

BOOK REVIEW

Harry N. K. Odamtten. *Edward W. Blyden's Intellectual Transformations: Afropublicanism, Pan-Africanism, Islam, and the Indigenous West African Church*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019. xxv + 272 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index \$49.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1611863208.

Harry N. K. Odamtten's intellectual biography of Edward Blyden is a welcome addition to the historiography of the Black Atlantic. Odamtten, an associate professor of African and Atlantic history at Santa Clara University, presents a multi-layered argument focused on the scholarly, institutional, and activist legacy of Blyden. To summarize Odamtten's argument, Edward Blyden was the progenitor of the systematic study of Islam in West Africa; he was a nineteenth-century "Afropublican" and the father of West African Ethiopianism. All of these, according to Odamtten, derived from Blyden's African experiences and his immersion in West African societies. From this argument, Odamtten attempts to demonstrate the importance of West African culture and thought to the Black Atlantic World, and in this he is quite successful.


Odamtten's employment of concepts such as Afropublicanism and Afro-positivism are critical to understanding the general argument of the book. Odamtten coined Afropublican himself, but he drew insight from the late sociologist Ruth Hamilton's concept of Global Africans, and the historian Michael Gomez's idea of diasporic African. Odamtten defines Afropublican as "a portmanteau to describe African public intellectuals who utilize an Afro-positivist discourse and whose scholarly engagement with provincial, cosmopolitan, and global public spheres is undertaken from an African perspective" (xii). Odamtten borrowed historian Gregory Mann's description of Afro-positivist discourse. Mann described the concept as scholarship that presents African societies as they are, based upon empirical research conducted with ethical care. Odamtten consistently evinces these concepts in Blyden's published works and speeches.

In writing this intellectual biography, Odamtten has divided the book according to themes. In unravelling the themes of the book chronologically Odamtten identifies specific turning points in Blyden's intellectual life that led to transformations in his thinking. For example, Odamtten identifies

Blyden as an Ethiopianist. Generally, Ethiopianism was an Afro-Protestant belief that God had allowed African enslavement in the Americas so that they would become Christians and “civilized” and then return to Africa to Christianize and civilize other Africans. According to Odamtten, Blyden held this belief of Ethiopianism upon emigrating to Liberia in 1851. Odamtten argues successfully that Blyden’s immersion in and study of West African societies shifted his thought away from the civilizing aspect of Ethiopianism. This change of thought is evident in Blyden’s *African Life and Customs* (1908).

Odamtten makes a critical observation regarding West African Ethiopianism, of which he argues Blyden was the progenitor. Odamtten describes West African Ethiopianism as the twentieth-century movement by West African church leaders to establish their own churches steeped in West African cultures. Odamtten correctly states that scholars have considered William Wade Harris (known as Prophet Harris) as the founder of this movement in West Africa in 1913. But Odamtten argues that Blyden called for the indigenization of West African churches owing to his own study of Islam in West Africa, which resulted in his most famous book, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1887). This was years before Prophet Harris’s movement; therefore, Odamtten concludes that Prophet Harris was a successor to Blyden’s own beliefs. According to Odamtten, Blyden concluded that Africans made Islam their own; in other words, they Africanized Islam. That being the case, Odamtten explains that Blyden believed that West African Christians should do the same. Unlike Islam, Christianity from the West had done harm to West African cultures. One weakness in Odamtten’s discussion is that he failed to contextualize Christianity in the broadest of senses. Historians of African Christianity have argued that Africans “localized” Christianity in Egypt, Axum, and other regions during the first few centuries of Christian presence on the continent. This is the same argument that Blyden posed regarding Islam in West Africa. It appears that Blyden was contesting Missionary Christianity with its Western cultural trappings, not Christianity in and of itself. Yet Odamtten’s conclusion is clear: Blyden deserves the credit for innovating West African Ethiopianism.

In *Edward Blyden’s Intellectual Transformations*, Harry Odamtten has re-affirmed Edward Blyden’s vital place in intellectualizing Pan-Africanism. Further, Odamtten advances the idea that Blyden centered West Africa in his Pan-Africanist and Afro-positivist discourse. Owing to this, this book is a fine contribution to the historiography of the Black Atlantic and nineteenth-century West Africa. Finally, this work will help scholars of both Africa and the African Diaspora to re-conceptualize West Africa as a region of intellectual importance during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sparking new research into Blyden and other West African intellectuals of the period.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Adi, Hakim. 2000. "Pan-Africanism and West African Nationalism in Britain." *African Studies Review* 43 (1): 69–82. doi:10.2307/524721.
- Eluwa, G. I. C. 1971. "Background to the Emergence of the National Congress of British West Africa." *African Studies Review* 14 (2): 205–18. doi:10.2307/523823.
- Savishinsky, Neil J. 1994. "Rastafari in the Promised Land: The Spread of a Jamaican Socioreligious Movement Among the Youth of West Africa." *African Studies Review* 37 (3): 19–50. doi:10.2307/524901.