

[Barnes on Odamtten, 'Edward W. Blyden's Intellectual Transformations: Afropolitanism, Pan-Africanism, Islam, and the Indigenous West African Church'](#)

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Harry N. K. Odamtten. *Edward W. Blyden's Intellectual Transformations: Afropolitanism, Pan-Africanism, Islam, and the Indigenous West African Church.* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019. 292 pp. \$49.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61186-320-8.

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Edward W. Blyden's Intellectual Transformations provides a book-length investigation of Edward Blyden's intellectual impact on diasporic African thought since the eighteenth century. The book is not an intellectual biography, though some effort is made to situate Blyden in his temporal and cultural milieu. The book does not offer any systematic examination of Blyden's ideas, at least not of Blyden's ideas from the point of view of how those ideas fit together according to European (Eurocentric) humanistic traditions. The book, in this last regard, recalls postmodernism as it revolutionized literary discourse towards the end of the twentieth century. Rather, *Edward W. Blyden's Intellectual Transformations* aspires to serve as a primer for an African diasporic intellectual consciousness that the author, Harry N. K. Odamtten, perceives to be in the process of maturing. Odamtten hopes to make clear for sharers in this consciousness, whom he labels "Afropolitans," or African public intellectuals who "utilize Afro-positivist discourse" (p. xii), the centrality of Blyden's ideas in most of their shared convictions. The main thrust of the book is to demonstrate Blyden's role in thinking past the various intellectual traps and blind alleys into which Afro-pessimism has historically guided the diasporic African mind. While Odamtten uses the term on a number of occasions, he never actually provides a definition of Afro-pessimism. In general, the term seems to be meant to stand for all the dismissive, perhaps racially inspired notions about Africa written by Europeans over the course of time and potentially read by peoples of African descent. Blyden is depicted, somewhat anachronistically, as having grasped all of these notions, dating backward to the first African reactions to encounters between Europeans and Africans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and dating forward to intellectual encounters between diasporic Africans and cosmopolitans here in the postcolonial world of the early twenty-first century. "Afropolitans" as defined by Odamtten, are a group that contains earlier diasporic African thinkers like the German-trained eighteenth-century African scholar Anton W. Amo and the former slave and British abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, but also all twenty-first-century hip hop artists and disc jockeys who promote Afro-positivism. One of the more intriguing sets of thinkers that Odamtten includes in this group are "plantation intellectuals," by which he had in mind the leaders of African slave revolts across the centuries, across the New World. Rather provocatively, Odamtten posits first that all these black folks have possessed the same collective consciousness; second, that Blyden gave this

consciousness its firmest intellectual footing; and third, that Afro-positivist thinking needs to be understood to have reached critical mass and experienced a qualitative transformation in the mind of Edward W. Blyden.

Key to Blyden's impact was his notion of the "African personality," which was not a specific personality type but a perspective on the world that expands outward from the local circumstances around a diasporic African thinker to the global issues about which a diasporic African thinker cogitates. This process of what Odamtten calls "glocalization" was perfected by Blyden and constituted his gift both to the Afropublicans who struggled towards the notion before him, and the Afropublicans who, since Blyden's time, have used the process to rebut articulations of Afro-pessimism. *Edward W. Blyden's Intellectual Transformations* supplies an examination of the "glocalization" experiences Blyden personally underwent from the various locations in which he began his various investigations of the "African personality." The book talks about the "ethnoscapes" that shaped Blyden's consciousness as a child. Odamtten identifies three, starting with Blyden's claimed Igbo ancestry, going through his Danish West Indian childhood and ending up with the affinity with Jews that Blyden claimed for himself and all other Afro-positivists. Odamtten then writes about the role of Islam in freeing Blyden from the biases of his Christian upbringing. He concludes with a discussion of how Blyden shaped West African Ethiopianism in ways that remain relevant for Afro-positivist thought.

As Odamtten observes at one point, "a nonlinear historical materialist approach to Blyden's work is imperative to understanding and providing increased clarity to the ethnogenetic processes and conditions that shaped his Afropublican status" (p. 112). There is a good deal of counterfactual speculation in this book. For this reason, historians, biographers, and philosophers operating within the European academic tradition will perhaps find Odamtten's work an exasperating read. Blyden drew intellectual recognition to himself in part because of his mastery of the Renaissance humanist tradition of empiricism. No person of African descent before, and perhaps only W. E. B. Du Bois since, displayed such an erudite command of the methods of humanist discourse. There is some irony then, in Odamtten's use of the methods that harken back to scholastic Aristotelianism to make his case about Blyden. Odamtten eschews empiricism in this work. He spends a lot of time, in fact, chastising scholars who have attempted to approach Blyden from an empiricist perspective. Odamtten builds his argument instead through syllogistic reasoning, suggesting, for example that the Igbo ancestry that Blyden projected upon the African American churchman Bishop Henry McNeal Turner provides a clue to Blyden's own Igbo heritage, and that one proof of the veracity of Blyden's claim to Jewish ancestry is the fact that the surname Blyden may have a Hebrew root. Particularly unsuited to this type of analysis are assessments of Blyden's misogyny and antipathy to peoples of mixed racial descent, which Odamtten explains together as an outcome of Blyden's bad marriage to a woman of mixed racial heritage.

Edward W. Blyden's Intellectual Transformations is not a work aimed at the Western academy, however. Blyden's most famous work was the anthology of his articles he collected and published in 1887 as *Christianity, Islam and the Negro*. Blyden advertised the work in West African newspapers as a guide for young Africans looking for ways to deal with Europeans. Odamtten would have his work read in much the same way by the twenty-first-century successors to Blyden's nineteenth-century audience. In a brief epilogue, Odamtten talks about an international Afropolitan, as opposed to cosmopolitan movement, made up mostly of professional diasporic African people like himself.

Odamtten wants members of this movement to embrace Blyden as the ancestor of their tribe.

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