

“Exhuming Passions:”¹ Religion and the emergence of the Middle Belt Struggle in Nigeria¹

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Introduction

The place of religion in the activation of social conflicts, particularly in the post-Cold War era, is being increasingly recognised in humanities and social science research.² However, the Middle Belt movement in Nigeria is still being seen largely from the political and ethnic angles while treating religion often as a subtext. The Middle Belt identity does not correspond to clear geo-political or ethnic unit, but is usually understood vis-à-vis its main (real or imaginary) adversary, i.e. the so-called Muslim ‘Hausa-Fulani’ culture which allegedly constitutes the main hegemonic culture of northern Nigeria, and the latter’s corresponding pre-colonial political institution, i.e. the Sokoto Caliphate.

This preliminary overview seeks to draw attention, albeit briefly, to the pivotal place of religion in the

emergence of the Middle Belt movement in northern Nigeria. Without dislodging the role of politics in the rise of minority consciousness in post-second World War northern Nigeria, the argument put forward in this essay is that religion was the rallying point around which the Middle Belt consciousness was originally activated. Some scholars have identified the phenomenon of religious manipulation in politics,³ but the tendency in contemporary political discourse has been to downplay the role which religiosity plays as a spontaneous discourse and realm of social consciousness and activity in its own right. This is particularly needed today, in the light of the increasingly violent dimension that religious conflict in certain areas of the Middle Belt, like Jos and southern Kaduna, is taking. In the following discussion, we will attempt to navigate through the religious parameter of the Middle Belt identity as seen by its proponents and opponents.

Imagining the Middle Belt

A corpus of scholarly works deals with the geographical, climatic and demographic dimensions of the Middle Belt region in Nigeria.⁴ Geographically, the Middle Belt has been defined as “an area roughly inscribed by the Hausa-speaking area to the north, and the Yoruba, Edo, and Ibo-speaking areas to the south”.⁵ Administratively, Nigeria is constitutionally divided into six geo-political zones: North-east, North-West, North-Central, South-West, South-East and South-South. The Middle Belt would then cor-



Nigeria: the six geo-political zones.

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respond roughly to most of the North-Central geopolitical zone.

Generally, the Middle Belt has been variously interpreted as a geo-political, cultural, religious and political entity. According to the Middle Belt intellectual Moses Ochonu:

“Several competing definitions of the Middle Belt abound, especially since the Middle Belt is a geographically fluid existence. In general it is agreed that a conservative territorial estimation of the Middle Belt (as opposed to the idea of a Greater Middle Belt, which is a largely political construct appropriating all non-Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri peoples of northern Nigeria) comprises of Benue, Plateau, Kwara, Kogi, Southern Kaduna, FCT, parts of Niger, Adamawa, and Taraba states. Even this territorial definition is imperfect, since in all these states, there are significant numbers of Muslim non-Hausa as well Muslim Hausa peoples, who may or may not be captured by specific delineations of the Middle Belt. Similarly, “Muslim Hausa” states like Kebbi, Gombe, Bauchi, Borno, and even Katsina and Kano contain pockets

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of non-Hausa, non-Muslim populations that may qualify as Middle Belters in the political sense of the word, since Middle Belt identity is often politically constructed against Hausa-Fulani, Sokoto Caliphate Muslim identity. There were and still are non-Hausa, non-Muslim peoples in the Jos Plateau, parts of Bauchi, Taraba, Adamawa, and Southern Borno who historically spoke Hausa as second or third languages, and these non-Caliphate people who did/do not share in Hausa ethnicity either

by inheritance or assimilation were also subjected to the British policy of cultural erasure and assimilation. The non-Hausa speaking, non-Muslim sector of northern Nigeria, on the other hand, is a narrower descriptive category which consists of districts in the former Benue, Ilorin, and Kabba Provinces, whose populations, for the most part, didn't speak Hausa at all.”⁶

As for the greater Middle Belt, according to Ochonu it “embraces non-Muslim and Christian indigenes of Kebbi, Kano, Jigawa, Katsina, Zamfara, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Adamawa, Niger, Kaduna, and Taraba.” He, nonetheless, insists that “the cultural Middle Belt is not to be confused with the geographical or geopolitical Middle Belt, which is roughly coterminous with Nigeria's Northcentral geopolitical space as defined by the 1999 constitution.”⁷

The inclusion of Kano, Katsina, Jigawa, Zamfara and Kebbi, predominantly Muslim communities in northern Nigeria, as part of the Middle Belt further complicates and blurs the meaning of its moving geographic and cultural frontier. Politically, the Middle Belt is interpreted as a “vehicle for political mobilisation and a rallying point in the struggle for identity and political participation.”⁸

From whatever perspective one chooses to look at this intangible identity category, the Middle Belt, there is only one common thread which runs through it – i.e. the fluidity and constructiveness of its frontiers as an “imagined community”.⁹ It is against this background that Sam Egwu, one of the prominent Middle Belt writers, has drawn our attention to the danger associated with the crude reductionism and essentialism which reduces the whole struggle to a question of number or any objective criteria, because identity is not only socially and politically constructed but it is fluid and subject to redefinition.¹⁰ The Middle Belt is imagined because the parameters which define its boundaries, history, sovereignty, cultural allegiance, but especially the distinction between citizens and non-citizens are still remarkably vague. Not only the Middle Belt is a socially constructed identity; it is also opposed to the equally problematic category of a “Hausa-Fulani” North, which is imagined as coterminous with the pre-colonial political entity of the Caliphate of Sokoto. The social, anthropological and historical realities of the two categories against which the Middle Belt is imagined (the ethnic category of the ‘Hausa-Fulani’ and the political category of the Sokoto Caliphate) are on their turn over-simplified and represented as homogenous, monolithic entities.

Despite its endemic cultural pluralism, the Middle Belt elites have succeeded in imposing a historical narrative of descent and dissent on the Middle Belt communities.

One North? One Middle Belt?

While defying any definitive taxonomy and interpretation, the Middle Belt remains a powerful identity signifier in Nigerian political discourse, which is usually deployed in the activation of non-Muslims’ consciousness against the so-called “Hausa-Fulani” Muslims. Hausa-Fulani as an ethnic category, however, is a misnomer, as brilliantly shown in some studies by Yusuf Bala Usman.¹¹

The identity mobilisation of the Middle Belt discourse is achieved mainly through the historiographic practice of telescoping back existing political contestations into the past. A narrative of dissent is evoked in defining and mobilising the Middle Belt community. Despite its endemic cultural pluralism, the Middle Belt elites have succeeded in imposing a historical narrative of descent and dissent on the Middle Belt communities. The classic examples of such narratives of dissent are two

publications, *The Kaduna Mafia* and *The Right to be Different*.¹² The former is a proverbial text, which set the stage for a conspiratorial view of history in which certain historical events associated with the history of the Sokoto Jihad and British colonialism are explained in terms of a historical plot by the “Hausa-Fulani” to dominate the non-Muslims of northern Nigeria. Hence the use by Bala Takaya of the term “British-Fulani conspiracy.”¹³

As a form of alternative consciousness, the Middle Belt requires certain cultural artefacts to function as an effective opposition to “Northern nationalism”.¹⁴ In actual fact, the Middle Belt project can only be understood as a by-product, and a reaction to, the project of ‘northernisation’ pursued in the 1950s-1960s by a sector of the new Muslim elites of the colonial entity known as Northern Nigeria. The project of “one North” as a broad policy of cultural allegiance, popularly known as ‘northernisation,’ can be defined as the promotion of the idea of a strong and united North as a powerful political block in the new political entity of Nigeria. This “consisted not only of the idea of the unity and distinctness of the North within Nigeria, but also perceptions of what the ideal structure of power in

Northern society ought to be.”¹⁵ Beneath the drive towards northernisation, however, was the reality of a mounting protest against perceived Muslim domination of Christian minorities. Northern Christians saw northernisation as a subtle attempt by the then premier of Northern Nigeria and Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello (1954-1966), to consolidate the legacies of his forebears, the Sokoto triumvirate — Shehu Usman Danfodio (1754-1817), Muhammad Bello (1781-1837) and Abdullahi Danfodio (1766-1828) — who led the Sokoto jihad of early nineteenth century in both its political and intellectual fronts. The most important political legacy of the Sokoto Jihad was the formation of the Sokoto Caliphate that lasted from 1804 to 1903.¹⁶

The northern Muslim political elites in the period of decolonisation and the First Republic (1960-1979) were regarded by non-Muslims of the Middle Belt as direct disciples of Danfodio, whose supposed dream of bringing the entire country under Islamic rule had been interrupted by British colonialism.¹⁷ This was a reaction to the deliberate attempt of the Sardauna

to create a one, indivisible north by bridging the endemic cultural divisions between the different groups within the north. The northernisation drive was, therefore, interpreted by the Middle Belt people as a continuation of Danfodio's jihad, and an alternative Middle Belt was mainly constructed as a reaction to this perceived threat.

There is, however, a complex history of theological/doctrinal divisions and class conflict in both pre-colonial and colonial northern Nigeria that are not captured both by the politics of northernisation and by its Middle Belt reaction. While many Muslims did see the politics of the Sardauna as an embodiment of the ideals of the Sokoto Caliphate, some prominent northern Muslim intellectuals such as Mallam Aminu Kano, espoused an opposing interpretation of the legacy of Islam and the Sokoto jihad, on the basis of which they tried to mobilise the northern masses *against* the Sardauna and his party. It should also be noted that the Sokoto jihad had never resulted in the formation of one single religious or even political block, but only in a loose allegiance of different, often competing emirates to the over-riding leadership of Sokoto. In fact, there were always many different social, political classes, and theological groups in the polity. Moreover, even if the drive towards uniformity in the north can be interpreted as a subtle policy of islamisation, the "religious bias of the Sardauna is acknowledged to have been always moderated by his pragmatic and visionary commitment to the development of the North and its institutions, so much so that a key aspect of the Sardauna's policy were his efforts to gain the loyalty of the northern Christian elites."¹⁸

In short, the interpretation of the northern politics from the prism of the Sokoto jihad represents a crude simplification of the complex history of the Muslim north with its political, class and theological divisions. The Kano and Bauchi Civil Wars,¹⁹ Mahdist resistance movements,²⁰ the age-old intellectual friction between the sheikdom of Borno and the Sokoto Caliphate²¹ and the oppositional politics between the Sardauna's NPC (Northern Peoples' Congress) and Aminu Kano's NEPU (Northern Elements' Progressive Union) that so powerfully animated

the last decades of colonial rule and the early post-colonial politics in the North, better illustrate diversity than homogeneity. While it is certainly true that Islam is central to the formation of the Sokoto Caliphate, the reality of the polity was far from being theologically and politically monolithic.

More importantly, the jihad had not brought some of the Middle Belt communities within the fold of Islam and the emirate system. Although the jihad movement saw the establishment of emirates in all the erstwhile states of Hausaland (Kano, Katsina, Zazzau, Daura, Gobir, Zamfara, Bauchi) and the non-Hausa emirates of Adamawa, Ilorin and Nupe around the Middle Belt area, the populations of substantial parts of Jos, Southern Kaduna and Southern Adamawa remained notably animist until the advent of Christianity in colonial northern Nigeria.²²

Religious passion as a mediator of identity

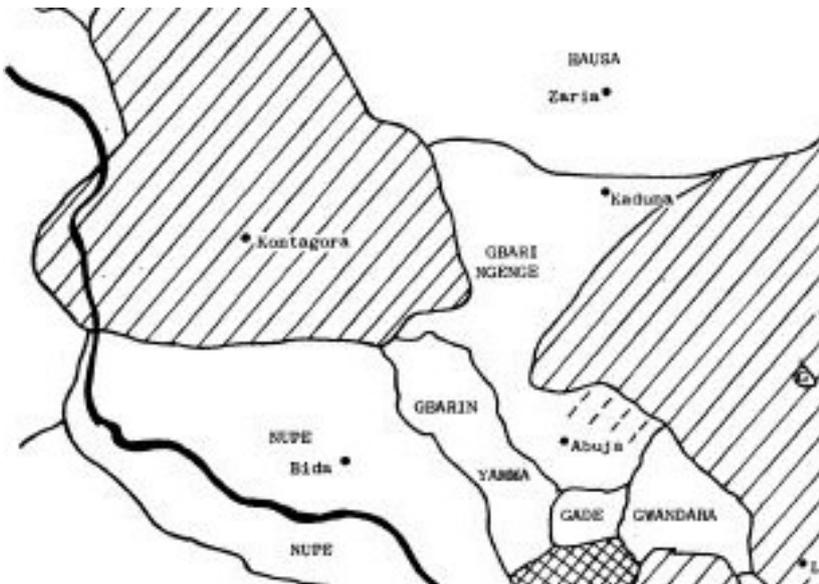
Unlike most parts of the Muslim north where Islam, Hausa language and culture provided a fertile ground for the construction of a universalistic social identity, the cultural artefacts required to have the Middle Belt operate as a viable social and political identity were lacking, especially during its formative days in colonial and early post-colonial period. There was no common language (except Hausa,

which is considered 'imperial' by the proponent of a Middle Belt identity), nor an indigenous set of cultural values to which a majority subscribed, nor a pre-existing national history to draw on.²³ The Middle Belt is one of the areas of greatest cultural and linguistic diversity in the whole West Africa, with hundreds of ethnic groups within the region (at times historically in conflict)

including the Tiv, Jukun, Igala, Igbirra, Idoma, Nupe, Gbaya, Birom, Angas, among many others. In the absence of a strong history of cohesion, the non-Muslim communities resorted to religion in search of a common cultural denominator.

British colonial policy on religion in northern Nigeria allowed Christian missions to operate in the non-Muslim areas, but prevented them from carrying out their activities in Muslim areas. This

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The Middle Belt: distribution of the main linguistic and ethnic groups.

saw the emergence and spread of Christianity as a dominant religion and source of identity among the non-Muslim groups. Their particularistic religions and world views gave way to Christian universalism. The British policy of religious and cultural non-interference in northern Nigeria has been criticised for creating two world communities and strengthening the religious divide between Muslims and non-Muslims within the North. Paradoxically, instead of conferring on the non-Muslim groups a better status and recognition within the British colonial matrix, it stigmatised their status since Christianity was considered politically subversive by the colonial regime and the 'Islamic' structures of the emirates, re-conceptualized as 'Native Authorities,' were recognized by the British as the legitimate authority throughout the North.

Naturally, the Christian missionaries operating in the Middle Belt supported the ideology of dissent against the political hegemony of northern Muslims and encouraged political activities among their converts, which pushed the process of politicisation of religion even further.²⁴ The intertwining of religion and politics took root largely in the context of decolonisation. Different groups fought the British for different reasons. To the non-Muslim groups, particularly the Protestants, "politics was a matter of religious and ethnic survival in the face of Muslim domination, and this was much more important to

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them than the question of national independence."²⁵ Consequently, many religiously-inspired groups and political organisations were founded to promote the religious interests of Middle Belt's Christians in an increasingly competitive political space.

Beginning with the Non-Muslim League (NML) founded in Jos in 1950, under the leadership of Pastor David Lot, the Middle Belt struggle transformed to become the Middle Zone League (MZL) in 1951. The former has been described as an expression of a shared hostility among the Middle Belters against the Emirates.²⁶ The

cardinal objective of the NML was the protection of the religion and customs of the Non-Muslims of the north.²⁷ In 1954 the Middle Zone League entered into a loosed alliance with the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), which was the ruling party. This was soon followed by a split in the party and the emergence of the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) in 1955. Three years following its formation, the UMBC was designated a "Pagan and Christian party" by the British colonial government.²⁸ Religious difference was a central theme in the Non-Muslim League and in the consolidation of UMBC in the Middle Belt struggle.²⁹

Conclusion

The widening of the religious divide today in northern Nigeria because of an increasing politicisation of religion is rooted in an older process of construction of a Middle Belt "non-Muslim" identity. The Sharia question throughout the North and the settler/indigene question in Plateau State have in recent decades evoked serious crises and communal conflicts in the Middle Belt. With the declaration of Sharia law in some Muslim-

dominated states in northern Nigeria following the return to civil rule in 1999, the confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims has resurfaced violently. Between 1999 and 2011 several violent clashes between non-Muslims and Muslims in the

Middle Belt region (particularly Jos and Southern Kaduna) were reported. Some of the worst of these religious disturbances were the 2000 Sharia riot in Kaduna in which an estimated 1000 people were killed and properties worth millions of Naira destroyed and the 2002 violence in Yelwa-Shendam in Plateau state.³⁰ The region has become a regular space for citizenship contestation, and for politics of inclusion and exclusion that often rely on religion as their main identity category.

This paper has attempted to problematise the question of the Middle Belt and to show how religion was used from the late colonial time as a vehicle for exhuming passions of victimhood among the non-Muslims of the area. It has shown that the struggle manifested itself mainly through opposition to forces of Islamisation and the drive towards uniformity in northern Nigeria. The case of the Middle Belt movement in Nigeria reinforces the view that religion remains a potent passion deployed in social dissension and identity contestations.

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Notes

- 1 This phrase is borrowed from a recent publication titled *Exhuming Passions: the Pressure of the Past in Ireland and Australia*, edited by Katie Holmes and Stuart Warts, Irish Academic Press, 2011.
- 2 See Huntington 1996; Volkan 2006.
- 3 See Usman 1987.

- 4 Bingel 1991; Ballard 1971; Buchanan 1953; Agboola 1961; Pullan 1962.
- 5 Ballard 1971: 1.
- 6 Ochonu 2008: 118.
- 7 Personal correspondence with Moses Ochonu, 2010.
- 8 Alubo 2006: 61.
- 9 For a now classical constructivist study of nationalism, see Anderson 2006.
- 10 Egwu 2001.
- 11 Usman 1992; Usman 2006.
- 12 Takaya & Tyoden 1987. Bagudu & Dakas 2001.
- 13 Takaya 1987: 25.
- 14 Smith 2002: 223.
- 15 Kwanashe 2002: vi.
- 16 See Last 1967.
- 17 Enwerem 1992: 109.
- 18 Ochonu 2010.
- 19 See Fika 1978.
- 20 See Al-Hajj 1973 and Saeed 1985.
- 21 Adeleye 1971.
- 22 The theme of resistance against the caliphate by non-Muslims is the central focus of Middle Belt historiography.
- 23 Smith 2002: 223.
- 24 Kastfelt 1994: 76.
- 25 Kastfelt 1994: 77.
- 26 Smith 2002: 223.
- 27 Kwanashe 2002: 195.
- 28 Willink Commission, *A Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the fears of Minorities and the Means of Allying them*, 1958, Colonial office, London.
- 29 Kwanashe 2002: 197.
- 30 Alubo 2006: 13.