

THE AFRICAN PERSONALITY OR THE DILEMMA  
OF THE OTHER AND THE SELF IN THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF EDWARD W. BLYDEN, 1832–1912\*

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The second stage of Europe's contact with Africa beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing throughout the nineteenth into the twentieth century started the long and difficult problem of the identity of Africa and of the Africans which is vital even today. During this period of Afro-European contact Africans were repeatedly confronted with the questions of change and choice as they tried to come to terms with the new world of an expanding Western civilization which was in process of moulding the world in its image. One man in nineteenth-century Africa who tried to see the problem in its entirety was Edward W. Blyden (1832–1912), a West-Indian of pure African descent who during his active career in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Lagos summed up his political and cultural theories, based on a rich fund of living experience and profound study, in his concept of African personality.

European contact with West Africa goes back five centuries, but the influence of Europe over this period has varied enormously. If we skip the first, the longest and in its effects entirely negative span of time which covered three centuries of African history and was dominated by the slave trade, it was the second stage of Europe's contact with Africa beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing throughout the nineteenth into the twentieth century, which actually started the problem of the identity of Africa and of the Africans. It was undoubtedly a time of great upheaval for Africa, when the destiny of the whole continent started to resolve itself for better or worse. A period in African history when regardless of their own wishes Africans were bound to be drawn out of their way of life and brought into a new relationship with the outside world and under the impact of an expanding Western civilization which was in process of moulding the world in its image. It was during this period, that first West Africans in Sierra Leone, in Senegal and in Liberia, and later also Africans in other parts of Africa were confronted with the presence of Europe and forced to deal with the intrusion of Western ideas, moral and ethical codes, including Western religion – Christianity and Western political institutions and economic patterns.

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\* This paper was supported by Grant agency: VEGA No. 2/4095/97–99.

Culture contact is a two-way affair and the meeting of two civilizations, European and African, was also a two-way process. The attitudes of Europeans towards Africa and the Africans in this period of culture contact can be better understood only if they are seen as a part of a wider intellectual system, a total world view. This world view which Europeans derived from contemplating their own European societies and on which European cultural tradition was based, served to distort and tint the culture filters through which Europeans observed other parts of the world, and namely Africa. To quote Paul Ricoeur, "The fact that universal civilization has for a long time originated from the European centre has maintained the illusion that European culture was, in fact and by right, a universal culture. Its superiority over other civilizations seemed to provide the experimental verification of this postulate."<sup>1</sup>

Many elaborate theories of race and culture that came to be accepted by most Europeans were put forward in the course of the nineteenth century and quite a few in England. As England in the nineteenth-century re-shaped itself into a class-conscious society based on a hierarchy of social grades, the new social order provided a ready foundation upon which to build a hierarchy of races and a set of racial assumptions which became part of the social, cultural, and intellectual baggage carried into Africa by the British and other Europeans in the few decades before and after the "Scramble for Africa".<sup>2</sup> The concept of progress, which was such a prominent feature of the nineteenth-century European set of ideas and of evolutionary theories of historical change of human society, also implied the existence of a social hierarchy and a scalar ordering of societies perceived as a progression from primitive savagery to civilization. Since white race had reached a higher rung upon a symbolic ladder up which all societies were climbing, and was advancing at a faster rate than other races, described as "lower" or "primitive", the European self-declared mission of leading non-white races along the road to civilization, conceptualized not as European civilization, but as "civilization unqualified and sole", knowledge, and true religion through colonization and Christian evangelization was considered as a natural right. For those who had to confront "the other" in a foreign setting, an elaborate ideology and a set of practices designed to control and change "the other" was inevitable.<sup>3</sup> The characterization of subordinate races by the dominant race was expressed in various conceptions of the subject race. The justifications, assertions and domination of the conception rested upon theories of science, evolution, culture and civilization. Deep-seated prejudices inherent in Eu-

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<sup>1</sup> RICOEUR, P.: *History and Truth*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1965, p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. LORIMER, D.A.: *Colour, Class and the Victorians*. Leicester University Press, 1978 and CAIRNS, H.A.C.: *Prelude to Imperialism. British Reactions to Central African Society 1840-1890*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, pp. 35-72 and 147-167.

<sup>3</sup> BURTON, R.F.: *The Lake Regions of Central Africa*. London, Longmans, 1860. 2 vols; CAMERON, V.L.: *Across Africa*. London, Philip, 1885, pp. 540-541; LUGARD, F.D.: *The Rise of Our East African Empire: Early Efforts in Nyasaland and Uganda*. Edinburgh, W. Blackwood, 1893. 2 vols, pp. 381, 471.

ropean cultural tradition towards dark-skinned people and beliefs about proper relationships between races based on alleged white superiority and an assumption of the white man's civilizing mission had grown up to rationalize them. Within the framework of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century all discourses on alterity or otherness could only be commentaries or exegeses on special traits of societies and cultures encountered and explanations of the possibilities of reducing non-Western otherness to Western sameness, defined and understood in terms of a model and a value standard determining attributes which emerged as classifiers with the power of measuring the social, cultural, historical and psychological distance from the "same" to the "other".<sup>4</sup>

Most Europeans were thus poorly equipped for either the intellectual understanding of African culture or for any degree of empathy with the way of life it represented. Africans, African culture, religions and artifacts were classified according to the grid of Western thought and imagination in which alterity was a negative category of the same. European representations of Africans or more generally of the African continent, demonstrated this ordering of otherness. Descriptions of African inferiority and commentaries on the Africans' backwardness, mental retardation, indolence, etc. formed part of the series of oppositions and of the levels of classification of humans demanded by the logic of the evolution of mankind and the stages of progress and social development. Travellers, missionaries and early administrators in the nineteenth century and their successors in the later period spoke using the same type of signs and symbols and acted upon them. In Mudimbe's words, "The African has become not only the Other who is everyone else except me, but rather the key which, in its abnormal differences, specifies the identity of the Same."<sup>5</sup> The early missionaries and administrators thus expounded the model of African spiritual and cultural metamorphosis and based their actions upon a general ideological framework according to which they saw themselves transforming through a civilizing process, the Africans into people like themselves.<sup>6</sup> Conceptions of Africa's regeneration consistently involved reduction of differences into a Western historicity.<sup>7</sup> Stressing the discrepancy between "civilization" and Christianity on the one hand and "barbarism" or "primitiveness" and "paganism" on the other, means of "evolution" or "conversion" from the lower stage to the higher stage were searched for and various theories of the steps of colonization and subsequent methods for Africa's "regeneration" were proposed as an ideological explanation for forcing Africa and Africans into a new historical dimension. Theories of colonial expansion, of "the white man's burden" on the one hand, and philoso-

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<sup>4</sup> MUDIMBE, V.Y.: *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> ROSCOE, Rev. J.: *Apolo Kaggwa, Katikiro and Regent of Uganda*. In: *Church Missionary Gleaner*, July 1, 1902, p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> MUDIMBE, V.Y.: *The Invention of Africa*, op. cit., p. 22.

phies of otherness and discourses on African primitiveness which flourished in Europe during the nineteenth century, emphasized the promotion of a particular model of history. In much of the early literature on Africa the nature of the Europeans' mission was described as the bearing of gifts of civilization, Christianity, peace, justice and good government to the natives.<sup>8</sup> The four C's – Commerce, Christianity, Civilization, Colonization – were deemed by many liberal-minded Europeans to provide the most effective recipe for the transformation and regeneration of Africa.<sup>9</sup> As European influence penetrated and then spread into Africa, countless Africans in different parts of Africa were throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth forced by circumstances or induced through preference to deal with the introduction of Christianity and of new moral and ethical codes and customs it brought and comply somehow or other with the new conditions of life generated by Europe's tightening control over Africa. During this period of Afro-European contact Africans were repeatedly confronted with the questions of change and choice as they tried to understand the new world of Western civilization and somehow to come to terms with it. The second stage of Europe's contact with Africa beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing throughout the nineteenth into the twentieth century also started the long and difficult problem of the identity of Africa and of the Africans which is vital even today and, as can be expected, African reactions to the process of Westernization and dis-Africanization have been widely various.

One man in nineteenth-century Africa tried to see the problem in its entirety and this man was Edward W. Blyden (1832–1912), a West-Indian of pure African descent, who has been considered by many to be “the most brilliant and articulate Negro spokesman on Africa in the half century preceding his death”.<sup>10</sup> Born in what was then the Danish island of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, Blyden, whose active career in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Lagos spanned the years 1851–1912, was no doubt a man of extraordinary commitment and many talents.<sup>11</sup> His parents were Romeo and Judith Blyden, believed to have been born about 1794 and 1795 respectively on St. Eustatius, another Danish West Indian island. Both were free, literate and “of unadulterated African blood”, his mother was a school teacher, his father a tailor.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> LUGARD, F.D.: *The Rise of Our East African Empire*, op. cit., p. 381, 471.

<sup>9</sup> HALLETT, R.: *Changing European Attitudes to Africa*. In: *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 5, ed. J.E. Flint, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 458–496, esp. 488–492.

<sup>10</sup> LYNCH, Hollis R.: *The Attitude of Edward W. Blyden to European Imperialism in Africa*. In: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. III, No. 2, 1965, p. 249. See also LYNCH, Hollis R.: *Edward Wilmot Blyden. Pan-Negro Patriot 1832–1912*. London, Oxford University Press 1967. 272 pp.

<sup>11</sup> BLYDEN, Edward Wilmot: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. Edinburgh, At the University Press 1967. Christopher FYFE's Introduction, pp. XI–XVIII. It was originally published with an Introduction by the Hon. Samuel LEWIS in 1887 in London by W.B. Whittingham & Co. (second edition 1888) and reprinted eighty years later in Edinburgh.

<sup>12</sup> The term was used by the Hon. Samuel LEWIS in his Introductory Biographical Note to the first edition of BLYDEN's *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. Himself “a Negro, of

Blyden came to Liberia as a very young man at the age of eighteen in January 1851 via the United States. Hoping to gain a higher education he spent there seven months attempting vainly to enrol first in Rutgers' Theological College and, failing in his effort, in two other theological Colleges both of which refused him admission on racial grounds. Disappointed by the racial discrimination he encountered in the United States due to his colour, he decided to emigrate to Africa at the expense of the American Colonization Society.<sup>13</sup> The destination was the young Republic of Liberia, the black American colony founded in 1822 and independent since 1847, where he hoped to complete his studies. In Liberia he attended Alexander High School in Monrovia where he studied theology, geography, mathematics and the classics. He proved to be a brilliant student who excelled especially in the last two subjects. In 1862 he was appointed professor of Classic languages at Liberia College, the first secular English speaking institution of higher learning in tropical Africa, and remained there as a Professor until 1871.<sup>14</sup>

Blyden was certainly not a personality on which one could pass a cut-and-dry judgement. The same is true of his philosophy. Himself a victim of the racial discrimination, Blyden wished to establish the respectability of his race. Race was the theme which predominated in all his writings. In seeking to oppose current racist theories he developed his own concept of race, stressing the virtues of African race and fostering pride in its history and culture. This theory of Blyden's affected his ideas on African history, culture, religion, education and on Africa's future, including his belief in the importance of a co-operation of Afro-Americans with Africa and the necessity of their repatriation as a first vital step in Africa's regeneration.

Despite a relatively short and limited formal education Blyden developed into an outstanding scholar – historian, sociologist, theologian, classicist and linguist, who could read Greek and Latin fluently and besides all the Romance languages also mastered several West African languages as well as Arabic and Hebrew. “To understand the Hebrew language – to read with facility the poets and prophets of the Old Testament, and the Talmud in the original...” was, as he himself admitted in *The Jewish Question*, one of the strongest wishes of his life

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unadulterated African blood”, he claimed that Blyden was also “of the purest Negro parentage”. See pp. VII and VIII. It was the father of Romeo Blyden and grandfather of Edward Blyden who came to the West Indies from Iboland. See also ESEDEBE, P.O.: *Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912) as a Pan-African Theorist*. In: *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Ser. No. 25, July 1969, pp. 14–23, esp. p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Blyden, who had long acted as adviser to Liberian Presidents, in 1864 also became Secretary of State and between 1864 and 1866 had to combine his position as Professor at Liberia College with his official position in the Liberian Government. Blyden hoped that Liberia College, the first secular English-speaking institution of higher learning in tropical Africa, would eventually become a University of great international renown serving black students and scholars from all over the world.

and he taught himself Hebrew in his spare time.<sup>15</sup> Born “in the midst of Jews in the Danish island of St. Thomas” from his childhood he developed a lifelong interest in the ancient and current history of “God’s chosen people”, including “that marvellous movement called Zionism”.<sup>16</sup> Blyden attempted to study the Jewish question from the African standpoint, since “the history of the African race – their enslavement, persecution, proscription, and sufferings – closely resembles that of the Jews”.<sup>17</sup> His interest in Zionism was fostered, as he himself put it, also by the fact that “The message of the great Zionist movement to the Jews,”...“in some of its aspects, is similar to that which at this moment agitates thousands of the descendants of Africa in America, anxious to return to the land of their fathers”.<sup>18</sup>

Blyden’s ultimate goal was the vindication the African race. He began writing at the age of eighteen. In his first pieces published in the colonization journals of America he condemned slavery and racial discrimination and advocated strongly the emigration of free Negroes to Liberia. Liberia, the newly independent republic, was for Blyden a synthesis of the best in African and Western cultures, a nucleus of a modern, progressive African nation, destined to play a most important role on behalf of the entire African race and demonstrating to the world African abilities and talents. “It is the earnest desire of Liberians to see American Slavery speedily abolished.... Their object is, *the redemption of Africa, and the disenfranchisement and elevation of the African race!!!* object worthy of every coloured man, of every Christian...,” he wrote in *A Voice from Bleeding Africa*, one of his earliest writings.<sup>19</sup> “What under the sun, can be worse than America slavery, that ‘mystery of iniquity’” by which energies of men are crushed and their spirit of manliness and independence almost extinguished. “What condition can be worse to a rational being than that which deprives him of the right to exercise those powers which God has given him in such a way as he deems advantageous to himself, and makes him the tool and chattel of another man, with whom he stands equal in the eye of the great Creator?”<sup>20</sup>

Blyden was a prolific writer though not always consistent in his views, which developed, matured and even changed over years.<sup>21</sup> His most active years

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<sup>15</sup> BLYDEN, Edward W.: *The Jewish Question*. Liverpool 1898, 23 pp. In: LYNCH, Hollis R. (Ed.): *Black Spokesman. Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*. London, Frank Cass & Co. LTD.1971, pp. 209–214, esp. p. 210.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209 and 210.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 210–212.

<sup>19</sup> *A Voice from Bleeding Africa*. In: LYNCH, Hollis R. (Ed.): *Black Spokesman. Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, op. cit., p. 10. This and many other early pamphlets were privately published, *A Voice from Bleeding Africa* on Behalf of Her Exiled Children. Monrovia, G. Killian 1856. 33 pp. was the very first of Blyden’s many pamphlets.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7 and 9.

<sup>21</sup> Very critical is Mudimbe who talks of “an unbelievable inconsistency in Blyden’s thought”. See MUDIMBE, V.Y.: *E.W. Blyden’s Legacy and Questions*. In: MUDIMBE, V.Y.: *The Invention of Africa*, op. cit., Chapter IV, pp. 98–134, esp. p. 115.

spanned the period of major European penetration and control of Africa, i.e. roughly the half century preceding the outbreak of the World War I. A list of his published writings drawn up by his biographer, Miss Edith Holden, contains nearly a hundred items.<sup>22</sup> His major works were all written between 1851 and 1912. They expounded his views on major problems facing Africa. Blyden had not only a wide knowledge of African history, thought, culture and traditions, but was also an outstanding publicist, a master of written English, and a brilliant speaker. At the age of nineteen he became a correspondent of the *Liberia Herald*, the only newspaper in Liberia and became its editor for a year in 1855–56, and later on he was the editor of the new periodical *Negro* which he himself founded in 1872 in Freetown. Blyden was also a regular contributor to various periodicals published in West Africa, e.g. the *Lagos Weekly Record*, *Sierra Leone Times*, *Liberian Bulletin*, as well as to secular and missionary periodicals published in America and England, such as *Methodist Quarterly Review*, *African Repository*, the journal of the American Colonization Society, *New York Colonization Journal*, *North American Review*, *A.M.E. Church Review*, *Journal of African Society*, *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society* and *Fraser's Magazine*. He was, at the time of his death, a resident editor of a British periodical *The African World*.

Blyden was first of all a propagandist. His published writings were all short pieces, some of which appeared during his lifetime in two collections, *Liberia's Offering* and *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. As a scholar Blyden distinguished himself by yet another work *African Life and Customs*, his major work of a sociological nature attempting to describe customs and institutions of West African societies.<sup>23</sup>

To give Africans confidence, self respect and pride, to refute charges of the inherent inferiority of his race and to rebut the myth that blacks are entirely destitute of intellectual ability and hence slavery is a means of their improvement, he turned to the past. In his pamphlet *A Voice from Bleeding Africa*<sup>24</sup> he listed twenty-seven distinguished Negroes from Africa and the New World, such as two African-born scholars, A.W. Amo, J.E.J. Capitein, Toussaint l'Ouverture and among "the African geniuses" of the nineteenth century he also mentioned Alexander Pushkin and Alexandre Dumas. "In view of such examples of intellectual and moral greatness, as we have mentioned, shall such ordinary white men as the majority of American slave-holders are, despise and insult the race from which they sprung, and allege its inferiority, in justification of their most

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<sup>22</sup> HOLDEN, Edith: *Blyden of Liberia. An Account of the Life and Labors of Edward Wilmot Blyden, LL.D. As Recorded in Letters and Print*. New York 1967. See also Christopher FYFE's Introduction to the reissue of the first edition of Edward W. BLYDEN's *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. Edinburgh, At the University Press 1967.

<sup>23</sup> *Liberia's Offering*. New York, John A. Gray 1862. 167 pp. and *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. With an Introduction by the Hon. Samuel LEWIS. London, W.B. Whittingham & Co. 1887. 375 pp. *African Life and Customs*. London, C.M. Phillips 1908. 91 pp.

<sup>24</sup> *A Voice from Bleeding Africa on Behalf of Her Exiled Children*, op. cit.

horrible system...?” he wrote.<sup>25</sup> In another pamphlet, *A Vindication of the African Race*, he skilfully refuted all the theories which purported to prove African inferiority, “the idea of phrenological inferiority” and the myth of Ham’s curse.<sup>26</sup>

The basic concept of Blyden’s works was a successful endeavour to interpret the history and culture of Africa from the point of view of Africans themselves. Blyden continually had in mind the future of Africa and the Africans, but saw it always in terms of historical continuity. Blyden, a pioneer among African historians, realized the opinion that Africa was without history was demoralizing for Africans. He believed, that Africans not only had a worthy past, they also possessed a unique culture and “in spite of all, the Negro race has yet its part to play – a distinct part – in the history of humanity, and the continent of Africa will be the principal scene of its activity”.<sup>27</sup>

An important pre-requisite in “regenerating Africa” and re-establishing its influence was thus in his view a dissemination of the knowledge that Africans had a history and culture of their own of which they could be proud. Blyden believed that “The Sphinx” which was for him a metaphor for Africa, “must solve her own riddle at last”.<sup>28</sup> Blyden also began to spread the idea of a common destiny which Americans of African origin shared with Africa. He himself returned to Africa from the New World and believed that other Afro-Americans should return for the very purpose of teaching their fellow Africans skills and standards he believed would improve the Africans’ lot. “The opening up of Africa is to be the work of Africans”<sup>29</sup> because “only the Negro will be able to explain the Negro to the rest of mankind”.<sup>30</sup> “The African at home,” he claimed, “needs to be surrounded by influences from abroad, not that he may change his nature, but that he may improve his capacity.”<sup>31</sup> And “the instruments for the regeneration of this continent,” he maintained, “are the millions of Africans in the Western hemisphere, where, after nigh three hundred years of residence, they are still considered as strangers”.<sup>32</sup>

Even in his early writings Blyden expanded much thought on the character of human civilization and human races and frequently referred to the character of the African race, his concept of race was, however, not fully formulated until

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> *A Vindication of the African Race*. Monrovia, G. Killian 1857. It appeared also in *Liberia’s Offering*, op. cit., pp. 31–64 and LYNCH, Hollis R. (Ed.): *Black Spokesman. Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, op. cit., pp. 131–133.

<sup>27</sup> *Africa and the Africans*. In: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>28</sup> *Africa’s Service to the World*. In: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *Africa and the Africans*. In: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit., p. 263.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>32</sup> *African Colonization*. In: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit., p. 349.



the early 1870's.<sup>33</sup> He developed his own theory of human races, which became the basis of his concept of Africanness or of the African Personality, to rebut European charges of African inferiority.<sup>34</sup> Blyden's concept of race was produced within a given historical period in reaction to a specific intellectual climate and the most intolerant racist interpretations of Africa, its history and culture. In the nineteenth century, race became the main explanation of human variety and of cultural and social differences. While the spread of the European power around the world was seen as an eloquent sign of the superiority of the white race, the enslavement of Africans, who had "not made known their existence by remarkable works, by superior monuments in the political field, literature, science or industry" was a sign of their inferiority and stupidity, for they allowed themselves to "be duped, enchained and sold even by men less strong".<sup>35</sup> Blyden seems to have been familiar with contemporary writings on race produced by American upholders of slavery, polygenists, monogenists and followers of Darwinism and with racial theories maintained by the English school of anthropologists led by Richard Burton and James Hunt and he was no doubt influenced by the main ideas on race elaborated in such works as Count Arthur de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, which conveniently synthesized the ideas on race of his predecessors and contemporaries and was regarded as the classic nineteenth-century statement on the subject.<sup>36</sup>

Blyden adopted the assumption that mankind is divided into races and their interaction is the driving force behind all developments of history and society. The basic idea behind Blyden's concept was a division of vocations between different races and racial individuality. As each of the major human races had special inherent attributes, he maintained, so did the African race and it was the duty of members of this race "to retain Race integrity and Race individuality" and to develop its special qualities for the ultimate benefit of humanity. Blyden pointed out the derogatory opposition of colour white versus black as a symbol of distance in culture and civilization, "The standard of all physical and intellectual excellencies in the present civilization being the white complexion, whatever deviates from that favoured colour is proportionally depreciated, until the

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<sup>33</sup> Some of his most significant statements on race were expressed in an article entitled *Africa and the Africans* published in August 1878 in the British Quarterly, *Fraser's Magazine*. It appeared as part of *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. See LYNCH, H.R.: *Edward Wilmot Blyden. Pan-Negro Patriot, Vindicator of the Negro Race*, p. 59.

<sup>34</sup> The phrase "African Personality" which Blyden used occasionally to describe the character and special inherent attributes of the Africans seemed to have been used by him for the very first time in a lecture to the Young Men's Literary Association of Sierra Leone, entitled "Study and Race", delivered in Freetown on 19 May 1893 and published in the Sierra Leone Times, 27 May 1893. See LYNCH, H.R.: *Black Spokesman*, op. cit., pp. 195–204, esp. pp. 200–201.

<sup>35</sup> VIREY, J.J.: *Histoire naturelle du genre humain. I.* Paris 1801, pp. 434–435, 2, pp. 52–57. Quoted in: COHEN, William B.: *The French Encounter with Africans. White Response to Blacks, 1530–1880*. Bloomington–London, Indiana University Press 1880, pp. 214.

<sup>36</sup> GOBINEAU, Count Arthur de: *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*. Paris 1854.

black, which is the opposite, becomes not only the most unpopular but the unprofitable colour.”<sup>37</sup> Taking this into consideration, “...for every one of us – there is a special work to be done,” he continued, “a work of tremendous necessity and tremendous importance – a work for the Race to which we belong. It is a great Race – great in its vitality, in its powers of endurance and its prospect of perpetuity... there is a responsibility which our personality, our membership in this Race involves. It is sad to think that there are some Africans, especially among those who have enjoyed the advantages of foreign training, who are blind enough to the radical facts of humanity as to say, ‘Let us do away with the sentiment of Race. Let us do away with our *African personality* and be lost, if possible, in another Race’.”<sup>38</sup> “But to retain Race integrity and Race individuality is no easy task in the hard, dogmatic and insurgent civilization in which we live. It has been said that the fringe of European civilization is violence. All agencies at work, philanthropic, political and commercial, are tending to fashion us after the one pattern which Europe holds out.”<sup>39</sup> Believing in the distinctiveness of races, Blyden argued vehemently, “One race tries to force another into its own mould and the weaker race is sometimes compelled to give way to its own detriment and the detriment of humanity... if you surrender your personality, you have nothing left to give the world”... “to give up your personality would be to give up the peculiar work and the peculiar glory to which we are called.”<sup>40</sup> According to Blyden, and some other black nationalist leaders later on, it was in the spiritual and cultural sphere that Africans were destined to make their major contribution to world civilization. The African Personality was characterized by cheerfulness, love of nature and willingness to serve, by “simple and cordial manliness and sympathy with every interest of actual life and every effort for freedom”.<sup>41</sup> One of the essential characteristics of the African was, Blyden claimed, the spirit of service born of his spiritual genius – “the supple, yielding, conciliatory, obedient, gentle, patient, musical spirit that is not full of offensive resistance – how sadly the white man needs it”.<sup>42</sup>

Blyden accepted the existence of different human races as well as the existence of an African race, but he vehemently protested against such expressions as the Despised Races, frequently used in the publications of the American Missionary Association, or the Dark Continent. Blyden’s perspective which arose as a response to racism and to Europe’s denigration of Africa rejected the evolu-

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<sup>37</sup> *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> BLYDEN, E.W.: A Lecture to the Young Men’s Literary Association of Sierra Leone, May 19th, 1893; *Sierra Leone Times*, May 27th, 1893. In: LYNCH, Hollis R. (Ed.): *Black Spokesman. Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*. London, Frank Cass & Co. LTD. 1971, op. cit., p. 203 and pp. 200–201. Italics are mine.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201 and p. 203.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>42</sup> Blyden to Booker T. Washington, 28th November, 1894. *New York Age*, January 24th, 1895. In LYNCH, H.R.: *Black Spokesman*, op. cit., p. 207.

tionary assumption of “identical but unequal races” which justified colonialism, imperialism and the self-imposed White man’s burden or mission, and asserted the thesis of pluralism in the historical development of races. Blyden deemed races to be different but equal. Africans, he wrote, “are distinct but equal”. “The mistake which Europeans often make in considering questions of Negro improvement and the future of Africa, is in supposing that the Negro is the European – in the undeveloped stage – and that when, by and by, he shall enjoy the advantages of civilization and culture, he will become like the European; in other words, that the Negro is on the same line of progress, in the same groove, with the European, but infinitely in the rear.”<sup>43</sup> “This view proceeds upon the assumption,” Blyden continued, “that the two races are called to the same work and are alike in potentiality and ultimate development, the Negro only needing the element of time, under certain circumstances to become European. But to our mind it is not a question between the two races of inferiority or superiority. There is no absolute or essential superiority on the one side, nor absolute or essential inferiority on the other side. It is a question of difference of endowment and difference of destiny”... “Each race is endowed with peculiar talents,” Blyden argued.<sup>44</sup> According to Blyden, each race had its own “personality” and mission, African customs and institutions representing a significant aspect of the “African Personality”.<sup>45</sup> Due to this special endowment “the Negro race has yet its part to play – a distinct part – in the history of humanity, and the continent of Africa will be the principal scene of its activity”.<sup>46</sup>

Blyden was the nationalist speaker of Africa who had, by study and travel, kept himself abreast of developments in the international situation. The second half of the eighteen-seventies saw Blyden’s thinking enter a new phase. The theoretical background of his thought remained, but new problems thrust themselves into the foreground with the continuing process of Africa’s opening up to a white presence and European colonization of the continent, the need for a theoretical preparation for the future ordering of Africa. The fundamental question became that of Africa’s unity. The idea of the unity of the African continent, the concept of the African nation and of the African Personality were major considerations central to Blyden’s political philosophy. Blyden devoted a great deal of attention to these problems. He conceded the disparity among the inhabitants of the continent, their ethnic and cultural differences as well differences of tongue and religion. He declared, however, with conviction, that along with these differences there existed or should exist a common consciousness of belonging together. He called in the help of history and declared and offered proof – not illogically or unsuccessfully – that the long history of Africa was evidence of an

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<sup>43</sup> *Africa and the Africans*, p. 277 and 276. In: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>45</sup> *Africa and the Africans*, op. cit., p. 191.

<sup>46</sup> *Africa and the Africans*, op. cit., p. 276.

inner spiritual and cultural unity based on the toleration of African culture and its ability to assimilate foreign cultures. Though himself profoundly influenced by Western, Christian ideas transmitted through schooling, language and contact with the Western world, Edward Blyden was curiously one of the first Africans to stress the danger of cultural dispossession. Africans, he maintained, should not indiscriminately adopt European values and institutions and should appreciate and cherish their own customs and institutions. Convinced that the African had special attributes and a distinctive contribution to make to world civilization, Blyden stressed the need to foster cultural nationalism in West Africa or Africa based on pride in African history and culture. "Africa may yet prove to be the spiritual conservatory of the world... when the civilized nations, in consequence of their wonderful material development, shall have had their spiritual preceptions darkened and their spiritual susceptibilities blunted through the agency of a captivating and absorbing materialism, it may be, that they may have to resort to Africa to recover some of the simple elements of faith; for the promise of that land is that she shall stretch forth her hands unto God."<sup>47</sup> "Ethiopia and Ethiopians" which is for Blyden a synonym for Africa, "having always served, will continue to serve the world. The Negro is, at this moment, the opposite of the Anglo-Saxon. Those everywhere serve the world; these everywhere govern the world."<sup>48</sup> African slaves, "the black stream of humanity... has fertilized half the Western continent. It has created commerce and influenced its progress."<sup>49</sup> "Africa is distinguished as having *served* and *suffered*. In this, her lot is not unlike that of God's ancient people, the Hebrews, who were known among the Egyptians as the servants of all; and among the Romans, in later times, they were numbered by Cicero with the 'nations born to servitude'.... The lot of Africa resembles also His who made Himself of no reputation, but took upon Himself the form of a servant, and, having been made perfect through suffering, became the 'Captain of our salvation'."<sup>50</sup>

Blyden criticized Christian missions for their sin of cultural alienation, for striving to completely Europeanize Africans and thus thwart the development of the "African Personality", and preached a Christianity adapted to the African context. Western-educated Africans should not only retain pride in the African history, customs and institutions, they themselves should control the process of selecting and integrating aspects or modified versions of Western culture into a new cultural synthesis. On the other hand, Islam, Blyden argued, had brought Africans the benefits of a major world civilization without creating in them a

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<sup>47</sup> *Africa's Service to the World*. In: *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit., p. 124.

<sup>48</sup> *Ethiopia stretching out her hands unto God*; or, *Africa's Service to the World*. In: LYNCH, H.R.: *Black Spokesman*, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

sense of inferiority.<sup>51</sup> In 1866 he made a journey to the East visiting Egypt, Palestine and Syria with the view of studying the Arabic language which he wished to introduce into the curriculum of the Liberia college.<sup>52</sup> By then Blyden had concluded that Africans lacked education relevant to the goals and aspirations of Africa and this very fact represented the greatest obstacle to creative progress on the part of the black people. When he was appointed President of Liberia College in 1880 he strived very hard to introduce a curriculum which would answer Africa's peculiar needs and he planned to introduce Arabic into the University curriculum and institute a chair of Arabic and West African languages. However, during the short period he was President of Liberia College, he was not able to put his educational theories into practice. Nor did he succeed in Sierra Leone where he strived to found a secular West African University controlled by Africans themselves.

By the 1870s Blyden's ideas had reached maturity and he made a significant impact on the English-speaking literary scene and scholarly world. During his life Blyden was brought into contact with some distinguished literary men of his day. After 1871, Blyden divided his time in West Africa between Liberia and the British colonies of Sierra Leone and Lagos. From this time his influence spread rapidly throughout English-speaking West Africa.

Blyden summed up his political and cultural theories, based on a rich fund of living experience and profound study, in a remarkable volume, entitled *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, his most influential work. This *magnum opus* first published in London in 1887, comprised of fifteen miscellaneous essays written and first published between 1871 and 1887, contained many challenging and stimulating ideas on the themes of the character and achievement of the Negro race and the role, past and future, of the New World blacks in Africa as well as on the influence of Christianity and Islam on the Negro. In it he gathered an imposing mass of factual material, admirably sifted, and worked up in brilliant style. In it, too, he attempted to find an answer to the urgent questions facing Africa and the black race, both Africans and the Negroes living in the diaspora.

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<sup>51</sup> In much of his writings after 1870 Blyden was highly sympathetic to Islam in Africa. Comparing it with Christianity he praised it as a unifying factor cutting across ethnic lines and having an elevating influence by bringing the Arabic language and literature to Africans. On the other hand Christianity and European Christian missions, according to him, created in Africans a sense of inferiority and servility and by their sectarianism were dividing Africans. See e.g. *Mohammedanism in Western Africa*. In: *Methodist Quaterly Review* 1871; *Mohammedanism and the Negro Race*. In: *Fraser's Magazine*, November 1875; *Islam in the Western Soudan*. In: *Journal of the African Society*, 1902, pp. 11–31; *The Koran in Africa*. In: *Journal of African Society*, 1905, pp. 160–166; and relevant parts in *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> Blyden first began studying Arabic in the early 1860s and in 1867, one year after his trip to Egypt and the Middle East, he was proficient enough to teach it at Liberia College. An accomplished linguist, Blyden completely mastered Arabic, reading, writing and speaking it fluently.

It was extremely well written, Blyden was a master of written English, and this book of Blyden's made a tremendous impact in Europe and America. Blyden's criticism of missionaries and his Islamic preferences were not always accepted, However, the cultured sophistication of the author of *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* was greatly admired in Europe and the New World.<sup>53</sup>

Blyden's life, work and achievements have received much scholarly attention. Blyden has been celebrated as "the First African Personality" who attempted and succeeded in fashioning a total philosophy of Africanness which not only had a great appeal for his contemporaries, but for future generations of Africans as well. In his writings he tried to defend, champion and inspire his fellow-Africans and thus re-establish the psychic and emotional sense of security of the Africans in the face of Europe's intrusion with a brilliance that foreshadowed to a remarkable degree African thinking in the mid-twentieth century when another generation of Africans strived to formulate a philosophy of *négritude* and of African personality.<sup>54</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, the father of *négritude*, called him the "foremost precursor both of *Négritude* and of the *African Personality*".<sup>55</sup> Some of his ideas concerning European colonization and especially Britain's political influence were ambiguous.<sup>56</sup> Of all the black intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Edward W. Blyden, stands out as by far the most arresting figure. The continuing interest in the life and ideas of Blyden who spent his entire life grappling with the fundamental problems of Africa and of the Africans and seeking to find answers to these questions, is an ample proof of the relevance of some of his ideas even today.

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<sup>53</sup> Some readers doubted that such a book could have been written by a Negro.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. JULY, R.W.: *Nineteenth Century Negritude: Edward W. Blyden*. In: *Journal of African History* V, No. 1, 1964; also JULY, R.W.: *The Origins of Modern African Thought*. Chapter II. *The First African Personality. Edward W. Blyden*. New York, Praeger 1967; London, Faber 1968 and JULY, R.W.: *An African Voice. The Role of the Humanities in African Independence*. Durham, Duke University Press 1987. See also LYNCH, Hollis R.: *Edward W. Blyden: Pioneer West African Nationalist*. In: *Journal of African History*, VI, 3, 1965, pp. 373–388.

<sup>55</sup> See SENGHOR's foreword to LYNCH, H.R.(Ed.): *Selected Letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden*. New York, KTO Press 1978, pp. XV–XXII.

<sup>56</sup> LYNCH, Hollis R.: *The Attitude of Edward W. Blyden to European Imperialism in Africa*. In: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. III, No. 2, 1965, pp. 249–260. Also ESEDEBE, P.O.: *Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912) as a Pan-African Theorist*. In: *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Ser. No. 25, July 1969, pp. 14–23. Blyden's ideas concerning European colonization have been recently criticized by MUDIMBE, V.Y.: *E.W. Blyden's Legacy and Questions*. In: MUDIMBE, V.Y.: *The Invention of Africa*, op. cit., Chapter IV, pp. 98–134. Blyden, who became deeply disappointed with Liberia, which was for him a nucleus of a modern, progressive African nation, synthesizing the best in African and Western cultures and destined to play a most important role on behalf of the entire African race, became Liberia's critic. When he started to doubt if Liberia would ever be able to play the ambitious role he assigned her, he attempted to persuade to British to establish a vast Protectorate over West Africa and thus help to elevate and modernize Africa and create a major English-speaking West African nation. He, however, never doubted that European political overlordship would be temporary and he was anxious to foster cultural nationalism in West Africa.