

# Understanding spiritual journey to hajj: Ghana and Uzbekistan perspectives

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the country-specific understanding of Hajj, its experience and challenges between the pilgrims of Ghana and Uzbekistan.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Anchored on the theory of constructivism, this study explored and used the purposive sampling method in the context of qualitative research to select 97 Muslim pilgrims from Ghana and Uzbekistan of varying demographics for in-depth interviews.

**Findings** – Findings show that the philosophy of Hajj as the fifth pillar obligation set by Allah was common among the Muslim pilgrims of these two countries which support earlier literature. Interestingly, this study uncovered some distinctions in the construction of the understanding of Hajj; that is Ghanaian pilgrims have attached social status of respect and titles to Hajj in their societies. While Uzbekistan pilgrims are seen in their communities as spiritual role models that inspire others to live meaningful lives in the society.

**Research limitations/implications** – The conclusion and the outcome of this study cannot be generalized as to represent the whole population of Ghana and Uzbekistan due to qualitative approach.

**Practical implications** – This study revealed country-specific understanding and experience of Hajj that can be used by the policymakers and marketers to create better travel package.

**Originality/value** – The outcome of this study advanced a cross-cultural Hajj understanding which is important to policymakers, businesses and spiritual tourism practitioners to have a better insight into Hajj in contexts.

**Keywords** Experience, Ghana, Challenges, Uzbekistan, Spirituality tourism, Hajj understanding

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

Spiritual journey to Hajj has been investigated by earlier scholars (Aziz, 2001; Bianchi, 2008; Haq and Jackson, 2009; Gatrad and Sheikh, 2005; Gunlu and Okumus, 2015; Raj and Bozonelos, 2015; Scott and Jafari, 2010; Timothy and Iverson, 2006; Toguslu, 2017). Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, meaning that it is one of the main obligations of able-bodied Muslims in terms

of health and budget (Gatrad and Sheikh, 2005). Since Muslims are highly encouraged to engage in meaningful travel, pilgrimage to Hajj becomes essential (Aziz, 2001). In 2019 alone, over 2.5 million people have undertaken pilgrimage to Hajj with 1.8 million being foreign pilgrims (General Authority for Statistics, 2019). Muslims who participate in pilgrimage to Mecca obtain a significant personal experience (Digance, 2006), such as feeling of peace and tolerance (Clingsmith *et al.*, 2009; Raj and Bozonelos, 2015), followed by spiritual and educational experience (Gunlu and Okumus, 2015). Bianchi (2008) stated that although there are many interpretations of Hajj by the Islamic thinkers and believers, there is no universally agreed meaning of Hajj which one cannot completely understand.

Earlier studies (Caidi, 2019; Muneza *et al.*, 2018; Haq and Jackson, 2009; Toguslu, 2017; Werbner, 2002; Van der Beek, 2017) have affirmed that shedding further light on understanding of Hajj pilgrims from various countries should be explored. Thus, the goal of this study is to explore the understanding of Hajj by Uzbek and Ghanaian pilgrims, since this direction of studies is crucial. The motivation for this research is four-fold. First, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) calls for further learning and investigation of Islamic tourism (which includes Hajj and Umrah) to increase awareness of economic and social and cultural aspects of this industry (OIC, 2018). Second, the study purposefully focuses on Hajj understanding, experience and observation in an effort to contribute to the growing body of theoretical and empirical knowledge and position the findings within ongoing discourse on Hajj by various researchers (Caidi, 2019; Caidi and Innocenti, 2018; Majrashi, 2018; Niu and Metwally, 2016; Raj and Bozonelos, 2015; Van der Beek, 2017). Third, the number of Hajjis has grown significantly in the world over the last few years and the necessity to cater for spiritual need of these travellers by the stakeholders in this industry has become paramount. For example, about 2.3 million Muslims participated in the 2018 Hajj ceremony in Saudi Arabia as compared to 2.5 million Hajjis in 2019 (Shaban, 2018; The National, 2019). Specifically, there has been a major increase in the number of people willing to participate in religious pilgrimage to Hajj in Uzbekistan and the quota has been increased from 5,200 to 7,200 hajjis (The Tashkent Times, 2017). Similarly, the quota on the number of pilgrims from Ghana in 2019 was 6,000 pilgrims, an increase from 5,536 in 2018 (Ghanaweb, 2019). Fourth, Hajj together with Umrah generates \$12bn to the economy of Saudi Arabia which is the 20% of its GDP, while using half a million people in the tourism sector (TRT World, 2020). Indeed, exploring and understanding pilgrims understanding of Hajj and their actual experience during the journey will assist the stakeholders such as policymakers and business owners to provide unique pilgrimage packages to strengthen pilgrimage of both in Ghana and Uzbekistan.

In the context of religious tourism research, limited cross-cultural studies have been carried out to explore the understanding, impact and observation of Hajjis between two different cultures (Donnan, 1995; Gunlu and Okumus, 2015; Haq and Jackson, 2009; Raj and Bozonelos, 2015; Toguslu, 2017). To fill this knowledge gap, this study works with three specific objectives: first to explore the understanding of Hajj between pilgrims of Ghana and Uzbekistan, second, to examine the impact of Hajj on oneself after the pilgrimage; and third, to identify challenges that are during the pilgrimage. This paper proceeds in four steps: first, this study presents a theoretical foundation and review of literature on the Islam in Ghana and Uzbekistan, understanding, experience and observations of Hajj. Second, the methodologies used are provided followed by data analysis and the discussion of findings section. Third, the next section gives the conclusion and implications. Finally, the study ends with the limitations and future studies.

## Literature review

### *Theoretical background*

To explain the differences of understanding of pilgrimage to Hajj between Ghanaian and Uzbek pilgrims, this study uses theory of constructivism. Constructivism is a psychology in the sphere of education, which consists of various theories of learning (Fosnot, 2005). Constructivism holds the view that knowledge is created by the individuals rather than obtained from external sources (Lowenthal and Muth, 2008), such as books and other materials. In other words, people must receive the information and based on their experience and cultural backgrounds, construct a meaning. Constructivism is split into two fields: cognitive and social. Cognitive constructivism is based on the works of Jean Piaget, who claimed that people's knowledge is the product of their ideas and experiences. In the cognitive constructivism field, an individual becomes the center of knowledge creation. In contrast to cognitive constructivism, social constructivism was created by Lev Vygotsky who argued that social factors such as peers and culture play a role in the individual during the process of knowledge creation (Brau, 2019). These cultural factors are beliefs, experience and interaction with others (Doolittle, 2014).

The issue with constructivism arises with logical consequences on the idea that knowledge is created in our minds. In constructivism, however, the knowledge does not necessarily match but rather fits into the reality. In traditional view of knowledge, a person simply replicates or matches the knowledge to reality, whereas in constructivism learner simply fits the knowledge to reality. It is similar to a key that fits into the lock to open the doors, that is, people with different understanding can open the same door as long as the knowledge that is constructed fits satisfactorily into the context (Bodner, 1986).

The theory of constructivism is mainly used in the education literature and practice to understand people and how to prepare learning materials for them. In terms of tourism research, little has been done on theory of constructivism to explore the travelers understanding of their journey. Since diverse number of pilgrims participate in pilgrimage, each and every one will have their own cultural and individual understanding of Hajj. To have a better understanding the pilgrim's personal understanding of Hajj journey, constructivism serves as the basis to comprehend how individual Pilgrims construct Hajj in their respective environments.

The importance of the theory to this research is how pilgrims perceived the understanding of Hajj in their various environments. This research holds that pilgrims understanding of Hajj would be based on their experience and cultural background. This is because cultural beliefs and values are determinants, which explain individuals' understanding of a phenomenon. Presumably, it is possible that Hajjis from Ghana and Uzbekistan might construct the meaning of Hajj differently in their respective context. In this vein, it is worth researching into this neglected area which is relevant within the religious tourism context.

### **Contextual background: Islam in Ghana and Uzbekistan**

Remarkably, the Islam religion is regarded as one of Ghana's main religions; approximately 20% of the 28 million estimated Ghanaians are recorded as Muslims (Religion Facts, 2016). The impact of Islam in Ghana' socio-economic development cannot be overlooked (Heaton *et al.*, 2009; Owusu, 2017). Muslims and other religions in Ghana have admirable inter-relations (Wandusim, 2015), achieved largely through the recognition of Islam by the state. There is also cooperation among other religious

bodies and the Muslim religion, represented by their agencies such as the National Hajj Council, Muslim Representative Council and National Chief Imam.

Contrary, in Uzbekistan, Islam is the major religion comprising 88% of the population being Muslim, comprised of mainly Sunni faith (US Mission Uzbekistan, 2019). Islam first entered Central Asia in the mid-seventh century and has remained the most influential in the region (Soucek, 2000). Cities such as Bukhara in present day Uzbekistan quickly turned into center of Islamic learning and culture. Over the years, Islam has left a great impression on its people (Gunn, 2003). The government of Uzbekistan manages both Hajj and Umrah for the pilgrims with the assistance of local and district administrations that provides logistic support such as chartered flights (US Mission Uzbekistan, 2019). A cross-cultural research in Islamic context is relevant because of a number of factors. First and foremost, Islam is common to both countries. Interestingly, the spread of Islam in both countries has its unique history. While Islam entered modern Ghanaian territory through trade (Salm and Falola, 2002), Islam spread in modern day Uzbekistan through conquest (Abazov, 2007). Second, according to the 2019 report on International Religious Freedom, Ghana has been listed as one of the countries in Africa that encourages co-existence of different religious sects (US Department of State, 2020). For example, Ghana has initiated compulsory religious and moral education in the national public education curriculum by the Ministry of Education (Addai-Mununkum, 2014), this allows every school going child to have basic knowledge of Islam and Christian religions. Third, Global Muslim Travel Index has ranked Uzbekistan in the top 30 Muslim Outbound countries in 2018 (Global Muslim Travel Index, 2018). Fourth, in terms of culture, both Ghana and Uzbekistan have some social principles in common such as value in large families, shared beliefs in superstitions, respect for elders and community, colonial heritage and duality of language, for example, colonial and local. Difference exists in celebrations, for instance, Uzbeks tend to play more emphasis on weddings (Ulko, 2017), whereas Ghanaians value big funeral services (Oppong and Oppong, 2003). Finally, this study heeds the suggestions of Nazroo *et al.* (2007) that comparative research could provide insight into different social context and would determine how ethnic identities vary over time and place. Therefore, this study took into cognizance the socio-cultural diversity, so as to have a very broad and deeper insights into the demands. In addition, Haq and Jackson (2009) also recommended that Hajj packages can be viewed as services, whereas pilgrims are considered as customers and by studying the needs and wants of pilgrims with different backgrounds characteristics the demand for Hajj can be increased.

Noticeably, both Ghanaians and Uzbek Muslims are of Sunni denomination of Islam, differences exist in their jurisprudence. Uzbeks are from Hanafi school of thought (Ulko, 2017), whereas Ghanaian Muslims are mainly Maliki (Sindima, 2017). This study did not make the attempt to explore the understanding of Hajj based on Islamic school of thoughts, but rather it is country-specific. This was done since the main purpose of this study was guided by the Islamic faith which is common to all Muslims regardless of the sects and school of thoughts of the interviewees. In the nutshell, analysis of Hajjis from Ghana and Uzbekistan will bring new insights of spiritual tourism since both countries are located in different continents, with different cultures and history of Islam. Hence, the study of Islamic tourism is essential to both government, practitioners, scholars, businesses and policymakers.

### Understanding of hajj

In literature, Hajj is defined as a religious pilgrimage to Mecca, and one of the five pillars of Islam that a Muslim person who is financially and physically sound must undertake once in a lifetime (Aziz, 2001; Jafari and Scott, 2014; Scott and Jafari, 2010; Timothy and Iverson, 2006).

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There is a whole chapter on Hajj in the Quran, but clear statement is made in Chapter 22, verses 27–30, where God says:

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). That they may witness things that are of benefit to them (i.e. reward of Hajj in the Hereafter, and also some worldly gain from trade, etc.), and mention the Name of Allah on appointed days (i.e. 10th, 11th, 12th, and 13th day of Dhul-Hijjah), over the beast of cattle that He has provided for them (for sacrifice) (at the time of their slaughtering by saying: Bismillah, Wallahu-Akbar, Allahumma Minka wa Ilaik). Then eat thereof and feed therewith the poor who have a very hard time. Then let them complete the prescribed duties (Manasik of Hajj) for them, and perform their vows, and circumambulate the Ancient House (the Kabah at Makkah). That (Manasik prescribed duties of Hajj is the obligation that mankind owes to Allah), and whoever honours the sacred things of Allah, then that is better for him with his Lord. The cattle are lawful to you, except those (that will be) mentioned to you (as exceptions). So, shun the abomination (worshipping) of idol, and shun lying speech (false statements) (Al-Hilali and Khan, 2020).

Since Hajj is a major lifetime event for most Muslims, it requires proper preparation in terms of education and dedication (Bianchi, 2008; Robinson, 1999). To participate in Hajj, Muslim pilgrims go through a yearlong process of financial, medical, transportation and mental preparation (Bianchi, 2008) and uncertainty that becomes stronger as the pilgrimage becomes closer (Peters, 1994). In terms of medical preparation, World Health Organization (WHO) notes that people must undergo vaccinations for diseases such as Poliomyelitis, Meningococcal meningitis, Yellow Fever and many others with a certificate of proof. Authorities on health are highly recommended to provide basic medical education such as food-safety and heat-exhaustion to the pilgrims before departure and people with health issues such as cancer are excepted from Hajj obligation (Ministry of Health, 2019; WHO, 2019).

Understanding of Hajj can vary from person to person. In the current study, understanding of Hajj is regarded as the personal meaning a Hajji attached to the spiritual journey to the land of Prophet Muhammad. For example, Pakistani pilgrims from Pakistan understand Hajj as a religious duty whereas Pakistani pilgrims from Australia viewed pilgrimage to Mecca as a spiritual adventure and achievement (Haq and Jackson, 2009). Pilgrims from the USA viewed Hajj, not as a tourism phenomenon, but a journey of a lifetime to pray and perform religious rituals where one's rewards are increased significantly while praying at the holy sites (Raj and Bozonelos, 2015). Belgian Muslims of Turkish origins also viewed Hajj as a religious obligation but also with some individual motivations such as purified minds, seeking spiritual path, understanding meaning of life and sense of returning home (Toguslu, 2017). Gunlu and Okumus (2015) confirmed in their study that female pilgrims from Turkey understand Hajj as a one of the five pillars of Islam and a religious obligation of a Muslim. The Dhund, rural people of Pakistan, viewed Hajj as a final sacrifice, where a person takes part after all the debts, family and social matters have been taken care of, in case the pilgrims dies there will be no issues outstanding for the family left behind (Donnan, 1995).

It is highly recommended to experience traveling in Islam to exchange cultures, knowledge and appreciate the creation of God (Timothy and Iverson, 2006). Although it is a part of a religious duty and one of five pillars of Islam, few people actually take part in it due to financial reasons, thus leaving only elders who have accumulated enough wealth to fulfill this duty. For many Muslims, Hajj is more than just a religious duty; it is seen as homecoming to Mecca, symbolic sense of returning to their religious roots (Delaney, 1990).

Grad and Sheikh (2005) state that Muslims participate in Hajj for five days and during that time pilgrims spend most of their time walking, prayer and camping in the desert.

Pilgrims are highly encouraged to visit the city of Medina, even though it is not strict part of the Hajj itself. The main site of interest in the city of Medina is the Prophet's Mosque, known in Arabic as "Masjid al-Nabi," where Muslims perform supplications and visit the tomb of the Prophet and his closest companions (Bianchi, 2008). The city of Medina plays an important role in the Muslim history because Islam as a religion was established there. It became the capital of Islamic state and the Prophet himself chose to be buried there with his trusted companions.

### *Hajj experience and observations*

Pilgrims, who take part in the Hajj pilgrimage, experienced significant positive changes in spirituality and personality with a long-lasting impact on their lives (Digance, 2006). This research considers Hajjis experiences as the impact of Hajj on oneself, gained after embarking on the journey to the holy land of Prophet Muhammad. While Hajjis observations were operationalized as problems faced during the spiritual gathering. During the pilgrimage, Hajjis spend time with different nationals and ethnic groups who wear the same white garments leading to more tolerance and harmony among fellow humans (Clingsmith *et al.*, 2009). Besides, gender mixing and show equality are common during Hajj, where men and women pray alongside each other (Bianchi, 2008), which leads to acceptance of women in the society, in areas such employment opportunities and support for female education. After Hajj, Muslims begin to pray more and observe fasting in accordance with the global Islamic practices, instead of their local rituals and traditions such as wearing of amulets or giving dowries (Clingsmith *et al.*, 2009). This is also supported by a study by Gunlu and Okumus (2015), which concludes that pilgrims after returning from Hajj, experienced positive impact on their lives such as peace and tranquility which led to better practice of Islam.

Pilgrimage to Hajj is very exciting but also a demanding journey with various experiences and observations to people with various backgrounds. For instance, Pakistani Muslims from Pakistan visiting Hajj were satisfied with their experience without any significant disappointment, while Australian Pakistanis have commented that locals viewed religious travelers as money bags and in some instances were treated rudely by other pilgrims (Haq and Jackson, 2009). American pilgrims were largely happy with the agents and their journey experience but raised issues with commercialization of Hajj and price hikes at the local shops (Raj and Bozonelos, 2015). Although female pilgrims from Turkey were initially hesitant to discuss shortcomings during their pilgrimage to Hajj given the sacred and spiritual nature of the journey, they eventually commented that the main issues were the hot weather in Saudi Arabia, visa process, hygiene and overcrowding in certain areas where people could get crushed easily (Gunlu and Okumus, 2015).

### **Methodology**

This research is an exploratory qualitative one that focuses on unearthing the meaning of Hajj, as well as the experiences and observations of Ghanaian and Uzbek Muslim pilgrims. These two countries were selected to advance and present diversified cultural and practical understanding of the meaning attached to Hajj by Muslims in the respective countries. According to Vijver (2018), a cross-cultural study advances and expands knowledge scope beyond a particular context. Although previous studies (Haq and Jackson, 2009; Toguslu, 2017; Werbner, 2002) have dealt with cross-cultural studies of Muslims on pilgrimages in their environments, no such research has been conducted on Ghana and Uzbek. This study

showed interesting results as the impact of the culture and the national lifestyle on the meaning of Ghana and Uzbek Muslims about Hajj was found to be weighty. First, the adoption of a qualitative method is to explore a deeper meaning of behavior rather than quantifying and generalizing results (Creswell, 2013; Walsh, 2002). Following previous research, spiritual management studies have appropriated the application of qualitative methods to explore behavioral issues (Haq and Jackson, 2009; Toguslu, 2017). Second, the main reason for using exploratory research was to unveil important issues, as well as search for explanations of behavioral issues (Hair *et al.*, 2013) regarding the understanding of Hajj.

The target participants for this study were pilgrims who had visited Mecca and its environs for their Hajj. This study was not interested on the number of times or the last time a respondent visited Hajj. Purposive sampling method used in this study to locate and collect the respondents for the interview. Purposive sampling is a non-random method, where respondents are collected in terms of their qualifications. In other words, respondents are chosen based on their knowledge and expertise to answer the questions posed by researchers (Bernard, 2017). The main disadvantage of purposive sampling method is that it cannot be considered as statistical representation of the target population (Saunders *et al.*, 2016); thus the findings of this study do not represent the whole population of Ghana and Uzbekistan. To optimize recall among the participants, the researchers first discussed issues relating to Hajj in Islamic. This was done for the participants to recall their experiences with Hajj. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis with a total sample of 97 Hajjis or interviewees who were in their forties to sixties, where 44 of the interviewees were Ghanaian Muslims and 53 were Uzbek Muslims.

Within the Ghanaian context, the researchers searched for Muslim pilgrims who could speak and read English language fluently in a nearby mosque located in "Madina," a suburb of Accra named after Medina in Saudi Arabia. Madina is regarded as one of the Muslims dominated areas in the capital city of Ghana with a population of 111,926 (La Nkwantanang Assembly, 2020). This site was chosen due to its advantageous location of reaching the target population for this study and also to ensure smooth data collection. First, the researchers visited a mosque with the understanding that the imam in-charge would be useful in recommending Muslims who have performed Hajj. In total, 49 pilgrims were recommended and contacted through telephone calls. Only 47 participants agreed to take part in the research after they have read and signed the printed consent form. The participants were interviewed in their various homes, as well as their workplaces on the days that were scheduled and convenient to them. In all, only one of the interviewees pulled out of the exercise due to their personal reasons. Also, information provided by two of the interviewees were not useful due to the similarity of information provided by the earlier participants; so the saturation method of data collection set in, making the researchers to conclude on only 44 interviewees from Ghana. The interviews were conducted in the period 9–15 April, 2019 and were audio recorded. In average, the interviews lasted 63 min. The translated transcripts were sent to the interviewees for double-check including some quotes presented. This is to confirm and be sure what the participants exactly meant.

The following demographics were gathered: gender, age, occupation and family status. The sample comprised of 31 males and 13 females. In total, 30 of the participants were in their early forties and fifties respectively and only 14 of the participants were in the early sixties. All the participants were married. All the interviewees reported having three and four children respectively. A wide range of occupations were identified in the sample: information technology (IT) expert (retired), statistician, imam and Arabic scholar, certified

nurse (PhD student), businesspersons, retired military officer and Lecturer, English teachers, etc.

Similarly, in Uzbekistan, the co-researcher also deployed the purposive sampling method to identify and also to establish contact with the first interviewee through coworker who was aware of this research. In all they were 56 interviewees who took part in the research. In total, 53 interviewees were considered useful for the study due to quality and the relevance of the information provided by these participants. The researcher visited the respondents at their homes and workplaces. In cases, where they were more than one respondent at a particular destination and who have showed interest in the study, the respondents were interviewed separately to avoid duplication of information. In all, the issue of confidentiality and anonymity were considered in the data collection process of this study. The preferred language was Uzbek and the interview lasted for 65 min on average, using a tape-recorder and some detailed notes were also taken. The interview and the detailed notes were finalized into transcripts and translated by a professional translator into English language. Earlier, the transcriptions before translation were sent to the interviewees to double-check, with focus on the quotations to be sure what the participant exactly meant. In some instance, the interviewees were contacted by email or on phone to cross-check and confirm the transcription with focus on the quote during the interview. Data was collected during the month of May–June of 2019.

Finally, the total sample size for the study is 97. Within the qualitative literature, scholars have recommended the *rich (quality)* and *thick (quantity)* approach which is considered as the *data saturation* concept where no new data, no new themes and no new coding identified (Guest *et al.*, 2006; O'Reilly and Parker, 2012; Walker, 2012). This is suggested as one of the best approaches in determining sample size for a study. Leveraging on this suggestion, the use of the 97 interviewees for in-depth study is appropriate for this research.

#### *Instrumentations and data analysis*

Extant Hajj literature (Delaney, 1990; Haq and Jackson, 2009; Toguslu, 2017) were useful in designing questions for the in-depth interviews for this study. In all, questions were asked linked to the interviewee's understanding or meaning of this spiritual journey (Hajj), their experiences and observations. The researchers were interested in how the respondents evaluated their Hajj understanding by asking them these questions:

- Q1. What is your personal understanding (meaning) of Hajj?
- Q2. What are your motives for visiting Hajj?
- Q3. In your opinion, how important is the visit of Hajj?
- Q4. What are your key beneficial experiences visiting Hajj?
- Q5. The reasons why these are perceived as your key beneficial experiences?
- Q6. What were your personal expectations before visiting Hajj?
- Q7. In what ways have this spiritual journey strengthen your expectations in Islam?

Probing questions were also used to understand the respondents well. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed; and the Nvivo 12 software was applied to the thematic coding. The coding process is key as it guides to structure the data and facilitate working with and to gain insight into the data. Data analysis was conducted



using the procedures of thematic analysis. This was established through a thorough examination of the data gathered to find repeated patterns of meaning of Hajj based on the interviewee experiences and observations (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ruane and Wallace, 2013). Following the recommendation of Braun and Clarke (2006) in identifying themes, a step by step thematic analysis was conducted by the researchers to explore the interview transcripts by searching for common patterns of response. Afterward, the themes were organized according to the objectives of the study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). First, the transcriptions were read over and over to be conversant with the materials before starting the actual coding. The next step involved generating the initial codes, where the transcripts after the analyses line by line to segment the information were considered. These stages mentioned above were carried out to ensure reliability of the findings and to assess the consistency of the analysis. The researchers exchanged their transcripts to validate the findings by reaching the same themes after reviewing the same data separately. According to Lazaraton (2017) to validate a qualitative analysis, two or more researchers should reach the same conclusions after reviewing the same data.

## Findings

### *Interviewees understanding of hajj*

Most of those interviewed shared their personal understanding of Hajj and their relevant experiences and observations. The primary understanding that were found to underlie the interviewees' personal meaning of Hajji were:

- Hajj is fifth pillar of Islam;
- equal before God;
- purification of the soul or renewal of faith;
- perform spiritual rituals;
- call by God;
- again social status;
- exemplary life or mentor others; and
- engaging in trade.

From the finding, it was indicated that pilgrims had different understanding of Hajj. However, the most widely accepted philosophical meaning of Hajj common to the Hajjis was the fifth pillar of Islam:

[. . .] Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam. Messenger of God (Peace and blessings of God be upon him) has informed us about five pillars and they are declaration of faith "Shahadatu la ilaha illallah" (There is no god but God), five daily prayers, fasting, donations and Hajj. Hajj is the last of five pillars."

(Uzbek, Male, 56)

Basically, as a Muslim I see hajj as one of the pillars of Islam which is the fifth pillar and a spiritual journey. It's an optional practice. If you have the means and you are physically capable then you are mandated to go on hajj."

(Ghanaian, Female 40)

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Hajj is the fifth obligations set by God. It is the obligations by which if a person is capable must go and ask God for forgiveness for the committed sins and complete the obligation set by God.

(Uzbek, Male, 64)

Well it is one of the five pillars of Islam to go to Hajj. [...] that is why, if a person who is pious, has the capabilities to perform [...] because one has accumulated wealth, one must make Hajj a wish or goal to perform Hajj.

(Ghanaian, Male 52)

Besides, the Quran understanding of Hajj to the pilgrims as fifth pillar in Islam, they were personal meaning among the interviewees in both countries:

I saw Hajj as short episode of Day of Judgment, which will happen according to Quran. That is the day that we would all be equal before our maker Allah. Regardless of race, colour, diversities in language and values, Hajj accommodate everyone.

(Ghanaian Male, 51)

Hajj is about purification and being reborn. Once you have done Hajj and have returned home, you must not repeat from your sins. You must become an example for others and help them out. You must be kind and forgiving.

(Uzbek, Male, 58)

[...] that is what I believe in, it is a call, a spiritual journey you have to undertake. Only travelling to Saudi Arabia is not Hajj. It is just travelling. But you doing the spiritual rituals is what hajj is.

(Uzbek, Male, 56)

Hajj is very important because it has been able to renew my faith, and I strongly believe that whoever embarks on hajj with high level of sincerity his faith will be renewed and somewhere the prophet told the devil that whoever embarks on hajj which sincerity and devotion the person comes back as a newly born child. A newly born child is free from sin.

(Ghanaian, Male 63)

[...] in our society especially in the “Zongo” communities there is some kind of respect attached to anyone who has been to Hajj, people begin to call you Alhaji. I went there purposely to fulfill the fifth pillar of Islam, so that I would be cleansed and to gain status in my community.

(Ghanaian, Male 53)

### **Interviewee's experiences of hajj**

Next, the interviewees shared their interesting experience of Hajj. The key findings on their Hajj experience were:

- change of heart;
- started to pray more;
- increase good deeds to others and avoid evil;
- started to appreciate God creation more;
- increased in social status in the society and at the workplace; and
- begin to feel more responsible or devoted to Allah.

When you go there you will see Muslim land, your heart will change there, and you will see different people there and will know that the last day will be the same. I have come to experienced that this world is temporary and we are just a guest here, rich or poor and we will all return to God, you will witness this in Hajj. You must understand the fact about this world, after we have done our repentance, our hearts have opened and changed.

(Uzbek, Male 56)

[...] my hope and heart have changed a lot and now I am more eager to pray more.” I would try and do good things to others as much as possible. People in our community are expecting that you should be able to do certain things and if you are not able to meet their expectations, they feel like you are disappointing them.

(Uzbek, Male, 46)

My understanding of Hajj has not changed, however, my thinking about the world have changed. I began to appreciate Allah in His own wisdom. For example, I am trying to increase my good deeds to others and avoid evils, as others look up to me in the society. [...] bathed myself into the spiritual benefits and must share good things, help others.

(Uzbek, Male 64)

If someone accidentally pushes you or touches you, they will say “Afwan, afwan ya ahi, ya Muhammad ya Abdullah” (sorry, sorry brother, Brother Muhammad, brother Abdullah). Even if they don't know you, they will ask so much forgiveness to the point they might even kiss your feet. You will not see this kind of environment anywhere in the world.

(Uzbek, Male 44)

My current understanding has not change, is still embarking on a spiritual journey. You go there to seek for whatever you go to seek. Some go to seek for financial strengthening, some to go to seek for all sorts of things. I went there to seek for forgiveness, bless my marriage, bless my family, give us good health and heal my mother who was sick then.

(Ghanaian, Female 44)

I have experienced and appreciated certain things that God in his own wisdom created us in various ways and shapes. You will see it there and I also see the convergence of people from different parts of the world. This as a preamble of what is going to happen on the day of reckoning. Because it doesn't matter how you are ranked at your workplace, a messenger or a director, you all appear in the same garments.

(Ghanaian, Male 44)

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When I came back things have changed in my life with things that I used to do as a Muslim after my visit. I put a stop to them and I do not want to go back to them, So, I see that so many things that have changed in my life because when I think of the fact that I've been there before I don't want to do anything else that would punish or destroy my hajj.

(Ghanaian, Male 62)

[. . .] when you go for hajj and come back you are more respected, in fact in our society, you would be saluted as "Alhaji". I command more respect because I am called Alhaji and I hold PhD degree as well. This makes you a unique person in our society.

(Ghanaian, Male, 53)

### **Interviewee observations of hajj**

The majority of the interviewees exhibited problems faced or observations during the Hajj journey. In particular, the Hajjis observed some unpleasant behavior:

- unhygienic facilities;
- theft;
- food being thrown to garbage; and
- pilgrims getting busy with trades.

They were some observations that the Hajjis expected to see like hot climate in Saudi Arabia, which is something they are aware, as well as the act of stampede. In addition, Ghanaian Hajjis expected the journey to be smooth and safe but only to encounter administrative challenges like:

- cheap accommodation;
- break of vehicle during the hot weather; and
- variations in the amount paid to Hajj organizers.

[. . .] others got a little too busy with commerce, such as buying gifts and so on [. . .] at the end though, it is not the main issue for me. We had a special goal and that was not to inspect others but rather to perform Hajj and fulfill the fifth pillar of Islam. When you go to Hajj, you must come back satisfied.

(Uzbek, Male 59)

We were told, before Hajj, that people step on, you will be stampeded and people die there, but I did not observe anything like this. [. . .] but you must consider the fact that it is hot there. They throw away food and bread to prevent diseases.

(Uzbek, Male 62)

I had cultural shocked because, here in Ghana or Africa I am use to using *t*-roll, wipe before I wash. And I go to a community there is no sight of *t*-roll, so, I have to go straight with water, it was a shocked. You don't use the normal bowl that we use here, I have to squat, it was like a bit disappointing. Hygiene is not really good.

(Ghanaian, Female 40)

[...] even around the Blackstone, people steal. I don't understand how you go that far even in the house of the lord to steal.

(Ghanaian, Male, 53)

With the amount you pay the organizers can get us better buses and comfortable accommodation and make the journey comfortable because when it comes to the heat in Saudi Arabia, when coming as a first-timer you will think that they have opened an oven of hot air that blows into the body but that is the normal temperature. So just imagine your bus broke down and you were in that sun for several hours.

(Ghanaian, Male 62)

The errors I think it has to do with organization. The Muslim communities in Ghana seem not to appreciate order, some people want to maintain the status quo and others will cause confusion because they benefit from it. We also need to streamline the processes to make Hajj easy and comfortable and in joining the Hajj-board I was able to streamline the processes but you know people can resist change.

(Ghanaian, Male 45)

### **Discussion and conclusion**

As shown in [Figure 1](#), the findings of the investigation proposed a model of Hajj understanding within developing countries context. Considering the issue of cultural multiplicities, different understanding, experience and observation were uncovered as showcased in the suggested model, which contributes to the existing understanding of Hajj in literature. Furthermore, the difference between the understandings of Hajj between these two nations confirms by theory of constructivism as each nation has its own unique historical and cultural development of Islam. Findings show that the philosophy of Hajj as the fifth pillar obligation set by Allah was common among Muslims of these two countries. This implies that Hajj is observed as one of the greatest religious duties regardless of the geographical and cultural variations among the participants. This observation was made based on the results of the two countries studied. Evidently, this study reaffirmed earlier results ([Clingsmith et al., 2009](#); [Gunlu and Okumus, 2015](#); [Toguslu, 2017](#)) that Hajj symbolizes equality in bringing together and uniting Muslims from different parts of the world irrespective of their color and race. As this provides Muslims the opportunity to worship, renew their sense of belongingness, cleanse oneself and be reborn.

Interestingly, this study identified some distinction with regard to understanding of Hajj among Ghanaian pilgrims as compared to Uzbek pilgrims. Findings showed that Ghanaian Hajjis have attached social status of respect and title to Hajj. At home, Ghanaian Hajjis are accorded with respect and titles such as Alhaji and Hajia in their communities. This finding could be possibly explained by the fact that within the African society, social status such as respect and titles tend to project the superiority of an African, and this was confirmed in the current study's results. As such, the use of titles within the African settings is important since titles enable people to gain attention and entice people to accord them special courtesies within the society. This is confirmed by [Akwei \(2017\)](#) that Africans are fascinated by their titles. This is one of the unique contributions of this paper to Hajj literature in a non-Islamic context of non-Western environment.

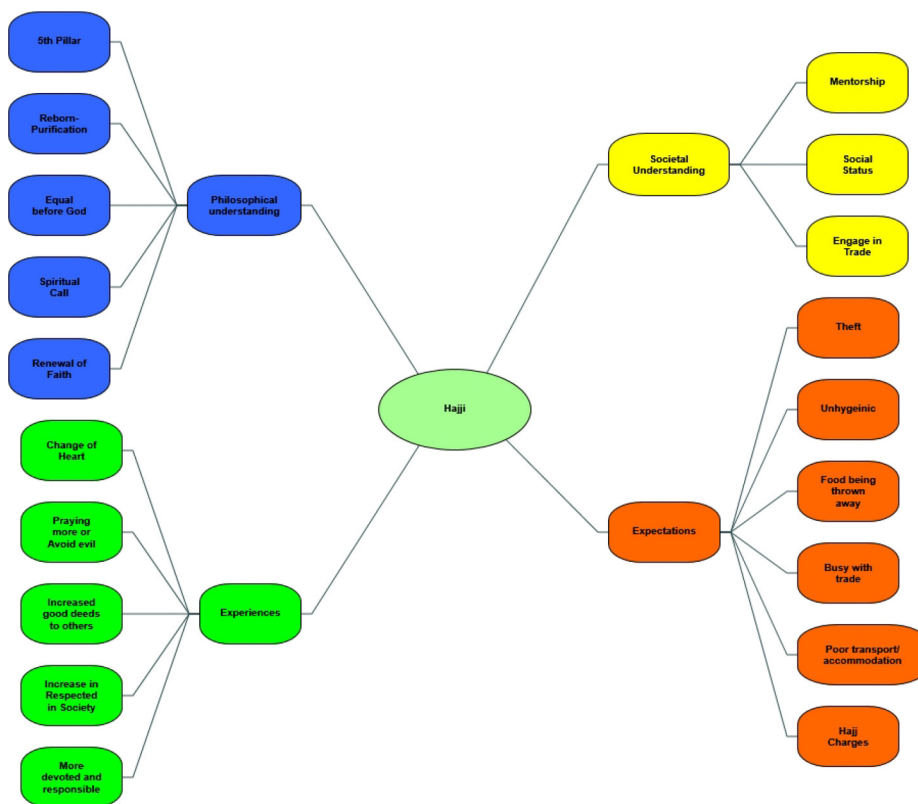


Figure 1. Proposed Hajj understanding, experience and observation

Nevertheless, Uzbek pilgrims were also unique in their own understanding of Hajj. They believe that anyone who performs Hajj can inspire others to live meaningful lives that can lead more followers of the Islamic faith. This explains the concept of spiritual role models that would influence others in the society. This supports the notion of [Delffs \(2018\)](#) that the people of God have always looked to one another for inspiration, encouragement and strength. In Islam, the greatest example of exemplary behavior in any given situation is Prophet Muhammad himself ([Jawad, 2018](#)). For example, drawing from the earlier findings ([Egel and Fry, 2017](#); [Fry et al., 2017](#)) on spiritual leadership as a model for Islamic leadership, it is obvious that each generation would look at faithful ancestors such as Prophet Muhammad, disciples and followers of the prophets for exemplary instruction on how to know God and live out one's faith. The variations in the understanding of the Hajj can be explained by culture influence or differences as Africans as seen as people who place value on respect and title, the Asians are more collective in nature. This is was also discussed by [Dadabaev \(2017\)](#), where Uzbeks live in a collective community unit known as "Mahalla" where people must socialize and assist each other in times of need such as constructing a new house and helping out with wedding ceremonies. In all, this research builds upon the knowledge gap in a cross-culture meaning of Hajj among Muslims in two countries. This

study has advanced the understanding of Hajj from developing countries perspective, by discovering new meaning attached to Hajj such as mentorship (spiritual role models) and social status, which are regarded as one of the contributions.

The findings of this study provide original contribution to the spiritual tourism literature by establishing country-specific understanding of Hajj pilgrimage and its experience by the Hajjis to improve the pilgrim's journey. First, this study expands the scope of understanding of Hajj within the spiritual tourism literature from different country and continent perspective. Second, it goes beyond the previous empirical studies (Bozonelos, 2015; Gunlu and Okumus, 2015; Haq and Jackson, 2009; Raj and Toguslu, 2017) to extend the pilgrimage to Hajj. The study of Haq and Jackson (2009) on the understanding and pilgrimage to Hajj between Pakistani pilgrims of Pakistan and Pakistani pilgrims of Australia discovered that understanding of Hajj was ultimate sacrifice for Allah, spiritual achievement and adventure. Gunlu and Okumus (2015) have confirmed that Turkish female pilgrims saw Hajj as fifth pillar of Islam and religious obligation and Raj and Bozonelos (2015) discussed how pilgrimage to Hajj was not a tourists phenomenon but rather lifetime journey for American pilgrims. Furthermore, Toguslu (2017) in his study of Belgian Muslims of Turkish origin identified that Hajj is spiritual homecoming, repentance and purifying of hearts and concluded that pilgrims had their own unique perceptions of their own concerning this holy pilgrimage. This current article goes beyond this to establish meaning of Hajj in Ghana and Uzbekistan with different culture and history and discovered that there is a spiritual and social understanding of Hajj.

Conclusively, the research findings are exhibited in three ways. One, it shows that there is a universal philosophy of Hajj which is common to Muslims interviewed within context. Two, findings indicate that after pilgrimage to Hajj, pilgrims were impacted in terms of changes in heart due to witnessing equality and foreseeing the Day of Judgment to look like Hajj. This implies that the participants have witnessed the present of Allah in their lives. Three, pilgrims faced problems such as issues of hygiene, stealing, trading, poor administrative organization of the journey and high Hajj changes.

This study works to unearth countries' specific understanding of Hajj, which is a spiritual journey of lifetime to pray and also perform religious rituals that is expected to cleanse oneself and increase Allah's blessing. Following the qualitative research method approach, this research findings shed light on growing and understudied research field of spiritual management literature. This study also offers an insight into how tourism authorities, businesses and spiritual tourism destination site practitioners and managers can use the Hajj understanding, experience and observations findings to educate potential pilgrims. In all, following these findings, the current study has made practical and contextual contributions to literature. This study has advanced the understanding of Hajj in two separate continents, which is relevant to spirituality management literature. Contextually, this study is the first of the kind on cross-cultural understanding of Hajj in Islamic and a non-Islamic states perspective.

Overall, theory of constructivism was used in this study to better understand the difference in the understanding of the pilgrimage to Hajj. Although, previously the theory of constructivism was addressed in the education related literature, less is known about this theory in the tourism literature. Thus, the main theoretical contributions of this study are manifested in the following ways. First, the study findings indicate that theory of constructivism is useful and important tool in identifying people's unique understanding of a phenomenon. Second, the constructivism theory was successfully used in the context of pilgrimage to Hajj between Ghana and Uzbekistan. Third, the difference in terms of

understanding of Hajj between the pilgrims of Ghana and Uzbekistan confirms that how people understand the world is unique and they do so in their own. Fourth, this study has not only validated the constructivism theory in non-Islamic and Islamic contexts but also proposed a model that is grounded on the theory for a better understanding of Hajj, which contributes to extend Hajj literature on the globe. It is important to note that the findings of this study can be significant for Hajj pilgrimage and cannot be overlooked. Truly, the findings can be useful for the policymakers, marketers, businesses, practitioners, non-governmental institutions and other stakeholders in Hajj pilgrimage for make future decisions and also have an improved understanding and knowledge about Hajj in the selected destinations.

Furthermore, this study also has practical implications for policymakers and marketing practitioners. The findings of this study provide opportunities for all the stakeholders that are involved in this pilgrimage to look into the Hajj observations of the pilgrims and formulate better pilgrimage packages to increase satisfaction. First, policymakers and marketing specialists can have a better idea of the images that the pilgrims have on the journey to Hajj based on their unique cultural understanding. According to Prayag (2010), understanding the needs of a particular segments enables the stakeholders to better allocate their resources. In addition, destination image can be improved and offered to the Pilgrims to increase “topophilia,” that is a bond between the people and the place (Tuan, 1974). Second, pilgrims observations can be used to understand their satisfaction during the Hajj. This study canvassed a need to improve the quality and hygiene at the rest stops can be improved to increase Pilgrims expectations. Orientations could be organized for the travelers prior to Hajj to avoid negative behaviors. Furthermore, management of transportation for Ghanaian Pilgrims can be updated to ease the hardships of Hajj for the travelers. Managing the observations of the Pilgrims is crucial as satisfaction of the travelers is important to increase further word of mouth in the tourism industry (Preko *et al.*, 2020). All of these implications are achievable through collaboration and policy formulations of the stakeholders involved such as governments of Saudi Arabia, Ghana and Uzbekistan and Islamic practitioners to improve Hajj conditions for future Muslim pilgrims. Overall, significant amount of education and public awareness is needed to better understand Hajj pilgrimage as part of religious tourism.

### **Limitation and future studies**

This research has contributed to the effort to advance country-specific understanding of Hajj among Muslims of non-Western contexts, though there are some limitations. First, the study has the inherent limitations of qualitative study that deter the findings from generalization. This is because the interviewees were not randomly selected and statistically represented. Thus, the results are limited to Ghana and Uzbekistan contexts. Second, this study did not aim at comparing demographics (gender, age categories and educational levels) of the interviewees with their personal understanding of Hajj, but rather explores a new perspective on country-specific of Hajj. In addition, this research did not examine the understanding of Hajj based on Muslims respective Islamic school of thoughts such as Sunni, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanafi. Therefore, considering the unique understanding of Hajj explored in both countries, the impact of Hajj and interviewees' observations during the religious celebration, future research should engage in a broader variety of quantitative and qualitative research techniques to address universality of Hajj understanding. Again, further research is needed to validate and extend the proposed Hajj model. This research has also open opportunity for further cross-culture studies on Islamic pilgrimage. Finally, future



research could address how Muslim understanding of Hajj vary within and between different Islamic school of thoughts, as well as gender, age and education cohorts.

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