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Formal Savings, Informal Networks, and Hajj Affordability: Evaluating the GCB Hajj Account and Savings Behaviour in Northern Ghana

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Abstract

Financing the Hajj pilgrimage in Northern Ghana demands extraordinary economic effort from Muslim households operating in one of the country's poorest regions. This paper investigates the savings strategies employed by prospective pilgrims and Hajj returnees in three communities Tamale (urban), Sagnarigu (peri-urban), and Kumbungu (rural) and evaluates the role of Ghana's first dedicated Hajj savings product, the GCB Hajj Account, launched in September 2025. Using a mixed-methods design comprising quantitative surveys with 150 Muslim households and semi-structured interviews with 25 participants, including prospective pilgrims, returnees, Islamic scholars, and bank officials, the study documents the persistent dominance of informal savings mechanisms: susu rotating savings groups (68%), home savings (58%), family contributions (52%), and asset liquidation (45%). Formal banking uptake remains low overall (12% GCB Hajj Account adoption) but is notably higher in urban Tamale (24%). Key barriers to formal savings adoption include limited rural branch access, financial illiteracy, and Islamic concerns over interest-bearing products concerns that the non-interest-bearing GCB account explicitly addresses. Government interventions under President Mahama, including a fare reduction from GH¢75,000 (2024) to GH¢62,000 (2025) with projections for below GH¢50,000 in 2026, and the anti-profit directive for Hajj governance, represent structural progress but remain insufficient for the lowest-income households. We propose an integrated Hajj Financing and Financial Inclusion Framework that combines agent banking expansion, mosque-based financial literacy campaigns, a government Hajj Stabilization Fund, and post-Hajj economic reintegration support. The study contributes to scholarship on Islamic finance, religious savings behaviour, and financial inclusion in low-income West African settings.

Keywords

Hajj financing, GCB Hajj Account, Islamic finance, susu savings, financial inclusion, Northern Ghana, savings behaviour, Zongo communities, pilgrimage economics

1. Introduction

The decision to perform the Hajj pilgrimage is, for Muslims in Northern Ghana, simultaneously a spiritual commitment and a profound economic undertaking. Unlike observant Muslims in wealthier countries, who may access subsidised pilgrimage schemes, government grants, or established institutional savings products, Ghanaian Muslims in the north face a stark financial arithmetic: the 2025

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Hajj fare of GH¢62,000 represents between two and five years of total household income for the average Northern Ghanaian family earning GH¢1,850 per month. In 2024, when the fare stood at GH¢75,000, this multiple was even more severe.

How do households navigate this challenge? The conventional economic answer save systematically in a formal bank account over many years is rarely available or attractive in Northern Ghana. Formal financial inclusion is limited: only 40% of adults in the region hold a bank account, compared to 60% in Greater Accra (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022). Mistrust of formal financial institutions, perceived conflicts between interest-bearing products and Islamic prohibition on riba (usury), limited branch access in rural areas, and low financial literacy collectively suppress formal savings uptake. In this context, informal savings mechanisms rotating savings groups (susu), home savings, extended family contributions, and the liquidation of productive assets such as livestock and land have historically dominated Hajj financing.

This landscape began to shift in September 2025, when GCB Bank launched Ghana's first dedicated Hajj savings product: the GCB Hajj Account. Designed as a non-interest-bearing, low-entry, fraud-protected savings vehicle, the account directly addresses several key barriers to formal savings among Muslim households. Simultaneously, the government of President John Dramani Mahama implemented significant policy reforms: reducing Hajj fares, issuing an anti-profit directive for Hajj governance, and breaking ground on a dedicated Hajj Village in Accra.

This paper examines these developments empirically, asking: What savings strategies do Northern Ghanaian Muslim households employ to finance Hajj? What has driven early adoption of the GCB Hajj Account, and what barriers persist? Have recent government policy interventions materially improved Hajj affordability? And what integrated framework can optimise pilgrimage financing while protecting household economic welfare?

These questions are distinct from and complementary to the social mobility dimensions of Hajj explored in companion scholarship. Whereas that work examines what happens after pilgrimage (changes in status, community leadership, and economic well-being), this paper focuses on the often-overlooked before: the years of sacrifice, strategy, and institutional navigation that enable or prevent the journey in the first place. Understanding the savings process is essential for designing policies that make the Hajj obligation genuinely accessible to low-income Muslims.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Financial Inclusion and Religious Obligation

Financial inclusion access to and use of affordable, reliable formal financial services is widely recognised as a precondition for household economic resilience and upward mobility (World Bank, 2022). However, financial inclusion frameworks have paid limited attention to religious financial obligations, which may both motivate and complicate savings behaviour. Hajj represents an unusual case: a compulsory expenditure (for those who are able) of extraordinary magnitude, targeted at a population segment (low-income, often rural, Islamic-faith communities) that is systematically underserved by formal financial systems.

Standard theories of savings behaviour predict that rational agents will accumulate savings to meet anticipated large expenditures. However, behavioural economics complicates this picture: self-control failures, present bias, and the fungibility of savings mean that households frequently fail to achieve their savings goals even when they have the intention and resources to do so (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Commitment savings products accounts that restrict access until a target is reached have been shown to improve savings outcomes in low-income settings (Ashraf et al., 2006). The GCB Hajj Account functions, in part, as a commitment savings vehicle: its design restricts withdrawal and directs funds toward the specific purpose of Hajj.

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2.2 The Role of Informal Savings Mechanisms

In contexts of limited formal financial inclusion, informal savings mechanisms rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), savings at home, and community-based lending networks serve as functional alternatives. The susu ROSCA, prevalent across West Africa, provides a socially enforced savings discipline that substitutes for the institutional discipline of a bank account. Research in Ghanaian economic anthropology (Aryeetey, 1994) has documented the susu's role in enabling capital accumulation for large expenditures, including business investment, school fees, and ceremonial costs.

However, informal mechanisms carry structural risks. Default by one member can destroy a susu's accumulated capital. Home savings are vulnerable to theft, fire, and the psychological temptation to spend on immediate needs. Asset liquidation particularly the sale of livestock or land converts long-term productive capital into short-term cash, potentially undermining future income-generating capacity. These risks are not incidental; they represent a systematic transfer of economic security from the future to the present.

2.3 Islamic Finance Principles and Savings Product Design

Islamic finance operates under a prohibition of riba (interest/usury), which restricts the types of savings products that devout Muslims are willing to use. Standard savings accounts that pay interest are, for many Muslims, religiously impermissible. This creates a significant gap in the formal financial landscape: even when formal accounts are physically accessible, they may be doctrinally unacceptable. Non-interest-bearing products, structured as qard (benevolent loan) or based on mudarabah (profit-sharing) principles, are required to serve the Muslim market.

The GCB Hajj Account's non-interest-bearing structure represents a direct response to this constraint. By forgoing interest, the bank sacrifices yield for compliance, creating a product that is acceptable to Islamic scholars and Muslim households alike. This design choice situates the GCB account within the broader field of Islamic finance, which has grown substantially across sub-Saharan Africa since the early 2000s (Hassan & Lewis, 2007).

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative semi-structured interviews. Mixed-methods approaches are appropriate when the research aims both to measure patterns such as the prevalence of different savings strategies and to understand the meanings and experiences that underlie those patterns, such as why certain strategies are preferred and what barriers prevent adoption of others. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enables a more comprehensive analysis than either method alone would permit.

3.2 Study Setting

The research was conducted across three communities in Northern Ghana, selected to represent variation in urbanisation, economic conditions, and formal financial access:

Tamale (urban): The regional capital of the Northern Region, with a population of approximately 950,000. Tamale has a Muslim-majority population, functioning bank branches (including GCB), and relatively higher exposure to formal financial products and literacy campaigns.

Sagnarigu (peri-urban): Adjacent to Tamale with a population of approximately 150,000. Sagnarigu exhibits mixed urban-rural characteristics, with some banking access alongside significant agricultural livelihoods and susu participation.

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Kumbungu (rural): A predominantly farming district approximately 30 kilometres from Tamale. Banking access is severely limited (one rural community bank), formal financial inclusion is low, and susu groups are the primary savings vehicle.

3.3 Sample and Recruitment

Quantitative surveys were conducted with 150 Muslim households, selected using stratified random sampling. Stratification was by community (50 households per community) and Hajj status (performed Hajj within five years, n=72; actively saving toward Hajj, n=78). Households were identified through community leaders and mosque networks.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 25 purposively selected participants: prospective pilgrims (n=12), Hajj returnees (n=8), Islamic scholars/imams (n=3), and GCB Bank officials (n=2). Purposive sampling ensured representation across age, gender, occupation, and community. Interviews were conducted in Dagbani or English, lasting 45–75 minutes each.

3.4 Data Collection

Quantitative surveys were administered by trained enumerators and covered household demographics and income, Hajj intentions and status, savings strategies and amounts, knowledge and use of the GCB Hajj Account, perceptions of Hajj affordability and government policy, and self-reported post-Hajj economic outcomes. Semi-structured interviews explored savings decision-making processes, experiences with formal and informal savings mechanisms, perceptions of the GCB Hajj Account, government policy evaluations, and the relationship between Hajj and household economic wellbeing. Document analysis was also conducted on GCB Hajj Account marketing materials, government policy statements, and media coverage of Hajj governance.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, cross-tabulations) in SPSS version 26. Comparisons were made across community type and Hajj status groups. Qualitative data were transcribed, translated where necessary, and subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Themes were developed inductively from interview data. Ethical approval was obtained from the Navrongo Health Research Centre Institutional Review Board (NHRCIRB489). Informed consent was obtained from all participants in their preferred language.

4. Findings

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The quantitative sample (n=150) was distributed evenly across communities (Tamale: 50, Sagnarigu: 50, Kumbungu: 50). Respondents were predominantly male (82%), reflecting the household financial decision-making structures prevalent in this context, with 18% female. Primary occupations included farming (45%), trading (30%), salaried employment (15%), and other (10%). Average household size was 7.2 persons. Average monthly household income was GH¢1,850 (range: GH¢500–5,000). Forty-eight percent (n=72) had performed Hajj within the past five years; 52% (n=78) were actively saving toward pilgrimage.

4.2 The Financial Burden of Hajj: Cost as the Primary Barrier

Across all three communities, the cost of Hajj was identified as the single most significant barrier to pilgrimage. The progression of Hajj fares over time was frequently cited as a source of frustration and despair. A 58-year-old farmer from Kumbungu, who had been saving for over twelve years, captured a sentiment echoed widely:

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> *"Every year I save a little, and every year the price goes up. When I started saving, the fare was GH¢15,000. Now it is GH¢62,000. I feel like I am running and the road keeps getting longer. But what can I do? Hajj is a pillar of Islam. I must go before I die."*

The 2025 reduction from GH¢75,000 to GH¢62,000 was welcomed as meaningful progress. Participants reacted to the projection of a fare below GH¢50,000 in 2026 with cautious optimism, though many emphasised that even GH¢50,000 remains beyond the immediate reach of typical households. A 45-year-old trader from Tamale noted that currency volatility historically responsible for much of the fare's increase was a persistent source of uncertainty: any cedi depreciation could reverse the gains achieved through negotiation and subsidy.

4.3 Savings Strategies: Informal Dominance and Formal Emergence

Table 1 below presents the quantitative distribution of savings strategies across the sample. Households employed multiple strategies concurrently, so percentages sum to more than 100%.

Table 1. Savings Strategies Employed by Muslim Households for Hajj Financing (n=150)

Savings Strategy	% of Households	Primary Location
Informal susu groups	68%	All communities
Saving at home (cash)	58%	All communities
Family contributions	52%	All communities
Sale of livestock	45%	Rural (Kumbungu)
Formal bank account (non-Hajj specific)	22%	Urban (Tamale)
Borrowing from moneylender	18%	Mixed
GCB Hajj Account	12%	Urban (Tamale: 24%)
Sale of land	8%	Rural/Peri-urban

Note: Percentages sum to >100% because households use multiple strategies simultaneously.

4.3.1 Susu Rotating Savings Groups

Susu groups were the most prevalent savings mechanism, particularly in rural Kumbungu and peri-urban Sagnarigu. Their appeal rests on social enforceability: community ties create accountability that formal institutions cannot replicate in contexts of low institutional trust. A 35-year-old female farmer from Kumbungu described her susu arrangement:

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> *"In our susu, there are ten women. Each month, we each put in GH¢100. One person takes the GH¢1,000. The next month, another person takes it. When it is my turn, I will have GH¢1,000 saved. It is not a lot, but over years, it adds up. And because the group will shame you if you do not pay, you are forced to save."*

However, susu groups carry significant risks. A 48-year-old trader from Tamale recounted the collapse of a susu following member default a loss that could not be recovered and that fundamentally undermined his confidence in the mechanism. Such defaults were reported as the primary driver of urban switch from susu to home savings or formal accounts.

4.3.2 Home Savings and Asset Liquidation

Saving cash at home was common (58%) but consistently described as precarious. Participants identified three primary threats: theft, household emergencies that required dipping into Hajj savings, and the psychological difficulty of maintaining discipline when money is physically accessible. A 42-year-old mother of six from Sagnarigu articulated the dilemma:

> *"I try to keep the money under my bed. But when my child is sick, or when there is no food, I look at that money and I think Allah will forgive me if I use it for an emergency. And then I use it, and the Hajj savings start again from zero."*

Asset liquidation primarily livestock sales (45%) and, less commonly, land sales (8%) was a strategy of last resort that households employed when approaching the target amount or when facing an imminent Hajj opportunity. Qualitative interviews revealed that participants understood the long-term economic cost of asset sales but felt compelled by the combination of spiritual urgency and limited alternatives. The sale of land, in particular, was described as a painful and sometimes irreversible sacrifice: land that could have been inherited by children or used to expand agricultural production was permanently foregone.

4.3.3 The GCB Hajj Account: Early Adoption and Barriers

The GCB Hajj Account, launched on September 6, 2025 just weeks before data collection had achieved 12% adoption across the sample. This figure masked significant spatial variation: adoption was 24% in Tamale, 8% in Sagnarigu, and only 4% in Kumbungu. Table 2 summarises the account's key features.

Table 2. Key Features of the GCB Hajj Account (2025)

Feature	Description
Minimum Opening Balance	GH¢50 (low entry barrier for low-income households)
Monthly Charges	None (no account maintenance fees)
Interest Structure	Non-interest bearing (compliant with Islamic prohibition on riba)
Insurance Coverage	Free coverage against death, theft, and loss of property
Fund Transfer	Direct transfer to accredited Hajj agents (fraud protection)

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Post-Hajj Flexibility	Convertible to standard savings account after pilgrimage

Adopters in Tamale cited security and fraud protection as the primary motivations. GCB's Executive Head of Retail Banking, Sina Kamagate, disclosed at the account's launch that he had personally been defrauded by a Hajj agent in 2009 a story that resonated deeply with prospective pilgrims who had heard or experienced similar fraud. A 50-year-old civil servant from Tamale explained his immediate uptake:

> *"I opened my Hajj Account the day after the launch. For years, I have been saving in a box at home. But I know myself if I see the money, I will spend it. With the bank account, I cannot withdraw easily. And they told me that when I reach the full amount, they will send it directly to the Hajj Board. I do not have to worry about an agent running away with my money."*

Non-adopters in rural and peri-urban communities cited three primary barriers. First, geographic inaccessibility: the nearest GCB branch for most Kumbungu households was in Tamale a one-hour motorcycle journey each way. The cost of transport to open or check an account was itself a financial burden. Second, institutional mistrust: older participants in particular expressed scepticism about banks, grounded in experiences with hidden fees, account closures, and perceived dishonesty. A 65-year-old retired farmer from Sagnarigu stated that with susu, he knew the people he was saving with; the bank was run by strangers. Third, information gaps: several rural participants were entirely unaware of the account's existence, having had no access to the radio announcements or community events at which it was promoted.

4.4 Government Policy: Fare Reductions, Anti-Profit Directives, and Infrastructure

Government interventions were evaluated with a mixture of appreciation and critical scrutiny. The fare reduction from GH¢75,000 (2024) to GH¢62,000 (2025) was widely welcomed. However, a recurring question emerged among participants: why had fares been so high in previous years, and who had benefited? A 40-year-old schoolteacher from Tamale, who had sold land to fund Hajj at the higher 2024 fare, expressed this tension directly welcoming reduced costs for future pilgrims while questioning the moral accountability of those responsible for past pricing.

President Mahama's directive that "Hajj is not a business" and that any surplus from Hajj operations must be donated to charity or invested in Muslim community projects was broadly praised by Islamic scholars and community leaders. A 55-year-old imam from Sagnarigu described the directive as a correction of a long-standing injustice, arguing that no one should profit from another person's desire to fulfil a religious obligation. However, participants emphasised that the directive's value lay in its implementation: without published, audited accounts of Hajj expenditure, the anti-profit principle remained aspirational rather than enforceable.

The planned Hajj Village a permanent facility in Accra to host pilgrims before departure was perceived as a quality-of-life improvement. Returnees described undignified pre-departure conditions, including overcrowded, poorly ventilated holding facilities. However, there was scepticism about whether the Hajj Village would reduce costs or simply provide a more comfortable experience at unchanged prices.

4.5 Islamic Scholarly Perspectives on Savings and Affordability

Islamic scholars (imams and mallams) interviewed in the study provided important theological framing for the economics of Hajj savings. Central to their teaching was the Qur'anic condition of istita'a (ability): Hajj is obligatory only for Muslims who are physically and financially able, where financial ability means

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possessing sufficient resources beyond one's own needs and those of one's dependents. A 65-year-old imam from Tamale emphasised:

> *"Some people think they must go to Hajj even if it means starving their children. That is not Islam. Allah is merciful. He does not require what you cannot give. If you cannot afford Hajj, focus on the other pillars prayer, fasting, zakat. Those are also obligations."*

Scholars were supportive of the GCB Hajj Account, particularly its non-interest-bearing structure. Several had endorsed it formally from the pulpit during Friday sermons, a practice they described as part of their broader educational role in helping communities distinguish between Sharia-compliant and non-compliant financial products. Scholars also cautioned against borrowing at interest from moneylenders to finance Hajj a practice reported by 18% of households noting that incurring riba-based debt to perform a religious obligation was theologically problematic.

5. Discussion

5.1. Informal Savings Dominance: Persistence and Fragility

The finding that 68% of households rely on susu groups, 58% on home savings, and 52% on family contributions reflects the deep structural roots of informal finance in Northern Ghana. These mechanisms are not simply the product of poverty or ignorance; they are rational responses to an environment in which formal financial services are geographically distant, institutionally mistrusted, and doctrinally suspect. The susu's social enforcement mechanism substitutes for the legal and institutional enforcement of formal contracts and often outperforms them in contexts where contract enforcement is weak.

However, the fragility of informal mechanisms is also evident. Susu defaults, home savings raids, and asset liquidation represent systematic failure modes that impose long-term costs on households. The 45% of households that sold livestock and the 8% that sold land to finance Hajj are converting productive assets future income streams into a one-time expenditure. This trade-off may be spiritually rational but is economically costly, particularly for farming households whose livestock and land constitute their primary wealth and retirement security.

The persistence of informal mechanisms despite their risks suggests that improving formal alternatives rather than simply promoting them is essential. The GCB Hajj Account's design directly addresses several key risk factors (theft, fraud, self-control failures), but its geographic inaccessibility and newness limit its current reach.

5.2. The GCB Hajj Account: Promise and Gaps

The GCB Hajj Account represents a genuine financial innovation with the potential to transform Hajj savings in Ghana. Its non-interest-bearing structure resolves the central doctrinal barrier to Muslim uptake of formal savings products. Its fraud protection mechanism direct fund transfer to accredited agents addresses one of the most painful and widely experienced risks of informal Hajj financing. Its low minimum balance (GH¢50) and absence of maintenance fees remove the cost barriers that have historically deterred low-income savers from formal banking.

The early adoption rate of 24% in Tamale achieved within weeks of the account's launch is highly encouraging. It suggests latent demand for a compliant, accessible, secure Hajj savings product that had not previously been available. If Tamale's adoption rate is indicative of potential urban demand across Ghana, the account could achieve significant scale within two to three years.

However, the rural adoption rate of 4% in Kumbungu reveals a structural gap that marketing and product design alone cannot bridge. Agent banking the deployment of banking agents (local shops, post offices, mobile money operators) to provide basic financial services in areas without bank branches

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is the most established solution to rural financial access. Research on agent banking in similar contexts (Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania) demonstrates that it can dramatically increase formal savings uptake among rural, low-income, and Muslim populations. GCB's scaling strategy should prioritise rural agent banking partnerships, with imam networks serving as trusted promotion channels.

The account's non-interest-bearing structure, while doctrinally necessary, also means that savers do not benefit from returns that could accelerate their savings accumulation. For a household saving GH¢1,000 per year toward a GH¢62,000 target, the absence of interest means a 62-year savings horizon. Even at GH¢5,000 per year a very high savings rate for Northern Ghanaian households the horizon is over 12 years. A mudarabah (profit-sharing) variant, investing deposits in Sharia-compliant ventures and distributing profits to savers, could meaningfully accelerate savings accumulation while maintaining doctrinal compliance. GCB should explore this option in consultation with the Islamic Council of Ghana.

5.3. Government Policy: Progress and Accountability Deficit

President Mahama's 2025 interventions in Hajj governance are the most significant government actions in this domain in a generation. The fare reduction, anti-profit directive, and Hajj Village construction collectively signal a reorientation of Hajj policy from commercial operation to public service. These are genuine and meaningful changes.

However, our findings reveal a persistent accountability deficit that threatens to undermine public trust in these reforms. Multiple participants across communities questioned whether the anti-profit directive was being implemented consistently, and who had benefited from the profits that by the President's own implication had been made in previous years. Without transparent, audited accounts of Hajj expenditure (airfare, accommodation, food, transportation, administrative costs), the anti-profit principle cannot be verified or enforced. Accountability requires transparency; transparency requires data disclosure. The Ghana Hajj Board should publish detailed cost breakdowns for each year's operations, subject to independent audit.

The proposal for a Hajj Stabilization Fund a government-managed reserve that absorbs currency fluctuations to prevent sudden fare spikes deserves serious consideration. Ghana's currency volatility has been the primary driver of Hajj fare escalation over the past decade. A fund capitalised through small annual levies on Hajj fares in good years could cushion against the currency depreciation shocks that have repeatedly increased fares beyond the reach of saving households. Similar instruments have been deployed in Indonesia and Malaysia with measured success.

5.4 An Integrated Framework for Sustainable Hajj Financing

Based on these findings, we propose an Integrated Hajj Financing and Financial Inclusion Framework comprising four mutually reinforcing components:

Component 1 Agent Banking Expansion: GCB Bank should partner with rural community banks, post offices, mobile money operators (MTN Mobile Money, Vodafone Cash, AirtelTigo Money), and reputable local merchants to offer Hajj Account services in areas without GCB branches. Each agent site should serve as an enrollment, deposit, and balance-inquiry point. Target: 200 new agent banking points in Northern Ghana within 18 months.

Component 2 Mosque-Based Financial Literacy Campaigns: Working with the Islamic Council of Ghana and the National Chief Imam's office, GCB and the Ghana Hajj Board should develop a structured financial literacy curriculum delivered through Friday khutba (sermons), radio broadcasts in Dagbani and Hausa, and community savings clubs. Content should cover: the difference between

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interest-bearing and non-interest-bearing accounts; the risks of susu default and home savings; how to open a GCB Hajj Account; and the Islamic scholarship supporting formal savings for Hajj.

Component 3 Hajj Stabilization Fund and Fare Transparency: The government should establish a Hajj Stabilization Fund, funded by a small annual surcharge (suggested: GH¢500 per pilgrim) deposited in a ring-fenced account. In years of currency stability, this fund accumulates reserves; in years of cedi depreciation, it offsets the resulting fare increase. The Ghana Hajj Board should publish annual audited cost breakdowns, making transparent the cost of each component of the pilgrimage package.

Component 4 Post-Hajj Economic Reintegration Support: For the 35% of returnees who experience prolonged financial strain, a structured reintegration programme should include: access to micro-loans for productive asset replacement (livestock restocking, land re-acquisition); financial counselling through bank or NGO partnerships; and Hajj returnee peer associations offering mutual aid, business referrals, and shared savings opportunities. These interventions complement rather than discourage pilgrimage, reducing its economic harm while preserving its spiritual reward.

6. Conclusion

Financing the Hajj in Northern Ghana is a decades-long economic undertaking for many households, requiring disciplined saving, community solidarity, and often painful asset sacrifice. The informal mechanisms that dominate this process susu groups, home savings, family pooling, livestock sales are resourceful responses to structural financial exclusion, but they carry significant risks of loss, default, and long-term economic harm.

The GCB Hajj Account, launched in September 2025, represents a landmark moment in Ghanaian Islamic finance: for the first time, Muslim households have access to a formal, compliant, fraud-protected savings product specifically designed for pilgrimage. Its early adoption in Tamale demonstrates genuine demand; its limited penetration in rural areas demonstrates the distance still to travel. Government fare reductions and the anti-profit directive signal a political will to make Hajj governance more equitable, but accountability mechanisms are needed to translate intention into verifiable practice.

The integrated framework proposed here agent banking, mosque-based financial literacy, a Hajj Stabilization Fund, and post-pilgrimage reintegration support offers a pathway toward a Hajj financing system that is accessible, transparent, and protective of household welfare. The goal is not to reduce the spiritual gravity of the pilgrimage, but to ensure that its material costs do not crush the households that bear them.

Future research should track GCB Hajj Account adoption longitudinally, disaggregated by community type, gender, and income level. It should evaluate the impact of financial literacy interventions on savings behaviour. And it should investigate whether households that use formal Hajj savings products experience lower post-pilgrimage financial strain than those relying on informal mechanisms a hypothesis with significant policy implications for the future of financial inclusion and religious obligation in West Africa.

The pilgrims of Northern Ghana carry both faith and financial burden on the road to Mecca. They deserve a system that lightens the latter without diminishing the former.

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