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Edward W. Blyden's intellectual tradition: the place of 'race' and religion

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the place of religion and "race" in Edward W. Blyden's thought and praxis. It is discussed and analysed against the background of an Africana intellectual tradition and aspects regarding sovereignty and resistance. On the one hand, it examines the views of Blyden concerning the place of "race" and religion in relation to recurrent elements within the Africana intellectual tradition. On the other, it explores Blyden's thoughts on "race" and religion with regard to historical context and the influence of sovereignty and resistance. It explores how historical conditions shaped Blyden's ideas relating to Black emancipation, and, specifically, how to interpret the multiple intellectual transformations during his life and how this changed his thinking. The framework used in this article is an interpretation of the Africana intellectual tradition, which consists of the recurrent elements of "race," slavery, colonialism, humiliation, dignity and memory. It uses this analytical framework to examine some of Blyden's more notable works. Examining the place of "race" and religion, intellectual tradition and sovereignty and resistance helps us understand the emergence, development and underpinnings of Blyden's thought, giving us more insight into his ideas and the ideas of thinkers who followed in his footsteps.

KEYWORDS

Race; religion; slavery; colonialism

Introduction

Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912) is often considered a key figure in the early days of Pan-Africanism (Adi and Sherwood 2003, 11–15). I use the premise that Pan-Africanism, as a thought and practice, began in 1900 with the Pan-African Conference. Although there were Pan-African initiatives before 1900, such as the Chicago Congress on Africa of 1893 (Abegunrin 2016, 17; Esedebe 1994, 39), I use 1900 as its starting point. It was when the name was officially introduced and ideas were put into practice. This premise implies that most of Blyden's life predates Pan-Africanism. It raises questions about continuity and where to position Blyden intellectually. In this paper, I attempt to answer these questions by arguing that Blyden is part of an Africana intellectual tradition.

Kwame Nimako argues in his article entitled "Location and Social in the Black: A Testimony of Africana Intellectual Tradition" that there is a distinct Africana intellectual tradition whose framework and methods can be delineated (Nimako 2014). Scholars

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such as Paget Henry and Lewis Gordon have also pointed out the existence of such a tradition. Henry spoke of a Caribbean – and Afro-American – intellectual tradition and a distinct Africana tradition of philosophical self-reflection (Henry 2000). According to Henry, “Africana philosophy [...] embraces African, Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean, and other African diasporic philosophies” (164). Gordon stressed the importance of a similar phenomenon, which he calls Africana thought, when he stated, “The reality of Africana peoples has been such that Freedom and their *identity* as thinking beings have been essential [...] and the impact of racism, which denies their *humanity*, makes the question of being human paramount” (Gordon 2000, 27, my emphasis added). As pointed out here by Gordon, identity and humanity seem common threads in Africana intellectual thought. Other scholars, like Reiland Rabaka, speak of an Africana Tradition of Critical Theory, preceding Eurocentric tradition, and taking Africana intellectual-activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James as point of departure instead of the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School (Rabaka 2009, 9). Nimako has stated about the Africana intellectual tradition:

Like all intellectual traditions Africana intellectuals describe their phenomena, but unlike other traditions, the Africana intellectual tradition is corrective and prescriptive in context and historical, structural, and developmental in content. The common thread that runs through the intellectual and political tradition I have articulated [...] is “race,” humiliation, slavery, colonialism and memory. And these are phenomena that continue to shape this tradition as we enter further into the twenty-first century. (Nimako 2014, 61)

Thus, according to Nimako, the framework of Africana intellectual tradition is “race,” slavery, colonialism, humiliation and memory. In addition, an element that was added later to the framework is dignity (Delea 2019; 14; Nimako 2022). The context of this tradition is corrective and prescriptive, while the content is historical, structural and developmental. It is corrective in the sense that errors based on the legacies of colonialism and slavery,¹ such as superiority-inferiority thinking, need to be corrected. It is prescriptive by setting new examples based on new and independent ideas. This is exemplified by the decisions of many African countries, such as Ghana and Zambia, to change the names, national flags and symbols of their countries after achieving independence. The content of this intellectual tradition is historical because of the necessity for historical writings that deal with the long legacy of oppression, colonialism and slavery and their relation with Africa, Europe and the Americas. It is structural since this history needs to be adequately organised along these international lines to provide sufficient insight, and it is developmental since slavery and colonialism created conditions of underdevelopment based on racism and oppression (Delea 2019, 25–26). In this paper, I probe and use the abovementioned framework and methods of Africana intellectual tradition to analyse the life and work of Blyden, with particular reference to “race” and religion.

In this article, I refer to “race” as a social construct based on ideology but with real consequences. I follow Barbara Fields, who stated, “Race became the ideological medium through which people posed and apprehended basic questions of power and dominance, sovereignty and citizenship, justice and right [...] Once acted upon, a delusion can be as murderous as a fact” (Fields quoted in Maza 2017, 218). Furthermore, I follow scholars such as Ousmane Oumar Kane and Isabel Wilkerson, who argue that “race” cannot be understood outside of its economic context (Kane 2016; 203; Wright 2019; 122;

Wilkerson 2020, 47). Colonialism and slavery were driven by a quest for profit and adopted “race” to “justify” land theft, and forced and unpaid labour. Wilkerson adds that “[...] in the making of the New World [...] Europeans became white, Africans black, and everyone else yellow, red or brown [...] humans were set apart on the basis of what they looked like [...] ranked to form a caste system based on a new concept called race [...] cast into assigned roles to meet the needs of the larger production” (Wilkerson 2020, 54). To complicate matters further, “race” in relation to black people took on different names such as the Black issue and the negro problem. It was initially imposed upon black people to create a common racial identity for Africans, neglecting their diversity and meant to oppress, exploit and dominate. Much later, it was used by Africans and the African diaspora to unite, uplift, liberate and embrace a shared identity. It was claimed and asserted to achieve a common Black identity (Gordon 2009; Nimako 2014). With memory, I refer to a collective recollection of African people and people belonging to the African diaspora in terms of the conditions in which they historically found themselves and its long legacy of oppression and exploitation. It is connected to the Africana intellectual tradition being historical in content.

This article consists of two main sections. Section one discusses the career of Blyden and his ideas concerning “race.”² The second section examines his viewpoints regarding religion and analyses the transformations in his thinking during his life. It does so by examining his work against the background of six recurrent elements within the Africana intellectual tradition and by examining the influence of sovereignty and resistance. Analysing Blyden’s work in light of the content and presence of these recurrent elements will help to place Blyden’s work in historical and intellectual context and assess his influence and impact. In this article, this is done by examining some of his statements regarding the six recurrent elements of the Africana intellectual tradition and, thus, placing his work within the context of a broader intellectual scope.

Blyden’s ideas changed during his life based on personal and societal circumstances. While this article’s biographical part, regarding Blyden’s career, is written chronologically, other parts are essentially about the history of ideas and, therefore, more thematically organised than chronological. Nonetheless, I have tried to organise the paper as chronological as possible and offer sufficient historical context within the themes used.

As stated previously, many scholars refer to Blyden as a Pan-Africanist. However, I argue that we should not confuse the Africana intellectual tradition with Pan-Africanism since not every Africana intellectual can be classified as a Pan-Africanist. I contend that intellectuals within the Africana intellectual tradition can be engaged in, e.g., Black Nationalism, *Négritude* or *Ujamaa* without being Pan-Africanists. Africana intellectuals work within the Africana intellectual tradition, but if they are Pan-Africanists, they have a specific objective. This was laid out by Henry Sylvester Williams, the organiser of the 1900 Pan-African Conference, who stated that it was to protest the:

[...] stealing of land in all colonies, racial discrimination and [to] deal with all other issues of interest to blacks. (Williams quoted in Falola 2001, 144)³

The quotation below, written in 1884, appears to show Blyden’s view on, what would later become, Pan-Africanism when he spoke about colonisation:

The principle of African colonisation in modern times, *with a view to the improvement of the country and the people* [...] to organise *their own government*, to enact their own laws, and to establish a community entirely independent of Europe. (Blyden (1888 1994), *my emphasis*)

This quote highlights Blyden's position on colonialism and the fact that, in contrast to Williams, who organised the first Pan-African Conference, he did not speak about the "stealing of land." Blyden saw a solution in colonialism for African independence while utilising Christianity. In 1888 he stated, for instance, that "as long as there are Christian Negroes [...] who may do a civilising work in Africa, and who desire to go thither, so long will this colonisation enterprise be a necessary and beneficent agency" (Blyden [1888]1994). He thus linked the idea of Black independence to Christianity and "civilising missions." Blyden seemingly had a double bind concerning colonialism. On the one hand, he was an ardent advocate of Black self-government; on the other, he saw colonialism as a way to achieve this. I will return to this point later. Let us first briefly examine the historical context around Blyden's career and life, followed by his ideas regarding "race."

Career and 'race'

The period of Edward Wilmot Blyden's life saw many changes and phenomena such as slavery, anti-slavery movements, abolition and the colonisation and partitioning of the African continent (Davidson 1992, 10). These events triggered questions among people belonging to the African diaspora in the Caribbean and the Americas regarding racial discrimination, the colonisation of the African continent and a possible "return" to Africa. While slavery in this period was coming to an end in the Americas and the Caribbean, thus increasing the freedom and sovereignty of the African diaspora, Africans on the continent lost freedom and sovereignty due to the colonisation of the African continent. I have elsewhere coined the terms *necessary engagement* and *possible confrontation*. I use these terms to describe and analyse changes in sovereignty regarding the resistance of African people on the continent and the diaspora to counter colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism (Delea 2019, 3). To achieve self-determination, this history reveals moments of having to engage and being able to confront oppressive powers based on national and international circumstances (Delea 2019). I will return to this. Let us now go to short biography of Blyden and his career and an examination of what Blyden stated about "race."

Blyden was a writer, diplomat and politician who has been widely recognised as a critical thinker in developing ideas that proved essential for Africans and the African diaspora. He was born on August 3 1832, on the Caribbean Island of St. Thomas and grew up during slavery in a free family of African descent (Adi and Sherwood 2003, 11).⁴ Blyden was proud of his heritage and claimed to be pure African. Growing up in St. Thomas, he would have been aware of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) and its impact on the Caribbean (such as the uprising of Tula in Curaçao) and beyond. It would most likely have affected his sense of identity, self-worth and pride. I suggest that this pride aligns with the recurrent element of dignity within the Africana intellectual tradition. As Hon. Samuel Lewis wrote in 1886 in the introduction to Blyden's edited volume of texts, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, written between 1871 and 1888:

Edward Wilmot Blyden [. . .] is of the *purest Negro parentage*. Inspired, in early youth, with a love for the Fatherland, and a desire to labour for its amelioration, he went to the United States in his seventeenth year, with a view of pursuing certain studies to fit himself to work in Africa. *(Lewis in Blyden (1994), my emphasis)*

Blyden tried to pursue his education in the US with the help of an American pastor, Rev. John P. Knox of the Dutch Reformed Church, who tried to get him into Rutgers's Theological College in New Brunswick, New Jersey. As with two other colleges, he was denied admission at Rutgers's College based on his "race" (Lynch 1964; 19–20; Moore 1994, 60). In 1850, the same year that Blyden arrived in the US, the country had passed the Fugitive Slave Law. Refused admission to study in the United States and disheartened by its racial climate, Blyden sailed to Liberia (Moore 1994, 62). He accepted the idea of Liberia as a possibility for a "return to Africa," convinced it would bring upliftment and strength to the African continent and Black people (Lynch 1964, 21). Blyden sailed to Liberia with the assistance of the Colonization Society and the support of the Presbyterian Church. Prior to his departure, he had stated that he knew that the object of the Colonization Society was to "evangelise the dark parts of Africa" by its "civilised and enlightened sons," about which he concluded: "How can any fail to perceive disinterested benevolence in such a scheme?" (Blyden, quoted in Moore 1994, 62). Blyden believed that through Christianity, Liberia would become the nucleus of a modern West African state which simultaneously would serve as an outpost of Christianity and proof of the capabilities of black people (Moore 1994, 62).

In the mid- to the late-nineteenth century, most black people in the US and, arguably also in the Caribbean, had been influenced by Western Christian values. Consequently, although the Liberian society was stratified with descendants of free blacks (often mixed-race) in the upper levels of society and former enslaved in the lower classes, all had been exposed to Christianity. Many of the black people who had migrated from the US were contemptuous of indigenous Africans, and many saw it as their duty to convert indigenous Africans to Christianity (Blyden 2002, 32–33). Blyden was no exception.

In the years after arriving in Liberia, Blyden would gradually distance himself from the Calvinism and theoretical and missiological orthodoxy of the Presbyterian Church. Blyden kept searching for answers to questions he had, which also motivated him to learn new languages (Moore 1994, 64). He possessed a rare talent for mastery of languages, which would prove advantageous in his career (Moore 1994, 75). The Rev. David Agnew Wilson, a white Southerner and missionary, praised Blyden's talents in 1851, but by 1859 criticised him for his "pompous display of learning" (Moore 1994, 64). Nonetheless, Blyden kept having "great faith in Presbyterian principles and policy for the elevation of the Liberian Church and state," as he stated in 1860 (Blyden quoted in Moore 1994, 65). In 1861, he was appointed Professor of Classics at Liberia College (Lynch 1964; 75; Delea 2019, 37).

In the following years, Blyden would have several disputes and conflicts in Liberia, attributing the essence of the conflicts with his rivals to skin colour. In his opinion, and that of others, Liberia had fallen victim to a system of pigmentocracy that favoured people of mixed parentage, which undermined the objective of establishing Liberia as "the nucleus of a West African state." This conflict came to a climax in 1870 when Blyden wrote an article not intended for publication but which nonetheless became public, entitled "Mixed Races in Liberia." It created even more problems and led to

a physical attack on Blyden. In 1871, he was accused of having an affair with the wife of Liberia's President Edward J. Roye. The latter and his stance on mixed-race forced him to flee to neighbouring Sierra Leone in the same year (Adi and Sherwood 2003; 12; Moore 1994, 67). It also resulted in Blyden's divorce from Sarah Yates, his wife since 1856, who was mixed-race and the niece of the then vice-president of Liberia, B.P. Yates (Tibebu 2012, 120). In Sierra Leone, he started a relationship with Anna Erskine in 1877 after they first met in Liberia in 1875 when she was his student. Erskine was an American teacher of "pure African" origin (Livingstone 1975; 159; Robinson 2005; 559; Blyden 2002, 40–42).

During this period, Blyden observed a lack of belief in what he called an "African nationality," referring to the ability of Africans to determine their own affairs in African states (Blyden 1862; Adi and Sherwood 2003, 12). Blyden's emphasis can be explained based on the developments in many states during the nineteenth century concerning an increasing engagement in nation-building and nationalism. As pointed out by Sarah Maza, it made leading historians write national histories, which included the entanglement of nationalism with racial assumptions, such as the English myth of a deep-rooted Anglo-Saxon identity (Maza 2017, 47–48).

In 1873, Blyden was appointed British Government Agent to the interior of Sierra Leone. While British involvement is apparent, the historical ties of Sierra Leone with the US, in contrast to those with Liberia, are still understudied. Nonetheless, there are many examples of such involvement, such as the arrival of the first "American settlers" in 1787, the black loyalists who had fought on the side of the British during the American War of Independence (Blyden 2013; 60–62, Blyden 2015, 357).

The Presbyterian Church can be seen as a vehicle that offered Blyden the necessary social mobility to pursue his interests. The church gave Blyden the opportunity to move around and get acquainted with new knowledge, different experiences and epistemologies. The church was the most critical institution for the African American settler population in Liberia (Blyden 2002, 36), but for Blyden, it was also crucial for his international and academic endeavours.

Blyden was able to return to Liberia some years after fleeing to Sierra Leone. In 1876, after being reappointed Principal of Alexander High School in Liberia, he was criticised by Rev. Robert A.M. Deputie, who was in charge of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. Deputie noted that "there appears to be a degree of favouritism manifested towards [...] Blyden, that such liberty be allowed him to go when and where, to travel and preach as he may deem proper [...]" (Deputie quoted in Moore 1994, 69). The same Deputie, a "mulatto" member of the Presbytery, stated in the same year that the Presbytery was in danger of being infected by Blyden's heresy of liberalism. These kinds of personal attacks could have affected Blyden's increasing criticism of mixed-race people and their dominant position among the Liberian elite. From the mid-1870s, evidence suggests that he started to distance himself from the traditional theological and missiological tenets of the Presbyterian Church (Moore 1994, 73–74). At the same time, the situation had changed, with women being able to attend Alexander High School and Liberia College by the late nineteenth century. One of the privileged women to receive advanced education was Anna Erskine, who would become Blyden's second wife (Blyden 2002, 39).

Blyden is widely seen as a pivotal contributor to the development of thought concerning the freedom and self-determination of black people. He influenced many thinkers and leaders, such as the Pan-African lawyer and author J.E. Casely-Hayford (Blyden 1903), who wrote the introduction to the collection of speeches titled *West Africa before Europe* (Blyden 1905b). Casely-Hayford was one of the most ardent disciples of Blyden and very influential in transmitting Blyden's work to the generation that followed (Symonds 1968, 72). Blyden was one of the first to write about the idea of an "African Personality" and the uniqueness of Africans. He also wrote about issues related to a common African destiny, a distinctive African mentality and place of religion in life and the "immanently socialist" nature of African society (Frenkel 1974, 277). According to Andrew Barnes, African Personality can be defined as "[...] a perspective on the world that expands outward from the local circumstances around a diasporic thinker to the global issues about which a diasporic African thinker cogitates" (Barnes 2020).

If we consider this in light of internationalism and the quest for unification, then it directly aligns with Pan-Africanism. Internationalism and continental African unification, or at least cooperation, need an outward perspective, a widely discussed and planned subject after Pan-Africanism fully landed on the African continent after the Second World War (Delea 2019). Between 1895 and 1912, Blyden lived in Sierra Leone and Lagos in a self-imposed exile from Liberia (Moore 1994, 87). As argued by Richard Symonds, one of Blyden's most notable achievements was, in his words, to "demonstrate the ability of the negro to be as heavily intellectual as any of his Caucasian contemporaries, so that future generations were relieved from needing to do so" (Symonds 1968, 71). Edward Wilmot Blyden died on February 7 1912, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. I will now turn to the recurrent element of "race" and examine if, and if so how, these elements appeared in some of Blyden's more notable works.

"Race" as a recurrent element of the Africana intellectual tradition is represented in numerous ways in Blyden's work following the impact of his stay in the US. Because of his "race," Blyden was refused admission at several universities on his arrival in 1850 when the Fugitive Slave Act came into operation. The Fugitive Slave Act was seen as a triumph for the US slave states, giving federal commissioners unlimited power to apprehend and detain Americans of African descent for escaping enslavement and to re-enslave, or even enslave, them. This history has been described in the famous 1853 memoir of Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*. For the African diaspora, the law was most horrific, terrifying and humiliating; even more so since the alleged fugitive enslaved could not summon witnesses or testify on their own behalf, essentially leaving all black people at the mercy of unscrupulous enslavers and commissioners.⁵ In this context, Blyden feared for his safety and the possibility of being kidnapped and enslaved (Lynch 1964, 20–21).⁶ It illustrates "race" as being the organising principle of slavery: everyone who was black could potentially be kidnapped and enslaved, including a free black immigrant student such as Blyden. In 1878, Blyden wrote in an article in Fraser's Magazine, which was later added to his collection of essays *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*:

The cruel accidents of *slavery and the slave trade drove all Africans together*, and no discrimination was made [...] between the descendants of nobles and the offspring of slaves, between kings and their subjects – *all were placed on the same level*, all of black skin and woolly hair [...] chattels, having no rights that their oppressors were bound to respect.
(Blyden (1888) 1994, *my emphasis*)

The Fugitive Slave Act can be interpreted as one of the last convulsions of Trans-Atlantic chattel slavery. Together with his experiences in the Caribbean, these observations would have increasingly pulled Blyden towards a “return to Africa” idea advocated by the American Colonization Society (Lynch 1964, 21). Based on his experiences in the United States, Blyden drew certain conclusions about “race” and American society. In 1878, for instance, he stated:

The teachers of the Negro in America cannot have failed to observe that there seems always to be in the mind of their pupils some reservation which they cannot overcome [...] Development is denied him; *he cannot expand*. He fills his belly with theories and dogmas which to him are like the dry, hard husk. He cannot digest them [...] Nearly everything he produces comes from the *memory*; very little flows fresh from the heart.
(Blyden 1994, *my emphasis*)

Thus, Blyden saw certain irreconcilable aspects for black, or African diasporic, life in American society. He saw a situation where US society was not able or willing to offer a space that, in its shared values, included the equal presence, and hence the interests, of black people. The quote above reveals that Blyden used memory in his work, which aligns with elements of the Africana intellectual tradition.

Following from the quote of Hon. Samuel Lewis on Blyden being of “the purest Negro parentage,” it is clear that this reveals some of Blyden’s ideas on “race” and mixed-race parentage. While living in Liberia, Blyden would launch attacks on people of mixed parentage, whom he referred to as “mulattos.” He even insisted at one point that they should be discouraged by the American Colonization Society from migrating to the African continent (Adi and Sherwood 2003). I would argue that this fixation can be explained based on two things. Firstly, Blyden’s Western education would have had traces of racial essentialism embedded within Western Christianity. According to the scholar Craig Martin:

One of the most obvious examples of essentialism in recent human history is race essentialism. Prior to the nineteenth century – and for most of Western history – Christians assumed that all races had their origin in Adam and Eve. This view was called “monogeneticism,” meaning all races had one single origin of genesis. However, in the nineteenth century scientists attempted to discern distinct essences that could be used to separate the white race from the other races.
(Martin 2017, 52)

This essentialism would most likely have significantly impacted Blyden’s concepts and ideas. I addressed above what could have created Blyden’s fixation on racial purity. Although Blyden’s position is understandable, it seems he could not entirely escape from the policies of oppression, such as the divide and conquer based on pigment. Later thinkers such as Du Bois were more refined by speaking of a worldwide colour line and question “as to how far differences of race – which show themselves chiefly in the colour of the skin and the texture of the hair – will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to utmost ability the opportunities and

privileges of modern civilisation” (Du Bois quoted in Walters 1917, 257–260). Thus, while a pigmentocracy might have given more opportunities to people with less pigment, it did not change the colour line division between coloured and non-coloured people. I argue that the quote of Du Bois also instils the economic context regarding “race” as mentioned in the introduction since it speaks of opportunities, which are not uncommonly of an economic nature.

It is certain is that Blyden fought against racism. From the day he arrived in Liberia, he actively combatted racial discrimination, compiling evidence to refute claims of African inferiority. His combat against racist ideologies became the subject of his first major work, *A Vindication of the African Race*, published in 1857 (Adi and Sherwood 2003; 12; Delea 2019). In this work, Blyden skilfully refuted dominant theories of the period purported to “prove” African inferiority, claims of phrenological inferiority and the myth concerning Ham’s curse (Pawliková-Vilhanová 1998, 169).

Blyden saw Black Americans as the designated people to uplift Africans and the African continent. Seemingly he thought that some of the features to create this upliftment were Christianity, self-determination (within the boundaries at hand) and (racial or African) pride. Blyden’s ideas regarding, and in support of, colonisation should therefore be read differently from that of Europeans. The first had the objective of Black self-determination and freedom. The latter aimed to provide Europe with profit and geopolitical power based on exploitation. In this sense, it seems Blyden saw European colonialism as a phase that eventually could provide African self-determination.

Blyden spoke about “race” and humiliation such as in a lecture in 1884 that was published in *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*:

There is no bitterer satire passed upon us, no graver injustice done to *the race* than by those of its members who assume that they are unfit for higher duties than that which consists in the comparatively unintellectual work of barter. And it is but a refined remnant of the institution of slavery [. . .].
(Blyden (1888) 1994)

This quote aligns with self-doubt among descendants of the enslaved (Essed 1991; Small 2012, 8). It addresses internalised inferiority-thinking, which I argue, can directly be linked back to “race” as a legacy of slavery. In 1881 Blyden stated:

All our traditions and experiences are connected with a foreign race [. . .] The songs that live in our ears and are often on our lips are the songs which we heard sung by those who shouted while we groaned and lamented. They sang of their history, which was the *history of our degradation*. They recited their triumphs, which contained the *record of our humiliation*. [. . .] Now, if we are to make an independent nation – a strong nation – we must listen to the songs of our unsophisticated brethren as they sing of their history.
(Blyden (1888) 1994, *my emphasis*)

This call for a “strong nation” and connections to African tradition and culture concerns identity formation. It is also a response and a rebuttal to humiliation. The refutation of humiliation is intrinsically a call to be treated in a dignified manner, which brings me to dignity.

If we focus on dignity, we can see that Blyden connected dignity to education. He stated that black people under the influence of “a social and literary atmosphere must have a deeper self-respect and higher views of the *dignity of human nature* than those trained under the blighting influence of caste [creating] a sense of perpetual and hopeless

inferiority” (Blyden (1888) 1994, my emphasis). In other words, Blyden’s ideas related to self-respect correlate with training, thus education. It also implies that Blyden saw education as a solution to overcome humiliation and to reclaim dignity, which explains his choice for an academic career. He also linked education with religion, particularly Islam, on the African continent. He said,

throughout Mohammedan Africa, education is compulsory. A man might now travel across the continent, from Sierra Leone to Cairo, or in another direction, from Lagos to Tripoli, sleeping in a village every night, except in the Sahara, and in every village, he would find a school. (Blyden (1888) 1994)

Based on the evidence, I argue that religion (i.e., Christianity and Islam) played a pivotal role in his thought conceptually and socio-politically. Therefore, let us now turn to what Blyden states about religion, followed by an analysis of how some significant transformations in his thinking can be best explained.

Religion and transformations

A striking quote by Blyden is the following in which he, later in life, seems to claim that Islam was less invested with power built on the social construction of “race” than Christianity when he compared Islamic to Christian conversion:

The Muslim missionary of the Sudan or of Arabia can forget his race or his tribe in the intensity of his interest in the story he has to tell. The missionary from Europe has his race always on parade. He cannot help himself. He cannot avoid revealing his consciousness and his delight that he belongs to a power which, if need be, can force upon the people certain conditions. (Blyden 1905a, 168)

Authors such as Rudolph Ware and Ousmane Kane have made other important observations concerning the difference between Islam, Christianity and “race.” Ware stresses that Muslim education in West Africa is often seen as less worthy based on the idea that children simply parrot Qur’anic verses. Ware refutes this idea because of a different educational system based on a long-term teacher-student relationship. Ware addresses “race” in his work by placing Africa and Africans at the centre of Islamic studies as opposed to the discourse that Africa is located on the periphery of Islam (Ware 2014; Hamdeh 2015, 120–121). In continuation to this point, Kane distinguishes three groups with anti-blackness attitudes: North African and Arab Muslims and European Christians. He argues that whereas the anti-blackness of the two groups of Muslims was immaterial, European anti-blackness was material through, among other things, colonisation (Kane 2016; 203; Wright 2019, 122). This aligns with the argument in the introduction that the examination of “race” cannot be separated from economic and historical context.

Initially, in the early 1850s, Blyden had little interaction with Muslims and other people in the interior, like most members of the Presbytery of West Africa and the mission in Liberia (Moore 1994, 74). Over time, this situation changed as he sought interaction. Many years later, he suggested that Alexander High School transfer to the interior to attract indigenous Africans and give them easier access to education (Blyden 2002, 39). In many ways, Blyden saw practical advantages of Islam on the African continent concerning cooperation and development. He admired Islam for its organisation and focus. Though he did not see Islam as the equivalent of Christianity, he did see it

as an effective way to stop paganism on the continent. Blyden thoroughly researched Islam, to the extent that authors such as Harry Odamtten called him the progenitor of the systematic study of Islam in West Africa (Washington 2021, E64; Odamtten 2019). Concerning dignity and Christianity, Blyden wrote in 1876:

[...] the circumstances under which the Negro throughout the United States received Christianity [...] was travestied and diluted before it came to him to suit the “peculiar institution” by which millions of human beings were converted into “chattels” [...] united in upholding a system which every Negro felt was wrong. Yet these were the men from whom he got his religion, and whom he was obliged to regard as guides. Under such teaching and discipline, is it to be wondered at that his morality is awry – that his sense of the “*dignity of human nature*” is superficial.
(Blyden (1888)1994, my emphasis)

Thus, Blyden criticised the way in which black people in the United States had become Christian and questioned the morality of the people who converted them to Christianity. According to him, this led to a form of Christian education with a superficial outlook on the dignity of human nature. On the one hand, we see the emphasis on the recurrent element of dignity in Blyden’s thought; on the other is Blyden’s criticism of how Christianity was practised in the United States, applying a double standard regarding humanity by not considering black people as fully human.

When Blyden left Liberia and moved to Sierra Leone, his reputation as a friend of Islam had preceded him. Not long after his arrival, he was invited by the Aku and Fula Muslims. He would become well-known and respected among them (Lynch 1964, 134). Blyden was convinced that cooperation with Muslim states on the African continent was crucial and saw Islam as a unifying force. His aim was also to have Muslims and Christians working together in a joined pan-Negro objective, which was revolutionary because of the mutual antagonism and distrust between the religions in Sierra Leone. According to Hollis Lynch, European missionaries and Christian Africans “had held Muslims in contempt” since the early history of the colony by regarding “them as ignorant, corrupt and superstitious” (Lynch 1964, 134). Blyden disagreed, and while he initially aimed to learn Arabic to convert Muslims to Christianity, he increasingly appreciated Islam and its impact in West Africa, primarily due to research and contact with West African Muslims and European Islamic scholars (Moore 1994, 76). To get a better understanding of the religion and accompanying culture, Blyden, already a Professor of Classics at Liberia College, decided to learn Arabic, remarking that, “The Arabic language must be the medium of communicating sound Christian knowledge” (Blyden quoted in Moore 1994, 75). He went to Lebanon, Egypt, and Syria in 1866 for three months, and when he returned, he introduced Arabic to the curriculum at Liberia College (Mazrui 2014, 99).

In the following years, Blyden began to publicly advance the controversial thesis that while Islam had been salutary for indigenous inhabitants and culture in West Africa, Christianity had been destructive (Moore 1994, 75). He received much criticism about his ideas, which eventually led him to leave the Presbyterian ministry in 1886 to become a private member of the church (Moore 1994, 78). Furthermore, it led to the publication of his edited volume of texts *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* in 1888 (Lynch 1964, 75, 106). Some critics of this work stated that he had left Christianity and joined the Mohammedans. According to Moore, his actual decision was much more complicated,

reflecting a convergence of personal, ideological, racial, theoretical and missiological factors in leaving the Presbytery ministry. After his departure, Blyden referred to himself as a “minister of truth” (Moore 1994, 77–79). In later correspondence with another minister, John Miller, Blyden wrote the following about this departure from the ministry:

My studies, my prayers, my travels, my reading, my conversations with intelligent pagans and Mohammedans in the interior of this country have convinced me that the method and teachings of Missionary Societies will never make any impression upon this continent. Feeling the force of this truth and tired of “playing at missions” while so pressing a work demands earnestness and intelligent energy, I severed my connection with the Presbytery.
(Blyden quoted in Moore 1994, 79)

In many ways, I read Blyden’s reasoning here as a departure from the paternalism and superiority thinking of the “civilising missions” organised by the Presbyterian Church in West Africa. As stated by Moore, with Blyden’s “demittance of his ordination, the Presbyterian mission in Liberia lost its most famous and farsighted member” (Moore 1994, 83). Eventually, in 1900, the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions terminated its foreign mission efforts in Liberia after almost 70 years (Moore 1994, 84). After ending its activities in Liberia, the Presbyterian Church took a more dismissive, condescending and sometimes openly racist stance. In 1901, Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions Robert E. Speer stated;

The Negroes from America have never proved immune from disease of fever, nor shown qualities on enterprise, stability and solidity of work without which a mission cannot be counted as satisfactory [...] the hope that the American Negro would evangelise the continent of his fathers has been abandoned, at least until he shall have been brought by education and long discipline to a tenacity and directness of character he does not yet possess.
(Speer quoted in Moore 1994, 86)

Nonetheless, Blyden’s quote above on missionary work shows his international approach and quest for cooperation. He saw a special task for both religions when he, in May 1887, wrote:

It is the African converts to Mohammedanism and the Negro colonists from Christian countries, who have, thus far, done most for the permanent advance of civilisation in equatorial Africa; and it is these who seem to me to be the only capable and efficient agencies for the work of African regeneration.
(Blyden (1888) 1994)

Again, what is clear is his disdain for traditional African religions, which he referred to as paganism and which, according to him, were not beneficial for “civilisation.” Blyden did not seem to realise that “paganism” did not mean without faith and that traditional African systems of belief had similar mechanisms regarding society and values as monolithic religions such as Islam and Christianity (Wiredu 1998). Blyden’s correlation between being uncivilised and not having a religion is thus flawed. As we have seen previously, it is clear that Blyden had problems with putting his Western upbringing and education in perspective. It is even more apparent when he, in 1887, stated:

[...] the conviction that, if Christianity cannot conquer the whole of Africa – a task which it can never accomplish through European agency alone – it may, by the efforts and influence of its African converts, at least divide the empire of the Continent with Islam; Paganism, with all its horrors and abominations, having been forever abolished. (Blyden (1888) 1994)

In this quote, he also speaks of converting people to Christianity. While he is against paganism, he does see cooperation with Islam, the other of the two – along with Christianity – dominant, monotheistic and universalising religions with a history of converting people (Park 2004). It forms another explanation for Blyden's preference for Islam. I will now attempt to give a concise analysis of the background of the multiple transformations in Blyden's thinking.

As to the question, “who was Blyden?,” the answer remains somewhat unclear. As stated by Thomas Livingstone;

Who was Edward Wilmot Blyden? Pan-Africanist or toady for imperialism? [...] Cosmopolitan or nationalist? [...] Conservative or progressive? Hypocrite or gentlemen? Ascetic or voluptuary? Politician or man of letters? To Blyden himself, he was all of these, and he was none. Aware of the multiple contradictions of his life, of his failures and blemished success, he had died an embittered man, misunderstood and misunderstanding.
(Livingstone quoted in Edwards 1978, 311)

Whereas I understand Livingstone's viewpoint, I argue that many contradictions can be understood based on the transformations in Blyden's thinking. These transformations were influenced by changes in Blyden's life based on issues related to *possible confrontation* and *necessary engagement* and acquiring new knowledge and more in-depth understanding of, e.g., Islam, indigenous African culture and traditional forms of religion. Odamtten also identifies transformations in Blyden's thinking based on specific turning points in his intellectual life, such as his study of West African societies, which helped him to shift away from the idea of civilising indigenous Africans through Christianity (Odamtten 2019; Washington 2021, E64-E65). These transformations do not take anything away from the troubling ideas that tarnished Blyden's reputation, such as his stance on mixed race and its relation to the upper classes in Liberia and his support for African nationalism while supporting British colonial rule (Zachernuk 2021, 658).

When Blyden arrived in Liberia in 1851, he believed that Liberia and the African continent needed redemption at the hands of African Americans who had returned to the continent after the horrors of Trans-Atlantic chattel slavery. At the end of his life, in 1908, he asserted in a speech titled *African Life and Customs* that the African continent was sufficiently equipped with cultural and historical richness to determine its own future (Zachernuk 2021, 657).

According to Odamtten, Blyden concluded that Africans had Africanised Islam; they made Islam their own. That being the case, Blyden believed Africans should do the same with Christianity. In his argument, according to Eric Washington, Odamtten failed to contextualise Christianity in a broader sense and include other forms of “localised” African Christianity that had been around for centuries, such as in Axum and Egypt. Hence, as Washington concludes, it appears that Blyden was contesting Missionary Christianity with its Western cultural trappings and not Christianity itself (Washington 2021, E65; Odamtten 2019). Based on the evidence in this article, I come to the same conclusion.

Despite Blyden's departure from the Presbyterian Church in 1886, he maintained cordial relationships with Presbyterians in West Africa and abroad. He still went on lecture tours, such as in 1889 when he visited the US, sponsored by the American Colonization Society (Moore 1994, 81). Thus, regarding his social mobility, he remained,

in some ways, dependent on the Presbyterian Church and the American Colonization Society. His lectures on Islam and the Qur'an in Africa were not always received without criticism. Some of his critics were members of the black community in the US, who thought his ideas were a threat to both Christianity and "the race" (i.e., black people). In a letter written while in Chicago to Francis Grimke, Blyden responded to his critics:

I regret to learn of the impression which had been received from my lecture, "The Koran in Africa." [...] I read the same lecture last Saturday to the students of McCormick Theological Seminary, 158 in number and their Professors [...] I think it will be found that on a closer examination of my views, neither the interests of Christianity nor the race are threatened – but there is a difference between comprehension and non-comprehension.

(Blyden quoted in Moore 1994, 82)

The way I read this quote represents Blyden's thinking and its transformations throughout his career. Whereas Blyden seeks answers to questions relating to black people and their self-determination, culture and religion, many actors around him seem invested in containment. Whether the containment of Islam, as we see above, the containment of black people by the American Colonization Society by sending them to Liberia or the containment of indigenous African inhabitants in Liberia by not recognising their cultures or religions. In other words, it seems Blyden was trying to open doors that others wanted to keep closed.

Conclusion

I conclude that Blyden's intellectual thought falls into the framework of the Africana intellectual tradition. I examined some of Blyden's notable works, and it shows that his intellectual thought dealt with all the recurrent elements of this tradition and included all the features that make up the framework of this intellectual tradition, namely "race," slavery, colonialism, humiliation, dignity and memory. Furthermore, he is corrective and prescriptive in context, for instance, when he compiles and refutes claims of African inferiority, leading to his 1857 published work, *A Vindication of the African Race*, and when he introduces Arabic to the curriculum at Liberia College to promote African (Islamic and Christian) cooperation. He is also historical, structural and developmental in content, exemplified by his references to slavery, memory and collaboration between Islam and Christianity. In essence, this entails that an Africana intellectual is not merely engaged in a historical, intellectual, political or economic endeavour but also in an emancipatory one.

Blyden shows a somewhat ambivalent stance towards religion. On the one hand, he criticises Western or Euro-Christianity for its racism. On the other hand, he supports Christianity on the African continent to "civilise" the African "natives" through "civilising missions." Moreover, he supports the colonisation of the African continent and sees a special role in this colonisation for the African diaspora that has come over from the United States. I argue that this contradiction can only be understood in the context and structure of the nineteenth century and elements of necessary engagement and possible confrontation. Whereas Trans-Atlantic chattel slavery was ending in the second half of the nineteenth century, colonisation of the African continent started. While the African diaspora in the Americas saw an increase in sovereignty due to the abolition of slavery, Africans on the

continent saw their sovereignty decrease. Thus, the African diaspora saw an increase in the *possibility to confront*, and the Africans on the continent were increasingly forced to *necessarily engage*.

This necessary engagement explains Blyden's stance on colonisation which, despite the evident contradiction, had a different perspective than the viewpoint of European colonial powers. While the colonial powers were on a quest for cheap or "free" (i.e., stolen) land, natural resources and labour, Blyden saw colonisation as a phase towards increasing Black self-determination. The fact that he kept writing articles, speeches, books and pamphlets to spread his ideas showed his commitment to possible confrontation with the colonial powers.

Blyden's ambivalence concerning Christianity and colonisation can also be explained by considering the racial essentialism underpinning Western Christianity. On the one hand, his Western education would have impacted his ideas. On the other hand, his fixation on "racial purity" can be understood as an answer opposing the centrality of whiteness in Western Christianity, which appeared in the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Blyden was unable to fully put his Western upbringing and education in perspective and adopt a more holistic and *humanocentric* viewpoint. Something, which I argue, many intellectuals and scholars within the African intellectual tradition who followed in his footsteps did embrace, if not entirely, then to a much larger extent.

Notes

1. In this article slavery refers to Trans-Atlantic chattel slavery.
2. Bear in mind that "race" in this article is discussed in two ways: 1) a main subject for examination and 2) as part of the elements of the Africana intellectual tradition.
3. See also "Background to the 7th Pan-African Congress" (Pan-African Congress 1994, 10).
4. Slavery was abolished in the Danish West Indies only in 1848. However, as in many former colonies with enslaved people, a small group of free people of African descent existed in St. Thomas before the legal abolition of slavery.
5. Some people of African descent were, in fact, seized as fugitive enslaved (or runaway slaves), see Brawley (1950, 84).
6. Thirty-four years later Blyden recalled "his great fear of being seized for a slave" (Blyden to Coppinger, September 15, 1884, quoted in Lynch 1964, 20).

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