



Division and Unity

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Kalu, Ogbu U. *Divided People of God: Christian Union Movement in Nigeria: 1875–1966*. Foreword by James I. McCord. Lagos: NOK Publishers, 1978. Reprint edition: Austin, Texas, USA and Ibadan, Nigeria: Pan-African University Press, 2018.

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Ogbu U. Kalu (1942–2009), a Nigerian theologian, was his generation's doyen of African Christian historiography. This re-publication of *Divided People of God: Church Union in Nigeria: 1875–1966*, first published in 1978, offers a fresh perspective on “history as interpretation” and on why the historians' commitment to facts, accuracy, objectivity, and balance in his or her endeavor remains an essential component of sound historiography.¹ This commitment is also beneficial to the church as it grapples with understanding the present in light of the past, and in its quest to navigate the future in light of the present.

Kalu's *Divided People of God* brings to the fore the unfolding journey and complexities involved in the emerging hope of a potential church union in Nigeria. The combination of divisions between European and American Protestant denominations, Protestants and Roman Catholics, competing missionary agencies, and the rising plethora of AICs² had resulted in a diverse and disunited tapestry of Christianity in Nigeria. In this context of different church bodies in Nigeria, with competing organizational polities, interests, ecclesial rivalries, and differing internal and external factors, Kalu uses a cohesive historical-theological approach to incisively unearth the beginning of the journey of church union in Nigeria. He explores the emergence of the idea of union by foreign mission agencies as an effort to face the challenges of the

¹ Ogbu U. Kalu, *Clio in a Sacred Garb: Essays on Christian Presence and African Responses, 1900-2000* (Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2008), 12.

² Editors' note: i.e., African Indigenous Churches, Africa Independent Churches, or African Initiated Churches.

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mission field, further development of this idea by missionary-founded churches through numerous consultations, and its eventual failure due to irreconcilable differences in 1965.

Chapters 1 and 2 highlight the impulse and path to union primarily inspired by the famous Edinburgh Conference of 1910. Kalu points to these developments in phases.

1. Discussions by the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Qua Iboe Missions over boundary agreements in the mission field;
2. A 1911 missionary conference, initiated by the Presbyterians, focusing on more practical issues;
3. An invitation extended by the Presbyterians, Primitive Methodists, Niger Delta Pastorate, and Qua Iboe Mission in 1923 to the Yoruba Mission (Anglican), the Wesleyans, Dutch Reformed Church, SIM, etc.

The first proposal towards church union was introduced at a 1926 missions conference. Kalu notes the difficulties caused when the missionary agencies who were still in full control of the churches in Northern Nigeria drew back from participation in the proposed union, choosing to uphold the boundaries of the civil administration. Further attention is given to the refusal of the Southern Baptists to participate, and the withdrawal of SUM (Sudan United Mission) and QIM (Qua Iboe Mission) in 1947 (34).

In Chapter 3, Kalu presents a theological appraisal of the then-contemporary theologies of unity. He justifies *one-ness* as Jesus's intention for his church. Drawing from the Bible and other credible sources, the author emphasizes the distinctness and mystery of the Christian church regardless of its several denominational extractions "as a community of faithful people sustained by the mysterious indwelling of Christ and by the gift of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God" (59). Thus, he spotlights a glaring weakness evident in the consultations on union which led to the eventual fallout in plans as "preserving their traditions as opposed to speaking to find how as Africans the reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ could be realized among them in their particular situation" (72). More so, he prescribes the "common clan structure" peculiar to Africans as a better paradigm of the nature of bonds that should bind us over denominational representation that ends in possible rivalry.

Chapter 4 critiques the proposed constitution for the Church Union in Nigeria and its specifics, which comprise doctrine and confession, worship and liturgy, ministry and polity, and the unification of the ministry. Referred to as *The Scheme of Church Union in Nigeria*, it stood as the proposed and final ratified constitution to guide the proposed Church Union in Nigeria comprised of the Methodist, Anglican, and Presbyterian churches. The author indicts the consultations' extreme focus on organizational problems, leaving out more

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important issues such as mission and worship. In addition, he highlights each party clinging to their foreign heritage for the fear of absorption despite acknowledging a dynamic conception of unity (86).

Chapters 5 and 6 highlight the fallout of the union inauguration as planned, the aftermath in salvaging the situation responsible for the fallout, and recommendations for the future by the author. In this light, the author asserts that the collapse was a commentary on the predicament of the church in Nigeria and was a symptom of theological failings (135). This assertion leaves me, as a twenty-first-century reader and a Nigerian Christian, with an important question: Do the presence of existing fellowships of churches — i.e., the Christian Association of Nigeria, Christian Council of Nigeria, and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria — portray a true vision of unity as Christ desires (John 17:21–23) in light of their inception, vision, public representation, and its prophetic role?

Evaluation

Kalu is to be commended for his lucid argumentative approach, accurate historical interpretation and representation, and unambiguous use of language. He helpfully offers practical recommendations for future consultations, objective critique, contextual relevance, and sound theological grounding. Kalu has succeeded in filling a gap in the history of missions in Nigeria and addressed a theological failing. The book could perhaps be stronger if it had more engagement with other ecclesiastical camps, such as the early Pentecostal churches outside the Protestant churches, in light of the idea of attempted union. For example, the indigenous churches such as the Aladura churches were only mentioned in passing with first contact with them after the unfortunate postponement (35). A more robust discussion on the peculiarity of the Indigenous churches' unique Christian expression based on its proximity to the African worldview remains to be explored. The emphasis of Pentecostal churches on the Spirit could help to emphasize the role of the Spirit in facilitating and executing organic unity beyond human tethers. More so, such engagement with AICS and Pentecostal churches could have served in corroborating his African-drawn “common clan structure” nature of bond required for proper dialogue over safeguarding denominational ties, since the indigenous churches offer a more indigenized expression of the Christian faith.

Conclusion

Though the first edition was published forty-six years ago, this 2018 reprint of Kalu's *Divided People of God* offers much to emerging twenty-first century Nigerian Church leaders grappling with the idea of Church union and ecumenism in light of biblical injunction. Contemporary Nigeria has a plethora

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of church traditions, all of which have a need to reconsider modes of negotiation, the dangers of sentimental denominational attachment, conflict management, the necessity for contextual authenticity, attentive communication, and grassroots engagement in building a united ecclesiology faithful to the Nigerian context. Kalu helpfully offers appropriate lessons that remain pertinent today. Furthermore, Kalu reminds us of the need for repentance and renewal as an essential component toward forging an organic united front, in response to Jesus's vision for the Church (John 17:21) and towards fulfilling his mission. *Divided People of God* presents an interesting perspective on the history of missions in Nigeria, exploring importance and praxis of Christian unity.