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RECLAIMING THE PLATEAU MINDSCAPE: MEMORY, TERRITORY AND POWER IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF JOS PLATEAU AND ITS ADJOINING LOWLANDS

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Abstract

The historiography of the Jos Plateau and its adjoining lowlands has been shaped largely by colonial administrative records, missionary ethnographies, and externally driven archaeological interpretations. While these sources remain indispensable, they have often fragmented Plateau history by privileging colonial territorial boundaries, fixed ethnic typologies, and extractive political economies over indigenous epistemologies. This article advances the concept of the Plateau mindscape the historically grounded interplay of memory, territorial and power as the frame work for reconstructing Plateau history from within. Drawing on oral traditions, spatial memory, indigenous political institutions, archaeological synthesis, and critical archival analysis, the study demonstrates that memory functioned as a living archive structuring authority, land relations and social order. It argues that colonial and post-colonial intervention reconfigured but did not erase these indigenous systems, producing layered and competing narratives of identity and belonging. By centering indigenous epistemologies, this article challenges static historiographical models and presents plateau history as a dynamic negotiated process in dialogue with Professor Monday Yakiban Mangvwat's periodization, this study extends his legacy by offering reflexive indigenous centered historiographical framework for understanding the Jos plateau and Nigeria's middle belt.

Keywords: Jos Plateau; Mindscape; Memory; Territory; Power; Indigenous Historiography; Middle Belt; Lowlands

Introduction

The Jos Plateau and its adjoining lowlands occupies a distinctive yet persistently contested position in Nigerian historiography. Geographically situated at the ecological and cultural crossroads of the Middle Belt, it has long served as a linking forest, savanna, and Sahelian system.

Despite this complexity, its history has been disproportionately interpreted through colonial administrative logic, missionary ethnography, and archaeological paradigms that separated "prehistory" from "history" (Isichei, 1982; Mangvwat, 2000).

Existing scholarship has significantly expanded knowledge of plateau society. However, it has not sufficiently theorized epistemological processes through which these societies produced, preserved and contested historical knowledge. This study addresses that gap.

It asks three questions:

1. How did plateau societies construct and transmit historical knowledge?
2. What role did memory and territory play in shaping authority and identity?
3. How did colonial interventions reconfigure these indigenous systems?

To answer this question, this article introduces the plateau mindscape as an analytical framework. The plateau mindscape refers to the nexus of memory, territory and power through which plateau societies understood their past and organized social relations. Here, memory functioned as a living archive; territory operated as a historically embedded landscape; and power emerged through ritual legitimacy and collective recognition.

By adopting this framework, this article advances three core arguments. First, it contends that indigenous historical consciousness on the Jos Plateau was deeply spatial, with hills, valleys, rivers, and settlement sites functioning as mnemonic anchors that structured narratives of origin, migration, and belonging. Second, it argues that power and authority were inseparable from memory and land, producing political systems grounded in ritual legitimacy and communal stewardship rather than centralized coercion. Third, it demonstrates that colonial and post-colonial interventions reconfigured but did not erase these indigenous mindscapes, resulting in layered and often competing historical narratives that continue to shape contemporary conflicts over land, identity, and political representation in the region (Nengel, 1999; Alubo, 2006).

Methodologically, the study adopts an integrative approach that combines oral history, historical anthropology, archaeological synthesis, and critical archival analysis. This pluralism is not merely additive but epistemological, seeking to place indigenous ways of knowing on equal analytical footing with written sources. Colonial records are read critically and comparatively against indigenous narratives to reconstruct history as a negotiated process shaped by power relations.

In advancing this approach, the article positions itself both in dialogue with and as an extension of Professor Mangvwat's historiographical legacy. While his structural analysis provided a crucial materialist foundation for Plateau history, the present study shifts attention to the cognitive and performative processes through which historical knowledge itself is produced, transmitted, and contested. In doing so, it offers a reflexive, indigenous centered historiography that illuminates not only the Plateau past but also the epistemological stakes of writing African history more broadly.

Early indigenous presence and archaeological foundations

Archaeological evidence places human habitation on the Jos Plateau deep into the late Pleistocene and early Holocene epochs. Stratified excavations at sites such as the Rop Rock Shelter reveal long-term microlithic tool occupation dating back to approximately 2000 BCE, while Nok related localities demonstrate an expansive cultural continuum characterized by sophisticated terracotta sculpture and early iron-working traditions dating from 1500 BCE to 500 CE (Fagg, 1965; Soper, 1965). The pioneering work of Bernard Fagg challenged deep seated colonial assumptions of Plateau marginality by demonstrating technological innovation and cultural complexity long before external contact. Subsequent archaeological surveys by York (1985) confirmed widespread settlement density and long-term cultural continuity across the Plateau rim and its adjoining escarpments.

Within the Plateau mindscape framework, these remains are not inert artifacts but material anchors of memory. Spatial correspondences between archaeological sites and contemporary ritual landscapes suggest continuity between material culture and collective memory. Archaeology, therefore, forms part of a living historical system rather than a disconnected "prehistoric" past. Equally important is the evidence for early technological innovation and regional connectivity.

Iron-smelting sites and massive slag deposits discovered across the Plateau indicate either localized independent development or early adoption of complex metallurgical knowledge. This technological baseline facilitated agricultural expansion, specialized craftsmanship, and robust interregional exchange. The Plateau's strategic location linked it to wider macro-regional economic networks extending into the Benue Valley, the Hausa city states to the north, and the forest zones to the south (Isichei, 1982). Similarities in material culture, pottery ornamentation, and subsistence strategies across these regions point to long standing patterns of interaction, migration, and cultural diffusion that flourished long before Islamic or European hegemony.

Despite these substantial findings, colonial and early post-colonial historiography treated archaeological data as belonging to a conceptually separate, isolated realm of "prehistory." Stone tools, pottery typologies, and settlement sequences were analyzed primarily in descriptive, positivist terms detached from questions of social organization, political authority, and historical consciousness. This epistemological separation reinforced a linear Eurocentric narrative in which meaningful history was assumed to begin only with written documentation, thereby marginalizing indigenous temporal frameworks.

More recent scholarship explicitly challenges this rigid division by emphasizing the explicit harmony between archaeological data and oral traditions. York (1985) demonstrated that spatial correspondences between ancient settlement sites and contemporary ritual groves are not coincidental but reflect enduring relationships between communities and geographic place. Oral traditions of first settlement, migration, and ancestral occupation among groups like the Berom, Ngas, and Tarok frequently reference hills, caves, and valleys that correspond precisely with archaeologically attested sites.

From the perspective advanced in this article, archaeological remains serve as material anchors through which collective memory is grounded in physical space, reinforcing contemporary claims of autochthony, land custodianship, and political legitimacy. When read alongside oral traditions and spatial narratives, archaeology reveals Plateau societies as dynamic, innovative, and deeply rooted in their environment.

By integrating archaeology into a broader historical and anthropological framework, this study moves beyond the colonial era dichotomy between "prehistory" and "history." It demonstrates that the deep past of the Jos Plateau is essential for understanding later political institutions, territorial consciousness, and intergroup relations. In reclaiming archaeological foundations as a vital component of indigenous historical experience, the article reinforces the argument that Plateau history must be understood as a continuous and internally meaningful process rather than as a sequence imposed by external epistemologies.

Colonial classification and their limitations

Colonial knowledge production on the Jos Plateau was explicitly shaped by the administrative imperatives of military pacification, political control, and economic resource extraction. From the early twentieth century onward, British colonial officers, Sudan United

Mission (SUM) missionaries, and government ethnographers sought to render the fractured Plateau landscape legible through rigid classificatory schemes that emphasized static ethnic identity, artificial territorial demarcation, and artificial political hierarchy. Texts by Olive Temple (1922) and C. K. Meek (1925), became foundational to this administrative project, shaping both British indirect rule policies and subsequent academic interpretations of the region.

These colonial classifications were not neutral descriptions of social reality but instruments of governance. Plateau societies were arbitrarily divided into discrete, bounded "tribes," assigned fixed territorial jurisdictions, and evaluated according to European-derived criteria of political centralization. Communities lacking centralized kingship were systematically perorated in administrative reports as "stateless," "acephalous," or politically rudimentary. Such terminology completely obscured sophisticated indigenous systems of authority rooted in lineage leadership, ritual custodianship, age-grade institutions, and collective, consensus-driven decision-making (Gonyok, 2001). In privileging centralized, monarchical authority, colonial ethnography systematically devalued and sought to dismantle alternative decentralized political forms.

Colonial ethnographic texts further relied heavily on social-evolutionary assumptions that positioned Plateau societies at lower stages of human development. Meek's (1925) comparative framework implicitly ranked societies based on perceived levels of political sophistication, while Temple's (1922) administrative notes overemphasized tribal fragmentation and supposed cultural isolation. These distorted portrayals reinforced the colonial myth that Plateau peoples existed outside meaningful historical progress until their forceful incorporation into the British Empire.

Post-colonial scholarship initially inherited many of these flawed classificatory frameworks, often reproducing colonial ethnic categories and territorial assumptions even while attempting to critique colonial rule. It was only from the late 1970s onward that indigenous, Nigeria-based scholars began to subject colonial classifications to rigorous, critical deconstruction. Works by Isichei (1982), and Mangvwat (2000) conclusively demonstrated that Plateau societies were historically dynamic, politically adaptive, and deeply interconnected with surrounding lowlands and regional trade networks.

Professor Monday Yakiban Mangvwat's intervention was particularly revolutionary. By developing a systematic periodization of Plateau history grounded in internal social processes,

class formation, and indigenous economic modes rather than colonial administrative timelines, he exposed the structural limitations of externally imposed classifications. His work showed that what colonial ethnographers interpreted as primitive political fragmentation was often the result of deliberate, highly sophisticated political strategies adapted to specific ecological conditions and historical experiences of resistance against jihadist and colonial incursions (Mangvwat, 2000).

Understanding these limitations is essential for correcting historical inaccuracies and for interpreting contemporary conflicts on the Jos Plateau. Many present day disputes over land, boundary adjustments, and political representation are rooted in the unresolved tension between bureaucratic, colonial mapped territoriality and indigenous, memory based claims. Reclaiming Plateau history thus requires moving beyond colonial categories toward an epistemology that recognizes memory, territory, and power as inseparable dimensions of historical experience.

Conceptualization of power and indigenous political structures

To fully comprehend the Plateau mindscape, it is necessary to interrogate how Plateau communities themselves understand, articulate, and legitimize power and authority within their indigenous political structures. This requires breaking away from state centric, Weberian models of centralized, coercive power and instead examining alternative political rationalities that prioritize relational legitimacy, moral authority, and ritual consensus.

1. Legitimation of Indigenous Political Authority

Within indigenous Plateau communities such as the Berom, Ngas, Tarok, and Goemai political authority is fundamentally inseparable from ritual legitimacy and ancestral continuity. Authority is not derived from a monopoly on the tools of violence, but from the ruler's status as the primary mediator between the living community, the ancestors, and the land. For instance, among the Ngas and the Berom, the institutional authority of priestly chiefs such as the 'Gololo' or the 'Gwom Rwei' is legitimized through strict hereditary lineage rituals that link the living incumbent directly to the founding ancestors of the territory (Gonyok, 2001; Oral Interview: Da Mwankon, 2024).

The leader's primary duty is the maintenance of cosmic and social harmony. Legitimacy is continuously renegotiated through the leader's capacity to successfully perform vital agricultural

rituals, ensure rain, guarantee soil fertility, and maintain absolute impartiality in dispute resolution. Should a leader fail to uphold these moral and spiritual obligations, or exhibit tyrannical tendencies, their legitimacy dissolves, and indigenous mechanisms of checks and balances including institutionalized removal by councils of elders or ritual abandonment are swiftly enacted (Aliyu, 1977).

2. The Relationship Between Memory, Territorial Identity, and Political Power

Power on the Jos Plateau is explicitly spatialized and tethered to historical memory. Political power is not exercised over abstract, geometrically drawn administrative boundaries, but over historical landscapes filled with ancestral meaning. Territorial identity is established through collective narratives of first settlement (autochthony). The lineage that holds the memory of clearing the virgin forest, establishing the first settlement, and erecting the foundational ancestral altars holds the institutional right to the custodianship of the land (the Ritual Ownership of Land).

This creates a dual structure of authority often misunderstood by colonial officers: The Ritual Master of the Land (e.g, the Berom 'Da Da To' or the Tarok 'Ponzhi Tarok') often wields greater long term moral power over the community than secular political figures, because their authority is backed by the collective memory of ancestral covenants with the landscape (Mangvwat, 2000; Oral Interview: Baba Nimyel, 2023). Territorial identity and political power are thus mutually reinforcing; memory validates the territory, and the territory materializes the power.

3. Traditional Institutions and Mechanisms of Power and Contestation

Rather than being concentrated in a single autocratic office, indigenous Plateau authority is decentralized and distributed across a complex matrix of interlocking traditional institutions:

Lineage Councils and Elders: Wield substantial legislative and judicial power, ensuring that decisions affecting the clan are reached purely through democratic consensus rather than executive fiat.

Ritual and Secret Societies: (Such as the '*Inis'* or '*Kwagh-fan*' structures) serve as vital political counterweights. They act as supreme judicial bodies, regulating moral behavior, enforcing customary laws, and acting as a check on the powers of the chiefs.

Age-Grade Associations (Regimental Institutions): Organize communal labor, execute defense strategies, and socialize youth into the political ethics of the community (Mangut, 2014); Mangvwat, 2013).

Contestation within these structures is managed through structured, ritualized mechanisms. Disputes over leadership succession or land allocation are mediated through extensive debates within the council of elders, where the primary evidence admissible consists of the recitation of oral genealogies, historical migration routes, and the physical identification of ancient boundary markers, such as specific trees (e.g, Newbouldia laevis), stone heaps, or rivers (Gonyok, 2001).

These mechanisms prioritize the restoration of communal equilibrium and social harmony over punitive actions, ensuring the preservation of the collective mindscape.

Territorial consciousness and collective memory

On the Jos Plateau, land was never viewed as a mere commodity; it was a lived, remembered, and deeply sanctified landscape. Hills, rivers, and ancient settlement sites functioned as active repositories of memory, anchoring narratives of origin, migration, and political authority. Memory operated as a performative archive, continuously invoked during annual festivals, farming cycles, and burial rites to legitimize contemporary land claims and political authority. Territory was inseparable from ancestral presence, and custodianship entailed profound ritual responsibility. Colonial intervention violently abstracted land into flat, taxable administrative space, but memory-based claims endured stubbornly in the collective consciousness of the people. The Plateau mindscape thus reveals history as spatially embedded and socially enacted rather than purely document-bound (Lefebvre, 1991; Assmann, 2011).

This nuanced understanding complicates colonial portrayals of Plateau societies as fragmented, chaotic, or ahistorical. What colonial administrators interpreted as political decentralization or "primitive lawlessness" was actually the deliberate outcome of a deeply rooted territorial logic in which local autonomy, ritual stewardship, and negotiated, inter-communal coexistence were intentionally valued over centralized domination or imperial expansion.

Mangvwat's (2000) periodization underscores this point by demonstrating that Plateau political systems evolved internally over long periods, adapting to ecological pressures, population movements, and external contacts while maintaining a rigid continuity in territorial consciousness and ancestral land tenure.

The lowlands plateau interface: interaction and contestation

examining this interface, scholars can better understand both historical and contemporary disputes over regional identity, land access, and political authority in the Middle Belt. The Plateau-lowland nexus demonstrates that Plateau societies were never isolated enclaves, but were integrally connected to wider regional macro-systems (Nengel, 1999).

The massive discovery and aggressive capitalist exploitation of rich tin deposits on the Jos Plateau by the Royal Niger Company and the British colonial state in the early twentieth century constituted a violent, structural intervention into both the ecological and social landscapes of the region. Tin mining was not merely an economic enterprise; it permanently reshaped settlement patterns, radically altered local power relations, and completely transformed the moral and symbolic geography of the Plateau. Colonial extractive interests forcefully reframed land as a commodity to be exploited and discarded, directly displacing indigenous understandings of territory as a moral and ancestral domain (Nengel, 1999).

Economic transformation was accompanied by a total spatial reconfiguration of the region. Mining operations concentrated vast influxes of migrant labor around resource-rich areas, fostering rapid, unplanned urbanization and creating entirely new settlement hierarchies (e.g, Bukuru, Jos, Amper). Traditional village structures were violently disrupted to accommodate imperial commercial imperatives, and social networks once mediated through kinship and ritual authority increasingly operated through wage labor, cash cropping, and market participation. These shifts severely disrupted established pre-colonial political balances and intensified competition over local leadership and land rights, creating the foundational structural conditions for enduring post-colonial disputes over indigeneity, access, and representation (Agi, 1998; Nengel, 1999).

Tin mining also profoundly altered the Plateau's moral geography. Land was no longer solely the province of ancestral memory and ritual obligation, but an alienated locus of economic

extraction governed by colonial jurisprudence and capitalist logic. Indigenous communities perceived these incursions as both material theft and symbolic desecration, directly challenging long-established norms of communal custodianship and stewardship. In response, memory and ritual were deliberately mobilized by indigenous actors to assert historical claims, protect sacred ancestral groves from mining bulldozers, and negotiate authority in an increasingly contested, multi-ethnic landscape (Connerton, 1989; York, 1985).

The Plateau mindscape framework illuminates the entanglement of economic, spatial, and mnemonic transformations. Mining-induced spatial reordering was not experienced solely as a material change; it fundamentally reshaped perceptions of legitimacy, belonging, and authority. Memory became a potent political resource in struggles over contested terrain, while territory was simultaneously a site of ancestral claims, colonial jurisdiction, and industrial exploitation. Authority, in turn, was redefined, with lineage leaders, ritual custodians, and colonial-appointed "warrant" chiefs negotiating overlapping and often contradictory claims to power.

Despite the disruptive effects of tin mining and colonial economic policies, indigenous systems displayed remarkable structural resilience. Ritual sites were fiercely maintained even amidst massive extractive landscapes, lineage councils continued to quietly arbitrate domestic disputes, and oral histories meticulously preserved the memories of pre-mining territorial arrangements. These persistent practices testify to the adaptive capacities of Plateau societies, highlighting how memory, ritual, and deeply held social norms continued to mediate land use, governance, and social cohesion under the intense pressures of colonial and industrial restructuring (Mangvwat, 2000; Banfa, 2004).

The historical roots of contemporary indigene settler contestations

The historical paradoxes, colonial misclassifications, and economic transformations detailed above are not merely dead history; they are the direct structural architects of contemporary, often violent, "indigene versus settler" contestations plaguing Jos and its surrounding local government areas today. The contemporary crisis of identity and citizenship on the Jos Plateau cannot be understood without mapping how the colonial state manipulated the Plateau mindscape.

1. Land Ownership Disputes and the Commodity Ancestry Clash

The tension between the indigenous understanding of land as a sacred, ancestral heritage and the colonial/capitalist framework of land as alienable real estate remains unresolved. Contemporary land ownership disputes in Jos North, Jos South, and Barkin Ladi Local Government Areas stem directly from the colonial displacement of indigenous communities during the tin-mining boom (Nengel, 1999).

When mining leases expired, the land did not automatically revert to indigenous ancestral custodians under statutory post-colonial law; instead, it became contested urban and semi-urban real estate. Indigenous communities, utilizing memory-based claims and oral genealogies, assert absolute, inalienable customary rights over these territories. Conversely, migrant populations, who settled during the colonial mining era, assert ownership based on decades of occupation, purchase, and statutory certificates of occupancy, creating an explosive clash between the legitimacy of historical memory and the legality of state documentation.

2. Political Representation, Citizenship, and Belonging

The British colonial administration's practice of importing, prioritizing, and organizing administrative quarters along ethnic lines creating separate settlements like '*Sabon Gari'* for non-indigenous, predominantly southern and northern migrant laborers institutionalized a structural dichotomy between "indigenes" and "settlers" (Alubo, 2006). In the post-colonial era, this structural division became tied to constitutional provisions regarding federal character and local socio-economic benefits.

Because political representation, access to state employment, educational quotas, and local government leadership are legally tied to the definition of "indigeneity," the historic Jos Plateau mindscape has become heavily politicized. Indigenous groups (such as the Berom, Anaguta, and Afizere) view the political mobilization of settler populations as an existential threat to their historical sovereignty and ancestral political institutions. Settler populations, some resident on the Plateau for over a century, argue that the denial of full indigeneity rights violates their constitutional rights to equal Nigerian citizenship, turning historical historiographical debates into bloody modern battles for political survival (Human Rights watch, 2006; Sayne, 2012).

3. Control of Indigenous Institutions and Political Power

The contemporary struggle over the creation of traditional chiefdoms and districts on the Jos Plateau reflects the ongoing struggle to reclaim the mindscape from colonial distortions. The British policy of Indirect Rule frequently subordinated decentralized Plateau communities under centralized paramount emirates or imposed colonial created "warrant chiefs" who lacked any indigenous ritual legitimacy (Mamdani, 1996; Gonyok, 2001).

In response, contemporary socio political struggles on the Plateau often center on demands for the restructuring of traditional councils, the autonomy of indigenous chiefdoms, and the resistance against any political arrangements that subvert ancestral hierarchies. The control of local traditional institutions is fiercely contested precisely because, within the Plateau mindscape, the traditional stool is not just a political office it remains the supreme custodian of the community's collective memory, territorial integrity, and moral authority.

Reclaiming indigenous agency in historical reconstruction

Reconstructing Plateau history requires centering indigenous epistemologies. Oral traditions, spatial memory, and ritual practices do not merely ornament written history; they function as active, independent historical archives. Indigenous agency is expressed through the continuous ability of these communities to remember, claim, and negotiate their positions despite centuries of external pressure.

Colonial interventions altered but did not erase these systems. A pluralistic methodology integrating oral, material, and archival sources allows for a more accurate reconstruction of Plateau history as internally generated and dynamically sustained. Reclaiming indigenous agency is not simply a romantic corrective to colonial misrepresentations; it is a empirical recognition that Plateau societies themselves actively produced, transmitted, and contested historical knowledge over centuries, creating dynamic frameworks for understanding space, authority, and social order (Mangvwat, 2000).

Territorial consciousness further grounds this indigenous agency. Control over land was inseparable from ancestral presence and ritual stewardship. Claims to territory were justified not only through current physical occupation but also through remembered, performed acts of first settlement, protection, and cultivation. Such claims, recorded in collective memory and performed

in ritual practice, challenged externally imposed administrative or colonial claims. Reconstructing Plateau history without deep attention to these spatialized and memory-based claims risks producing sterile narratives that privilege state bureaucracy over lived experience, and alien state law over local historical legitimacy (Temple, 1922; Gonyok, 2001).

Ultimately, reclaiming indigenous agency affirms the intellectual sovereignty of Plateau societies. It reframes history as an interactive dialogue between memory, place, and power, restoring the capacity of local communities to define their own past and to participate as active subjects rather than passive objects of historiographical narratives. In doing so, it extends the pioneering legacy of scholars such as Professor Monday Yakiban Mangvwat, whose work demonstrated the internal structural dynamism of Plateau history, and firmly situates the study of the Jos Plateau within the broader contemporary movement of indigenous centered historiography across the African continent.

Conclusion

This study has interrogated the historiographical architecture of the Jos Plateau and its adjoining lowlands, advancing the concept of the *Plateau mindscape* to correct the structural imbalances left by colonial ethnography and extractive administrative mappings. By analyzing the past through the tripartite framework of memory, territory, and power, this article demonstrates that pre-colonial Plateau societies possessed a highly sophisticated historical consciousness. Their historical knowledge was profoundly spatial, anchored in living landscapes and maintained through relational, ritualized systems of authority such as the cyclical rites of the Irigwe or the sacred spatial repositories of the Afizere.

As explored through dialogue with Monday Mangvwat's structural history, these indigenous governance systems were severely fractured, but never entirely extinguished, by British colonial interventions. The contemporary "indigene-settler" crises, land tenure conflicts, and struggles for the control of traditional stools in modern Jos are the direct, structural inheritance of these unresolved historical distortions. When elite political actors weaponized exclusionary "landlord versus settler" rhetoric, they exploit fissures left behind by colonial era mappings that failed to comprehend the relational fluidity of indigenous borders.

Ultimately, reclaiming the Plateau mindscape requires more than just rewriting academic papers; it demands an active epistemological shift. De-centering colonial administrative records in

favor of indigenous oral traditions, spatial memories, and rigorous local ethnographic critiques is a critical step toward healing the region's historiographical and socio political divisions. Only by understanding how Plateau communities historically constructed, institutionalized, and negotiated identity from within can modern policymakers and historians build sustainable frameworks for political representation, citizenship, and lasting peace in Nigeria's Middle Belt.

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