Eyasu Berento Assefa

Chapter 5
Zär'a Yaʿəqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät: Exceptionality and Situatedness of the *Ḥatätas* in the Ethiopian Intellectual Tradition

Abstract: As its title suggests, this paper will assess the nature of the Ethiopian written intellectual tradition, the controversy over the authenticity of the *Ḥatäta Zär'a Yaʿəqob* and the *Ḥatäta Wäldä Ḥəywät*, and their philosophical significance both for Ethiopian and African philosophy and for the history of ideas in general. An examination of external religious and historical sources, as well as an assessment of the relevant scholarly literature combined with in-depth analysis of the content of the *Ḥatätas* (in the original Gəʿəz version as well as in their Amharic and English translations), reveal both the exceptionality and situatedness of the *Ḥatätas* in the Ethiopian intellectual tradition. Drawing on the meticulous work of Claude Sumner, I argue for the authenticity of the *Ḥatätas*, showing that they can be securely attributed to seventeenth-century Ethiopian authors. Although firmly anchored in the socio-cultural context and educational background of seventeenth-century Ethiopia, these authors are also freethinkers, offering critical and distinctive reflections on the religious, political, and socio-economic realities of their time. Regardless of the texts' exceptionality and the possibility of some European influence therein, one cannot deprive them of the Ethiopian soil in which they are rooted. Furthermore, the *Ḥatätas* are by no means the sole exemplars of philosophical writing in Ethiopia; they are rather gateways to the rich tradition of philosophical wisdom to be found in Ethiopian intellectual history. Apart from their contemporary interest in relation to ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, and social and political philosophy, they are pathways to the study of hidden voices found in the non-Western world.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110725810-007

1 Introduction

> On the basis of the enthusiastic reaction to the totality of the Ethiopian "philosophical" experience I believe it would be unfair to deprive the modern audience from the richness of Ethiopia's wisdom, as it would be to limit oneself to the expression of Ethiopia's original approach to rationalism.[1]

What does Sumner mean by "Ethiopia's original approach to rationalism"? To address questions like these with seemingly descriptive answers, one must, on the one hand, engage in and interrogate broad approaches in the study of the history of ideas and philosophy; but on the other hand, one must also pay attention to the specificities of the intellectual tradition under scrutiny. Careful analysis of human history and thought reveals untapped social, cultural, scientific, and philosophical documents and traditions where rigorous attempts yield discoveries of both commonalities and exceptionalities among human lived experiences.[2] Building on the insights and findings of earlier scholars, I propose to rethink, re-examine, and reclaim the ontological foundations, epistemic resources, axiological precepts, and methodological approaches and contributions to be found in Ethiopian philosophy.

Contemporary study in African philosophy (after colonialism) is marked by an aspiration for decolonisation (that is, decolonising the mind from the colonial legacy) and a soul-searching process to reveal hidden wisdom in the alcoves of different lived experiences, traditions, as well as formal and informal education of indigenous peoples.[3] As part of such a soul-searching process, Ethiopian philosophy has been a vital source of inspiration for scholars studying non-Western history of philosophy, particularly African philosophy. Among other things, the production of Gəʿəz manuscripts preserved for thousands of years has given scholars the privilege of accessing a written African literature—a rather rare case of extant original texts from pre-colonial Africa. The two original *Ḥatätas* and three translated texts considered here have attracted the attention of many scholars, in large part thanks to the Canadian scholar Claude Sumner.

As part of research in Ethiopian philosophy, this study is aimed at situating the two *Ḥatätas* in the history of ideas and the intellectual tradition of Ethiopia. Understanding the underlying characteristics of Ethiopian philosophy and intellectual history allows us to better determine the place of the *Ḥatätas*, to deal with issues of authenticity, and to ascertain the contemporary significance of the texts. In part,

1 Sumner (1985, p. 10).

2 Benedict (2019).

3 Wiredu (2004); Bekele Gutema (2004); and Eyasu Berento (2021).

this study of the two *Ḥatätas* is an invitation (to those interested in learning from Ethiopian wisdom[4]) and a call for further investigation of Ethiopian philosophy as part of the broader project of African philosophy and non-Western approaches to knowledge, truth, aesthetics and ethics, as well as political and social philosophy.

Beginning from the question, "what is the nature of Ethiopia's intellectual milieu such that it could form the foundations for philosophical treatises like the *Ḥatätas*?", we need to ask what the place of the *Ḥatätas* is in the history of philosophy in general and in African philosophy and Ethiopian Studies in particular. More specifically, what philosophical contents (metaphysico-ontological, epistemological, axiological-normative, social-political, etc.) can be extracted from them? How can we characterise their methodological approach and contextualise and integrate them into the study of the humanities and philosophy in particular?[5] How can we approach the texts in a way that transcends controversies as to whether they are forgeries or authentic and moves beyond the cultural politics of the dispute and the politicisation of knowledge more broadly?

By approaching and addressing these and related questions, one can more readily demarcate the nature of the interaction between Ethiopian philosophy and philosophy in Ethiopia, and begin to grasp the totality of philosophical phenomena in the intellectual milieu of Ethiopia. Since Sumner's voluminous contribution to Ethiopian philosophy, there has been a relative lack of interest in the *Ḥatätas* and in identifying areas of priority within the remit of scholarship on contemporary Ethiopian philosophy. Hence, it is necessary to reopen and revisit the project of Ethiopian philosophy with a different approach.

Let me focus on three alternatives (which are however not exhaustive) for approaching the aforementioned questions.

First, "Is the author dead?" Answering in the affirmative gives us the right to ignore the controversy as to the identity of the authors of the *Ḥatätas*, and enables us to focus more centrally on the texts' contents. This approach is congenial to scholars who come both from philosophical and non-philosophical backgrounds, and indeed to students from the tradition of Tewahedo Church education. We need not commit ourselves to Roland Barthes' theory of literary criticism that marginalises the place of the author in a literary work. Declaring that "[t]he Author is Dead", Barthes argues that: "[w]e know now that a text does not consist of a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various

4 For "it would be unfair to deprive the [contemporary] audience from the richness of Ethiopia's wisdom" (Sumner 1985, p. 10; cf. the epigraph above).

5 This question is enriched by Yirga Gelaw's (2017a) insightful article.

kinds of writing, no one of which is original".[6] Should we therefore forget about the issue of searching for the authors of the *Ḥatätas*, and focus on their contents and the intellectual milieus out of which they grew? Or, alternatively, is the continued search for the implicit intentions of the authors in question to initiate and sustain a discourse, that of the philosophical project on Ethiopian soil, in the way Foucault argued in his "What is an Author?"?[7] In either case, we need to gain clarity on the intellectual climate that brought the *Ḥatätas* into fruition, whether or not we take the authenticity dispute seriously.

Second, we need to ask whether the texts reveal continuity or change within the Ethiopian intellectual tradition, and indeed the extent to which they are informed by, or depart from, existing ideas concerning their place of origin and their intellectual background.

Third, one might engage in comparisons with "Western philosophy" and ask, for example, whether the texts are likely to be the outcome of the "Western mind" (as in Conti Rossini's Eurocentric position).

The first approach has been largely ignored so far; the second has been underexplored, with the exception of Sumner's classic contribution; and at least some versions of the third turn on questionable premises. Without totally denying the import of some versions of the third position, this study intentionally prefers the first and the second approaches, with the inevitable generalisations and risks of simplification they entail. This is not only because of their ambitiousness, but also because of the sheer complexity involved in tackling relevant issues in the history of ideas and philosophy in Ethiopia and the broader history of philosophy and intellectual history as such.

2 The Ethiopian Intellectual Tradition

In approaching and engaging with texts like the *Ḥatätas,* one should first acquaint oneself with their intellectual background.[8]

The vast literature on Ethiopian Studies has thus far focused on historical analysis of mainstream political events, with a focus on prominent actors. The scholarly climate is bent on emphasising events and personalities and is fraught

6 Barthes (1967).

7 Foucault in Foucault and Faubion (1998 [1969]).

8 I take an "intellectual tradition" to encompass a wide range of complex phenomena: the written and the oral, popular wisdom and personal reflections, the mythical and rational; the ethical, social, cultural, religious, and political; as well as systematically integrated wisdom and frameworks of knowledge.

with political motivations and partisan orientations that perpetrate epistemic violence against the Ethiopian intellectual tradition and popular wisdom.[9] Recent developments and contemporary scholarship in Ethiopian Studies have also focused on linguistic, religious, and cultural phenomena in particular contexts that are exposed to the methodological pitfalls of "scientism" and emotional positioning of the researcher.

With a few exceptions,[10] the history of ideas in Ethiopia remains an overlooked area of scholarship. Sumner's efforts deserve special acknowledgement in this regard. The history of ideas in Ethiopia calls for rigorous efforts to discern the patterns, the "*logos*", underlying the seemingly unstructured, "superstitious", and conventional common-sense expressions (which Donald Levine calls a "medley of expressions"[11]) as well as the praxis, the continuity within change, the foundational systemic structure underlying diverse modes of expression.

The problem might seem to lie in the difficulty of finding sufficient and relevant data. Yet Ethiopia has provided scholars with ample resources, in the form of both a rich oral tradition (that of storytelling, parables and riddles, as well as proverbs, but also the *qəne* poetic culture of creativity, symbolism, and imagery) and written literature (the huge Gəʿəz corpus but also overlooked Arabic texts in Ethiopia,[12] original works and translations of philosophical texts, and so on). Sumner's series on Oromo Wisdom Literature and Levine's *Wax and Gold*[13] are exemplary studies of oral literature in Ethiopia. The so-called "Dark Ages" in Europe is a time that typifies the "Golden Age" of the Orthodox Christian tradition, the peak of theocentric literary production but also rationalistic worldviews. It was the era, in written literature, in which numerous texts were produced not only for exclusively religious apologetics but also for the sake of astrology, medicine, philosophy, law, and related areas of inquiry.[14]

The Orthodox Christian tradition is known for its intercultural expositions, explorations, and knowledge production predicated on contextualising and translating from foreign wisdom and producing original texts. This is also true of the spe-

9 Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes (2017b) and Maimire Mennasemay (1997).

10 Here, I have in mind the exemplary work of Messay Kebede (2008), Richard Pankhurst (1990), and Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes (2017a and 2017b).

11 Levine (1972 [1965]).

12 To enrich the outcomes of studies on the history of ideas in written literature in Ethiopia, one needs to survey the philosophical elements in Arabic literature in Ethiopia.

13 Levine (1972 [1965]).

14 Äbära Ğäməbäre (2006) and Getatchew Haile (2017 = Chapter 1 in this volume).

cific Gəʿəz corpus in Ethiopia.[15] One of the problems raised by the study of the history of ideas in Ethiopia lies in figuring out the central ideas that persist over time and the individuals who had an enduring influence on subsequent generations. Certain salient issues reverberate across the cultural and historical lineages of Ethiopia. These include the idea of justice, of creationist metaphysics (rooted in Christianity, Islam, and Indigenous religious views), eternal reconciliation (with its political, social, and ecological implications), the notion of a personalist world[16] (unlike the Cartesian subjective turn and Bacon's world of things to be studied and subjugated from afar, wherein "knowledge is power"), and concepts in ethics—including virtuousness, wisdom or sagacity, courage—and the political question of "Reason of State".[17]

The search for a history of ideas in Ethiopia can benefit from demarcating what Levine characterises as "high culture", as distinct from "low culture".[18] This can help us better appreciate the uniqueness of Ethiopian modernity[19] and its place in human history.

What are the basic characteristic features of the history of ideas in Ethiopia? Its mystical aspects, to which I return below, along with its contributions to what we might call the circle of "being, living, and knowing" are its central pillars: "being" refers, for example, to what it is to be, including what it is to be human —in accordance with the dictates of nature and mystical truths (construed as the outcome of God's benevolent revelation and accessible first through his creation, second through consciousness and the contemplative mind, and finally in Himself, through the Words of God (Scriptures) as well as practical and spiritual communion with the Absolute); "living" refers, for instance, to what it is to live a virtuous life; and "knowing" tracks, *inter alia*, empiricist, rationalist, and revelatory positions. It is sometimes suggested that the Ethiopian worldview is one of theocentrism, wherein the living spirits of the dead are invited "to awaken the slumbering spirit of the living"[20] and the eternal spirit from above is called upon to

15 When one speaks of original works in Gəʿəz literature, one is of course not confined to making claims about the two *Ḫatäta*s. Besides common names like St. Yared, *abba* Baḥrəy, *abba* Mikaʾel (translator of *The Book of the Wise Philosophers* in the sixteenth century – cf. Chapter 7 in this volume, by Peter Adamson), there are the *Däqiqä Ǝsṭifanos* (cf. Chapter 9 in this volume, by Binyam Mekonnen), Emperor Zärʾa Yaʿəqob, Liqu Atsqu (d'Abbadie's famous counsellor), the *däbtära*s that accompanied Giusto Da Urbino in the nineteenth century, as well as later thinkers like Gebrehiwot Baykedagn.

16 Sumner (1978).

17 Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes (2017a, p. 269) and Haile Gebrial Dagne (2007).

18 Levine (2006).

19 Bahru Zewde (2013 [2002]) and Pankhurst (1990).

20 Pelikan (1984).

attend to the human world, revealing the truth and endowing human life with rectitude. From this perspective, the Ethiopian history of ideas is not purely secular and rational; it is also of a practical, collaborative, and religious nature, accommodating the mystical conviction that man longs to receive God's grace and that God longs to share His Holy Spirit with human beings. These characteristics suggest that the Ethiopian worldview emphasises the adoration of holistic beauty and cosmic integrity rather than the subjectivity of the individual. Sumner concludes that the Ethiopian worldview is a personalist one that characterises man as a part of nature. "The Western world is one of things, the Ethiopian world is one of persons".[21]

3 Philosophy in Ethiopia and Ethiopian Philosophy

> Philosophy always presupposes and grounds its reflexive and reflective discourse in and on the actuality of a lived historico-cultural and political milieu—a specific horizon.[22]

Analysing the place of philosophy in Ethiopia on the one hand and the place of Ethiopian philosophy in the global history of philosophy on the other can give us a clear picture of the nature of philosophy in the Ethiopian intellectual tradition. The broader cultural basis of philosophical ideas will be the primary object of scrutiny here; for "[a]ll philosophies are embedded in the culture from which they emerge and are considered to constitute a form of self-consciousness of their culture".[23]

"Philosophy in Ethiopia" here is therefore intended to characterise the reception of foreign wisdom or philosophical culture in the Ethiopian context through translation and intercultural dialogue, as well as exercises in systematic interpre-

21 Sumner (1978, p. 62). A thorough explanation of the Ethiopian worldview is beyond the scope of my discussion. Let me note a central feature, however. The Ethiopians did not see nature from the outside point of view. There is rather a strong link with natural phenomena, and man as an agent of history shapes the course of nature's movements by responding to its voices. Hence, a natural phenomenon is either to be assisted, valued intrinsically, or imitated; and through language and naming the Semitic Ethiopian evokes the social potential of individuals and groups and their place as active agents in the course of nature (Sumner 1978, pp. 9–12). The cultural rituals and instances of storytelling where animals and plants are the main characters suggest a conception of nature as a dwelling place of ancestral spirit. It is found among many Ethiopians, and reflects a strong attachment between nature and man (Horne, Mousseau, and Sosnoff 2011).

22 Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994, p. 2).

23 Bekele Gutema (2015, p. 140).

tation. Ethiopians are known in their own tradition for systematic adaptation of foreign texts in the service of religious, legal, and social functions.[24] The production of texts in the parchment *brana* manuscripts reflects an age-old practice that started with the translation of the Bible and has continued to the present day.[25] Through such a long period of literary production, the history of ideas and philosophy in Ethiopia is one characterised by hybridity and conceptual cross-fertilisation. According to Bekele Gutema, "the idea of our own pure culture not influenced by other cultures is a fiction [...]. The purity of a given culture or philosophy is fictitious so long as cultures have cross-cultural overlapping".[26] The Gəʿəz language was a medium for this kind of intertextual dialogue. Though often erroneously identified as a language and textual tradition of a solely religious character, Gəʿəz literature in fact also provides us with rich philosophical resources. As Maija Priess puts it:

> Although for many Gəʿəz might have been considered an ancient "dead" language useful only for the study of the ancient literature, within the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Church this is far from true. Gəʿəz is still the liturgical language of the church, moreover in many monasteries highly trained monks converse on matters of theology and philosophy using the Gəʿəz language. The language is taught using the centuries old methods, in what the distinguished Ethiopicist, Richard Pankhurst, has described as "one of the oldest continuous systems of learning in the world".[27]

While there is no agreed definition of Ethiopian philosophy, it is clear that it blends the spiritual and the secular, the oral and the written, as well as features of individualist reflection and collective thinking, and thereby challenges mainstream conceptualisations of philosophy as the outcome solely of individuals' reflections. Ethiopian philosophy is comprised of the thought of individual Ethiopian sages or philosophers and the shared wisdom of culturally diverse communities that have passed the test of time and often cut across received geographical boun-

24 See Levine (1974), Sumner (1985), and Messay Kebede (1999) on the art of translation of foreign texts. Levine calls the Ethiopian response to foreign influence a "creative incorporation", which is not "passive and literal borrowing" (1974, pp. 64–65). This form of contextual adaptation is not specific to literature, but is also apparent in religion, art, and architecture (Levine 1974, pp. 65–68). Sumner agrees with Levine that "Ethiopians never translate literally: they adapt, modify and, subtract. A translation therefore bears a typical Ethiopian stamp: although the nucleus of what is translated is foreign to Ethiopia the way it is assimilated, and transformed into an indigenous reality is typically Ethiopian" (1985, p. 51).

25 Four pioneering translations were produced in the sixth century: the Holy Bible, the *Fisalgʷos*, The *Book of Qərəlos*, and the *Book of Hermits.*

26 Bekele Gutema (2005, p. 207).

27 Priess (2015, p. v).

daries. It encompasses efforts to understand nature, to account for the meaning of life, and to settle social problems as well as negotiate social relations and interactions. It informs the folk wisdom that society transfers from generation to generation but also underpins the mental map that guides theory and practice in both the public and private spheres. As Sumner remarks: "Ethiopia therefore harbours both types of philosophy: oral and written, traditional and radical, sapiential and critical, popular and personal. It is the land of diverse expressions of philosophy and the birthplace of modern thought".[28]

We might distinguish between strict and broad senses of "philosophy" in Ethiopia.[29] The broad construal lies in extracting philosophical content from the practical aspects of society and its cultural artefacts, including parables, storytelling, oral literature, religious practices and rituals, folk wisdom, Gəʿəz *qəne*,[30] contextually adapted texts, and the like. In this broader sense, philosophy can be understood as "an integral part of social and political life: not as the isolated speculations of remarkable individuals, but as both an effect and a cause of the character of the various communities in which different systems flourished".[31] This broad conception of philosophical wisdom[32] helps us discern the philosophical content and patterns of order in the comprehensive life forms and social activities of Ethiopian society. Levine has proposed that "[t]he scholar's job is of course to transcend such medley of impressions and to discern the patterns of order through which such details are bound together in a living whole".[33]

An obvious question this raises is *who* these Ethiopian philosophers or sages are. These were men and women of great intellectual ability who were familiar with high culture—namely, *Täbiban* (Sages). The latter enjoyed the highest position in society and took an interest in the nature of the universe, human nature, and social realities. The sixteenth-century Gəʿəz translator of the *Book of the Wise Philosophers*, *abba* Mika'el gave the following invitation to philosophy:

> Behold: these men collected in it [have to say] many good recommendations and counsels and anecdotes as sweet as salt. […] Their philosophy pleases the heart of man and strengthens his conscience. Philosophers recall in this book the clear and well inspired actions from the wisdom and history of learned persons. It searches for light and is itself the light of the heart. […]

28 Sumner (1998, p. 333).

29 See, for example, the distinction in Sumner (1976a).

30 My unpublished article on the Philosophy of *qəne*, presented at two conferences (Bahir Dar University and Wollo University), tackles a new approach to the *qəne* tradition of the Church from a philosophical perspective.

31 Russell (1945, p. ix).

32 Cf. Teodros Kiros (2015) and Sumner (1985).

33 Levine (1972 [1965], pp. ix–x).

> *Its excellence surpasses gold and silver and precious stones and all nature. For nothing in the world resembles it.* It is the paradise of happiness, carried in your chest, conceived in your heart and adjusted to your conscience. [... And] as you read this book, you will develop your conscience, soften your conduct, sweeten your tongue, improve your manners and strengthen your speech.[34]

4 The Two *Ḥatätas*: Situatedness and Exceptionality

> The long debate over the authenticity of the authorship of the treatises of Zara Yacob has now been skillfully put to rest [by Sumner], and it is no longer doubted that Zara Yacob, and not Padre Urbino as Conti Rossini claimed, who [sic] created the literary figure of Zara Yacob.[35]

Situated in a broader Ethiopian intellectual tradition, the *Ḥatätas* bear the general characteristics of Ethiopian philosophy. By restricting himself to written philosophical texts in Ethiopia, Sumner arrived at the conclusion that "[w]ithout the latter developments of Ethiopian philosophy, the *Fisalg*^{w}*os* is deprived of its significance; without the *Fisalg*^{w}*os*, [written] Ethiopian philosophy is deprived of roots".[36] Historically, they are germinations of seventeenth-century Ethiopian political, sociocultural, and economic turmoil. The central issues they tackle and the concerns driving their inception have historical roots in the real lived experiences of Ethiopians. Focusing on the content and general contexts of the texts, one can easily identify the basic elements of ideas central to Ethiopian philosophy, discussed above. While the authorship controversy is still ongoing, major scholars of Ethiopian philosophy and philology are in agreement that the *Ḥatätas* are the offspring of the Ethiopian mind. Sumner (1976a, 1986) and Getatchew Haile (2017) have defended their originality as the product of seventeenth-century Ethiopian freethinkers,[37] and argued that the *Ḥatätas* are works of two separate minds, the teacher and his disciple, with common objectives.

The *Ḥatätas* are situated in the historical, religious, cultural, and educational milieus of the Ethiopian intellectual tradition. They reflect the issues Ethiopian faced at the time on account of the prevalence of blind faith and the problem of religious and cultural difference. The methods they adopt (*Andəmta, 'interpeta-*

34 Quoted in Sumner (1985, p. 63).

35 Teodros Kiros (1996).

36 Sumner (1985, p. 9).

37 Though Getatchew Haile (2017, reproduced as Chapter 1 in this volume) considers these original materials to have been significantly altered in the nineteenth century.

tion'; *Ḥatäta, 'discourse'*) mirror the educational backgrounds of seventeenth-century Ethiopian thinkers. And the particular combination of metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological sensibilities found in the texts all bear the flavour of a distinctly Ethiopian worldview.

My own stance as far as the authorship dispute goes is close to that of Getatchew Haile, Sumner, and Teodros Kiros. While offering a detailed and systematic review of the authorship debate is beyond the scope of this study,[38] in what follows, I will provide some relevant points of consideration in the debate drawing on both internal and external evidence, building on the work of previous scholars.

Based on my preliminary review of historical documents (both primary sources—namely, the *Royal Chronicle of Susənyos*—and secondary sources), I have found some corollaries between a historical man from Tigray (the birthplace of Zär'a Yaʿəqob) who was a "troublemaker" and the identity of Zär'a Yaʿəqob in the autobiography of the first *Ḥatäta.* According to the sources, there was a person who named himself Yaʿəqob, was accused of being a "man of falsity", and was identified as a gossiper (*wäräña*). His influence, "deception" or "trickery" of the people and the possibility of gaining followers probably upset church scholars and the king. Based on the report about this man, the king (Susənyos) proceeded to punish him.[39]

---

38 I have presented my arguments in favour of authenticity in my previous paper presented at a conference at Bahir Dar University in 2018; the Amharic version of that paper appeared in the conference proceedings (Eyasu Berento, unpublished). I argue that besides an internal, contents-based analysis of the texts that reveals features peculiar to Ethiopian authors, we can uncover exterior evidence that confirms the possibility that the texts were indeed products of seventeenth-century Ethiopian authors. First, according to historical records (based on the *Royal Chronicle of Susənyos*), the road through which Zär'a Yaʿəqob came to Ǝnfraz is the one the then King Susənyos took to travel from Gondär to Aksum. The journey of the king is aimed at punishing the so-called "man of falsity and betrayal" (a line that recalls Zär'a Yaʿəqob's resentment of false accusations made by Wäldä Yohannes) (Alämu Hayəle 2005 E.C., 2012, p. 91). According to other historical documents, there was a story of a man who was a traitor, who was against the established religious faith and who was supposed to have influenced the people to stray from their faith, and his name was Yaʿəqob (Fəs'um Wäləḍä Marəyam 2009 E.C., pp. 160–161 and 209; Alämayähu Abäbä 2005 E.C., 2012, p. 175; and Täkəlä S'adiqəmäkuriya (2000 E.C. [1936 E.C.], p. 132). According to these sources, we can trace the historical man with a similar name (Yaʿəqob) and possible reasons why he was accused by those who took themselves to be loyal to the established faith (since Yaʿəqob is characterised as *ḥäsawe mäsiḥ*, that is, a man of falsity) and rebellious (against the king). These kinds of facts are clearly in the background of the treatise of Zär'a Yaʿəqob.

39 "At that time, a certain enemy of mine, a priest from Aksum and a friend of the king, went [to bring a charge against me] […] This betrayer went to the king and said this about me: 'Truly this man misleads the people and tells them we should rise for the sake of our faith, kill the king and expel the *Frangˇ*'. He also said many other similar words against me" (*Ḥatäta Zär'a Yaʿəqob* in

These parallelisms could not be mere coincidences. So, adopting the positions of earlier scholars and supposing these external historical facts to be relevant to the question of Zär'a Yaʿəqob's existence, I take it that the texts are attributable to the time in which they purport to have been written (the seventeenth century), to the space in which they are set (Ethiopia, which no one doubts), and to the authors to which they are ascribed (i. e., Ethiopians by birth: Zär'a Yaʿəqob and Wäldä Ḫəywät). If one is interested in the issue of authenticity, this additional evidence cannot be easily dismissed, even if it is not mentioned in existing debates. Getatchew Haile's[40] calendar-based analysis is eye-opening after Sumner's study and is worthy of consideration. Sumner's classic approach, combining internal and external analysis and dedicating more than 260 pages in a book of a large size (including notably statistical differences in uses of words and syntactic arrangement of sentences between the two *Ḫatäta*s, which proved that they are the outcome of two separate minds) makes an undeniably strong case. Other Ethiopian scholars, like Alemayehu Moges and Amsalu Aklilu, have also contributed to rehabilitating the authenticity thesis.

Attempts to alienate the *Ḫatäta*s from their time and intellectual environment, to deprive them of their Ethiopian authors in the name of forgery are open to the charge that they are themselves a forgery. Such a forgery would imply a concealment of the nature of Ethiopian history of ideas and a denial of the intellectual property of Zär'a Yaʿəqob and Wäldä Ḫəywät. They exhibit exceptionality in offering complete, personal accounts on controversial issues (religious, political, and social) in the public sphere. They present strong criticisms of central issues in the society of their day (like fasting, patriarchal hegemony, monasticism, religious commitment, sexuality, and marriage). They position themselves against the tradition of Orthodoxy and Islamic polygamy and open the way for multiculturalism; they advocate the revolutionary potential of critical examination over blind preservation of the wisdom and faith of one's forefathers.

Sumner 1985, p. 231). There is a parallel story in the *Royal Chronicle of Susənyos*: "there was a report from Tigray that an unknown man, who is a gossiper and a fake prophet (*wäräña, ḫäsawe mäsih*), named himself Yaʿəqob [who deceives the people]. Upon hearing the report, the king moved to Tigray crossing Täkkäze [the big river, the route Zär'a Yaʿəqob followed on his journey to Ǝnfraz] to Shire, stayed there for a while and visited the House of Mary, stayed at Aksum, was crowned there like his predecessors [since it was the tradition that any new king/queen should have their legitimacy approved by the pope of Aksum, head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church]" (Alämu Hayəle 2005 E.C., 2012, pp. 95 and 91; my translation). See further Täkəlä S'adiqəmäkuriya (2000 E.C. [1936 E.C.], p. 132); Alämayähu Abäbä (2005 E.C., 2012, p. 175); Alämu Hayəle (2005 E.C., 2012, p. 85); and Fəs'um Wälədä Marəyam (2009 E.C., pp. 160–161 and 209).

40 Getatchew Haile (2006 E.C., 2014).

Questioning the status quo of religious, cultural, and social realities is rather exceptional in the vast collections of Gəʿəz literature. However, this is a feature that the two *Ḥatätas* share with fifteenth-century critics, their predecessors known as the *Däqiqä Ǝsṭifanos*, seemingly religious critics who were not on good terms with the then Ethiopian king, Zär'a Ya'əqob, and who were violently tortured and imprisoned due to their open opposition to him.[41] Apart from the *Ḥatätas* and the Hagiographies of the *Däqiqä Ǝsṭifanos*, as far as I know, no other text openly challenges the established norms and principles of the religious traditions, social customs, and thought of their time. But this exceptionality notwithstanding, we cannot deprive these texts of their strong foundation in Ethiopian soil, sharing basic elements with Ethiopian history of ideas. Their exceptionality reveals originality as another aspect of the Ethiopian literary tradition, and indeed an original philosophical approach to rationalism.[42] As Sumner remarks:

> Zara Yaeqob's thought claims to be original, and for the written literature of the 17th century Ethiopia that we know, it certainly is. But the images are not original. The offshoots are personal adventures into free space, but the stem is deeply rooted in Ethiopian soil[43]

The two *Ḥatätas* also invoke the theme of man's responsibility to reconcile the earthly and the heavenly worlds—a motif which would remain prominent in Ethiopian philosophy down to the contemporary period.[44]

Connecting the dots, Zär'a Ya'əqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät are seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosophers, freethinkers, and critics who wrote original philosophical works. The two treatises complement one another, the first being more abstract and the second tending to be more practical. Both stress the enlightenment and rationalism of individuals on the basis of an examined search for the truth rather than a reliance on mere faith. Questions related to being, existence,

---

41 See relatedly Binyam Mekonnen's essay (Chapter 9) in this volume.

42 Teodros Kiros, for instance, claims that: "at the center of Zara Yacob's originality lies the hitherto unrecognised place of the human heart in philosophical activity. No philosopher before or after him (Pascal, the writer, excepted) had attached such a firm significance to the function of the human heart" (Teodros Kiros quoted in Krause 2008, p. 274). While this conclusion might be open to debate, it remains that Zär'a Ya'əqob's approach is distinctive in the history of philosophy.

43 Sumner (1978, p. 61).

44 The authors of the *Ḥatätas* anticipate the twentieth-century Ethiopian philosopher, Ǝgälä Gäbərä Yohänəs (2003), who claims that, metaphysically, man is positioned between the earthly and heavenly worlds. As a partaker in the earthly world man is subject to the laws of nature, but is also endowed with the freedom of heavenly bodies. Such similarities of thought are not the product of direct influence (for Ǝgälä never quotes Zär'a Ya'əqob or Wäldä Ḥəywät) but are rather the outcome of similar educational backgrounds and schooling.

peace-making, multiculturalism, gender equality, good governance, public rationality, and social transformation are central to these treatises.

For example, in experiencing uneasiness at the "civil wars in his time" among fellow citizens, Wäldä Ḥəywät comments that: "Mutual love embellishes man's entire life; it makes all our afflictions easier to bear; it adds flavour and sweetness to our whole life; it makes this world the kingdom of heaven".[45] He is unequivocal in his direct attack on identity-based conflicts and violent responses to religious differences:

> Do not think that the doctrine of the fools who say the following is good: "The word 'fellow man' is confined only to relatives, or our neighbours, or friends, or members of the same faith". Do not say the same as they do; for all men are our fellow men whether they are good or evil, Christians, [Muslims,] Jews, pagans: all are equal to us and our brothers, because we all are the sons of one father and creator,[46]

For Wäldä Ḥəywät and Zär'a Yaʿəqob, despite differences in faith, knowledge, and culture, human beings are by nature essentially similar and have the same genesis, forming a brotherhood. Conflicts based on differences in religion or culture are artificial, contingent, and based on fallible beliefs. Therefore, no one should rely on them for the sake of defining man.

As a final remark about the general nature of the texts, the very employment of the method of the *Ḥatäta* ('discourse, examination, search for the truth, inquiry') and *Andəmta* ('interpretation, hermeneutics') is specific to the Ethiopian intellectual tradition in which the authors are prime participants. This suggests situatedness in adopting the methods of the intellectual tradition that produced Zär'a Yaʿəqob but also a refusal to accept this same tradition on the basis of criticism of its basic tenets by the tradition's own lights. Zär'a Yaʿəqob is an immanent critic rather than a foreign and external spectator who merely ridicules the society in question in a way that is divorced from its values, conventions, and norms.

5 Rereading the *Ḥatätas*

Now that we have situated the *Ḥatätas* in their intellectual milieu and the history of ideas in Ethiopia—without disregarding their possible exceptionality and

45 Translated by Sumner (1985, p. 268). An alternative translation in Zara Yaqob, Walda Heywat, Lee, Mehari Worku, and Belcher (2023, p. 133) runs as follows: "Mutual love improves all human life. It relieves our suffering, it seasons and sweetens our whole life as it transforms this world into the kingdom of heaven".

46 Translated by Sumner (1985, p. 267).

uniqueness—we are in a position to revisit their content afresh with an eye to the authorship dispute. According to Sumner (1976a), these debates had at the time of writing been limited to external rather than internal sources.

In terms of content there is a chain between metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological questions. Metaphysically, three things are dealt with, namely: Nature, God, and Man. Accordingly man is situated between the worlds of the earthly (nature) and the heavenly (God), buttressing his ontological attachment to the two worlds.[47] Epistemologically, the sources of human knowledge are mediated through empiricism, rationalism, and special forms of revealed truth. Such knowledge enables human beings to understand human nature, the laws of nature, and the will of God. These metaphysical and epistemological bases guide man towards axiological rectitude. For example, the ethical responsibility of man to be good emanates from the consciousness of the mind that the soul is immortal. The notion of moral responsibility in the realm of ethics and social and political philosophy emanates from the inalienable rights of other human beings. And aesthetically God has placed man amidst this beautiful universe, which is the "best possible world".[48]

In terms of human nature, we learn that man is not evil and endowed with free will, and that from such freedom originates one's moral responsibility.[49] Truth is the outcome of scrutiny of pure intelligence by the rational mind.[50] Human beings are students of nature and ultimate truth is to be grasped by discerning its laws. Reflections around the place of women, the idea of cooperation

47 Ǝgälä Gäbərä Yohänəs (2003).

48 Sumner (1985, pp. 256 and 261).

49 Sumner (1985, p. 235).

50 Sumner (1985, p. 236). This position of Zär'a Yaʿəqob is adopted from books written in (and/or translated into) Gəʿəz in the fifteenth century to serve as guidance of monastery life in Ethiopia. According to the epistemological positions of the school system that produced Zär'a Yaʿəqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät, man is endowed with empirical knowledge, rational contemplation of the mind (or the heart, as per the original Ethiopian position to rationalism, on which see Teodros Kiros 2005) and hits on the truth if he lives according to the will of God. This is clearly put in the *Arägawi Mänfäsawi* (Täsəfa Gäbəräśəlase 1982), the third Book of the three Books on Monastery Life (the *Books of Hermits*, *Mäs'ahəfətä Mänäkosat*): human beings are endowed with the capacity and privilege of knowing hidden truths, including the Trinity, the heavenly world (p. 59). Similar verses are found in the assertions of *Mar Yəshäq*, specifically the first book in the series (1982, p. 102). According to the teaching of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, true knowledge is revealed truth that can be acquired through the senses on the basis of attentive observation and examination of nature, through reason and through mysticism (being and knowing that requires the help of God and results in union with God). Unlike restricted epistemological positions of rationalism and empiricism, such holistic and comprehensive approaches to human knowledge have metaphysical, epistemological, as well as ethical elements. And we can trace a direct lineage between this position and the thought of Zär'a Yaʿəqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät.

and responsibility toward others, and the natural equality of men are also found in the texts.[51] The society envisioned in the mind of the authors of the *Ḥatätas* is one that manifests equality, liberty, fraternity, and familyhood within a just and peaceful social order.

The texts' arguments for the immortality of the soul and eternal justice in the afterlife[52] implicate metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical aspects in human life. Wäldä Ḥəywät concludes that our reason tells us that we have an immortal soul and that moral responsibility is one of its consequences. We are given the light of reason to discriminate between goodness and badness.[53] We also learn that "the will of God is known by this short statement from our reason that tells us: Worship God your creator and love all men as yourself".[54]

Wäldä Ḥəywät's metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical positions reveal a direct influence from, and emulation of, his teacher. Consider, for example, his argument for the existence of a perfect God[55]; his characterisation of human nature: "by human nature, understand thereby the soul of man, his spiritual essence, the fine nature that thinks and knows"[56]; and his view is that the soul of man is immortal, which is the basis and reason for our moral responsibility. This world is the best possible world, which is the work of a perfect God and each creature befits its place in the cosmos, which is endowed with holistic integrity and beauty (Sumner 1985, pp. 256 and 261[57]). In terms of the possibility of knowledge, Wäldä Ḥəywät is an advocate of the mysticism of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, whereby knowledge is the outcome of the collaboration between the sense organs, the rational mind, and God's help: "I believe nothing except what God demonstrated to me by the light of my reason [...] for he himself gave me the light of reason[58]

51 Sumner (1985, p. 239).

52 Sumner (1985, p. 241).

53 See further Ǝgälä Gäbərä Yohänəs (1983) and Sumner (1985, p. 259).

54 Translated by Sumner (1985, p. 242). Reading these lines in the *Ḥatätas*, one easily discerns Zär'a Ya'əqob's educational background and the influence of the teaching of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church that emphasises the two pillars of the Ten Commandments (Fear of God and Love of One's Fellow Men).

55 Sumner (1985, p. 256).

56 Translated by Sumner (1985, p. 257).

57 "We should admire and praise the creator in all his work [...] and thank him because he created us and placed us among these beautiful and admirable creatures, and made us superior to them; he gave us the reason and science of which he has not endowed the other creatures..." (Sumner 1985, p. 261).

58 "*The light of reason*" is a direct translation of the concept of *bərhanä ləbbuna* (that has both epistemologically illuminating elements and ethically guiding implications that protect men from straying from the way of God). Herein lies a distinctly Ethiopian approach to rationality,

that I may discriminate between good and evil, true and false".[59] In his aspiration to offer up original insights rather than simply repeating his teacher's views, Wäldä Ḥəywät places greater emphasis on practical issues like sexuality, the ethics of aid, education, the standards of a hygienic life, multiculturalism, and ethics of work. God is the source of all wisdom and science,[60] but man is endowed with the ability to share in God's grace through his observance of God's will and active attendance to the laws of nature (as opposed to adhering to fallible human laws). On the problem of evil, Wäldä Ḥəywät offers a vivid argument that recalls the arguments of Leibniz, Hick, and Irenaeus,[61] according to which evil is a therapy of God.[62]

6 Contributions

One final question that warrants comment is what contemporary significance might be extracted from the *Ḥatäta*s.

The texts play contextual roles in historical and literary studies pertaining to Ethiopia and Africa but also have a broader significance in terms of the representation of non-Western voices in human civilisation.

If we can arrive at a consensus as to their authenticity, Zär'a Ya'əqob's autobiography and Wäldä Ḥəywät's reflections on it will provide historians of seventeenth-century Ethiopia with primary sources and precious eyewitness accounts. Moreover, as has often been remarked, these texts can serve as a basis for debunking prejudiced claims about the non-existence of African philosophy due to the absence of a literary tradition and written philosophical treatises. Hence they can enrich Africa's soul-searching process within the remit of indigenous philosophy. The texts, crucially, represent some of the unheard voices of the Global South.

Uncovering and reclaiming classical indigenous philosophy along with its foundational tradition can help us enrich contemporary discussions[63]; indeed,

which Wäldä Ḥəywät picks up from his immediate teacher and from the long tradition underpinning his educational background.

59 Translated by Sumner (1985, p. 259).

60 Sumner (1985, p. 255).

61 For connections to Leibniz, Hick, and Irenaeus, see further Henry Straughan's and Michael O'Connor's essay (Chapter 12) in this volume.

62 Eyasu Berento (2019); Sumner (1985, p. 263). According to Wäldä Ḥəywät, "after God created the world, He does not forsake his creation, but he takes care of it and guides it according to the necessity of each creature and leads all according to the way he created them" (translated by Sumner 1985, p. 256).

63 Pelikan (1984).

the texts' central tenets, theses, and methods provide the contemporary scholar of Ethiopian intellectual history and philosophy with valuable conceptual resources. In-depth critical study of the texts is already yielding contributions to debates in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social philosophy, and philosophy of education, and has the potential to enrich the study of the humanities from broader and varied perspectives. On a more practical level, the ideas and objectives envisioned in the *Ḥatäta*s can yield important lessons about equality, justice, and public rationality.

7 Conclusion: On the Way Forward

The study of the history of ideas in Ethiopia has not so far sufficiently brought out its philosophical components. Such an analysis requires a holistic approach to the materials at hand, honing pedagogical and methodological aspects of the age-old Ethiopian intellectual tradition—attending to both oral and written forms of philosophising, formal and informal aspects of knowledge production, spanning collective wisdom and private speculation. Analysis of both internal and external evidence in relation to the two *Ḥatäta*s speaks to their simultaneous situatedness and exceptionality, features which are consistent with a seventeenth-century authorship. Ethiopian philosophy as it appears in the *Ḥatäta*s can play a pivotal role in bridging folk wisdom and personal reflection, the oral and the written, the religious and the secular, the abstract and the practical, continuity and change. The chain of reasoning tying together metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological issues also enriches our contemporary longing for social justice, social harmony, and cosmic integrity.

Situating the texts in their proper place within Ethiopian and African philosophy can help develop African self-esteem in the academy, combat epistemic "self-colonisation", and reawaken the true spirit of African philosophy in dealing with its existential problems.

Going forward, we need to resume Sumner's project in Ethiopian Studies from the point of view of the history of ideas, in a way that best fits contemporary and future human aspirations. In doing so, we must ask the questions: "what is the nature of Ethiopian philosophy and philosophy in Ethiopia, and how can we clearly situate the two *Ḥatäta*s in the intellectual tradition of Ethiopia and in the broader history of ideas?".