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A Network of Mediation: Imagining a Middle belt through Narrative Remembering

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of the middle belt dream as articulated through acts of narrative remembering in both digital and physical public spheres. Focusing on a generation of individuals between the ages of twenty and forty, the Paper examines how this demographic constructs a collective middle belt identity through their narratives. By analyzing the diverse ways in which the middle belt dream is conceptualized and expressed, this Paper argues that a network of counter-narratives shapes these imaginings. Ultimately, the Paper contends that it is within this network of circulated narratives that the social self of the middle belt is actively produced and negotiated.

Keywords: Counter-Narrative, middle belt dream

Introduction

How do you mediate a middle-belt narrative?

This question trails a complex imagination found within post-colonial societies, where narrating nations is synonymous with constituting a national consciousness. In providing the link between narratives and the nation, Homi Bhaba acknowledges the conscious making of continuous progressive ideas of self within nationalist discourse.¹ However, Bhaba does not stay stuck within a monolithic idea of the nation's origin story which is at the cost of society's turn into modernity.² Rather he suggests a gaze into cultural temporality which carves the transitions of social realities.³ This ambivalence which does not lean into the

¹ Homi, Bhaba *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990 pg. 14

² Ibid 15

³ Ibid 15

totalization of state ideology nor popular rhetorics that are utopian⁴ leads to new ways to think through the narration of the nation as a negotiation between the state and the people. This requires not simply outlining the narratives in textual storyboards nor a linguistic analysis of the narratives that are produced but also the meaning making process that goes into it.

It is this meaning making process that centers Stuart Hall's analysis of symbolic meanings in cultural media and discourses where narratives as part of representation are justified based on the meanings they seem to produce.⁵ It is equally this meaning making process that engages the quest of the narrative as an integral part of remembering which is embedded in public discourse.⁶

We return to our opening question; how do we mediate the middle belt or phrased differently, how do we imagine the middle belt and narrate it? I take on a specific mode of remembering that connects media cultures with individual and collective memories. This Paper reflects on the mediations of the middle belt narrative in the physical and digital spheres. It suggests that the middle belt dream remembered and re-imagined from the vantage point of the present is influenced by a desire to correct age old stereotypes as expressed in historical narratives. However, the Paper does not merely take on the narrative as a text to be interpreted but the conditions of its cultural production which occurs within a violent making of the middle belt in popular misconceptions, an obscuring of the middle belt member groups in traditional media and the understanding of the collective self through selfhood.

The Paper is divided into two major sections. The first is a narrative account of a personal stories that traces political awakenings of collectives. I argue here that by profiling non-state actors through their recollections, the catalyst of political consciousness based on personal experiences can be connected to the dreams that are conceived for the public and the model for a social self. The second section is an analysis of media in the Middle belt Times within the period of January 2023 to December 2023. The study of this independent media positions the role of digital in the network of mediation that is interchanged between offline and online activities that circulate middle belt led narratives and re-imagines the middle belt dream. By referencing digital platforms as an active platform of political consciousness

⁴ Ibid 20

⁵ Hall Stuart, *Representation, Cultural Representations and the Signifying Practices*(Ed). London: Sage Publications pg. 9

⁶ Bosch, TE. "Memory Studies: A Brief Concept Paper." MeCoDEM Working Paper, 2016. ISSN 2057-4002, unpublished

within the generation chosen for this study, I utilize narration as an act of remembering which re-imagines the middle belt dream of the nationalist era in the present era.

3.1 I am not an Aboki: Offline and Online Assemblages of a Social Self

In the course of fieldwork in the middle belt, there was a repetitive pattern to how the people presented themselves. To concisely summarize the ideas of what it meant to be part of the middle belt, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were carried out. Focus group discussions were designed to obtain selfhood ideations and how it connects to the collective self of the contemporary generational transition which this study is based on. I interviewed students from the History department of University of Jos because I was interested in the parallels of the national narrative and the regional narrative. It was important to find subjects who operated within institutional frameworks and the assumption here was that the students who had been exposed to historical training on Nigeria were aptly positioned to speak on these parallels. The choice of the University of Jos was also particularly instrumental as it forms part of the intellectual scholarship within which middle belt dissident narratives are formally developed in Nigeria. Their views while not a totalizing representation of the views of the middle belt minorities offers a multi-position in ethnicity, religion, and education as part of vital social institutions that make up society and corresponding consciousness within this demography.

After sessions based on questions of identity, I thematically coded the discussion within the following recurrent identity markers. These identity markers show how these individuals use the narrative to negotiate social contexts in order to maintain what Giddens refers to as a sense of self.⁷

Typology of Identity Markers

Category	Markers
Religion	Christianity
Geo political zone	North central, central Nigeria, middle belt
Place of origin	Plateau, Kaduna, Nassarawa, Kogi
Ethnicity	Berom, Afizere, Mwaghavul, Ngas, Tarok , Eggon , Igala , Bajju
Religion	Christianity

⁷ Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Modern Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991

3.2. Stories of Misconception

A particular contrast in the approach to the middle-belt question in the city of Jos among educated circles was the insistence of the term middle belt against north central. This distinction dates back to the geographical debate on the nature of the middle belt, where the official geopolitical zone is northern Nigeria, and the middle belt is assumed to be an imagination of the minorities. At the beginning of the discussion, interviewees were suspicious of my intentions. I introduced myself with my academic affiliation, and they shared that they were curious as to why a Ugandan was interested in the middle belt question and were worried about how much they could share. I noticed this in their tempered response and shared my nationality and ethnicity. There was a physical shift in their body language and they were more accommodating. This level of tension, as noted, was the first insight into the nature of consciousness that circulated amongst the minorities, one filled with fear and distrust for outsiders.

Quite valuable for understanding the fear in this consciousness is Ochon's argument that the conflict in the contemporary, as seen in Nigerian middle belt states, does not stem from the contemporary but rather resurfaces from earlier disputes that occurred between the Hausa -Fulani and the minority groups in colonial times. These clashes, he claims, have happened from a historical construction of a minority consciousness subservient to the hegemony of the Hausa Islam dominant group.⁸ A researcher probing these sensitivities was subject to scrutiny based on this internalised fear.

When asked how they typically introduce themselves, the first thing that most participants were keen on leading with were their names and place of origin especially when dealing with outsiders. Very quickly on, the sense of generalization in the North where everybody is believed to be Muslim was noted by Mercy, a female student and baker from Plateau State who introduced herself as a Plateau state indigene and an entrepreneur looking to get her business out there with every first introduction. For Solomon, who is from Nassarawa state, his name and his origin from what he called 'central' Nigeria was important to him.

Balang was more expressive in her introduction stating that felt that there was a misconception that she was out to correct every time she met someone that was not from Jos. According to her, the misconception of everyone being Hausa was one that she was uncomfortable with and it was also important that people knew she was Christian. In the course of self-introduction, the misconception of being Hausa was at the top of mind whether it was an introduction inside the geopolitical zone or outside.

⁸ Ochon, Moses. *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness*. Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2014

Balang recalls a story of working at the National Youth Service Camp(NYSC)⁹ as a vendor and being told not to put Hausa ‘things’ in the food. The reference being made here was to the sometimes, pungent spices used to make meals in the North which is a novel taste to those who are from outside the Northern region.

Generally, middle belt was used by most used in presenting themselves. This contestation between the geographical mapping of Nigeria and the middle belt as an expression of belonging is one that I expand on in Paper Five where space as a core expression of the middle belt identity is examined and as such I do not expand on the geographical notes here.

However, the reason for this distinct geographical identification was established when they shared their stories of being in other regions of the country. For Audu, he remembers his first experience in Lagos state.

“My first time in Lagos, in 2012. They didn’t know plateau like that. They knew there was a place called Jos. But if you tell them plateau, they will be like is it a state? They were looking at me as if I was from the Niger delta, or because of the way that I am big, I don’t look like a plateau person. They would tell me I am Arewa or I am Muslim. Because I communicate well in Hausa, they said I was Muslim. I told them no, I am a bonafide Christian from a Christian family. You know, in the middle belt, there is this thing of giving people names in Hausa even when you are a Christian. For instance, I bear Audu. I had to explain that Hausa is a language and Islam is a religion. When we go there, they think that Hausa is a religion and I tried to tell them it is just like speaking Yoruba in Lagos or Igbo in the East or Ogoja and the rest. I need them to know that not everybody is an Aboki. I am not an Aboki”¹⁰.

Solomon had raised two important points in his story of misconception which was the tensions of language that have developed in the middle belt. On the national front, the Nigerian national policy on language recognizes English as the official language of the country and Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as

⁹ NYSC is the compulsory national youth service corps program for everyone that has received an undergraduate degree. Individuals are usually posted to regions that they are not from in order to foster the sense of service and unity in Nigeria

¹⁰ Interview held with Unijos History students on November 10th 2023

¹⁰ The term aboki is popularly used in Nigeria to refer to any person from the Northern Region In some areas, it is also used as a class distinction where cleaners, roadside meat sellers and other menial workers from the north are referred to as abokis. This term as derogatory disregards the original meaning of aboki which is friend in Hausa.

indigenous language franca.¹¹ With Hausa also being the language of trade and mass communication, it was easy to connect why language had penetrated the social fabric of the people and become concrete within households to the point of naming.

This language problem dates back to the development of Hausa-Fulani consciousness, which the middle-belt consciousness attempts to counter. Post-Jihad, the Hausa identity became one with Islamic consciousness and underneath a cosmopolitan nature of Islam, specifically in West Africa, to be Hausa was to be Islam, denoted by access to the privilege of the dominating group. In developing this Hausa - Muslim imaginary, Moses Ochonu states that fluency in Hausa as the criterion for belonging led to a more distinct change in autochthony as a criterion for belonging.¹²

The language of dominance as key to the narrative is also used in the British colonialist depiction of the Hausa caliphate, which was instrumental in amplifying the divide. The accounts of the British explorers started with the base understanding of the Sokoto caliphate's relationship with the middle belt groups. In this regard, explorers such as Dr. William Baikee described the Tiv group, alongside other minority groups, as a group that was highly suspicious of visitors, possessed crude minds, and couldn't exist beyond war and raping. In specific reference to the Tiv, he said the *Mitshis* were '*wilder and less intelligent*' than other African races he had seen except for Baibai and Djukuns."¹³

In identifying language as critical part of consciousness, Language aids in public and private negotiations as a historical element shared publicly¹⁴. In this negotiation, the middle belt is presented with a double self where dominant culture has taken over cultural minorities through the politics of naming and language. The way out becomes an intentional use of naming to reclaim as most members of the group interview had taken to. One of the core problems also underscored is the articulation of self in a public

¹¹ Emenanjo, E. Nolue, ed. *Multilingualism, Minority Languages and Language Policy in Nigeria*. Central Books Limited, 1990.

¹² Ochonu, M. *Colonialism by Proxy: Hausa Imperial Agents and Middle Belt Consciousness*. Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2014 pg. 27

¹³ Ibid 31

¹⁴ Spivak, G.C. "Nationalism and the Imagination." In *Nation in Imagination: Essays on Nationalism, Subnationalism, and Narration*, edited by C. Vijayasree, M. Mukherjee, H. Trivedi, and T. Vijay Kumar, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2007.

hood that is not just a distinction between the middle belt and the core north but categorically breaking down the middle belt identity from a northern identity in external interaction.

With regards to Audu’s religious categorization, Andrew Barnes allows us to see the middle belt from a cultural perspective, which looks at the church as an institute of consciousness. The Christian affiliation in the nationalist era with political parties such as the United Middle Congress(UMBC) and its alliance with the southern province's Action Group was made possible by a shared spiritual agenda that helped each other's cultural and religious development.¹⁵ However, it is the shared goal of ethnic improvement that enabled the Christians in the North to redirect their local Christian culture into a political project.¹⁶ Although some of the participants in the interview admitted that their religious identity was connected to their upbringing and wasn't always a matter of personal faith, they also stated that their religious consciousness was non-negotiable in its political category. In other words, being non-Christian was not an option for them if they wanted any political freedom.¹⁷

For Balang, her experience of misconception came in 2022 where she went for University games and a woman selling food assumed that she was Yoruba. This was because of her entry level knowledge of multiple Nigerian languages including the Yoruba language. While in conversation, Balang recounts speaking Hausa and immediately being met with a different countenance. Almost immediately, the woman started speaking with someone else in Yoruba stating that Balang was a Hausa lady and a terrorist from the North. The woman also told her that she doesn’t deal with people from Jos as they were all terrorists. This was in reference to violence set within the context of a politically charged and ethno-religious crisis in Jos¹⁸. This external perception which was limited based on the way through which the news was filtered to the rest of the country had already created an imagery of Balang ahead of her arrival at the university games venue. The collective social self was already stereotyped through a generalization of violent occurrences in Northern Nigeria. Some of these occurrences are tables below.

1	5 1994	April	Jos, Plateau	Indigenes staged a protest
2	28-Feb-00		Kaduna, Kaduna	Kaduna city exploded in
3	14	April	Agvragu, Nasarawa	Communal clash that started

¹⁵ Barnes, Andrew E. "The Middle Belt Movement and the Formation of Christian Consciousness in Colonial Northern Nigeria." *Church History*, vol. 76, no. 3, 2007, pg 602

¹⁶ Ibid 610

¹⁷ Niels Kastfelt, in his book *Religion and Politics in Nigeria: A Study of Middle Belt Christianity*, explores the role of Christian missionaries and Protestant churches in the creation of Christian elites opposed to the Muslim elites in northern Nigeria

¹⁸ Human rights watch a city torn apart

	2000		
4	7 Sep-01	Jos, Plateau	A violent ethno-religious
5	2 Nov-01	Gwantu, Kaduna	A clash that started on a
6	30 Dec-01	Barikin Plateau Ladi,	A violent communal conflict
7	6 2002	June Yelwa-Shendam,	A religious/ethnic fracas
8	Mar-03	Langtang North, Wase and Kanam LGC of Plateau	Fresh ethno-religious conflicts in the three neighbouring LGCs which is
9	01-May-04	Yelwan Shendam,	A fresh ethno-religious
10	3 2005	May Buruku/Katsina- Ala,	A violent clash between
11	28 Nov-08	Jos, Plateau	Ethno-religious clash
12	7 2009	April Guma, Benue	Violent communal clash
13	19 December 2009.	Nasarawa, Nasarawa	A violent farmers/herdsmen
14	26-Jan-11	Jos, State. Plateau	Hundreds of aggrieved women staged a public
15	11 2013	June Rukubi village, Doma Local Government Area of Nasarawa State.	No fewer than 50 people were killed in renewed clashes between Tiv/Agatu

Source: Institute of Governance and Social Research (IGSR) (2011).

In referencing the 2001 crisis, the interviewees also stated that they found themselves in a default setting of defending Jos against the rest of the country. There were specific examples of their experiences in the South of Nigeria, specifically, Lagos. In speaking of the violence, some of the misconceptions that they had heard were that, firstly, that Jos was very volatile and that, secondly, violence made it a terrorist zone and unsafe place to live. However, within themselves, they also shared that while the violence was sensationalized, there was still the fear that violence could erupt at any time.¹⁹

In moving towards aspirations of how best they wanted to be represented, Nakling was keen on Islam being treated as a religion and not a tribe. While Manji wanted people to know that;

“Jos are very welcoming and very peaceful people and secondly, we want people to know about our culture, to know that we have diverse cultures. People need to know that everybody has their own tribe and Hausa is just used for communication and trade. In fact, I want them to know that I can’t identify myself as north- anything, I am from the middle belt”.

¹⁹ Interview held with Unijos History students on November 10th 2023

The narratives of self are not merely constituted through this representation of self towards an external audience. Beyond these spirited responses to the notion of a collective self, how do we understand the internal tensions in narratives that produce the middle belt against the north? I propose an understanding of the factors that lead to the political consciousness in middle belt narrative dreamers.

3.3 Online Non-state actors and Political Consciousness

Who produces the middle belt?

There are three main categories of those who have been involved in the production of the middle belt. The first is the political category of nationalist middle belt elites, the second is the intellectual middle belt and the third is a post-independent crop of middle belt leaders. In the political category, there are a number of social movements and collectives that cover the political concerns of the middle belt. One of the distinct definitions of the middle-belt is found in The Middle Belt People's Party (MBPP) description of the Middle Belt as 'a political movement for the protection of the interests of the mainly Christian people groups in the old Northern Region of Nigeria'.²⁰ This description captures the objective of Middle Belt movements and associations such as the Middle Belt Forum, Middle Belt Zone League, Middle Belt Congress, United Middle Belt Congress, Middle Belt Christian Association, Middle Belt Youth Organization. These collectives in the shape of forums, organizations and political parties all connect as a movement that socio-politically produces the middle belt.

In the nationalist period, the middle belt movement was championed by middle belt elites. Notions of the middle belt were expounded in speeches, letters and public declarations by middle belt intellectuals, who were put in contrast to the very popular northern elites referred to as the Kaduna mafia. The Kaduna mafia had generated a one north one people idea which swallowed within it the dichotomy of the reality which was actually what Tyoden et al call two norths, two people.²¹ Among those who championed the movement of creating political parties and demanding the creation of states for the middle belt was J.S Tarka. Tarka who has been described as a charismatic leader was a co-founder of the United Middle Belt's Congress (UMBC).²² His philosophies and aspirations towards politics included an antagonistic stance towards the Hausa/Fulani hegemony, an ideology of politics based on the *ya na anygbian*.²³ Tiv Aphorism, development of a multi-plural and multi-ethnic state and the introduction of anti-opposition

²⁰ Middle Belt People's Party. *Agenda, First General Conference of the MBPP held at Jos on July 12 & 13, 1953*

²¹ Tyoden, S. G., and B. J. Takaya, editors. *The Kaduna Mafia: A Study of the Rise, Development and Consolidation of a Nigerian Power Elite*. Jos University Press, 1987. Pg

²² Tersoo, Richard Mnenga. *J.S. Tarka: The Life of a Charismatic Leader*. Bakin Nigerian Publishing, 2009

²³ This means eat and give your brother which refers to a communal sense of sharing opportunities and building community

politics in Tiv land. While his attainment of these aspirations was contradicted through the course of his political career,²⁴ he championed a successful mobilization towards a demand for the creation of new states.



Source: Middlebelt Facebook page

In the intellectual space, middle belt historiography which was birthed at the Ahmadu Bello University's (ABU) school of history was produced within a social context of ABU's expansion which resorted to an enrollment of Christian students from the middle belt.²⁵ Historian, Samaila illustrates that what informs the historiography of resistance more concretely is the emergence of the university of Jos in 1975 and Benue state University in 1992.²⁶ The strategy used was an appropriation of the idea of marginalization

²⁴ j Ukase, Patrick I. "J. S. Tarka and Ethnic Minority Agitations and Struggles in Nigeria 1960-1980: A Eulogy Revisited." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol. 22, 2013, pg. 84

²⁵ Samaila, Suleiman. "Nigerian History Machine and the Production of Middlebelt Historiography." Dissertation, University of Cape Town. Pg. 87

²⁶ Ibid 103

and the discourse of internal colonialism from middle belt activism which was then deployed ‘as a narrative for historical production’.²⁷

The direction of remembering through narration is one popular in the Nigerian historical scene where the process of remembering has been a conscious act of narrating the nation, inked with the aspiration of cohesive identities within the distinct differences of religion, class and ethnicity in Nigeria as advanced in official histories²⁸. These historiographies which come from tradition of writing against colonial tropes becomes a contested arena of narratives that emerge as regional histories.²⁹ In the middle belt, narratives were developed distinctly through institutional centers of tertiary education as already mentioned. Within but not limited to these universities exists an intellectual community of middle belt historians who produce intellectual histories through a thematic range of culture, economics and politics at both the micro and the macro level.³⁰ While these intellectual histories make up a formidable and burgeoning force in Nigerian regional histories, it falls into the conventionality of histories that operate only from the institutional center.

This use of narrative for historical production is in turn inverted in the case of the fourth group of middle belt dreamers who in answering the recurring question of what makes up the middle belt historically, have re-imagined versions of the middle belt dream through a reliance on history. I identify this group as a younger generation of social intellectuals who make up the digital part of the movement by primarily operating within digital spaces.

The use of digital platforms for political activity is not new to Nigeria. The most distinct in recent years is the #EndSARS movement which was led by young Nigerians who were protesting against the incessant brutality of the Nigerian police force. The Special Anti-Robbery Squad(SARS) created in 19992 for the specific purpose of combatting armed robbery and violent crimes in Nigeria had escalated in their designated duties and abused their powers by extorting young people through stereotyping them as fraudsters.³¹

In the case of the middle belt digital activists, they have primarily operated through the strategy of resisting through narrative. An example of this is the use of hashtag campaigns on Twitter in order to stir

²⁷ Ibid 111

²⁸ Ibid 51

²⁹ Ibid 227

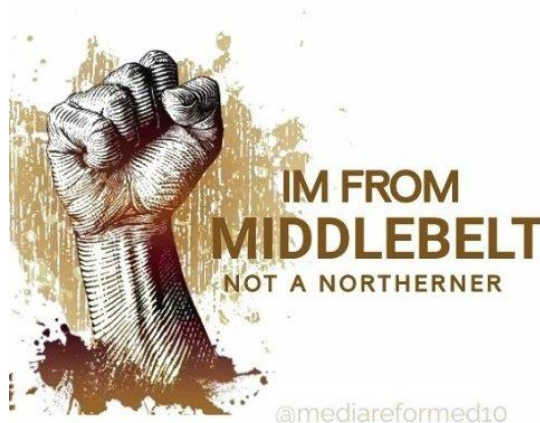
³⁰ Ibid 127

³¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/19/nigeria-year-no-justice-endsars-crackdown>

conversations on middle belt consciousness. Some examples of this hashtags include; #middlebeltnotnortherner, #iammiddlebelt #middlebeltawakening #iamnothausa #middlebeltisnotnorth. Based on my observation, while these hashtags had a decent reach especially with the use of images designed for momentum, the limitations of the general statistics were noted in manual tracing of the tweets that accompanied the hashtags. I observed that there were people who simply used the hashtags to push their businesses which did not give a decent and true reflection of how this particular data set reflected the activity reach online. It was more productive to manually trace the most vocal voices in the social movement whose tweets were not limited to heightened period of crisis such as farmer-herdsmen occurrences in Benue or ethno-religious clashes in Kaduna or Plateau.

Through this tracing, handles which were vocal in sharing information about the middle belt ranged in topics from awareness on the insecurity in Nigeria to what they classified as genocides in the middle belt. There were also culture related tweets that gave more information on different ethnic groups found in the middle belt.

Through digital ethnography, I discovered that most of those who were vocal belonged to a middle belt WhatsApp group that was focused on mobilizing towards counter-narratives on Twitter as well as providing relief to conflict-affected victims. As part of the WhatsApp group, I was privy to the conversations which were based on an understanding of historical narratives about the Middle Belt. Materials from the archives as well as texts on the middle belt were circulated and members were tasked to inform themselves on the way that middle belt identity has been shaped by othering. This was especially emphasized around the last Nigerian presidential election of February 2023 when contestations of the middle belt were again revived based on the alliance of middle belt members with the Igbo presidential candidate, Peter Obi. From the tone of the conversations, it was established that the alliance was based on a minority recognition where the middle belt group who did not feel represented by past dominant leaders felt that this was an opportunity for them to be represented at the national level.³²



³² Middle Belt Patriot whatsapp group

Image retrieved from twitter used for social media campaign

This WhatsApp group mobilized under the name Middle Belt Patriots (MBP) equally has a website with the following mission,

‘The Middle Belt Patriots brings together diverse voices of our communities to promote understanding of our rich cultural histories and common experiences. We aim to foster a deeper connections and solidarity among ethnic groups through political awareness, grassroots advocacy, youth engagement, and policy development. By honouring each group’s unique identity while finding shared purpose, we can overcome divisions and stand unified in shaping our future in this region on the principles of nonviolence, collaboration, justice, and autonomy. Our mission is to ignite positive social change and participatory democracy for all people to thrive in the Middle Belt’³³

The vision of the collective which captures the middle belt dream is also listed as,

We envision a Middle Belt region where all ethnic nationalities unite around shared values of cultural diversity, inclusive identity, equality and empowered self-determination for the common good of our people’³⁴

The initiatives of the middle belt patriots include community dialogues and cultural exchanges, political awareness campaigns, grassroots mobilizations, youth engagement programs and the promotion of nonviolence and collaboration³⁵. Of the listed items, the most active initiative is the political awareness campaign which is carried out on social media and through the middle belt times.

However, I was interested in the social contexts that accompanied their politically themed activities. This led to a profiling of individuals quite vocal in the digital space. Patrick is the co-founder of the Middle Belt Patriots(MBP) and he shared his political awakening and aspirations of the middle belt dream.

3.4 Patrick’s Violent Awakening

In conversation with Patrick who is the co-founder of Middle Belt Patriots, he identified himself as a middle belt nationalist involved in online awareness campaigns around the Middle Belt area. In connecting selfhood to mobility and family dynamics, he mentioned growing up in Kano, plateau, Kaduna and Benue states. When asked whether his parents were exposed to active national consciousness, he replied that there were no politically toned conversations beyond election candidacy

³³ <https://middlebeltpatriots.org/>

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

where his parents always rooted for the best qualified candidate. However, there were conversations around ethnic groups and the promotion of language and culture. He identified that a cultural awareness had always been there.

When did his political consciousness begin?

For Patrick, his consciousness grew from a cultural awareness into a political sense after university, when he was again reminded of the genocides happening around him. In trying to understand what was going on, he asked himself what the difference was between Nigeria's geopolitical zones and the middle belt and could only remember listening to a jingle repeatedly when he was younger that kept repeating the term middle belt. This was the first phase.

The second phase which began in 2020 influenced his readings on the different eras of the middle belt movement. This sparked reading was a reaction to the online spaces during COVID. With specific reference to clubhouse, where people seemed to be catching up with what was going on in the world, he recounts that a genocide that had occurred in the middle belt was being misrepresented and in the speaker claimed that the settler and migratory herdsmen were also owners of the lands and that the clashes were simply fights between brothers. In response to this, he had told the speaker that those were not his brothers. This simple but emotionally charged encounter became the reason he started reading in order to debunk the misrepresentations that were repeated on the online platforms. To prepare himself for the debates, Patrick turned to history which he had limited access to as most of the materials on the middle belt were only housed in libraries. This was also an illuminating connected fact to the curriculum that I noticed in the history students' department. In the course of four years, only one academic course came close to a dedicated study of the middle belt but even this was organized thematically. If the institutions and the circulation of the history is subverted, it then becomes primary to penetrate these public spaces with more information which is what Patrick and the Middle Belt Patriots do.

The subconscious cultural awareness had been there along but it was now made awake. What then fueled his awakening? Patrick recollects his personal experience with understanding the violence he was exposed to from childhood to adulthood. These killings which he says were not framed as middle belt crisis had the major elements of conflict which included, the aggressors and victims, a cause which was land expansionism, the lack of government will power and the lack of understanding of Nigeria by other groups³⁶.

³⁶ Interview with Patrick, December 10th 2023

“The first time I saw violence, I was ten. I was about to go to school and I heard that the Hausa settlers had brought militia and were killing people and when you hear of these things you think it is happening far away, let’s just chill and before you know it, you see flames everywhere, you see people running towards you, you see people whose houses have been burnt and you don’t know where they are coming from. and then your parents say pack up and you start running and you don’t know where you are running to, you just run. then you run to a place of safety and see people praying to different gods. What struck me was that I saw. A lot of Yoruba muslims who were praying and I was like wait, what is up with you guys? I thought this was about Islam? why are you guys here, you start asking questions within, is it a Muslim issue? is it an ethnic issue, you still don’t understand even though you know majority of the culprits are Hausa. so you think maybe it is a Hausa- muslim issue. As a child, you are trying to piece these things together. After a while, we went home and noticed that the attack did not reach our home. but the next day, it was a repeat, and this time it was different, there were littered bodies in the street”³⁷.

After seeing those dead bodies, on September 7th 2001 in Plateau state, the next encounter he had was in 2008 when he was in university and there was an issue with the local government elections and the militias also came. In speaking on the loss around him, Patrick said,

“People died, I lost a couple of friends. One of my friends, this is how he died. Their family had guns so when they told them to run, they refused. And when the guys came, their bullets ran out and they militia set them ablaze in the house”.

The third incident he recalls was driving to church during Sallah and he wasn’t aware that roads were blocked so he got trapped on the road while they were praying and had to wait till the Sallah prayers were done before he could leave. However, some of the young men around threatened to kill him saying,

You come put your car where we dey pray, if you mess up, we go burst your tire.

Patrick says that the only reason he wasn’t killed was because the people around said he didn’t talk back and should be let go. While sharing his story, he narrated that years after the incident he still had dreams where he found himself in their midst and woke up in cold sweats. There are aftermaths of this violence that affects not just the collective but also smaller units like family members. Patrick told stories of family members who had experienced the threats of these killings, those who had run into hiding and the underlying sense of fear that had permeated the families.

³⁷ Ibid

For him, his activism based on his experience in understanding himself had grown into a need to protect his people and find ways to make sure that they were aware of the historical facts of the issues on ground. a lot of these stories which have also affected his consciousness of protecting his people. It didn't start as a middle belt question but it was a need to protect his people and find ways to make sure that the truth of their cantankerous relationship with the North was made public. *What was the narrative in the media?*

The prevailing narrative of the middle belt in the national narrative is that it is a federal question of.³⁸ Yet, the ways in which it has been narrated in offline spaces suggests that there is more to the question which is not being tended to. This also suggests a mode of narrative remembering that silences emotive accounts towards the question. In profiling the middle belt digital dreamers through stories of their political awakening, the emotive and psyche of the middle belt is tapped into providing a link between memory and narrative as connected parts of our framing network of mediation. Three themes of the narrative that were found were violence, misrepresentation and awareness.

According to Patrick, while growing up, when there were genocides, it rarely made national news, it was often written through an under representation, the groups perpetuating the killing were not identified, there is a lot of room left for misrepresentation. In his adult years, he was also keen on the vague kind language, that was used in reporting including terms like bandits, clashes which obscured the identity of the attackers. This tension at the national front questions the ways that minorities are represented in the media and how independent media responds to the issues. It was equally what drove him to co-found the middle belt patriots and times where political awareness as the first phase of the middle belt dream in the contemporary could be carried out.

3.5 Narratives Retold

At the height of 1953, the Nigerian debates towards a proposed self-determination in 1956 were intensified across media platforms. In a letter to the editor of the Nigerian Citizen, a contributor named Politico wrote in response to the debate of Nigeria's sufficiency to stand on its own, 'Where is the North?'³⁹ This reference was to the dominant activities of leading political parties in the South and the East who had taken on the slogan of 'self-government in 1956' and an equally seemingly docile approach of Northern Nigeria to the question of independence. While the nationalist movements in the south were directly critiquing the inadequacies of the colonial system and were active towards independence, the

³⁸ Benedict (1991); Kastfelt (1994); Kukah (1994); Falola (1998); Chabal & Daloz (1999) and Suberu (2001) speak about the Federal question as a problem of scarce resources.

³⁹ The Nigerian Citizen, July 1953

criticism of the North towards colonialism was limited to the application of indirect rule⁴⁰. As such, while the first movement was abolitionist in nature, the second was reformist and direction towards reform became the preoccupation of political activity in Northern Nigeria⁴¹.

At the forefront of the Northern political activity was the Northern People's Congress(NPC) which was paraded largely in print media as a 'reunion for old boys of kastina college'⁴². However, with time, this grew into the dominant party of the North becoming what Dudley summarizes as a 'weakly articulated, organizationally diffused but highly centralized political party.'⁴³ On the other side of this political party was the opposition of the United Middle Belt People's Congress (UMBC) which was a meeting point for minority ethnic associations including the Tiv Progressive Union, The Idoma Hope Rising Union and the Birom Tribal Party.⁴⁴

The middle belt is mediated in the colonial narratives through a clear distinction of the Sokoto caliphate as superior and civilized while the groups that form the middle belt have been presented as inferior and uncivilized. In the contemporary era which this dissertation operates from, there are equally narratives that have been developed of the groups of people found in this study. These narratives are part of a tradition of the media as a construction and perpetuation site for Nigeria's political consciousness and cultural nationalism.⁴⁵

In the nationalist period, the press was instrumental in nationalist politics towards independence. Quite famously, the *Nigerian Daily Times*, the *Daily Service*, the *Nigerian Standard* and the *West African Pilot* which were all owned by Nigerians were critical of the colonial government in varying degrees⁴⁶. However, more actively in northern Nigerian, there was a growing Hausa nationalism which required an active spread in order to develop a northern nationalism that could respond to the country's nationalism. The solution to this wide spread northern nationalism was a suggestion by Aminu Kano that what was

⁴⁰ Dudley Billy. *Parties and Politics in Northern Nigeria*. Psychology Press, 1968. Pg. 218

⁴¹ Ibid 218

⁴² Ibid 316, Dudley highlights reports on the Nigerian citizen which presented in a space of twelve years a consistent rendering of the NPC as a political party without structure but steeped in religious traditions.

⁴³ Ibid 401

⁴⁴ Ibid 476

⁴⁵ Omu Fred. *Press and Politics*. pg. 100

⁴⁶ Idemili, Sam O. "What the West African Pilot Did in the Movement for Nigerian Nationalism between 1937 and 1957." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1978, pg. 85

needed was a newspaper which would be ‘staunchly inclined to moulding the north into the solid mass’⁴⁷ The newspaper that came into fruition as a result of this was *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo* which covered cultural and politics issues in Northern Nigeria⁴⁸.

On the other hand, the middle belt had been struggling with ways to rally given that its expression was limited to a debatable geographical expression and lacked a social and political identity to make it a bound concept that could represent the concerns of the people.⁴⁹ Its expression was more clearly articulated in the struggles presented in the testimonies to the Willink commission. Through these recollections at the Willink Minorities Commission sittings, the submissions of the minorities underwent a vital wave of consciousness in the middle belt discourse that follows a process of recollection by witnesses in the public space. These witnesses served as memory sources and produced a linkage of fears and concerns at the individual level that carried the temperament of a critical point in history.

Some of the fears included; First, schools taught children Islamic doctrine without the consent of their parents, and Hausa Muslim women refused to eat or associate with Christian women and also referred to them as Kafiri (infidels). Second, Hausa people called them pagans, and Christians would not be allowed to practice their religion when self-governance was granted. Third was that there were threats the Hausa language might become the lingua franca in Northern Nigeria would lead to the languages of the Middle Belt people becoming extinct. Fourth, there are no Native Courts in Jos to serve the non-Muslim communities., but just Alkali Courts with Muslim judges applying Islamic law. Fifth, that election results were readily cancelled whenever the ruling NPC lodged complaints about them. Sixth, The Fulani were in the habit of taking their farmlands by force. Seventh, Christian women were afraid of domination by Muslim women who practiced purdah and so could not get educated.⁵⁰

There are vital revelations of the fears that represent the consciousness that the people were dealing with at the time. The first is a state of rejection where the minorities did not feel accepted by the Hausa-Fulani Muslims. The second was the domination of language, customs, culture, and land by the core north, made up of the Hausa-Fulani Muslim group. The fears of the minorities also operated in the private and public spheres, where the interaction in homesteads accompanied political interactions in the public spheres of

⁴⁷ Smith, M.P. 2004. “Northern Identity and the Politics of Culture in Nigeria, 1945- 1966”, PhD. Dissertation, University of London.pg 56

⁴⁸ Mytton Graham , *Mass Communication in Africa*. Britain: Edward Arnold Publishers Pg.. 63

⁴⁹ Smith, M.P. 2004. “Northern Identity and the Politics of Culture in Nigeria, 1945- 1966”, PhD. Dissertation, University of London.pg 223

⁵⁰ Kwewum, R. S. *The Middle Belt (Selected Readings)*. Ndeya Publishing Limited, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020. P. 23-65

religious and political institutions. Against the background of these fears, how has this wave of consciousness developed into contemporary and public representations of the collective self given that a post-modern search for a reach into a historical past became commodified and led by ideologies that resulted in amnesia.⁵¹

In order to circulate memories, newspapers like the *Middle Belt Herald*, *The National Impression*, *Free Nation*, *Northern Nigeria in Perspective*, and *Todays Challenge* were established to challenge dominant narratives of the Mafia group but they are no longer in circulation.⁵² The act of writing the nation out of amnesia through the media is popular as a collective endeavor in the twentieth century. As Garde- Hansen notes, the production of cultural memory in the twentieth century has continued to how citizens ‘participate, create and recreate a nation’s past’⁵³ Astrid Erll argues that a productive way of remembering follows the assumption that the past is a continuous act of re-construction and representation⁵⁴. The ways in which the past remembers is in what is remembered and how it is remembered. The range of remembering is exemplified by Erll when war is remembered as a mythic event, political history, family history, traumatic experience or a generational transition⁵⁵.

The Middle Belt patriots have an attached media platform which is called the Middle belt Times. Its tagline, *reporting for the downtrodden*, covers issues including security, politics, terrorism, corruption, opinion, human rights, sports, economy, health and education as listed on its site. Through a coverage of its publications between January 2023- December 2023, I traced the role of the paper in retelling narratives for the middle belt. These categories are based on the Newspaper’s system.

Month	Category
January	Elections, Tech
February	Politics, Human rights, Press release
March	Corruption, Politics, Human rights,
April	Politics, Press Release
May	No publication
June	Foreign, Politics,

⁵¹ Rossington, Michael and Anne Whitehead. *Theories of Memory: A Reader*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pg. 5

⁵² Samaila, Suleiman. "Nigerian History Machine and the Production of Middlebelt Historiography." Dissertation, University of Cape Town pg. 218

⁵³ Joanne Garde-Hansen. *Media and Memory*. Edinburgh:Edinburgh University Press 2011 pg. 53

⁵⁴Erll, Astrid, ed. *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin:Walter de Gruyter, 2008. pg. 7

⁵⁵ Ibid 7

July	Insecurity, Economy, Faith, Terrorism, Corruption
August	Insecurity, News, terrorism, human rights
September	Report, Health, Insecurity, Human Rights, Crime, Politics, Agriculture, Environment
October	Press Release
November	Human Rights
December	Insecurity, Lifestyle, Human Rights, Politics

In the above table, the most recurrent category across the month is that of human rights and politics. How are the stories told under this category representative of a middle belt’s counter narrative?

3.6 A media narrative: Human Rights and Politics

What are the perspectives towards the middle belt as a human rights issue? The genocidal campaign as undertaken in the middle belt benefits from the figures of the genocide watch which states in a 2022 report that between January and June 2022, no fewer than 2,543 Christians were killed by Nigerian Islamic Jihadists.⁵⁶ More figures on the case estimated that 14 Christians were killed daily and 420 monthlies with the pressure areas being Kaduna, Niger, Plateau and Benue state which are all member states of the middle belt.⁵⁷ As the catholic News agency reports, a five-year-old boy was beheaded in southern Kaduna state on April 15th during an attack by Islamists⁵⁸. In international newspapers, this conflict was reported as pastoral conflicts.⁵⁹ These reports supported by the international crisis group which articulates the crisis as a Farmer-Herdsmen conflict suggests a livestock sector reform and a freeze on open grazing bans.⁶⁰

The varying reports on the conflict is reconstructed in the Middle belt Times. Giving an insiders perspective, the paper reports that national media’s lack of reporting on daily issues from the minority areas is what has led to dominant misrepresentations being upheld.⁶¹ As a way of highlighting how politics of reporting affects narratives from below, the paper states that Christian journalist Steven Kefas was arrested and imprisoned for reporting on the ‘massacres’ in their homelands. According to Steven Kefas, this arrest was an abduction as there was no warrant.⁶²

⁵⁶ <https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/jihadists-have-murdered-2543-nigerian-christians-in-2022>

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254147/5-year-old-beheaded-33-killed-in-nigeria-christian-foundation-calls-for-action>

⁵⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/27/africa/nigeria-herdsmen-boko-haram-report/index.html>

⁶⁰ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence>

⁶¹ <https://middlebelttimes.com/2024/01/12/genocidal-killings-in-the-middle-belt-of-nigeria-perspectives-facts-and-fugures/>

⁶² Ibid

Yet another misleading narrative as reported by the paper is the reportage of the genocide a climate change issue. Reporting on this, Steven kefas notes that,

““It has nothing to do with climate change. They bring in climate change to deceive the international community and some gullible Nigerians, but we here in Nigeria, we have loved ones being killed, we have witnessed these attacks, we know that the attackers just come in to kill people. Sometimes when they kill people, they tell them: “Why don’t you call on your God to come and defend you?” There is a lady I interviewed, who was taken by these terrorists, she was raped and molested in the forest and they told her: “You say you have a God, why don’t you call your God to come and safe you from our hand?” This tells you that these people have an agenda, it is a jihadist agenda, that is not just restricted or limited to Nigeria. It is an agenda that is across Africa, we have them in Mali, Somalia, Guinea and some other places. So that is what is on the plate and it has nothing to do with climate change”.”⁶³

In reference to Patrick’s personal story where the national media was not clear in their naming of aggressors, the article represented here and similar ones in the newspaper take on a more active approach to representing the facts. Words like massacres are used to replace clashes, genocides used to replace pastoral conflicts and militias used to replace herdsmen. In a ten-point agenda by the Plateau state Christian leaders towards the management of attacks in Plateau state, the leaders of the community who described the killings as ‘unprovoked, satanic and genocidal’ suggested that the armed militias be officially proscribe as terrorists in order to give the military power to engage them as per the Terroism Act of 2022.⁶⁴ This naming politics in narrative reflects the stance of language being political.

The effects of insecurity based on killings have also led to economic battles for the middle belt the newspaper states. Agriculture which makes up the primary source of income for the majority of rural communities in Nigeria is threatened due to the incessant attacks. In Kaduna state which is a top maize producing state in Nigeria, the activities of the terrorists were said to have encumbered intensive farming in the states.⁶⁵

The politics of insecurity cause by the middle belt genocide has been left with within a blame game. In reporting on the internal blame games after attacks in Benue state, The Benue Youth Forum criticized former President Buhari for blaming the former Benue state governor, Samuel Ortom for the federal

⁶³ <https://middlebelttimes.com/2024/01/12/genocidal-killings-in-the-middle-belt-of-nigeria-perspectives-facts-and-fugures/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.channelstv.com/2024/01/08/proscribe-militias-as-terrorists-plateau-christian-leaders-present-10-point-demands/>

⁶⁵ <https://middlebelttimes.com/2023/09/05/effects-of-insecurity-on-agro-productivity-in-middle-belt-nigeria/>

Government's inability to protect lives and property in Benue state. As a way of re-directing the narrative that the security situation was worse due to the governor's refusal to accept intelligence provided to him, the youth's president Terrence Kuaman noted that no appointee of the President had been to see the damages and console the people over their loss.⁶⁶

In relating to the government's inaction towards insecurity, the paper also reports on Tinubu's first 100 days of tenure where insecurity as an important part of his campaign was not being tackled. The paper reported that between May 29th and July 2023, approximately 629 Nigerians lost their lives to non-state actors with Middle belt states experiencing the highest numbers.⁶⁷

Conclusion

What this Paper reveals is the middle belt dream in the contemporary from the vantage point of the younger generation takes on a shift in shape from the middle belt dream in the 1960s which was merely seen as a struggle for states and more actively becomes a struggle for truthful narratives. It also shifts in the form of its organization, whereas the previous generation was led by a middle belt elite, the middle belt dream in the present is organized around social movements that have individuals activating it but not limiting its direction. These narratives, however, are not merely static texts. They are brought to life through an embodiment that takes them from what is said into what is performed and this is what we explore in the next Paper on performance.

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⁶⁶ <https://middlebelttimes.com/2023/04/21/benue-youth-forum-criticizes-president-buhari-for-blaming-governor-ortom-over-insecurity-in-benue-state/>

⁶⁷ <https://middlebelttimes.com/2023/09/05/insecurity-soars-in-tinubus-first-100-days-nigerias-battle-for-peace-continues/>

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