



## Culture harbours a lot of stumbling stones

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Entering the ECOWAS markets, one must be particularly aware of cultural differences, e.g. the sense of time, as cultural patterns – predictable behaviour of individuals within a certain community – and values are fundamentally different from Germany. The following article will deliver insight into this topic and shall provide you with some helpful tools to avoid a serious clash of cultures.

### Many Countries – Few Languages

Considering the fact that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) includes 15 member states, one of the first questions to arise may concern possible language hurdles. Fortunately, the only 3 lingua franca are French, English and Portuguese; much fewer languages when than compared to the European Union. However, French is the most spoken language in the ECOWAS, whereas Portuguese is only used in Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau. Therefore, in consideration of future business negotiations, it is advisable to at least have one person among your employees who has a good command of French.



Figure 1: French is a dominant language in the ECOWAS

Please also keep in mind that you might stumble over problems arising from the fact that more than 40 different indigenous languages are spoken in the area. This might lead to communication problems, especially when dealing with lower hierarchy levels, e.g. in the fields of production.

## Doing the splits between Islam and Christianity

As someone living in a secular country valuing Christian traditions, one should consider the fact that **Muslims** constitute the majority of the population in ECOWAS. This, in fact, may greatly affect consumption and demand, for example during Ramadan and Christmas season. To give an example, let us assume that you are a manufacturer of toys and you predicted a sales peak for December due to the forthcoming Christmas season and therefore increased your production. Now that December has come, you might be fairly disappointed to see that your sales are not booming as estimated, which is due to the fact that Christmas is of lower importance in Muslim countries. Therefore, in order to succeed economically in the countries of ECOWAS, it is essential to gather information about their religious ceremonies and traditions.

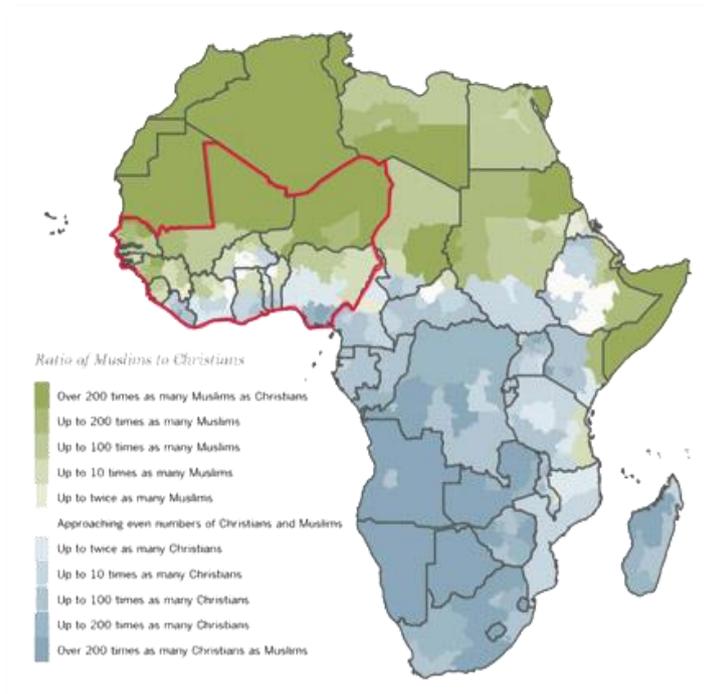


Figure 2: Muslims and Christians in Africa

## Cultural Iceberg right ahead

Until now, we have only regarded the tip of the iceberg. Diving a little deeper, there is a lot more beneath the surface and your business is likely to get damaged when it crashes into this part. Social scientists – like Geert Hofstede who is one of the leading scientists when it comes to cultural sciences – conducted helpful studies on how **values** are influenced by culture, especially in the working environment. The well-known cultural dimensions theory by Hofstede includes the six-dimension model, which provides a means for quantifying and comparing cultural values among different populations:

- **Power Distance** – The extent to which people accept a hierarchical order.
- **Individualism** – The degree of interdependence among members of a society.
- **Masculinity/ Femininity** – Masculinity indicates that a society is driven by competition, achievement and success, whereas a feminine society embraces values like quality of life and caring for others.

- **Uncertainty Avoidance** – The extent to which members of a culture are threatened by unknown situations.
- **Pragmatism** – How societies maintain links to their past while dealing with the present and the future.
- **Indulgence** – The extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses.

## Many Differences between Germany and ECOWAS

The bar chart below remarkably illustrates that between Germany and ECOWAS, there is a fundamentally different concept of values. However, it should be kept in mind that customs can vary not only from country to country but also from village to village.

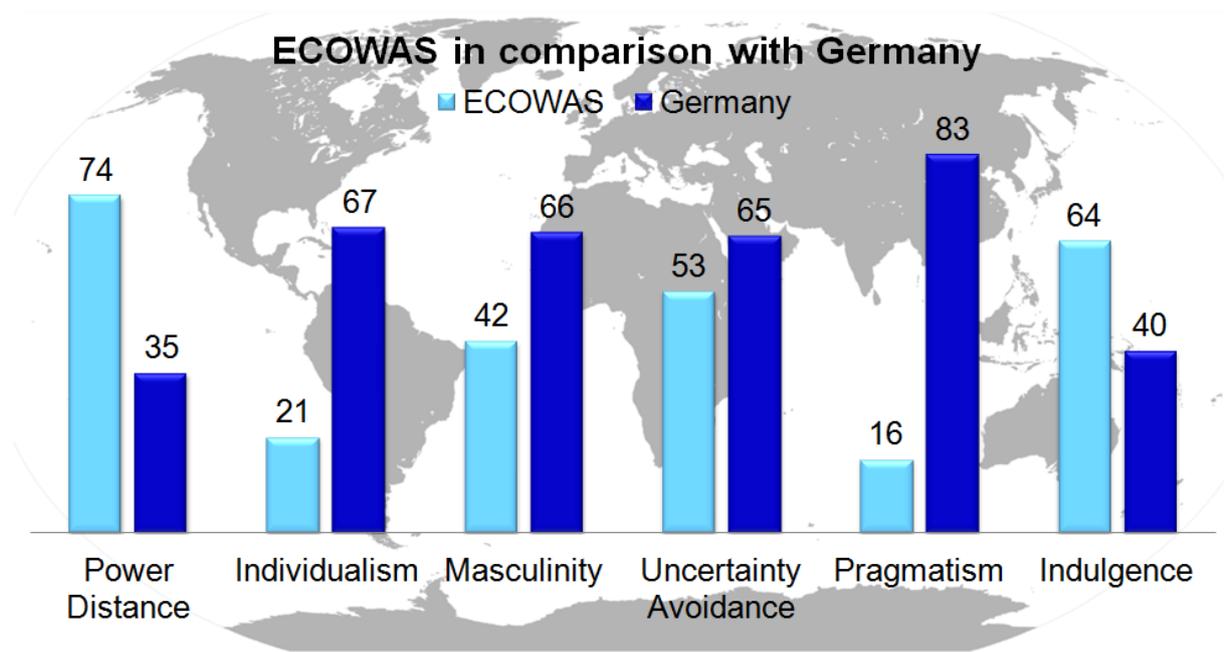


Figure 3: Cultural tendencies of Germany compared to the average of 8 ECOWAS member states.

While Germany is a strongly individualistic country with a **low power distance**, where direct and participative communication is highly appreciated and loyalty is based on personal preferences, the countries of ECOWAS are strongly **collectivistic** and are used to a high power distance. This means that subordinates expect to be told what they have to do and offence leads to shame and a certain loss of face. People belong to social groups whose members look after each other in exchange for loyalty. Being an outsider, it might be difficult to enter these social structures.

This is also related to the fact that countries within ECOWAS harbour more **feminine values** like caring for each other and paying attention to quality of life instead of living in order to work, which is the dominating value in German society. Regarding the aspect of **uncertainty avoidance**, there is no clear tendency within the community. However, some countries like Cape Verde score low in this dimension, which results in more improvisation and acceptance of novelties in general.

In contrast, Cape Verde is also a good example in terms of the **pragmatism** dimension as the member states of ECOWAS are clearly normative societies. This means that people prefer to maintain their traditions and norms; they are not likely to save up money for the future and want to achieve quick results.

This is also based on the fact that West African societies are **indulgent**, which means that they are optimistic about their future and want to enjoy their lives. However, the fact that leisure time is really important to them – in sharp contrast to a work-oriented German society that also clearly distinguishes between private and work life – can potentially lead to conflicts, for instance within the scope of project work.

### **Tripping Hazards also in Business**

After having read about the differences in culture, there are also some important business habits that one should be familiar with when dealing with companies in the ECOWAS. First of all, especially the francophone countries prefer using checks instead of remittances when **making payment**. Apart from that, credit cards are used frequently.

Considering the **sense of time**, Germans are known for their punctuality and the strict separation between work time and personal time. As expected, this is different in the West African countries. Work hours are a lot more flexible and people tend to have their mobiles switched on even when they have already left their office. Thus, in urgent cases, it is possible to reach your business partners even in the evenings.

Since the sense of time among the West African community is vastly different in comparison to German standards, there is a certain possibility that payment is not made on time or products do not arrive in time. This issue must be clearly regulated in your contracts. However, when it comes to the **value of contracts**, German companies typically implement them strictly, whereas contracts in West African countries commonly provide a basis for negotiation. Therefore, make sure that you and your partner are on the same page when concluding a contract.

Another topic you should thoroughly discuss with your business partners in ECOWAS is the **quality of products**. High quality is considered a basic requirement in Germany and although West African countries clearly prefer high quality over cheap prices, most of the population cannot afford it. Therefore, it is recommendable to figure out with your partners how to offer a good quality product at a relatively low price.

### **Finally “going ECOWAS”**

When you or your employees finally get literally in touch with your business partners from ECOWAS, the following dos and don'ts should be kept in mind:

- **Use right hand only or both hands**  
Since the left hand is considered unclean, this is very important when receiving presents, business cards or when eating.
- **Shake hands with a warm, welcoming smile**  
Don't rush a greeting. At least ask about the general well-being.
- **Compliment your host's home and belongings**  
When being invited, the host wants to impress you. Therefore, compliments are a way of being polite.
- **First eat, then talk**  
Generally, the talking is reserved for after finishing eating, especially when it comes to business.

- **Maintain an open mind**

Most important thing, as there might occur situations where you are confronted with totally unknown circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

Within the scope of this article, we can only slightly scratch the topic of cultural differences. Keep in mind that ECOWAS is as multifarious as the European Union, and that habits as well as values may differ from country to country or from village to village within ECOWAS. So please carefully watch your business partner's actions, and always be respectful and considerate. If you feel insecure about a cultural issue, do not hesitate to ask for advice!

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*The Hofstede Center's Country Comparison Tool – [www.geert-hofstede.com/countries.html](http://www.geert-hofstede.com/countries.html)*

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