as the construction of in-groups and out-groups. Who belongs to a group or ethnicity cannot be decided by the individual concerned, but by those who have power in this group. Ethnic affiliation can also be constructed by powerful people outside the group. The most famous and tragic example of this are the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. The colonial power pushed the *Divide and Rule* principle so far here that they made two out of the relatively

homogeneous population of the colony that did not exist before. The deadly conflict that arose from this shows how stable such constructed identities still are almost a century after their “creation”.

Nevertheless, the perceived affiliation to an ethnic group represents an important part of a person’s personality. The traditions associated with it differ considerably within the continent and then again with possible business or cooperation partners from Europe. The latter refers in particular to the integration of traditions into today’s life. In the majority of African countries, great importance is attached to cultivating and emphasizing the traditions that are tied to ethnic affiliation. This does not stop at business life—and here is certainly one of the biggest differences in dealing with ethnicity and ethnic affiliation to most Europeans. A prime example from Namibia illustrates this: For the Herero, one of at least twelve ethnic groups in the country, livestock farming traditionally plays a major role. The size of the livestock is still used today to measure wealth. Herero who live in the cities and go to the office in suits and with iPads on weekdays, naturally say goodbye to the farm on weekends, where they follow the traditional lifestyle in their traditional clothing and in their villages. The perfection with which many Africans manage to live tradition and modernity at the same time is usually as surprising as it is impressive for European business people. Nevertheless, the thematization of this area can lead to considerable problems, precisely because Europeans have made attributions to ethnic affiliations that can be perceived by those affected as neither accurate nor flattering.

Without a doubt, religion plays a much larger role in everyday life in Africa than in Central Europe. Religion is omnipresent and by no means a private matter, but the subject of constant confessions and a constant point of reference in everyday life. With the colonization and Christianization by European powers as well as through missionary work and conquests by Arab powers, the formerly strong religions on the continent were pushed into the background. Many maps therefore basically depict the distribution of different religions on the continent in two colors, the north is depicted as Islamic and the area south of the Sahara as Christian dominated. Typically, such maps make it clear through hatching that there are influences from other religions. However, this representation is problematic. The currents of Christianity and Islam represented in Africa are so diverse that they sometimes hardly remind of their “main current”. There are very liberal and freedom-oriented variants of Christianity, especially in southern Africa (for example, the South African Catholic clergyman Desmond Tutu advocates marriage between same-sex couples). At the same time, there is also a rapidly growing number of followers of the so-called *Pentecostal* or *Born Again* churches, which also refer to Christianity and the Bible, but are strictly conservative in their views and have values and norms that ultimately strongly resemble those of very conservative Muslims. This concerns the role of women, dealing with homosexuality, educational issues and the role of physical punishment in this and in general up to very conservative modest clothing. At the same time as Christianity and Islam, many Africans also adhere to other religions in a context-

sensitive manner. Ancestor and voodoo beliefs play a significant role in large parts of Africa, and are part of the completely self-evident coexistence of attitudes and ideas that are difficult to reconcile with each other for people shaped by Europe.

The secularization of everyday and business life, as is familiar from Europe, is rather rare in Africa. Faith is omnipresent, emphasized, turned outward, and lived. Services of any kind last much longer than in Europe, some believers spend the entire Sunday or its equivalent in the houses of God. Partly considerable parts of the income go as donations into the churches, also and especially when the families own less.

Apart from some exceptions like parts of the Sahel zone, there are hardly any violent religious conflicts in the 55 countries of Africa. Often one can experience a completely unproblematic and conflict-free living and working together, in a team of Muslims, Lutheran and Catholic Christians, Pentecostals and religions based on ancestor worship. Employers or department heads who send Christmas greetings with explicit, long and meaningful Bible quotes, equally wish their Muslim employees a happy Sugar Festival and Allah's blessing. This lived tolerance is increasingly covered in the media by focusing on so-called Islamic terrorism and the supposed separation between Muslim north and Christian south, not only covered but also endangered.

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### 8.3 Cultural Imprint as *Zeitgeist*: Helpful for Cross-Cultural Contacts

As previously outlined, the understanding of culture as a kind of hard-coded programming of the mind is problematic. In the present context, culture should rather be understood as a specific view of the world, contexts, and one's own personal location in it. Thus defined, the cultural imprint of Africa can finally be grasped further than the conclusion previously touched upon and thus say something beyond empirical data.

With the economic upswing presented in this publication, there was a change in the way African publicists wrote about their countries and situations. Much discussed was the polemic of the Cameroonian publicist Axelle Kabou *Neither Poor nor Powerless* (in the original *Et si l'Afrique refusait le développement*, Kabou, 1991), in which she puts the responsibility for the desolate conditions in many countries of the continent into the hands of the Africans themselves. Unwilling, corrupt, and ignorant heads of state who rule over phlegmatic citizens are more the cause of grievances than the supposed exploitation of the continent by the West. Thabo Mbeki picked up this analysis in the late 90s and justified the need for an "African Renaissance":

"The thieves and their accomplices, the givers of the bribes and the recipients are as African as you and I. We are the corrupter and the harlot who act together to demean our Continent and ourselves.

The time has come that we say enough and no more, and by acting to banish the shame, remake ourselves as the midwives of the African Renaissance." (Mbeki, 1998).

In the aftermath and the extremely controversial intra-African discussion about the appropriateness of the analysis, a number of initiatives and plans were created, the most prominent of which was certainly the so-called NEPAD plan (New Partnership for Africa's Development). In it, the signing governments committed themselves to good governance, democracy, the protection of human rights, transparency, and reliability. Regardless of this, what remained as an echo on the continent was an increased self-confidence in the sense of perception of unused scope for design. This was the time when Chinese companies began to invest unconditionally on the continent compared to traditional development cooperation and funds, and a growing return to already existing "African Pride" movements.

This also explains why Muammar Gaddafi and Robert Mugabe are more idols than dictators or criminals for a not insignificant number of Africans. A new generation of political leaders, who often came from the Youth Leagues of the ruling party (like Julius Malema in South Africa or Job Amupenda in Namibia), are clearly anti-Western, partly racist in their statements, anti-capitalist, and value-conservative. They demand the expropriation of white farmers, reject liberal lifestyles as Western, and strive to construct a modern pan-African identity.

The examples mentioned show that, if there is not the one African culture, there is however a growing and important socio-political issue on the continent, namely what was or should be "African". A rapidly growing number of online magazines, blogs, and pages now write from an African perspective for African readers. The pages are typically called, for example, *The Africa they dont show you on TV* (a photo blog about African prosperity, about urban living spaces and tech-savvy people), *African Voices* (alternative news platform) or, very popular, *This is Africa*. Their *mission statement* reads as determined as searching:

"To refresh the world's view of Africa, correct misperceptions and shatter old stereotypes, by showing that what gives urban Africa its funk and vibe today is far removed from the tired and narrow clichés of safaris, traditional drums, corruption, poverty, war and disease. We do this through online and offline projects." (This is Africa: [o. J.](#))

It remains unclear what exactly the new African identity should be and for what purpose it is needed. However, the young African managers, creatives, and business people make one thing very clear, namely how they no longer want to be seen. This cultural imprint and the *mind set* is ultimately what European investors need to pay much more attention to than the right handshake or (memorized) learned from an intercultural seminar.

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