

Teachers vs Education Secretary Boer¹

Our first few years in Nigeria were spent in the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN). During the course of this time, the Church appointed me their Education Secretary (ES). This put me in charge of their primary school system that I knew very little about. These were schools started by the CRCN-Mission community but were operated by the local government Education Dept, who provided the salaries and supplies. However, the CRCN still had quite a bit of control over them, including the location of any new schools and the placement of teachers. I was not altogether happy with the appointment, for I felt it over my head, but decided to give it a shot and see.

I soon became embroiled in village rivalry and politics, with two neighbouring villages vying for one new school. Of course, the loser will immediately begin to accuse the ES of favouring one over the other, if not worse.

During December, 1971, I was vilified in letters to both church and the Local Education Authority as well as in a letter directed to me personally. I reproduce the opening paragraph in a letter to the denomination's Chairman, dated December 11, 1971, that says it all in a document called "*Petition against Transfer of 1972:*"

Kuteb EKAS² Teachers
P.A. Takum
11th December 1971

EKAS Chairman,
EKAS Church Sabongida,
Lissam

Sir,

Petition Against Transfer of 1972

Re. John Boer's Attitudes.

¹ The narrative surrounding the core of this story about a petition is taken from *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 54-55.

² "EKAS" is the Hausa-language acronym of an early name of the CRCN.

To be candid and sincere, John Boer is solely responsible for present misunderstanding among the EKAS teachers. He made Haruna Abutu the EKAS representative without the consultation of the entire body of EKAS. We want Rev. John to tell us the good qualities in Haruna that made him to choose him. Further on, he boldly declared that there is not any right person in the whole of EKAS who is as fair, just and without tribal feelings as Haruna. Still we want Rev. John to enumerate the people he feels or thinks are tribally-minded. How does he know this? We want Rev. John to bear in mind that he is not in America to exercise his dictatorship. If he is here as a missionary let him carry on with his mission work and not to tamper with the indigenous affairs. We know quite well that some missionaries play or participate in politics under the cover of Religion. All the missionaries with no exception should stand aloof and stop poking noses into the African Affairs. Correct only what is wrong in the church and no more. To be frank Rev. John has turned the EKAS Teachers upside down.

Rev. John Boer believes strongly that Haruna has no tribal feelings; for this reason we will like him to visit the two EKAS Schools – EKAS Schools Wukari and Takum respectively to check how many Kuteb EKAS teachers are there. Find out the truth yourself. In short, if there is any clash among the EKAS teachers, he is the cause. So we want him to do all he can do in his power as Haruna's boss to amend the transfers with immediate effect.

It is hard to counter such accusations and I felt I had no stomach for that nonsense. But was it really nonsense? Tribalism does create a lot of negative nonsense, but it *is* real and *must* be taken into consideration in such contexts, for it always affects the dynamics. I did find it interesting to attend the meetings of the Dept of Education, but was not always sure I understood the intricacies of local politics, let alone the intrigue that was never far from the surface. Actually, the time for a white man to be involved in such local government affairs was rapidly phasing out and I could sense that. Within a year I was replaced, whether due to my resignation or to Synod's own initiative I do not recall. I was happy to bow out.

This development was at least partially due to inexperience on my part as well as ignorance of ethnic dynamics. I include this part of the story to indicate that I was not always regarded as the darling missionary. The suspicion many educated Nigerians had of missionary motivations could also be directed to me.