The Myth and Reality of Middle Belt Geo-Politics in Nigeria: A Discourse

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Abstract
The middle Belt is a relatively big complex multi-ethnic religious geographical area, where unlike the Hausa — Fulani and the Kanuris of the far North is populated largely by minority ethnic groups. The areas since before the pre-independence period have been agitating for its region characterized by separation from the Hausa Fulani and Muslim domination, it also characterized by insecurity in terms of political instability, conflicts and ethnic crisis especially in the past two decades. The paper seeks to look at the pre-independence movements for the creation of middle Belt region since 1909, the myth and reality of the middle Belt region, conflicts and crisis especially in the Benue valley and Plateau State with the view of making recommendations and possibly laying the foundation for finding solutions towards peace, stability and development in the Area.

Keywords: Middle Belt, Geo-Politics, Politics

Introduction
It is often argued that establishing a viable definition of the Middle Belt is a most arduous task. To properly capture the very essence of the true meaning of Middle Belt, it is imperative to identify and appreciate the geographical location, the population, and people of the area and the history of the people. According to Gyuse and Ajene (2006; 65) describe the middle Belt, include all that geographical section of Nigeria which incorporates states such as Benue, Taraba, Adamawa, Plateau, Nasarawa and Federal Capital Territory. This paper discover that some of the features of the Middle-Belt region is the presence of several heterogeneous communities with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds who all claim indigene ship of different portions of the region.

The area therefore lacks homogeneous characteristic, which other regions such as South West and South East hold. These ethnic groups which include Tiv, Birom, Bassa, Angula, Hausa, Fulani and several others have in general terms inhabited their present locations ever before Nigeria’s political independence in 1960. The social relations between these ethnic groups over the decades have often been characterized by peaceful co-existence, symbiotic relationship in terms of trade and commerce. (For instance the Tiv who were predominantly farmers and the Jukun who were fishermen) as well as the retention of traditional ruler ship institutions despite the presence of the western style, legal institution and process, (Oga and Gyuse 2006).

The ethnic groups in the middle belt in spite of their salutary role in political and constitutional development of Nigeria remains the most under developed in terms of employment, security, infrastructural development and capital income remain one of the lowest in the country. There is hardly any redistribution of capital, socio-economic programes from the centre to this area.

The region is in serious economic decline and is dependent on primary commodities. Undoubtedly, the valley is at high risk of violence given its social and economic characteristics. This cocktail is as it has created a pool of improvised and disaffected young men who can always be cheaply recruited by “entrepreneurs of violence”. Expectedly, the interaction between their different peoples and the attendant competition for political and economic advantages has at several times in the history of the region, created social friction which snowballed into full-scale conflict, resulting in the massive loss of lives and properties as well as the overall disruption of the social equilibrium.

Conceptualizing Middle Belt
Several contesting definitions of the Middle Belt abound, especially since the Middle Belt is a geographically fluid existence. In general it is agree that a conservative territorial estimation of Middle Belt comprises of Benue, plateau, Kwara, Kogi, Southern Kaduna, FCT, Niger, Adamawa and Taraba states. Even though this territorial description is imperfect, since in all these states, there are significant numbers of Muslims non Hausa as well as Muslim Hausa people, that who may or may not be captured by specific delineations of the Middle Belt.

According to Suleiman (2012) states like Kebbi, Gombe, Bauchi, Borno and even Katsina and Kano contain pockets of non-Hausa, on 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. What do we actually mean by Middle Belt of Nigeria? This seems to be a very simple question
but a difficult one in reality. In connection to this, Agaba (2006) argued that there is some difficulty finding sound criteria for this area and agreeing on its geographical and cultural limit. In a similar vein, T.T Shut has attempted to capture the meaning of the Middle Belt. To him

The middle Belt comprises people that existed in Nigeria with a consciousness, identity and culture that is difficult from the Hausa/Fulani and the Kanuri of the far North. There is no consensus between scholars on what constitutes the Middle Belt region, while some scholars perceive the Middle Belt in the context of religion i.e northern Christian as against their Muslim counterparts, others perceive it to include all non Hausa/Fulani speaking people of the north. The area covers the people of Benue, Plateau, Kogi, Nassarawa, Taraba, Niger, Southern Kaduna, Southern Borno and kebbi states. The Abacha regime created six geo political zones. The North West, North East, North Central (Middle Belt), South West, South East, and South-South. The central zone Middle Belt comprises of Benue, Kogi, Niger, Nassarawa, Kwara, Plateau and FCT. The Middle Belt perceived either as a geographical concept of people found in a particular geo-political area that is fairly contagious as described above or a religious grouping that have a share identity and belief that is distinct from the followers of Mohammed or a collection of minorities whether they are Christians, Muslims or Animist (Logams, 1985, Hembe 1983, Ayoade, 2011, Duddley, 1968, Dent, 1966, and Tyoden, 1993). Whatever definition one gives to the Middle Belt, one fact remains that this area has suffered serious political and religious manipulation by the Hausa/Fulani who are predominantly found in the North East and North West geo-political zones of Nigeria (Shut, 2007:91)

The description definition of the term Middle Belt is near a mirage. All the definitions attempted above are inconclusive or not exhausted as Egwemi (2014) assert that it is not possible to categorize all Middle Belters as Christians because a significant number of Muslims exit across the length and breadth of the region. Egwu (2001) also make us to believe that Hausa/Fulani speaking people constitute the region will not be true also as a significant number of Hausa/Fulani ‘settlers’ have been in the region for over a hundred years.

This paper affirms that the Middle Belt of Nigeria also called central or lower North is the geographical belt of the South of Northern Nigeria and the North of Southern Nigeria. Historically, no aspect of Nigeria has been so designated or demarcated officially after the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, the component part of Nigeria have been designated first as regions and today as states. While it is true that there was a major agitation for a Middle Belt region in the First Republic, such a region never came to be. Thus, inspite of the sentiments about a Middle Belt group in Nigeria, no such group exist in reality. It is indeed the care that the elites of the belt use the sentiment to further their interest in relation to their core-Northern ‘Hausa-Fulani ‘oppressors ‘in particular and the Nigeria state in general (Egwemi, 2012)
Theoretical framework
The middle belt movement which stated before independence was a reaction to colonial relationships and domination by culturally different groups. The reaction took the form of activating tribal support for creation of a middle belt region. This was meant to separate the middle belt from the Northern region which was purely dominated by the Hausa Fulani.

The existence of a plural society is an essential condition for the analysis of political problems with conflict models. This is particularly with the theory of internal colonialism which suggests that a situation of plurality exist with inequalities among the group members of the societies. This in turn produces potential and sometimes, actual unequal socio-economic and political relationships between the political different groups, they also generate conflicts, the conflict is essentially between dominant groups and the minorities Logmas (2004).

The Middle Belt: History and Politics since Pre-Colonial Independence Period
The history of the middle belt region can be traced to pre-colonial era. The region being in the central part of Nigeria federation shows that they are subjected to domination and being control by Hausa/Fulani and it is felt that there was need for the creation of the Middle Belt region in order to have its own area of jurisdiction just like the South West and South East regions.

Preceding the political demands for the creation of the paramount chiefs, some non-Islamic chiefs in the middle belt areas, made request for the separation of their areas of authority from Fulani and Islamic leadership, as early as 1908 for example, some non-Islamic chiefs in the Chamba, and Bachama areas of Adamawa, the Lere district in Southern Bauchi and the non-Islamic chiefs of Zagon-Kataf in Southern Zaria demanded from British Residents in Adamawa, Bauchi, Zaria and some parts of the Plateau, separation from control by Fulani.
and Islamic rulers, particularly among areas where British conquest had succeeded in establishing authority. These are areas that had come under the direct impact of the Fulani jihad and where partial political incorporation into the structure of political sphere of Islamic rule had been achieved before 1900 (Yoroms, 2002).

These demands, however, were not made in terms of a middle-belt identity or regions but rather in context of a distinct cultural identity that was meant to restore indigenous control in the affairs of the groups. In the 1940’s the demands were taken over by the tribal unions which had emerged from achieved social and political consciousness from Christian missionary activities. When this happen, the demands become characterized by violent protests and riots. This was so the case of the demands for separation from the Emir of Bauchi by the Sayawa in Lere districts, the Madagali from the Emir in Mubi, Higg, Kilba, Chamba and Batta under Fulani district heads, centered on the Emir of Yola in Adamawa Province. Later in 1958, the Kilba and associated groups won their independence from Yola after refusal of northern Cameroon in the plebiscite to join Nigeria. Protest and political hostilities also characterized demands for separation from the Fulani and Islamic leadership in the district heads among the Kataf and other related non-Islamic groups such as the Karekare and Lafia districts (Alemik and Okoye 2006).

The politically significant aspects of this local campaign which demanded for Fulani and Islamic separation in Adamawa, Southern Bauchi, Zaria and parts of the Plateau before the organization of the middle belt movement in 1949, was British administration in the North which was obliged to introduce some forms of elected representation into the mother authority councils more fully and much more rapidly than in other areas of the Middle-belt like the main Plateau areas, Jukun, Idoma, and Tiv. However these demands also suggest that separatist demands existed among some of the non-Islamic groups in the middle belt area before an overall political movement of separation from the Islamic groups emerged as a Middle belt movement.

The earliest, of these ideas and conceptions of a “middle-belt region” were those of the German Christian Missionary with the British Sudan united mission1 (SUM) Dr. Karl Kumm in 1907, in which he suggested a Benue region to both Christian and the British administration in Nigeria. A more serious political conception of an administrative unit in the British protectorate of Nigeria, as a Region for non-Islamic groups and cultural minorities in the north which received the attention of the government of British administration before the development of a full-blown political organization that articulated demands for the creation of a Middle-Belt region, came from E.D Mirel, He was an Influential journalist in London and editor in one of the British African mail. Mirel made his proposal for the creation, of a central Region for non-Muslim and cultural minorities (which he called pagans) in the north in 1911 in the specific political context of the anticipated emulation of Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria in to one administration (Timothy and Oga 2006). In 1919, there were more suggestions from British political officers in the services of the government of the British Administration in Nigeria for the subdivision of the protectorate into more units. These particularly focused on the north, as a solution to the problem of Mal-incorporation of the non-Islamic groups.

In the period between 1920 and 1939 for example, British officers who had served in the non-Islamic areas in the north made several proposals for the subdivision of the North and Nigeria in general into a dozen or more political units, largely developed from the idea of Mirel and Temple. However, when these developments were gaining the attention of public policy makers, there was a sudden outburst of tribal nationalism among the Middle-Belt group and for the decade after 1940; interest in political separation from the Islamic society was temporarily submerged. (Yoroms 2002).

The mal -integration of the Middle-Belt groups by forceful political measure (i.e. conquest) and their subordination to the Islamic society and leadership (i.e. in certain phases of the application of indirect rule policy), explain the subsequent resurgence of tribal movements within the very political boundaries of the north. The tribal movements were mainly concentrated in the tribal areas, which among other factors created the foundations and origin in the growth and development of the Middle-Belt movement.

The tribal movements of the 1940’s were also to produce political support for the Middle-Belt movement when it demanded the creation of the Middle-Belt region in the North in 1950. One of the most important contributing forces in the development of tribal movements was the attainment of Christian consciousness among the Middle-Belt groups. Factual evidence on the growth and development of the Middle-Belt movement in the period between 1949 and 1965, derive from the interview discussions with politicians in Adamawa, Southern Bauchi, Benue, Plateau and Zaria who participated in the different phases of the organization. (Logams 2004).

The personalities and politicians involved in the Middle-Belt period between November 1980 and February 1981 included Moses Nyam Rwang (Biror Jos Division of the plateau) Pastor David V. lot (Sur-Pankshin Division on the plateau. Jonah Asadugu (BacharnaNuman Division in Adamawa province), Azi Nyako (Jarawa-S. Bauchi in Bauchi Division) Isaac Kpum, Isaac Sha’ahu (Tiv-Benue Province) Gayus Gilama (Bachama-Numan Division in Adamawa Province), Patrick Dokotri (Biror —Jos Division on the Plateau and secretary to the UMBC party). An interview was also held with J.S. Tarka in London in March 1980. (Alemik and Okoye, 2006).
During the past two decades, Nigeria has witnessed different forms of dysfunctional conflicts. These conflicts are sometimes caused by certain factors like mainly resources, psychological needs and values.

The Middle Belt region of Nigeria has had a sizeable share of Nigerians communal and identity based conflicts. Other regions occupied by ethnic minorities such as Niger Delta, Aguleri Umauleri conflict in 1960 territory of south eastern Nigeria, caused by contest over “who owns the land” (Ekeh 1999). The Ife Modakeke conflict in the Yoruba areas of western Nigeria caused by disputes over the ownership of the Area and accompanying political rights (Albert, 1999). In 1988, some three hundred inter-communal conflicts were recorded in six states alone (Ekeh 1999).

As indicated, the Middle Belt region in general, and the Benue valley in particular, have had a large share of these conflicts. Part of this paper attempted to look at conflicts in the middle Belt and Benue valley but pays specific attention to the political dimensions, that the political dimensions do not explain the totality of
occurrences in these conflicts but rather complement other dimensions. For instance, there is a link between land, citizenship and accompanying political rights and conflicts in the region. Some selected conflicts in the Middle Belt between 1975 to 2002.


Other ethnic conflicts that have taken place from 2000 to 2005 and even the recent Jos crisis are enumerated below.Toto, Nasarawa state, May 6, 2003 between Egbura, Gagyi Bassa over politics. Wase, Plateau state, 2002-204, Taroh, Jukun, Hausa/Fulani over land, politics and religions. Yelwa Sendam, Plateau state 2002-2004 Jarawa, Hausa and Gamai over land, politics and religion. Numam, Adamawa state 2004, Bachama, Hausa/Fulani over land ownership and religion. These crises are areas that the north conservatives are using as strategy to deter the reality of the Middle Belt creation aimed at destabilizing every arrangement with respect to unity among the ethnic groups in the middle Belt region.

The conflicts in Jos Plateau sate is the quest for land ownership and indigenship especially in the last two decades which generated series of conflict and crisis in the region where the Hausa/Fulani people argued that they are the first settlers in that land especially during the Tin mining which started during the colonial period and after independence.(Suleiman:2012)

On the other hand, the Birom people argued that, in spite of the fact that though he Hausa/Fulani in people claim to have been the first settlers in Jos does not automatically guarantee them the possession of the land which is believed to be the domain of the Birom people. The opposing forces are always in constant disagreement with each other especially when it comes to land ownership and the occupation of political power in the area. These manifestations can be seen in the recent crisis in 2004, 2005 during Joshua Dariyes administration and currently the one in March 2010 between the Biroms and the Hausa Fulani in some villages namely Turu Karama, Dogon Nawa, Anguwan doki, Barkin Ladi, etc. These conflicts have over the years resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and properties.

Causes for the Agitation Of Middle – Belt Region From Pre-Independence to Date
It is understood by some people that part of the history of the middle Belt is the history of control and domination by the Hausa -Fulani which are predominantly Muslims in the North. Izah (2010). However, the factual evidence collated for this study suggest that one of the major cause for the organization of the initial parent organization of the Middle-Belt movement, the NML in 1949 took shape from accepted premise by political hardship in the “tribal” unions among the middle-Belt groups and societies was that “Christians’ were deprived of political representation relative to Moslem in the institutions of government in the north previous to 1949, tribal unions among the middle Belt groups and societies were concerned that there existed neglect of their socio-economic problems by governments in the north and that there was domination of political roles and decision making in the local affairs by Hausa-Fulani and non indigenes of their territories. In 1949 therefore, the “theory” propounded for liberation by the Christian leadership in the “tribal unions that are predominantly Christians, they might assert political power and influence to serve their interest in the North, only to the extent that “tribes” among the Middle-Belt groups and societies achieve and strengthen Christian solidarity as a political identity.

Another factor also is believed by its people to be one of the marginalized regions in Nigeria.

The larger part of the population of the area is made up of economically and politically disempowered rural-based peasant farming population. Its people have little or no access to benefits of democracy. The matrix of causal variable in the analysis of the Middle-Belt government and the causes of the demands for the creation of a Middle Belt movement therefore centres on: Uneven development of some sections of the north, mainly the Middle Belt areas, which conditioned the activation and mobilization of the Christian religious identity as political identity among the European educated persons, indigenous to the Middle Belt areas. The political problems in the politics of the demands for the creation of a Middle Belt region as a unit of the Nigeria federation, among some of the causes, was Nigerian political development with federation itself, while unit of the north contained a system of dominance and exploitation.

Myth and Reality of Middle Belt Region in Nigeria
In an attempt to establish the myth or reality of Middle belt region in Nigeria, Egwemi (2014) argues that: The reality of the Middle Belt can thus be summarized under two school of thought viz; it is a geographical entity- The people of the ‘Middle Belt’ share a geographically contiguous space; the lower part of the old Northern region of the old Southern region of Nigeria. The people have common minority status vis-a-vis the dominant
control and domination which will not allow the middle belters to have equal share and representation in the advance, but the main source is economic, political and lack of national integration. Conservatives who are the ethnicity, indigenship and religious alone. Yes, one cannot completely deny the fact that these factors cannot be background.

The quest for this identity has to have the ability of carrying along everyone, irrespective of faith or ethnic background. The neocolonial elites (northern conservatives) should avoid inciting people in generating conflict and consequent crisis which engulf the region for a long period of time. The socio-economic effect of this reprising in the region cannot be over emphasized.

To this effect, this paper is of the view that a Middle Belt identity is still a mirage. The one north philosophy and ideology is still active and well recognized. The existence of umbrella such as; The Northern Governors Forum, Northern Senators Forum, Arewa consultative Forum, Northern Elders Forum, Northern Elders council are clear indications that Middle Belt identity is just the interest group of ethnic and religious league in the North central mostly Benue, Plateau, and Southern Kaduna. It is against this background that the idea of Dalong (2003) was recognized thus;

The Middle Belt agitation is a mere handbag association without any known office and even registered members. There is no secretariat or even employees despite the huge clamor about it. There is no single project for the benefit of the people today the group cannot boast of achieving. The people of the Middle Belt languish in abject poverty, hunger and perennial instability. This high profile group has never attracted any intervention of either the federal government or international agencies despite the sophisticated network of the leaders. The Middle Belt leadership has never contributed relief materials to the crisis victims in the region, except to visit government houses on such occasions for their welfare package.

From the foregoing discussions, we will deduce the reality or myth of its existence. However, do those who deny the existence of Middle Belt have a point? Yes, they do to the extent that while there was an agitation for region, the effort was never successful. So legally speaking, there was never a middle Belt region as argued by Suleiman,(2012) that, administratively, Nigeria is constitutionally divided into six geo-political zones; North East, North West, North Central, West, South East and South - South., if the argument is about what was in existence rather than what the people wanted but failed to get. The anti-Middle Belt group many have another point if those promoting the cause of a separate identity of area give the impression that the issue is more about religion than geographical, historical circumstances and genuine minorities fears. Nothing give those who do not like the idea of middle Belt better ammunition than the impression that is about religion exclusivity for one religious group. Christianity, cannot be promoted as the binding factor since to do so would exclude Muslims who however happen to form a significant percentage of the population. Christians may be in the majority, but a quest for this identity has to have the ability of carrying along every one, irrespective of faith or ethnic background.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

From the foregoing discussions, it shows that most of the conflicts, crisis in the middle Belt is not basically on ethnicity, indigenship and religious alone. Yes, one cannot completely deny the fact that these factors cannot be advance, but the main source is Economic, political and lack of national integration. Conservatives who are the neocolonial set of people that are not in support of the middle Belt region want to continue with the idea of control and domination which will not allow the middle belters to have equal share and representation in the national issues, and resource distribution.

This paper therefore concludes that the crisis in the middle belt are not basically ethnic, religious oriented, but have its root in the fight against the creation of middle Belt created by the colonial masters and sustained by neocolonial elites (northern conservatives) for their selfish political and economic interest. The allusion to speed economic conflicts as ethnic conflict is a subtle way of diverting attention away from societal inadequacies existing in the country due to administration and greed which encourage perpetual dominance of the ruling class.

The consequent negative effects of these crisis are reflected in destruction of lives and property, existence of mutual distrust and suspicion leading to lack of national integration; the paper therefore suggest that if the government and stakeholders can only arrest the situation by allowing and legally put into paper the reality of middle-region, it can help in addressing the issue of crises in this area. The neocolonial elites (northern conservatives) should avoid inciting people in generating conflict and consequent crisis which engulf the region for a long period of time. The socio-economic effect of this reprising in the region cannot be over emphasized. However, the Middle Belt leaders must come to a realization that the people are different in terms of ethnic and
religion. It is necessary fact that they reconcile themselves and agree on the realization of the Middle Belt would only amount to waste of time and resources.

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