

# **Nigerian Religious Pilgrimages: Piety or Economic Waste?**

by

**Chentu Dauda Nguvugher**

Religious pilgrimages have been of great national significance in Nigeria, particularly when seen from the point of government involvement, individual participation or the number of people involved each year. Apart from the huge sum wealthy Nigerians spend and the hard-earned personal income expended by the poor, the Government at both federal and state levels expends billions of naira from the national treasury each year to send Muslim and Christian pilgrims to places considered holy, Mecca<sup>1</sup> and Jerusalem,<sup>2</sup> respectively.

The excitement the exercise generates among Nigerian Muslims and Christians in spite of its adverse economic implication on the nation's economy raises issues that often leave one perplexed and dumb-founded. Given Nigeria's socio-economic context, one would think that under normal circumstances and the right frame of mind, 'excitement' would have been an alien word in this scenario. The issue is further complicated by the involvement of those who should have been at the vanguard of justice and equity and the conscience of the nation. One must note at the onset that religious pilgrimages are very passionate and sensitive issues within Nigeria's religious communities. In the middle of this controversy are respected Muslim and Christian leaders (imams and pastors) and subjects who justify and promote the religious explanation at the expense of other critical factors, prominent among which is the economic. Many attribute their involvement in the hajj or pilgrimage operations as an 'act of God' or "*alherin Allah*" as some would put it.

What does God say concerning pilgrimage in Muslim and Christian sources? In this paper, we seek to evaluate the religious and economic implications of the pilgrimages on Nigerians and Nigeria. The thesis of the paper centers on whether government and individual spending on the exercise denotes piety or economic recklessness and waste. To be able to achieve this, we will begin by an evaluation of the concept from Muslim and Christian perspectives before reviewing the hajj or pilgrimage tradition in Nigeria. The extent of government and individual involvement in the exercise with its economic implications vis a vis Nigeria's socio-economic realities will form the thrust of the evaluation before drawing a conclusion that would seek to place the exercise in its proper place.

## **Definition and Religious Basis for Pilgrimage**

Generally, the concept of pilgrimage denotes "a journey of religious significance to a sacred spot."<sup>3</sup> The noun, pilgrim, is one who embarks on such journey to the place considered sacred for the purpose of religious devotion. In Islam's sacred text, the Qur'an, pilgrimage is

sanctioned as a religious duty for all adult Muslims who are capable spiritually, physically and materially to undertake it at least once in one's life time.<sup>4</sup> *Surah 22:27* in particular states, "And proclaim to the people the hajj (pilgrimage); they will come to you on foot and every lean camel; they will come from every distant pass." Its primacy makes it one of Islam's generally accepted five pillars, the others being the *Shahādah*, *Salāt*, *Zakāt* and the fast of *Ramadān*. The lesser hajj (*'umrah*) is voluntary and could be observed at any time within the year for personal devotion. Despite its spiritual<sup>5</sup> and physical<sup>6</sup> significance for the Muslims, the Qur'an is not ambiguous regarding those who should undertake the journey including the sources for financing it. No Muslim is "expected to perform the act if it exceeds his or her physical and economic means"<sup>7</sup> and nowhere is it stated in the Qur'an that the government bears any responsibility for sponsorship of pilgrims. It is even expected that any one embarking on the journey "must be free of debts and leaves one's family with enough resources to cover their daily expenses in your absence."<sup>8</sup> The plight of one's neighbours is also a determinant factor for embarking on hajj. This fact is illustrated in the Qur'an with a cobbler who gave up his journey after years of saving and planning. It is reported that on the eve of his departure for Mecca, he "heard the cries of children from neighbouring houses for want of food and nourishment. He was so moved by the plight of the children that he gave up the idea of hajj and gave the money instead to the mother of the children."<sup>9</sup> From the foregoing, hajj is required in Islam on two conditions: that one is able to do it personally rather than relying on government funds and that it does not inconvenience one's family members, friends and even those not related to the pilgrim but whose needs are obvious.

Pilgrimage has no scriptural basis in Christianity. Although many have tried to use scriptural references to justify its observance, a close scrutiny of such references make such insinuation or rather interpretation suspect. For example, references to David's returning the ark to Jerusalem, the Queen of Sheba's special pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Jewish annual fellowship in Jerusalem (*Zech. 14:16-17*), the Old Testament Jewish centripetal preoccupation as reflected in *Zechariah 8:20-22* and Jesus' compliance to the law when at twelve he and his parents went to Jerusalem for the annual worship have been used for this purpose. Stephen M. Gyang, for example, conclusively states based on these references that "Christian pilgrimage to the Holy land is in obedience to the word of God."<sup>10</sup> Although many Christian leaders and members involved in the enterprise in recent years have tried to canonize, rationalize and moralize it, they remain in want of scriptural basis to justify their claim. It does not require any rigorous Bible knowledge to recognize that such argument cannot be sustained.

As we shall see below, Nigerian Christian participation in the exercise began as a reaction to what they considered government partiality and insensitivity in handling public funds rather than on any theological or biblical conviction. The manual on Christian Pilgrimage published by Christian Pilgrims Welfare Board, Plateau State, categorically states that "performing the holy pilgrimage neither makes a Christian holy nor automatically offers a passport to heaven."<sup>11</sup> Why then do Christians spend not only their hard-earned resources but also partake in pillaging government (public) funds to embark on the exercise? With little or no spiritual benefit,<sup>12</sup> why are Christians so excited whenever they are appointed into the Christian Pilgrims Welfare Board or are sponsored by the government to embark on the journey? The justifications (religious and otherwise) often put forward by both Muslims and Christians for the exercise remain suspect in view of the realities on ground. Before returning

to this, a review of the hajj or pilgrimage tradition in Nigeria including government involvement in the exercise will serve as a useful background.

### **Pilgrimage Tradition and Government Involvement in Nigeria**

Much has been written on pilgrimage tradition and government involvement in Nigeria and a rehearsal need not delay us here.<sup>13</sup> However, it will suffice to sketch key historical developments particularly regarding government involvement from the beginning to the present and the reactions it has elicited. Pilgrimage in Nigeria, especially on the Muslim side, is almost as old as Nigerian Islam itself. Following the introduction of Islam, first, in Kanem-Borno<sup>14</sup> and later in Hausaland<sup>15</sup> in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively, Nigeria Muslims began to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. From this time up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, pilgrimage was a private affair. Like their other West African counterparts, pilgrims raised their travel fares earned during stays in settlements *en route* or through their cattle which some traveled with or other personal resources that were complemented *en route*. The means of transportation (trekking or boarding lorries or trains) and the resources available to the pilgrims made pilgrimage a slow exercise, with only few completing it in less than two years. The average time was eight years, with some spending up to thirty years or even virtually a lifetime.<sup>16</sup> Pilgrimage hardships were reduced beginning in the 1950s upward with the introduction of air travel as well as government involvement. In April and May 1958, Pilgrim Welfare Boards were set up in the North and West respectively. But even at this time until the early 1970s, government role was largely limited to logistic issues.<sup>17</sup> Awash with oil money beginning in the 1970s upward as well as the desire for religious and political relevance and survival, the government became fully involved by setting up the Nigeria Pilgrims Boards (NPB) in 1975 which was hurriedly stepped down to the state levels.<sup>18</sup> Since then, government involvement has been on the increase, culminating in the passing into law of the 1989 decree which established the Nigerian Pilgrims Commission.<sup>19</sup> With the comfort of air travel and finances from the government, the number of pilgrims remarkably increased with obvious implications on state resources.

While the Muslims welcomed such government intervention and vehemently argued in its support, Christians called for an end to government involvement. Because Christians were non-beneficiaries at this stage, they regarded it as a clear demonstration of government partiality towards Islam.<sup>20</sup> In tandem with similar voices among Christians, CAN took the lead by suing the federal government, demanding for government withdrawal on the basis that government involvement contradicted Nigeria's secular status and was discriminatory and hypocritical.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand as indicated, the Muslims felt that government was fulfilling its legitimate duty to its citizens since Islam encompasses all of life with no distinction between the sacred and the secular. In fact, they saw what the government was doing as a right.<sup>22</sup> When the Christians discovered that the government was adamant considering the political and financial implications, they started to demand for equal treatment.<sup>23</sup> Since the government was unwillingly to "steer clear" of pilgrimage affairs as they wanted, they demanded for their own share of the national cake:

if support is available to Muslims, then it must be for Christians as well. If the government insists on handling pilgrimages, then whatever facilities the government accords one religious group must be made available to another religious group. Otherwise a most unpleasant impression will be created that the government prefers Muslims.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, the CAN National Executive Committee issued its own demand:

We warmly appeal to the federal government to promulgate, as a matter of utmost urgency, a decree which will establish a Pilgrim's Commission that will cater for the welfare of pilgrims to all the "Holy Lands." Such a decree will help to promote a peaceful atmosphere for the practice of various religions in Nigeria. It may also help to create confidence in the federal government's declared desire to foster religious tolerance and create no impression which can be interpreted as preference of one particular religion.<sup>25</sup>

Whether Christian participation in pilgrimages like their Muslim counterparts have ensured the fairness to all religions and promoted the "peaceful atmosphere" envisioned or not is not our focus here. Their discontent however paid off with the setting up of Christian Pilgrims Boards across federal and state levels. The reactionary cry for justice and fair-play has become sacrosanct such that most Christians do not see anything wrong in government spending on the exercise. While leaders and citizens of most if not all civilized and developed countries do everything in their position to conserve their money and other resources by reducing spending on imported goods and services into their countries as well as use their hegemonic tendency to exploit as well as attract external resources to build their economies, ours do the opposite. The most worrying thing is religious leaders (ideally the voice of the voiceless and a conscience to the nation) who turn deaf ears and actively participate in ruining the economy of the nation in the name of religious pilgrimages. While people in developed countries may enjoy holiday grants from the coffers of their governments to any destination of their choice within a permitted distance, such is never done at the expense of the masses. In fact, it is mostly taken care of from surplus. Individuals who go on religious pilgrimages do so from their personal earnings often sufficient to cater for this and other basic needs given their economic advantage. Apart from Christianity and Islam, pilgrimages associated with Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Hinduism in the oriental world have and are sponsored not by the government but by individuals.<sup>26</sup> The Nigerian scenario defies rational analysis. Is it piety? I suggest we look elsewhere. Nigerians are largely motivated by other factors other than the 'religious' often claimed.

## **Economic Implications of Religious Pilgrimages in Nigeria**

The statistics of Nigeria's 2010 religious pilgrimages and its cost are indicative of the economic implications on its economy. About 110,000 to 120,000 Nigerians participated in the exercise, with 85,000 or 95,000 depending on sources on the Muslim side and 25,000 on the Christian side respectively.<sup>27</sup> Of this number, the government at both federal and state levels sponsored between 40 to 50 percent of the pilgrims, the cost of each pilgrim pegged at N460,000 and N540,000, costing the government billions of naira. In 2008 the government spent well over 34 billion naira on both Muslim and Christian pilgrimages.<sup>28</sup> This spending has been as old as the pilgrimage tradition in Nigeria itself whether from the individual or government coffers. Most of those who sponsored themselves come from among the poor or people at the bottom of Nigeria's economic ladder. Often such people spend their lifetime savings to undertake the exercise after which they become pathetic and helpless. Fulani herdsmen often sell off their herds built up over most parts of their lifetime to finance their pilgrimage, subjecting themselves and family members to grave lack subsequently. The money used by wealthy self-sponsored pilgrims is most often suspected to be the proceeds of corruption. The bottom line of the matter lies in the unbearable reality that this money builds other economies other than Nigeria's in the form of royalties and *mutawwifs* (guides) fees apart from other business transactions undertaken by pilgrims. The large government contingents often sent ahead of pilgrims for logistic matters also engulfs huge sums of money on their upkeep and allowances as well as the welfare of pilgrims. In 2005 the concept of five-star hajj was brought to light in Mecca. Similar to a five-star hotel, some Nigerian governors and their wives, national and state assembly members, commissioners, government contingents and the rich receive VIP treatment at the cost of between 1 to 6 million naira depending on the standard, most at the expense of the Nigerian government treasury.<sup>29</sup> On the home front, the national and state Pilgrims Welfare Boards have board members, secretaries, principal pilgrim welfare officers, large staff strength and material resources to maintain. The emoluments of staff, who are often left redundant for half a year, pilgrimages being seasonal, and the maintenance of buildings, motor vehicles and other equipments are dependent on government grants, a pilgrim board being a non fund-generating body.<sup>30</sup> Granted that the exercise has some economic benefits to the nation and its citizens in term of those employed or temporarily engaged, business opportunities particularly in the food and textile industries while pilgrims are on camps and their uniform respectively and the national airlines used, its adverse impact on the country's economy far outweighs such considerations. Apart from the fact that Nigerian Airways no longer has a monopoly of airlifting pilgrims, instances of fund embezzlements and siphoning by officials abound.<sup>31</sup> In the end, Nigeria's poverty level has continued to skyrocket due to misplaced priorities.

### **Nigeria's Poverty Level**

While Nigeria and its citizens continue to sink money in foreign "Holy Lands," the majority of its citizens continue to live in abject poverty. In 1999 the Nigerian Population Commission produced a statistic which indicated that 70 percent of Nigerians earn less than US \$1.00 a day.<sup>32</sup> The situation rather than improving is getting worse. At the theoretical level, Nigeria has fantastic blueprints for the reduction or 'eradication' of poverty.<sup>33</sup> However, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen with no end in sight. While the

government continues to pay lip service to human and infrastructural developments, the majority of Nigerians continue to lack the basic needs of food, water and shelter not to talk of road networks that have become death traps, hospitals that are a shadow of what they should be, schools that are only schools in name, lack of power that has become endemic and legendary, unemployment and underemployment, insecurity and lack of sanitation. Most Nigerian families cannot afford three square meals a day. Many who can afford three square meals a day eat and drink only to survive as such food or drink often falls short of the required standard of what qualifies as a balanced diet. Many live on the famous students' formula of feeding 0-0-1, 1-0-0, 0-1-0, or even 0-0 and only Allah knows when the next meal will come. Recently a middle-aged man who didn't know where the next meal for his family was going to come from jumped into a well and demanded for 100,000 naira from the president (late Pres. Yar'adua) before he could come out of the well or he was ready to die. He was only cleverly rescued.<sup>34</sup> The majority still depend on traditional water sources from ponds, rivers, unprotected springs and traditional wells that are adversely contaminated and often are the breeding grounds for waterborne diseases like typhoid, diarrhea, cholera, dysentery, guinea worm, river blindness and meningitis. Here on the Plateau, for example, especially in the southern part beginning from Chip downward, people go in search of brackish, muddy and diseased water, abandoning their day jobs, for half a day or even the whole day particularly during the dry season. In some instances, girl-child education is affected because they have to forfeit their education to walk several miles each day in search of water. Even here in Jos, the state capital, poor people use their hard-earned money to buy diseased water in jerry cans. Many Nigerians live in what does not qualify as shelter, to put it mildly, apart from those who do not have any place of their own. They sleep under bridges, on trees, in uncompleted buildings, markets, parks, and abandoned cars. Many Nigerians still live in places that are inaccessible by any form of motorized vehicle. They carry their terminally ill, who often do not make it to the clinics, on donkeys or even on their heads. Most deaths on Nigeria's highways are directly linked to bad road networks. Preventable and treatable diseases continue to kill in mass because of the inaccessibility to government health care or private health facilities by the majority of people. The few health facilities available are ill-equipped, leaving the few trained doctors with no option than to flee the country. Some who decide to stay know they cannot reach their potential and out of frustration get themselves entangled in unprofessional and unethical activities to the detriment of their patients. HIV/AIDS is devastating the population with the government mostly relying on foreign aid. The educational system is in shambles with many children still out of school. Many still study under trees or with teachers largely ill-trained and poorly paid. A typical example is a primary school in Kaduna (Rafin Pa) said to have two teachers including the headmaster with 300 pupils divided into two classes but sharing one classroom building. A chalk line on the floor serves as demarcation for the different classes.<sup>35</sup> Generator fumes have led to the untimely death of many, and continue to threaten public health. About 80 percent of our industries are rendered redundant for lack of regular power supply. Billions have been siphoned and emergencies have been declared on electricity and yet we can't talk of stable electricity for domestic and small businesses. Many continue to die from inhaled polluted air and carbon monoxide from charcoal, the prominent means of cooking. Our teeming unemployed and unemployable youths continue to saturate our cities in search of non-existing opportunities. As the unemployed, unemployable and the underemployed become frustrated, the state of insecurity continues to be on the increase as everyone tries to survive by all means as 419ers, political thugs, armed robbers, kidnappers or religious fanatics. Of the over 80 million youth population in Nigeria, 64 million are unemployed.<sup>36</sup> A gory scenario recently was a stampede at a recruitment centre that left 12 applicants dead. More than 130,000 candidates applied for 1,260 jobs.<sup>37</sup> We can go on and on but the point has been made. How

can a country so described spend its resources on so-called “Holy Pilgrimages” at the detriment of its citizens? Okey Ndibe opines that Nigeria can be compared

to a car in reverse gear that is said to be on forward thrust. When you ask them how the country is moving forward, all they will tell you is that ‘God is in control’ as if God has become a robot to clean the mess whenever he is ordered to do so. When citizens complain of too many accidents and fatalities on our gutted roads, the ‘leaders’ will tell you to dial God. Need Nigerian street clean? Call God to do it. How about creating jobs? What about electricity? Take it to God in prayer. What about security? God will guide you.<sup>38</sup>

Nigeria’s religious pilgrimages largely fall within this suffocating religiosity. The recurrent cases of drug peddling, currency trafficking, abscondment, immorality and other objectionable practices by some Nigerian pilgrims lend credence to the suspicion that piety could not be the whole explanation for Nigeria’s and Nigerians’ involvement in pilgrimages. It must be noted that religiosity is not the same as spirituality.

### **Sinister Motives for Religious Pilgrimages in Nigeria**

Without completely denying the spiritual motive and benefits derivable from observing religious pilgrimages as some claim, the way and manner in which it is conducted in Nigeria leaves ample room to look beyond the spiritual as earlier indicated. Although space is not in our favour to be exhaustive here, suffice it to note that underneath the surface of what appears to be spiritual motivation are often other sinister factors that becloud rational thinking on the side of the government and the poor. The exercise has thrived and continues to thrive largely on wrong theology, socio-economic, religious, political, adventurous motives and what we could describe as a westernophilia syndrome among Nigerians. Salisu Suleiman suggests that many rich Nigerians and those in position of authority go on pilgrimages, sponsor or grant pilgrimage tickets to acolytes and praise singers as a means of bribing God. In their reasoning, they think that God will overlook their fraudulent embezzlement of public funds if they use part of the proceeds to build mosques or churches and in sending friends and supporters to pilgrimages. In his words, he says:

They think it is justified – if they can divert public resources supposedly in the name of God, he may not be angry if some of the funds are poached along the way for other things. So in the same breath (and from the same contract), millions are stolen to build places of worship and also for onward transfer to Swiss bank accounts. . . . What is the value of a prayer prayed on food bought with stolen money or pray in places of worship built with stolen money or loot public funds to go on pilgrimage?<sup>39</sup>

Pilgrimages in Nigeria enhance pilgrims' socio-economic and religious standing in the society. Unlike folks from other parts of the world who go on pilgrimages but retain their titles (Mr., Miss, Mrs. or whatever title they hold before pilgrimage), Nigerian pilgrims parade themselves as *alhajis* or *JPs* on return from the exercise signifying their rise up the socio-economic and religious ladder. Once a Nigerian performs the exercise, he or she becomes a 'local champion' in most cases as he or she is distinguished by his or her newly acquired title. While the Muslim pilgrims become *alhajis* or *hajiyyas*, the Christian pilgrims suffix their names with JP meaning Jerusalem Pilgrim. Rufus Kayode Oteniya states that "the yearning propensity for titles other than Mr. has created a surge in the number of people going on yearly pilgrimage to the holy lands."<sup>40</sup> This is not unconnected with the general mentality of Nigerians when it comes to the craze for titles, Nigeria being a class society. Oteniya opines that "Nigerians generate new titles almost with the same frequency as Microsoft comes up with security updates for the vista operating system."<sup>41</sup> Most Nigerians, cutting across the whole spectrum of society including the religious circles, are no longer satisfied with 'insignificant' titles like Mr. or Mrs. and Pastor. Hence, you hear people refer to themselves as "Banker Jide, Accountant Emeka, Surveyor Ahmed, Manager Bala, Pharmacist James, Journalist Segun and other inconceivable Nigerian-made titles."<sup>42</sup> Politicians clench to 'Honourable', 'His Excellency' and 'Distinguished' even when they know they are not honourable, excellent or distinguished. Most if not all retain their titles even after the expiration of their tenures, not minding that there are permanent and temporary titles. Honorary doctorate degrees are up for sale to the highest bidders. Traditional rulers, who are supposed to be the custodians of traditional values, confer chieftaincy titles on undeserving candidates provided they can pay. Within the religious circles, the constituency to which we belong, the titles are mind boggling to say the least. Side by side with this rise in social status is the economic stimulus. The Basic Traveling Allowance (BTA) associated with government sponsorship has been partly the push factor for many who often unashamedly declare they have gone on pilgrimages several times and are looking forward to many more trips. How could we justify going several times on basis of spirituality? Pilgrimages are also avenues for commercialization. Apart from selling and buying, pilgrims make commercial deals and even form companies with partners from other parts of the globe.<sup>43</sup> The titles also have their religious dimension as the title-holders think that by going on pilgrimage they become more religious over and above those who have not.

There is also the political factor, especially among the political class, responsible for the surge in Nigerian pilgrimages. Politicians use state sponsorship of pilgrimages as a political tool to govern as well as to win votes. Governor Alao Akala of Oyo state spoke the minds of many politicians when during the send-forth organized for the state's hajj contingent he told them of his hope for the over 1000 of the 15000 pilgrims sponsored by the state: "if these, 1,500 and another 1,500 that will be going to Jerusalem bring along 10 each to vote for us, then we will be here again next year to do this kind of programme for another set."<sup>44</sup>

While some undertake the journey to satisfy their adventurous instinct, many do so for their love of the 'west' and anything foreign. The definition of the 'west' for an average Nigerian is any country with a white population. Mecca and Jerusalem fit this classification. An average Nigerian dreams of going to the 'west' as the solution to his or her predicaments.

Why do pilgrims abscond once in the 'Holy Lands'? Granted that the socio-economic condition in the country is responsible for the migration of many to foreign countries, this romantic feeling for the 'west' is partly responsible for our brain drain syndrome.<sup>45</sup> There are people within the country who scheme daily for years planning their escape from the country by all means not for a particular reason but for the ecstasy of going abroad. Those who cannot go through legitimate ways, die on high seas as they try to cross into 'Europe.'<sup>46</sup> Nigerians are not deterred with stories of some professionals getting stocked as taxi-drivers, gas station attendants, factory hands or prostitutes, not to talk of non-professionals, many of whom end up as prisoners, often deported after their jail terms. Westernophilia is responsible for Nigeria's dependence on finished products imported into the country irrespective of the quality. As a consumer state, Nigeria and Nigerians are legendary in the importation of goods and services, the most ridiculous being the importation of toothpick.<sup>47</sup> Goods made in Araria market are labeled 'made in Japan', 'Taiwan', 'China', 'London' or 'America' without which Nigerians are reluctant to buy. The national treasury is being looted by those in the corridor of power to acquire luxurious houses as well as build factories in London, New York, Paris, Berlin, Dubai or South Africa partly to fulfill this delusion. If Nigerians were aware of the institutional hegemony, arrogance and selfishness of the western world, they would be more responsible. The craze for pilgrimages could also be seen within this lens. The psychological fulfillment derived from visiting these foreign nations outweighs any other considerations. Some churches have carried this as far as differentiating among their clergies the 'have been' and the 'have not.'

Again, we can go on enumerating these sinister motives, but I think the point again has been made. Are Nigerian religious pilgrimages a demonstration of piety or an economic waste?

## **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it has been established that instead of judging the religious pilgrimages in Nigeria from the spiritual perspective, which is suspect, their economic implications on the nation's economy should receive precedence. Are we saying that pilgrimages should be abolished entirely in Nigeria? From a personal point of view, I do not think so. As a pastor and theological teacher, a visit of Jerusalem to see where Jesus was born, the paths where he walked, the places he preached and performed miracles, the famous garden of Gethsemane, the upper room where he had his last supper, the court where he was tried and the place of his crucifixion and the tomb will enhance my ministry. However, doing that at the expense of my family and the national economy is anathema and unspiritual. Within the Muslim circle, those who can conveniently afford it without the fears expressed should be encouraged to fulfill their religious obligation. The holy books emphasize that true spirituality has a social dimension. Consequently, it is contradictory to ignore Nigeria's poor subjected to drinking diseased water, eating an unbalanced diet and dying of preventable and treatable diseases, illiteracy and unemployment to embark on pilgrimages in the name of God. This is far from piety. It is economic recklessness and waste to say the least. Although many people think that pilgrimages serve as a stimulant to economic activities at certain period of the year

as indicated, the economic drain is adverse. Instead of conserving our scarce resources for the provision of basic necessities of life for citizens and the general development of the nation, billions of naira go away to other countries, only for us to go and marvel at their level of human and infrastructural development.

Should Nigerian Muslims insist on state sponsorship of pilgrims to Mecca as expected, what should the Christians do? First, as the conscience of the nation, they must insist that sponsoring just Muslims and Christians to pilgrimages from the national or state treasury is discriminatory to other Nigerians belonging to other religions, being fellow citizens as well. This, including the economic drain associated with the exercise, should serve as a basis for conversing for an end to state sponsorship of pilgrimages. To continue to partake in the unholy pillaging of state treasury because the Muslims do same made Jan H. Boer to pertinently ask, “From where, I cannot help asking, do Christians take their cues? Has Islam become their new source of revelation?”<sup>48</sup> Matthew Hassan Kukah in the same vein decried that “pilgrimage business” has done “more harm than good” to Christianity. It is no point waiting

until Muslims decide on what they want for their faith before we start saying: Well, the government has done it for Muslims; it must do it for us too... This kind of reactionary policy only increases tension among us. Why have we been unable to articulate our own policies ourselves in keeping with the dictates of our faith? Since we have started these imitations, we have continued to fumble about from one policy to another.<sup>49</sup>

For Christians who would insist on a fair share, even though it is exclusive to Muslims and Christians, what about state nations and state governments earmarking the money meant for Christian pilgrimage and utilizing it for developmental projects which will benefit all irrespective of religious affiliation? If this cannot work due to its political expediency, what about Christians, those engaged at the federal and state Pilgrims Welfare Board, downing their tools in protest? Still, should this not work, what about individual Christians with the consent of the authorities, if possible, receive the sum (N460,000 – N540,000) and use it for developmental projects like the provision of potable drinking water, health care facilities or educational facilities in their communities where all could again benefit irrespective of religious affiliations? If some people’s God will insist that they have to meet him abroad for their worship to be complete and acceptable and that Nigeria has to pay for the trip or that every worshipper has to go irrespective of his or her economic standing, isn’t it an opportunity for those of us who claim to know the God we are serving to show that our God is different? Continuing participation in the exercise as it is being done now especially by Christians undermines any spiritual significance attached to it. Its adverse economic impact on the nation’s economy makes one with no option than to ask whether the continued spending by individuals and the government on the exercise is economically wise. To a large extent, is it even spiritual or only religious?

---

<sup>1</sup> Muslims, depending on whether they are Shiites or Sunnis and other less known groups visit several other spots considered sacred other than Mecca. For examples, see Bernd Homuth,

---

“Changes in Early History of Ismailism” (Edinburgh: M.Sc. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Although Jerusalem represents the main destination of Christian pilgrimage, other places are considered sacred and are visited too. Although Christian pilgrimage has been mostly limited to Jerusalem, other sites visited are Mount Sinai in Egypt, Rome in Italy, Lourdes in France and other spots considered sacred in Greece, Turkey, Spain and Portugal. For more details, see Stephen M. Gyang, *A Guide to Jerusalem: Places of Peace and Power* (Jos: Self-published, 2010), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Williams (ed.) *New Concise Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), p. 435.

<sup>4</sup> *Surah* 2:158, 196-203; 3:97; 5:2; 22.

<sup>5</sup> Due to its spiritual significance, pilgrimage in Islam is considered more than merely visiting a sacred place. Although the spiritual benefits of the pilgrimage are obscure and indefinite in the Qur’an, Muslim traditions (*ahadith*) assure pilgrims and their relatives of forgiveness of sin and paradise. A clear example is the tradition that attributes to the Prophet as having said “the pilgrim intercedes for four hundred of his relatives and is as sinless as on the day his mother gave birth to him...Between one *umrah* and another, all sins are redeemed, while the reward for the blessed Hajj is nothing short of paradise.” . Quoted in F.E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). See Watson, Khadija, “Hajj a Journey for Eternity” in <http://www.islamuncovered.com> (accessed on 24.03.2011).

<sup>6</sup> Pilgrimage has been an avenue for socio-cultural, educational, economic and political exchange. See for example Yusuf Usman Bugaje, “Hajj and the Nigerian Government: Towards a Clear and Sustainable Policy on Hajj-1” in [www.webstar.co.uk/bugaje](http://www.webstar.co.uk/bugaje) (accessed on 24.03.2011); F. E. Peters, p. xxiv.

<sup>7</sup> F.E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places*, p. xxii.

<sup>8</sup> Khadija Watson, “Hajj a Journey for Eternity” in <http://www.islamuncovered.com/articles/Hajj%20a%20Journey%20for%20Eternity.pdf> (accessed on 24.03.2011).

<sup>9</sup> Idumange John, “Nigeria: Abolish State Sponsorship of Pilgrimages” in [http://www.saharareporters.com/ article/nigeria-abolish-state-sponsorship-pilgrimages](http://www.saharareporters.com/article/nigeria-abolish-state-sponsorship-pilgrimages) (accessed on 02.02.2010.)

<sup>10</sup> Stephen M. Gyang, *A Guide to Jerusalem: Places of Peace and Power*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Christian Pilgrims Welfare Board, Plateau State, *A Manual on Christian Pilgrimage*, August, 1999, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Many Christian leaders and members will argue passionately that apart from other benefits, they derive immense spiritual benefit from embarking on the exercise. But there is no concept of holy place in Christianity like in Islam. Those who must worship Christ must do so in Spirit and in truth. Jesus even blessed and continues to bless those who have not seen him but believe (John 4:24; 20:29).

<sup>13</sup> Since the historical development of pilgrimage tradition and government involvement in Nigeria is not the focus of this paper, I would skip details and recommend that the following: Usman Bugaje, “Hajj and the Nigerian Government: Towards a Clear and Sustainable Policy on Hajj-1” in [www.websatr.co.uk/bugaje](http://www.websatr.co.uk/bugaje) (accessed on 24.03.2011); Susan O’Brien, “Pilgrimage, Power, and Identity: The Role of the Hajj in the Lives of Nigerian Hausa Bori Adepts” in *Africa Today*, Vol. 46, No. 3/4, Islam in Africa (Summer-Autum, 1999): 11-40; J.S. Birks, “The Mecca Pilgrimage by West African Pastoral Nomads” in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (March, 1977): 47-58; O.E. Tangban, “The Hajj and the Nigerian Economy 1960-1981” in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 21 (Aug. 1991): 241-255; Jan H. Boer, *Christian: Why this Muslim Violence?* Vol. 3 (Ontario: Essence Publishing, 2004): 124-129.

---

<sup>14</sup> Islam first came to Kanem-Borno temporarily in the 7<sup>th</sup> century before its permanence was sealed between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century such that by the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Kanem which included Borno already had a Muslim king.

<sup>15</sup> It is claimed that Hausaland came into contact with Islam beginning from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was not until the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century that their acceptance of Islam became more pronounced.

<sup>16</sup> Birks, "The Mecca Pilgrimage by West African Pastoral Nomads," pp. 47-58.

<sup>17</sup> See K.K. Olosio "Hajj and its Operations in Nigeria, 1954-1980" Ph.D Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1984, p. 165; Western Region Gazette, No. A000 of May 27, 1958 and No. 58, Vol. 8, December 17, 1959.

<sup>18</sup> See Federal Republic of Nigeria official Gazette, No. 24, Vol. 62, May 1975, Section 1, 4 & 6.

<sup>19</sup> J. Boer, *Christian: Why This Muslim Violence?* p. 125.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. See also S.M.O. Aka, "Religious Riots and the Third Republic" in *Nigeria Tribune*, 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1989, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See *Vanguard*, March 21, 1985, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> J. Boer, *Christian: Why This Muslim Violence?* p. 128.

<sup>25</sup> CAN, 12 August, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> John Idumange, "Nigeria: Abolish State Sponsorship of Pilgrimages" in [www.saharareporters.com](http://www.saharareporters.com) (accessed 02.02.2010.)

<sup>27</sup> PMnews "Must Government Sponsor Pilgrimages?" accessed on 11.10.2010. See also Stanley Oronsaye "Government spends 1.5bn on 2010 Pilgrimage" in [http://234next.com/csp/cms/Next/Home/5644407-146/government\\_spends\\_1.5bn\\_on\\_2010\\_pilgrimage.csp](http://234next.com/csp/cms/Next/Home/5644407-146/government_spends_1.5bn_on_2010_pilgrimage.csp) (accessed on 21.11.2010).

<sup>28</sup> Ayo Akinfe "Nigeria Desperately Needs to Tax Religion" in <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com> (accessed on 13.03.2009).

<sup>29</sup> Kabiru I. Dandago "Five-Star Hajj Controversy: Matters Arising" in <http://www.englishsabra.com/forum> (accessed on 12.02.2011).

<sup>30</sup> See O.E. Tangban, "The Hajj and the Nigerian Economy 1960-1981" in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 21 (Aug. 1991): 241-255.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Karen L. Bloomquist and Musa Pantil Filibus (eds.) "So the Poor have Hope, and Injustice Shuts its Mouth: Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa" (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2007): 121.

<sup>33</sup> Previous and present governments initiated and continue to initiate various programs and projects in this direction. They include austerity measures, SAPs, the National Directorate of Employment Program, the Better Life Program, the People's Bank Program, the National Poverty Alleviation Program and the National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS). The government also collaborates with national and international agencies such as UNDP, WHO, UNICEF, WB and numerous other NGOs. See Karen L. Bloomquist and Musa Pantil Filibus (eds.) "So the Poor have Hope, and Injustice Shuts its Mouth: Poverty and the Mission of the Church in Africa," pp. 121-23.

<sup>34</sup> BBC Hausa News, May 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Salisu Suleiman, "The Psychology of Northern Elite" in [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com) (accessed on 30.07.2010).

<sup>36</sup> A. Cyril Awogbenle and K. Chijioke Iwaumadi, "Youth Unemployment: Entrepreneurship Development Programme as an Intervention Mechanism" in [www.academicjournals.org/ajbm/pdf](http://www.academicjournals.org/ajbm/pdf) (accessed on 24.03.2011).

- 
- <sup>37</sup> BBC, "Nigerian Jobs Scramble Kills 12" in <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk> (accessed on 14.07.2008).
- <sup>38</sup> Okey Ndibe, "A Motion against Moving Forward" in <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com> (accessed on 07.01.2008).
- <sup>39</sup> Salisu Suleiman, "In God's Name" in [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com) (accessed on 09.06.2009).
- <sup>40</sup> Rufus Kayode Oteniya, "Nigerians and the Title Craze: Proud to be Called Mr." in [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com) (accessed on 09.06.2009).
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> See F.E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): xxiv.
- <sup>44</sup> Stanley Oronsaye, "Government Spends 1.5 bn on 2010 Pilgrimage" in <http://234next.com>(accessed on 21.11.2010).
- <sup>45</sup> N.K.O. Chukunta, "The Nigerian Brain Drain: Factors Associated with the Expatriation of American Educated Nigerians," Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation (New Jersey: The State University of New Jersey, 1976).
- <sup>46</sup> The Malta Independent, "Libya: Panic, Bad Weather Led to Drowning of 236 Illegals" in [www.usillegalimmigrants.com](http://www.usillegalimmigrants.com) (accessed on 03.09.2009).
- <sup>47</sup> Charles Dickson, "A Nation that Imports Toothpicks" in [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com) (accessed on 03.12.2010).
- <sup>48</sup> J. Boer, *Christian: Why This Muslim Violence?* p. 128.
- <sup>49</sup> Matthew Hassan Kukah, "Choose this Day whom you will Serve" in *NS*12 Dec/95, p. 12.