

Foreword to *The Origins of Modern African Thought*
By Robert W. July, pp. i-xi; originally published, 1967;
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By
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For the better part of two centuries, racial domination has been the central concern of African social thought. Other questions, among them national identity, the role of chieftaincy, representation, justice, and constitutional design, have often been defined in relation to preoccupations with racial and colonial forms of domination. During the colonial era, a few African thinkers, notably Edward Wilmot Blyden, Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, interpreted Africa for intellectuals throughout the world. Many other thinkers of analytical or philosophical merit were scarcely noted by intellectuals outside of their own countries and neighboring lands where they lived and worked. Most of those locally significant thinkers have now disappeared from the recorded history of ideas. So it is that the discovery and elucidation of modern social and political thought in Africa poses a formidable challenge to scholars in the field of intellectual history.

Robert W. July took up that challenge in the early 1960s while he was a scholar in residence at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. By then, the optimism and euphoria of late colonial times, particularly in British West Africa, had begun to fade into the gathering gloom of postcolonial disillusionment. Meanwhile, on campus, inspirational historians associated with the renowned Ibadan school of African history taught a new generation of scholars to place African, rather than colonial, goals and values at the center of

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their thought and research.² July did not share the methodological preoccupation of the Ibadan school with oral history and its documentation. His own search for the origins of modern African thought was conducted in archives and libraries without recourse to oral evidence. Yet the roster of African thinkers whose works are examined in this book include three historians of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose scholarship “anticipated to a remarkable degree those present-day students of Africa’s new history” (p. 277). And July’s attempt to view “the intrusion of the West as completely as I could through the eyes of those on whom it fell” (p. 17) is genuinely Afrocentric and largely accounts for the enduring influence of this pioneering work.

Reading *The Origins* shortly after its publication, I was reminded of a celebrated study of American social and political thought by Vernon Louis Parrington, published in 1927 and entitled *Main Currents in American Thought*. Many of us who studied the history of political ideas in mid-century America were indebted to Parrington for his illuminating exposition of American thinking over a period of three hundred years, from the early seventeenth century until the early twentieth. Parrington described his three volume work as “a field of American letters which has been pretty largely neglected.”³ In private conversation, July has confirmed the influence of Parrington’s achievement on his own plan for a history of African thought. In academe, Parrington was a professor of literature with a partiality for “the claims of aesthetics.”⁴ July’s similar penchant for the study of cultural history reached fruition twenty years after publication of *The Origins* in a work devoted to the contributions of artists, artistic performers, dramatists, educators, musicians, and the literary estate to the movement for independence in Africa.⁵ Like Parrington in America, July in postcolonial West Africa contemplated a field of letters that had been “largely neglected” by scholars. To this day, there is no standard history of Af-

² J. F. Ade. Ajayi, “The Ibadan School of History,” in Toyin Falola, ed., *Tradition and Change in Africa: The Essays of J. F. Ade. Ajayi* (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2000), pp. 377-388.

³ Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930), Vol. I, p. i.

⁴ E. B. Eby, “Vernon Louis Parrington,” in *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. vii.

⁵ Robert W. July, *An African Voice: The Role of the Humanities in African Independence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987).

rican thought comparable to *The Origins* in its combination of historical depth and transcolonial breadth within a multi-state region of Africa.⁶

The thinkers considered in this book were either born in sub-Saharan West Africa or resided there as immigrants. The countries concerned extend from Senegal in the west to Cameroon in the east. The predominant colonial powers were Britain and France; Germany was evicted from its colonies (Cameroon and Togo) as a result of its defeat in World War I; Portugal ruled a small Atlantic coastal and island colony, while Spain colonized an island cluster in the Gulf of Guinea. July acknowledges that even within this sub-region of Africa, his study does not encompass African thought comprehensively. He is specifically concerned with Africa's intellectual response to social forces unleashed by the impact of Western imperialism and its accompaniment of Western thought. While his conception of Western thought includes ideas "emanating from America as well as from Europe" (p. 17), he does not examine the influence of ideas introduced by African-Americans in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an acknowledged omission that he thought he would address in a subsequent work. Furthermore, his account of modern ideas in West Africa does not include Islamic thought, a subject of crucial importance that intellectual historians have scarcely begun to compare with the body of ideas attributable to Africa's relationship with Europe and America.

In British and French West Africa there were relatively few European settlers by comparison with those countries of northern, eastern, and southern Africa, where many Europeans settled permanently. Moreover, from the latter nineteenth century onward, there was a growing tendency in the British and French West African colonies to extend rights of citizenship to African people. In the aftermath of four centuries during which millions of African slaves were transported to American shores, colonial rule in West Africa was, on the whole, less oppressive than it proved to be in the settler-colonies where Africans were systematically dispossessed of their lands. By the late colonial era, the is-

⁶ Claude Wauthier's important study, *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*, trans. Shirley Kay (London: Pall Mall, 1966), and *ibid.*, 2nd ed., trans. Clive Wake (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1979) is organized thematically by contrast with the individual thinker format to which July adheres consistently. In addition to these two comparable books, there are several edited compilations of works by African social and political thinkers, notably J. Ayodele Langely, *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa 1856-1970: Documents on Modern African Political Thought from Colonial Times to the Present* (London: Collings, 1979); and Gideon-Cyrus M. Mutiso and S. W. Rohio, *Readings in African Political Thought* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

sue of racial domination in West Africa, despite its great importance, was balanced more evenly by other political and social issues than had been the case in countries where racial despotism defined the system of government until either the onset of independence, as in Kenya, Angola, and Mozambique, or racial emancipation, as in Rhodesia and South Africa. Hence there was a well-established tradition of non-racial political and social thought in West Africa that was unrivalled elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. More precisely, in West African thought, racial emancipatory themes have shared their pride of place with anti-colonial motifs; similarly, the rights of persons and citizens have complemented claims by precolonial nations to redress their historic rights. This aspect of West African thought may have weakened the impact of *The Origins* on African studies in the United States of America where nationalist values superceded preoccupations with problems of representative democracy until the final decade of the twentieth century.

There is yet another aspect of African thought that has been underappreciated in the United States; it is the durability of sentiments that sustain special relationships with the former colonial powers. Americans often appear to be oblivious of these profound sentiments and binding ties, manifest in a myriad of functional relationships, e.g., the learned professions, educational norms and methods, parliamentary etiquette, military traditions, commercial practices, religious beliefs, literary and linguistic commonalities, manners, styles, habits and cuisine. Africans rarely explain these matters to their American friends and associates, who frequently lack appreciation for the complexity and cosmopolitan sophistication of African thinking. These qualities of modern African thought are displayed in every chapter of *The Origins*.

The life histories of most of the thinkers whose ideas grace these pages are every bit as remarkable as their intellectual and literary achievements. One marvels at the heroism, fortitude, linguistic competence, literary merit, objectivity, and analytical skill of the eighteenth-century emancipated slaves, Ottobah Cuoango and Olaudah Equiano, portrayed with riveting acuity in this book. Their immediate successors in the world of West African ideas were associated with communities in the Atlantic coastal countries of Senegal, under French rule, Sierra Leone, a British dependency, and Liberia, created by free persons of African descent from the United States. In Sierra Leone, “the Province of Freedom” (p. 49) as it was called by Granville Sharp, its crusading English founder, nur-

tured successive generations of modernizing intellectuals who, in turn, exerted a powerful transforming influence throughout British West Africa. For Senegalese, the vaunted French “civilizing mission” proclaimed by the French empires, monarchies, and republics of the nineteenth century, implied paternalistic rule facilitated by an intermediary class of mixed African and European descent. As for Liberia, home to several important thinkers who lectured and wrote creatively about racial questions, the settler minority of African descent never came to grips with the problem created by its oligarchic rule of the country. In that respect, among others, the intellectual histories of Liberia and Sierra Leone are similar despite their different statuses until 1962, one an independent republic, the other a British colony.

Among those nineteenth century African thinkers who bequeathed to posterity oeuvres in written form, two individuals achieved towering stature, namely Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Edward Wilmot Blyden. Crowther, a recaptive (one who was freed from captivity by the British navy and returned to Africa) of Nigerian Yoruba descent became an Anglican bishop in charge of missions in the Niger Delta, far inland along the Niger River, and other places in Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Liberia, and The Gambia. He made an extraordinary contribution to the creation of modern, particularly but not only religious, institutions despite the overbearing prejudice against Africans that he encountered within the church hierarchy itself.⁷ His humility as a servant of his people as well as the Anglican Church is legendary. As July remarks, he responded to chastisement by prejudiced European associates by offering to undertake the arduous task of founding new mission stations at the age of eighty (p. 194).

Like Crowther, Blyden believed ardently in the modernization of African societies. But his commitment to the principle of racial self-reliance profoundly influenced the course of African, and African-American, nationalism for generations to come. Born of free and literate African parents in the Danish (now American) island of St. Thomas, Blyden emigrated to newly independent Liberia in 1850, at the age of eighteen. He soon became a Presbyterian minister and a professor of classics at Liberia College, which he later served as president. His governmental service in Liberia included office as Secre-

⁷ J. F. Ade. Ajayi, “Bishop Crowther: A Patriot to the Core,” and “Native Agency in Nineteenth Century West Africa,” in Falola, ed., pp. 85-127; Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-91: the Making of a New Elite* (London: Longman, 1965).

tary of State, Ambassador to Britain, and Minister Plenipotentiary to Britain and France. He also held official positions relating to the education of Muslims in the British colonies of Sierra Leone and Lagos. Yet his institutional achievements were far less significant than his contribution as a theorist of racial nationalism. He believed that racial sentiments had become the main motivating forces in modern history; that every race has been endowed by the creator with its special potential for achievement; and that the African race was superior to others in matters of spirituality and religion. "Africa," he declared, "may yet prove to be the spiritual conservatory of the world."⁸

As a practical matter, however, Blyden accepted the necessity of cooperation with British and French imperial rule in Africa. He understood that no force on earth could prevent the impending colonial occupation of Africa and he did not regret the tide of history. On the contrary, he viewed political imperialism with favor as a necessary stage of historical development which could, if wisely conducted, have highly beneficial effects for the people of Africa. In that regard, he shared the pro-imperialist sentiments of most progressive and worldly intellectuals of his time, including Marx, Engels, and the younger Lenin. But Blyden was not about to clamber aboard the European bandwagon. The unflinching mark of serious thought is an ability to perceive the divergent implications of related ideas that resemble one another in important respects. Blyden knew and warned that colonial domination would be justified on the despicable ground that African cultural values were inherently inferior to those of Europe. In defense of African values, he constructed a shield of cultural nationalism to repulse the assault of European cultural imperialism. By word and example, he stood for intimate political collaboration with the imperial overlord without ever conceding a cultural strongpoint.⁹

Throughout his life, Blyden was an ardent "black Zionist," ever promoting the return of diaspora Africans to the continent of their origin. In his view, a black person in a white country would always be culturally enslaved. He ridiculed the arrogance of Europeans who sought to educate Africans in accordance with Western standards and values; that kind of education, he warned, would only stunt the growth of African genius and

⁸ Edward W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, 2nd ed., (London: W. B. Whittingham, 1888), p. 143.

⁹ This paragraph is derived, almost verbatim from Richard L. Sklar, "The Colonial Imprint on African Political Thought," in Gwendolen M. Carter and Patrick O'Meara, eds., *African Independence: The First Twenty-Five Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.), p. 3.

thereby diminish Africa's contribution to human civilization. Viewing the colonial era as a relatively brief transitional phase, he particularly favored the British colonial principle of indirect rule because it appeared to minimize the degree of colonial intrusion into African social institutions. Toward the end of his life, Blyden was estranged from many younger nationalists, whom he often criticized for what he took to be premature challenges to European rule. Yet his views and influence were lauded by his many disciples, among them the Gold Coast nationalist, Joseph E. Casely Hayford, whose judgement has been regarded favorably by later thinkers: "The work of Edward W. Blyden is universal, covering the entire race and the entire race problem."¹⁰

Considering the breadth of Blyden's thought and knowledge, derived from multilingual scholarship (English, Spanish, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic), it is tempting to adopt Casely Hayford's perspective and classify twentieth century African thinkers as the heirs of Blyden with respect, for example, to racial exclusivity and self-reliance, black zionism, cultural nationalism, and pragmatic political conservatism. Thus, Nnamdi Azikiwe's rousing call for "mental emancipation," to rescue "mis-educated" Africans was authentically Blydenite.¹¹ In anticipation of Senghor's concept of negritude, discussed briefly in conjunction with the ideas of other mid-century nationalist thinkers in the final chapter of this book, July captions a section of his chapter on Blyden "Edward W. Blyden and the Philosophy of Negritude" (p. 212); the chapter itself is entitled "The First African Personality" in anticipation of the use of Blyden's phrase, "African Personality" by nationalist leaders of the mid-twentieth century, notably Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah at the First Conference of Independent African States in 1958.

In francophone African thought, attitudes toward colonial authority during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries revolved around the rival principles of assimilation and association. The concept of assimilation was predicated on a belief that France had produced a high culture of universal value; assimilationists taught that African people should be incorporated into the world of French civilization, where they would be equal in every respect to the people of France. In opposition to that belief, the concept of association presupposed separate cultural identities for European and African peoples as a

¹⁰ Quoted in Hollis R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832-1912* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 241.

¹¹ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Renasant Africa* (Accra: 1937), p. 135.

natural and permanent condition. France, therefore, should carry out its “civilizing mission” in Africa without the presumptions or goals of racial equality or eventual cultural identity. In Senegal, ardent assimilationists in the African and Creole communities advocated military conscription to promote their vision of one French identity for all. At issue for true believers was not racial differentiation but assimilation of Muslims who comprised an overwhelming majority of the African population.

The African demand for full citizenship, including the right to be conscripted like other French citizens, was asserted by a political movement called the “Young Senegalese” and sponsored in the French National Assembly by the first African, in the racial sense of that term, rather than Creole or European, deputy for Senegal, Blaise Diagne. In 1915 and 1916, with France at war, Diagne achieved the enactment of laws providing for conscription of African inhabitants of incorporated municipalities, and conferring citizenship on them and their descendants in perpetuity. Furthermore, Muslim Africans would henceforth be free to follow the precepts of Islamic law in personal and family matters, including the practice of polygamy. Diagne’s African constituents had “secured privileges unique within the French empire” (p. 402). Toward the end of the war Diagne was appointed Commissioner of the Republic with responsibility for military recruitment throughout French West Africa. Through equal valor in combat, he declared, France had become a country of one hundred million people. With deep patriotic conviction, Diagne became the foremost exponent of French colonial policy in public life. Eventually, he even defended the racialist and authoritarian principle of association as a necessary condition for material progress and preparation for the higher ideal of assimilation. July’s poignant chronicle of Diagne’s decline as a champion of African rights concludes appropriately with an account of his capacity for honest introspection.¹²

In British West Africa, each of four distinct territories included a Crown Colony, which had been acquired before the comprehensive partition of Africa in the 1880’s, and an expansive hinterland, known as the protectorate. In the colonies – Bathurst, Freetown and its environs, Lagos, and the Gold Coast – African inhabitants were British subjects with rights of political representation for taxpayers; in the protectorates, however, indi-

¹² At page 414, July cites a conversation with Diagne reported by his friend, the scholar and former administrator Robert L. Delavignette, in which Diagne’s awareness of his ambiguous role in later life is unburdened.

rect rule, meaning colonial government through the medium of indigenous authorities, was the main method of choice.¹³ Intellectuals clustered in the colonies; there, as elsewhere throughout the ages, renaissance thinkers debated issues that have proven to be timeless. Their intellectual formulations have been recovered repeatedly by successive generations of new thinkers unto the present century. Religious thinkers pondered the compatibility of European theologies with Africa's own cultural heritage. Educational philosophers debated the question of bilingual education in primary schools. Journalists tested the limits of freedom under authoritarian forms of government; they also considered the meaning of journalistic responsibility in their culturally plural societies. Administrative theorists assessed the legacy of indigenous political and legal institutions as well as the role of traditional authority as an instrument of government. Communitarian thinkers grappled with the issues of land ownership, rents, and property taxation. Legalists discoursed on the constitutional prerogatives of legislative councils vis-à-vis colonial administrations. Constitutional theorists compared the forms of government and examined the relationship between ethno-linguistic identities and new nationalities based on the colonial partition of Africa. Pan-African patriots revived Blyden's dream of West African political unity and created an inter-territorial forum of Anglophone intellectuals to pursue that goal. Politicians publicized these and other issues as they mobilized supporters in their quest for office. Thinkers in all of these categories come to life in the latter chapters of this book.

The dramatis personae include two bitter antagonists in colonial Lagos, namely Herbert Samuel Heelas Macaulay, known as the "father of Nigerian nationalism," and Henry Rawlinson Carr, who rose to the rank of Resident (highest administrative official) in the colony. Both of them were repatriates from Sierra Leone and persons of Yoruba ethno-linguistic origin. Macaulay, a crusading journalist, became a tribune of the indigenous people of Lagos, as distinct from that city's substantial immigrant population. His political career was based mainly on his service to the traditional king and chiefs of Lagos. He defended their claims to administer communal land and their asserted rights of recognition in the colony, similar to rights enjoyed by traditional rulers in the Nigerian

¹³ Michael Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 199-216.

protectorates. He organized their followers, who comprised a majority of the inhabitants, into a big city political machine that controlled elections to the Lagos Town Council. He was the indispensable link between the traditionalist organization of the masses and their English-speaking elected representatives. As he was a staunch defender of the rights of all Lagosians as British subjects, the chapter on his thought introduces him accurately as the consummate “liberal nationalist” of his time.

By contrast, the chapter devoted mainly to Henry Carr describes the thought of a “conservative nationalist,” one who served the colonial government as deputy to the Governor-General of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria yet envisioned the timely achievement of self government and other nationalist goals. A dedicated modernizer, Carr was repelled by demagogic politics and despised the incumbent traditional ruler as a dismal example of archaic custom. No less than Macaulay, Carr is given his due in this book. Liberals, let us remember, can be more or less conservative, more or less progressive. On the issues of his day, Carr was no less liberal than Macaulay; on certain issues, including the reform of traditional authority in Lagos, he was surely no less progressive. In his later years, Macaulay outmaneuvered his political opponents in Lagos by leading his traditionalist followers into an alliance with a new generation of militant nationalists. He died while campaigning for Nigerian national independence.

By mid-century, African thinkers had begun to grapple with questions arising from the study of international political economy. The emergence of the Soviet Union as one of two superpowers and the communist revolution in China positioned the twin theories of capitalist imperialism and socialist revolution at the forefront of intellectual discourse in Africa. The debates occasioned by these developments are indicated in July’s concluding chapter, where Senegal’s Léopold Senghor is shrewdly identified as “the philosopher of twentieth-century Africa” (p. 480) for having followed, independently and in the idiom of francophone philosophy, in the theoretical footsteps of Edward W. Blyden.

During the latter twentieth century, socialists in Africa suffered economic, intellectual, moral, and political debacles that were comparable to socialist disasters in other parts of the world. In Africa, as elsewhere, the debacle of twentieth-century socialism was due, in no small part, to an obsession with the methods of socialist revolution at the expense of individual liberty. At the outset of the twenty-first century, new thinkers have

begun to revisit the intellectual history of Africa's quest for freedom, liberty, and social progress. For that purpose, they can find reliable guidance in the pages of this masterful work.