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FOR PRAYER AND PROFIT:
WEST AFRICA’S RELIGIOUS AND ECONOMIC TIES TO THE GULF
1960S TO THE PRESENT

Emmanuel Akyeampong¹

ABSTRACT

West Africa’s historic ties of trade and Islam with the Arabian Peninsula date back to the 7th and 8th Centuries CE. On independence from colonial rule several African countries turned to the Arab world for official development assistance (ODA). The period from the 1990s has seen Gulf businesses making important financial investments in West African real estate and telecommunications. The Gulf has become an important source of consumer and capital goods for West Africa, as well as a buyer of African exports like coffee, cocoa, and timber. African professionals work in the Gulf, though Asians remain dominant in the Gulf labor force.

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INTRODUCTION

West Africa’s historic ties to the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region date to the early centuries of Islam. Kharijite Muslims, among the first breakaway factions in Islam, moved to North Africa during the caliphate of Ali (656-661 CE) to avoid persecution, and relocated into the Sahara when Muslim soldiers overran North Africa in the latter decades of the 7th-8th centuries CE. Kharijite Muslims and their Berber clients were central to the forging of the trans-Saharan trade routes. The first Jihad movement in West Africa by the Almoravids in the 11th century CE was a result of the realization of leaders of the Znaga Berbers, after their visit to the holy places of Islam, that their Khariji version of Islam was perceived as unorthodox.

Pilgrimage and education at leading Islamic universities have been central aspects of West African Islam. As early as the 1240s the West African state of Kanem ran a hostel in Cairo for Kanem students. Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Islam’s holy lands in 1324-5 was legendary for its extravagance, and he gave away so much gold as gifts in Cairo that the price of gold was still depressed when the Arab chronicler Al-Umari visited twelve years later. At the end of the 15th century, West African rulers such as Muhammad Rumfa of Kano (1463-99) and Askia Muhammad of Songhai (1493-1528) corresponded with leading Islamic jurists such as Al-Maghlili on Islamic governance and jurisprudence. Egypt and Saudi Arabia - with the recent addition of Iran - have remained influential as sources of Islamic inspiration and orthodoxy in West Africa ever since.

Trade between West Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East extends back to the early years of Islam, but the Gulf has become increasingly important to West Africa in the last two decades for trade and broader commercial ties. Two distinct patterns have emerged in West Africa’s economic relations with the Gulf region: an increase in trade as West African merchants have sourced consumer goods (textiles, jewelry, electronics, etc.) from Jeddah, Beirut, and Dubai and have begun to export African primary products (coffee, tea, cocoa, timber) to the Gulf and Asia; and the import of capital goods
into West Africa with West Africa becoming an attractive place for Gulf investment especially in real estate and telecommunications. In many ways, relations with the Gulf have come to parallel Africa’s new economic relations with China (Alden, 2007).

This paper examines West Africa’s changing religious and economic ties with the Gulf from the 1950s-1960s period of independence to the present. It reviews the historic and central place of Saudi Arabia in the West African Muslim imagination together with the emergence of recent rivals in the endeavor to shape Muslim sensibilities in West Africa, such as post-revolutionary Iran. Competing poles of Islamic orthodoxy have been particularly important in the context of reformist Islam or Islamism in West African countries such as Nigeria. The paper also analyzes new trade patterns between West Africa and the Gulf, as well as Gulf investments in West Africa. These economic transformations have occurred with the World’s Bank structural adjustment programs (SAPs) as the backdrop. The internationalization and privatization of trade from the late 1980s have had, perhaps, the unintended consequences of diversifying Africa’s networks of trade away from prior dependence on Europe and North America (Meagher, 2003). Aimed at ending unregulated trans-border trade, the effects of SAPs - devaluation, inflation, and declining real income - encouraged the sourcing of cheaper consumer goods from non-traditional trading partners in Asia and the Gulf.

The internationalization of production from the 1980s, which has dispersed sites of production from North America and Europe to Asia, connected by more efficient transport and telecommunication networks, has benefited trading networks in West Africa with small business coming into their own and circumventing former intermediaries such as the Lebanese (Van der Lann, 1975; Hourani and Shehadi, 1992; Akyeampong, 2006; Beuving, 2006). Developments in shipping and air transport from the 1990s have placed Asia within the nexus of Africa’s trading networks (Pedersen, 2001). These include the emergence of the Danish Maersk and the French
Delmas as the major shipping lines connecting Europe and North America, Africa, and Asia, and their expansion of hub ports in Africa and the Gulf such as Dubai’s Jebel Ali that have connected Africa and the Gulf in a more organized system of transport. By the early 1990s Dubai had become a major transfer center for sea and air transport between North America/Europe and Southeast Asia (Pedersen, 2001; Fleming and Hayuth, 1994), as well as a major commercial entrepot in its own right. The emergence of direct airline routes between the Gulf and West African countries by airlines such as Emirates incorporated the United Arab Emirates (UAE) into the itineraries of West African traders. Today special fares are offered to entice traders from Lagos to Dubai. Many Ghanaians fly on Emirates to Europe and North America, using transit stops in Dubai to go shopping. As air freight is a by-product of air passenger transport, the emergence of these airline networks holds promise for non-traditional exports from West Africa to the Gulf, such as Ghana’s export of pineapples which depends on air freight to retain the fruits’ freshness.

The Gulf has been connected to East Africa for centuries. It is clear from this introduction that it has emerged as a major economic resource for West Africa. The changing dynamics linking West Africa to the Gulf through religion and trade from the 1960s to the present are explored in this paper through case studies of Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal. Though not a key component of this paper, the attraction of the Gulf region as a destination for West African professionals is not discounted, considering the growing importance of trans-nationalism as an accumulative strategy for West Africans and the largely foreign workforce in the Gulf states.

**ISLAMIC REFORM, PHILANTHROPY, AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDEPENDENT WEST AFRICA**

Pilgrimage has been an important avenue of contact between West African Muslims and the international world of Islam. The impact was often socially revolutionary in the pre colonial period,
as seen in the holy war of Umar Tal and the creation of the Tokolor State in present-day Mali in the mid-19th century. Umar Tal was one of the few 19th century West African Muslim leaders who went on pilgrimage to Mecca. Colonial rule witnessed both resistance and accommodation between West African Muslims and colonial governments. Muslim states militarily confronted colonial annexation in the Senegambia, Guinea, and northern Nigeria. Many northern Nigerian Muslims used the pilgrimage as hijira (flight) at the time of British annexation and large groups of Muslims relocated to Chad, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia (Paden, 1986, p.280). But other Muslims settled under European colonial rule, and the emirate system of northern Nigeria became the model for the British in Africa, indirect rule through indigenous structures and leaders. The French came to appreciate Sufi Muslim contributions to the Senegalese economy, especially with the prominence of the Mouride Brotherhood in cultivation of the groundnut, Senegal’s leading export (Robinson, 2004, pp.182-196). Initially, the British and the French both discouraged pilgrimage, afraid of the political repercussions of Muslims from their colonies coming into contact with other Muslims. For the British in northern Nigeria, the fact that Muslim pilgrims would pass through Sudan, a seat of Mahdist resistance to colonial rule, was enough for them to discourage pilgrimage. Gradually, with the consolidation of colonial rule, French and British colonial governments even became sponsors of pilgrimage, extending patronage to accommodating Muslim leaders (Paden, 1986, p.280).

For northern Nigeria the 1950s were not only a period of decolonization, but also a decade when pilgrimage to Mecca took on greater significance. Air travel made pilgrimage easier, and 300 -400 official pilgrims from Nigeria visited Mecca annually during that decade. In 1955 the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello, the political leader of northern Nigeria and a prominent religious figure, undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca. The experience had a profound
impact on him, and he subsequently went to Mecca every year, endearing himself to the Saudi ruling family and befriending many foreign dignitaries he met there. The Sardauna would also sponsor prominent Nigerian Muslims to accompany him in his pilgrimages as an expression of his generosity. These included Abubakar Gummi, who with only one exception accompanied him to Mecca each year until the Sardauna’s death in 1966. In the 1950s and 1960s Gummi emerged as one of the leading Muslim scholars in Nigeria. Because the Sardauna did not understand Arabic, Gummi served as his translator and attended meetings of Muslim leaders in Mecca on his behalf (Paden, 1986, p. 281). Those close to the Sardauna indicate that from this time he developed a new passion to convert pagan northern Nigerians to Islam (Paden, 1986).

In 1952 the West African Airways Corporation began special pilgrimage flights from northern Nigeria to Saudi Arabia, and a special pilgrimage passport was instituted, which was valid for six months and could be obtained for 10 shillings (p. 283). The Northern Peoples Congress, headed by the Sardauna which would form the northern regional government in Nigeria in the 1950s, had close ties to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, a fact discomforting to political parties in the non-Muslim south. In 1963 the Saudi royal family gave the Sardauna a plot of land in Medina to build a house, which was finished at the end of 1965 (p.533). The Sardauna talked of Medina as his second home and discussed retiring there. On the Sardauna’s untimely death in 1966, King Faisal instructed that prayers were to be said for his soul in all the mosques in Saudi Arabia (p.282). Faisal who was educated in the US spoke English, which facilitated his close relationship with the Nigerian.

As premier of the regional government of a federal Nigeria from 1960, the Sardauna led the drive for development, keen on combining accelerated education with cash crop agriculture (groundnuts and cotton) and light industries. He sought to galvanize internal capital from agriculture and the mercantile community, and he
traveled in Europe and the Muslim world in search of capital and technology to aid northern Nigeria’s development. The Sardauna succeeded in mobilizing considerable investment capital in Kuwait, and in attracting skilled technology teachers from Egypt and Pakistan (Paden, 1986, p.510). Kuwait provided £5 million for the establishment of an investment company to finance development projects in northern Nigeria and donated money for Islamic work and building schools. Saudi Arabia also contributed to religious programs in northern Nigeria while Egypt provided manpower (pp.512-13). As the Sardauna tried to stay out of the competition between Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the 1960s for leadership of the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia helped pay for several mosques in northern Nigeria. Egypt, on the other hand, awarded him the “Grand Cordon of the Order of the Nile” in 1961. In 1962 Al-Azhar University in Cairo gave him an honorary doctorate (Paden, 1986).

As a founder of the World Muslim League (Congress) and its vice president, Ahmadu Bello was keenly interested in Muslim unity and traveled broadly in West Africa, North Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Seen as the head of the Muslim community in Nigeria, the Sardauna was the recipient of numerous requests from Nigeria’s Muslims for mosques and schools and petitions for the settlement of local disputes. He established a Council of Mallams to advise on matters of church and state and later an organization called “Society for the Victory of Islam” (Jama’atu Nasril Islam or JNI) to spearhead the endeavor to convert non-Muslim (and non-Christian) communities in the north. Early in 1963 Gummi as acting grand Kadi announced that JNI would promote Islamic literature in Nigerian vernacular languages, build mosques, and encourage Islamic centers of learning. JNI, with Bello as its backbone, linked all the emirs and chiefs of northern Nigeria, as well as eminent scholars and prominent Muslim leaders. The Sultan of Sokoto, as the spiritual head of northern Nigeria, was President-General of JNI with Waziri Junaidu as Chairman. JNI was a private organization and privately funded
with some financial assistance from the Sardauna’s international Muslim network in countries such as Saudi Arabia.

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Egypt for Islamic leadership would be joined from the 1970s by Iran. Each had supporters in northern Nigeria. Gummi and his network of radical university students, Izala, were pro-Saudi, making strident attacks on Sufism and the ruling aristocracy. Sheikh Aminudeen Abubakar’s Da’wa group, while pro-Saudi, refrained from attacks on Sufis and the traditional aristocracy. And there were new movements like Ibrahim El Zakzaky’s Muslim Brothers, inspired by the Iranian revolution (Larkin and Meyer, 2006). Central to all these groups was defining Muslim identity in a time of reformist Islam. All espoused cosmopolitanism, and embraced modernity in a distinctly Islamist way. Gummi, fluent in English, Arabic, Hausa, and Fufulde, was the first Islamic leader in Nigeria to use radio and television. El Zakzaky is fluent in English, Farsi, and Hausa. He was banned from state media because of his trenchant attacks on the secular state (p.300).

Though the Shi’a persuasion is very marginal in West Africa, El Zakzaky’s strong rhetoric attracted uneducated youths disconcerted by the growing disparity of wealth in Nigeria. Larkin notes how the “rise of Islamism paralleled the reorienting of northern Nigeria’s economy towards new economic entrepots in the Middle East, especially Jeddah, Beirut and Dubai” (p.307). Islamism, part of modernity, offered new forms of economic advancement.

A parallel trajectory to the Sardauna’s ties with international Islam is seen in the career of Ibrahim Niass of Kaolack in Senegal. Leader of a branch of the Tijaniyya Brotherhood in Senegal, Niass visited northern Nigeria several times in the 1940s and 1950s on his way to Mecca. He became the shaykh or spiritual advisor to Abdullahi Bayero, Emir of Kano, and to Bayero’s successor, Muhammad Sanusi. This would create a Tijaniyya constituency in Kano in the predominantly Qadiriyya northern Nigeria (Paden, 1986, pp.310-11). Niass had strong ties to Muslim leaders in West Africa, North
Africa, and the Middle East, and until his death in 1970 was one of the most prominent West Africans in the international Muslim community. A trend in Senegal since the 1980s, which has received little mention in the literature, is the conversion of some Senegalese Sunni Muslims to Shi’a Islam (Leichtman, 2009). This trend is part of the larger movement of reformist Islam, the search for an authentic Islam. Leichtman considers this movement not toward the revolutionary model of Iran, but a return to earlier forms of Islamic practice “perceived as a solution to the failures attributed to Western influence and the innovations (bida) in recent Islamic practice” (p.111). Intriguingly, Senegalese converts to Shi’a Islam have sought to indigenize their Shi’a faith by adapting Shi’a theology and ritual to Senegalese cultural practice, to make it authentically Senegalese, in order to distance it from Iranian model (pp.111-12). The Iranian Revolution and admiration for Ayatollah Khomeini initially drew some Senegalese to Shi’a Islam, but the result was to turn them to earlier Islam. It has not been easy for Senegal’s small group of Shi’a Muslims. In 1984 President Abdou Diouf closed the Iranian Embassy for distributing Shi’a literature, an action probably instigated by local Sunni Muslim leaders. The Iranians had tried to counter what they saw as Saudi promotion of Wahhabi-influenced Islam throughout Africa. But the Internet and the growth of cybercafés in Senegal have insured access to the breadth of Islamist literature. Many of Senegal’s new Shi’a Muslims are from the Fulbe ethnic minority and not from the Wolof majority.

That most of the Lebanese Muslims in Senegal are Shi’a may have familiarized the Senegalese with Shi’a practice, though the Iranian Revolution arrested the popular imagination. Leichtman notes that there was no formal Shi’a religious institution or representation in Senegal until 1978 when the Lebanese Islamic Institute was established. From the 1970s Lebanese Shi’a sheikhs, particularly Sheikh El-Zein, have provided instruction to Lebanese in Senegal and also to some Senegalese converts. The institutions and activities of
Senegalese Shi’a have been funded through these Lebanese sources. The Iranian embassy was reopened in the early 1990s but has been careful to focus its activities on trade. But Islamic and international diplomacy maintains some links between Senegal and Iran. The meetings of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in 1991 and 2008 in Dakar were attended by the presidents of Iran, Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad respectively. Senegalese President Wade visited Iran in 2003 and 2006. An Iranian Sheikh built a Shi’a Islamic seminary, Hawza Al-Rasul Al-Akram, in Dakar in 2001 (Leichtman, 2009, p.117). The most prominent Shi’a mosque in Dakar was built by Lebanese industrialist Al-hajj Ibrahim Derwiche, next to Dakar’s main intercity bus station (p.127). It is patronized by Sunni Muslims of the Mouride, Tijan and Qadr Sufi orders along with a few Shi’a. Sermons are directed at all Muslims and not just Shi’a. Even Ghana with its minority Muslim population has attracted Iranian educational philanthropy. The Training Institute for Islamic Theology founded in 1988 in Accra by the Iranian Ahlul Bait Foundation received accreditation in 2002 as the Islamic University College (Ghana) offering Bachelors degrees in Business Administration and Religious Studies. For West Africans, Islam, pilgrimage, philanthropy, and development have become closely connected. Pilgrimage draws the attention of West African Muslims to sites of Islam that appear materially advanced and connects them with the networks of international Islam. Out of this comes a new vision for remaking society and the expectation that the international Muslim community will assist, as Ferme’s (1994) humorously titled article, “What ‘Alhaji Airplane’ saw in Mecca, and what happened when he came home,” underscores in the example of a rural Sierra Leone Muslim who went on pilgrimage.

Scholars have contrasted the emergence of a major Islamist movement in Nigeria with the absence of a similar movement in Senegal, though the latter is 90 per cent Muslim. In Northern Nigeria Islamism has manifested itself sometimes in violent confronta-
tions between Islamist movements and the military such as in Yan Tatsine in the 1980s (Lubeck, 1985), in conflicts between Muslims and Christians (Anthony, 2002), and in recent controversies over the imposition of Sharia law in some states in northern Nigeria (Kalu, 2003). In Nigeria oil revenues, major income disparities between the urban poor and the affluent few, massive rural-urban migration, and other related factors have been highlighted as the basis of a radical Muslim movement (Lubeck, 1985; Keddie, 1995).

FROM TRADE TO INVESTMENT: WEST AFRICA’S CHANGING ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITH THE GULF

The link between Islam and commerce in West Africa has a long history, and for centuries before the 17th century Islam was referred to as a “religion of court and commerce” (Levtzion, 1968; Levtzion and Fisher, 1987). Networks of pilgrimage have also been networks of trade. With the organization of special chartered flights for Muslim pilgrims from the 1950s and the more recent establishment of airline routes between major West African cities and Jeddah and Dubai have come opportunities for trade in consumer goods. Here again West African Muslims were the pioneering traders, though these networks have now expanded to include non-Muslims as well, who go specifically to Jeddah and Dubai to trade or who route their trips to Europe and North America through Dubai to afford transit and trading opportunities.

Attention has been drawn to the centrality of the global networks of the Mouride Brotherhood to trade in present-day Senegal. With an ethic of prayer and work, and immensely loyal to leaders of a highly bureaucratized order, Murid international migration from the 1970s has created global networks from France to the United States (Babou, 2002; Buggenhagen, 2009). Networks of migration have overlapped with trading networks, meeting consumer demand in Senegal and elsewhere, as well as creating new demands from being embedded in global networks of consumption. The emergence of the dirriankhe, a
cult of fashion among Senegalese women in the last couple of decades, has transformed them into keen connoisseurs of trends and patrons of the international textile trade (Mustafa, 1998). The fashion and textile trade in Senegal has been dominated since the 1980s by Murid women who have developed contacts with textile manufacturers in Hong Kong and other Asian centers that enable them to secure imitations of luxury materials for low-end consumers. Dressing well has become a preoccupation of both wealthy and poor Senegalese women. Murid trading networks span from Hong Kong, Jeddah, and Dubai to New York. They acquire goods wholesale, usually electronics and beauty products, which they sell wholesale and retail in Senegal and in other countries (Ebin, 1995). Murid migrants in cities such as New York are also involved in street trade, selling American beauty products and Asian-made watches (Ebin, 1995; Babou, 2002).

In the last twenty years, another form of trade to West Africa has tapped into the information technology revolution. It started off as a parallel economy based on video piracy, but out of that has emerged the Nigerian video or film industry dubbed “Nollywood.” Larkin notes that Hollywood films were copied illegally by Nigerians, sent to Asia and the Middle East for sub-titling and mass-duplicating to video cassettes, video CDs (VCDs), and DVDs, and then brought into Nigeria for distribution in West Africa. As Nigeria becomes more separated from the official global economy - except for the oil industry - it has become more integrated into an informal world economy that orients it towards new centers such as Singapore and Dubai (Larkin (2008)). In the era of cassettes, Dubai was the prime source of pirated tapes for Nigeria. Pakistan became Nigeria’s new source of this material with the establishment of VCD factories in Pakistan. Hence West Africans have the singular, and illegal, pleasure of viewing films that are still in their first release in the United States. This pirate infrastructure for the distribution of films from the US and India created the foundation for Nigeria’s film industry. The same networks that brought illegal cassettes, VCDs, and DVDs into the country, and the
same machines that dubbed pirated films now copy made-in-Nigeria movies. The ubiquity of technological breakdown in Nigeria has spawned ancillary industries that feed off the Nigerian film industry and home entertainment. These developments have underpinned huge demand for televisions and video players, and Dubai has been a source of both new and used electronics for the West African market.

Capitalist infrastructure and illegal activities spawned video piracy in Nigeria and oriented it towards new trading centers in Asia and the Middle East. But these new circuits and the accumulation of wealth in new industries related to information technology also developed potential for trade in capital goods and technology between West Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The revolution in information technology and the huge volume of information available on the internet have made it easier for West African traders, such as the Hausa-Fulani networks in northern Nigeria and Niger that depended on Lebanese and Igbo suppliers in southern Nigeria and Cotonou in the 1970s and 1980s, to bypass these suppliers and go directly to Dubai or Singapore for their goods (Meagher, 2003, p.65). The changes in freight transport since the 1990s have facilitated these new economic connections between West Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Telecommunications, investment, and real estate firms from Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE and other Gulf businesses have began to invest in West Africa. Recently, Kuwait’s National Mobile Telecommunications Company bought Africa’s largest mobile phone operator, Celtel, for $3.4 billion. Abu Dhabi’s Mubadala Development Company recently won a $400 million license to provide Nigeria with a range of fixed line and mobile, data and multimedia services (Africa Research Bulletin, 2007). To link West Africa more firmly to the Gulf, and reflecting the growing economic importance of relations between West Africa and the Gulf, Gulf airlines such as Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar have commenced operation to the West African cities of Accra, Lagos, and Abidjan, and partner with local airlines to convey travelers to these West African hubs. By the
beginning of the 21st century, West Africa had gained in Asia and the Middle East new valuable trade and investment partners, and the coming years will provide more comprehensive understanding of the impact of these emerging networks.

An interim assessment of Gulf-Africa trade relations reveals the growing importance of Africa to the Gulf region. Gulf exports to Africa rose in value from $2,806 million in 1980 to $11,009 million (in real 2000 terms) with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates the major beneficiaries. In 2005 out of the total value of exports of $13,566 millions, Saudi Arabia accounted for $9,055 million and UAE for $3,814 million. Egypt and South Africa represent the Gulf’s major trading partners in Africa. From 1980 - 2005, the trade balance has grown in favor of the Gulf as much as 338 per cent in real terms (Githĩnji, 2009). Even more important is the high proportion of technologically sophisticated products the Gulf region exports to Africa - non-agricultural manufactures, products used in processing and engineering such as engines and industrial machinery - indicating that Gulf trade with Africa has expanded to include valuable capital goods utilized in industry (Githĩnji, 2009). The implications for industrialization in both regions are enormous. Whereas early Gulf monetary flows to post-independent Africa were primarily official development assistance (ODA), often an adjunct to foreign policy, foreign direct investment by Arab Gulf companies has begun in West Africa.

CONCLUSION

With trade to UAE and Saudi Arabia flourishing and Dubai’s emergence as a center of trade, tourism, real estate, and finance, African professionals have taken up high-paying positions in Dubai. Lacking the oil revenues of other emirates of the UAE such as Abu Dhabi, Dubai has chosen a different route to economic growth and prosperity. Oil-rich Arab countries have attracted labor migrants from poorer Arab countries and from Asia. By the early 1980s migrant labor made up 85 percent of the total working force in UAE,
81 percent in Qatar, 70 percent in Kuwait, 75 percent in Saudi Arabia, and 40 percent in Bahrain (Humphrey, 1993, p.6). Asians from South and Southeast Asia comprised the fastest growing component of the Gulf labor force. African professionals have made their presence felt, with South Africans being perhaps the largest group in the past decade. South African businesses such as Woolworths, Sasol, Nandos, among others have extended their operations to UAE, especially Dubai. There is a small but growing Ghanaian community in Dubai and growing international recognition encouraged the former vice president of Ghana, Alhaji Aliu Mahama, to visit Dubai to boost bilateral ties between the two countries. In 2004 trade between Dubai and Ghana was valued at 267 million dirhams (US $66 million) with Ghana’s exports to Dubai standing at 46.2 million dirhams (US $10.4 million). Ghanaian nurses, civil engineers, architects, and banking professionals have found jobs in Dubai and a recruitment agency for nurses in Dubai operates in Ghana.

The promising networks linking West Africa and the Gulf are threatened by the present global economic recession. A New York Times feature story published in February 2009 recounted Dubai’s downward economic spiral with companies making huge financial losses, cutting back workforces, leading to an exodus of foreign workers overwhelmed with debt who lose their work visas once they are unemployed. “With Dubai’s economy in free fall, newspapers have reported that more than 3,000 cars sit abandoned on the parking lot of the Dubai Airport, left by fleeing debt-ridden foreigners (who could in fact be imprisoned if they failed to pay their bills). Some are said to have maxed-out credit cards inside and notes of apology taped to the windshield.”

It is hard to predict what the economic landscape may look like after the present global recession, but considering the long-term ties between the Arabian Gulf and West Africa, and the important shifts in the constitution of trade, it is likely that the relationship will continue, albeit perhaps transformed.
REFERENCES


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