

THE AXIS OF A HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMAT:

A Short Review of Jan H. Boer's Work

At the Institute of Church and Society/Northern Area Secretariat, Jos

By Istifanus M. Habila

Abstract

Dr. Jan H. Boer served as an SUM-CRC[1] Missionary in Northern Nigeria for more than 30 years. Aside his primary assignment; understood traditionally as “Evangelism” [2] or “*Shelar Bishara*”, [3] most of his activities centred on empowerment and mobilization beyond the “religious.” He went far more into community empowerment for “social action”. He published more than 30 books and articles on various subjects, especially areas affecting the socio-economic development of the masses. This paper is a study of his activities from the axis which view it as “Humanitarian Diplomacy”. Boer himself called this “Conscientization” (*Christians and Mobilization*, 1989). [4] The paper respond to the following questions; to what extent was Boer’s work successful? How was he more of a Humanitarian Diplomat than a Christian Missionary? What factors were responsible for these successes? What were the challenges? What lessons can we learn from his “Humanitarian Diplomacy”?

The purpose of the paper is to assess his work; looking at both the successes and the challenges; purposely to draw lessons for young leaders, Christian Ministers, NGOs that are presently doing similar work in Nigeria. The creativity, tact and peaceful approach to issues has enable him to initiate more than 15 different community development programmes which has earned him a unique admiration among the *Talakawa* (Boer, 1987) [5] ; the basis on which this article perceived him more as a “Humanitarian Diplomat” than just a “Christian Missionary”. [6]

Defining Humanitarian Diplomacy

It is the act of persuading decision makers to act in the interest of vulnerable people. Diplomacy as a word can be explained as the “art” and the “tact” of conducting

relations between two countries through negotiation and persuasion without resorting to violence or war.[7] Humanitarian means doing it for the sake of “humanity”.

Humanitarian Diplomacy is therefore the art of “...persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act , at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles” (IFRCRC).[8]

Generally speaking; vulnerable persons are persons at the risk of abuse or harm due to the situation they have found themselves; due to poverty, war, disaster or crisis.[9] It is a situation of a person or persons under pressure which makes them liable to succumb or yield to temptation which may not be to their interest or advantage (Kakaliagou, 2009).[10]

The Emerging Concept of “Humanitarian Diplomacy”

Looking back at some few centuries, there is a significant development in classic diplomacy alongside with emerging issues on globalization. Particularly; “a multiplicity of new ideas of global diplomatic activity, relating to such issues such as climate change, the environment, access to water, culture, health, and knowledge...” (Regnier, Emerging Concept of Humanitarian Diplomacy: 2011) . While the conventional diplomacy maintain its objectives as focusing on the management of international relations of states through persuasion and negotiation devoid of resorting to use of force, humanitarian diplomacy focuses on raising support for operations and programmes to achieve humanitarian objectives (Regnier, 2011).

Profile of a Humanitarian Diplomat

There are quite a number of skills required of an effective diplomat; few of them will be mentioned here because of the limit of this paper. The skills among others specifically include: Negotiation, Leadership, Persuasion, Advocacy, Effective Listening, Language Proficiency, Media skills, Information management and Intercultural Communication. [11] Jan Boer demonstrated beyond dispute all the above-mentioned skills. That was why it was not too difficult for him succeed as humanitarian Diplomat and as a Christian Missionary. An exemplary talented personality that must be emulated.

The Principles and the Objectives of Humanitarian Diplomacy

It has four main principles on which its credibility is built: The Centrality of “Humanity”. It was formed out of strong desire to help and protect humanity. The emphasis is on

“the imperative (need) of addressing human suffering wherever it is found”. Consequently the whole purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health, and to ensure full respect for human dignity (IACWHC, 2010).[12]

Other principles are Neutrality,[13] Impartiality and Operational Independence, while the Red Crescent adds Unity and Universality, all of which may not be necessary to discuss as time and space will not allow us.

A Short History of Jan Boer

After his two first degrees,[14] he did African Studies for one year at the Michigan State University, and studied Islam at the Pierre Benignus Study Centre in Ibadan. Boer was a research fellow at the Vrije University in Amsterdam where he obtained his doctorate in 1979. He has lectured at various universities, including Calvin Seminary in the States, University of Jos and TCNN, Bukuru.[15] Boer was the founding director of Institute of Church & Society in Jos, and also director of the Wholistic Health Care in Nigeria. He came to Nigeria in 1966 as a Christian Reformed Church Missionary under the auspices of Sudan United Mission (Kumzhi, 1996).

Boer was a household name in community development activities in the rural areas in Northern Nigeria due to his approach to community development which he called “conscientization” (*Christians and Mobilization*, 1988).[16]

The Works and Achievement of Jan Boer

Few of Boer's activities and publications will be treated here due to the limit of this paper. Boer, a theologian by training, found out in Nigeria that traditional healers and faith healers have popular patronage from Church members including the educated ones leaving the health centres almost empty. He wondered why it should be so. He soon discovered that most of the health complaints are neurotically psychological, even though they prefer to describe it “spiritual”[17] Boer did not disregard the Western medicine, but he radically departed from the notion that it is the only solution, he saw the need for a wider approach. Which he explained as “...healing that accepts the medical model as only one component of a large arsenal of healing methods...” He departed from “imposition of monopoly of medical model on Africa by colonialism and missions” (*Wholistic Health Care*, 1995 and *Wholistic Health Care of, for and by the People*, 1989). Boer's clear engagement in “plea (or advocacy) for wider approach to

healing that includes the medical model, selective African traditional healing and faith healing” is an authentic exercise of a Humanitarian Diplomat (*Wholistic Health Care Of, For and By the People*, 1989).

Boer empowered the “vulnerable” through education using principles of liberation theology; noting the society is religiously oriented, he used biblical texts to give the people biblical and theological basis of their action. (*Living in God's World*, 1980).^[18] Boer’s concern was not only getting the attention of decision makers and the government, but also donors and other strong NGOs that can influence decisions to come to the aid of the masses who were suffering because of poverty and general neglect. He empowered the people themselves to demand for their rights through peaceful means (*The Way of Peace*, 1996).

He became a little bit unpopular later in the eyes of the “Big Men” probably because of one of his publications titled in Hausa *Talakawa Ku Tashi Tsaye*.^[19] Here he was building awareness, educating and edifying the illiterate population of the masses to rise up to their responsibilities as citizens of their country. Using a Kuyperian reformed liberation approach to encourage these villagers to begin to ask questions and take legitimate actions against any oppressive elite in government, business and the Church. Empowering them with biblical basis for such action as in *Talakawa Ku Tashi Tsaye* (1987) and *Christians and Mobilization* (1989).^[20]

Boer succeeded to remove the fear in the masses. He reached the peak of his mobilization when he published another title: *You Can Do Greater Things than Christ* (1991).

Boer started to point towards external factors that have contributed seriously to the situation of the poor masses. He started organizing international conferences out of which he was able to make some thought provoking publications. There were three outstanding publications: *The Church & the External Debt*, together with which Boer published a little pamphlet titled “Why are you poor?” Boer explained the former in this little book, breaking all the technical jargons into a simple and understandable English for poorly educated Nigerians. His message in these publications was clear: Your government took some huge loans from IMF. Instead of using the loan to better your life, they have used it on luxuries and other unnecessary or unprofitable things that have generated no interest.^[21] Even though Boer was just the editor of the book,

[22] he wrote and presented during the conference a 70-page paper, and he was in the forefront of shaping the focus of the conference. Boer's concern with the exercise was to develop Christian perspectives, including solutions to the Nigerian debt problems affecting the vulnerable persons (Boer, *The Church & the External Debt*, 1992; Boer, "Why are you Poor?," 1992).

One of Boer's publications that has to be mentioned here is *Caught in the Middle: Christians in Transnational Corporations* in which he continued to unveil how external factors have made the Nigerian society terribly underdeveloped; leaving the poor masses poorer year after year. The main text of the book as described by himself is "discussion of corporations; effect of bottom-line investments; investor responsibility for employees, host community, end-user; Reformed theology of investment stewardship...." (Boer, *Caught in the Middle: Christians in Transnational Corporations*, 1992).

A Christian Missionary and a Humanitarian Diplomat

Boer was true to his call as a Christian Missionary (that is what is expected of any Christian Missionary: liberating the people totally), especially of the reformed tradition, when he published four main titles: *Christians & Mobilization*, *Talakawa Ku Tashi Tsaye*, *Why are you Poor?*, *Caught in the Middle*. He was doing his work as a missionary when he mobilized the people to act against any oppressive elite in the government. He was also doing his work when he told the masses that, their government took some huge loans from IMF, and have used it on luxuries and on unprofitable things that has generated no interest etc. Here Boer is understood as having left the area of Humanitarian Diplomacy; because humanitarian diplomats are not supposed to interfere in the economic and political positions or views of their host countries. Boer is viewed as interfering, building or shaping the opinions of the citizens on socio-economic and political matters which according to the concern politicians is not his missionary task.

But that was the problem with the "gospel" that was brought to Africa. The "gospel" which kept talented Christians too long in the shackles of poverty. As such most Nigerian Christians remained economically illiterate,[23] and politically paralysed, because they were constantly reminded that "They are in the world but they are not of world" and that "The love of money is the root of all evil," etc.

The Challenges of His Work

One of the main challenges Boer faced while conducting advocacy, negotiating, communicating to persuade decision makers, political and Church leaders and other opinion leaders to act in favour of the vulnerable masses, it was extremely difficult for the people to understand him because from their religious orientation they did not see their role as businessmen and businesswomen, they did not see their relevance in politics. In fact, it was considered a sin to take business seriously and to participate in politics.[24] That was why Boer concluded that without conscientizing the people, it is not possible to bring about change.

The Lessons/Recommendations

Looking at the extent and the elaborate work Boer has done, there has not yet been an appreciation from the direct and indirect beneficiaries commensurate with what he did. Boer has certainly played a key role as a missionary and a Humanitarian Diplomat. Such type of missionary work-ethos is needed in every deprived society. Individuals should learn from Boer's type of missionary work which has earned him a respect among the masses. There is need for Mission boards and Christians to look at their tasks differently. The emphasis on "evangelism" without strong or higher emphasis on humanitarian actions is old fashioned and should be discouraged. Continuously preaching the gospel of "humility"[25] without empowering the people to speak out, to stand up for their right, or hold leaders accountable is as bad as promoting the enslavement of the people for whom Christ died to set them free.

Conclusion

Humanitarian Diplomacy is act of persuasion, so that decision makers and opinion leaders can act at all times in the interest of vulnerable people, with the aim to mobilize public and governmental support and resources for humanitarian operations and programmes, and to facilitate effective partnership for responding to the needs of vulnerable people. Boer was truly a successful humanitarian diplomat guided not only by the core principles of the Humanitarian Diplomacy, but he was guided by his core Christian missionary principles, and he has lived up to expectation.

EndNotes

- i SUM-CRC: Sudan United Mission-Christian Reformed Church.
- ii Which the host Church or the local Church in Nigeria will refer to in Hausa as “*Yada Bishara*” and essentially means “spreading the good-news”: the ultimate in evangelism in our understanding of “winning souls” or converting people to Christianity.
- iii Hausa translation of “Evangelism.” That is how the local Church understands as the most important thing to do.
- iv Boer was personate about the situation he found the masses. The situation in some places without exaggeration was more of a war situation than ordinary conflicts.
- v “*Talakawa*” is a Hausa (a widely spoken language in West Africa, mainly in Nigeria, Niger & others) word for “masses.” At the grass root level, Boer was mobilizing the masses, while at the policy-making level, governmental or national level, Boer continuously advocated, lobbied and at times confronted leaders with facts for change of policies; and persuaded leaders to act in the interest of the masses, the people he considered vulnerable.
- vi Traditionally Missionaries are thought to only preach, evangelize and convert people to Christianity. They thought to have no business with other aspects of the lives of the people.
- vii Source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diplomacy/> accessed last 25/10/2013.
- viii Source: <http://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/humanitarian-diplomacy/> accessed last 26/10/2013.
- ix For example a civilian population is displaced due to war, disaster or crisis. These persons are; but not limited to persons in abject poverty, caught up in war, or have no health care, or they are facing gross injustice and have no legal remedies.
- x Source: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/vulnerability/>.
- xi McAvoy, 2010.
- xii IACWHC: Inter-Agency Committee for Humanitarian Coordinators
- xiii Neutrality as one of the principles prohibits humanitarian actors from taking side in hostilities or engaging in controversies that have to do with the political, racial, religious

or ideological issues of their host countries. To make this clear, it does not mean that the humanitarian diplomat does not recognize the political, religious and ideological development of the country. He/she practices his religion and respects the political opinion of the people, but remains neutral by abstaining from any controversial discussions that are linked to these areas.

xiv Jan Boer did his high school at Port Alberni in Canada, then had two bachelor degrees at Calvin college and Calvin Theological Seminary where he obtained BA and BD respectively.

xv TCNN: Theological College of Northern Nigeria, Bukuru, near Jos, Nigeria.

xvi Boer radically distinguished himself on social theology when he wrote *The Prophet Moses for Today: 366 Social Meditations*, a devotional literature replacing the well-known Hausa “*Abincin Yini*,” later known as “*Abincin Ruhaniya*,” and the English “*Our Daily Bread*,” later referred to as “*Our Daily Spiritual Bread*.” That book represented community development activities in the light of Humanitarian Diplomacy. He was better described as “*Humanitarian Diplomat*,” because of his humanitarian approach to community development and the skills he possessed , which are also the qualities of the Humanitarian Diplomacy mentioned above.

xvii In most instances when the local people described their problems as “*spiritual*,” care must be taken not to understand it completely in the western sense. “*Spiritual*” in the African context could mean I have an attack by a ghost, or there is witchcraft, or someone is charming me.

xviii Boer was good at meeting Nigerian parliamentarians, governors and he had a quick way of getting to them, inviting them for dinner, lunch or any informal meeting of different sorts. I personally sometimes accompanied him to deliver lectures, one of which was the lecture he gave at the Nigerian Police Staff college located at Bukuru in Plateau State.

xix The Literal translation of which is: “*Poor Masses Arise*” meaning poor masses arise and act, or stand up for your right.

xx Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was a famous Dutch Calvinist, who was Prime Minister (circa 1901-1905) of the Netherlands. Kuyper's most widely read book translated into English is his *Lectures on Calvinism* and a fairly recent popular reader *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*. He became popular because he was able to implement Calvinist theology in his political agenda in a synthesis rarely imitated, and in doing so, breaking ground and setting precedent towards implementing a

Christian Government that we may pray comes to fruition in the future for all the world's states.

xxi Instead of the government improving living conditions, they have not enough money to do that, because they are paying back not even the initial external loan money that was borrowed, but they are using all the oil money to service just the debts interest. Besides, a large part of such loans did not even come to benefit us in Nigeria, for they were siphoned into personal accounts abroad.

xxii The rest of the chapters were contributions from eminent scholars from Nigeria and around the world, especially Africa. Scholars of international repute applauded the conference outcome.

xxiii Even though educated in the western sense, they were still uneducated in the sphere of business. They were still afraid of business for the fear that they may not be respected as good Christians.

xxiv The famous quote was always "...for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye on a needle."

xxv Humility is even misunderstood and wrongly interpreted to mean keeping quiet, not to question leaders even if they go wrong or hold unto power through illegitimate means and corrupt practices. Sometimes they were defended by wrongly adducing the biblical reference "that leaders are placed by God."

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Notes from Proprietor of this Website

1. We have taken the liberty of doing some editing of this document to fit the purposes of this website. No information or ideas have been changed.
2. For the full story of Boer's work, including publications, with the Institute of Church & Society and other organizations mentioned herein, you are referred to:
 - a. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, the very first entry on this page after the Introduction.
 - b. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, at < www.lulu.com >.

How to contact Rev. Habila M. Istifanus

Contact in Switzerland: World Peace Academy: Swiss Centre of Peace Studies [SWISSPEACE, ZURICH]

Gutterstrasse 187, CH4053, Basel-Switzerland or Pfeffingerstrasse 12 [University of Basel Centre for Advanced Studies]

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Nigera office: JPRM: Justice, Peace & Reconciliation Movement
No. 3 Dogon Dutse P.O. Box 13175 Jos. Plateau State -Nigeria
Tel.: +234 8057832665, 8088168888, 0805727472

habilaistifanus@yahoo.com

istifanus2007@yahoo.co.uk

habilaistifanus@jprm-justice-peace.org

<http://www.jprm-justice-peace.org>