
Middle Belt in Nigeria's Political Space

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The Bible tells us about the confession of a repentant tyrannical Babylonian ruler in Daniel 4: 34-35: “For his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; ... But he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and no one can ward off his hand or say to him, 'What hast thou done?'” What this means is, God is in control of any political arrangement (which includes the making of Northern Nigeria), whether we realise it or not. Our peace is not in the absence of conflict but in God's control of human affairs. Like Paul David Tripp rightly says “...Rest is not to be found in your control but in God's absolute rule over everything. You will never be in a situation, location, or relationship that is not under his control.” But you do not have to understand the world you live in to trust the One who is in control.

Abstract

The paper examines the genesis of Middle Belt ideology and its political pace in Nigeria's political arrangement and permutation. It argues that the wide spread of indigenous Christians in northern Nigeria and the intrusion of Islamic domain in areas within the Middle Belt is its strength or bane. The paper calls for a more diplomatic negotiation with northern Muslim politicians so to have an opportunity to have a shot at the high office of the land. The Muslim core north would always need to Middle Belt support, so Muslim core north must be ready to accept the importance principle of political reciprocity.

Key words: Middle Belt, Caliphate, Islamic State, syncretic Islam, Colonial jihad, political consciousness, northernisation, political bride.

Introduction

Out of the foreign religions in Nigeria Christianity and Islam were the oldest, such that it can be said that these two religions have become tradition religions of Nigerians. Of these two Islam is older in Nigeria than Christianity. Islam entered Nigeria about the eleventh century. Christopher Steed and David Westerlund tell us Islam spread in northern Nigeria informally. According to them, “Islam came to northern Nigeria from two directions: in the eleventh

century from the north-east via Arab and Berber merchants from North Africa and the Sahara, to the kingdom of Kanem-Borno (north-eastern Nigeria); and from the west in the late fourteenth and early fifteen centuries, through the influence of the Wangarawa, to the city kingdoms of Hausaland (northern Nigeria)". The first Christian missionaries in Nigeria came from Portugal and they arrived in 1515. The Portuguese missionaries introduced mediaeval Christianity to Nigeria.

The growth and endurance of this Christianity during this period was limited, but Islam grew in the courts and in the markets; ordinary Hausa and Fulani, however, continued to practice traditional religion or at least syncretic Islam. Islam in the Kanem-Borno area was much purer. This limited scope of Islam continued in the Hausa states until the jihad led by Othman dan Fodio in 1804. Distinct marks of the Muslim societies in post-jihad northern Nigeria were the establishment of the emirate system under the caliphate and the entrenchment of the Shari'ah as the constitution of state. As such, the caliphate was created as a result of Fodio's Islamic revolution. So, by all intent and purposes, the caliphate was an Islamic state.

The Islamic caliphate in Northern Nigeria did not have any contact with modern Western Christianity until 1900 when the first missionary team led by Bishop Herbert Tugwell visited Kano. Emmanuel Ayandele tells us these missionaries were seen as spies and the emir of Kano, Aliyu, gave them seventy-two hours within which to pack their loads and leave Kano. He had retorted thus after the team told him of their mission:

Start a school? No. We have our own and our children are taught the Holy Quran. Medical work? No. Our medicine is the Holy Quran and the name of Allah. We don't want you. You can go. I give you three days to prepare a hundred donkeys to carry your loads back to Zaria, and we never wish to see you here again.

But in retrospect and contrary to the view that the Kanawahad that these Western missionaries were spies, the emir spoke this way because Kano was one of the major cities in the Islamic state and a centre of Islamic learning. To introduce a rival religion in Kano at this time would be unthinkable. Thus, the gates of Kano were not open to Christians until the first decade of the twentieth century during the colonial period which provided an opportunity for the influx of Western educated Christians from southern Nigeria into the city as petty traders or in search of white-colour jobs in the colonial civil service. A major means of travel at this time was the rail line, which was extended to Kano in 1911. These southern Christians were kept in separate

communities called Sabon Gari (i.e. new settlement/town). This settlement pattern characterized nature of many cities in the northern emirates. The only Christian settlement within a Muslim city in Caliphate (Islamic State) was in Zaria beginning from 1905, but had to vacate this location to a place outside the city, named Wusasa, in 1929, due to growing number of Muslim converts to Christianity and children of Christian converts who had been sent to attend the mission school there.

Colonialism extended the spread of Islam outside the borders of the Islamic caliphate and the Kanem-Borno through its policies, notably the Indirect Policy. This Policy was implemented by, as YusufuTuraki argues, the incorporation of non-Muslim territories into the emirates and the subjugation of non-Muslim groups and societies under emirs. This 'colonial jihad' was more effective in the spread of Islam in central Nigeria than the jihadi Fulani raids on the non-Muslim groups and societies in pre-colonial period. Thus, the spread of Islam beyond Islamic state/caliphate into central Nigeria was not through jihad but through colonial policies. The other policy was the prohibition of Christian missionary activities in the emirates. But the ban was providential, as Andrew Barnes notes in his study of the colonial records. Within thirty years of the ban on Christian missionary activities in the emirates in Northern Nigeria, Western missionaries and their Nigerian collaborators effectively created a 'middle belt', the Christianised part of the northern Nigeria, which serve a buffer zone between southern Nigeria (which was predominantly Christian) and the Islamic state/caliphate. Thus the Middle Belt as a geographical space was a creation of Christian missions. This space included a bit of Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Kano, Jigawa, Yobe and Kastina states, some parts of Borno, Gombe, Bauchi and Niger states, major part of Kaduna, Adamawa, Taraba, Nasarawa, Kwara, and Kogi states, and almost the whole of Benue and Plateau (the melting pot of the Movement) states. So, there was no states that had no missionary presence in northern Nigeria by 1960. The missionary bodies that spread tentacles almost throughout northern Nigeria were the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) and the many Catholic missionary organs. However, the harbinger of

Catholicism in northern Nigerian cities were the Igbo traders and civil servants. These Catholic migrant missionaries followed a pattern of evangelism in Africa where, as Andrew Walls argues, the church goes before the mission.

The Emergence of the Middle Belt Political Consciousness

The Middle Belt political consciousness was expressed in terms of 'Middle Belt Movement', with a central goal: the creation of geographical space called the Middle Belt Region out of the Northern Region. The founders of the Middle Belt Movement were all Christians, some of them were ordained ministers of churches founded by several missionaries bodies that introduced Christianity into northern Nigeria in the 1900s. Scholars are not in agreement on the role missionaries played in the development of Middle Belt political consciousness. But what is clear is that Western missionaries, in their efforts to handover churches they founded to the locals, contextual Christian civic responsibility by planting an anti-Islam and anti-Hausa Fulani hegemony sentiments in the minds of their converts, or as Logams puts it, missionaries created “an explicit Christian religious identity vigorously directed at reducing Islamic hegemony of political roles and decision making in government in the North.” This is seen in the name leaders of the Middle Belt Movement gave to their first political party, non-Muslim League (NML) in 1949, in 1950 it was changed to Middle Zone League (MZL), then in 1953 there was split in the MZL and Middle Belt Peoples' Congress (MBP), led by Joseph Tarka, emerged out it because some members MZL wanted to join the party of the ruling government controlled by Hausa Fulani, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC). Later in 1955 some elements of the MZL cross carpeted into MBP and formed the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) also led by Tarka. This was, perhaps, the first Christian political party on the continent! Ahead of the elections in 1959, the UMBC joined the Yoruba party, the Action Group (AG) led by Chief Obafemi Owolowo due to the fact that he was the only political leader at that time who believed in a true federalism. The Middle agitators believed it was only a true federalism that would liberate them from the domination of the Hausa Fulani Muslims. So, Western missionaries not only created the Middle Belt, they also inculcated religious based political sentiments in the minds of its politicians. This thinking has subsisted as can be seen in contemporary Christian polemics. In fact, Barnes has reported write-ups by one of the

Church Missionary Society's (CMS) missionaries, Ethel Miller, a younger sister of Dr. Walter R. S. Miller, one of the pioneer CMS missionaries in northern Nigeria. She had published at least two pamphlets, *The Truth about Muhammed* and *Women Count* in which she describes Islam as a religion that suppresses women and Muhammad as an associate of Satan and an antichrist. The pamphlets were published by another mission printing press, SIM Niger Press in Minna. The purpose of writing these pamphlets was not just theological but to cast doubt in the minds of colonial authorities of the ability of the Muslim controlled government of northern Nigerian government to uphold values of modern civilisation. In fact, Karl Harm Kumm, the founder of Sudan United Mission (SUM) had written in 1917, "There is not a single country where Mohammedanism [Islam] has been dominant for any length of time in which any advance of civilization can be traced to that religion." Barnes attributed to Kumm the missiological strategy that gave birth to the Middle Belt in which he called for the formation of an ecumenical mission that would spread its tentacles across West Central Sudan to "counteract THE MOHAMMEDAN ADVANCE into the largest unevangelized Mission Field" (meaning traditionalist domain in central Nigeria). Toward independence of Nigeria the SUM created a platform political activism, the federation of SUM churches in northern Nigeria called TarayyarEklisiyoyin Krista A Sudan (now TarayyarEklisiyoyin Krista A Najeriya, TEKAN) (I.e. the Association of Churches of Christ in the Sudan (now Sudan has been replaced by 'Nigeria')). Perhaps the first church based pressure group in Nigeria. An insightful political scientist, Paul ChununLogams agrees with Kasfelt and categorically stated that "the founding fathers of the Middle Belt movement saw the initial struggle for the creation of a M-Belt Region as a struggle for the creation of a Christian Region in the same sense of the creation of a 'Christian Zone' in the North whose aim was to halt the southward advance of Islam in the 'Sudan Belt'. But by 1960, the agitation for Middle Belt region had subsided and the energies of the politicians were directed to national causes through one of the three major political parties, NPC, NCNC and AG.

Why did Middle Belt Movement go into extinction?

The British government had calmed the agitations of the Movement through the well known Sir Henry Willink Commission, which inquired into the fears of minority groups in Nigeria and offered ways of allaying them. The government promised to put certain measures in place to guarantee the rights and freedom of minority groups in northern Nigeria. The government of

northern Nigeria under the Premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardunan Sokoto, took the commission's report seriously and began the northernisation programme. In this programme qualified members of minority groups were employed to fill their quota in the government bureaucracy. For instance, most of those recruited into the Nigerian Army at this time were Christians from the Middle Belt. Some of Sarduna's confidants were Christians. At one time, he temporarily handed over the premiership of northern Nigeria to Christian minister, Rev. David Lot (who at that time was an elected member of the Northern House of Assembly) when he was to travel to Mecca for the lesser hajj. This is why well meaning Christian politicians from the Middle Belt have described the Sarduna as large hearted and pragmatic. One of them was Danboyi Zang from Gyel village near Bukuru. He was popularly known as 'DanboyiGyel'. He was appointed into the Northern House of Assembly by the Sarduna led government. In his first speech on the floor of the Assembly he showered praises on the Sarduna for exemplary leadership qualities:

I, DanboyiGyel always dreamt that I was in the midst of the members of this House, but for the good leadership of the Premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduna of Sokoto, who said that every person whoever he may be, should ask for his rights and it will be given to him, has thought it necessary for my dream to be fulfilled... We have good government under the leadership of the Hon. Premier Alhaji, Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sarduna of Sokoto which is unique in the whole of Nigeria. In the first place, he likes everyone to enjoy without caring what tribe you belong to... I am appealing to our ministers to emulate the good character of the Hon. Premier to help everybody who comes to them for help.

General Yakubu Gowon's creation of twelve states in Nigeria in 1967 seemed to have been received with sigh of relief by Christian minorities in northern and south eastern Nigeria. Minorities in the south west had had their liberation in 1963 when Mid-west Region was created. In this new development the Gowon's administration put the chief architects of the Middle Belt Movement Plateau and Benue Provinces into one state, called Benue-Plateau State.

The Resurrection of the Quest for the Middle Belt as a Geographical Space

The quest began, perhaps, with the coup de tat led by Major Gideon Orkar on the 22nd April 1990. In his speech, Orkar gave the reason for the takeover, which was to liberate the “marginalized, oppressed and enslaved peoples of the Middle Belt and the south with a view to freeing ourselves and children yet unborn from eternal slavery and colonisation by a clique of this country.” He accused the 'clique' of working against the Willink's Commission's recommendations of assuaging the fears of minorities in Nigeria. To end the domination of the peoples of the Middle Belt and southern Nigeria, Orkar announced temporal “excise” from Federal Republic of Nigeria “the following states namely, Sokoto, Borno, Kastina, Kano and Bauchi”, what is also called the core north. He gave certain conditions to be met before these

states were re-admitted. Be that as it may, this is the first time Christians from the central part of Nigeria would wish to go along with a developed south. More than twenty years after Orkar's coup, the idea of separation from the 'core north' is still rife; some have even asked for the Middle Belt to constitute itself into a nation; this is, perhaps, heightened by the spate of killings in the Middle Belt area and in the southern parts of Nigeria. To achieve the objective of creating a territorial entity called the Middle Belt, such a geographical space and its people was re-defined:

Everyone that feels and knows he or she is Middle Belter, such a one belongs to the Middle Belt. A Middle Belter is anyone who was historically never defeated by the Fulani Jihad...A Middle Belter is any one who does not subscribe to Caliphate ideology and the hegemony of the Fulani dominated emirate system...a Middle Belter is anyone in the former North who does not wish to live under sharia.

And territorially, the Middle Belt includes area, such as, Southern Borno, Southern Adamawa, Southern Bauchi, Southern Gombe, southern Yobe, southern Kaduna and southern Kebbi, among core Middle Belt states, like, Benue, Taraba and Plateau. Two problems can be seen with this arrangement. Firstly, we have earlier stated that Western and African missionaries had extended Christian influence into the far north/core north with converts from non-Muslim Hausa and a few Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri Muslims. With this arrangement, would 'Middle Belters' of southern Kaduna, for example, exclude Hausa Christians in Ikara Local Government Area? Secondly, given the ideology of the Middle Belt, how would it deal with Caliphate or Sultanate outposts in emirates like Wase, Lere, Jere, Kanam, Keffi, Nasarawa, Lafia, Muri, Adamawa, Jama'a etc. Would these territories be excised, as Orkar suggested? Give the above definition of the Middle Belt and the demography discussed above, would it may be safer to describe the Middle Belt as a political ideology with an undefined territory. We propose a geographical spread of the Middle Belt in our conclusion below.

Whether we agree or not, the position of Middle Belt in Nigeria as a geographical entity is ambiguous. Christians in northern Nigeria are seen as northerners (or even Hausa) culturally by those in the south of Nigeria, while those in the Islamic core north consider them as nasara (Western Christian), sharing religious and Western cultural values with Christians in southern Nigeria. Thus politically, the Middle Belt is a hybrid. In recent times, it has become a ship without a pilot. Courageous leaders of the Middle Belt ideology, the likes of Tarka and Solomon Daushep Lar are no more. This makes it difficult to have a Christian state. Benue State is the only state in northern Nigeria that does not have an Islamic emirate, that is, no inch of its territory was conquered by the Fulani Jihad. Therefore, the present Benue State trouble with unknown bandits can be understood.

Concluding Remarks

The Middle Belt, or whatever we would want to call it, should remain within the north and negotiate its political identity and survival. To do this negotiation, Middle Belt ideology should be driven by the need to promote the rights of minorities in the north, the demographic spread would mean include Fulani, Hausa and Kanuri Christians in the far north and peoples within the emirates in central Nigeria (enumerated above), the latter actually control the politics of the area they are occupying, for example in Nadamawa, asarawa and Niger states. It means the Middle Belt, must not be driven by a religious ideology because there are groups and societies within it are religiously diverse; meaning Christians, Muslims and Traditionalists exist among Alago, Mada, Egon, Igala, Kadara, Bugum, Igbira, just to mention a few. This would be a large and powerful political group and territory, indeed. After all, the peoples that constitute this territory, scattered throughout the northern Nigeria, are considered as beautiful 'political bride'. Which means no one gets into political office as state a governor or even as a head of state without the support of the Middle Belt. This is a plus for the Middle Belt, because its population is its strength. I personally think, bandits hired from other west African countries were meant to cow the 'Middle Belters' to support Buhari fourth bid to become Nigeria's head of state. The fear was that Buhari could not clinch the presidency of this country without the massive support of the 'Middle Belters'. Thus, with proper and rigorous negotiation with the Muslim politicians in the core north and even southern sympathisers, the emergence of the Nigeria's president from the Middle Belt is a possibility.