The Mecca Pilgrimage by West African Pastoral Nomads

by J. S. BIRKS*

Each dry season many Um Borroro or nomadic Fulani set off eastwards to Mecca. They are some of the 5,000 or so West Africans who make the pilgrimage (the haj) each year by travelling along the savannas through Cameroun, Chad, and the Sudan.1 About four-fifths of them come from what is generally called Hausaland and Bornu in Nigeria and Niger, but some pilgrims from all the West African savanna countries travel overland.2 Although they comprise only about six per cent of the total arriving in Mecca from West Africa (the majority come by air and sea), they represent an important relict movement which earlier this century involved more than 15,000 migrants per annum.3

This overland route has an important political, social, and economic impact upon the societies through which the pilgrims pass. Most of them board lorries and trains, travelling slowly and in stages, each fare being earned during stays in settlements en route. Few complete the haj in less than two years, and the average time is four times as long – some even take more than 30 years, virtually a lifetime. They travel in family units, and comprise a substantial transient population of West Africans in the countries en route, and especially in the Gezira and Gedaref areas of the Sudan.4

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Almost all the West Africans who cross the savannas to Mecca are of rural origin, and a large majority are farmers. However, some claim to lead a nomadic way of life: they are Fulani, mainly from Mali, Upper Volta, Niger, and Nigeria. For the duration of their pilgrimage most of these nomads leave their cattle in the care of relatives, and depart eastwards by lorry. They earn their living by farming and working as urban labourers, and so become largely indistinguishable from the Gidan or sedentary Fulani.¹

Some of the Um Borroro, whilst intent upon visiting the Holy Places, are not prepared to forego their nomadic existence, even for a limited period. The intimate relationships they develop with their cattle, combined with the scorn they feel for farming and town life, mean they can hardly conceive of being separated from their herds. These Fulani, therefore, leave for Mecca driving some or all of their stock. They propose to live off their animals whilst passing along the savannas, and to raise the finance for the final stage of the pilgrimage – crossing the Red Sea, and entering Arabia – by selling the surviving cattle. They are determined to make the haj without compromising their traditions and customs by undergoing a change of life-style, and so avoid many of the indignities attendant upon lorry and train travel. These pastoral Fulani pilgrims are the subject of this article.

THE COMPLEX OF ROUTES ALONG THE SAVANNAS

The Fulani drive their cattle through Chad and into the Sudan, although this is ‘illegal’ in so far as regulations are contravened which govern the movement of both animals and people. However, the cattle of the pilgrims comprise only a minority of the livestock crossing the border. The transhumance orbits of several cattle-herding tribes, notably the Rizeghat, involve seasonal journeys across the border, and there has also been a continual albeit irregular flow of cattle into Darfur Province since the delimitation of the border. These movements have been caused by the ‘pull’ of a preferred system of administration,² by regional variations in taxation and cattle prices, by the occurrence of drought, and – since the mid-1960s – by the arrival of refugees with their herds from Chad.

Almost all the nomads who bring their animals into the Sudan for these motives have their origins in Chad. Others come from west of the River Chari (especially from Cameroun and north-east Nigeria),

² Sudan Government, Darfur Province Diaries, Khartoum, 1921.
but having lived in Chad previously for many years they are also effectively refugees. Some Fulani entering Darfur have come directly from West Africa. The reasons behind their departure include the congestion of pastures, increased cattle taxes and the vigour of their collection, a desire to visit relatives in the Sudan, and the making of the pilgrimage.

As with the motives behind most movements of people, the reasons for nomad immigration into Darfur, as deduced from conversations in the field, are not clearly defined. Like their farmer counterparts, nomads embark upon the *haj* as the result of a complex of factors, as well as the basic desire to visit Mecca. Even within a single family enumerated whilst crossing Darfur, various individuals will express different motives behind their departure. For instance, one member of a *farīq* – or temporary nomadic camp – from near Hadeija, in Nigeria, claimed that the congestion of home pastures was the reason for their trip across Africa, whilst another independently asserted that the move was simply to make the pilgrimage.

It was possible, however, during fieldwork in 1970 and 1971, to isolate some of those nomadic groups moving across Darfur Province for whom the dominant motive seemed to be the *haj*. There was no basis for taking a scientifically selected sample of these pastoral pilgrims, but those encountered were recorded in the greatest possible detail as part of a larger, more general study on pilgrimage. Information was gathered about origins, routes, duration of travel, sizes of animal and human populations, births, deaths, and selling rates of cattle, as well as stories about their experiences *en route*.

Nomads were always interviewed either in the bush, with their cattle, or preferably in their *farīqs*. No attempts were made to question them in the local markets; only in their home camps could their confidence be won and accurate facts be ascertained. This necessitated numerous visits to various *farīqs* and periods of residence there. It is the notorious evasiveness of nomads, especially the Fulani, in answering questions and ‘distinguishing truth from convenient falsehood’,¹ that determined such a slow and laborious method of data collection.

It was sometimes easy to distinguish in the field between groups of nomadic pilgrims and those moving for other reasons. Many who are on their way to Mecca are proud to declare this, believing that the secular powers cannot stop them attaining their goal, in spite of their travelling illegally. Some Fulani groups were more difficult to classify, but criteria were developed to identify the pilgrims which utilised factors such as

¹ Graham, op. cit.
rates of travel, standards of religious behaviour, and relations with local groups of nomads.

Comprehensive data were obtained from 16 separate groups of nomads who were passing through Darfur Province on pilgrimage. Much complementary information was also obtained from other Fulani, not all of whom were going to Mecca, but who had travelled with groups of pilgrims.

The origins of the enumerated pilgrims are plotted in Figure 1. It is interesting that only one group started west of Nigeria; the nomads from this area generally travel to Mecca by lorry, in contrast to those from the east of Kano for whom pastoral pilgrimage seems to be more common. To some extent this is a consequence of sheer distance but, in addition, the Um Borroro from the west would have to drive their herds through the Kano close-settled zone, where cattle are subject to relatively strict veterinary and governmental controls which constrain the mobility of livestock. This contrasts with the thinly populated areas in Chad and the Sudan where cattle controls are virtually ineffective.

Social links between Fulani families in eastern Nigeria and the Sudan are close and common, which means that information is available about grazing, water holes, occurrence of disease, and relations with settled peoples along the route. Nigerian Fulani driving cattle eastwards can therefore use a network of contacts to obtain shelter and advice. Such connections between nomads in the Sudan and those to the west of Nigeria do not commonly exist. An indication of the frequency and importance of these contacts is shown by the fact that 5 of the 16 groups interviewed included members who had previously visited the Sudan, obviously to the benefit of all the pilgrims concerned.

The routes taken by those interviewed are also shown in Figure 1. These could only be plotted approximately because the nomads use Fulfulde names for the places they have visited – mainly areas of bush and wells – and seldom refer to the more widely known villages. The far-western section of the route from Mali taken by group No. 9 is not known, but it was established that they drove their cattle near to Zaria, and to the north of the Jos plateau, so steering their herds between centres of dense population, avoiding high relief and taking the line of least resistance to cattle movement. From then onwards they took the same direction as the other nomadic Fulani from Nigeria to Maroua in northern Cameroun. The routes to the east then meander through the long grass savannas, but coalesce upon the various Fulani dira or tribal homelands which the pilgrims have to pass. This nodal effect is well displayed by the fact that they deviate markedly to pass through
the *dira* of Bokoro, Bitkine, and Tullus. The Fulani have little need of towns, and so they skirt these and trade in small rural markets attended mainly by other nomads. The pastoral pilgrims not only avoid large settlements, but also keep away from the areas around them where clashes between cultivators and nomads are most likely to occur.

Another factor balanced against the overwhelming desire to move towards Mecca is the necessity to utilise the savannas in a manner which is best for the cattle. If there is a lack of waterholes directly to the east, or a rocky area that becomes excessively hot, then the pilgrims may take a circuitous route. Similarly, good grazing normally causes them to deviate and delay, so that their cattle can benefit from the available browse. Such diversions may be on a considerable scale, but normally involve only a few days of extra travel.

**THE SYSTEM AND DURATION OF NOMADIC MOVEMENTS**

The routes of the pilgrims, with nodal points and southerly loops, are explicable in terms of the basic pattern of nomadic transhumance that prevails in the savannas, with seasonal movements from north to south in order to secure optimum conditions for the cattle at different times of the year.¹ This is what the travellers try to achieve whilst *en route* to or from Mecca.

The transit zone used by the pilgrims runs to the south of the *dira* of the nomadic Fulani groups indigenous to northern Cameroon, Chad, and the Sudan, along the clay lands to the south of the *qoz* sands.² This is where the local cattle graze during the dry winter. In the wet season, movements of herds are very difficult, being hampered by running *wadis*, tall grass, and wet clay; indeed, the tsetse fly impedes the very existence of cattle in this southern zone when it rains. By way of contrast, these clay lands are favourable during the dry season. Then the ground is firm, the grasses are palatable, and the flies disappear as the standing water evaporates. This is when the pilgrims herd their animals through these tall grasslands, thereby causing the detours in their routes to the south of the *dira*, as shown in Figure 1.

With the onset of the rains, the cattle are driven northwards, out of the long grass savannas along which they have been travelling, to one of the local Fulani *dira*. They are then allowed to recuperate from the


Figure 1. Routes of Some Pastoral Pilgrim Groups from West Africa to Mecca
MECCA PILGRIMAGE BY WEST AFRICAN NOMADS

(a) Typical Transhumance Cycle Across the Savannas

Some local movement in rains

WET SEASON (June to August) in Northern Grasslands

September

Movement south after rains

May

Movement north before rains

DRY SEASON (December to March) in Southern Grasslands

November

(b) Movement Eastwards During a Three-Year Period

June–August

Dar

(Year 1)

October

September

Dar

(Year 2)

November

March

April

Dar

(Year 3)

March

October

Dar

June–August

FIGURE 2. Combination of Nomadic Transhumance Orbits with Movement Eastwards Across the Savannas

rigours of the dry season, and are herded only short distances to local pastures around the dar until the rains are spent. This enables the animals to build up their strength before the next drive eastwards during the following dry season.

This cessation of movement during the wet season also allows the travellers to develop social contacts with the local Fulani of the dar. Pilgrims are able to gather information about the coming stages of the journey – in particular, news of the location and condition of wells and pastures – and the survival of their cattle may be dependent upon such foreknowledge. The pilgrims also enquire about the whereabouts of bandits and government patrols, both of which are a threat to their progress.

It is also to, or through, the indigenous Fulani that pilgrims sell cattle in order to defray the expenses incurred en route that cannot be met by the sale of dairy produce. Those who wish to farm during the wet season are also aided by the local Fulani, who provide seeds and implements and allow them to cultivate recently farmed land to lessen
the work involved in weeding. In these, and many other ways, the pilgrims benefit from a stay in an established Fulani *dar* during the wet season.

Each southerly detour shown on Figure 1 therefore represents the paths followed by a group during the dry season, the wet seasons being spent in the *dira* to the north, the nodal points upon which the routes converge. This seasonal pattern of movement eastwards from one *dar* to the next is depicted diagrammatically in Figure 2 (a) and (b), which also shows the approximate timing of the various stages of the transhumance cycle.

Some groups spend more than one wet season in a particular *dar*, taking their cattle through a transhumance cycle with local herds, and passing on eastwards only after spending a second wet season there – for example, group No. 7 in Figure 1. In contrast, group No. 2 travelled eastwards much more quickly, driving their herds from Hadeija in Nigeria to Kubbum in the Sudan in one dry season. This route shows no diversion from the zone of transit, for the group made no trek northwards associated with a wet season halt in a *dar*. The members of this *farīq* had travelled over 120 miles per month, not allowing for detours made to find river crossings and browse. Their rapid rate of travel, maintained over the whole dry season, left the cattle dangerously near to exhaustion, and prone to bovine infection, even though they were driven mainly at night. Some cattle arrive in Darfur only to die, having been pressed too hard whilst crossing eastern Chad, the area most disturbed by bandits.

Another problem associated with any attempt to move quickly across Chad is the tendency for the cattle to be kept in the zone of transit too late in the year when, with the onset of the rains, they ought to be in the *dira* to the north. One group, surprised by early rains near Foraburanga, and obliged to stay in an area very adverse to cattle because of the flooding of the *wadis*, lost several animals as a result. The pilgrims would not drive forwards so remorselessly if political conditions in Chad were to improve and if the herds were less at risk – indeed, in these circumstances, probably none would attempt to cross Chad without spending at least one wet season there.

**FINANCING THE PILGRIMAGE**

All the enumerated *farīqs* intended to finance their journey to Mecca by the sale of cattle. Some planned to return westwards by lorry, having sold all their livestock in the Sudan, but others intended to return with
the cattle that remained. As the animals provide funds for the *haj*, an attempt was made to examine their ratio to people in a *fariq*, and to see if there was a specific number per pilgrim which may, in turn, have been related to the cost of the passage across the Red Sea to Mecca.

The necessary information was obtained from the *fariq* heads, and by counting—the results tallied well, so that the data are probably accurate for the eight groups studied. The number of adults in each extended from seven to over 50, a range of size representing a spectrum from a single nuclear family to an extended household of three brothers, their father, their wives, and some cousins and uncles. As for their herds, they extended from eight to over 200 animals, with a ratio to each adult which varied from 1.1 to 4. Four of the groups interviewed were within the range of 23–30 people, thereby resembling the local *fariqs* in Darfur, and they had from 55 to 100 cattle in their herds, as well as some calves.

Cattle prices in the Sudan vary greatly: regionally, seasonally, and annually. Fulani animals sell well, fetching up to S£8 more per head than Arab breeds because they carry more meat. This price differential is greater in the east than in Darfur, mainly because the Fulani livestock lose weight by being driven eastwards to the Nile Valley by traders who treat them like Arab cattle. The pilgrims know of this regional disparity and consequently sell few animals in Darfur, driving them on eastwards to markets in Khartoum and the Nile Valley.

Good Fulani bulls can fetch up to S£30 in the east, whilst cows tend to sell for under S£20. Since it costs a minimum of S£75 for a pilgrim to make the final stage of the journey from the Sudan to Mecca, it is necessary to sell five or six good animals to finance the cost of one return journey. In other words, a ratio of five animals per person might just provide sufficient finance. It would not seem possible, therefore, for any of these groups to pay for their pilgrimage by sale of cattle alone, although this was their avowed intent. They all claimed that they would not augment their finance by becoming labourers in the Gezira, as do those pilgrims who travel by lorry. Regular work for cash is considered to be demeaning and involves separation from the herd; moreover, then ‘one does not have enough time left for prayer’—which is true for these orthodox Tijanis.

Some young men might undertake this kind of work if their families were faced with a critical shortage of cash, but the pilgrims will first consider other possibilities. Not all the members of each group may visit Mecca; alternatively, they may live for some years in the Sudan, building up herds large enough to finance the pilgrimage on their sale.
Several groups leave West Africa with too few cattle because they are reluctant to travel across the bandit-ridden areas of Chad with more than a minimum number of cattle and have underestimated the cost of their pilgrimage. The hardships that result from relying upon such small herds - in particular, the small quantities of milk - are borne stoically. But such discomforts to the Fulani pilgrims are much more tolerable than a change of life-style which involves separation from their cattle.

**THE FINAL STAGES OF THE PILGRIMAGE**

Once the pilgrims arrive in the Nile Valley they rest and fatten their cattle prior to selling them just before each *haj*. This may take several years, although some members of the group may go on earlier to Mecca. The Fulani make their way to Khartoum, and there, for the first time, they officially declare their intention to visit Mecca. They obtain passports issued by the embassies of the West African nations, and then travel on by train to Suakin or Port Sudan, and by boat to Saudi Arabia. After performing the rites at Mecca - it seems that few nomadic Fulani continue the pilgrimage to Medina - they return to the remaining members of the group in the Sudan. If others of the *fariq* are to go to the Hejaz, then the remainder will continue to stay in the Nile Valley.

After all the important members have been to Mecca - some wives and younger people may not go - the group sets off homewards. Some Fulani are impatient to return in order to build up a new herd and enjoy their new status as pilgrims, so they sell their remaining cattle to pay for lorry fares, and complete the westward journey in as little as six weeks. Others travel back with their cattle, and they naturally take considerably longer - indeed, some settle *en route*, forming part of the growing West African population which now lives permanently in the Sudan.¹

**CONCLUSION**

The adaption of the traditional pastoral way of life - based upon transhumance - to enable movements of a scale such as those described, shows a flexibility which has not often been stressed. There is a need for more study of such aspects of nomadism. Even today, when conditions in sub-Saharan Africa have drawn attention to the life-style of the nomads, comparatively little is known about them. As R. M. Prothero has noted, details can be drawn only from individual and relatively rare

¹ Davies, loc. cit.
case-studies. It is difficult, however, to elicit information from, and evaluate data about, nomadic groups. Even after lengthy field-work it is impossible to establish accurately the numbers of people and cattle moving along the savannas. Informed speculation suggests that out of those who annually drive their animals across Darfur the majority are refugees, and that about 600 consider themselves as pilgrims.

These clandestine movements—whatever their reason—are considered undesirable by the Sudan Government; the nomads and their cattle have been accused of spreading human sickness, such as relapsing fever, and bovine diseases, most importantly rinderpest. Apart from adding to minority groups in the Sudan which owe little allegiance to the national Government, the pilgrims drive their cattle through areas traditionally utilised by indigenous nomads, and over which rights are claimed by various Baggara groups, and the Fellata of Tullus. Although the numbers of migrant cattle are not large, they are often sufficient to disturb local grazing patterns by traverse and browse of areas which the local nomads were expecting to use. This often leads to violence, and caused friction between the Rizeghat, Bani Helba, and Fulani during the winter of 1974. The more prolonged residence of the West African pastoralists in the eastern Sudan, which may amount to a decade or more, also causes problems, especially since the pastures are becoming increasingly congested in dry years.

Consequently, the Sudan Government has recently stepped up its efforts to prevent the illegal entry of nomads. Such is the determination of the pilgrims, however, that even after being deported and having their cattle confiscated, they return eastwards across the border, undeterred. The efforts of the Government to control such a long and open border have so far been ineffective.

This determination to make the haj without a change of life-style is illustrated by a Fulani nomad from Upper Volta who, having been robbed by bandits in Chad, borrowed cattle in Darfur in order to build up a herd to finance his pilgrimage to Mecca. Another from Mali, who had set off without cattle because his herd was small and his dependents many, also settled in Darfur, borrowing and buying animals until he was in a position to travel on eastwards. This process of paying for the pilgrimage by cattle sales takes many years—much longer than the haj

3 Sudan Government, Darfur Province Diaries, Khartoum, 1943.
by overland farmers – but cash-crop farming is so alien to the *Um Bororo* that they can hardly conceive of this means of raising money.

Such single-mindedness, together with the continued reluctance of the Fulani nomads to adopt a sedentary existence, means that this form of overland pilgrimage is likely to continue, especially as effective preventative controls are unlikely in the forseeable future. Moreover, because of the devaluation of the *haj* by air travel, more pastoral Fulani are considering the advantages of driving their cattle eastwards rather than using modern transport. Such a pilgrimage on foot is considered to bring superior spiritual benefits, and certainly gives greater significance to the title of *al Haji* afterwards. Should this point of view become more widespread, the long overland pilgrimage with cattle could become less a tradition and more a fashion – with a concomitant increase in numbers.