

RE-THINKING EDWARD WILMOT BLYDEN'S NOTION OF AFRICAN IDENTITY.

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ABSTRACT:

African identity has long been a subject of debate in human history. This is partly due to Africa's difficult historical experience of conquest, slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism by European powers. The identity of the African has been deeply undermined as a result of this painful and dehumanizing past. Edward Wilmot Blyden was an African-American intellectual who was compelled to leave his birthplace and relocate to Liberia as a result of institutionalized racism. In his philosophy of African identity, he sought to demonstrate that Africa and Africans possess a rich and valuable history and culture. He rejected the prevailing notion of the inferiority of Black people but accepted the view that each major race has a unique contribution to make to world civilization. The method of this research is the philosophical tool of critical analysis. Blyden's central thesis is that African culture should be promoted in the face of alien influences, in contrast to certain Christian abolitionist ideas. He argued for a deeply rooted African identity and maintained that Africans must follow their natural instincts and reaffirm their own values in order to regain their sense of dignity and contribute meaningfully to global civilization. Although there are notable flaws and inconsistencies in his philosophy, his ideas remain a springboard for further discourse on the question of African identity.

KEY WORDS: Re-thinking, Notion, African, Identity.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt the fact that Africans or Africa as a people or as a continent has grossly been misrepresented, misinterpreted and equally underrated among the committee of nations. The above pathetic condition of the African in relation to other races of the world was fuelled and sustained by Africa's past nay history. The African, prior to his contact with the west has lived in his own world and such a world has all the characteristics of independence and self-government. That is to say that they enjoyed all the indices of an independent state-social, political, economic, and cultural etc. Conversely, with the European and Western incursion into the heart of Africa, things changed for the worst as the West anxious to provide cheap labour for its industrial breakthrough and plantations and equally believing the black man to be best adapted for such an undertaking, characterized Africans as primitive and uncivilized. J. Obi Oguejiofor saw clearly the situation as he avers:

It is not that the continent was a pristine paradise, but rather that the actual situation was worsened by these interventions. Thus whether he was in the continent or working in the plantations of the new world from this condition was no longer in position to control his destiny or to stand shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the world with which he was forced into increased contact,"¹

The Western superpowers hiding under the pretext of civilizing the uncivilized' began a mission of conquest and slavery which lasted for decades. As slavery became less fashionable they bounced back with colonization and in the present time Africans are still struggling to be free from neo-colonialism and globalism.

African - American slaves having been freed as a result of the abolition of slave trade but yet confronted with stark racial discrimination was forced to ask themselves the fundamental question, who am I? I believe it was the posing of such questions that spurred the forerunners of pan-Africanism who were bent on defining themselves as Africans and as a unique people equally created in the image and likeness of God.

Edward Wilmot Blyden is one of such forerunners and in fact "He should be considered one of the great forerunners of Pan African thought and African Islamism"², He was reckoned to have published fifteen of his articles and essay under the title, Christianity, Islam and the Negro race.

This research is going to dwell more on his philosophy of "African identity" and lucidly expose it as far as possible. The exposition will be carried out under five headings, (1) Introduction, (2) The question of African Identity (3) Blyden's view on African Identity (4) Critical evaluation and (5) conclusion.

THE QUESTION OF AFRICAN IDENTITY

The Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary defined identity as who or what somebody/ something is."³ The same dictionary defined an African as "a native of Africa, especially a black person"⁴ the above definition may be ordinarily correct; however they are laden with inadequacy when placed on a philosophical scale.

Philosophy in all its analytical and critical sojourning is aimed at giving meaning to human existence and thereby helps man realize more fully his existence. One of the ways through which the above goal is realized is the objective analysis of the problem of human existence. The problem of "African identity" has ever been a perennial problem and topical issue in African philosophy.

Consequently Frantz Fanon was reputed to have posited that the African discovered the need to talk about his personhood only when confronted by the Western gaze that regarded him as nothing. C.B. Okolo corroborating the above view has this to say:

However since his independence, the African is increasingly emerging from years of cultural slumber in his quest for full status as a subject. He ceaselessly makes manifest efforts to be conscious of himself as an African and to fight decisively those causes which alienate him from self and self-world.⁵

Philosophically, identity goes beyond who or what somebody is and points to the intrinsic worth of somebody or something. To talk of a person's identity is to question the quidity or essence of his being. The question of; who is an African? Is equally as controversial as there are philosophers. Even among African Philosophers, the question; who exactly qualifies as 'an African'? has come to stay. C.B. Okolo while acknowledging the role of African philosophy in recent times as having necessitated the serious search by Africans for who they are in concrete life, that is, in his cultural characteristics and identity as an African, observed; "For many scholars, to speak of African philosophy is to discern clearly two distinct questions, namely, what specific African thoughts qualify as 'philosophy'?; and, who exactly qualifies as 'an African'?"⁶,

Conclusively, African identity is all about the intrinsic or fundamental characteristics that identifies Someone as African. Thus, the question of African identity touches the core of African humanity as J. Obi Oguejiofor reasoned that Western philosophy has surreptitiously assumed a honorific connotation and thereby said;" it is backed by the conclusion by stealth that the African must have a philosophy if he is to be human"⁷

BLYDEN'S AFRICAN IDENTITY

Edward W. Blyden's thought in all its stages according to an Internet source is "centered around the idea of race, race-pride, love of the fatherland (Africa) and belief in a brilliant African renaissance"⁸, However it will be germane at this juncture to posit the fact that Blyden arrived Liberia to serve the Pan-Negroist cause, his frame of mind fully expressing Christian Abolitionism. Based on the above mindset he preached that following the dictates of providence, Negritia or "Ethiopia shall soon, stretche out her hands unto God"⁹ and will be reborn. In fact he considered slavery to be in the divine plan of God and through the new world slavery experience, 'the sons of Ham' could absorb Christianity in order to effect the regeneration of the African continent. The Christian abolitionist imprint in him equally made him committed to the reunification of black people all over the world.

Unfortunately both Abolitionism and Pan-Negroism provide a view of Africa from a position outside of Africa, thus positioning Africa and Africans within the grand, originally European or new world, dichotomies, namely civilized-primitive and black-white respectively. The early Christian pan-Negroist, such as Blyden and Crummell, made a peculiar combination of Abolitionism and Pan-negroism by applying the civilized-primitive dichotomy within the black race, namely between the New world "exiled brethren" "trained for the work of rebuilding waste place under severe discipline and hard bondage"¹⁰ (i.e. the civilized) and the indigenous Africans who had to be "raised from the slumber of ages and rescued from a stagnant barbarism"¹¹ (i.e., the primitive).

Interestingly, Blyden after a first-hand knowledge of African life and cultures corrected his negative idea of African culture and gradually distanced himself from almost every aspect of the Christian Abolitionist discourse. As a later development he held that African culture should be protected against alien influence contrary to Christian abolitionist idea that "savage African culture should be replaced by christianity"¹²

Blyden in his elucidation treaded the path of history as he avers:

Africa is no vast island, separated by an immense ocean from other positions of the globe and cut off through the ages from the men who have made and influenced the destinies of mankind, she has been closely connected, both as source and nourisher, with some of the most potent influences which have affected for good the history of the world.¹³

Edward Blyden was a very vociferous race man, and studied the great achievements of Africans in an attempt to dispel the racist myths about Africa and Africans. "He held the view that every race is a natural unit, having its own home' continent, character and mission"¹⁴, Thus he strongly believed that each black man should strive to project himself as a distinctive African personality. While intellectually immersing himself completely in African life and custom he had this to say:

Their peculiarities of complexion and hair were as well known to the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, as they are to the American people today. And when they spoke of the Ethiopians, they meant the ancestors of the black-skinned and woolly-haired people...¹⁵

Blyden believed religiously in the uniqueness of all races nay the African race and therefore, for him, 'pride of race' was natural and providential. The great challenge for the self conscious 'Negro' becomes to bring out, discover and develop this specifically African' mode in all aspects of life. It was based on the above principles that he was quoted as saying; "Be yourselves... if you surrender your personality, you have nothing left to give the world"¹⁶ and that the African must advance by the methods of his own. He must possess a power distinct from the European,¹⁷.

Blyden elucidated that the Europeans. in spite of their assumed superiority of learning and understanding are ignorant of the black man and "while every effort is made to explore and describe the country, very little attempt is made to study the man of Africa"¹⁸, Many travelers to Africa, he observed belonging to all the principal nations in a greater or less degree rather indulge in strains of disparagement of the man and he concluded that "the European world is, as yet, only in the infancy of its studies in African psychology"¹⁹ Pieter Boele van Hensbroek described Blyden's development as constituting a long journey from abolitionist cultural imperialism to cultural nationalism, from a view of Africa as still having to acquire everything to the view that Africa, in principle has everything already, from an evolutionary discourse to an essentialist discourse, from a standard narrative of an outsider preaching to Africans to civilize and christianize, to a standard narrative of an African for outsiders. Blyden thus refuted the western mindset when he observed;

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. No amount of training or culture will make the Negro European; no lack of training or deficiency of culture will make the European Negro.²⁰

The indigenous African needs to be surrounded by influences from abroad in order not to change his nature but that he may improve his capacity and Blyden sees hereditary qualities as fundamental and not to be replaced by human agencies, but to be assisted and improved. He believed without reservation that:

In the music of the universe each shall give a different sound, but necessary to the grand symphony. There are several sounds not yet brought out and the feeblest of all is that hitherto produced by the Negro; but only he can furnish it. And when he does furnish it in its fullness and perfection, it will be welcomed with delight by the world,²¹

To drive home his fundamental thesis Blyden anchored on the African physical features, religiosity and hospitality among other unique characteristics. Africans for him has unique complexion as quoted earlier in this write-up and religion is of universal practice in Africa as according to him "... there is not, I say, a single tribe which does not stretch out its hands to the Great creator"²² and "there is no ethics or agnostics among them"²³, On African hospitality, service and community he elucidated:

And if the belief in common creator and father of mankind is illustrated in the bearing we maintain towards our neighbour, if our faith is seen in our world, if we prove that we love God, whom we have not seen, by loving our neighbour whom we have seen, by respecting his rights, even though he may not belong to our clan, tribe or race, then I must say, and it will not be generally disputed, that more proofs are furnished among the natives of interior Africa of their belief in a common fatherhood of a personal God by their hospitable and considerate treatment of foreigners and strangers than are to be seen in many a civilized and Christian community.²⁴

Blyden argued vehemently for a deeply rooted African identity and believed the African needed only to follow his natural instinct and to reaffirm his own values in order to regain his ancient sense of dignity and once again make his unique contribution to world culture.

Blyden being a citizen of Liberia bemoaned its unfortunate situation where the ruling elite whom are mostly America- Liberians chose to identify with the culture of their former slave masters and all their policies were planned to benefit the "repatriated" Negroes against the aboriginal Africans. He described such as paternalistic and stressed that "our relation to the aborigines is no mere commercial relation like that generally of the Europeans who reside upon the coast; ours is a fraternal relation"²⁵, He developed what he called "Three needs of Liberia" as Emancipation, illumination and Harmonization and thus encapsulated in these 'three Needs' was the idea of the existence of a distinct African personality with its own identity and values, capabilities and accomplishment, history and promise for the future. Standing on the above view he hoped that Liberia would solve its problems of development through intercourse with the tribes of the interior.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

Edward Blyden no doubt influenced and equally spurred his contemporaries and present-day African thinkers on the idea of African renaissance nay African identity. However, apparent flaws and inconsistencies can objectively be traced in his philosophy. Blyden was once quoted as saying: "we must cultivate pride of race [...]; we must have faith in the Negro race"²⁶, What nature should this "pride of race" be? Does it imply taking anything African as reasonable? As he defended traditional institutions like polygamy?

A consistent elaboration of his philosophy of racial cultural difference implied the idea that Africans should leave politics to the race that excels in it, namely the Europeans. This was implied in the following comment:

Thus, Ethiopia and Ethiopians, having always served, will continue to serve, the world, The Negro is, at the moment, the opposite of the Anglo-Saxon. Those everywhere serve the world; These everywhere govern the world The one serves mankind by ruling; the other serves mankind by serving. The one wears the crown and wields the scepter; the other bears the stripes and carries the cross,²⁷

The above comment to me constitutes one of the fundamental flaws of his African identity. This is because it implies that the African is doomed for eternal servitude while the European is blessed with eternal superiority and leadership. The question is, does the above comment not overtly approve the paternalistic posture of the Europeans? How can we reconcile the above statement with Blyden's forceful positions on such issues as African church, an African curriculum, an African personality, history and high culture as well as his ideas on race pride and non-acculturation? Who will then lead such institutions? Not the Africans of course since they are meant to be servants. Yet the Westerners whom are crowned to rule cannot come to man such institutions since we intend to make them uniquely African. So where do we go from here?

Blyden equally anchoring on the leadership superiority of the West welcomed colonialism in the speech he gave in 1903 at a banquet in his honour with the following words:

Our country (Africa) has been partitioned, in the order, I believe, of Divine providence, by the European powers, and I am sure that [...] this partition has been permitted for the ultimate good of the people and for the benefit of humanity generally,²⁸

What criteria did Blyden use in arriving at the conclusion that the European has a special endowment for leadership and the African that of servitude? How did he arrive at a providential approval of colonialism? Couldn't the Europeans equally have improved the lot of the Africans without partitioning their lands and colonizing the supposed "uncivilized"? History has proven them wrong based on their ulterior motives for partitioning Africa.

Colonization has done more harm than good to the African, socially, psychologically, economically, and otherwise. Blyden will today agree with me that the unholy description of Africa as a war ravaged continent was necessitated by a colonization, where Africans were never consulted and merged into unholy and incompatible alliances or unions mostly based on economic interest.

Unfortunately too, Blyden advocated selective emigration perhaps biased by the current ethnological studies in Europe and America. He deemed that the idea of a people depended largely upon blood and described mixed blooded peoples as Malignant progeny' of 'Mulattoes'.

The question is; if those mixed blood were African mixed bloods, whose fault? Theirs or their parents? Is Blyden not going back in favour of racism which he suffered in the hands of white Americans?

Worthy to note is his condemnation of Christianity which he described as having a disruptive and deleterious influence on the African mind. Rather he considered Islam more appropriate to the basic African lifestyle. However Islam may seem enticing maybe because it allows the African room to still practice his traditional religion, it still sounds harsh and hasty to conclude that there is more goodies in store for the African in Islam than in Christianity. I am more inclined to assert that Christianity based on its antecedents in Africa has been more enriching to the African than Islam.

These questions raised and many more stand to question Blyden's African identity principles.

Conclusion

The claim of Edward Wilmot Blyden to the esteem and regard of thoughtful Africans rests not so much on the specific work he did for any particular group within the African race, but rather on his broader contribution to the race as a whole.²⁹

This observation by Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford speaks volumes about the significance of this great African Pan-Africanist, who is widely regarded as a precursor of Negritude and of the idea of anti-racist racism in the twentieth century. His works are therefore considered universal in scope, addressing both the African race and the broader "race problem."

A work dedicated to Blyden summarizes his intellectual project as an effort sustained over more than a quarter of a century to reveal the African to himself, to direct his attention to original ideas concerning his place in the global order, to define his role among the races of the world, and, most importantly, to restore his sense of self-respect.³⁰ Consequently, any right-thinking African ought to appreciate the foundational framework Blyden established for future African thinkers. Despite numerous challenges and opposition from some of his contemporaries, he consistently advocated for African personality and identity. He articulated various dimensions of Black identity and integrated them into a coherent vision of existence, encompassing social life (African communalism), religious life, and psychological disposition (the African personality).

Blyden further argued that Africans possess a distinct mode of being rooted in deep historical foundations, tracing African cultural traditions back to classical Egyptian civilization.

In conclusion, his discourse on identity provides a normative framework, as he regarded the history of Black people as an expression of a divine and benevolent plan. In this view, humanity consists of different races, each endowed with unique qualities and a distinct role in world history.

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