

HAJJ DIPLOMACY AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN NIGERIA AND SAUDI ARABIA, 2012-2022

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Abstract

The Hajj Pilgrimage has maintained a central role in the overall belief architecture of the Islamic faith. As a unique symbol in the Islamic tradition, the Hajj pilgrimage has gone on to also play a very pivotal role in deepening diplomatic relations between countries like those under review whose citizens carry out this very holy ritual. Through Hajj, diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia have become entrenched and sustained over the years. Nonetheless, the economic benefits in this bilateral diplomacy appear to favour the Saudi Arabian side, at the expense of Nigeria. This paper therefore attempts to underscore Hajj diplomacy and its economic undertone and analyse it within the context of the Nigerian – Saudi Arabian relations. The data for the study which is qualitative research, were collected through interviews and analysis of documents. The findings of the study revealed that one of the reasons for the lopsidedness in the economic benefit of this relations is the perception amongst people of the Islamic faith in Nigeria, that Hajj is only a spiritual affair devoid of any economic undertone. The paper also found that the Nigerian authorities do not have an organized and well-coordinated approach to engaging the Saudi authorities. It recommends amongst other things the need to redefine the Hajj diplomatic relations between the two countries in a bid to capture its economic aspect, and for more coordination in Nigeria's management of hajj affairs.

Keywords: *Hajj Diplomacy, Economic Relations, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Pilgrimage, Economic Benefits.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The annual Hajj pilgrimage has become a source of a crucial relationship between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. The Hajj ritual since Nigeria attained independence in 1960 has attracted national significance both in terms of government's participation in the process and the growing number of private entities interested in the Hajj. Although the Hajj is basically a spiritual endeavor, it holds great potential for diplomatic and economic relations between Nigeria and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Both countries had engaged in various aspects of cultural and economic interactions long before they emerged as sovereign nations. Theological tracts and colonial memoirs such as the *Jordan report on Mecca Conference of 1926* show that these interactions ranged from trade, pilgrimage, intellectual and other cultural exchanges (Egemba, 2022). These precolonial interactions formed the foundations of colonial and post-colonial Nigeria-Saudi Arabia relations.

The involvement of not only the Nigerian government but also, the increasing number of pilgrims from the country in the Hajj pilgrimage, makes it a serious issue in the Nigeria-Saudi Arabia relations (Egemba, 2022). Three institutional structures have already been put in place by the Nigerian government comprising: the Directorate of Pilgrims Affairs, States Pilgrims Boards, and the Immigration Department, which essentially handles cross-border movements of its citizens (Egemba, 2022). Consequent to the perennial problems associated with the Hajj operations, the Nigerian Government established the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON) in 2007 to ensure a smooth yearly Hajj operation. From the foregoing, there is no doubt therefore that, the annual movement of thousands of pilgrims from Nigeria to and from Saudi Arabia necessitates closer ties between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia (Egemba, 2022). Ties that will mutually benefit both Nigeria and Saudi-Arabia.

On the contrary, despite Nigeria's huge investments in its relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia especially through its Hajj related activities and the enormous advantages therein which include Hajj-related markets, the country has not made use of this potential to forge closer economic ties with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or to fully tap into the global economy that would equally benefit Nigeria. The prevailing perspective on the analysis of Hajj operations in the Nigeria-Saudi Arabia bilateral relations primarily focuses on the cultural and spiritual aspects. The only organisation depending solely on the spiritual and welfare aspects of the Hajj activities is the Nigerian government, via the Hajj Commission. It is important to highlight that, according to the Nigerian policy document, the main goal of the Hajj

commission is to improve the pilgrims' experience throughout their sacred journey to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This position may not fully capture the complete picture as the benefits derived from the Hajj are not only aligned with religious doctrines and injunctions but also contribute to their reinforcement. Sadly, the Hajj operations disproportionately benefit the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, whereas Nigeria has not adequately examined the economic dimension of their diplomatic relations, resulting in an economic disadvantage on its part. Also, Nigeria's vague foreign policy position has incapacitated it to fully use its opportunities to maximize strong ties particularly with the Saudi Arabian economy and the global economy in general. Nigeria has primarily had an insular, more Afrocentric policy orientation but has been amenable to receiving developmental assistance from Western countries. Saudi Arabia is not an exception to the rule that the Nigerian state has not yet reaped the many benefits of its alliances with other nations since independence.

Consequent upon the foregoing, this research holds the view that among other factors, the Nigerian government through the Hajj commission needs to have a mutually beneficial diplomatic relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Hajj pilgrimage has over the years played a central role in cementing the relationship between Nigeria and the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia. The relationship which is mostly viewed from the spiritual angle from the Nigerian side has continued to be of immense economic benefit to the Saudi-Arabian counterpart. Nigeria has not yet reaped significant financial rewards from this special and essential connection.

It is expected that all diplomatic ties should be founded on a mutually beneficial connection between the nations involved, however, as rightly captured in the preceding submission, the Saudi Arabia-Nigeria Hajj diplomacy appears unbalanced, benefiting the Saudi Arabian side of the relations economically. Although millions of dollars' worth of economic benefits are created yearly from Hajj operations in Nigeria alone, all of these benefit the host country. Apart from a few private airlines that receive government assistance to prevent them from going bankrupt due to rising aviation fuel and other expenses to meet pilgrims demand considering the perception that the trip is a religious endeavour, neither Nigerians who engage in such a religious tourism nor the Nigerian government benefit materially from this activity. In diplomatic negotiations, reciprocity refers to a trading transaction between governments, a negotiating tactic wherein countries exchange goods for equitable treatment in return. The nature of the diplomatic negotiations might be open-ended or restrictive. A bilateral agreement

between two countries often reflects the limited form, which may include benefits (or other types of treatment) that are not available to other parties or that need specific negotiations on the part of outside parties (Smith, 2018).

In this case, the dearth of reciprocity-based diplomacy in all facets of Nigeria's foreign policy agenda is also relevant. To gain benefits and bring in positive deliverables therefore, it has fostered a laissez-faire mentality that has strengthened our hesitant attitude to finding common ground in our dealings with other countries, whether in Hajj operations or other areas of foreign policy.

Saudi Arabia hopes to see millions of people visit the most sacred sites of Islam. A vast economic reform plan known as Vision 2030, spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman calls for 30 million people to participate in the Hajj and Umrah, a smaller, year-round pilgrimage (Von, 2023). In comparison to pre-pandemic levels, it would represent a rise of more than 10 million people. The ancient cities of Mecca and Medina are now largely replaced by skyscrapers and shopping centres, there will need to be a major expansion of hotels and other facilities as well (Von, 2023). There will also be a greater need for long-haul planes, cars, buses, water, and electricity as there are more intending pilgrims. According to research conducted on the 2018 Hajj by experts from Victoria University in Melbourne, the five-day journey produced well over 1.8 million tonnes of greenhouse gases—nearly twice as much as New York City does every two weeks. With 87% of emissions coming from aircraft as the main contributor, the Saudi government have embraced sustainability as part of the Vision 2030, which calls for the protection of natural resources to attract pilgrims, visitors, and businesses (Abonomi, 2022).

Despite the responsibilities of the Pilgrims Commission, the benefits of Hajj diplomacy and economics are still not fully understood by the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The necessary adjustments in the Islamic realm of Hajj have not yet been made by the government and as a result, many Nigerian Muslims still have problems related to their Hajj practises. The Nigerian Hajj Commission still views the Hajj as purely a spiritual endeavour and has not paid enough attention to capitalising on the many commercial and economic benefits linked to Hajj.

Apart from Nigeria not capitalising on the many commercial and economic benefits linked to its Hajj diplomacy between both countries, not much has been done by way of in-depth research on "Hajj diplomacy" in the context of Nigeria's foreign policy and how it might serve the

country's interests, especially in terms of related economic development given that the Hajj is quickly becoming a major issue in the relationship between the two governments. The truth is that sentiments and emotions, not reason, have shrouded the topic of Hajj operations and the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Nigeria (Imam, 2017). As a result, this research aims to bring to the fore the economic potential associated with this relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Nigeria.

2. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative method was adopted as the approach to anchor the study due to the nature of the research topic. The discussion on Nigeria-Saudi Arabia Hajj diplomacy, in the view of the researcher, requires rigorous interrogation of issues, through instruments that can allow for a face-to-face interaction hence, the research relied on documentary analysis and in-depth interviews. The documentary analysis involved the collection of significant data for the study from primary sources from certain governmental agencies like the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabian Embassy in Abuja, and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). The in-depth interviews were personal interviews as well as key-informant interviews which were aimed at obtaining insights that may have been easily and immediately accessible in existing documents in addition to gaining further clarification on sourced materials.

3. HAJJ DIPLOMACY AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Hajj diplomacy is a composition of two terms that may appear not necessarily related. In the context of this research however, the concepts of *Hajj* and *Diplomacy* attempt to describe a possible symbiotic relationship between Nigeria and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia beyond the Hajj rites. Discussed in isolation, the Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam where Muslims are obligated to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land of Mecca at least once in their lifetime if they are physically and financially able to do so (Press, 2023). The Hajj is a very deep spiritual experience for travellers that emphasizes the unity of Muslims, helps them atone for their sins, and enhances their connection with God (Press, 2023). An exceptional spiritual journey that combines the Hajj pilgrimage with the celebration of Eid al-Adha occurs annually during the month of Dhul Hajj.

Known as one of the five pillars of Islam, the Hajj is one of the most important obligations in Islam. These pillars include faith in God and His prophets, praying five times a day, fasting for

a month during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, and, if one is able, giving away 2.5 percent of one's yearly savings as alms. Many people perceive the Hajj as a way to ask for forgiveness for past transgressions. It is believed that Muslims who make the Hajj pilgrimage also get Allah's forgiveness of their transgressions. There are two distinct aspects of the Hajj: the spiritual and the physical. Bianchi (2004) states that while the Hajj is a spiritually reassuring experience, there are significant bodily risks and uncertainties involved.

The majority of Muslims believe, based on Islamic historical traditions, that the first pilgrimage—which followed Prophet Muhammad PBUH's journey from Makkah to Madinah—took place on the fourth of Dhul Hajj in the seventh year of the Islamic calendar (Pilgrim, 2022). It is not widely acknowledged, yet, that the Hajj has its roots in the year 2000 BCE. The Hajj rite is said to predate Zamzam, the event when Hajar (AS) runs between the Safa and Marwa (Pilgrim, 2022).

The Holy Kaaba itself was constructed in the early months of 629 CE by Prophets Ibrahim (AS) and Ismail (AS) at Allah SWT's desire (Pilgrim, 2022). Following its construction, worshippers from many faiths went to the Kaaba. Prophet Ibrahim (AS) arranged to offer his son, Prophet Ismail (AS), as a sacrifice on the Mount of Arafat (Pilgrim, 2022). The Hajj was first performed formally in 630 CE by the followers of Prophet Muhammad PBUH. In the name of Allah SWT, Prophet Muhammad PBUH destroyed all the idols inside the holy Kaaba during the Hajj, establishing it as the purest and most precious sanctuary (Pilgrim, 2022). After that, he raced between the Safa and Marwa to retrace Hajar's (AS) trip. Next, he stoned the devil and gave the last sermon atop Mount Arafat. The Hajj has been performed in the same manner ever since (Pilgrim, 2022).

As to the Quran, Bakkah, or Mecca, was the site of the first human-built house of worship. There are clear signs present, such as the Abrahamic Standing Place (Maqam Ibrahim). Anyone who enters the House of Worship at Bakkah, Mecca, is believed to be safe. It is the responsibility of those who are able to go there to honour God by making this entry feasible throughout the trip to the temple. The teachings of Prophet Muhammad PBUH state that in order to do the Hajj, both men and women must dress entirely in white, symbolizing equality and a state of purity devoid of jewellery or body deodorant. Men wear ihrams made up of simply two plain white sheets thrown over their bodies, while women wear ihrams made out of any plain clothing covering their whole body except for their face (Pilgrim, 2022). The Hajj occurs on the eighth and twelfth days of Dhul Hajj. It lasts for five or six days as a religious

rite. Over three million Muslims perform the Hajj to the Holy Kaaba in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, each year.

Nonetheless, while the Hajj as an Islamic practice has extensively been studied as a religious phenomenon, as a form of diplomacy and a dimension of international relations it has been given scanty attention by researchers. Going by the concept and usage of diplomacy as a significant instrument of foreign policy and global governance, the idea of Hajj Diplomacy would relate to the employment of Hajj operations as an instrument of state interactions.

The Economic Significance of Hajj

The crux of the conversation in this paper is the economic possibilities that could be accrued from the Hajj exercise, for both countries under review. The cost of Hajj has risen globally generating billions of dollars. According to Ahmad Muazu, the Saudi government benefits from taxes and revenue generation from pilgrims makes up to 31% of Saudi non-oil GDP which totals around Eight billion dollars (Muazu, 2022). This becomes the second source of income to the Saudi government after hydrocarbons and does not include *Umrah* Operations (Muazu, 2022). In 2007, *umrah* operations alone attracted 8 million pilgrims which generated four billion dollars to the kingdom. The vision 2030 targets thirty million pilgrims per year. 25 to 30% of businesses in Makkah and Madinah depend on pilgrims to survive (Makkah chamber of Commerce, 2022).

Experts say that with crude oil prices hovering around \$100 a barrel, generating billions of dollars a day for the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the pilgrimage's economic benefit is marginal by comparison but it's great, untapped potential could bring significant riches to the kingdom in the long term (Lawati, 2022). Robert Mogielnicki, a senior scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington opines that "Religious tourism in Saudi Arabia may not have the current revenue-generating capacity of the oil and gas sector, but the religious significance of Mecca and Medina will never run dry" (Lawati, 2022).

Mastercard reports in its latest global destination Cities Index that Mecca was second only to Dubai attracting about \$20 billion in tourist dollars in 2018 alone before taking a downturn during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic affected the journey to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina more in economic terms than spiritually. Before the pandemic,

pilgrimage revenues were forecast to average about \$30 billion a year and create 100,000 jobs for Saudis by 2022. That was when the kingdom attracted around 21 million worshippers annually during the 10-day Hajj and *Umrah* pilgrimages according to official data cited by Reuters (Lawati, 2022). The number of pilgrims however shrunk significantly during the pandemic even though the Saudi Arabian government is targeting 30 million pilgrims by 2030, which some analysts have said is an ambitious figure (Lawat, 2022). This figure has stabilised because, according to Seán McLoughlin, a senior lecturer in religion, anthropology, and Islam at the University of Leeds in the UK, eight countries—Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Egypt, Nigeria, Turkey, and India—represent 75% of the hajj pilgrims who are not Saudi nationals.

Muslim-majority countries often have bigger quotas than other countries; nevertheless, Muslims in the West often have more discretionary income than Muslims in less developed nations, so they may take advantage of as many visas as possible. Every year, over 25,000 Muslims from Britain do the Hajj. The International Edition of Accounting and Business journal reports that in 2017, the largest contingents from Africa came from Egypt (108,000) and Nigeria (79,000), with 221,000 travellers coming from Indonesia and 179,000 from Pakistan. It also shows how different Hajj packages are for every nation. They average around £4,750 in the UK, although the same amount goes up to £1,050 for umrah. Operators make between £100 and £200 on average for each pilgrim (Business Magazine, 2018). Turkey's average hotel rate per person increased from over 2,700 euros (\$2,900) in 2014 to \$3,600 in 2015. As a result, pilgrims paid around 9,360 liras in total that year—1,660 liras more than the previous year. In the midst of the remarkable increase in the value of the US dollar relative to all other currencies, pilgrims paid \$5,000 for individual rooms at the Diyanet-run facility, while hotel rooms in Mecca ranged in price from \$6,900 to \$9,900 (Diyanet, 2014). In fact, the cost of a pilgrimage varies depending on the package chosen and the country of origin.

For instance, there are two varieties of Hajj packages offered in Indonesia: Hajj Plus and regular Hajj. The typical Hajj stays in shared accommodations, with five people per room. Conversely, Hajj Plus offers accommodations that are five stars. In 2014, the price per participant for the traditional Hajj varied from USD 2,000 to USD 4,000. When Hajj Plus was initially introduced in 1987, it was intended to serve wealthy individuals who did not want to wait to get a visa. In 2016, the Hajj Plus waiting time was around 5 years, whereas the traditional Hajj waiting period was 10 to 15 years. The minimum cost of the Hajj plus in 2014 was approximately USD 8,000

per person depending on the package chosen with more expensive Hajj plus packages including extra trips to countries such as: Turkey, Egypt, Dubai, Singapore, or Hong Kong, (Elisiva & Sule, 2015).

Historically, the proclamation towards the call for Hajj exercise was strictly speaking, to attain spiritual closeness to the Almighty God. Nonetheless, it did not wholly deter adherents from undertaking economic or financial dealings and making gains thereof. While the purpose was seen largely as a chance to wipe clean past sins and start fresh, to deepen one's faith through these series of rituals of the Hajj exercise its economic benefit angle was apparent in the case of some women taking on the Islamic face covering known as "hijab" upon returning to their various destinations, while the men could purchase clothing and other items which were not in their places of abode. The original intent and purpose of the Hajj exercise has been detailed in the glorious Quran as a call to answer the invitation of Allah when he commanded Prophet Ibrahim to make the call as stated in the Quran:

"And proclaim to mankind the Hajj (pilgrimage). They will come to you on foot and on every lean camel, they will come from every deep and distant (wide) mountain highway (to perform Hajj)" [Quran: Surah al-Hajj; Chapter 22: Ayah (Verse) 27].

According to Khan in his Sahih Buhari translation, every eligible Muslim should make the Hajj pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. It is also said that Muslims might cleanse their slates before Allah (SWT) and wash away their sins via pilgrimages. Muslims retrace the steps made by the prophets Ibrahim (AS) and Ismail (AS) prior to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), as well as the way that Hagar, the wife of Ibrahim (AS), ran between two hills seven times in order to get water for her dying child. According to Islamic belief, Allah (SWT) produced a spring that flows even now (Khan, 1976). Given the importance of the Hajj, Muslims often research ways to increase their level of devotion to Allah (SWT). The Hajj is the perfect example of a religious demonstration, when individuals and groups from every race, class, and country come together in a specified location and at a certain time to continually recite a single call and proclaim the same phrase. The same goal is being pursued by everyone in attendance: declaring one's obligation and dedication to Allah alone, freeing oneself from any remnants of polytheism and ignorance in a potent collective form that swells the spirit with feelings of faith and unity (Khan, 1976).

Since Mecca and Medina are the sole sacred locations, the fact that Muslims with the resources to travel the whole globe must do the Hajj pilgrimage has given the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia a steady stream of money. Therefore, it stands to reason that the Hajj revenue will eventually surpass Saudi Arabia's reliance on oil. The millions of pilgrims who visit Mecca each year contribute billions of dollars to the country's GDP through their purchases at hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, airlines, cell phone companies, and other businesses, and the government reaps the benefits in the form of taxes.

The Economics of Hajj Diplomacy between Nigeria and the Saudi Arabia

There have been numerous significant commercial deals between Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, especially with regards to their relationship with the Hajj pilgrimage. These accords have strengthened economic connections between both countries and facilitated the seamless organization of the Hajj pilgrimage for Nigerian Muslims. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Hajj Cooperation holds significant importance as a business agreement between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. This agreement delineates the modalities for bilateral cooperation and coordination between the two nations with the aim of facilitating the Hajj pilgrimage for Nigerian Muslims. The establishment of trade and investment delegations between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia represents a noteworthy economic agreement. Increased trade and investment between the two nations will engender enhanced economic prospects for both parties involved. The objective of the agreement is to achieve this outcome.

The Bilateral Air Services Agreement (BASA) serves as a pivotal accord for the establishment of direct air travel routes connecting Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. This agreement holds substantial importance in fostering bilateral relations between the two nations. According to the deal, it is stipulated that the Saudi-owned airlines should be responsible for transporting 50% of the pilgrims, while the Nigerian airlines shall be allocated the remaining 50%. In 2010, the Saudi authorities implemented a policy in their diplomatic engagements with other nations as a substitute for the revenue derived from airline operations. During a bilateral meeting held in Jeddah, representatives from various agencies were present to sign and finalize a bilateral agreement on behalf of the Nigerian government. These agencies included the Ministry of Aviation, Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA), and the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON). Similarly, representatives from the Saudi government were also in attendance, representing the Saudi General Authority on Civil Aviation (GACA) and the Saudi Ministry of Hajj. The agreement was intended to be gradually implemented starting from the

designated implementation period of 2015. According to Okeke (2017), Nigeria's contribution to the specified metric increased from 25% in 2015 to 35% in 2016, further rising to 45% in the same year. Subsequently, starting from 2018, Nigeria's contribution reached 50%.

The ease of travel for Nigerian pilgrims has been facilitated by this arrangement, which has concurrently stimulated economic and tourism activities between the two nations. Moreover, a noteworthy element in enhancing their economic ties is the Nigeria-Saudi Arabia Hajj connection. Nigeria consistently dispatches a substantial number of Hajj pilgrims to Saudi Arabia on a yearly basis. The aforementioned development presents economic prospects for Nigerian travel agents, transportation firms, and hotel chains, alongside the benefits it brings to the Saudi economy.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Saudi Arabia and Nigeria engage in business activities outside the Hajj season. Bilateral agreements have been established between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, encompassing several sectors such as tourism, infrastructure development, and cultural exchange. The primary objective of these agreements is to enhance the level of involvement and collaboration between the two nations across multiple domains, so as to guarantee mutual advantages and progress in their economic interconnections. The sectors encompassed by their activities are diverse, spanning agriculture, oil and gas, infrastructure development, and education. The involvement of Nigerian companies in Aramco projects in Saudi Arabia serves as a significant illustration of industrial cooperation within the oil and gas industry. The establishment of these connections has facilitated the transfer of technical knowledge, exchange of information, and formation of joint enterprises, thus yielding economic benefits for both nations (Bishku, 2021).

In the agreements between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia, promotion of mutual economic benefits in the area of investment opportunities is a major priority. With regards to Hajj diplomacy, Saudi Arabia seems to have benefitted more from the existing relationship and this reflects more in the aviation and tourism sectors. The Saudi Arabian government has for years benefitted from great investment opportunities presented by annual Hajj pilgrimage and this manifests greatly in its existing relations with Nigeria.

4. MAJOR FINDINGS ON THE ECONOMICS OF HAJJ DIPLOMACY BETWEEN NIGERIA AND THE SAUDI ARABIA

Based on analysis of documentary data and the responses obtained from interviewees, it has been observed that Hajj has impacted majorly the following investment sectors of the Nigeria and Saudi Arabia.

Aviation Sector: The Nigerian and Saudi Arabian governments have bilateral agreements on airlifting of Hajj pilgrims annually. The Bilateral Air Service Agreement (BASA) was signed between the following agencies of the Saudi government: Saudi General Authority on Civil Aviation (GACA) and the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and the Nigerian agencies including the Nigerian Ministry of Aviation, the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA) and NAHCON. The agreement was meant for implementation in 2015, with the initial agreement that the Nigerian airlines would be granted 60% airlifting of Hajj pilgrims, while the Saudi-based airlines would airlift 40% of the pilgrims. However, the Saudi government's policy on airlifting of passengers required that 50% airlift of pilgrims should be by Saudi-owned airlines. Nigeria is obligated to follow the directive, which suggests in actual fact, that 50% of pilgrims are to be airlifted by the Nigerian airlines and not 60% as initially agreed upon (Achenimie, 2023).

The Nigerian airline operators have consistently criticized the agreement because, according to them, the agreement appears to be a rip-off for the Nigerian aviation industry and more skewed in favor of the Saudi economy (Achenimie, 2023). In the 2022 Hajj exercise, for example, it was reported that only two Nigerian airlines (Azman Air and Max Air) were licensed to airlift passengers while Saudi's FlyNas airlifted the largest number. In 2023, the number of Nigerian airlines increased slightly to six including Max Air, Arik Air, Aero-Contractors, Azman Air, Valuejet and Air peace. *Daily Nigerian* reported that within seven days, FlyNas operated twenty-two flights to Nigeria from Saudi, airlifting 8,063 pilgrims while the Nigerian airlines on the other hand, were only able to airlift 3,093 pilgrims (Ramalan, 2023). Even at that, the Nigerian airlines were able to airlift this number of pilgrims after diplomatic interventions because the Saudi's aviation authority had initially refused to grant slots to the Nigerian airlines to airlift the pilgrims back to their country (NAHCON, 2023).

Besides the fact that the Nigerian airlines do not have enough capacity to airlift all the passengers allocated to them thereby giving advantage to the Saudi airlines, the Saudi authorities often give special and preferential treatments to pilgrims that fly their airline

(FlyNas) and this creates a perception of incompetence by the pilgrims against the Nigerian airlines. Past pilgrims interviewed for this research indicated preference for FlyNas against Nigerian airlines because they had hassle-free experiences at the airports in Jeddah.

The Tourism Sector: The Nigerian authorities have given license for Hajj operations to one hundred and eighty-three (183) travel agencies, and this has significant impact on the Nigerian economy. Besides the state agencies responsible for the management of the Hajj activities, the licensed operators are private companies that have the responsibility to facilitate the travel logistics of the Hajj pilgrims while they operate under the supervision of the NAHCON. The existence of the travel agencies has contributed immensely to the growth of the tourism industry in Nigeria. Official data indicates that the tourism industry contributes an estimated 3.6% to Nigeria's GDP (<https://www.statista.com/>). In addition to the licensed agencies, there are other unlicensed and secondary agencies that work under the licensed agencies. Apparently, they contribute to the Nigerian economy through taxation and employment generation. There is no adequate data on the specific contribution of the agencies to Nigeria's economy. However, available data shows that Nigeria's official data rate for large companies (100million and above) is 30% and 20% to medium-scale enterprises (<https://taxsummaries.pwc.com/>). Most of the travel agencies fall within the category of medium-scale enterprises. They mostly charge a minimum of USD500 fees in the total Hajj package. This implies that about USD 100,000 is generated by the companies annually.

Revenue Generation: The Hajj is an endless economic reserve for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia because, its practise must be done annually by millions of Muslims around the world. The economic vitality of Saudi Arabia is therefore greatly influenced by the Hajj pilgrimage. Observers claim that the number of visitors to Saudi Arabia, who are mostly there to perform the Hajj pilgrimage, has a significant positive economic impact on the country. Numerous businesses, including construction and services, are expanding as a result of the influx of travelers during the Hajj season.

The Hajj market in Nigeria is valued in billions of Naira. While the Saudi government aimed to increase Hajj revenue to \$160 billion in 2020 and \$267 billion in 2030, it has already invested nearly \$50 billion to improve transport and infrastructure with the goal of creating 100,000 permanent jobs for Saudi nationals and \$150 million coming from the Hajj sector alone.

In Nigeria, pilgrims from the southern region paid N2,496,815.29 for the 2022 Hajj, while those from the northern region paid N2,449,607.89. The states of Adamawa and Borno paid N2,408,197.89 for their closeness to Saudi Arabia. The biggest difference in Hajj prices is the cost of an airline ticket. On the average however, available statistics shows that it costs a pilgrim an average of \$4,250 to make the religious trip to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Hajj revenue is projected to exceed \$150 billion by 2022 (NAHCON, 2017). The table below shows the amount Nigeria has earned from Hajj services between 2015 and 2022.

Table 1: Total Revenue from annual hajj pilgrimage (2015-2022) for Nigeria

YEAR	Number of Pilgrims	Revenue (50,665 per pilgrim)
2015	75,000	3,799,875,000
2016	75,000	3,799,875,000
2017	75,000	3,799,875,000
2018	55,000	2,786,575,000
2019	95000	4,813,175,000
2020	NIL	NIL
2021	NIL	NIL
2022	42,000	2,127,930,000

Trade: The relationship between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia has been largely centered on the religious side of the Hajj pilgrimage. In recent times, both states have begun to see the importance of exploring the possibility of trade within the sphere of the Hajj activities. In 2003 for instance, Nigeria and Saudi Arabia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that informed the establishment of the Nigeria-Saudi Joint Commission. The major objective of the Commission was to promote trade and investment in both countries. The Second Session of the Joint Commission was held in October 2022. With the emphasis on trade, the Second Session of the Nigeria-Saudi Arabia Joint Commission also included agreement between the Federation of Saudi Chambers and Nigerian Chambers of Commerce in order to promote private sector partnership between both countries (Odor, 2022). In the same vein, a private initiative by Nigerian and Saudi companies namely: Al-Yaro International, Matasa Charity Association for Sustainable Development and Soroh Hijaz, organised the National Hajj and Umrah Exhibition (NHUE) to showcase business opportunities to Nigerians during the Hajj pilgrimage. At the event, the Nigerian government made a commitment to facilitate more export of Nigerian products to Saudi Arabia during Hajj (Jimoh, 2019).

Despite the existing bilateral agreements, there has not been robust mechanisms to facilitate pro-Nigerian trade in Saudi Arabia during Hajj. The Saudi authorities only give restricted visas during the Hajj. According to the Saudi Ministry of Hajj, the Hajj Visa is only restricted to the major cities for Hajj pilgrimage including Jeddah, Mecca, and Madinah. The visa which is exclusively for the purpose of the holy pilgrimage and not for any other purpose is for a specific period of the Hajj only. Furthermore, the Saudi Authorities prohibit food products into the country with the Hajj Visa. Therefore, prospective Nigerian vendors may not have the legitimacy for business transactions during the exercise. Most of the existing Nigerian business operators engaged in food and logistics businesses are considered illegitimate because they do not have the license to operate in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and during Hajj.

From the findings, most economic benefits derivable from the Hajj operations go directly to the Saudi Arabian government in a relationship which ought to have been mutually beneficial to both countries.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is astonishing that the oldest known accounts of pilgrimages date back to before the arrival of European settlers. From that point on, pilgrimages became a regular and continuous custom across West Africa, especially in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the economic benefit that the Hajj operation brings, especially to Nigeria, has not been thoroughly examined within the intellectual framework. Despite the Hajj's religious and cultural components, there is no denying that the operation has a strong commercial component as well, which is often overlooked or overshadowed when the controversy surrounding it is raised. Thus, the research looked at how this connection may be significant economically for both nations and, as a result, strengthen diplomatic relations between Nigeria and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the modern day. The report also offered an academic finding on how feasible it has been for Saudi Arabia to benefit more from economic diplomacy based on the current quo. The study found that the Hajj operation tends to economically benefit the kingdom of Saudi Arabia more than Nigeria because the latter's government has not sufficiently investigated the economic angle of the diplomatic relations. This is a direct consequence of the status quo and people's perceptions of the issue. It is imperative that the Nigerian government acknowledge and address the reality that the Hajj pilgrimage has immense and significant economic value for both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Nigeria. This stands in stark contrast to the widely held belief and narrative that the Hajj pilgrimage is only about reaping spiritual and cultural benefits.

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