European Missionary Influence on African Nationalism: A Case Study of Edward W. Blyden

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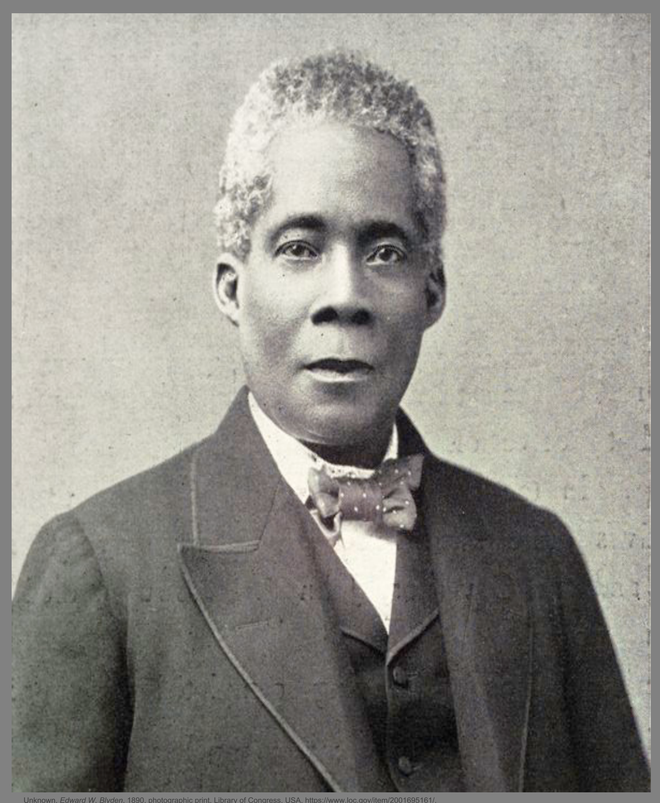

Unknown, *Edward W. Blyden*, 1890, photographic print, Library of Congress, USA, https://www.loc.gov/item/2001695161/.

Abstract

This research project explores the influence of the activities of European missionaries, specifically missionary education, on the development of an early form of African nationalism through a case study of Edward Wilmot Blyden. Blyden was a West African intellectual during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries who influenced later nationalists, such as Leopold Sedar Senghor and his Negritude movement beginning in the 1930s. Drawing on Blyden's biography, relevant historiographical material, and, most importantly, Blyden's own written works and transcripts of his numerous speeches, I came to understand how interactions with missionaries throughout his life shaped Blyden's intellectual perspective. His views would lead him to encourage other Africans, in his native Liberia and throughout the continent, to adopt racial and national pride into their lives.

Thesis

Edward Blyden's interactions with European missionary education in West Africa during the nineteenth century shaped his adverse perception of Christianity; this perception would be one of the driving forces behind the materialization of the acute sense of African Nationalism he would become known for.

Missionary Education in West Africa

- George Reid says that missionaries propagating the gospel in Africa helped lead to European political domination, but it also led to the rise of African nationalism.[1]
- European missionaries were symbolic of economic uplift, Christian and western values, and technology to many Africans.[2]
- The bible and Christianity teach that all are loved and valued equally in god's eyes, however, colonialism went against these values.[3]
- Christian values helped some Africans to see through colonialism and to fight back against it, as well as to coexist with one another.[4]
- Western education didn't practice the love and equality that it taught.[5]
- According to Edward Berman, the colonial governments were overwhelmingly in favor of little or no education, with a sole focus on manual labor for young Africans, which they claimed would benefit both the Africans and them.[6]
- In addition to this, Berman stated that education beyond the primary level was discouraged by both the government officials and the missionaries.[7]
- Missionaries worried that a native who was too educated would no longer be able to connect with the masses, therefore making them less successful evangelists.[8]

Unknown, Unknown, unknown, photographic print, Global Black History, https://www.globalblackhistory.com/2015/08/the-role-of-missionaries-in-african-society.html.

Impact on Blyden

- Blyden says that Liberia either needs to become independent of their reliance on westerners or they need to just give up the status of being a free country.[9]
- On the concept of nationalism, Blyden noted that nationalism was growing all over the world but that it was important for them to embrace it in Liberia because Liberia needed to continue to be an example for the rest of Africa so that they might follow in Liberia's footsteps.[10]
- He said that the rest of Africa looked to Liberia because of their African run government; and that they should let this drive and encourage them to keep pushing forward despite setbacks, as they had already faced and overcome many of them.[11]
- Regarding emancipation Blyden said that even though the Africans enslaved in America had been freed from their physical bonds by President Lincoln, their souls were not yet free. Because of this, they and their descendants had not yet reached social, intellectual or religious freedom.[12]
- Blyden says that the goal of missionaries to Christianize all of Africa is an impossible one.[13]
- He does say that missionaries have done some good along the way, saying that many Africans have become successful men because of missionary education, however, this benefit came with both geographical and cultural restrictions. Missionary education, prior to and at the time of Blyden's life, often did not extend beyond the coastal cities. It also required the adoption of European culture such as, style of dress and mannerisms.[14]

"The Christian World, trained for the last three hundred years to look upon the Negro as made for the service of superior races finds it difficult to shake off the notion of his absolute and permanent inferiority." -Blyden[15]

"We must learn to occupy the standpoint of our aboriginal brother and to believe that in his place there is no man under the sun better than or equal to him." -Blyden[16]

1. George Reid, "Missionaries and West African Nationalism," *Phylon* 39 no. 3 (1978): 225.
2. Reid, "Missionaries and West African Nationalism," 225.
3. Reid, "Missionaries and West African Nationalism," 226.
4. Reid, "Missionaries and West African Nationalism," 227.
5. Reid, "Missionaries and West African Nationalism," 227.
6. Edward H. Berman, "Christian Missions in Africa." in *African Reactions to Missionary Education*, ed. Edward H. Berman (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1975), 9.
7. Berman, "Christian Missions in Africa," 9.
8. Berman, "Christian Missions in Africa," 9.
9. Edward Wilmot Blyden, "Liberia as She is; and the Present Duty of her Citizens: An Independence Day Address given at Monrovia, July 27th, 1857," in *Black Spokesman Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, ed. Hollis R. Lynch (London, UK: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1971), 65.
10. Edward Wilmot Blyden, "Our Origin, Dangers and Duties: An Independence Day Address given at Monrovia, July 26th, 1865," in *Black Spokesman Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, ed. Hollis R. Lynch (London, UK: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1971),79.
11. Blyden, "Our Origin, Dangers and Duties," 79.
12. Edward Wilmot Blyden, "The Three Needs of Liberia: A Lecture delivered at Lower Buchanan, Grand Bassa County, Liberia, January 26th, 1908," in *Black Spokesman Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, ed. Hollis R. Lynch (London, UK: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1971), 120.
13. Edward Wilmot Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (Edinburgh, SCT: Edinburgh University Press, 1967), 47.
14. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, 49.
15. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, 46.
16. Blyden, "The Three Needs of Liberia," 120.