

What can Ivorian entrepreneurs teach us about building ventures on colonial foundations?

Six Ivorian entrepreneurs rework colonial legacies through faith, culture and community finance.

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In Daloa, in the cocoa belt of western Côte d'Ivoire, stands a warehouse built to hold crops waiting for the train to the coast. From there the beans went to French ports and French chocolate makers. The building now houses a small processing business. Its owner buys wet beans from 120 smallholders, dries them with solar power and sells single-origin chocolate under an Ivorian brand. He calls it reversing "the direction of the railway."

That phrase captures what a new study set out to explain. Most entrepreneurship theory pictures a lone founder chasing opportunity in a market that is neutral, secular and free of history. In Côte d'Ivoire that picture fits badly. The CFA franc, a currency born in the colonial era, still ties monetary policy to French oversight, the study notes. Transport links, legal codes and banking rules were designed for export and extraction. And most founders answer to their community and their faith as much as to their customers.

Two questions drive the research. How have colonial and postcolonial histories shaped the way Ivorians build businesses? And which cultural and religious forces shape that engagement, reinforcing or challenging conventional models of entrepreneurship?

WHAT WE STUDIED

The research takes a decolonial perspective. In plain terms, it questions whether concepts such as "innovation", "opportunity" and "value creation", developed largely in Western business schools, capture what entrepreneurship means elsewhere. Instead of

testing an existing model in an African setting, the study treats Ivorian founders as people who produce their own theories of value and legitimacy.

The evidence comes from in-depth interviews, held online in 2023 and 2024, with six entrepreneurs based in Abidjan and in the regional towns of Daloa and Bouaké. Each conversation ran for one to two hours in French and was later translated into English.

The six were chosen for contrast. They work in cocoa and cashew processing, digital health, luxury fashion retail, artisanal furniture, circular fashion and natural products. Two are women and four are men, aged from about 29 to 52. Their faiths span Catholic, Pentecostal and nominal Christianity, Islam (including one member of the Tijaniyya Sufi order) and Rastafarianism.

Each story became a short narrative vignette, written with the entrepreneur and approved by them. Preliminary themes went back to four of the six for comment, and their pushback changed the analysis. When the circular-fashion founder insisted her environmental work was "not strategy but obedience," the coding was revised to treat her sustainability as religious duty. Few qualitative studies let participants correct the researcher this directly.

KEY INSIGHTS

Founders turn colonial infrastructure to their own ends

The Daloa warehouse is the clearest case. Built to move raw crops out of the region, it now adds value inside it, and the railway carries its owner's finished goods

around the country. A hybrid solar and biogas system, fuelled by cocoa-pulp waste, keeps the plant running. "The warehouse was built to take things away from us," he told the researcher. "Now it is where we make something of our own."

Symbols get the same treatment. An Abidjan boutique owner sells limited-run Milanese pieces, re-cut locally for Ivorian body types, beside African labels, reaching 60,000 Instagram followers including many diaspora clients. Colonisation taught customers to look to Paris for beauty, he argues, and his shop puts Abidjan, Dakar and Bamako in that conversation. In Bouaké, a furniture maker descended from Senufo carvers engraves the fala spiral and ancestral masks into headboards and cabinets. Missionaries once condemned those motifs as idolatry. His grandfather hid his tools. Today the pieces ship to London and New York with QR codes that let buyers trace each one's origin.

History becomes raw material. Recovering what colonial rule suppressed gives their products a story imported competitors cannot copy, and earns them standing at home.

Faith does the work of governance

Courts and regulators are often unreliable. Religious ethics fill the gap. They guide pricing, hiring, the handling of data and the destination of profits.

The health-tech founder offers the sharpest example. Her Abidjan start-up builds low-bandwidth apps for clinical triage and STEM education, employs 18 people (half of them women) and runs a Saturday code club for teenagers. An accelerator advised her to monetise patient data. She said no. Under the Islamic principle of amanah, what is entrusted to you is held for others. She also channels 5% of profits, in the spirit of waqf (charitable endowment), into rural e-learning centres hosted in mosques. This is the finding readers should linger on: a centuries-old moral tradition produced a data-protection standard that many tech firms adopt only under regulatory pressure.

The other cases follow the same logic in different idioms. The Bouaké workshop pauses for communal prayer, and its owner matches employees' zakat contributions. The circular-fashion founder, a Pentecostal, opens each working day with devotions linking ecology to faith and sends 10% of profits to reforestation in Banco National Park. A Rastafarian shop owner in Abidjan runs his organic food and herbal business according to livity, the unity of self, earth and the divine.

Trust stands in for collateral

Formal credit is hard to reach, and the study links that partly to banking structures inherited from colonial

times. Reciprocity fills the gap. The cocoa processor pre-finances fertiliser for his farmers and guarantees them floor prices, securing supply without written contracts. The circular-fashion venture runs as a 30-member women's cooperative whose quarterly assemblies decide how much surplus goes to childcare, literacy classes and micro-loans, echoing local mutual-aid and tontine traditions. The boutique owner takes stock from a designer in Milan and pays only after it sells; three completed rounds have built the confidence to continue.

The model has a cost. When trust erodes, liquidity disappears, and social pressure inside close networks can discourage experimentation.

Language still carries colonial weight

The health-tech founder opens meetings in Dioula so people know she is not pretending, then switches to French for the contract. Credibility in Ivorian boardrooms remains tied to the colonial language. Women in tech face that hurdle on top of gender bias.

TAKEAWAYS

The study does not examine family businesses, and its lessons speak to entrepreneurship broadly. Several still travel well.

For investors, lenders and accelerators

- Collateral-based screening will miss ventures that run on relational credit. A founder's record with suppliers, cooperatives and savings groups is evidence of reliability.
- Standard playbooks can collide with founders' values. Advice to monetise data may be refused for reasons users respect.

For founders

- Heritage can be a competitive asset. Symbols and craft traditions that outsiders once dismissed can command premium prices abroad.
- Visible faith-based commitments build trust with staff and customers where contracts are weakly enforced.

For business families

Family firms will recognise much in these cases: obligations to a wider community, profits shared beyond the owners, values placed ahead of returns. Families partnering with founders from such traditions should expect moral and communal duties to weigh heavily. That is usually a sign of reliability.

IMPACT

The study pushes back against two habits in research on African business. One measures ventures against

Western yardsticks such as rapid growth and disruption. The other treats them as survivalist or informal by default. Six vignettes are a thin base for broad claims. Still, they make a convincing case that innovation can mean recovering suppressed knowledge, and that a firm's governance may live in a prayer schedule or a cooperative assembly.

The method matters too. By letting entrepreneurs co-author and correct their own stories, the research shows how business in the Global South can be studied with participants instead of about them.

The limits are real. The sample is small and mostly urban, and all interviews took place online. Future work could compare francophone and anglophone African countries, bring in macroeconomic data on monetary regimes, or track how digital and regional trade infrastructure reshapes these practices over time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Assess entrepreneurs in trust-based economies on their relational track record, such as supplier pre-financing, cooperative membership and repayment within savings groups, alongside formal collateral.
2. Before proposing a business model, ask founders which religious or communal commitments it must respect, and build those into the plan.
3. Treat overlooked cultural heritage as a design and branding resource, and make provenance verifiable for distant buyers.
4. Commit a fixed share of profit to community purposes and make the pledge public; the founders here used 5% and 10%.
5. Arrange backup financing for when trust networks weaken, so one broken relationship cannot halt the business.

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