

Pilgrimage and the Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board

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Pilgrimage (Hajj) is a command from Allah that Muslims strive to fulfill in their lifetime. It is one of the core rites in Islam, with significant spiritual, moral, and social relevance. Hajj unites Muslims across various backgrounds, fostering unity and renewed faith. This paper examines the activities of the Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board (RIPB) and its role in coordinating Hajj operations. Using historical and phenomenological approaches, the study traces the origin of the Board and its organizational responsibilities. Hajj not only unites Muslims but also renews their relationship with God and humanity. The paper recommends that the government grant the Board operational autonomy and that its officials serve with integrity and reverence for divine duty.

Keywords: Islam, Hajj, Worship, Allah and Pilgrimage.

INTRODUCTION

The word *Islam* signifies submission, surrender, and obedience to the will of God. A *Muslim* is one who submits with unshakable belief in the existence of Allah. Pilgrimage (*Hajj*), in Islamic understanding, involves the observance of specific acts of worship performed in and around the sacred city of Mecca during the month of *Dhul-Hijjah*, the twelfth lunar month of the Islamic calendar. The performance of pilgrimage (*Hajj*) is based on the Holy Qur'an (2:196–203; 3:96–97) and the *Sunnah*, the practice of the Prophet. The institution of pilgrimage and the associated rites commemorate significant events in the lives of Prophet Ibrahim, his wife Hagar, and their son, Prophet Ismail. Pilgrimage denotes submission to God and serves to nourish spiritual joy.

In performing *Hajj*, one experiences a spirit of total sacrifice—forsaking personal comfort, worldly pleasures, the acquisition of wealth, companionship of relatives and friends, vanity in dress and personal appearance, and pride based on birth, nationality, accomplishments, occupation, or social status (Hanga, 1999, p.1). This paper examines the activities of pilgrimage in Rivers State through the instrumentality of the Rivers State

Islamic Pilgrims Board (RIPB), focusing on *Hajj* operations. The functions and operations of the Board, as well as the challenges it faces, will be critically analyzed. The qualifications of individuals eligible for pilgrimage, along with the religious, social, and moral benefits of *Hajj*, will also be explored as an essential pillar of Islam.

HISTORY OF PILGRIMAGE (HAJJ) IN NIGERIA

Hajj (pilgrimage) began in Nigeria around 1920, when the Emir of Katsina, His Majesty Alhaji Muhammad Dikko, performed the pilgrimage from Lagos through London and Cairo by means of a British steamboat. Following his safe return, other Muslims were inspired to undertake the journey, recognizing its spiritual significance and the blessings (*barakah*) it attracts. In 1927, a prominent Kano businessman, Alhaji Alhassan Dantata, also performed *Hajj* by steamboat via Morocco and Egypt, accompanied by fifteen individuals. His successful journey further encouraged others, including the Emir of Katsina, Alhaji Ibrahim Ringim, to embark on pilgrimage.

From that period onward, pilgrimage became an annual tradition among Nigerian Muslims. Initially, *Hajj* travel was self-sponsored and lacked formal organization. However, in 1944, a level of organization was introduced when a

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group of individuals formed the West African Pilgrims Association (WAPA) to coordinate transportation for pilgrims. The association provided buses and lorries to ease the journey to the holy lands.

About a decade later, air travel was introduced, significantly simplifying the pilgrimage process. Even with the advent of air travel, land transportation remained in use, and many continued to travel by road. According to Kabiru, the number of pilgrims increased as both air and land routes were utilized, leading to a significant rise in the population arriving in the holy land during *Hajj* season.

In 1958, the Federal Government of Nigeria became actively involved in *Hajj* operations, focusing on the welfare of Nigerian pilgrims. The government assumed control of the process by contracting a company, Alharmaini, to manage the transportation of Nigerian pilgrims to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This institutional involvement led to a significant rise in the number of pilgrims. For example, in 1979, 50,580 Nigerian Muslims performed *Hajj*, and this number rose to 66,000 in 1980 (Hanga, 1999).

In July 1975, the Federal Government enacted Decree No. 16 to assert full control over annual *Hajj* operations. This included the arrangement of aircraft for pilgrim transport, the establishment and maintenance of transit camps, and the provision of medical personnel, welfare officers, guides, travel documentation, and foreign exchange. The government also began maintaining accurate records of the number of Nigerian pilgrims, ensuring yearly accountability (Hanga, 1999).

History Of Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board

The Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board was established under the Pilgrims Welfare Law RSE No. 13, Part II, on 7th September 1972. It was created to manage *Hajj* operations within Rivers State. The Board's primary responsibility is to organize Muslim faithful who intend to undertake the pilgrimage (*Hajj*). Its officers are charged with screening intending pilgrims, preparing travel documents, obtaining foreign exchange allowances, scheduling flights, and overseeing the welfare of pilgrims from their departure until their return to Rivers State (Abdulrazaq Diepriye, Oral Interview, 20th March 2025).

Composition of the Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board

The officers of the Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board are composed of "persons of proven integrity" appointed by the Governor of Rivers State, subject to the approval of the State Assembly. The Board consists of the following:

Chairman: Serves as the Chief Executive and Accounting Officer of the Board and is responsible for the

day-to-day management of its affairs.

- **Three (3) full-time members:** One of these members is appointed as the Secretary by the Board. The Secretary holds office on terms determined by the Board and must possess sound knowledge of Islamic studies.

Functions of the Secretary:

1. Keep records and conduct all correspondence on behalf of the Board.
2. Serve as the Secretary at all meetings of the Commission; prepare, maintain, and update a register of all agencies licensed by the Board.
3. Perform any other duties as may be assigned by the Board or the Chairman from time to time.

QUALIFICATION FOR ISLAMIC PILGRIMAGE

There are specific conditions that guide the performance of *Hajj* for every Muslim who intends to embark on the pilgrimage. These conditions include:

- The individual must be a **Muslim**, as acts of worship performed by a *kāfir* (non-believer) are not valid. As the Qur'an states:
"And nothing prevents their contributions from being accepted from them except that they disbelieved in Allah and His Messenger" (Q9:54).
- The pilgrim must be **free**. *Hajj* is not obligatory for a slave, as they are occupied with responsibilities toward their master and may not have the liberty to fulfill the pilgrimage rites.
- The pilgrim must be **capable**—both physically and financially. The Qur'an affirms:
"And Hajj (Pilgrimage) to the House (Ka'bah) is a duty that mankind owes to Allah, those who can afford the expenses" (Q3:97).

Physical ability refers to being in sound health and capable of enduring the hardships of travel. Financial ability means having sufficient funds to cover the journey to and from the sacred House of Allah, as well as to provide for dependents during one's absence. Additionally, women intending to perform *Hajj* must be accompanied by a husband or *mahram* (a male relative she cannot marry).

If a person is indebted and lacks sufficient means to both repay the debt and perform *Hajj*, they are expected to settle the debt first, as *Hajj* is not obligatory in such circumstances.

Due to the spiritual importance of *Hajj*, Muslims in Rivers State, like those worldwide, strive to fulfill this obligation at least once in their lifetime (Abdalati, 2007:128). It is therefore the responsibility of the Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board to ensure that these

conditions are properly verified and met.

Eligibility Criteria for Pilgrimage

•Memberships

The intending pilgrim must be a true Muslim, as *Hajj* is a religious obligation exclusive to Muslims (Kilani, 2007:163). Therefore, only qualified Muslims—who must be adults according to the available data—are enlisted and invited for an interview. The following personal information is required during the screening process:

- i. Name of the applicant
- ii. Residential address
- iii. State of origin
- iv. Marital status
- v. Age
- vi. Gender and place of worship (Mosque)

•Finance

The financial standing of the applicant is a critical consideration. *Hajj* is only prescribed for Muslims who have the means to perform it. This implies that an intending pilgrim must be able to finance their journey and stay in the Holy Land without becoming a burden to others. Additionally, they must have sufficient resources to support their family in their absence and must settle any outstanding debts before undertaking the pilgrimage.

•Health

Prospective pilgrims must be in good health, as *Hajj* involves significant physical exertion. Recognizing this, the Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board collaborates with local government mosques to engage medical personnel who assess the health status of intending pilgrims during the screening process. Those deemed fit are required to receive vaccinations against meningitis, yellow fever, and polio, as mandated by the Saudi Arabian authorities for visa eligibility for *Hajj* or *Umrah*.

Activities of the Islamic Pilgrims Board in Rivers State

The Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board is charged with the comprehensive coordination of *Hajj* operations within the state. Its responsibilities include securing adequate aircraft to transport pilgrims to and from Saudi Arabia, establishing and managing transit camps for the accommodation and processing of pilgrims, and providing essential support services such as medical personnel, welfare officers, pilgrimage guides, and porters.

Additionally, the Board arranges travel documents and foreign exchange for intending pilgrims. It is also responsible for the equitable distribution of *Hajj* seats allocated annually, as approved by the Governor of Rivers State. Another key function of the Board is to promote public education about *Hajj*, including the

dissemination of relevant information through libraries and mass media outlets.

The detailed activities of the Board include:

i. Licensing and Regulation:

The Board licenses, regulates, supervises, and performs oversight functions over organizations, associations (corporate or non-corporate), or similar bodies involved in organizing and coordinating the movement of pilgrims from Rivers State to Saudi Arabia for *Hajj* or *Umrah* (Lesser *Hajj*).

ii. Accommodation and Transportation:

It ensures the provision of suitable accommodation, transportation, and other essential services to pilgrims during their stay in Saudi Arabia.

(Source: <http://nigeriahajj.com.gov.ng/content/nachonacts>)

iii. Liaison Services:

The Board liaises with the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to facilitate all necessary immigration, passport, and consular services related to *Hajj* and *Umrah*.

iv. Inter-Agency Coordination:

It coordinates with relevant bodies to provide health, financial, security, customs, immigration, and other services for pilgrims traveling to or returning from *Hajj* or *Umrah*.

v. Pilgrims Camps

Ensure the establishment and effective management of pilgrims' transit camps, including all related activities, equipment, and necessary materials for smooth operations.

vi. Information Services

Establish and maintain an adequate information system and resource libraries containing relevant publications, books, audiovisual materials, and cinematographic resources for individuals interested in undertaking the pilgrimage.

vii. Biometric Data

Develop and maintain a biometric data bank of all intending pilgrims from Rivers State for both *Hajj* and *Umrah*.

viii. Enlightenment Campaigns

Organize public enlightenment and educational campaigns on *Hajj* and *Umrah* across all Local Government Areas of Rivers State, to inform and prepare intending pilgrims.

ix. Medical Staff

Appoint a sufficient number of qualified medical practitioners and support medical staff to cater to the healthcare needs of pilgrims before, during, and after the pilgrimage.

x. Regulations

Formulate and enforce policies concerning the welfare of Rivers State pilgrims, both within and outside Nigeria, and regulate all matters related to *Hajj* operations.

xi. Registration of Travel Agencies

License and regulate travel agencies authorized to handle *Hajj* travel arrangements, ensuring compliance with established guidelines and standards.

xii. Orientation

Conduct comprehensive orientation programs for all pilgrims before departure to Mecca and Medina. These sessions provide essential education on the requirements and procedures of *Hajj*.

xiii. Welfare Services

Provide accommodation and transportation for pilgrims both in Rivers State and in Saudi Arabia. Monitor pilgrims' movements, ensure proper feeding arrangements, and oversee their general health and well-being throughout the pilgrimage until their safe return.

Rites of Pilgrimage (Hajj)

Hajj is performed during the first twelve days of the twelfth Islamic month, **Dhul-Hijjah**, in the Islamic calendar. The journey begins when a pilgrim reaches a designated location known as **Miqat**, where they don the special white garment called **Ihram**, signifying a state of spiritual purity and humility.

For the **lesser pilgrimage (Umrah)**, the pilgrim wears the **Ihram**, then performs **Tawaf** — circumambulating the **Ka'bah** seven times — while reciting supplications in obedience to Allah. This is followed by **Sa'y**, the ritual of walking seven times between the hills of **As-Safa** and **Al-Marwah**, glorifying Allah during the process. Upon completion, male pilgrims shave their heads or trim their hair, while female pilgrims cut a small portion of their hair. This concludes the *Umrah*.

The Main Hajj Rites

8th Day of Dhul-Hijjah (Yawm at-Tarwiyah):

Pilgrims proceed from Mecca to **Mina**, a valley outside the city, where they camp in preparation for the major rituals.

9th Day of Dhul-Hijjah (Day of Arafah):

This is the most sacred day of *Hajj*. Pilgrims leave Mina early in the morning for the **Plain of Arafat**, where they engage in prayers, supplications, and listen to the **Khutbah (sermon)** delivered at **Masjid Namirah**. Pilgrims remain in Arafat until sunset. Afterward, they proceed to **Muzdalifah**, where they spend the night under the open sky and collect pebbles for the next day's rites.

10th Day of Dhul-Hijjah (Eid al-Adha):

Pilgrims return to **Mina** to perform the ritual of **Jamrat al-Aqabah** — the symbolic stoning of the devil by throwing seven pebbles at one of the three pillars (*Jamarat*). This day also marks **Eid al-Adha**, the Festival of Sacrifice. Pilgrims sacrifice a **sheep, goat, or camel**, sharing the meat with the poor and family members. This act

commemorates Prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to Allah.

11th Day of Dhul-Hijjah and Beyond:

- Pilgrims **shave or clip their hair** again (men are encouraged to shave, while women clip a fingertip length).
- They return to **Mecca** to perform **Tawaf al-Ifadah** (a key Hajj ritual) and **Sa'y** (if not done earlier).
- Pilgrims then return to **Mina**, where they continue stoning the **three Jamarat** (pillars representing the devil) on the 11th, 12th, and optionally the 13th of Dhul-Hijjah.

Visit to Madinah (Optional):

Pilgrims who have not yet visited **Madinah** may travel there after completing the Hajj rites to pray at **Al-Masjid an-Nabawi (the Prophet's Mosque)** and visit the resting place of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

BENEFITS OF PILGRIMAGE (HAJJ)

- **Attaining Piety:** Piety is firmly connected to *Hajj* (And complete the *Hajj*) and Umrah for Allah....And be pious to Allah) (Q.2:196).
Hajj is based on dedication of once life to Allah and doing everything for His sake. Allah says (And Complete the *Hajj* and *Umrah* for Allah.(Q2: 196).
- Honoring the symbols of Allah and what He deems sacred: One need to fear Allah by violating or going against the forbiddances of Allah. Allah says (What means): (That is so). And whoever honors the symbols of Allah-indeed, it is from the piety of hearts. (Q22:32).
- Teaching noble morals and go character which include:
 - a. **Chastity:** Allah Says (What means): (*Hajj*) is (During well-known months, so whoever has made *Hajj* obligatory upon himself therein (by entering the state of Ihram) there is (to be for him) no sexual relations...(Q2: 197).
 - b. Restraining Anger and Abandoning Disputing and arguing: (and no disputing during *Hajj*...) (Q2:197).
 - c. Gentleness, leniency and tranquility: The Prophet in his advise to Muslim in Muzdalifah said: " O people be tranquil, because it is not hastiness that indicates righteousness."
 - d. Teaching patience in all its aspects due to the multitude of people converging doing the same thing at the same time.
 - e. Reminding of the Hereafter: The mammon crowd of Muslims from across the world is a remainder to all of the Day of judgment (Q4:87).
- The throwing of stones which represents rejecting the devil as the Prophet Ibrahim did when Satan tempted him to disobey God by not sacrificing his son, Ishmael.
- The killing of Animal is in remembrance of how God provided a sheep for Ibrahim in the place of Ishmael to

be sacrificed, as animals are powerless in the hands of humans especially pilgrims reminds Muslims that mankind will be powerless in God's hand the last day.

Objectives or Reasons for Embarking on Pilgrimage (Hajj) As outlined by Abdalati:

- It is the largest annual convention of faith and greatest regular conference of peace known in the history of mankind, where Muslims meet to know one another, study their common affairs and promote their general welfare.
- It is a wholesome demonstration of the universality of Islam and the brotherhood and equality of the Muslims. They dress in the same simple way, observe the same regulations, and utter the same supplications at the same time in the same way, for the same end. There is no royalty, but loyalty of all to God.
- It is to confirm that commitment of the Muslims to God and their readiness to forsake the material interest in the service of God.
- It is to commemorate the Divine rituals observed by Abraham and Ishmael (*Ibrahim* and *Isma'eel*) who are known to have been the first pilgrims to their first house of God on earth, which is the *ka'ba* at Makkah.
- It is to acquaint pilgrims with the spiritual and historical environment of Prophet Mohammad (PBH) so that they may derive warm inspirations and be strengthened in their faith.
- It is a reminder of the Grand Assembly on the Day of judgement when people will stand equal before God, waiting for their final destiny, and where no superiority of race or stock can be claimed.
- It is also a reminder of the fact that Makkah alone, amongst the nations of the world, was honored by God as the centre of monotheism since time of Abraham, till the end of time.

Challenges of Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board

The Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board is faced with some challenges in its operations.

• Political influence

Politicians use the opportunity of political party affiliation to override the job of Islamic pilgrims Board, appointing their party members as officials of *Hajj* agency.

• Corruption

Official of the Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board sometimes involve themselves in act of corruption by including suspicious names either to have access to State fund or for personal interest thereby compromising the essence of *Hajj* in Islam.

• Government

The government over the years has refused to hand off

from *Hajj* operation due to political interest. Individual Muslims travelling to *Hajj* and *Umrah* pay through their hand earned saving to carry out the exercise. However, government appointment of corrupt individual as *Hajj* officials has continued to mar the yearly *Hajj* operation.

SUMMARY

Hajj represents the perfection of faith, encompassing the distinctive qualities of all other obligatory acts. It calls Muslims to relinquish material comforts and worldly vanities. The physical journey of *Hajj* serves as a prelude to the ultimate spiritual pilgrimage before God—where one surrenders the world and stands in His presence. It powerfully demonstrates the equality of all believers, as rich and poor alike congregate in identical garments, free from discrimination.

The Rivers State Islamic Pilgrims Board was established to provide consular and logistical support to pilgrims and was conceived with the best of intentions. Unfortunately, its noble mandate has been compromised by corrupt practices among some officials, transforming what should be a public service into a forum for personal gain.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Grant the Pilgrims Board full operational independence, free from political interference.
2. Ensure that Board officials carry out their duties with integrity, accountability, and a genuine fear of God.

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