

# Edward Wilmot Blyden.

## The African Personality and Early Intellectual Work in the Gold Coast (Ghana)

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### **Abstract**

There is a commonly held view that African nationalism took shape out of contacts of African intellectuals with twentieth century Pan-African leaders. Yet, this interpretation lacked concrete evidence, as many of these intellectuals owed their ideological formulation to Nineteenth century teachings of Edward Wilmot Blyden. In his writings, Blyden articulated a thorough understanding of African's strengths and weaknesses. For Blyden, Western civilization intended to make the African a caricature of European society. As a result, the situation of the African became one of chaos as he lived in strict psychological conflicts. A revival of the African personality rested as a solution to the distorted manhood of the African and a path to his future progress. This article examines Blyden's theory of the African personality as revealed in early intellectual work in the Gold Coast (Ghana). Drawing on Blyden's African personality theory, the article revealed that these intellectuals begun a vigorous campaign to oppose Europeanization of the African system of life and took an uncompromising stand against ideas of black "inferiority" and "backwardness".

**Keywords:** Blyden; the African personality theory; Western civilization; intellectual; the Gold Coast.

### **Introduction**

The belief in African inferiority and the superiority of Europeans remained a tense and often challenging theme in African history. Since the early contact of Europeans with Africans, Africans were depicted as inferior, unable to reason and to crown it all people without history and origins. Europeans, much influenced by the anthropological race theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reached Africa pre-occupied with the assumption that people of Africa were in need of Western modernity and civilization. A revolutionary spirit should arise in all parts of Africa to supplant African superstitious practices with much Westernized modes of life. Indeed, Africans were made to feel victim of being part of a system that enforced their inferiority and

subjugation. African arts, history and philosophy were remodeled to be a sort of shame and humiliation. To this point, imitation of Western life and manners became a fashion of every African and a sign of modernity and education.

Fortunately, the situation did not last for long as Edward Wilmot Blyden created a counter discourse to the derogatory and malicious effects of Western influences. Blyden was born on 03 August 1832 in the Island of St. Thomas, the Dutch West Indies. His father was a tailor while his mother was a teacher. Upon his apprenticeship in school, he showed an accomplished level in all subjects. This was why his teacher the Reverend John Knox advised Blyden to go to America as to continue higher education. In 1851, Blyden went to America with a much vigor to find a place where he could develop his intellectual and physical reflections. Yet, he was rejected in two colleges in the U.S. because of his race. Later in the same year, he met two friends Walter Lowrie, secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, and John B. Pinny of the New York Colonization Society. They asked Blyden to repatriate to Liberia as a next destination to pursue higher education. Upon his arrival at Liberia, he attended Alexander High school and was able to attain many positions early in his life. As a teacher, editor, politician, educator and theologian, Blyden formed a distinctive philosophy regarding the African problem and ways of its remedy. His account of the African personality theory was a one dimension of this brilliant work to elevate the African race.

Blyden saw in the African personality theory an asset to restore the distorted manhood of Africans. He preached among Africans the need to see in their African personality an avenue to their development and progress. He further advanced that an understanding of the African personality would make Africans one-step closer to the restoration of their identity and a re-evaluation of their place among races of the world. Indeed, Blyden's appeals attracted many emerging African intellectuals in general and Gold Coast intellectuals in particular. In the Gold Coast, the focus of this study, intellectuals engaged in systematic resistance to Western influences. Their actions and intellectual production became a source of great nationalistic uprising which set the revival of the African personality a foremost priority to all Africans. As such, the writing of this article emerged as a need to examine Blyden's concept of the African personality and in particular the impact it had on West African intellectuals which is scarcely recognized in existing literature.

### **The African Personality Theory in Edward Wilmot Blyden's Philosophy**

Africa and Africans had long been the target of immense false depictions. These depictions dated back almost to the eighteenth century when life in Europe flourished because of the industrial revolution coupled with an apparent subordination and underdevelopment of Africans because of the slave trade. In the meantime, there

emerged a tendency to subdue African systems and glorify Western systems. This mindset owed its existence to the works of the Anthropological Society of London, which was determined to draw a race ladder where Europeans came at the top of the race ladder while Africans occupied the lowest status. All these changes enforced the idea of black inferiority and placed, as it was known “a burden” on Europeans to civilize Africans and change much of their systems to be Western in outlook. Alas for Africans, European presence did nothing but made the African live in two worlds, the African and the European, as to attain high social status and secure white color job in the emerging colonial systems and to crown it all lost touch with their origins.

Blyden’s principles of the African personality came out as a response to the malign experience of Africans with the westernization process. Blyden (as cited in Lynch,1967) rejected the idea of innate superiority, or inferiority of races and stipulated that “each race was equal but distinct”(p.60). Distinctiveness of any race was because of differences of destiny and endowment. As such, the peculiarity of the African system of life was because of a differing socio-cultural environment and not an inferiority complex. For Blyden (as cited in Shapley,2003), this naturally peculiar nature of the African was a God given and there was no need to temper with a system that was God given:

...these racial peculiarities are God given. For his own glory they are and were created. The neglect of them, suppress them, or get rid of them is to get rid of the cord which binds us to the Creator. Try and learn the important lesson that it is God’s intention for you that you should be different from all the rest of mankind (p.78)

European intentional suppression and neglect of these peculiarities was antithetical to the teachings of God and could bring nothing but a distortion to the divinity of these systems. Furthermore, Blyden (as cited in Lynch,1967) advanced that the westernization process of African systems would deviate the African from approaching the real essence of the African personality and enforce the moral and mental peculiarities of these systems out of their real rational and normal actions.

In a stronger tone, Blyden appealed on all Africans to preserve the distinctiveness of the African personality. For Blyden (as cited in Shapley, 2003), the African should resist the tide of Western influences and understand that there would be no real physical and intellectual emancipation without restoring ties with the African personality. It was the “worst suicides” to give up the African personality:

Be yourselves.... If you are not yourself, if you surrender your personality, you have nothing left to give the world. You have no pleasure, no use, nothing which will attract and charm men, for by the suppression of your individuality, you lose your distinctive character.... You will see, then, that to give up our personality, would be to give up the peculiar work and glory to which we are called. It would really be to give up the divine idea— to give up God—to sacrifice the divine individuality; and this is the worst of suicides (p.61)

As a counter process, the African personality would make the African in touch with his origins. He no doubt would find along traditional life of ancestors a very dynamic system of worshiping and socialization. The African personality would further Africans self-pride and esteem as he was in touch with systems known and very close to his natural development and evolution. It would further restore African pure divinity, which have been destroyed by European Christianity and the presence of Western agencies that worked to the good of Europeans and the detriment of Africans.

Blyden's systematization of the African personality brought about a comparison between the African personality and the European personality. In an attempt to elucidate the mystifying effect of Western influences, Blyden (Lynch, 1967) stated that the African personality was spiritually in advance of the European personality. Its communalistic, spiritual, cooperative and sympathetic nature placed it in parallel or in advance of the European personality. For Blyden, the distinctiveness of the African personality made the Negro "on a different plane", religiously superior and morally different from his European counterpart. Blyden further exemplified by many instances where the African individual placed communal interests over individual interests. As part of his childhood education, the member of the community learned that his destiny was inseparable of the whole community. According to Blyden (1908), for the African "we, and not I, is the law of African life" (p.30). Conversely, the European personality (Lynch, 1967) exhibited traits of harshness, individualism, competitiveness and combativeness. These traits made the European personality materialistic in nature as it sought individual's achievements over spirituality. Blyden (1888) wrote:

It would seem that the tendency of the West Aryan genius is ever to divorce God from His works, and to lay great stress upon human capabilities and achievement. Man is an end, not a means. The highest man is the highest end to which all things else must bow. The aggregate must bend to the individual if he is superior to other individuals in intellectual or pecuniary might. The more favored race must dominate and control the less favoured race. Religion is to be cherished as a means of subserving temporal and material purposes...there is now no more direct communication with or inspiration from God necessary or possible (p.278)

Because of its materialistic aggrandizement, the European personality searched for the material over the immaterial-the soul- and tried to subordinate individual's sacredness in the presence of technological advancements and progress. This mindset, Blyden continued, was behind Europeans racial hierarchy of races and the failure of philanthropic movements in diffusing real progress among Africans.

Blyden's theorization of the African personality did not only evince through mere racial prognostications, but also revealed through its impact on the political, educational and social needs of Africans. Blyden hinted to the fact that mere understanding of the merits of the African personality could do nothing to Africans until theses principles

were modeled to bring advancement in all Africans walks of life. In Blyden's view, a concrete and real realization of the African personality could materialize through pure African institutions. These institutions be they educational or religious could be as a medium to accelerate African opportunities for a positive change and reveal the real essence of African manhood. Indeed, the burden was too heavy for Africans, as many of them could not resist Western influences and at the same time feel still attached to their old systems.

Blyden's conceptualization of the African personality theory coincided with a time of immense challenges for the African people. African intellectuals in general and intellectuals in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in particular, either through direct contact with Blyden or through his publications, found in Blyden's principles of the African personality a force to advance their educational, social and cultural needs. Indeed, the period after the scramble of Africa in the Gold Coast, the focus of this study, was a period of remarkable resilience against the Westernization process of African's system of life and an opportunity to shape an African personality similar to that cherished by Edward Wilmot Blyden.

### **Blyden, the African Personality and Early Nationalism in West Africa**

Since the fifteenth century, West Africa had been at the hub of European commercial and philanthropic influence. This influence accelerated in the seventeenth century because of the slave trade and later in the nineteenth century as European presence changed from mere commercial relations into formal colonialism. The latter brought about more government scrutiny over natives especially their education and religion. For the government, Western education and missionary activity were vital in making the native an easy prey to the ruler. Both shared the view that a complete indoctrination of the natives rested on imparting the ruler's culture and modes of life. Through systematic spread of government and missionary schools, the natives were exposed to Western culture, history and philosophy while African culture and lifeways were neglected or excluded from the curriculum. Alas for Africans, their personality was lost in the pursuit of an alien psychology while their image of themselves was of detest to all things pertaining to African life. Within this time of great upheaval for people of West Africa, a great deal of anger was aroused by many intellectuals who felt the danger of being absorbed by Western culture. Indeed, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were times of great resilience to the tide of Western influences and a remarkable phase in renovating the African personality.

In Nigeria, Blyden's African personality theory had gained the attention of many intellectuals. Mbonu Ojike refuted European's claims of the primitiveness of African culture and obviated that no one can consider African systems as a "passing culture". For Ojike (as cited in Glora,2014), these systems are "too stable to be unproductive, too

dynamic to be static, too dignified to be unimpressive, too African to be Western.” (p.92). In Liberia, John Payne Jackson alluded to the mystifying nature of European influence. Like Blyden, he affirmed that any attempt to develop the African on European lines could only worsen the situation. The African must find the lines of his evolution as the only path for progress. Johnson further attacked the attempt of Europeans to associate African systems with inferiority. He (as cited in George,1895) wrote:

In the work of elevating Africans, foreign teachers have always proceeded with their work on the assumption that the Negro or African is in every one of its normal susceptibilities an inferior race, and that it is needful in everything to give a foreign model to copy; no account has been made of our peculiarities, our languages enriched by the traditions of centuries, our- parables many of them the quintessence of family and national histories (p.48)

Identical to Blyden’s view, peculiarities of the Negro were neglected in the pursuit of a foreign model. These feelings of detest to European influence and admiration of African worldview led many to change their European names into African names. Both Edward Macaulay and Jacob H. Samuel of Nigeria became Kitoyi Ajasa and Adeg boyega Edun respectively. There emerged a tendency to use the Yoruba instead of the English language. This further led to increased publications of African history written in Yoruba. The press was further another medium where the intellectuals refuted ideas about black inferiority and praised many notable African personalities and their contribution to the African race and humanity at large.

In Sierra Leone, resistance to European influences and an appraisal of the African personality was the fashion of the time. The Sierra Leonean intellectual felt fed up with the systematic erosion of African lifestyle and the imposition of Western models. James Africanus Beale Horton was at odds with the anthropological race theories that denigrated the African race and idealized the European race. For Horton (as cited in Meberbeche,2010), “there exist no radical distinctions between him and his more civilized confrère”. Similar to Blyden, Horton believed that people of the African race are intelligent, productive and in advance of the people of Europe. He called on propagators of race distinctions to read history so that they could unveil reality and see the uncontaminated picture of the Negro unspoiled by European influence. Indeed, the work of these intellectuals stipulated a positive start for fellow Africans to reconsider how they view their mission in life. In the Gold Coast, the focus of this study, the intellectuals were avid followers to Blyden’s view. Many of them disdained the apparent subordination of African systems and called to make comparisons between the African personality and the European personality as a means to make people proud of their own history, culture, literature and philosophy.

## **The African Personality in Early Intellectual Work in the Gold Coast**

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Gold Coast intellectual showed great zeal to integrate into the colonial machinery. This was because ideas of Black inferiority were not very much common as many of them obtained Western education and white color jobs. In this regard, Kimble (1963) observed that Africans integration into the colonial service “depended on their ability and willingness to serve, and it would appear that the question of color had scarcely been relevant”. Yet, this vision did not last for long as race relations hardened due to the belief in the incapacity of Africans to hold important positions. Indeed, the period witnesses an apparent hostility from the British colonial government to Gold Coasters, coupled with systematic policies to impose British culture at the expense of people’s culture and way of life. The response of the intellectuals formed the nucleolus of a culture of protest against (1) ideas about black inferiority, (2) a fight against the strong tendency to imitation, (3) and a revival of the African past.

## **The Intellectual between the Myth of Black Inferiority and the Merits of the African Personality**

As white abuses in the Churches and the colonial service intensified, questions of color became central to the Gold Coast intellectual. Feelings of racial inferiority as part of a race conscious stipulated by Blyden through his contacts with West African intellectuals and the Gold Coast intellectual in particular and the day-to-day experience of the intellectual necessitated an immediate response to de-construct the myth of the superiority of the West and give life to the dead African personality. The intellectuals provided comparisons between the African personality and the European personality. Attoh Ahuma (1911) noted that it was a mistake to associate the African personality with bad things. He, in reverse, advanced that “the Whiteman has his vices as well as his virtues, and sometimes the vices of his virtues” (p.40). In the same manner, Aggrey had heaped praise on the intellectual and physical contribution of the African personality. While the European personality appeared to favor the material over the spiritual, the African personality was spiritual and more tied to human nature. In a vivid description of the merits of the African personality, Aggrey (as cited in Edwin,1929) mentioned that “Some people took to war; we took to love; some people took to hate; we took to song; some people took to anger; we took to laughter; some people took to despair; we took to hope”. Similar to Ahuma and Aggrey, J. E. Casely Hayford levelled severe criticism at the European personality and opined that throughout history the African personality was full of positive traits and good habits. In his masterpiece, *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911), he provided a description of the two personalities. Kwamankra, African, and Whitely, a European theology student, exemplified a staunch attack on the materialistic nature of Europe and the spiritual

nature of Africans. Throughout the whole narrative, the reader notes how whitely, though a theology student, was empty, believing the superiority of any individual as part of his material achievement. In contrast, Kwamankra exposes the reader to a deep intellectual, spiritual and philosophical personality. The reader becomes attached to how Kwamankra sees life and how he interprets the world around him. In all these, Hayford plainly succeed in delivering the faults in the European personality and the hidden and unseen attributes of the African personality. Indeed, these descriptions fuelled the minds of intellectuals for the need to fight imitation and escape European physical and intellectual incarceration.

### **Fashioning an African Personality and Combatting Imitation**

For the Gold Coast intellectual, Imitation would never create a liberated, modernized and civilized African but rather a personality without roots and essence and mostly parasite upon the European. Consequently, concerted actions were deployed to provide an Afro-centric interpretation of the African world as to counteract Eurocentric interpretations. Kobina Sekyi attacked the unreasonable imitation of European modes of life especially by the Western educated elite. According to Sekyi (as cited in Langley, 1970), “whatever is borrowed is superficial and only taints our culture and chains the nation to the whims of external powers”. Sekyi exposed his readers and theatre audience to the most influential play of the time, “The Blinkard” (1915). The play attacked the blind mimic of European lifestyle. For Sekyi, the time when the African despised his own culture, he only deepened his own misery and became psychological unstable as he could neither live with the new Western culture nor forget about African worldview. John Mensah Sarbah (1906) shared Sekyi’s opinion and advanced that the African could not develop with things alien to his environment. Instead, progress was the “natural outcome of its own history” (p.121). Identical to Blyden’s view, Casely Hayford (1911), disdained imitation and condemned African’s rush for the adoption of European lifeways. In “Ethiopia Unbound”, Hayford used the character of Tom Palmer as a vivid example of Africans who lost their identity in the pursuit of European personality. The reader experienced the cultural abortion of Palmer as he blindly dressed, behaved and thought like a European. By the end, Tom Palmer realized the bad effects of imitation of Western modes of life. Hayford further provided the example of many African women who became contaminated by the ruthless imitation of everything European. Ekuba, one of the characters, refused to be one of the wives of the king as part of her great attachment to Western ideas. For Hayford, this signified a staunch attack on monogamy which represented one aspect of the African system of life that had been greatly damaged along European presence.

Resistance to imitation became the cry of the time. In 1889, Sarbah founded the “Mfantasi Amanbuhu Fékuw” in Cape Coast. The new body worked a scheme to make

Africans know about their institutions. As part of the objectives of the body, Sarbah sought to make Africans proud of themselves. He (as cited in Kimble, 1963) saw no reason why Africans ignored their own origins and propounded that the Japanese kept attached to their “national costume and yet excel in wisdom and knowledge” (p.515). Indeed, the appeals boosted the reputation of the body and encouraged people to discard their European names and adopt African names. One editor (as cited in Kimble, 1963) in the Gold Coast People noted in 1893:

“To All Whom It May Concern!! Two gentlemen of intelligence having pluckily dropped their foreign names, have encouraged me to do the same...I am no slave, so no body must call me Ebenezer Weldu Cole Eshun any more. My real name is Esuon Weldu” (p.518)

Along this highly positive revolutionary spirit to revive the African personality, the Gold Coast intellectual thought further of strengthening roots of the African personality through reviving the African past. Many of them sought the African past as an authentic medium to diffuse the real essence of the African personality.

### **The African Past as a Source of the African Personality**

Many intellectuals tried to counteract the idea that African history started with the arrival of Europeans. For them, there was a need to correct these misconceptions as part of a good understanding of the African personality. For example, Attoh Ahuma published “The Gold Coast Nation and National Consciousness”. The book’s themes centred on giving an account of African history with an emphasis on the contribution of these personalities to human history. In this regard, Ahuma (1911) wrote “In prehistoric days, Europe looked to Africa for new ideas, for fresh inspirations, and the saying was perpetuated and handed down from generation to generation, *Semper aliquid novi ex Africa*-There is always something new from Africa”. Identical to Ahuma, Casely Hayford (1911) reminded his fellow Africans that they had a rich past where people of the African race were perceptive, knowledgeable and intelligent:

“It had even been granted that for intellectual endowments he had nothing to be ashamed of in an open competition with the Aryan or any other type.... Here was a being anatomically perfect, adaptive and adaptable to any and every sphere of the struggle for life. Sociologically, he had succeeded in recording upon the pages of contemporary history a conception of family life unknown to Western ideas”(p.1-3)

As an editor, Hayford wrote many article about some notable African personalities. These included Hendrick Vroom and George Ferguson, to mention just few. In 1906, Ahuma published “Memoirs of West African Celebrities”. As part of reviving the African past, Ahuma noted that Africans are in need of “Intelligent Retrogression” as a means to know about the African past and a path for future progress. Moreover, many

intellectuals rallied together and formed the Aborigines Rights Protection Society in 1897. The main objective of the body (as cited in Padmore,1936) was "To foster in the rising generation a knowledge of their historical past". The body further established a newspaper in 1898. The newspaper published a series of articles under the names "Sketches of the Lives and Labours of our Great Men". The articles focused on the intellectual, religious and philosophical contributions of the African personality to Africa and the Western world.

## Conclusion

The article examined Blyden's theory of the African personality as revealed in early intellectual work in the Gold Coast (Ghana). The article exposed Blyden's conception of the African personality. It revealed that Blyden's preoccupation was to dismiss the idea of black inferiority and instill positive ideas about Africa and the African race. Blyden attempted to create a collective psyche among fellow Africans to overcome European stereotypes and carve new paths of development and progress. The article further revealed that Blyden's theory of the African personality had much impact on early intellectual work in West Africa in general and in the Gold Coast in particular. The African personality became the bone of their resistance and a force to re-shape Africa of their own uncontaminated by Western life and civilization. Drawing on Blyden's theory, these intellectuals resisted the strong tendency to imitation and called on behalf of all Gold Coasters and by extension Africans, that European system of life could never suit Africans because each race had its own peculiarities. The erosion or the intentional suppression of these systems would only enforce African's subjugation and servility. Like Blyden, the intellectuals attempted to create in peoples' minds a confidence in their capacities and advanced that the African personality gave to the world aspects of its rich history, art and civilization. Indeed, Blyden's principles remained vital in shaping new beginning for these intellectuals that forged new paths to independence. Therefore, it is essential to encourage further investigations on Blyden's principles as their impact could not be limited to colonial Gold Coast, but rather to much modern Ghana.

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