

Socio-Political and Cultural Context of Independence in 1960: Perceptions, Lived Experiences in Middle Belt Areas and Lessons (Not Learned?) for Modern Nigeria

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Abstract
Nigeria's political independence on October 1st 1960 was highly 'emotional' among citizens in different parts of the country at that moment. This paper examines some critical socio-cultural issues veritable to the formation of a new nation. Information in form of reports, written testimonies, and related archival materials were examined from the National Museum and National Archives, Jos in writing the paper. In-depth/personal interviews were also conducted in Jos and Makurdi. From the analysis and interpretation of information for the study, the following constitute major findings: 1, while the whole country was said to be ready to receive independence in 1960, not all known regional interests, such as those of the Middle Belt minorities were accepted and included in the national agenda 2, the demand for the creation of Middle Belt region (along with those proposed for the Mid-West and COR States) was perceived by 'majority' political actors as 'extraneous' to the planned independence, and 3, since hopes of Middle Belt minorities for a separate region of theirs were dashed, the overall perception of independence was suspect and morale low. The implication is that since the 'celebration' of the first independence suffered an initial 'social fracture', the rapid integration of various ethnic nationalities into mainstream post independence Nigeria has been faced with daunting difficulties, which the alienation and exclusion of majority of citizens from participating in the nation's petro-economy represent focal loci of social helplessness. Occasions of national celebration of 1st independence in 1960 should not have been hastily contrived which leaves the country now undergoing unnecessary birth pangs, if it was a nation for all citizens with equal rights, obligations and privileges.
Keywords: independence, ethnic nationalities, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, oppressors, domination, Nigeria.

2. Socio-historical background

There is nothing like freedom. The French revolution that brought a fundamental change in human rights globally was not vague about freedom of doing things by oneself. The French revolution, by implication, was the bastion of the United Nations Universal declaration of Human Rights, which constitutes series of diverse fundamental human rights, including freedom of choice. Freedom to choose what one wants and when and how to do things is an inalienable part of the human nature. This is more appreciated under circumstances of domination by foreign colonial powers. Although not obtained by force of arms, Nigeria's independence from the British in 1960 must be viewed from this natural human disposition to prefer freedom to domination and self-determination to external control. Nigeria was under colonial rule for all of the 19th century up to the greater part of the next.

Prior to and up until the amalgamation of northern and southern Nigerian protectorates in 1914, the country's constituting parts existed not only as independent and semi-autonomous communities and nation-states, but also as separate British protectorates. The new independent country as at 1960, therefore, incorporated a number of people with aspirations of their own 'sovereign' nationalities (Logams, 1985). The reality of colonial rule was not in doubt as many of the relatively independent and semi-autonomous ethnic groups in varying degrees resisted but were brought under British colonial rule. By sheer force and superiority of military power, virtually all parts of the now Nigeria were annexed, with the last major onslaught of the British forces leading to the fall of Kano and Sokoto in the North in 1903 (Smah, 2002). The success of the indirect rule system in the country was easily facilitated by the pre-eminence of existing local/traditional coercive and oppressive systems organised around state power.

The Constitutional Conference of 1957 in London, involving local political parties and the following elections in 1958/59 marked a watershed in the history and concreteness of moves by the British colonial authorities to grant political independence to Nigeria, in a matter of no distant time. As part of the preparations for the independence celebrations on 1st October 1960, various political, cultural, or social groups organised to position themselves for the coming independence.

Politically, the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), which was the dominant political party that ruled the northern region and even formed the central government however, dominated the Northern region by overshadowing the several ethnic minority groups in the region. The Middle Belt ethnicities expressed the need for a region of theirs. Thus, in the Middle Belt region, the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) was formed

and served as a political party in Nigeria during the nation's First Republic. The Party was a fusion of two major middle belt organizations, the Middle Zone League and the Middle Belt Peoples' Party. The party (UMBC) was formed to create a political forum for the various ethnic groups in central Nigeria covering parts of present day Benue, Kogi , Plateau , Nasarawa , Kwara, Adamawa and parts of Kaduna, Borno and Kebbi States[1]. Largely, this assisted in understanding the perception of the issues involved in the preparation and celebration of independence in 1960 by the people[2].

The UMBC was in existence prior to independence and the people of the region it served had expectations for the coming independence. The Middle Belt region is synonymous with cultural, ethnic and religious diversity[3]. The major political associations had no patience to unite this diversity for the interest of the country in the immediate and long-term gains. The UMBC as a political platform was however, there to facilitate the expression of unity in diversity among them and to create the people's sense of community (Post, 1963). The socio-cultural diversity of the northern region was perceived in terms of ethnic, cultural and religious cleavages. They were to have been exploited for the greater good of the entire region/country and not be seen as a curse and a basis for persecution and division.

This paper is therefore, intended to capture and analyse the concerns of central Nigerian ethnicities, on the verge of political independence on 1st October 1960. The rest of the presentation is organized in sections as follows.

3. Rationalizing Middle Beltern Concerns in the 1st October 1960 Independence

The 1st of October 1960 offered a golden opportunity to create a modern Nigeria with all sense of equality, inclusiveness, respect of rights and social justice for all. Prior to the day of independence, the people of the Middle Belt had high hopes and anticipated to have a free state with them having control over all aspects of their existence under a democratic setting. Also many expectations were raised that touched on economic development, political stability, social integration and cultural harmony of the people of the Middle Belt in northern Nigeria.

A study of the aspirations of ethnic minority groups in northern Nigeria could produce volumes. For example, a collection of ethnic by ethnic events leading to the celebration of independence in 1960 requires wide ranging stages of anthropological and ethnographical fieldwork. But even though on this scale, the present study is very important to analyse the issues that form the foundation of a great country like Nigeria. This may inspire some hope in post-independence social and political development and also rekindle dwindling expectations in the country without resort to socially unacceptable paths to socio-cultural and intergroup engagements.

As expected, preparations for independence across the country were under different platforms, such as ethnic and cultural associations, schools, religious organizations as well as political parties or political associations. The primary concern is with political platforms used to crystallise issues that demanded inclusion in the making of a new, independent nation. This was necessary in harnessing Middle Belt people's consciousness to avoid being politically sidelined and marginalised by other regional political actors in the political process leading to independence. But did they avoid being marginalised and excluded from the mainstream national economic and political opportunity structure? This paper analyses the perceptions and fears of the Middle Belt leaders in the events leading to independence by identifying official sources of relevant information regarding the preparations for Independence Day in 1960. It also articulates a critical sociological analysis/discussion of information generated from the field relating to the issues.

4. Methodological Note

Two types of data were elicited for the study, i.e. secondary and primary data. Secondary (archival) data include all official published information and other relevant documents contained in books, journals, newspapers, magazines, minutes of meetings, and technical reports, among others, that were obtained from the Jos Museum as well as the National Archives Jos, through documentary survey method. Fieldwork, beginning with obtaining permission to access data from those institutions began in early April 2010. Primary data include all information generated for the purpose of the study through oral/in-depth interview with Chief Elai, Pa. Andry and Mallam

[1] Certain 'voices' within and without the Middle Belt denounce these states as essentially a creation of Christians and does not reflect the heterogeneous nature of the region.

2 Some of the early leaders of the UMBC were Joseph Tarka, David Lot, Patrick Dokotri, Edward Kundu Swem, Ahmadu Angara, Isaac Shaahu (Northern Assembly Opposition Leader), Solomon Lar, Bulus Biliyong, D.D. Dimka, V.T. Shisha, M.D. Iyorka, and Ugba Uyeh (see Post, 1963).

[3] In addition to existing traditional religious beliefs, the adherents of the two received religions- Christianity and Islam have transformed the region into arenas of persistent antagonisms and proselytization of converts, which in most cases have led to sectarian violence leading to the killing of innocent citizens and destruction of property with enormous economic values. The growing antagonisms between Christians and Muslims have attendant consequences on peaceful coexistence among the various ethnic and religious groups in the country.

Sabo (not real names), who were actual key players and witnesses to various stages of the preparations leading to the celebration of Independence Day and even beyond the region. Such qualitative approach by design better captures the lived experiences of the people of the sub-region prior to and on the 1st Independence Day on October 1, 1960. That day happened to be a Saturday.

The collection of data was the sole responsibility of this writer. This involved travelling to Jos four times from his base at the Nasarawa State University in Keffi near Abuja, the Federal Capital City and once to Makurdi in Benue State, for the conduct of documentary survey and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with the selected living key figures of the independence experiences from the region.

a) Data for the Study

Although the study proposed six (6) in-depth interviewees, three (3) were eventually interviewed; two (2) in Jos, Plateau State and one (1) in Makurdi, Benue State. This was due to the inability to access all those anticipated for participation in the study. They each represented experiences shared by school teachers, marketers and politicians at the time that participated in pre-independence activities and witnessed the coming of independence in the sub-region. One of the in-depth interviews was conducted with the man who was regarded as the father of Middle Belt/Minority rights and peoples emancipation, Chief Elai in Jos on 17th April 2010. He shared lived experiences on broad-range of issues from his membership of the Federal House of Representatives to the hopes and anticipations of the Minorities in the north generally. The second person was another Octogenarian, Pa. Andry. The interview took place in Makurdi on 3rd May 2010. His experiences were however, specifically based on happenings in Gboko, a township in Benue state about 70km from Makurdi, where he was on the day of independence. He was a school teacher until his retirement from the public service. The third person was Mallam Sabo, who said he was a trader/marketer in Jos at that time and reportedly witnessed the lowering of the 'Union Jack' and the hoisting of Nigeria's national flag on 1st October 1960 at the Race Course Jos.

Sources for secondary data for the study include libraries, National Archives Jos and the National Commission for Museum Jos. Information generated from these sources include proceedings of the debates of the Federal House of Representatives, Report of the Willinks Commission (1958), colonial memoirs, and documentary analysis by researchers, analysts, media reporters, among others[1]. However, what best captures the mood of the pre-independence thinking was the pre-existing Federal House of Representatives (FHR 1958). The study utilised the FHR's debates, especially its official report of the 1958-59 session, which ran between 6th and 17th March 1958.

b) Field Observations

The National Commission for Museum and the National Archives, both located in Jos were the most reliable sources of data in terms of their 'memorial' (artistic, archaeological, geological, documentary and related) holdings/collections not only on the Middle Belt but for the whole of the northern part of Nigeria. The Jos Museum, for example, had existed long before independence, preserving/storing monumental data bases for colonial activities in the north, such as mining, geology, political and native administration, town and regional planning, anthropological, literary documentation/pictures and library activities, which are repositories or repertoires of national or regional history for the newly independent country in 1960.

5. Issues for Middle Belt Minorities' Preparations for Independence?

The premise and promise of independence for minorities bordered mostly on issues concerning religion, politics, law and social practices, among others. This provided the socio-cultural context in which we attempt to understand the expectations and perhaps, frustrations of the minorities (who are defined broadly in religious and population terms) in the Middle Belt area of the country.

Before independence in 1960, it was alleged in a colonial memoir 49 years earlier that Lady Lugard wrote a 'letter to the editor ' and which was published in the *London Times,* suggesting that the British Government should amalgamate the northern and southern protectorates to form one country known as Nigeria. Although hardly known and regarded as a document to be taken seriously, yet this was to have influenced the decision to invite Lord Lugard the then Governor of Hong Kong by the British Secretary of State for the colonies, Viscount Harcourt, to undertake the exercise (Etaghene, 2000). It would be recalled that just months after he arrived, the two protectorates were amalgamated and a newly amalgamated country was in place in 1914. Lord Lugard was the first Governor-General of the country. Further, in 1922 the League of Nations allegedly mandated the British Territory of (southern) Cameroon to be annexed to Nigeria for administrative conveniences.

In 1954, Nigeria got a federal constitution. This was in response to greater desire for regional autonomy (not central unity) as well as the need for a more precise definition of functions between the centre and the regions. The constitution came into being on 1st October 1954 as a result of constitutional conferences held in London in 1953 and 1954. That constitution defined the country's five constituent parts, namely- western, eastern and northern regions as well as Lagos the federal capital and southern Cameroon (which is now part of

[1] Not all the materials cited in the main report of the study are referred to here.

the Republic of Cameroon). At the 1957 constitutional conference in London, arrangements were concluded for both eastern and western regions to be self governments later in the year.

Part of the fall-outs of the 1957 constitutional conference was the agreement that certain commissions and bodies be established due to the fact that certain items of business on its terms of reference were unfinished. The conference agreed that a resumed conference (the 1958 constitutional conference) should be hosted to consider the reports of the Minorities Commission and the Fiscal Commission as well as other matters then outstanding. The report of the Minorities Commission (Willinks Commission, 1958) was published on 18th August 1958. The 1958 conference, of which the issue of Minority Rights was a part, considered other key concerns, such as fundamental human rights, state creation, procedure after independence for changing regional boundaries and creating new regions.

The creation of a mid-western minority area was already being considered by the Western Regional Government before the 1958 constitutional conference in London. The North was led by Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardaunan Sokoto. The conference merely noted and adopted the existing proposal/undertaking to that effect. The creation of Calabar and Ogoja minorities' areas was recommended by the conference, consisting of Calabar and Ogoja Provinces. Provincial assemblies in both the West and East were to undertake to process the demands for the establishment of the Minorities Areas from those blocs. In the North, however, there were no discussions, except the Ilorin-Kabba boundary dispute, which the conference had recommended settlement through a plebiscite. However, the conditions for a plebiscite was not fulfilled to enable the authorities hold it before Independence Day in October 1960. Of course, the Regional Governments had even proposed independence for 2nd April 1960. This meant there was little time to accomplish all the planning and preparations for the independence.

Furthermore, up to the setting up of the Willinks Commission (1958) on the 'Minority Insecurity and Modalities of Reassurance', minority concerns had been expressed in the process of the forging of a new nation. In 1953, 1954 and 1957, fears had been expressed by minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Willinks Commission (1958), which report was presented and discussed during the 1958 constitutional conference in London was one of the last opportunities minorities had to have their fears addressed before the coming independence.

The Commission was appointed on 26th September 1957 by the Secretary of States, to among others, 'ascertain the factors about the fears of minorities in any part of Nigeria and to propose means of allaying those fears, whether well or ill-founded'. The report was submitted on 30th September 1958. According to the Commission, the fears of the minorities in Nigeria arose from two circumstances, namely- the division of the whole territory into three powerful Regions, each one group being numerically preponderant, and as well the approach of independence with the removal of restraints which had operated then. While the fears and experiences of minorities in the south bordered on neglect and discrimination on the basis of access to jobs, schools, hospitals, etc., because the areas in question where remote from the ports or capitals, in the northern region, it was the reverse. In this case, it was the minority areas that had advantage, because of the presence of missionaries in those areas. This was the general picture between the Northern and Southern minority areas, which led to far more being spent on both schools and hospitals in the south than in the core north. Mileage of roads in proportion to the population was also greater in the south at that time. The fears of northern (largely Middle Belt) minorities were generally summarised as follows.

The first set was fears and grievances regarding traditional rulers. Pagan or Christian areas, such as southern Zaria (now southern Kaduna), Wase, Lafia, Nasarawa, Yelwa and Ilorin, etc, had been ruled by Muslim District Officers (DOs) who were appointed by the British authorities. The traditional rulers in those areas had close affinity with the DOs. District Heads were also appointed by the Emirs. It is the prerogative of the Emir to appoint these cadres of rulers, who in turn were subordinate and answerable to them.

The minorities had expressed the fear of marginalisation and neglect by the Emirs in not appointing them to positions of influence in the emirate. The predominance of Emirs in the political structure was marked and exclusive. Non-Muslim Chiefs feared dismissal and restraints. The Colonial authorities, however, dealt with the issue by appointing a Council of Chiefs who handled the appointment, recognition and grading of chiefs. Prior to this, of the fifteen Traditional Rules in the North, only the Tor Tiv in the now Benue State, who was not a Muslim, was First Class and included on the list, even though there were a sizeable number of Chiefs from the Middle Belt in the Council of Chiefs.

The second set of fears as recorded by the minorities' commission was social fears and grievances. According to the Commission:

> These fears regarding Chiefs and Administration were coupled with a number of allegations regarding the use of contemptuous expressions and social practices. It was alleged that the stricter Muslims would not eat with non-Muslims that they referred to them by contemptuous names and that it was feared that Muslim practices such as observance of Purdah and the prohibition of alcohol would be extended and made compulsory… (Willinks Commission, 1958, par.7)

The Federal Government at the time believed that the greater contact of strict Muslims with other people may lessen the fear.

The third set of fears of the northern minorities at the verge of independence was the fear of political influence. The Commission observed the more serious allegations regarding the Native Authority police and of the *Alkalai* (singular is alkali- meaning judge in Hausa). This referred to the use of their position to influence the political scene, acting at polling stations as agents for political candidates, and influencing election results by their manifest preference for a political party, especially the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the party with majority number of seats in the Northern Regional House of Assembly. A reform in the appointment of Alkalai and Dogarai (body guards) was suggested as a way of allaying this anxiety by northern minorities.

The fourth fear which confronted the northern minorities at the verge of independence was that of foreign policy. This hinged on the NPC-led Regional Government's sympathy towards the Middle East, especially United Arab Republic, which tended to promote Islam as a state religion. This was feared to cause a grave divergence on foreign policy between different elements in Nigeria. The Commission dismissed this fear. The Commission felt the NPC was more aligned with Sudan than with Egypt and that the Commission did not 'believe that this is a widely held fear among the pagan minorities of the Middle Belt area' (par.17). The Commission however, held the view or belief that even if the fears were true, the NPC would not control the federal government without the support of their own minorities, nor be able to effect foreign policy changes without the support of non-Muslim Nigerians.

The fifth set of fears by northern minorities was that of religious intolerance. Both Christians and Animists were said to have expressed fears regarding the future when the colonialists would have left the political/administrative scene. The Commission did report that the fears were not particularly impressive, since the Northern Regional Government had on September 14th 1957 declared that 'Subject only to the requirements of the law and public order the Regional Government has no intension of favouring or advancing any religion at the expense of another' (par.26).

The sixth expressed set of fears by the Northern minorities was that of the Muslim law (Sharia). It was a subject of the Brooke Commission, who recommended that the Muslim law was a subject of complexity as many of the writs did not fall under specific head. However, the colonial authorities felt that the fears were of two broad categories, namely the notion which makes a distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims and the notion of the affinity and tie between the legislature and the executive, which was feared, would even be closer with the exit of the colonialists.

The last challenge to minorities while preparing for independence was summarised on the floor of the FHR in Lagos on 11 March 1958 by the Hon. J S Tarka, when he said that:

> If we plan carefully now and have independence in 1960, or at any time thereof, the celebrations, the rejoicings and weepings shall take care of themselves. (Some northern Hon. Members said: 'Weeping'?). When I say weeping I do not want to be misunderstood. Independence as interpreted by others in this country today is meant for their own personal use only. Some people here are asking for independence to subject their brothers to slavery… In respect of a great matter such as this, Nigerian leaders must not set aside minority groups. We, the minority parties, must be consulted and considered when such a major issue is discussed, as the Premiers and the big guns are too big to sit on the same table and discuss with their smaller brothers on matters of this nature. I think they are not sincere in their demand for independence… When I say that they are not sincere, Sir, I mean that recently, we the smaller parties in all the Regions put out proposals for all-party conference, but all were in vain ; they refused…I am aware, Sir, of the Minorities Commission which was caused by the refusal of the big political parties to listen to reason… (Willinks Commission, 1958, pp. 634-635, emphasis original).

The above constitute self-revelation of the texture and structure of the interests, issues and concerns that existed in the country then, which form the building blocks of modern day Nigeria. Had these concerns been incorporated into national independence agenda and settled before independence, the country may have moved faster on the lane of development and cohesion. Obviously these issues had been discussed before the day of independence. The minorities in the Middle Belt had a single platform around which their aspirations were organised. That was the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC). The party was the vehicle through which awareness campaigns were organised to sensitize the grassroots on the coming independence, among other roles it played even beyond the Independence Day celebration.

7. Reporting Independence Celebrated

Minority Moods in the Middle Belt

The celebration of independence in the Middle Belt could best be described as low key. This arose from the alleged 'refusal' of the then Northern Regional Government to even mention that there were felt needs expressed in certain parts of the Region for recognition and attention. In an interview with Chief Elai, one of the architects

of modern Nigeria, the issue of the 'independence' of Middle Belt minorities was widely known and received among the educated elite from certain minority areas, such as Gwoza (one of the earliest areas hit by the on-going terrorism in South East Borno State); Plateau, Niger and Kwara states; and Zuru in Southern Kebbi as well as Benue State, among others. Of course, the North attained self-governance status in 1959. One can then appreciate the enormous tasks of organising the various ethnic nationalities and interests within it to be able to play active roles in the coming independence only the next year. However, the UMBC had mounted serious campaigns for the creation of Middle Belt Region out of the Northern Region. The party even won seats in the Regional House of Assembly and as well had adequate representation at the Federal House of Representatives. Solomon D Lar and J S Tarka were part of the Federal Legislators on the platform of the UMBC.

According to information from an interview with Chief Elai in Jos on 17th April 2010, Solomon Lar was reportedly invited by J S Tarka and Patrick Dokotri, among others, to:-

> Leave the classroom and (start) campaigning in Lafia, Niger, Kwara, Plateau, Nasarawa, Southern Kaduna, Zuru, Taraba. We had our member, Alhaji Mohammed Gwoza in the FHR. From Gombe we had Bulus Billiong. From Adamawa, we had Jonah Asadugu. In Benue we had Ahmadu Angara who later became the Chief of Idoma. Women came out and testified and became associated with progress…These were …in line with progress and we wanted change. For example, in the whole of the old Plateau, there was no single Government Secondary School…only Missions, until later. The demand was overwhelming. (Excerpts of Interview with Chief Elai on 17th April 2010).

The priority for the minorities for celebrating independence was the granting of their request by creating a separate region for them. This was to enable the region to compete more favourably with older ones like Western and Eastern regions thereby accelerating development. The creation of the Mid-Western Region was already in the pipeline. The creation of the Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers (COR) State was already in the consideration of the Eastern Regional Government. The Middle Belt Region's creation was the only one that was not even mentioned at all.

Chief Elai pointed out that although the Minority Inquiry Report (aka Willinks Commission, 1958) recommended the creation of regions for the minorities, party and political leaders in the three regions allegedly refused. According to him, it was reasoned that creating additional regions would mean adjusting the time-table for the independence on 1st October 1960 (the date was originally fixed for April 2nd, not October 1st, 1960, anyway!). Then the politicians had a working agreement/understanding with the leaders, Premiers and the Prime Minister at the centre that after independence was granted in October 1960, they would be willing to open up the issue of new regions. They were said to have reneged on the 'understanding' for the creation of regions. They put aside the issue and said their priority was the 'development of the country and whatever other things'. Then they (middle Belt leaders) started the fight again. 'That was what led to the Tiv riots. In the Middle Belt our people did not like it, said Chief Elai. According to Chief Elai:

> We were not fully admitted into the new independence because our demand for the creation of new regions was not realised and I believe it was a very big mistake on the part of the government. They said they would not allow their regions to be carved out by an inch and go somewhere and name it something else. That was the language- 'they would not allow any part of their region...to be carved out even by an inch and be named something else' (Excerpts of Interview with Chief Elai on 17th April 2010)

Though in Lagos for the actual celebration, yet in capturing the mood back at home in the Middle Belt, Chief Elai recalled that:

> There were receptions all over the regions and all over local areas, too. But at home, quite frankly, because they didn't get the Middle Belt region, they were not very happy, because that was not what they wanted. During the Willinks Commission, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the greatest friend of the minorities sent lawyers to come and help our people with their case for the demand for the Minorities' Region. The NCNC-NPC coalition did not want the creation of Middle Belt and the COR regions (Excerpts of Interview with Chief Elai on 17th April 2010).

It should be noted that regardless of the possible national excitement for the independence come true, lived grassroots experiences should point to the greater source of memory. Flag symbolism and national spirit should naturally grow out more from a socially conscientized local, ordinary folks. For the Middle Belt minorities, the excitement and euphoria would have been greater if the creation of their region was attained latest that morning of Saturday October 1, 1960. Even if the desired Middle Belt Region (MBR) creation was achieved during the ceremony, the rather 'not very happy' mood that apparently eclipsed the leaders of the Middle Belt would have been different.

But that view is not all that may have been observed from other specific locations in the areas. Excitements may have characterised the celebration of the Independence Day as captured by Pa. Andry in an interview with this writer on 3rd May 2010 in Makurdi, Benue State capital. He narrated how:

> We were happy in Gboko where I was at that time. The idea of self-rule was what made us school teachers happier. Because we knew what it suggested, we were excited. The National Flag was on display. As you would recall, our people were in the forefront of the fight for independence. So we were happy to see that day come to pass (Excerpts of Interview with Pa. Andry on 3rd May 2010).

In spite of that mood in Gboko, Pa. Andry was quick to point to the fact that their leader, JS Tarka, who was very prominent in the struggle for the creation of a Middle Belt Region, was unhappy. 'Most people expected large gathering of people to celebrate independence but only few even realised it was Independence Day', he said.

Back in Jos, Mallam Sabo, recounted how he watched the 'Union Jack' symbolically lowered while the National Flag, Green White Green was raised. As a trader then, he told of his observation of a march-past that day. In his words:

> School children lined up the streets around west of mines in Jos and we sang, danced and marched on the streets. We played drums and flutes. Everybody was happy that the colonialists were leaving the country. The event was not that a big show but we felt what freedom meant and how we were now set to do our things they way we thought best (Excerpts of Interview with Mallam Sabo on 20th May 2010).

In addition, though it was not quite clear where precisely, staff at the National Archives Jos informed this writer that the Nok Art was visible at the celebration of independence in Jos in 1960. It was part of the show case of the rich cultural heritage of the people of the Middle Belt. It also symbolised the development of their technology and art forms, which were expressions of their civilisation. From afore-going, Middle Belt minorities were 'hidden' in the celebration of independence in the Northern Region.

8. Discussion and Conclusions

Middle Belt minorities reportedly made clear demands for the creation of their own region but this was to be postponed indefinitely. State creation exercises undertaken by the military from 1967 to 1996, however, appear to have met the demand, even if belatedly, for the creation of a northern minorities' region. But it is not clear whether the creation of geopolitical zones do meet the geosociological requirements (that is the sum total of all social, cultural, religious, economic and political values, norms, institutions, organs, structures and systems) of rights of self-actualisation and relationships among the various ethnic nationalities and other social groups, unless of course, the structure of such relationships engenders equity and social justice. The absence of equity or the promotion of inequities and injustices among nationalities making up specific geosociological spaces may only end up replacing one level of hegemony with another form of hegemony. The singular act of not boldly recognising the demands of minorities and creating a region of theirs for them may have made the independence celebrations also merely symbolic and not driven by the passion that drove the leaders on one hand and inadvertently laid the solid foundation for social and political instability arising from domination, social discrimination and cultural persecution of minorities evidently reported in the country today, on the other hand.

The scope or quality of participation of Middle Belt minorities in the events and debates leading to the first Independence Day is a matter of variegated discourses among scholars, especially given the phenomenon of marginalisation of minorities at the centre of Nigeria's development today (Bingel, 2003; Smah, 2008). Whereas the agitators for the Mid-West and COR States were assured that the minorities' fears of marginalisation were being redressed, the situation for northern minorities was not the same.

In the literature, we find notions embodying minorities to vary. For example, Alemika (2003:2) notes that:

> Minority studies are being undertaken from several philosophical, theoretical and research perspectives. The issues that have been brought under the rubric of minority studies go beyond ethnicity and religion and include gender, sexuality, disability, and age (especially old age and youth concerns). The field therefore is expanding beyond the traditional concerns with ethnic and religious minorities (Alemika 2003:2)

The point is that the boundary for minority rights debates or scholarship is not only expanding but is invariably collapsing, such that even the issues of religious and ethnic cleavages as well as other primordial ties are being (and should be) included in the broader intellectual discourses on multiculturalism and identity politics. Identity issues include concerns of group membership or social categorisation, a sense of belonging to a group and identifying with a group. Often times, identity is an empirical fact, which is the religion, ethnic and linguistic group, state, country, gender, generation, social class, marital status, etc., to which someone may belong. While some of these identities are relatively fixed others are rather fluid. In another sense, there is the politicisation of identity, such as assertion, organisation, and mobilisation for collective action to defend such group's interests in the public sphere (Jega ed., 2000, Eriksen 1999, Alemika 2003, Onoja 2003, Bingel, 2003, Smah, 2002).

Various scholars and analysts (Jega ed., 2000, Eriksen 1999, Alemika 2003, Onoja 2003, Bingel, 2003, Smah, 2002) therefore, view identity in different ways. For example, while others see identity in general as anti-modern counteraction to the individualism and freedom embodied by globalisation, others see it as the defence

of the weak against foreign dominance, or even as a concealed strategy of modernisation. Also, some emphasise the psychological dimensions of identity and a sense of rootedness in an era of rapid change. Still others focus on competition for the proverbial scarce resources between and among groups, while others see identity as strategy of exclusion and an ideology of hatred for other people. As Kamylicka (2002) argues, identity is organised around demands for the redistribution of economic resources and recognition, which ranges from representation and participation to respect. These are values that distinguish one group from another. Middle Belt minorities demonstrate clear cultural, religious and normative identities that warrant recognition and respect.

As Alemika (2003) notes, there exists two broad perspectives in studying identity issues, namely- existentialism and constructionism. The existentialists consider identities such as ethnicity as natural and objective reality, being largely fixed or stable phenomena, which are essentially immutable. On the basis of this approach, conflict of values and interests between and among ethnic, religious and minority/majority groups is seen as more or less irreconcilable. The social constructionists on the other hand argue that identities are imagined and constructed by 'political entrepreneurs' who have a lot to gain from their organisation and mobilisation in multicultural settings. Thus, self identities are not fixed but created by people and groups in interaction with others in a complex of political and economic structures. Once constructed and politicised, identities such as minority, ethnicity, religion etc., exert influence on the social and political organisation of society (Smah, 2008). The social constructionists argue that ethnic boundaries are fluid and dynamic and are determined by economic and political contexts. The identity markers, depending on contexts, are emphasised, especially those capable of promoting solidarity and social action, while markers that may reveal internal differences are concealed. This approach therefore allows for a dynamic analysis of the formation, transformation and politicisation of identity, which are based on the political, social and economic conditions and nexus of a given society in perpetual or continuous fluidity (Smah, 2008).

The contention in this write-up is that given the twin existentialist and constructionist perspectives, the task for minority rights advocates and researchers remains that which should not see this field of study as consisting of mere narratives of prejudices used to justify ethnocentrism, xenophobia and exclusion but one (especially in Nigeria which context is replete with ethnic and religious identities evoking passionate arguments dressed as intellectual discourses) that must however, distinguish between the narratives of political opportunists who politicise (by constructing, mobilising and manipulating vague) identities from concrete historical experiences of people and groups and their relationships with 'outsiders', such as the predominant people of the Middle Belt (James, ed., 2000; ICES/CODESRIA, 2000; Nyamnjoh, 2006). For example, the fundamental fact is that so-called minority elite elements perpetuate all forms of corruption and injustices in alliance with their so-called 'oppressors' who control mining, crude and other extractive resources against the wellbeing of the larger collective of minorities. In any case, the failure of the minority elite classes to effectively conceive and address the development challenges facing their people is a reflection of the unfair national redistributive justice system.
As shown by the circumstances of the Middle Belt minorities, the opportunity of securing independence from internal colonial domination on Nigeria's first Independence Day was unused as showcased by the popularity of the intellectual perspectives of existentialism and constructionism presented here. It is imperative to note that ethnicity and religion formed the cardinal grand basis for the pre- and post independence marginalisation of the many distinct ethnic nationalities and multiplicity of people with diverse religious orientations by powerful oligarchies. However, the more veritable and tenable conceptualisation, explanation and understanding of the myriads of challenges frustrating economic empowerment, national integration and overall development of contemporary Middle Belt area as well as the pervasive powerlessness of the vast majorities of the people can best be located in the greed and corruption of their political leaders at all levels of governance, who find the option of collusion with their oppressors better than sacrificing for the advancement of their respective communities and the nation at large. Managing the region's ethnic and cultural as well as religious pluralities can be an arduous task. However, civic education, social awareness, economic empowerment and collective social assertiveness are a feasible starting point (Smah, 2011).

Furthermore, James' (ed., 2000) collections are an array of consensus intellectual discourses on the settler phenomenon in the Middle Belt which raise challenges to the problem of national integration in Nigeria. For example, James (ed., 2000) addresses the historicity of the Nok, geo-politicality and demographic patterns, northern trading/farming colonies, mining as well as the patterns of disjunctive isolated migrations and related prehistoric documentation on the identities of the Middle Belt ethnicities (also see Bingel 2003, Onoja, 2003). In all this, conflicts as pre- colonial inheritances in the region provide a clear basis to understand what the quality of integration in Nigeria's post-independence era would be. At the moment, the world terror networks since 9/11 attacks on the United States and the self-revelations they made about terrorism worldwide (such as Al-Quaeda and Boko Haram, etc.) appear to have burdened and strained the threads of social, power and economic relations and in the process defined new patterns of inter-group relations, social integration, national cohesion and international re-alliances based on suspicion, mistrust and distrust of others' religion, ethnicity and nationality. The new faces and forms of international and inter-racial relationships definitely challenge global peace, and

more practically national and regional integration.

Conclusions

This paper demonstrates that the celebration of Nigeria's 1st Independence Day among the Middle Belt minorities focused on issues of self-actualisation but such expectation was really short-lived. Perceived or real political marginalisation demonstrated in the non-inclusion of the demands of the people from the Middle Belt for the creation of a region for them was possibly evident from the utterances of political elites from the region during debates at the FHR when independence celebration was being planned.

The 1960 independence celebration was a mere symbolism by the political class. Not many ordinary folks at the grassroots level in the Middle Belt understood the meaning and implication of political independence, except of course, teachers who represented the emerging educated elite classes. The elite political actors may have planned the independence and celebrated it largely in the way they best understood. This, however, may have isolated the greater proportions of the grassroots.

The existentialist and constructionist perspectives and notions of forces behind the independence celebration readily come to the fore in the analysis of national/regional integration and identity management, such as in post independence Nigeria. The Middle Belt region, unlike other regions preponderant with minority ethnic nationalities in Nigeria possesses a dual personality/character of itself whereby local elite forces act in consonant with 'external' elite classes against the collective 'independence' of the majorities in the geosociological region defined as Middle Belt through religious and cultural infusions and influences. The 1st October 1960 Independence was a mere declaration of symbolism in the Middle Belt areas. But given the dialectics of identity construction by the founding fathers of Independence Middle Belt, independence frustration did ordinarily centre on ethnicity and religion. Unfortunately, the reality arising from deconstructing the people's lived historical experiences does demystify any pretensions over the presupposed collective perception and aspiration of the people; it did not create watertight divisions between existentialist reality and socio-cultural constructionism among Middle Belt areas. The post independence leaders do see themselves as possessing natural and culturally fixed identities and characteristics yet the importance of these in the construction of national and regional consciousness in the emerging country has been relegated to the level of insignificance in favour of demanding a nation of some classes of citizens deserving of equal treatment and respect as humans than others. While the pre-independence leaders did not want their people to be used as willing tools in the hands of the colonisers to destroy themselves through perpetual subjugation and oppression, contemporary leaders are in alliance with their oppressors. In this situation, no lesson has been learned by post independence leaders of the Middle Belt. It is stressed that ethnic and religious values are not merely fluid identities, but are largely created and affixed and tend to be solidified/perpetuated in line with the complexity of existing social, political and economic opportunity structures in the society where the interests of a few are in constant conflict with those of the majority. The whole scenario of the celebration of independence by Middle Belt minorities in 1960, therefore, was more of anxious frustration than realisation of concrete paths to sustaining development.

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