



## **Government Sponsorship of Muslim and Christian Pilgrim in Nigeria: Socio- Economic and Religious Implication**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Religious pilgrimages have had great national significance in Nigeria, particularly when seen from the point of view of government involvement in sponsoring Muslim and Christian pilgrimages at the expense of other religions in the country. The Nigerian government at all levels expends billions of naira each year to send exclusively adherents of Islam and Christianity to Mecca and Jerusalem for pilgrimages. While Nigerians continue to live in abject poverty with no basic amenities, the Nigerian government and its citizens continue to sink money in foreign "Holy land." The money used by the Nigerian government to sponsor Muslim and Christian pilgrims to holy land can be channelled to provide basic needs and provide employment opportunities for unemployed Nigerian youth. This paper x-rays the socio-economic and religious implications of government sponsorship of Muslim and Christian pilgrimages with tax payers' money with the aim of calling an end to these leisure trips of a selected few. The paper, among others, recommends that faith is personal and should be treated as such by political authorities. The privatisation of matters relating to religious pilgrimage will have positive implications for the anti-corruption war and promote peace, harmony, and development. The methodology adopted is historical and phenomenological, using several methods of data collection and analysis done qualitatively.

**Keywords:** Government; Muslim; Christian; Pilgrimage; Socio- Economic and Implications.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Religious pilgrimages have been of great national significance in Nigeria, particularly when seen from the point of view of the government's involvement (Nguvugher, 2011). Ranging from individual participation on a yearly basis, the Nigerian government both at the federal, state, and local levels expends billions of naira from the common treasury that is meant for all Nigerians, irrespective of religion or tribe, each year to send exclusively adherents of Islam and Christianity to Mecca and Jerusalem for pilgrimages.

According to Nguvugher (2011), pilgrimage in Nigeria, especially for Muslims, is almost as old as Nigerian Islam itself. With the introduction of Islam in *Kanem-Borno* and later in *Hausaland* in the eighth and ninth centuries and the fifteenth and sixteenth

centuries, respectively, Muslims in Nigeria began to go on pilgrimages to Mecca. From this time up until the early 20th century, pilgrimage was a private affair for Muslims, with a lot of individual sacrifice and hardship. Pilgrimage hardship was reduced, beginning in the 1950s and upward, with the introduction of air travel as well as government involvement (Can, 2020). In April and May 1958, Pilgrimage Welfare Boards were set up in the North and West, respectively, but even at this time until the early 1970s, the government's role was largely limited to logistical issues (Oluwatoki, 2020).

As a result of oil money and the desire for religious and political relevance and survival, the Nigerian government became fully involved by setting up the Nigerian Pilgrims Board (NPB) in 1975, which was stepped down to state levels (Nigeria Official Gazette, 1975). Since then, government involvement in pilgrimages for Christians and Muslims has been on the increase, culminating in the passing into law of the 1989 decree that established the Nigerian Pilgrims Commission (Olupona, 1990).

### **GOVERNMENT SPONSORSHIP OF PILGRIMAGES IN NIGERIA**

According to Boer (2004), initially, the Muslims insisted on deep government involvement in pilgrimage for Muslims. They regarded it as a government duty to support their religion, including this feature, and as a Muslim human right, while Nigerian Christian leaders called for an end to government involvement, since Christians were non-beneficiaries at this stage. They regarded it as a clear demonstration of government partiality for Islam. CAN particularly 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.

In 1990, CAN threatened to sue President Babangida to challenge the legality of the 1989 Decree which established the Nigerian Pilgrims Commission. Ogueri (1992) argued against government's involvement to subsidize the 1992 pilgrimage by some fifty per cent. He considered the subsidy as a misplacement of priority and its religious implications could not be ignored. In his words,

Nigeria is a secular society by constitutional provision and should not accord any recognition to any religion. It is unfortunate that federal administrations have taken decisions and carried out actions which approximate to the elevation of other religious groups. Government's role in matters of religion should stop at the level of ensuring a hitch-free hajj operation and not using tax payers' money to finance such a costly venture. Government has a duty to distinguish between its traditional and legitimate role as an institution for public peace and its illegitimate role as the custodian of the religions of a segment of the society (p. 5).

Yaro (1988) also blasted the government for its support of Muslim pilgrimage. He condemned the act as the most blatant and defiant government act of favouritism on behalf of Muslims. He gave statistics as to the number of Nigerian Muslim pilgrims from 1968-1985. The lowest number was twenty thousand in 1984, while the highest was one hundred and twenty thousand in 1980 (Rivers, 2005). When it became obvious that the government was adamant to the above condemnation by CAN and others, and also considering the political implications of pilgrimage, they changed their earlier position and started demanding for equal treatment. Since government was not willing to steer clear of pilgrimage affairs as the Christians wanted, they also demanded for their own share of the national cake. Boer (2004, p. 128) categorically stated that:

If support is available for 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 for

another religious group, otherwise, a most unpleasant impression will be created that the government prefers the Muslims.

From the above statement, it is clear that the reference to other religions is rightly interpreted as only Christianity. CAN felt that the solution to the issue of pilgrimage in reference to government involvement with Islam was to create two boards, one for Muslims and one for Christians, not considering other religions that are in the country and the constitutional provisions of Nigeria as a secular state (Ludwig, 2008). After the threatened suit against the government, the CAN National Executive Committee, in 1989 said that:

We warmly appeal to the Federal Government, as a matter of utmost urgency, a decree which will establish a pilgrim's commission that will cater for the welfare of pilgrimages to all the "Holy land." Such a decree will help to promote a peaceful atmosphere for the practice of the 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 (p. 2).

Owing to the above demand by CAN, has Christians' participation in pilgrimages like their Muslim counterparts as we have it today ensured fairness to all other religions in Nigeria and promoted the "peaceful atmosphere" envisioned by CAN? However, the Christians' pilgrimage programme was established in the late 1980s. Today, the Federal Government and the states have their Christian Pilgrimage Boards, but since then, Christians' Pilgrimages are far fewer than their Muslim counterparts, the government money spent on this project is still much less.

According to Nguvugher (2011), the reactionary cry for justice and fair play has become sacrosanct such that, most Christians do not see anything wrong in government spending on pilgrimages exclusively for Muslims and Christians not considering other religions in the country. While people in the developed countries may enjoy holding grants from the coffers of their government to any destination of their choice within a permitted distance, such is never done at the expense of the general 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 enough to cater for this and other basic needs given their economic advantage. Apart from Christianity and Islam, pilgrimages are also associated with other religions too, but they are not sponsored by the government but by individuals. It is only the Nigerian scenario that defies rational analysis. It smacks of partisanship. Apparently, states' use of public funds for pilgrimages is an abuse of the 1999 Constitution, given its express disapproval in Section 10, which declares that "the Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as a State Religion."

However, it is worrisome that despite this constitutional imperative and austere economic conditions that have turned many states into chronic salary debtors to civil servants, the abuse thrives. Some of the governors indulge in self-adulation for defying the odds to sustain the practice. Governor Mohammed Abubakar of Bauchi State is one of them. In a farewell message to the 3,090 pilgrims from the state in 2017, he said the government had continued to fund the operations of the state pilgrims' welfare board, both at home and abroad, "despite the economic hardship." Each pilgrim was given N85,000. For Katsina State, the Governor, Aminu Masari, said it had been subsidising Hajj with N1 billion annually. According to him, pilgrimage to Mecca is "neither a picnic nor a holiday, but an act of worship."

But unfortunately, the Federal Government's avowal of disengagement is one of double standards. In 2016, it influenced the Central Bank of Nigeria to direct banks and

authorised forex dealers to pay Pilgrims Travelling Allowance to intending pilgrims at a concessionary exchange rate of N197 to \$1; and in 2017 for N305 to \$1; very much at variance with the prevailing rate of N360 to \$1 then. According to the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria statistics, 81,000 persons out of the 95,000 slots approved by the Saudi Arabian authorities performed the pilgrimage to Mecca in 2017. The slot ranks Nigeria as the fifth highest globally.

This partly explains why Nigeria remains a poor country. In January 2017, the CBN Governor, Godwin Emefiele, declared that there would be no discriminatory foreign exchange allocation to intending pilgrims to either Saudi Arabia or Israel. Just in August, the Senate directed the CBN to provide forex to Muslims undertaking pilgrimage to Mecca at N200 per dollar. In 2015, the Federal Government had approved the purchase of a maximum of \$1,000 at a concessionary rate of N160 to the dollar by each intending pilgrim as personal travel allowance.

But Nigeria's loss is gain for Saudi Arabia and Israel, who both see pilgrimage as serious business. Saudi Arabia has listed tourism as one of the most important economic sectors in its post-oil Vision 2030, expecting revenue from religious tourism to rise from \$27.9 billion in 2015 to \$46.6 billion in 2020 (Nurunnabi, 2017). When Israeli tourism hit an all-time high in 2017, earning 20 billion shekels in revenue from a total of 3.6 million tourists, Yariv Levin, Israel's Minister of Tourism said, "We have implemented several significant initiatives, including reaching out to new and focused markets, building sub-brands and launching new campaigns, collaborations with large online travel agents, giving financial incentives to airline companies that open new routes to Israel and continued marketing throughout the world."

It is obvious that the country is the big loser for meddling in religious matters. Many of the states that flaunt the sponsorship of pilgrims and building of mosques as achievement rank among those with the worst indices in education, child and maternal mortality and economic development. Oxford University Human Development Initiative, Multidimensional Poverty Index Data Bank, of 2017, revealed very much so, when it classified Zamfara State as the poorest with 92 per cent poverty rate; Jigawa State 88 per cent; Bauchi 87 per cent; Kebbi, 86 per cent; and Katsina 82 per cent, among others.

Performances of these states in public examinations, including the common entrance to the 104 Federal Unity Colleges, are nothing to write home about. Embarrassingly, pupils from some of the states could be admitted for scoring just two marks out of 200, whereas pupils from other states of the country are required to score 139 marks to be enrolled. The *almajiris*, and the over 10.5 million out-of-school pupils, sprung from this ironic policy of the state placing more premium on religion than education. Therefore, governors who are still misguided should get the message: state sponsorship of pilgrimages does not promote development; but education and infrastructure provision do.

## **SOCIO- ECONOMIC AND RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF PILGRIMAGES IN NIGERIA**

While Nigerians continue to live in abject poverty, the Nigerian government and its citizens continue to sink money in foreign “Holy Land.” The Nigerian government spends billions of naira on both Muslim and Christian pilgrimages, apart from spending so much to maintain the national and the states’ Pilgrimage Welfare Boards’ staff, who are often left redundant for half a year – pilgrimages being seasonal, and the maintenance of buildings and other equipment’s are dependent on government grants because a pilgrim board is a non-fund generating body (Tangban, 1991). The government normally sends large government contingents on a separate budget not considering the adverse impact on the Nigerian economy.

The money used by the Nigerian government to sponsor Muslim and Christian pilgrims to holy lands can be channelled to provide basic needs like water, roads, schools, hospitals, power, and provide employment opportunities for unemployed Nigerian youths instead of spending it on politicians and their associates in the name of pilgrimages that largely fall within suffocating religiosity. Recently, there were cases of people travelling with their girlfriends to enjoy holidays in “Holy Lands”, recurrent cases of drug peddling, currency trafficking, abscondment, immorality and other objectionable practices by some Nigerian pilgrims lend credence to the suspicion that piety cannot be the whole explanation for Nigeria’s and Nigerians’ involvement in pilgrimages (Nguvugher, 2011; Udofia 2021).

According to News Agency of Nigeria, during the 2016 holy pilgrimage to Mecca, three Nigerian pilgrims on the entourage from *Kwara* State were arrested in Saudi Arabia for possessing cocaine. The Executive Secretary of the *Kwara* State Muslim Pilgrim Welfare Board confirmed the arrest in August, 2016. The pilgrims were arrested in *Medinnah* by the authorities in the Islamic country. Another 55-year-old female hajj pilgrim, Basira Binuyo, also from *Kwara* State, but used to sell cosmetics in Lagos excreted 82 wraps of cocaine weighing 931 grammes. According to the National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency, the pilgrim was arrested at the Nnamdi Azikiwe Airport, Abuja. Apart from the spiritual benefits of the exercise, the manner in which pilgrimages are conducted in Nigeria leaves ample room to look beyond the spiritual benefits. Pilgrimage in Nigeria enhances the pilgrim’s socio-economic and religious standing in the society. Unlike people from other parts of the world who go on pilgrimage, Nigeria’s pilgrims parade themselves as *Alhajis* or JPs on return from the exercise, signifying their rise on the socio-economic and religious ladder.

Recently, Nigerians are calling for the end of government sponsored pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Mecca. Two landmark suits have been filed against the Federal Government of Nigeria in the Federal High Court, Port Harcourt, Rivers State by a Port Harcourt based legal practitioner, Victoria Opara, challenging the legality and constitutionality of the Nigeria Christian Commission Act, the Nigerian Pilgrims’ Commission and the Federal Character Commission Act. The suit is challenging the legality and the constitutionality of the Federal Government of Nigeria and the various State Governments using public funds meant for development purpose to sponsor individuals and groups on religious pilgrimages. Opara also sought for a declaration by the court nullifying the establishment of the various Pilgrims’ Commissions established by the Federal and States Governments (pointblanknews.com, 2015).

Also, according to Orosanye (2015), a presidential committee on the restructuring and rationalization of government parastatals, commissions and agencies had in its report in 2012, recommended that the government should stop sponsoring pilgrims and pilgrimages. However, on white paper, it was reported that, the government rejected the proposal and also rejected the recommendation that the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria and the Nigerian Christian Pilgrims Commission be abolished and their functions be transferred to a department under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

President Jonathan who partook in the Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem before his exit to partly pray for Nigeria and to partly discuss bilateral issues with the Israeli leaders was the presidency that denied the accusations (Essien et al., 2021). However, what is the propriety or otherwise of government spending public funds to transport only Muslims and Christians on pilgrimage? Although this has been an age-long practice in Nigeria, it does not make it right. Pilgrimage is a personal thing and since the country is regarded constitutionally as a secular state, government should stay off religious matters, including funding of pilgrimage. People intending to go on pilgrimages should be able to foot the bills. None of the two dominant religions in the country should make it mandatory for people to go on pilgrimage, whether they can afford it or not. This practice is in itself a form of corruption, especially if it involves public servants. Worse still, the religious exhibitionism has not resulted in good governance in the country (Omotoso, 2013, p. 17).

Odivwri (2015) also calls for the states in Nigeria to follow the example of the Federal Government and some states like Kaduna to stop sponsoring pilgrims to holy lands; there are some states that owe heavily their workforce, pensions or retirees and even banks, yet, they are still using public funds to send people to holy lands. Pilgrimages in Nigeria are undertaken by Muslims and Christians only with the exclusion of adherents of other religions who should also be sponsored to some voodoo conclaves in China or India.

Odivwri (2015) faulted the negative effect of pilgrimage on the Nigerian civil service and gave a concrete experience of how he applied for a particular document from the Lagos State Government and had the misfortune of having the final approval from a Muslim officer who was away for Hajj exercise to Mecca. While the exercise normally takes about two weeks or so, the officer was away from work for over six weeks all in the name of pilgrimage. Everybody was waiting for him as the head of the unit and the business of that department was literally held down. Beside the huge loss in man hour, many states still spend huge sums of money every year sponsoring pilgrims, both civil servants and non-civil servants, many of who are political or *filia* cronies, sending a huge delegation of pilgrims to Holy Lands had long become a cheap way of rewarding political loyalty and support (Odivwri, 2015, p. 14).

Many top government officials see the budget for pilgrimages as avenue to steal government money in the name of religion. Worse still, the pilgrimages do not necessarily make the pilgrims to fear God more or make them become more committed to government work but they narrow their appetite for bribery and corruption. Pilgrimages have been reduced to orchestrated tourism. How can a responsible government be using taxpayers' money to bear the cost of leisure trips of selected few, while workers are owed salaries, pensioners are being owed and infrastructures are crying for attention?

According to Ehikioya (2013), the delegation led by the then Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) President, Ayo Oritsejafor, submitted its 2012 report to President

Jonathan. It announced that 16,372 Nigerians participated in the Christian pilgrimage while seven states in the North i.e. Jigawa, Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Zamfara, Benue and Gombe declined to sponsor Christian pilgrims, promising to discuss with the affected states. The president maintained that the federal government could not force any state government to sponsor pilgrims if they do not want to do so. Notwithstanding, he cautioned that such a decision not to sponsor pilgrims must affect both Christian and Muslim pilgrims. He advised that:

Government cannot force state governments to sponsor pilgrims if they do not want to do so. If they decide to pull out from sponsoring pilgrims, there is nothing we can do. But if some state governments are sponsoring pilgrims of one religion and leaving out the others that is against the law. Nigeria is a secular state and so, nobody should be discriminated against based on religious belief (p. 4).

If the president can refer to Nigeria as a secular state and insist that nobody should be discriminated against based on religious belief, is there any reason for the government to be sponsoring only Christians and Muslims to pilgrimages, and is it not discrimination against practitioners of other religions in the country?

There is now a ray of hope that state governments will soon shut down the practice of sponsoring pilgrims with taxpayers' money since the Federal Government and some states like Kaduna have followed suit to stop government sponsorship of pilgrimage. Nasir El-Rufai the then governor of Kaduna State declared that the state had saved ~221.81 million from stoppage of sponsorship of 2015 Hajj pilgrimage. The government only sponsored 116 officials for the 2015 Hajj exercise to support the 5,682 citizens of the state going for the Holy pilgrimage. The government of Kaduna State has completely eliminated the concept of government sponsored pilgrims (Alabelewa, 2015).

Even though the same Kaduna State Governor, contrary to the above position, gave out about ₦20 million to be shared among the pilgrims from Kaduna State during the 2015 pilgrimage for the Hajj as *Eid-el-kabir* Sallah gift. 5,710 pilgrims performed the 2015 Hajj in Kaduna State, each pilgrim was given 50 Saudi Riyals at an exchange rate of ₦7 per Saudi Riyal, each pilgrim got ₦3,500 to celebrate *Eid-el-Kabir* (Agbese, 2015).

The action of the then Kaduna State Governor followed the detachment of the Federal Government from the funding of pilgrims to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj by the Muhammadu Buhari's presidency. Instead, the Federal Government's role will be restricted to providing consular, medical and welfare support to the pilgrims (Eriye, 2015). The actions of the Federal Government and Kaduna State need to be extended to all state governments in Nigeria on a more definite and definitive terms so that successive administrations will not reverse the decision. The non-governmental sponsorship of pilgrimage should also be applied to Christian pilgrims as well.

## CONCLUSION

For so long now, government sponsorship of pilgrimages related to Islam and Christianity involves money that could be used for development purposes. Faith is personal and should be treated as such by political authorities. The privatization of matters relating to religious pilgrimage will probably have positive implications for the anti-corruption war. It is high time to distinctly differentiate the secular from the spiritual in a country that claims to be secular or has a non-theocratic tag.

The Nigerian problem is to define the place of religion in the political and constitutional framework of the country—a definition based not on any presumed ideal situation, but how to maintain neutrality on issues of religion and a fair treatment for all Nigerians, irrespective of their religious affiliations. Nigerians should always enjoy their full rights as human beings in every part of the country no matter their religious affiliation or non-affiliation to any religion. Most Nigerians will reject the idea of a “Godless state”, at the same time, there is no need for the Nigerian government to patronize and favour Islam and Christianity against other religions in Nigeria which is tantamount to giving Islam and Christianity official status as state religions contrary to the provisions of the constitution. The role of the Nigerian government in religious matters is not healthy for peace and development (Eyo et al., 2011; Udofia 2017). There is urgent need for the Nigerian government to maintain a neutral posture with regard to all religions in Nigeria.

As far as history can tell, religion for so long has been turned into a lethal weapon in the hands of bad men in Nigeria who hide under religion to achieve their selfish ends. Religious crises and riots are always masterminded by men who claim that they are trying to help God in the arduous task of winning souls back to him. We should be sincere and honest to admit that, religion has made fools of too many of us. Religion has hijacked and has continued to hijack us to a point that is not the direction we had intended to go. Religion has caused us so much pain, disunity, and so much of all that is bad and undesirable. There is need to re-examine our commitment to religion towards a positive change or keep it away from our national life and move on as a country.

Intending pilgrims should be prepared to fend for themselves. If not, that Nigeria is a wasteful country, the issue of religion is private and personal, the business in funding pilgrimages, going on pilgrimage is not even compulsory for Christians and Muslims and in Islam where it's a pillar its only mandatory for those who can afford it. Whether mandatory or not for Islam and Christianity, the funding pilgrimages is hypocritical of Nigerians claims as a secular state and unfair to those Nigerians who are neither Muslims nor Christians or why didn't the government sponsor adherents of their faith on pilgrimages.

Beside the economic importance of ending the state sponsorship of pilgrimage, there is also a constitutional inconsistency in such funding. Section 10 of the constitution says the government the federation or the state shall not adopt any religion as a state religion” spending taxpays money on sponsorship of pilgrimages seems to be in conflict with this constitutional provision. The federal, state and local government should stop all financial involvement in the trips of individual who are as beneficiary of Islam and Christianity to fulfil their personal religious obligation.

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