

Hajj Management Tradition in Nigeria, 1958 - 2006

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Abstract

Hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina and other Holy places in Saudi Arabia for spiritual rejuvenation, has been an enduring tradition in Nigeria. In spite of the injunction that Muslim faithful are to perform the Hajj at least once in a lifetime, most Africans and indeed Nigerians choose to perform the Hajj as many times as they can. Nigerian Government is actively involved in Hajj administration and management both at the national and the state levels. Various bodies; pilgrims welfare boards, have been created in 1958, 1975, and 1989 and finally in 2006 to ensure the smooth operations of Hajj. Using library, archival search and structured interviews, this paper examines the institutionalization of Hajj and its management tradition in Nigeria up to the establishment of the National Hajj Commission in 2006 taking off in 2007. The paper describes the evolution of Hajj management tradition, identifies some of the factors that had hindered Hajj operations and efforts to address them, impacts of operational challenges in Nigeria's international image and finally attempts to illuminate the challenges to be faced by the 'New' Commission to meet expectations for operational improvement.

Keywords: Hajj Pilgrimage, Management Tradition, Pilgrims' Welfare, Destitute Pilgrims, Hajj Management, Challenges.

Introduction

As elsewhere in the world, Hajj has evolved as a social barometer in Nigeria. Even when they knew that he/she had not made the Hajj, non-Muslims in Nigeria generally refer to a devout Muslim as an Alhaji or Alhaja, a tacit acknowledgement of the person having reached the peak of faith, so to speak. Hajj has also become a status symbol; it is used as a title for the affluent, even if assumed. Hajj exercise has gone on in Nigeria for more than nine hundred years (HAMON: 2004) as pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial administrations of Hajj roll into one. The high and the low, the old and the young and the rich and the poor perform Hajj in Nigeria. Until very recently (late 1970s), the Hajj season has evoked festivity, nostalgia and expectations. The returning pilgrim was often met with fanfare. The most profound effect of Hajj as a social barometer is how it reflects on the image of the country and its reputation as a state (HAMON: 2004). Every year the Hajj exposes the country to the world by the way it has been managed vis-à-vis the global Hajj operations. Moreover, the behaviour of Nigerian pilgrims, itself, largely a by-product of the way and manner the Hajj is operated, reflected the image of the country. Historically, Hajj is one of Nigeria's earliest institutions. Whole communities were often Islamized when the monarch got converted to Islam (Smith: 1987). As Kings and Sultans performed the Hajj so frequently ((Mai Dunama, c. 1098-1150, Mai Ali b. Umar (1656, 1667), Emir Muhammad Sanusi of Kano (1937)), Hajj has come to be an institutionalized state duty. Since ordinary pilgrims partook {and still partake} in it on a large scale, it is a widely recognized customary practice. The colonial government came to meet it as a social function, recognized it so and did not interfere with peoples' acceptance of this religious duty. According to Bullard (1924), pilgrims would rather suffer in silence than complain to the (colonial) Agency about the hardships or wrongs they suffer during the pilgrimage. Reminiscent of the royal pilgrimages of the pre-colonial period were the annual pilgrimages of the Sardauna of Sokoto (Bello: 1962) who normally traveled in large entourage of dignitaries (Paden: 1986).

It has also become a tradition with various Muslim organizations throughout Nigeria to be preoccupied with Hajj matters. The Jama'at Nasril-Islam (JNI), founded in 1962 came to monitor, in collaboration with the Advisory Committee on Islamic Affairs, the conditions under which pilgrimage should be performed (Paden: 1986). The Zumratul Hujjaj formed in 1961 was very prominent in the Western Region. This Organization aims at educating the Muslims who are willing to perform pilgrimage, and to discourage unbecoming behaviours among pilgrims. Many Muslim Organizations are today concerned with Hajj. Nasrullah al-Fath Society of Nigeria (NASFAT) organizes its own Hajj operation.

Ansar-Ud-Deen Society (founded in 1923), one of the oldest Muslim Organizations in Nigeria, also organizes Hajj operation. There are a few other non-organizational concerns which have gone into the “hajj business”, such as ‘*Qiblah*’, ‘*Al-Hujjaj*’ and “*Focal Point*”.

Nigerian Hajj Administration and Tradition

The annual Hajj pilgrimage is a global phenomenon; the complex nature of its operation cannot be overemphasized. Its management involves catering for the pilgrims’ traveling needs, documentation, transportation, accommodation, health and general welfare. Many of the pilgrims are going on Hajj and perhaps traveling out of the country for the first time. Going for a rigorous spiritual matter, and in a more or less different society, the pilgrims need special attention. Significantly, Hajj became an important annual ritual in the states of West Africa with large Muslim populations such as ancient Bornu, Hausa (Habe) states as well as in the Sokoto Sultanate. The colonial administration in Nigeria, which was heir to the culture of Hajj among the people and official commitment on the part of their rulers, had reason to pay particular attention to Hajj as an important factor of Nigeria’s diplomacy. It feared that Hajj would expose Nigerians to anti-colonial sentiments in the Middle East; hence it sought to monitor and control the movement of pilgrims to and from Saudi Arabia.

Nigerian government’s involvement in the organization and management of pilgrimage started somehow in early 1953, when Alhaji Abubakar Imam, a member of the House of Representatives “tabled a motion for the establishment of a “Nigeria Office” in Jeddah to cater for the welfare of Nigerian pilgrims going to Saudi Arabia every year” (Imam, 1989; Bugaje, 1999). The motion adopted; Imam made the year’s pilgrimage after which he submitted a report that was well received (Imam: 1989). His recommendations were also all implemented at the instance of Alhaji Sir, Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto and the first Premier of Northern Nigeria (Bugaje: 1999). The Northern Nigeria Pilgrims Licensing Board was established in April 1958, to authorize and regularize the number of travel agencies and pilgrims’ agents for the purpose of organizing and guiding pilgrims for hajj operation. In the same vein the Western Region’s Pilgrims’ Welfare Board was set up by law in 1958 for the same purpose. Travels and pilgrims agents operated in collaboration with these Boards; they helped the Boards to process prospective pilgrims, collected fees on behalf of the Boards and assisted the pilgrims in the rites of Hajj.

The Pilgrims Boards proliferated as states were created in 1967 with each State creating its own Board. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) had a section – Office of Pilgrims Affairs –, which was devoted to the coordination of the States’ Boards. There was no uniformity in the operations of the Boards in the States with worsened Pilgrims’ conditions in the holy land; many were sleeping outside and some died. The problem persisted partly because the pilgrims’ agents still served unofficially as middlemen even to the Nigerian Pilgrims Commission, another nomenclature for the Department of Pilgrims Affairs, MFA, after it was established in 1971. By now, Nigerian pilgrims had gained notoriety in Saudi Arabia. Their behaviour and that of the agents had become an embarrassment to Nigeria.

In 1971, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a meeting of the stakeholders in Hajj matters; Islamic scholars, representatives of the MFA, the Customs and other relevant ministries, to consider the myriad of problems confronting the Hajj operations. The meeting resolved that the number of persons going on pilgrimage should be restricted, specifying some criteria to follow in order to ensure this (Oloso: 1984). It was against this background that the Federal Military Government established the Nigerian Pilgrims Board in 1975. Significantly, Hajj practice in Nigeria lost the Sardauna’s unique leadership and concern it had hitherto enjoyed after his assassination during the January 15, 1966 Coup d’état. It was a boom period for private agents; pilgrims’ welfare was neglected, fraud and inefficiency kept growing unchallenged just as there was a rapid increase in the volume of pilgrims. It was in response to this situation that the Nigerian government, in 1975, abolished the private agents and established the Nigerian Pilgrims Board by Decree No. 16 on 16 May 1975 with the sole power to organize the pilgrimage. Today, Hajj with its operations and management has become the single most important item in Nigeria-Saudi Arabia relations.

Nigeria and Saudi Arabia co-operate on many important issues e.g. oil and security, they are both members of international organizations (UNO, OIC, NAM) and are actively involved in South-South Cooperation and international peace and security. Yet, the annual pilgrimage continues to be the core issue in Nigeria - Saudi Arabia relations. No bilateral trade agreement treaty has been signed between them even though there is much informal trade going on – in gold, food items, Mecca wears, prayer accessories etc. – between them, the bulk of these trading activities are associated with the Hajj and indeed revolve around the annual Hajj pilgrimage and the all year round ‘Umrah (lesser Hajj) (Oluwatoki: 2016). Hajj operations and its management with the attendant problems therein raise other issues particularly consular matters and the problems of accommodation in Saudi Arabia. Other critical issues include the health of intending pilgrims, meeting of the deadline fixed by the Saudi authorities for effective management of the entire pilgrimage and the early post-Hajj evacuation of Nigerian pilgrims. More importantly, Hajj involves much diplomatic activities between Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. Nigerian Ministers, diplomats and special envoys (most often officials of the Nigerian Pilgrims Board/Commission) pay visits to Saudi Arabia for talks on pilgrimage, seeking clarification on regulations, asking for concession over deadlines or protesting restrictions, as the case may be on Hajj matters. In the same vein, Saudi Arabia has had to intervene in airlifting stranded Nigerian pilgrims, ban Nigerians from participating in Hajj because of the outbreak of epidemic diseases – cholera and cerebro-spinal meningitis (CSM) –, or threaten to cut down on allowable number of Nigerian pilgrims if Nigeria will fail to repatriate its destitute nationals who have stayed on illegally in Saudi Arabia years after performing the pilgrimage.

Saudi Arabia has always magnanimously accommodated Nigeria whenever its operations fall short of the high and tight global operations. According to Hujjaj Baghini, Saudi Minister for Hajj (2003), there are two Ministries of Hajj in his country; one for Nigeria, one for the rest of the world (Opeloyeru, Personal Communication: 19/3/03). The new Hajj law (2006) and the Commission (2007) were two drastic measures Nigeria had to take to tackle the myriad of problems of Hajj operations in Nigeria. It was a long journey to get to the turning point (Oluwatoki, 2011). Saudi Arabia has put in place an elaborate Hajj operation that makes the pilgrimage less stressful at enormous costs. The stress of Hajj remains nonetheless and understandably so (Oluwatoki: 2018). Saudi Arabia has been playing host (since 1992) to a minimum of two million pilgrims (WAB: 2004), a great increase from the hundreds of thousands of the years up to the 1960s (Aramco World: 1992). The number of pilgrims that make the annual Hajj has passed three million since the turn of the first decade of the 21st Century (Oluwatoki: 2018).

Growth of Hajj Traffic from Nigeria to Saudi Arabia

In eleven years (1968-1978), 580,000 Nigerians performed the Hajj. In twenty-seven years (1979-2006), 1,073,728 Nigerians had performed the Hajj (OPA, 2003; Newspaper reports; Hajj News, 1(1) May, 2006; *The Guardian*, Editorial: Jan. 20, 2006). In thirty-eight years (1968-2006), 1,653,728 Nigerians had performed the Hajj. This number averages about 43,520 (actually 43,519.158) pilgrims per year reaching an all-time peak of 105,000 in 1977 and an all-time low of 5,417 for 1996. 100,000 Nigerians performed the 2007 Hajj; 85,000 Government pilgrims, 15,000 so-called international pilgrims (*The Punch*, December 4, 2007; December 17, 2007). It has not been easy to get the figures of Nigerians who have performed the Hajj from 1958 to 1967. In the early 1960s and indeed up to 1975, Hajj operations were mainly by Pilgrims Agents licensed by the Regional Pilgrims' Welfare Boards. The Nigerian Pilgrims Board was established only in 1975. Hajj operations in the early years were largely in the hands of the Agents; the Boards were at their mercy. Apart from the chaos characteristic of the Hajj operations of these years and the abuses by the Agents, proper records were not kept. In any case, many pilgrims still traveled by road and accurate figures could not be kept of how many pilgrims left for Saudi Arabia or how many of them came back in a particular year. 1977 was significant because the Hajj operation of that year was an abysmal failure; pilgrims suffered endlessly unnecessarily and many of them died. It was blamed on an uncontrollable number of pilgrims (*Nigerian Tribune*, March 25, 1978; *New Nigerian* Editorial, March 15, 1978). This problem repeated itself in 2003 and 2004.

Three separate reports on the 1977 Hajj operation by the Amirul Hajj for 1977 pilgrimage, a nine man task force set up by the Federal Military Government and Alhaji Lateef Jakande, a journalist,

recommended that the Federal Military Government should cut down drastically the number of intending pilgrims to Saudi Arabia (*New Nigerian*, March 10, 1978). Federal and State Government Hajj officials were seriously indicted in these reports. The Government therefore took the unprecedented decision of pegging the number of pilgrims to go for 1978 Hajj at 50,000 (*Nigerian Tribune*, June 1, 1978). The move was made and it was generally hailed hoping that the problems of the past were gone. Skeptics were proved right when pilgrims were stranded on their outbound flight for Hajj 1978. The Obasanjo-led government had to give a two-week ultimatum for the airlifting of the pilgrims with the Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters, Brigadier Shehu Musa Yar'adua personally overseeing the rescue operation. Scheduled international flights of the Nigeria Airways were to be cancelled to this effect and Air Force planes had to come to the rescue. (*Daily Times*, October 18, 1978; *New Nigerian*, October 23, 1977; *Nigerian Herald*, October 27, 1978; *Daily Times*, October 22, 1978). In 1979 a ceiling of 50,000 was put on the number of pilgrims for that year.

The sudden upsurge in the number of pilgrims for 1980 (66,370) and 1981 (78,000) was due to the loss of the military fiat of the immediate past years. The civilian regime was in office, and it felt uncomfortable controlling the figures of the hajj. Moreover, party patronage made it difficult to maintain the ceiling on the number of pilgrims. Yet for 1982 and 1983, the pilgrims fell just short of the 50,000 ceiling. This might be due to the general recession in the economy. The Buhari administration pegged the number of pilgrims lower still at 20,000 in 1984. The dwindling economy called for prudence in national spending and the Government was intent on enforcing its domestic "War Against Indiscipline (WAI)" policy even in the Holy Land. The number of pilgrims actually never reached the 20,000 mark until 1991 when 30,000 Nigerians made the Hajj. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was improving things somewhat. In 1990 and 1996, the figures were 9,358 and 5,417 respectively due to outbreak of Cholera and Cerebro-Spinal Meningitis (CSM); the figures fluctuated between 20,000 and 60,000 throughout the 1990s. Two factors stand out as the determinants of the Hajj traffic in Nigeria; the economic condition in the country and government control to prevent what the *Nigerian Herald* in an Editorial, (October 10, 1978) dubbed "Pilgrimage with Tears".

Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the details of Nigerian Pilgrims to Saudi Arabia in thirty-eight years.

Table 1: Number of Nigerians Who Performed Hajj between 1968 and 1978

Year	Total	Percentage Per Year for Eleven Years
1968	26,000	4.48
1969	28,000	4.83
1970	29,000	5.00
1971	30,000	5.17
1972	35,000	6.04
1973	50,000	8.62
1974	70,000	12.07
1975	92,000	15.86
1976	65,000	11.21
1977	105,000	18.10
1978	50,000	8.62
Total	580,000	100%

Source: Oluwatoki Research Survey, 2009; Culled from *New Nigerian* (Kaduna) March 10, 1978.

Table 2: Nigerian Pilgrims per State in 1976/ 77 and 1977 /78

State	Total 1976/77	Total 1977/78	Total 1976/77/78	% Total 1976/77/78
Lagos	5,000	3,450	8,450	5.28%
Oyo	6,000	3,200	9,200	5.75%
Ogun	1,060	1,900	2,960	1.85%
Ondo	500	560	1,060	0.66%
Bendel	500	560	1,060	.0.66%
Kwara	3,500	4,060	7,560	4.72%
Benue	500	963	1,463	0..91%
Niger	2,500	3,100	5,600	3.50%
Bauchi	2,000	4,000	6,000	3.75%
Kano	13,000	25,000	38,000	23.75%
Kaduna	9,000	17,300	26,300	16.43%
Plateau	2,500	4,170	6,670	4.17%
Gongola	2,680	3,350	6,030	3.76%
Sokoto	6,000	7,570	13,570	8.48%
Borno	5,500	6,300	11,800	7.37%
Rivers	2,600	3,065	5,665	3.54%
Imo	20	4,200	4,220	2.64%
Anambra	-	1,000	1,000	0.62%
Cross River	-	603	603	0.38%
Total	65,260	94,801	160,061	100%

Source: Oluwatoki Research Survey, 2009; Culled from *New Nigerian* (Kaduna) March 10, 1978.

Table 3: Number of Nigerian Pilgrims, 1979 – 2006

Year	No. of Pilgrims	Change from Previous Year	Percentage per Year for 26 years
1979	50,580	580	5.19
1980	66,370	15,790	6.81
1981	78,000	11,630	8.01
1982	49,849	-28,151	5.12
1983	49,390	-459	5.07
1984	19,503	-29,887	2.00
1985	19,470	-33	2.00
1986	19,468	-2	2.00
1987	19,468	0	2.00
1988	17,552	-1,916	1.80
1989	17,936	384	1.84
1990	9,358	-8,578	0.96
1991	30,000	20,642	3.08
1992	20,108	-9,892	2.06
1993	30,652	10,544	3.15
1994	54,889	24,237	5.63
1995	56,485	1,596	5.80
1996	5,417	-51,068	0.56
1997	24,193	18,776	2.48
1998	18,371	-5,822	1.89
1999	20,556	2,185	2.11
2000	48,188	27,632	4.95
2001	54,816	6,628	5.63
2002	63,484	8,668	6.52
2003	65,000	1,516	6.67
2004	65,000	0	6.67
2005	51,625	3,375	5.03
2006	48,000	3,625	4.47
Total	1,073,728		100%

Sources: Office of Pilgrims Affairs, Abuja, Nigerian Hajj Information Services www.nigeriahajj.org and the Press. **Note:** The Press has largely given higher figures than what the OPA publishes for each year. We have relied largely more on OPA numbers because they are more comprehensive.

The Government is solely responsible for Hajj operations in Saudi Arabia. In the same vein the Nigerian Government is statutorily involved in Hajj operations in Nigeria (NPCD, 1989). In fact, the government had managed the Hajj operations through an extra-Ministerial body, Office of Pilgrims' Affairs (OPA) that was solely responsible for Hajj until the establishment of the National Hajj Commission of Nigeria (NAHCON) in 2007. Going on Hajj has become a national social event in Nigeria. Nigerian pilgrims either failed to turn up to be airlifted at scheduled time or the airlines were not punctual for either or both outbound and inbound airlifts, hence, the Hajj season became a season of anxiety and embarrassment for Nigerians. Because of poor management of the Hajj and health concerns, the Saudi authorities have had to apply some sanctions on Nigeria for which the Nigerian media accused the Saudis of diplomatic sacrilege (*Daily Time*: April 29, 1996, Editorial).

Nigeria stood out notoriously as the only country that airlifted its pilgrims behind schedules. It became almost an annual ritual that Nigeria had to plead, sometimes at Presidential level for the re-opening of Jeddah airport to it. It happened twice in 1971, in 1974, 1975, 1977. In 1978, inadequate provision of aircraft hampered the in-bound flight schedules (*New Nigerian*, November 20, 1978, p. 1). The outbound journey itself took the personal intervention of the Head of State, General Obasanjo to get it accomplished. Meanwhile, this was the year in which the number of pilgrims was halved (50,000) from the previous year's number to ensure smooth operations (*Daily Times*: October 24, 1978). Delay in the issue of visas was also part of the problems for the year (*New Nigerian*: October 30, 1978). It happened also in 1981 due to delay in the issue of visa and consequently foreign exchange problems (*New Nigerian*: September 8, 1981). In 1982, in-bound airlift of pilgrims was complicated for the national carrier, Nigeria Airways, as it had to cater for the return journey of 31,000 international pilgrims in addition to the 50,000 officially approved by the Federal Government. It was ill prepared for this extra responsibility (*The Punch*: October 9, (1982). According to Babatunde (*New Nigerian*: October 23, 1982), "Nigeria came third in terms of number of pilgrims; we were number one in length of queues at the airport counters". These tormenting and frustrating queues, in his opinion, killed any morale left in pilgrims and sent them into angry demonstrations and mobbing of officials.

In 1992 and then in 1994, the same problem still resurfaced. A week after pilgrims had all left Saudi Arabia; more than 30,000 Nigerian pilgrims (out of the official 38,000) were still stranded at the Jeddah airport (*The Guardian*, July 17, 1992). Shortage of aircraft, shoddy arrangements and bureaucracy and above all, excess luggage was blamed for "the ugly spectacle of thousands of Nigerians huddled at the Jeddah airports", as *The Guardian* put it. Yet, there had been times when flights were delayed as aircrafts were waiting for intending pilgrims who failed to turn out. This happened during Hajj 1982 when Nigeria Airways lost ₦80, 000 daily for such flights not made (*New Nigerian*: September 4, 1982). This seemingly intractable problem entered the 21st century with Nigeria even with more intensity. Nigerian pilgrims were stranded in Saudi Arabia after Hajj in 2000 for more than two weeks (*National Concord*, March 3, 2001). This came after the trauma, which many of them went through before their outbound journey. The inability of the official airlines, Trans Air and Kabo to airlift the pilgrims back home at the end of the pilgrimage forced the pilgrims who ran out of cash to sell their properties – electronics, jewelries, house-hold equipment and gift items – to feed (*National Concord*, March 3, 2000). As reports mounted that stranded pilgrims were sleeping in the open field, contending with the biting weather, the Lagos State Government had to hire a foreign airline at a cost of ₦11.6 million (₹116, 000) to evacuate the 700 stranded pilgrims from the State (*The Guardian*, April 5, 2000). The State doubted the capability of Kabo Air, which was the approved official airline for the year's Hajj. It asked for the decentralization of Hajj operations. Such calls had also been made in 1978 after the year's abysmal Hajj operation. In the event, Saudi Arabian government decided "to assist the stranded Nigerian pilgrims to bring them home" (*Vanguard*, April 5, 2000). This humanitarian gesture on the part of the Saudis was apparently meant to remove the embarrassment from its shores.

Table 4: Crises Years in the Management of Hajj Operations, 1980-2006

YEAR	NATURE OF THE CRISIS	REMARKS
1981	Pilgrims stranded in Nigeria. On inward journey pilgrims stranded in Saudi Arabia.	Bureaucratic bottleneck; delay in issuing of visas and unavailability of foreign exchange.
1982	On outbound journey aircrafts were delayed waiting for intending pilgrims who failed to turn out. Pilgrims stranded at Jeddah and Kano International airports respectively.	Pilgrims registered with private agents complicated flight schedules.
1984	Pilgrims' luggages damaged	Pilgrims protest.
1992	30,000 pilgrims stranded in Saudi Arabia (Abandoned)	Shortage of aircraft, shoddy arrangement, bureaucracy.
1994	Pilgrims stranded at Jeddah airport	Shortage of aircraft.
1996	Outbreak of Cerebro-Spinal Meningitis	Many did not make Hajj. Saudi authorities quarantined Nigerians.
2000	Pilgrims stranded in Jeddah after Hajj. Pilgrims stranded on outbound flight.	Death, pilgrims sold their goods
2001	Pilgrims abandoned in Saudi Arabia after Hajj	Irate pilgrims beat up Hajj officials
2002	Stranded pilgrims on outbound journey	2,950 pilgrims affected
2003	Stranded pilgrims on outbound journey	3,5000 pilgrims affected
2004	Stranded pilgrims on outbound journey	4,100 pilgrims affected
2005	Stranded pilgrims on out bound journey	Thousands of pilgrims affected.
2006	Failure to airlift pilgrims on out bound journey. A few pilgrims stranded in inbound journey	10,500 pilgrims did not make Hajj. 4000 pilgrims stranded at Jeddah airport after Hajj.

Source: Oluwatoki Research Survey, 2009

In any case, Saudi Arabian government considered blacklisting two Nigerian airlines from the airlift of 2001 pilgrims. Saudi authorities wrote the Nigerian Government banning two of the airlines for poor performance in recent Hajj operations. They frowned at the way and manner the airlines abandoned pilgrims and their luggage in Saudi Arabia after Hajj 2000 (*New Nigerian*: December 12, 2000). Yet, pilgrims were stranded in Saudi Arabia after Hajj 2001 with irate pilgrims beating up Hajj officials and holding them hostage (*Daily Times*, March 21, 2001). And yet, thousands of intending pilgrims were stranded in 2004 with delays of their outbound flights across the country. Historically, airlift of pilgrims is the bane of Nigeria's Hajj operation. The worst case perhaps was Hajj 2006 when 18.14 % of Nigerian pilgrims, (i.e. 10,500 out of the 57,870 pilgrims) could not make the Hajj due to the failure of the airlines to lift pilgrims for the outbound journeys (*The Guardian*, (Editorial), January 20, 2006).

Another contending area is internal transportation of pilgrims inside Saudi Arabia; Jeddah—Medina, Medina—Mecca, Mecca—Muna, Muna—'Arafat—Muzdalifa, Muna—Mecca, Jeddah—Mecca, Mecca—Medina etc. Pilgrims and Officials (Personal communication) were of the opinion that, almost as a rule, pilgrims wait at the International Pilgrims' Camp (Jeddah) for upward of ten hours before they could take off for Mecca or Medina. Pilgrims often had to wait for hours in boarded buses due, most of the time, to 'missing' or 'misplaced' pilgrims' passports. Many of the drivers chain-smoke and there are cases of communication breakdown due partly to mutual non-intelligibility between drivers and pilgrims and especially as pilgrims fail to reason with the drivers on instructions. Sometimes the non-Saudi bus drivers missed their ways with the pilgrims getting anxious. Pilgrims often could not draw the

line between what problems were due to Nigerian officials' ineptness or bottlenecks that are Saudi Arabian in origin. As the most important factor in the Nigeria – Saudi Arabia relations, the successful operation of Hajj enhances these relations and earns Nigeria more respect in its relations with Saudi Arabia. It is understandable that hitches in Hajj operation are veritable sources of strain in relations between the two states.

Many factors account for the legendary problem of airlifting the pilgrims in Nigeria. First, sometimes a contracted airline company does not have aircraft. It goes to contract another airline, sometimes one of the airlines already contracted. This causes confusion and delays. Second, as Opeyoye (Personal communication, 18/3/03) explains, many pilgrims from Kano, Lagos and Maiduguri – the large pilgrims' centers – are traders and therefore always have excess luggage. Third, sometimes, pilgrims are not available to board at the appropriate time. These VIP pilgrims appear last to be airlifted on the outbound trip, but they want to be the first to be airlifted for the inbound journey. All these disrupt arrangements and cause enormous chaos. Hajj 2006 was the worst in the history of Hajj operations in Nigeria. At the last count more than 10,000 intending pilgrims could not make the Hajj. Equally disappointed were other thousands of pilgrims who registered with registered tour operators. Ironically, it was perhaps the most well-planned Hajj so far too. To Prof. Gwandu, Chairman, Technical Hajj Committee (THC), what happened was simply an act of God (Hajj News: May 2006). Perhaps their best was simply not good enough. But the DPA did meticulously search for airlines, screened them, involved the States' Boards in the whole process and got approval for them from Saudi authorities and there was no cause for alarm (Senator Mantu, 2006 Amir al-Hajj, *The Guardian*: Dec. 15 2005). In the event, none of the three carriers had enough aircrafts available as agreed and as at when due. The air crashes that happened around that time, involving Belview and Sosoliso airlines put the Aviation Ministry on edge and the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority (NCAA) was uncompromising. Saudi authorities also insisted on the installation of a safety device, Enhanced Ground Proximity Warning System (EGPWS). All these complicated the airlifting process. But all said, thousands of Nigerian pilgrims were stranded and traumatized. The 36-hour extension which President Obasanjo got from the Saudi authorities by which aircrafts carrying Nigerian pilgrims could land till 8.00am Saudi time, on Friday January 6, 2006 did not help the situation (*The Guardian*: January 11, 2006).

Many people called for the decentralization of the Hajj operations (Governor Modu Sheriff of Borno State) and that states should airlift their pilgrims (Governor Tinubu of Lagos State) (*The Guardian*: January 11, 2000; *The Guardian*, January 5 2006). The two governors intervened massively and got the many pilgrims in their respective states all and timely airlifted to Saudi Arabia. To cap it all, at the end of the Hajj exercise, 4000 Nigerian pilgrims were still stranded at the Jeddah airport (*The Guardian*: January 23, 2006). *The Guardian* (January 20, 2006) in its editorial, "The Hajj embarrassment" called for an investigation and decried the governments' involvement at all levels in the Hajj operations - "...governments' duties in pilgrimages should be limited to provision of consular and logistic support", it decried! In this respect, the details of individual pilgrim's journey, accommodation and funding should not be government's business. Three strands can be identified in the myriad of reactions to the failure of Hajj 2006. There are those who call for investigation into the incident to prevent future occurrences. Those found guilty of corruption and/or incompetence must be punished. There are those who want the *status quo* maintained. Reforms however are necessary; decentralization of Hajj operations, thus allowing the states to airlift their pilgrims. There are those who want the Government to hand off Hajj matters entirely. *The Guardian* Editorial is in this category. It was in response to these calls that the Senate passed the Nigerian Hajj Commission Bill, 2006 into law with the Commission taking off effectively in 2007. The bill repealed the Nigerian Pilgrims Act of 1989. There is a moral factor to all of this. Positive work ethics is paramount in the success of any operation and proffering solution to operational challenges

Hajj Operations, Government Sponsorship and Nigeria's Image

In Nigeria, the government at Federal, State and Local levels sponsors several people to Hajj every year. The list of sponsored pilgrims is long. It includes civil servants, party men and women, cronies, relations and friends of top government officials. Apart from Government subsidy of Hajj in various respects (Federal Government spent over ₦1 billion on the subsidization of the pilgrims

accommodation, Hajj fares and other charges on Hajj 2000, for example (*The Guardian* (Lagos): January 2, 2001), the Hajj entails much diplomatic pressure for the Government. Government sponsorship of pilgrims is an additional burden, not in the statute book and to a large extent complicating the Hajj operations. It also encourages much corruption on the part of the officials and potential to dent Nigeria's image.

Hajj management involves all aspects of Hajj operations as they relate to implementing Hajj policy. Meanwhile, Hajj operations are the ways by which Hajj administration works – the organization, the arrangement of the parts of Hajj administration that form an effective whole. Hajj management in Nigeria has affected Nigeria's image in Saudi Arabia in various ways. First, it exposes administration challenges facing its managers. Second, the rowdy behaviour of Nigerian pilgrims often caused by frustration, present the people as undignified and undisciplined. Third, the yearly failure of Nigeria to get its Hajj operations dovetail into the global Hajj operations reflects the enormity of administrative challenges in Nigeria. Hajj is a global event that attracts international media coverage. The misdeeds of states and their nationals are in the glare of international reportage. This is apart from the fact that millions of people are witnesses to form opinions about the state and the people. For Nigeria not to be tagged administrative laggard, something had to be done. This was the essence of the National Hajj Commission established in 2006 and which took off in 2007.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the Hajj management tradition in Nigeria with its attendant challenges, the various factors that affect the annual Hajj operations that necessitated the establishment of the National Hajj Commission that took off in 2007. It describes the passion for Hajj pilgrimage on the part of the people and government involvement in Hajj operations to regulate the annual Hajj traffic to the Holy Land. Hajj has become an established system and a custom in the Nigerian society. With more than nine hundred years of Hajj exercise in Nigeria; the high and the low, the old and the young and the rich and the poor perform Hajj in Nigeria. Aside from its economic, political dimensions, Hajj has spiritual, social, psychological and mental effect on the individual pilgrim and the society. The great effect of Hajj on pilgrims is discernible in the fact of an un-abating zeal of people from all over the world, including Nigeria, heading to and from Hajj and the wish and eagerness to repeat the Hajj, several times after the conditional obligation “once in a life time” has been fulfilled. It is therefore an obligation for Nigeria's government as elsewhere in the world to take its responsibility seriously for the welfare of its nationals on the annual Hajj pilgrimage. This was the reason Nigeria took the bold step in 2006 to remedy the situation with the establishment of the National Hajj Commission. After two decades, i.e. by 2027, a scorecard to ensure that the necessary improvement in Hajj management has been achieved for the Commission would be due. Safeguarding the Hajj, as Bianchi (2004) put it, is imperative as part of humanity's common heritage.

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