

The Middle-Belt Agitation and Religious Politics: Myth or Reality

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Abstract

The Middle-Belt and religious politics is not a new phenomenon on the Nigerian political landscape. The paper tries to prove the point that the Middle-Belt movement started as a response by the Christian minority/ethnic groups to perceived religious domination by the Hausa-Fulani Muslims of Northern Nigeria. Their response resulted to the formation of the Northern non-Muslim Association, United Middle-Belt Congress and the politico-religious organization, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Both the elite and the constructivist theory were used as theoretical bases to explain the phenomenon, where the elite theory views the agitation by the movement as elitists driven, the constructivist theory views it as contrived by the colonialists and the early educated elites with the support of colonial Christian missionaries. Data

was largely generated from secondary source. The paper recommends amongst other things that government at all levels must ensure that they turned the country into a land of opportunities where everybody can engage in whatever lawful trade or job that they desire as well as aspire to get to any position they want as long as they are qualified without looking at where they come from or any primordial sentiment. It concludes by saying that the Middle-Belt agitation for a region of its own has remained a mirage since it started. It has only existed in the imagination of its advocates, the Middle-Belt politicians, but its potency has continued to influence our political existence in the north and the country at large.

Keywords: middle-belt, politics, religion, minority, majority, agitation

Introduction

Agitations and counter agitations are normal within any plural society and democracy. In America for instance, there are agitations between the Whites, Blacks, Latinos etc. Agitations are found even in countries that are homogenous. But in Nigeria, ethnic and religious agitations are so rife and tend to plunge the country into chaos and confusion. Ojukwu (1989:1-2) wrote that:

the problem with Nigeria is that she is fully embroiled in an identity crisis... The problem is rooted in our fear of unity-or to put this in a different way, our lack of will to transform our primordial instincts and create a modern polity... This disunity has distorted, complicated and to a large extent stultified every developmental effort undertaken by government. The effect of the shibboleth called dichotomy is so very well-known that it has become a cancer in our body politic. Because we have found no cure, and because we do not even seek a cure, it continues to spread thereby enhancing its virulence. Today, when we look at Nigeria-no matter from whatever direction, no matter the focus of our perspective, everything which we see bears the frightful aspect of a dichotomy: The

north/south dichotomy, the east/west dichotomy, majority/minority dichotomy, Muslim/Christian dichotomy, military/politician dichotomy, Socialist/Capitalist dichotomy and urban/rural dichotomy.

Nigeria first emerged during the colonial era as two different protectorates of the South and North merged together, later under the Richard's Constitution it became three (3) regional federating units, the North, the West and the East. After independence, the Mid-West Region was created as a response to the cry of marginalization by minority groups in parts of the West and East respectively.

There have been several agitations on economic, political, and geographical imbalances in Nigeria. The Ibo elites complained that the Indigenization Policy of the 1970s was hurriedly carried out so that the Ibo, destabilized in the aftermath of the civil war would not be able to take full part in the exercise, [similarly they often complain of marginalization with regards to leadership of the country]. Niger-Deltans complained bitterly about well-connected northerners lifting oil under the dictatorship of Babangida and Abacha, when they did not have similar access to oil wealth from their area. In 2006, Northern elders raised an alarm claiming a systematic edging out of the region and its people from the commanding sectors of the economy like oil/gas, communications, banking and energy. Harowitz have suggested that when policies threaten the individual economic interest of elites, while at the same time creating group apprehension, the consequence is likely to be inter-group conflict and even separatism (Mustapha, 2007: 4).

The Middle-Belt which housed most of the minority ethnic groups in central Nigeria and is located in the Northern part of Nigeria is not an exception in these streams of complains. The agitation for the carving of a Middle-Belt within the north is based on several factors, among which are cultural, political, economic, social and religious. Mutual mistrust, distrust and suspicion have characterized the co-existence of the

people of the north for a longtime where in some instances, it plunges parts of the region into violent conflicts that results in loss of innocent lives and properties. Of course, politics cannot be rule out of this quagmire as some politicians whenever they are assaulted by superior ideas from another group or feel their political ambition is threatened, they resort to scapegoating-blaming their “perceived” enemy for their woes and misfortune by inventing stories or turning history upside down in order to influence and win support from their ethnic or religious group where they think is their stronghold and power-base.

However, this brief paper intends to critically look at the agitations for the Middle-Belt Region as well as to establish whether the question of religion in the struggle is a myth or a reality.

Conceptual Clarification

The Middle-Belt narrative as a concept is being highly contested by scholars, as there are among them those who do not think it is worth any academic rigor because it has never existed but only remains a mirage (Emmanuel,& Tari, 2015:2). The Nigerian Constitution did not expressly refer to any of its constituent parts as the Middle-Belt region or zone. But some colonial officers have made reference to the Middle-Belt as part of the Northern Region hosting the minority/pagan tribes of the region such as the Tivs, Igalas, Angas, Berom etc. (Hon, 2001:136). Some scholars see it as a preconceived and deliberate attempt to carve out mainly non-Muslim areas within the predominant Muslim population of the north for political gains (Egwu, 2001, Kukah, 1993, & Sulaiman, 2019). While to some, Middle-Belt is incongruous with the spirit of the Nigerian State. All these have rendered both the concept and the struggle somewhat ambiguous.

Ochonu (2008 as cited in Sulaiman, 2019:17-18) gave a descriptive definition of the Middle Belt as comprises of Abuja [the capital of Nigeria], Benue, Plateau, Kwara, Kogi, Southern Kaduna and parts of

Niger, Adamawa, and Taraba States. This conservative regional approximation of the Middle Belt is 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. Sulaiman (2019) added that “the Middle-Belt is sometimes used interchangeably with Central Nigeria, because most of the ethnic minorities in northern Nigeria are geographically located at the “centre” of Nigeria. Constitutionally, today, this part of Nigeria is referred to as North-Central geo-political zone”.

Shut, (2007as cited in Emmanuel, & Tari, 2015:2) defines the Middle-Belt as comprises the people that exist in Nigeria with a consciousness, identity and culture that is different 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 perceived the Middle-Belt in the context of religion i.e. northern Christians against their Muslim counterpart, others perceived it to include all non- Hausa/Fulani speaking people of the North. The area covers the people of Benue, Plateau, Kogi, Nasarawa, Taraba, Niger, Southern Kaduna, Borno and Kebbi States. The Abacha regime created six (6) geo-political zones; the North West, North East, North Central (Middle Belt), South West, South East and South South. The central zone called the Middle-Belt comprises of Benue, Kogi, Niger, Nasarawa, Kwara, Plateau and FCT. The Middle-Belt is 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 shared identity and belief that is distinct from the followers of Mohammed or a collection of minorities whether they are Christians, Muslims or Animists (Logams,1985, Hembe,1983, Ayoade, 2011, Dudley, 1968, Dent, 1966 and Tyoden, 1993). Whatever definition one gives to 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.

Egwemi (2014 as cited in Emmanuel & Tari, 2015:2) assert that it is not possible to categorize all Middle Belters as Christians because a significant number of Muslims exist across the length and breadth of the region...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, in spite of the sentiments about a Middle-Belt group in Nigeria, no such group exists in reality. The elites of the belt use the sentiment to further their interest in relation to their core-Northern “Hausa-Fulani oppressors” and the Nigeria state in general.

All the narratives above point to one simple fact the religious factor. The Middle-Belt struggle is predicated on emancipating the minority Christian groups in northern Nigeria from the domination of the majority Hausa-Fulani-Muslims, whom by an act of destiny outnumbered the collective summation of these minority entities, and therefore, in a democracy, must determine and control the affairs of the region by dint of that; but yet justice demands that they have to accommodate and respect the cultural and religious values of the minority groups.

Theoretical Framework

The Elite Theory

Two theories are employed to explain the theoretical bases of this study. They are; the elite theory and the constructivist theory.

Ethnic agitations, wrangling, struggles, conflicts and consensus are and shall always be about power, wealth and recognition. Those who define and determine the extent of any struggle are the elites. Shut (2005:18) sees the elite as “the top brass in religion, education, military, politics, economy etc. who use or manipulate tribe and ethnic identities for their selfish ends in their competitive struggle with other elites.

The elites are masters of ethnic game by mobilizing ethnic groups to the direction they wish to advance their interest”.

The emergence of the early educational, religious and political elites in the non-Muslim dominated areas of Northern Nigeria during the colonial era engendered minority agitations which were led by these elites. Consequently, the elite theory would be quite relevant in explaining this phenomenon.

The elite theory is predicated on the assumption that the elites who are few but cohesive and coherent group in the society determine the aspirations, interest and the direction of the society. The elites are found in almost all facets of endeavor like education, industries, religions, businesses, armed forces etc. It is with regard to the manipulation of the masses by the elites that ethnicity is said to act as a tool in the hands of the elites in their politico-economic struggle for power.

In political science and sociology, elite theory is a theory of the state that seeks to describe and explain power relationships in contemporary society. The theory posits that a small minority [the elite], consisting of members of the economic elite and policy-planning networks, holds the most power-and this power is independent of democratic elections (Anonymous, 2020). This means, that it does not matter whether a government is democratic or not, the elites are always relevant under any kind of government; be it military, democratic, monarchical etc.

The Constructivist Theory

According to Wimmer (2008 as cited in Williams, 2015) the constructivist theory perceives ethnic identity as a socially constructed and fluid entity that can be formed through various means including conquest, colonization or immigration.

Ethnic conflicts evolve out of specific historical situations; they are moulded by particular and unique circumstances and are constructed to serve certain interests by ideologues, visionaries, opportunists, ethnic entrepreneurs, political leaders and ethnic power brokers of various kinds (Nnoli, 2007:87-88). At the heart of the constructivist approach is the belief that ethnicity is socially constructed.

The constructivist theory is a creation by colonialism through their policy of separated residence, rigidification of ethnic identities and boundaries especially in the cities, where separate settlements were encouraged between settlers and indigenes. The major proponents of this theory are Webner Sollors 1989, Terance Ranger 1983 (Shut 2005:18).

The colonial administrators/missionaries in collaboration with our traditional leaders/educated elites constructed the negative ethnic divisions we are now experiencing in Nigeria, and particularly in Central Nigeria (Middle-Belt). Nnoli, gave a similar scenario where he mentioned that in 1989, Loverosy Vail edited a book titled “The Creation of Tribalism in South Africa”, and the substance of the book is that ethnicity or tribalism was invented by forces external to Southern Africa. Among those forces are missionaries, migrants and colonial anthropologists. The entities in question certainly do not represent pre-colonial historical facts and cannot be presently described as tribes or clans, no matter how African and European commentators employ these terms (Nnoli, 2007: 86).

The agitations by the Middle-Belt leaders can be linked to the above theories based on the fact that whether one looks at it either as constructed or as elite driven, both theories have much to do with the involvement, determination and control of the elites. In other words, the agitations for the creation of the Middle-Belt were to serve the interest of the colonial government, the missionaries, and the emerging local elites within the belt. To achieve this, the North was demonized and made to look like an enemy of the minority groups

within it, just like the Hutu and Tutsi where the latter was demonized and the result was the vision of the Tutsi as an alien and oppressive group that must be eliminated. But in this case, the Hausa-Fulani Muslims are the ones that are viewed as the alien and oppressive group, and hence, have to be neutralized or possibly pushed out of the region.

Group and Minority Agitations in Nigeria

Prior to Nigeria's independence, the Nigerian political arena was dominated by the three (3) major tribes; the Hausa, in the North, the Yoruba, in the West and the Ibo, in the East. In 1945, some Yoruba students in London formed the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, a cultural organization which soon took on the character of a political party (Action Group). One of these students was Awolowo. In 1949, Aminu Kano and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa were among the founders of the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), a cultural congress which, like the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, was converted into a political organization to meet the requirements of the new Macpherson Constitution. It was not surprising therefore; that tribal unions also interested themselves in political affairs and the Pan-Ibo Union itself was one of the founding members of the N.C.N.C (Crowder, 197:278-279).

Within each of these regions, series of agitations abound by minority groups fighting against what they simply believed to be an internal colonization or domination by their own. In the Northern region, some of the predominantly non-Moslem and non-Hausa Middle-Belt formed the United Middle Belt Congress. The party demanded the creation of a separate state for the Middle-Belt so that the people could escape from what its leaders alleged was the domination of the Fulani and Hausa... In the Western Region, as a reaction against the allegedly Yoruba dominated Action Group, the Mid-West state movement was started, supported largely by non-Yoruba speaking people, and particularly, the people of the old Benin

Empire...In the East, the Ibo form a solid core of well over seven million, and are surrounded by three provinces in which other groups predominate: Calabar, Ogoja and Rivers. The movement for the creation of a separate state in the East has been more complex. The main movement has been for the creation of the C.O.R. State or Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers state, but there have been subsidiary movements for the creation of Ogoja state and Rivers state including Ijo from both Western and Eastern Nigeria. In all case the movements were inspired by fear of the dominant group, and by ethnic chauvinism (Crowder, 1973:294-295).

Fear has been constant in every tension and confrontation in political Nigeria. Not the physical fear of violence, not the spiritual fear of discrimination, of domination. It is the fear of not getting one's fair share, one's dessert (Kirk-Greene, 1975:19).

It was against this background that the 1957 Constitutional Conference referred this knotty matter to a special commission headed by Sir, Henry Willinks to look into the fears and agitations of these minority groups in Nigeria. The commission came out very strongly against the creation of new states because it felt that the fears and problems of minority groups could be better solved within the existing political framework. In each case the commission found that the cores of the minority movements were too small compared with the area which they claimed for their new state... For instance, they argued that in the West, while most Bini wanted a Mid-West state, by no means all Its ekiri and Ijo felt happy at the prospect of its creation. Yet, the commission admitted that minority fears of ethnic domination and discrimination in development were real, and proposed that minority areas be set up for both Calabar and the Mid-West. However, the commission gave no truck on the creation of a Middle-Belt state in the North, it did recommend that a plebiscite be held there to determine whether Illorin and Kabba wished to remain in the

North or join up with the Western Region. Otherwise, the commission felt that minority fears could be assuaged by the entrenchment of fundamental human rights in the constitution (Crowder, 1975: 295-296).

Northern minorities constitute a significant component of the population of the Northern Region. Otite (1990 as cited in Egwu, 2001:11) presented a survey of the number of ethnic groups found in the area geographically described as Middle-Belt as varying between 150 and 200, and account for about 35% of the population of Northern Nigeria.

In spite of the entrenchment of the fundamental human rights in the constitution as suggested by the Willinks Commission especially the freedom from discrimination, these fears still persist and the agitations have continued to increase in leaps and bounds.

The Middle-Belt and the Religious Politics

Historically, Middle-Belt agitations predate Nigeria's independence. The belt is located in the Northern part of Nigeria and was directly administered under the Native Authority Administration during the colonial era. The Native Authority was the instrument through which the Indirect Rule System introduced by Lugard was implemented, and through it the natives were administered by proxy through their own traditional rulers in the whole country. In the North, it was through the extant emirate system that was based on the Islamic system of administration, only with some few modifications by the colonial government.

Under the Native Authority, the traditional rulers headed the local administration and were made answerable to a colonial officer called Resident. Orders and directives from the Governor-General come through the Resident, then to the traditional ruler. Kirk-Greene graphically described it as:

Through Indirect Rule, the European keeps himself a good deal in the background and leaves the mass of the native individuals to understand that the orders which come to them emanate from their own chief rather than from the white-man(Ola, 1984:33).

Lugard succinctly gave his reason for the adoption of the Indirect Rule as:

Our aim is to rule through the existing chiefs, to enlist them on our side in the work and progress of good government... Our hope is that we may make of these born rulers...types of British officials working for the good of their subjects in accordance with the ideals of the British Empire (Ola, 1984: 24).

If as Lugard stated above that the aim of the Indirect Rule was to ensure good governance through the local chiefs, one may rightly say that his hope left so much to be desired. These traditional rulers especially in the North had absolute powers and therefore, ruled with extreme high-handedness. It was a commonplace for an emir or any of the officials close to him to unleash any kind of harm on any of their subjects. In some instances, when they see that a poor subject's wife is beautiful, they can force him to divorce her for them to marry, or in some cases they get her by way of usurpation. Lands were easily confiscated by some of these traditional rulers from their poor subjects. Scores of stories abound on how those traditional rulers meted unthinkable atrocities on innocent people out of sheer greed and power intoxication. Yet one needs to be careful in making a generalization because of those who engaged in such barbaric acts. There were quite a number of these traditional rulers who left good legacies with regards to their quality of character and knowledge. Those that used to engage in those barbaric acts were mostly ignorant and illiterate in both the Islamic as well as in western education. And a good number of them inherited their positions from their fathers not because they truly deserved the positions.

This kind of leadership came to be reflected in local administrations during the colonial era under the Indirect Rule system. It was an autocratic kind of leadership which later characterized the subsequent leadership style of some traditional administrators under the Native Authority System, and such high handedness was used on anybody or group of persons under their rule, not minding whether they belong to the same religion, language, ethnic group or not. Adeyi (2013:5) rightly observed that “the digression from the goals of Dan Fodio by his flag bearers was the origin of political unrest in the area that now constitutes Northern Nigeria”.

The major contention that led Malam Aminu Kano in spite of his being one of the founders of the Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC) to leave the party was the role played by the northern aristocrats (the emirs) who dominated the party. Being not satisfied with their style and their domineering and selfish tendencies, he opted out and formed the Northern Elements and Progressives Union (NEPU) as the party for the masses through which they could shake off the shackles of the feudal aristocrats in the NPC. In other words, to overthrow the aristocrats who dominated the N.P.C., still within the North, most of the educated elites from the minority groups and their people were equally victims of the high-handedness of some of the traditional rulers of the emirates. They lamented about the contempt, the arrogance and the domineering tendencies of these emirs or aristocrats.

The point of departure between those who are from core Hausa-Fulani stock and those from the minority groups was “religion”. To the minority groups who are mostly at the time pagans, with few of the Christian educated elites, contempt for their religion was what they thought exposed them to such abuses under the Native Authority System headed by mostly Hausa-Fulani-Muslim emirs in the North. Kirk-Greene (1972:vii) posited that in the political Sturm und Drang of the 1950s, a certain Middle-Belt solidarity was discernible in spirit stimulated by the Plateau leadership of the Middle Zone League (later Tiv-led United

Middle Belt Congress) working for some kind of undefined, non-emirate, non-Moslem, non-NPC style of state.

Tyoden (1993 as cited in Egwu, 2001:19) said that “the advent of Christianity and Western education as a result of the activities of the Christian missions led to the emergence of an elite leadership in the struggle against domination. The consequence of this was the identification of “Middle Belt” identity with Christianity”. Again, Kastfelt (1994 as cited in Egwu, 2001:19) has shown in his interesting study of the impact of Christianity on the non-Muslim groups in the old Adamawa Province especially among the Bachama, Kilba, Longuda and Mbula, that the situation was such that Christianity became an essential component of their ethnic “identity”. It is in this sense that the struggles for minority identification coincided with attempt to project and protect a Christian identity in a predominantly Muslim region.

Given the origin of the clamour for the creation of the Middle-Belt which is rooted in the establishment of the Northern Non-Muslim League of the 1940s, it is highly untenable to say that it is coincidental that minority groups have come to identify themselves with Christianity.

The struggle for the carving of a Middle-Belt state within the Northern Region predates Nigeria’s independence and was motivated largely by religion rather than any cultural or social differentiation.

Kukah, (1993: 49) said that:

it was in the realization of the role of religion and politics and the threat of Islam to Christianity that Christian leaders in Northern Nigeria backed by some British politicians recognized the need to unite and halt the spread of Islam...This began with a secret meeting called at Rahol Kannang near Jos in 1948, which eventually gave birth to the politico-religious associations, the Northern Christian Association (NCA), a precursor to the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).

Hausa culture has never been a contention; and the champions of the Middle-Belt cause have not been able to discourage Hausa language as it has remained the lingua franca and medium of communication even in churches. Hausa dresses are the common dresses in the Middle-Belt.

Dr. Abashiya, has observed that the people of the area (Middle-Belt Region) have two main religion, namely Christianity and traditional religion. There are some Muslims scattered all over the area, but these are in the minority (Hon, 2001:136). Among the Middle-Belt states only three can be said to be dominated by Christians, these are Plateau, Benue and probably Taraba State. States like Nasarawa, Kwara, Kogi, Borno, Kaduna, Kebbi are predominantly Muslims. So, to say that Muslims are in the minority and only scattered around the area is a misinformed statement and is misleading.

The Middle-Belt Region is a contrived region whose map meanders through the whole Northern part of Nigeria collecting those communities that are predominantly Christians, and who were not before the coming of the Whites part of the emirate rule. To put it differently, before the advent of colonialism, they were not subjugated under the caliphate founded by Danfodio and his successors. Rather, they were units of independent animist groups spread across the caliphate, and who never posed any threat to it and were therefore, left intact to live according to their ways. Later with the arrival of the colonialists and their conquest of the whole of the North which included these units of independent pagan groups, the imposition of the Indirect Rule System brought together these pagan groups under the caliphate that was equally left intact by the colonial conquerors to administer the North through the traditional administrative structure of the emirate system. This was because the emirate system was a fully advanced and structured administrative system that was based on the Islamic administrative system that runs according to the dictates of Islamic sharia system. While among the pagan groups there were hardly any form of developed

administrative system. Considering this fact, Lugard lumped up these pagan groups under the leadership of the emirates under the Native Authorities of the North.

Sulaiman (2015:16) captured the broadcast made by Major Gideon Orkar on 22nd April, 1990, when they staged an abortive coup to topple the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. The coup was said to be executed on behalf of a section of the country that is the Middle-Belt and Southern Nigeria. Excerpt of the broadcast reads as follows:

On behalf of the patriotic and well-meaning people of the Middle-Belt and the Southern parts of this country, I Major Gideon Gwaza Orkar, wish to happily inform you of the successful ousting of the dictatorial, corrupt, drug baronish, evil men, sadistic, deceitful, homosexually (sic), prodigalistic, unpatriotic administration of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida... We wish to emphasize that this is not just another coup but a well-conceived, planned and executed revolution for the marginalized, oppressed, and enslaved people of the Middle-Belt and the South with a view to freeing ourselves and our children yet unborn from eternal slavery and colonization by a clique of this country.

It should be noted that General Ibrahim Babangida is a Muslim from the “Middle- Belt”, from Niger State, and his administration was hinged on the elevation and advancement of the minorities. Most of his lieutenants and the most powerful among them came from the Middle-Belt like General Domkat Bali, Brigadier Dogonyaro, General John Shagaya etc. who constituted what was then popularly known as the “Langtang Mafia”. And they were all Christians. Dan Suleiman accused Tafawa Balewa (the First Prime Minister of Nigeria), General Ibrahim Babangida, General Yakubu Gowon (a Christian from the Middle-

Belt) and General Abdulsalam Abubakar for seeing themselves as northerners rather than Middle-Belters (Suleiman, 2001: 156).

Middle-Belt Concerns/Issues

There is the saying that “there has never been a smoke without a fire”, yes, this is true as it is indicated above that the agitations of minority groups in the Middle-Belt was stimulated by religion. But there are other contending issues which are equally either perceived or real. Hon (2001:138) claimed that:

according to Islam, adherents of other faiths are considered inferior human beings, and they are called derogatory names like “arna” or “kado”... Also that nearly all the peoples of the Middle-Belt engaged in the practice of brewing and consumption of alcohol called with various names like “burkutu”, “muss”, “pito” “sha” etc., and the Hausa-Fulani Moslems looked down upon them as a result. He further claimed that oil was discovered in commercial quantity in the Middle-Belt especially in Benue State, but the North had frustrated its exploration, and therefore, the Middle-Belt remains perpetually impoverished.

The Federal government of Nigeria under its privatization policy sold one of its properties located in Benue State i.e. the Benue Cement Company, otherwise known as BCC Plc, to Alhaji Aliko Dangote in 2000. The people of Benue (Middle-Belt) rejected it and call it a theft by agents of the core North... They accused the committee (on privatization) of being fraudulent in its action during the bidding process; and that it was an attempt by the Hausa-Fulani to create a generational gab among the political class of the Middle-Belt and they are saying no, no, not now again (Hon, 2001.138-147).

Dabup (2001:127-128) also posit that:

the Middle-Belt cherished their autonomy, and their religion and social ways of life and saw no reason why they should exchange their own superior cultures to that of the Hausa-Fulani which they considered alien and therefore, unsuitable. Issues on educational institutions are rife as the Middle-Belters are alleging that the core North has monopolized some of the educational institutions like Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and Kaduna Polytechnic, especially at the management level and thereby, made the headship of these institutions a no go area for non-Hausa/Fulani.

Other issues raised are that Islam remains the guiding light in public policy as buildings are shaped in Islamic architecture even though they are meant to serve secular purposes. And that Muslims regard their religion as a way of life, non-Muslims in Nigeria are expected to conform to Islamic values, this is because the powers that-be succeeded in ensuring that all strata of government are permeated with Islamic values. Furthermore, state/local government creations were made in favour of the Hausa-Fulani, and where they are in hopeless minority that cannot bear the distortion, they ensure that the state capital is situated in a Muslim enclave e.g. Lafia in Nasarawa State and Jalingo in Taraba State, while local government headquarters are located in wards with high Muslim Hausa-Fulani concentration (Dabup, 2001:127-132). This could be the reason why the former Governor of Plateau State, Jonah David Jang moved the headquarters of Jos North Local Government Council from the city center which is a Muslim dominated ward to a Christian dominated ward during his first tenure.

Adeyi (2013:17) alleged that:

most of the British colonial administrators in Northern Nigeria were atheists who were committed to their colonial agenda at all cost. They felt promotion of Islam would make their position

convenient, more especially when they held a wrong view that the pagans were inferior to Muslim rulers. Protections of Christian converts against Islamic court rulings and forced labour on Sunday were some of the hard nuts cracked by the missionaries.

In Nigeria, the fastest growing industry is the manufacture of scape-goats: politicians, journalists, trade unionists, students, lecturers and sometimes, Britain or USA...(Ojukwu, 2011:2). In other words, Nigerians are very good at distorting facts, deception and blaming others for their woes.

In a democracy, those in the majority must always have an edge over minorities no matter how egalitarian that society is. In Nigeria, states with predominantly Christian population hardly recognized those who are not Christians in most aspects of government activities. They tend to do almost everything in total disregard of the presence of the other faiths. The same thing applies to states with majority Muslim population.

The claims and allegations above are totally uncalled for. Because it is a common knowledge that what they are accusing the Hausa-Fulani Muslims for, are the same things they are doing to the Hausa-Fulani Muslims as well as those Middle-Belters that are Muslims. In Plateau State for instance, none of the higher educational institutions is managed by even an indigenous Muslim Middle-Belter, talk more of a Hausa-Fulani.

Erecting public buildings designed in the shape of Islamic architecture is not an issue. What then would be said about the American “White House” and other important world class buildings spread across the globe in Christian dominated countries? Browne (1968: p. 132) says that the Moors (Muslims) were better tradesmen, better architects ...than the Christians. Hitti (1937 as cited in Yusuf, 2010:44) also said that in the field of designs no one surpassed the Arabs, it was said that in Christian Europe when the rulers needed

a surgeon or a dress-maker or an architect it was in Cordova they applied. Cordova used to be one of the centers of Islamic civilization when Spain was an Islamic state before it was conquered by Queen Isabella and Ferdinand of Aragon towards the end of the 15th century.

Definitely, Muslims believe that their religion is a complete way of life, but Muslims in Nigeria never say that Christians must have to conform to Islamic values. In fact, if truth is to be told, Muslims are the ones been forcefully ask to conform to Christian values as school calendars are made to reflect Christian festivities like Easter, Christmas and New Year celebrations. Public holidays are specially designed to coincide with these festivities. Graduation gowns worn by students in Nigerian Universities and other schools are designed to conform to choir dresses. Schools and examination time-tables are prepared in such a way that Friday's prayer is not considered despite the fact that in most Muslim countries it is observed as a work free day. Civil servants and public schools observe Saturdays and Sundays which to Seventh Day Adventists and the other Christians are work free days, while Muslims are denied such a work free day on Fridays in Nigeria. The symbol of public hospitals in Nigeria and elsewhere is the "Cross" revered and worshiped by the Christians. Muslims never raise an eye-brow on all these and even more. Most of these have remained as colonial legacies bequeathed by the colonial government that imposed itself on us and ruled us against our wishes. Most of the issues and concerns of the Middle-Belters are based on speculations and are mere political propaganda aimed at instigating Christian faithfuls against their Muslim counterparts. Where and when did the Muslim North ever imposed any aspect of the Islamic sharia on the Christian/pagan Middle-Belt which they observed or are still observing as a public policy or law in Nigeria?

It is a well-established fact that one of the reasons why Europe colonized Africa was to teach the Africans about God, which they felt they were religiously bound to come and preach to us. So, if it is said that most

of the colonial administrators were atheists, then it is really paradoxical. Mining sites or grounds were exclusively administered by the colonial masters and not the Islamic courts, and the courts were indirectly controlled by the colonial administration, therefore, conscripted labour and administration was entirely tele-guided by the then colonial administration.

Islamic laws only regulate the conducts of its adherents, those who are not Muslims even if they take themselves to Islamic court for adjudication they will not be entertained unless in situations where they feel they have been wronged by a Muslim, they can decide to take the matter to an Islamic court. But they are under no obligation to accept the rulings of an Islamic court on both civil and criminal cases.

Way Forward

It was Ojukwu who said that if he were to be made the ruler of Nigeria, the first thing he would do would be to fix the meaning of the word “citizen”(Ojukwu, 2011:25). We have come a long way and in fact, it is high time that we realize the importance of our staying together. All the excuses are no longer tenable; we have to rise up to the challenges of development in order to catch up with our contemporaries in Asia, and the Middle East. The world today is at a race for civilization. We should cast away all those primordial/dogmatic tendencies that have stunted our growth as a nation. Nigeria is blessed, and we have all it takes to develop. We therefore, have to come out to challenge our leaders, not to blame those whom we have much in common with for our woes. Our leaders are our problems. Both Christian and Muslim leaders are the same; they are selfish, greedy, megalomaniac and can do anything to deceive even the elect among us to fan the embers of hatred so that we propel them to the position of power that they desire. Religion is not the problem, so also are our languages and geographical or regional locations. Let us cast

away the doubts and the fears, and accept one another. The problems have to do more with our programmed perspectives rather than any conspiracy.

Government at all levels must ensure that they turned the country into a land of opportunities where everybody can engage in whatever lawful trade or job that they desire as well as aspire to get to any position they want as long as they are qualified without looking at where they come from or any primordial obstacle.

Regionalism, sectionalism and all other forms of isms that tend to divide us are evil, and we must do away with them.

General Domkat Bali (Rtd) was from the Middle-Belt, a Christian, a one-time Chief of Defence Staff and the current Ponzhi Tarok of Tarok nation in Plateau State. In an interview with Sunday Trust, Domkat Bali said, he never wanted the army as a career. It was Ahmadu Bello [former Premier of the then Northern Nigeria, a Muslim and a scion of the Danfodio Caliphate of Sokoto] who made sure I got into the army. I tell people that the North died with Ahmadu Bello, and I mean every word of it. Ahmadu Bello was truly a good Nigerian. He was not biased. Ahmadu Bello came to Kuru (near Jos), I think in 1958. I was then in form five. Ahmadu Bello went round the North preaching to us to join the military. He felt there were no sufficient northerners in the services. He was not looking for Fulani men to empower. He was genuinely interested in seeing that the North was not at a disadvantage among the other regions of the country. He came and got me instead to join the army. He did so not because he despised me. As far as he was concerned northerners who were qualified should join the service (Sunday Trust, 2013).

Late General John Shagaya himself was from the Middle-Belt and a one-time ECOMOG Field Commander in Liberia and one-time Minister of Internal Affairs accused leaders of the Middle-Belt as the architects of

the problems confronting the region and not the Hausa-Fulani as they want people to believe. Shagaya argued that it was wrong for the Middle-Belt to be ruling themselves and then accused others for causing their predicament, adding that those who have been ruling the Middle-Belt were not taking directives from Kano or Katsina States. He added that the Middle-Belt leaders should be held responsible. He said that since the creation of Plateau State, no Hausa-Fulani man has ruled the state as a governor and wondered why people put their woes on the Hausa-Fulani, stressing that the essence of carving an identity was nothing more than organizing one's people to make your own people or culture and tradition not to die (The Monitor, 2002).

The agitation by the Middle-Belt should aim at preserving the good culture and customs of the people of the belt, and not the propagation of Christian religion through political propaganda by way of unfounded allegations and distorted information.

Conclusion

The Middle-Belt agitation for the creation of a separate identity and state has been on from colonial times to date. The move for the creation of the middle-belt state was led first by the early Christian educated elites from the north who were instigated by the colonial missionaries/politicians who were good at applying the divide and rule principle on any nation they colonized. They have succeeded in dividing the country as a whole, that is the north and the south that have never seen themselves as one right from the beginning of the amalgamation. The same colonialists ensured that within each of the regions, seeds of divisions were sowed. In the North, the division was motivated by the most sensitive aspect of human existence, religion. Clashes between Muslims and Christians in the North have resulted in the mass killings being witness in this part of the country. The paranoia and the distrust have been on the increase with no

sign of abating. Middle-belt agitation has remained a mirage since it started. It has only existed in the imagination of its advocates, the Middle-belt politicians, but its potency has continued to influence our political existence in the north and the whole nation.

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