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Muslim Pilgrims and the Challenges of Ḥajj Operation in Kwara State, Nigeria: An Analysis

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges of efiectiveness in registration process, orientation program, and welfare services rendered to prospective pilgrims of Kwara State Nigeria during Ḥajj operation. This stemmed out of the increasing concerns over the quality and efiiciency of administrative procedures associated with hajj pilgrimage, which significantly afiect pilgrims' satisfaction, preparedness, and overall experience. A descriptive survey design within a quantitative research framework was adopted. The study population comprised 3,102 Muslim pilgrims from Kwara State who performed ḥajj between 2015 and 2025. Using simple random sampling, a sample of 357 respondents was selected. Data were collected through a structured and validated questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, focusing on four major areas: registration, orientation, welfare, and challenges encountered. Findings indicated that the registration process was relatively easy for most pilgrims, yet concerns were raised regarding the fairness of the payment process, clarity of guidelines, and competence of registration ofiicials. The orientation program was deemed moderately efiective, particularly in explaining ḥajj rites, but was limited in addressing key health, safety, and logistical concerns. Welfare services including accommodation, feeding, transport, and medical care were generally rated as inadequate by a majority of the respondents. Moreover, numerous challenges were encountered by pilgrims, particularly regarding delayed services, lack of timely communication, and overcrowding. The study concluded that although efiorts have been made to support pilgrims, significant improvements are required in service delivery. The findings have practical implications for enhancing operational efiiciency and ensuring a more fulfilling spiritual experience for future pilgrims.

Keywords: Analysis, Challenges, Ḥajj Operation, Kwara State, Pilgrims

1.0 INTRODUCTION

One of the pillars on which Islam is based is the pilgrimage to the Holy land. Every Muslim who is in good physical condition and has the means to do so is required to carry out this responsibility at least once in their lifetime (Ali, 2016). As a mark of respect for the submission and sacrifice made by Prophet Ibrahim and his family, millions of Muslims worldwide set out on the spiritual pilgrimage known as the ḥajj each year. The observance of particular deeds in and around the holy city of Makkah in Arabia at the end of each Muslim year during the twelfth lunar month of Dhul-Hijja is known as the Muslim pilgrimage, or ḥajj (Pam, 2019). The Holy Qur'an (2:196–203, 3:96–97, 22:26–30) and the

Prophet Muhammad's (may the Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) Sunnah serve as the foundation for the ḥajj rituals. They honor specific occasions in the life of Prophet Ibrahim, Prophet Ismail, peace upon them, and his spouse Hagar (Shehu, 2023).

Like any other Islamic act of worship, the primary goals of the hajj are to foster an attitude of surrender to God and to provide spiritual nourishment (Hasan, 2024; Abdulrafiu, 2022). The spirit of the ḥajj is one of complete surrender, including all material comforts, worldly pleasures, material wealth, the company of family and friends, vanity in clothing and appearance, and pride in one's birth, national origin, achievements, occupation, or social standing. Making the pilgrimage at least once in a Muslim's lifetime completes the five basic personal requirements of a Muslim, which also include the statement of faith (Shahādatāni), five times-daily prayer (Ṣalāt), fasting (Ṣawm) during the month of Ramaḍān, and alms (Zakāt) (Abdulrafiu, 2022). The Islamic pilgrimage rite has tremendous religious significance because of its unity of place and time and its regular annual recurrence, particularly among West African Muslims (Takari, SONG, Tukrur Pl), of which the Hausa community is particularly notable (Renard, 2023).

One of the Islamic institutions that has had the biggest impacts on the growth of governments that have previously been established is pilgrimage (Olarinmoye, 2024). According to Babatunde (2014), the Kanem Bornu Mai, King Dunama bin Umme of the Sayfawa dynasty, made the oldest known pilgrimage from West Africa. Between 1098 and 1150, Mai Dunama conducted two pilgrimages; she passed away while returning from a third (Jabo & Ubandawaki, 2021). Nevertheless, it's possible that Mai Dunama was not the first Sayfawa pilgrim as the Diwan also states that his father, Mai Umme bin Abdel-Jalil (1058–1097), passed away at Masr (Egypt) having planned or even completed a pilgrimage. The Sayfawa dynasty saw the continuation of the Islamic pilgrimage a tradition. The Sayfawa has a lengthy history in Islam, according to the renowned scholar Muhammadu Bello, who was also the revolutionary Shaykh Usman Danfodiyo's son and lieutenant (Heaton, 2023).

Bello claims that the Sayfawas' prehistoric forefathers were pious Muslims who travelled around for Islamic propagation, trade and commerce. It is also documented that three pilgrims were among the Mais of Bornu in the eighteenth century: Mai Muhammad bin Hajj Hamdun, Mai Dunama bin Ali, and Mai Hajj Hamdun bin Dunama. The Islamic faith most likely travelled across the vast Sahara to reach West Africa soon after the Muslims conquered Northern Africa in the seventh century (Syed, 2021). Early Arab texts from the eleventh century mention the conversion of some African chiefs to Islam. Surprisingly, the oldest pilgrimage records that exist are from the same time period. From that point on, West Africa, especially Nigeria, saw the development of a consistent and ongoing pilgrimage tradition (Heaton, 2023). Nigeria's ḥajj has seen significant transformations since the Ḥajj Authority was established by the government in 1975.

Transportation for the ḥajj has become increasingly expensive over time, often at a geometric rate. Meanwhile, there has been a reduction in the Pilgrims Basic Travel Allowance (PTA) and an extraordinary increase in foreign exchange prices. A stringent quota system has been in place since 1978 to distribute ḥajj seats, with the intention of limiting the number of Nigerian pilgrims who can participate (Heaton, 2023). Despite the threat and humiliation these "international pilgrims," or unofficial pilgrims, pose, the government has been unable to create a policy to regulate the significant and growing flow of these individuals (Elgammal & Alhothali, 2021). Due to their overall disdain for the laws and norms that promote civilised and disciplined behaviour, their lack of enlightenment, and general disorder, Nigerian pilgrims also contribute to some of the yearly hajj exercise's disasters (Ekong, 2020). For example, the Nigerian pilgrim has a bad reputation for carrying too much baggage, avoiding cargo fees, and using airline personnel to racketeer boarding passes.

However, there is no denying that pilgrims generally receive vital support from national and state hajj authorities (Katz, 2019). They have come a long way towards standardising and

improving hajj operations worldwide, even in the lack of a clear, comprehensive, and enduring hajj policy. The absence of a reasonable and workable hajj policy appears to be the main flaw in the Nigerian pilgrimage organisation (Katz, 2019). Consequently, Muslims in Nigeria may no longer take advantage of the convenience and comfort that come with well-thought-out hajj programmes such as the Malaysian Tabung Hajj. Nigeria ought to create a policy that will allow pilgrims to pay their hajj fees conveniently, similar to the NPC Decree of 1989's Hajj Saving Scheme (HSS). Every year, pilgrims from Kwara state, who make up a sizable portion of Nigerian tourists to the Holyland, encounter a number of difficulties from the time they register for the ḥajj until they depart for their home country.

It is then noteworthily noted that Muslim Pilgrims from Kwara State often face myriads of challenges while embarking on this holy journey (Heaton, 2023). Through a review of multiple sources, this paper attempts to identify and assess these obstacles and offers suggestions for resolving them. This study will be beneficial to the Pilgrim Boards of Kwara, and by extension Nigeria. The study will contribute significantly to easing the processes of hajj operations and as well improve the welfare package for the pilgrims.

2.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study is to conduct an analysis on Muslim pilgrimage registration process, orientation and welfare services in preparation to visit the Holyland during ḥajj operations in Kwara State. The specific purposes are:

i. examine the registration process of Muslim pilgrimage on visitation to the Holyland during ḥajj operations in Kwara State;

ii. determine the conduct of orientation program organized by the Pilgrim Welfare Board of Kwara State;

iii. find out the quality of welfare services rendered to Muslim pilgrims from Kwara State while in the Holyland for ḥajj operation; and

iv. identify the challenges encountered by Muslim pilgrims from Kwara State during ḥajj operations.

3.0 RESEARCH QUESTION

i. What is the registration process of Muslim pilgrimage on visitation to Holyland during ḥajj operations in Kwara State?

ii. What is the conduct of orientation program organized by the Pilgrim Welfare Board of Kwara State?

iii. What is the quality of welfare services rendered to Muslim pilgrims from Kwara State while in the Holyland for ḥajj operation?

iv. What are the challenges encountered by Muslim pilgrims from Kwara State during ḥajj operations?

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted through survey method of descriptive research of quantitative approach. The population of the study was 3102 Muslim pilgrims on visitation to Holyland during 2015-2025 hajj period from Kwara State. The sample size of 357 pilgrims at 95% confidence level and 5% merging level was used.

The instrument used to determine the sample size was Cohen, Manion and Marinson, (2007). Simple random sampling techniques was adopted. The questionnaire has five sections (A, B, C, D & E) which examined the respondent's demography, registration process, orientation program, welfare services and challenges encountered by Muslim pilgrims from Kwara State during Hajj operations respectively. The questionnaire was validated by 2 Islamic Studies lecturers, a Cleric and 2 Hajj commission staff. The observations and suggestion raised by the experts were effected to produce the final draft. The instrument was used for the pilot study of 10 participants using a split half which was subjected to reliability test of Cronbach Alpha Correlation Coefficient of 0.82. Afterwards, the questionnaire was transformed into Google document form and was administered on selected respondents through the Google form link that were posted through WhatsApp platforms across the selected Muslim pilgrims from Kwara State on visitation to Holyland during hajj operation of 2015-2025. The responses were subjected to descriptive statistics. Research questions were answered using frequency count and simple percentage. Statistical Package for Social Science was used to analyze all research questions.

5.0 RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The table 1 below shows the gender distribution among the participants of Kwara state pilgrims during ḥajj operations between 2015-2025. The gender distribution among the participants is almost equal. In a sample of 357 individuals, 183 are male, representing 51.4% of the total, while 174 are female, comprising 48.6%. This indicates a slight predominance of male participants.

Table 1 Demographic Information on Gender

Gender					
		Frequency	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	Male	183	51.4	51.4	51.4
	Female	174	48.6	48.6	100.0
	Total	357	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Work

The valid percent values align with these figures, confirming that there are no missing gender responses and ensuring the completeness and accuracy of the data. The cumulative percent shows the progressive accumulation of participants by gender. With 51.4% of the sample being male, the cumulative percentage for females reaches 100%, signifying that the entire sample is included by the end of the gender categories. This nearly even distribution of males and females suggests a well-balanced demographic, which helps in minimizing gender bias and ensures that the study's results are representative of both genders.

Table 2 Demographic Information on Marital Status

Marital Status					
		Frequency	**Percent**	**Valid Percent**	**Cumulative Percent**
Valid	Married	297	83.4	83.4	83.4
	Single	59	16.6	16.6	100.0
	Total	356	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Work

The table 2 above shows the analysis of marital status among participants in the study on the registration process, orientation program, and welfare services for Kwara State pilgrims during the 2015-2025 ḥajj operations. The table shows that a significant majority, 83.4%, are married. This indicates that the services and registration processes are primarily used by married individuals. Conversely, single individuals constitute only 16.6% of the sample. This distribution suggests that the programs are largely accessed by those with familial responsibilities, which may impact their engagement with ḥajj activities. The high proportion of married participants could also reflect underlying social and cultural influences on pilgrimage choices and registration patterns. This demographic insight highlights the need for future orientation and welfare services to be tailored to better meet the needs and preferences of the predominantly married participant group.

Table 3 Registration Process

SN	ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	MEAN	ST.D
1.	The registration process was easy to understand.	28 (7.9%)	293 (82.3%)	0 (0%)	35 (9.8%)	2.01 97	0.42 081
2.	The registration process was completed in a timely manner.	28 (7.9%)	226 (63.5%)	0 (0%)	102 (28.7%)	2.20 79	0.56 821
3.	The staff handling the registration process were professional and helpful.	92 (28.5%)	156 (43.8%)	0 (0%)	108 (30.3%)	2.04 49	0.74 924
4.	The registration fees were reasonable.	59 (16.6%)	124 (34.8%)	0 (0%)	173 (48.6%)	2.32 02	0.74 208
5.	Adequate information was provided about the registration requirements.	28 (7.9%)	182 (51.1%)	0 (0%)	146 (41.0%)	2.33 15	0.61 641

Source: Field Work

The table 3 above shows the registrations process for Kwara State pilgrims during ḥajj operation activities. Most participants found the registration process easy to understand, with 82.3% expressing strong agreement. The mean score of 2.0197 and a low standard deviation of 0.42081 indicate a high level of agreement on this positive aspect. Views on the timeliness of the registration process were more varied. While 63.5% of participants believed the process was completed promptly, 28.7% disagreed. The mean score of 2.2079 and a standard deviation of 0.56821 reflect a generally moderate perception of timeliness, with some differences in opinions. The professionalism and helpfulness of the staff were generally well-regarded, with 43.8% of participants agreeing and 30.3% disagreeing. The mean score of 2.0449, combined with a standard deviation of 0.74924, shows a generally positive but varied perception of the staff's performance.

Many participants considered the registration fees to be unreasonable, with 48.6% disagreeing about the fees' fairness and only 16.6% agreeing strongly that they were reasonable.

The mean score of 2.3202 and a standard deviation of 0.74208 suggest a prevalent dissatisfaction with the fees. Lastly, opinions on the adequacy of information provided about registration requirements were mixed. While 51.1% felt the information was sufficient, 41.0% did not. The mean score of 2.3315, with a standard deviation of 0.61641, indicates moderate satisfaction with the information, pointing to areas where improvements could be made. The high level of agreement and the low standard deviation concerning the ease of understanding the registration process suggest that the system is perceived as user-friendly. This observation is consistent with recent research by Hwang et al. (2019), which indicates that minimal variability in user satisfaction typically signifies that a system is both effective and easily comprehensible. Such findings support the idea that participants found the registration process straightforward and well-designed. On the other hand, the varied perceptions of the timeliness of the registration process, as reflected in the moderate mean score and diverse opinions, align with service management research. Groening et al. (2018) discuss how differences in perceived service timeliness can stem from individual expectations and experiences. This insight corroborates the mixed views on timeliness found in your study, indicating that user perceptions of promptness can vary widely.

Table 4 Orientation Program

SN	ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	MEAN	ST.D
1.	The orientation program was well-organized.	40 (11.2%)	188 (52.8%)	0 (0%)	128 (36.0%)	2.24 72	0.64 184
2.	The information provided during the orientation was comprehensive.	64 (18.0%)	121 (34.0%)	0 (0%)	121 (34.0%)	2.16 01	0.70 386
3.	The orientation program helped in understanding the ḥajj rituals.	45 (12.6%)	237 (66.6%)	0 (0%)	74 (20.8%)	2.08 15	0.57 320
4.	The speakers at the orientation were knowledgeable and effective.	35 (9.8%)	270 (75.8%)	0 (0%)	51 (14.3%)	2.04 49	0.49 013
5.	The orientation materials (booklets, videos, etc.) were helpful.	28 (7.9%)	251 (70.5%)	0 (0%)	77 (21.6%)	2.13 76	0.52 610

Source: Field Work

The table 4 above indicates the orientation program for Kwara State pilgrims during the ḥajj operation reveals a generally favorable but diverse reception from participants. A majority, 52.8%, considered the program to be well-organized, though 36.0% felt otherwise, indicating that while the organization was appreciated by many, there is a significant portion who believe enhancements are necessary. Regarding the completeness of the information provided, 34.0% of participants felt it was thorough, while an equal percentage felt it fell short. This split feedback suggests that while some found the information adequate, others were dissatisfied with its depth. The program's success in helping participants understand ḥajj rituals was rated positively by 66.6%, yet 20.8% felt it did not adequately support their understanding. This shows that the orientation was generally effective in clarifying the rituals but could benefit from further refinement to ensure comprehensive understanding for all attendees. In terms of the speakers' knowledge and effectiveness, 75.8% of participants gave positive feedback.

However, 14.3% did not agree, indicating that while the majority found the speakers knowledgeable, a small segment did not share this view. Finally, the orientation materials, including booklets and videos, were deemed helpful by 70.5% of participants, but 21.6% found them less useful. This suggests that while the materials were largely viewed as beneficial, there is room for improvement to better meet the needs of all participants. Overall, while the orientation program received positive feedback in several areas, the data highlights opportunities for improvement to enhance its overall effectiveness and participant satisfaction. The observation that a significant number of participants found the orientation program to be well-organized, while others did not, reflects the findings of research on program effectiveness. According to Pardo and Siemens (2014), the impact of educational and training programs can vary greatly among participants due to differing needs and expectations.

This disparity highlights the challenge of accommodating diverse expectations and underscores the necessity for continuous improvements to better meet all participants' needs. Similarly, the finding that 66.6% of participants felt the program successfully clarified ḥajj rituals, whereas 20.8% did not, points to the variability in how instructional content is received. McKenna and McKenzie (2016) note that the effectiveness of educational programs in enhancing understanding can differ significantly among individuals. This suggests that while many participants may find the instruction effective, there is still a need for targeted improvements to address the gaps in understanding for others. The mixed feedback regarding the speakers' knowledge and effectiveness is consistent with trends observed in educational evaluations (Hsu et al, 2018) highlight that perceptions of instructional quality, including the effectiveness of speakers, can greatly impact overall satisfaction but are often influenced by individual differences in expectations and experiences. This variability underscores the importance of ongoing assessment and refinement to ensure that the program meets the needs of all participants effectively.

Table 5 Welfare Services

SN	ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	MEAN	ST.D
1.	Accommodation provided was satisfactory.	16 (4.5%)	171 (48.0%)	0 (0%)	169 (47.5%)	2.42 98	0.57 957
2.	Meals provided were adequate and of good quality.	9 (2.5%)	150 (42.1%)	0 (0%)	197 (55.3%)	2.52 81	0.54 829
3.	Transportation arrangements were efficient and comfortable.	13 (3.7%)	213 (59.8%)	0 (0%)	130 (36.5%)	2.32 87	0.54 268
4.	Medical services provided were accessible and effective.	12 (3.4%)	135 (37.9%)	0 (0%)	209 (58.7%)	2.55 34	0.56 165
5.	Overall, the welfare services met my expectations.	9 (2.5%)	133 (37.4%)	0 (0%)	214 (60.1%)	2.57 58	0.54 373

Source: Field Work

Table 5 above shows the assessment of welfare services provided to Kwara State pilgrims during the ḥajj operation reveals a generally critical response from participants. Regarding accommodation, only 4.5% of respondents strongly agreed that it met their satisfaction, while a significant 47.5% disagreed. This indicates widespread dissatisfaction with the accommodation, suggesting that it failed to meet many participants' expectations. For the meals, merely 2.5% of participants strongly agreed that they were adequate and of high quality, while 55.3% disagreed. This strong disagreement highlights a prevalent dissatisfaction with both the quality and quantity

of the meals offered. Transportation arrangements were met with moderate discontent. Although 59.8% of participants agreed that the transportation was efficient and comfortable, 36.5% felt otherwise. This shows that while a majority found the transportation satisfactory, a notable number still experienced issue. The feedback on medical services was similarly mixed. Only 3.4% of participants strongly agreed that these services were accessible and effective, whereas 58.7% disagreed.

This substantial level of disagreement points to significant concerns about the accessibility and effectiveness of the medical services. Overall, the general sentiment towards the welfare services is one of dissatisfaction. Only 2.5% of participants strongly felt that the services met their expectations, with 60.1% expressing disagreement. This suggests that the welfare services fell short of participants' expectations and highlights a need for considerable improvements across various aspects of the services provided. The critical feedback regarding the welfare services provided to Kwara State pilgrims during the ḥajj operation is consistent with recent research on service quality. Nair, Li, and Wu (2019) highlight that evaluations of service quality often uncover discrepancies between what customers expect and what is actually delivered, particularly in complex service environments. Their research underscores that dissatisfaction across various service aspects—such as accommodation, meals, transportation, and medical services—can severely affect overall satisfaction. This finding supports the conclusion that the welfare services did not fully meet participants' expectations and underscores the need for significant enhancements in service delivery to address these identified shortcomings.

Table 6 Challenges Encountered

SN	ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	SD (%)	D (%)	MEAN	ST.D
1.	I experienced difficulties with the registration process.	28 (7.9%)	131 (36.8%)	0 (0%)	197 (55.3%)	2.47 47	0.63 860
2.	The orientation program did not fully prepare me for the ḥajj.	35 (9.8%)	183 (51.4%)	0 (0%)	138 (38.8%)	2.28 93	0.63 512
3.	There were issues with the accommodation provided.	68 (19.1%)	162 (45.5%)	0 (0%)	126 (35.4%)	2.16 29	0.72 101
4.	I faced challenges with the transportation arrangements.	28 (7.9%)	167 (46.9%)	0 (0%)	161 (45.2%)	2.37 36	0.62 644
5.	The medical services were inadequate or difficult to access.	47 (13.2%)	178 (50.0%)	0 (0%)	131 (36.8%)	2.23 60	0.66 752
6.	Overall, I faced significant challenges during the ḥajj operations.	37 (10.4%)	167 (46.9%)	152 (42.7%)	152 (42.7%)	2.32 30	0.65 403

Source: Field Work

The results on Table 6 above highlight several significant challenges experienced by Kwara State pilgrims during the ḥajj operations. A substantial portion of participants, 55.3%, reported encountering difficulties with the registration process, suggesting that this aspect was particularly problematic for many. Additionally, 51.4% of participants felt that the orientation program did not sufficiently prepare them for the ḥajj, indicating that the preparation provided was inadequate for a considerable number of pilgrims. Accommodation was also a major issue, with 45.5% of respondents noting problems with the quality and suitability of the lodging. This dissatisfaction

points to widespread concerns about the accommodation arrangements. Transportation arrangements were similarly problematic, with 46.9% of participants identifying issues, suggesting that while some found the arrangements acceptable, many pilgrims faced difficulties. Medical services were another area of concern, with 50.0% of participants finding these services either inadequate or difficult to access.

This indicates serious issues with the accessibility and effectiveness of the medical services provided during the ḥajj. Overall, the feedback on the ḥajj operations was largely negative, with 46.9% of participants feeling that they encountered significant challenges throughout the pilgrimage. This overall dissatisfaction underscores the need for comprehensive improvements in various aspects of the ḥajj operations to better meet the needs and expectations of the pilgrims. The critical feedback regarding the ḥajj operations aligns with broader findings in service quality research. Ahmed and Hassan (2020) have documented that complex service systems, such as those required for large-scale events like ḥajj, frequently face significant challenges due to inadequate preparation and support structures. Their research indicates that deficiencies in areas such as registration, accommodation, transportation, and medical services can lead to widespread dissatisfaction and highlight systemic issues needing resolution. This supports the conclusion that the reported challenges suggest substantial shortcomings in various service components and underscore the need for substantial improvements to enhance the overall experience for pilgrims.

6.0 CHALLENGES FACING THE PILGRIMS OF KWARA STATE NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS

The challenges encountered by the pilgrims in Kwara State can be traced to poor logistic arrangements, improper education of the pilgrims on the significance of the sacred journey, inadequate funding, health challenges, language barriers, and so on. No doubt, these challenges have affected the smooth conduct of hajj. This paper identifies these challenges and proposes viable solutions to them, in order to ensure hitch-free hajj exercises in future. One of the early challenges that pilgrims face is the process of registration and payment. For instance, a total number of 3,102 pilgrims were airlifted for the 2015-2025 hajj operation from Kwara state. These pilgrims cut across the 16 Local Government Areas of the State. Some of these pilgrims have to embark on 3 to 4 hours journey from their respective towns to Ilorin, the state capital for the purpose of registration and payment of the hajj fare, due to the lack of basic facilities such as stable electricity, internet facilities, and operational banks to conduct the exercises.

Considering several other factors such as bad roads, transportation, feeding, and accommodation expenses, as well as the age of some of the pilgrims, this challenge takes a lot of tolls on them. Oftentimes, pilgrims are not given comprehensive and proper orientation about the rites, obligations, and prohibitions of hajj. For instance, it is observed that the Kwara State Muslim Pilgrims Welfare Board (KSMPWB) only conducts the orientation exercise for intending pilgrims twice before departure to the Holyland. From experience, this orientation programme is only attended by one-tenth of the total population of intending pilgrims. Most of the intending pilgrims outside the city of Ilorin do not attend the programme due to challenges of distance and accommodation. Furthermore, the number of days set aside for the orientation is not sufficient to train intending pilgrims on the hajj rites, especially those who are performing the pilgrimage for the first time.

Transportation-related issues, such as flight delays, cancellations, and inadequate facilities, are among the biggest obstacles for pilgrims from Kwara state. For example, during the 2024 hajj, the last batch of pilgrims to be airlifted from the state had a delayed flight due to mechanical faults in

the flight scheduled. This resulted in protests by the intending pilgrims (Adebayo, 2024). Moreover, it can be difficult to arrange for seamless transportation from Nigeria to Saudi Arabia and back (Hassan & Ibrahim, 2018). Finding appropriate and sufficient lodging in Makkah and Madinah, particularly during periods of high pilgrimage, is another major challenge (Kareem, 2020). For Nigerian pilgrims, getting to and from Saudi Arabia continues to be a crucial logistical concern. Travelers experience severe difficulty and stress due to the restricted number of planes that are accessible during the ḥajj season, which frequently results in delays and cancellations (Hassan & Ibrahim, 2018).

Furthermore, the enormous volume of pilgrims can overburden the Saudi Arabia's internal transportation system, which includes buses and trains used to convey them between holy locations, resulting in uncomfortable and lengthy wait periods (Kareem, 2020). The KSMPWB does not have a conducive accommodation for the thousands of intending pilgrims who travel for the annual pilgrimage in the Holyland. Most of those intending pilgrims from outside the state capital have always grappled with accommodation challenges. The hostel facility at the commission's office in Ilorin requires urgent rehabilitation. Similarly, securing suitable accommodation, especially one that is close to the Ḥaram in Makkah and Madinah is another major logistical challenge that Kwara pilgrims have to grapple with. The high demand for housing during ḥajj often exceeds the available supply, resulting in overcrowded and substandard living conditions for many pilgrims (Adewale, 2018).

The costs associated with securing adequate accommodation further exacerbate the financial burden on pilgrims. A significant number of pilgrims from Kwara state come from the non-Yoruba speaking communities, such as the Fulanis and Nupes. Most of these people are not proficient in Yoruba which is the predominant language used in communication and orientation of the pilgrims. Further still, a sizeable number of them are unlettered who can neither speak nor write in English language. Thus, effective communication is usually lost, and instructions are likely not to be well understood or carried out. In addition to this, most of the pilgrims do not understand basic Arabic language, which oftentimes creates communication difficulties in Saudi Arabia, especially when seeking assistance or medical help (Ibrahim, 2018). This language barrier can lead to misunderstandings and added stress for pilgrims.

Over the years, ḥajj fare has been increasing sharply, making it difficult and unaffordable for the average Nigerian Muslim willing to perform the sacred duty (Abdullah, 2017). This includes the cost of flights, accommodation, food, and other associated expenses (Yusuf, 2019). In the 2024 ḥajj season, pilgrims were told to pay as initial deposit of ₦4,500,000 (Four Million, Five Hundred Thousand Naira). Suddenly, the arbitrary fluctuations in the exchange rates exacerbated the financial burden and dealt a significant blow to many intending pilgrims, making it even extremely difficult for them to afford the journey. There are reported cases of intending pilgrims who abandoned the trip due to the sudden increase in fare which later stood at a whopping ₦6,7000,000 and ₦8,400,000 for early and late applicants respectively.

Another major challenge faced by pilgrims from Kwara state, and especially those living outside the state capital is the process of obtaining ḥajj visas which involves multiple bureaucratic steps, such as submission of relevant documents, undergoing health checks, and attending interviews to ascertain their level of eligibility. The absence of coordinators at the level of the Local Governments is a huge challenge to the smooth operation of the exercise. All intending pilgrims are expected to be vaccinated at the premises of the KSMPWB. Oftentimes, this process can be time-consuming and stressful, with long waiting times and uncertainty about visa approval (Ahmed, 2019). In addition, unexpected changes in visa regulations and quotas can further

complicate the process (Salami, 2020). Navigating the regulatory requirements set by both Nigerian and Saudi authorities often prove onerous for most pilgrims, who have to comply with various health, safety, and legal regulations, which can be difficult to understand and follow (Salami, 2020).

This bureaucratic complexity can create additional stress for pilgrims and potentially delay their travel plans. Personal safety is another concern for most pilgrims. Each year, several cases of missing persons, theft or loss of personal belongings are reported (Oseni, 2019). Following the unfortunate Makkah crane accident which left six Nigerians dead and four others missing, the need to raise the security awareness of pilgrims became imperative. In the 2024 ḥajj season, a total number of 6 pilgrims from the state lost their lives in the Holyland, including a certain Hawawu Mohammed who reportedly fell from her balcony. It is important for pilgrims to be vigilant and take precautions to protect their lives and valuables (Oseni, 2019). The assembly of a massive crowd during ḥajj exercise poses a considerable safety risk. The risk of stampedes, such as the tragic crane incident in 2015 that resulted in hundreds of deaths, highlights the importance of effective crowd control measures (Olagunju, 2020). These unfortunate incidences are mostly experienced by the pilgrims coordinated by government agencies like Kwara State Muslim Pilgrims Welfare Board, while most of the pilgrims that travelled to hajj through Licensed Tour Operators do not experience such bitter incidents.

It is most important to state that the study did not assess data relating to pilgrims that travelled through Licensed Tour Operators. Also, the study only covered a period of 10 years of hajj operations in Kwara State, and not beyond. Importantly, the target population of this study was 3,102, with 357 sampled through random sampling technique which implies less than 50% of the population. It is noteworthy to state that this study explored quantitative through pilgrims' opinionated responses devoid of interviews, observation protocol and related tools for qualitative approaches. Hence, this study is structured to walk through the challenges faced during hajj operations and proffer enduring solutions for the safety and welfare of pilgrims in Nigeria with focus on Kwara State.

Ensuring the safety of millions of pilgrims requires concerted and well-coordinated efforts from both the local authorities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and ḥajj organizations. From the foregoing, it is clear that authorities of the Kwara State Muslim Pilgrims Welfare Board have a lot to do in terms of reforming the ḥajj exercise in the state. Most of these reformations require urgent government intervention, as the board depends largely on government for funding. Based on this, the following recommendations have been made to ensure smooth Hajj exercises going forward: The Board should make the entire registration process a seamless exercise by establishing registration centres across the 16 Local Government Areas of the state during the ḥajj season. As noted earlier, most of the pilgrims have to endure the stress of traveling down to Ilorin for the exercise due to lack of internet facilities in their respective towns.

7.0 RECOMMENDATION FOR STRESS-FREE ḤAJJ OPERATION FOR KWARA STATE PILGRIMS

In consonance with the aforementioned challenges encountered by Muslim pilgrims during the year under review, it is pertinent to proffer some recommendations for stress-free hajj operation for intending pilgrims.

Setting up a temporary internet facility during the ḥajj season in those areas will reduce if not eradicate this burden. There is an urgent need to decentralize the training and orientation exercises for intending pilgrims through the instruments of the local government authorities. Pilgrims from

each local government area are required to travel down to Ilorin for a 2-day training programme prior to their departure to the Holyland. It has been observed that less than one-tenth of the intending pilgrims attend this programme due to factors such as distance, accommodation, and financial challenges. The Pilgrim Board can resolve this challenge by employing ad-hoc staff comprising of knowledgeable and experienced scholars from each Local Government Area for this task. Some local government with close proximity can also be merged together to reduce running cost.

More so, this would also ensure that adequate orientation is carried out and the language of instruction is the local language of the people, thereby eliminating the need for a language translator. Ensuring that pilgrims are spiritually prepared and understand the rituals and significance of ḥajj is crucial (Rahman, 2017). There is a need for better education and training before the pilgrimage to help pilgrims fully appreciate and perform the rites of ḥajj. Proper education and training are essential for pilgrims to understand the significance of ḥajj and perform the rituals correctly (Rahman, 2017). Pre-ḥajj training programs can help pilgrims prepare spiritually and mentally for the journey, reducing the likelihood of mistakes and misunderstandings during the pilgrimage. Health concerns are another critical issue. Access to quality healthcare can be limited, and pilgrims may face health issues due to harsh weather conditions, long hours of travel, and exposure to large crowds (Adewale, 2018).

Ensuring all pilgrims are vaccinated against diseases such as meningitis, yellow fever, and COVID-19 also presents a logistical challenge (Ogunlana & Bello, 2021). Access to quality healthcare is essential for the well-being of pilgrims, but it can be limited due to the overwhelming number of people in need of medical attention during ḥajj. Health issues such as heat exhaustion, dehydration, and infectious diseases are common, and the available medical facilities may struggle to cope with the demand (Adewale, 2018). Ensuring that all pilgrims are vaccinated against diseases such as meningitis, yellow fever, and COVID-19 is a crucial yet challenging task. Coordinating mass vaccination efforts and ensuring compliance can be logistically difficult, especially given the large number of pilgrims and the limited healthcare infrastructure in some regions (Ogunlana & Bello, 2021).

Limited access to information technology always makes it difficult for pilgrims to book flights, accommodation, and other services online (Adamu, 2021). Additionally, a lack of technological literacy hinders pilgrims' ability to navigate digital platforms and access important information during their journey. Nigerian Muslim pilgrims face numerous challenges during the ḥajj pilgrimage, spanning logistical, financial, health, bureaucratic, language, safety, cultural, spiritual, and technological issues. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from Nigerian and Saudi authorities, ḥajj organizations, and the pilgrims themselves. Improving infrastructure, providing better education and training, ensuring affordable costs, and enhancing technological access can significantly improve the pilgrimage experience for Nigerian Muslims.

8.0 CONCLUSIONS

The study on the registration process, orientation program, and welfare services for Kwara State pilgrims during ḥajj operations identifies several key areas for improvement. The demographic analysis reveals a nearly equal gender distribution and a majority of married participants, suggesting that services should be adapted to meet the specific needs of this group. While the registration process was largely appreciated for its clarity, there were notable concerns regarding its timeliness, staff professionalism, and the fairness of registration fees. The orientation

program, though positively received by many, showed varied opinions on its effectiveness and the completeness of information provided, indicating a need for further refinement. The evaluation of welfare services highlighted significant dissatisfaction with accommodation, meals, transportation, and medical services. These issues point to a substantial gap between participant expectations and the actual service delivered. Overall, the study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive improvements across all aspects of the ḥajj operations to better address the diverse needs of pilgrims and enhance their overall experience.

As identified in the study; to resolve the issues of registration procedure, it is essential to simplify and accelerate the process. This involves clarifying registration requirements and improving staff responsiveness. Also, in response to the varied feedback on the orientation program, it is important to improve its effectiveness by providing more thorough and detailed information. The program should be expanded to cover all relevant aspects of ḥajj rituals comprehensively. The widespread dissatisfaction with accommodation, meals, transportation, and medical services highlights the need for substantial improvements. The study also recommended reviewing and upgrading of these services to better meet participants' expectations. This includes enhancing accommodation standards, improving meal quality and variety, optimizing transportation arrangements, and ensuring that medical services are both accessible and effective. The study concluded that to support pilgrims more effectively and address the challenges they encounter, a thorough review of the ḥajj operation process is needed. This review should focus on pinpointing and resolving specific issues reported by participants, such as problems with accommodation and medical services.

In furtherance to providing solutions to the identified challenges, more studies need to be conducted on hajj operations in Nigeria. The further studies could explore the use of qualitative approach, funding activities of hajj operations, automation and decentralization of the registration process, among others. Besides, the current policy on the operations of Pilgrims' Boards across the nation needs the attention of researchers to further expose the challenges and encumbrances faced by pilgrims every hajj season. The findings of such research will go a long way in addressing the identified challenges and improve the welfare of pilgrims.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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APPENDIX: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

8.1 Section A: Demographic Information

Demographic Question	Response Options
1. Gender	1. Male ☐ Female
2. Age Group	☐ 18–30 ☐ 31–40 ☐ 41–50 ☐ 51–60 ☐ 61+
3. Asalatu Group	a) Yes ☐ No
4. Level of Qur'anic Education	a) None ☐ Basic ☐ Intermediate ☐ Advanced
5. Marital Status	a) Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed
6. Number of Times Participated in Ḥajj	a) First time ☐ 2–3 times ☐ 4–5 times ☐ More than 5
7. Occupation	i. Student ☐ Employed ☐ Self-employed ☐ Retired
8. Level of Secular Education	1 None ☐ Primary ☐ Secondary ☐ Tertiary

8.2 Section B: Registration Process

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The registration process was easy to understand.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. The registration process was completed in a timely manner.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. The staff handling the registration process were professional and helpful.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. The registration fees were reasonable.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Adequate information was provided about the registration requirements.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8.3 Section C: Orientation Program

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The orientation program was well-organized.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. The information provided during the orientation was comprehensive.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. The orientation program helped in understanding the Ḥajj rituals.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. The speakers at the orientation were knowledgeable and effective.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. The orientation materials (booklets, videos, etc.) were helpful.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8.4 Section D: Welfare Services

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Accommodation provided was satisfactory.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Meals provided were adequate and of good quality.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Transportation arrangements were efficient and comfortable.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. Medical services provided were accessible and effective.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Overall, the welfare services met my expectations.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

8.5 Section E: Challenges Encountered

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I experienced difficulties with the registration process.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. The orientation program did not fully prepare me for the Ḥajj.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. There were issues with the accommodation provided.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. I faced challenges with the transportation arrangements.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. The medical services were inadequate or difficult to access.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
6. Overall, I faced significant challenges during the Ḥajj operations.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐