Factors Associated with the Mecca Pilgrimage among the Bokkos Fulani

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Introduction

This paper is an empirical examination of social factors associated with the pilgrimage to Mecca among the pastoral Fulani (a predominantly Muslim tribe) who live in the vicinity of Bokkos, a small market village in central Nigeria. To the degree that social, political or economic factors are responsible for the pilgrimage behavior, we may draw conclusions about the necessity of taking non-theological considerations into account in understanding the Islamic hajj. Although the specifics of the Bokkos Fulani situation are not generalizable to the larger Muslim world, observation that the hajj is more than a purely religious exercise may be taken as applicable to the larger Muslim world and presumably to pilgrimages that are central to other religions as well.

Review of Literature

The fifth pillar of Islam, the pilgrimage (or hajj) to Mecca, is not only a major factor in the religious life of Muslims throughout the world, but it is also socially significant. In most societies that are dominated or strongly influenced by Islam, the believer who has completed the pilgrimage may be accorded wealth, power and prestige by the community. The rewards for making the hajj may be substantially greater than one can attain prior to the hajj.

Although the hajj is a fundamental duty for all Muslims, not all Muslims succeed or even try to fulfill it. This is especially true for those believers who live relatively long distances from Mecca, such as in Indonesia, China, or sub-Saharan Africa. In these areas, where poverty and political realities often in-
hibit all but the most ambitious and financially solvent Muslims from going on hajj, those who complete the hajj and return home are likely to gain much for their efforts. But wealth may not be the significant factor. A number of authors have suggested that Mecca pilgrims are a truly heterogeneous population. Persons who make the holy pilgrimage are representative of all social and economic strata within their societies. Likewise, the literature suggests they make the pilgrimage for a number of reasons.

Interestingly, the religious reasons for making the pilgrimage are deemphasized in the literature. This is especially true of the literature concerning sub-Saharan African societies. The majority of researchers suggest that the pilgrimage is made for a variety of social, economic and political factors including: wealth, political power, prestige, sedentarization and economic or cultural change (Westernization). Cohen, for example, states the pilgrimage is a religious duty and is strongly related to recent Sabo political developments.

"The pilgrimage to Mecca by the chief and landlords...was in many respects a rite of passage of these men into new roles in a new polity" (Cohen 1969: 171). Likewise, Trimingham (1968) remarks that there are numerous references to the pilgrimage among rulers of Mali, Songhay and other ancient African states. "The same practice holds today and new adherents, chiefs or the ruling elite in modern states, set off soon after their conversion" (Trimingham, 1968: 64). Al Naquar (1972: 118) points out scattered illustrations of the relationship between pilgrimage and (political) reform in West African history. Frantz (1978a) notes that among the Pastoral Fulani groups he studied, the majority of "Lamidos" and "Ardos" (political leaders) had made the pilgrimage.

Prestige seeking is often considered a critical factor. "The pilgrimage remains for most African peoples the most difficult of the Five Pillars... despite all the problems and expenses it involves it is a remarkable testimony to the prestige which its successful accomplishment brings" (Lewis 1966: 73-74). Among Ethiopian muslims..."those who hold religious and teaching offices go because it enhances their prestige" (Trimingham 1952: 229). According to Frantz, Pastoral Fulani associate prestige with a combination of criteria including..."wealth, polygyny, and Islamic identification, the latter variable manifested preferably by making a pilgrimage to Mecca" (Frantz 1978b: 109).

Other works suggest that wealth is the significant consideration. Wealth can be interpreted in at least two ways. Persons travel to Mecca because they are wealthy, or the pilgrimage is made to ensure future economic rewards. Skinner (1966: 365) suggests that few Mossi have any hope of making the pilgrimage. "Most muslims were too poor to pay for the trip... the initial outlay was just too much for them." Jones (1974: 249) notes... "the respect the village has for the hajj is much involved with family reputation and the resources required to make the journey." According to Islamic oral tradition, one of the pilgrimage benefits is material rewards. "The pilgrimage requires expenditures but the material rewards will be substantial." (Landau 1971: 115). Bokkos Fulani informants strongly adhere to both economic interpreta-