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Chapter 11
Examining the *Ḥatätas* as a Foundation of Ethiopian Philosophy

Abstract: The idea of a written Ethiopian philosophy that is founded on the *Ḥatätas* of Zär'a Ya'əqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät is grounded on an illusory foundation. It is an intellectual exercise borne of a Eurocentric discourse that is involved in the search for an Other that can think like a European man. The picture of Ethiopian philosophy as being founded on the *Ḥatätas* is part of a larger effort to introduce an Ethiopian philosophical tradition that is made up of written philosophy, adapted philosophical wisdom, and societal wisdom and proverbs. Such an understanding of Ethiopian philosophy has not only failed to establish the authorship and philosophical worth of the *Ḥatätas*; it also does not explain the epistemic context within which such an exercise originated in the first place. In this chapter, it will be argued that Ethiopian philosophy is still in the making and that the idea of an Ethiopian philosophy that is founded on the *Ḥatätas* gives rise to three basic limitations. First, this idea emerged in a Eurocentric discourse, and its real purpose is to identify a form of subjectivity that participates in the European form of individual rationality. Second, proponents of the view that the *Ḥatätas* are authentic have not established that these works are philosophical in the strict sense: that is, primarily focused on critically examining metaphysical, epistemic, and axiological issues. Third, those who defend the authenticity of the *Ḥatätas* have failed to prove that the texts are authored by Ethiopians and not by Giusto da Urbino. As a result of this, most commentators on the *Ḥatätas* have accepted the validity of the *Ḥatätas* without properly explaining the striking similarities that are attested between the personalities of Zär'a Ya'əqob and Giusto da Urbino. This chapter concludes that Ethiopian philosophy is still searching for its identity and that it is not grounded on the *Ḥatätas*.

Introduction

The search for an Ethiopian philosophy has arisen as a response to the colonial prejudice according to which there is no rational form of criticism in non-Western societies. The need to establish the existence of Ethiopian philosophy has indeed largely been motivated by efforts to counter the Eurocentric bias that philosophy is a uniquely Western cultural product, supposedly unparalleled in other parts of

the world.[1] This has more generally driven the quest for non-Western philosophies that might fulfil all of the requirements of the Western canon of philosophy. Given that it is specifically implicated in the debate over the nature of rationality in the context of African philosophy, Ethiopian philosophy was appealed to as a way of refuting this colonial edifice and demonstrating that there is indeed a uniquely Ethiopian and African philosophy that is written by an individual and is able to exhibit a form of philosophical criticism that questions the validity of accepted wisdom and knowledge.

The quest for a philosophy of an "Other" that is able to participate in the European concept of subjectivity and autonomous rational inquiry thus lies at the heart of the standard picture of Ethiopian philosophy. It was most clearly developed by Claude Sumner, who argued that there are three major sources of Ethiopian philosophy: translations of foreign philosophy, original written philosophy, and oral wisdom.[2]

First, Sumner argued that there are texts that have a foreign origin but have been creatively adapted to the Ethiopian context and that the manner of adaptation makes them a part or aspect of Ethiopian philosophy, founded on an original synthesis of foreign sources. In the eyes of Sumner, a philosophical text does not necessarily have to originate within a given context in order to belong to a given philosophical tradition. On the contrary, what is important is the manner in which it is appropriated and synthesised within the societal wisdom of a particular tradition. This leads Sumner to contend that texts like *The Life and Maxims of Skendes* constitute one aspect of Ethiopian philosophy, since these foreign texts have been appropriated on Ethiopian soil.[3]

Second, Sumner also argued that there is a written philosophical culture in the Ethiopian context that finds expression in the ideas of Zär'a Ya'əqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät. He used this to argue that there are written philosophical texts that are produced by an individual, and which originated in the context of a religious controversy in modern Ethiopia.[4] For Sumner, the *Ḥatäta*s of Zär'a Ya'əqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät are so profound that the ideas that are developed in the texts demonstrate the existence of a rationalist philosophy that can be compared to the ideas of Western thinkers like Descartes.[5] Sumner argued that the texts are uniquely Ethiopian but also participate in broader philosophical debates about the nature of knowledge, reality, and human values.

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1 Masolo (1994).
2 Sumner (1996).
3 Sumner (1974b).
4 Fasil Merawi (2019).
5 Sumner (1978).

Third, Sumner argued that there is also an oral source in Ethiopian philosophy and that it is, among other things, found in Oromo wisdom and literature, wherein proverbs and maxims are used in order to disseminate philosophical teachings from one generation to the other.

By drawing on broader debates about Ethiopian philosophy, this chapter will attempt to question the standard picture of Ethiopian philosophy that is founded on what Sumner identifies as the second source of philosophy in Ethiopia: the *Ḥatäta*s of Zär'a Ya'əqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät. The focus will be on how the interpretation of these texts as a foundation of a written Ethiopian philosophy produced by individual thinkers has three basic limitations.

First, it will be argued that the notion of Ethiopian philosophy originated from a Eurocentric discourse and that it is animated by attempts to identify a Black man able to participate in the Western conception of individual existence. This suggests that the whole idea of Ethiopian philosophy does not emerge as a unique indigenous philosophy but only makes sense from the vantage point of consolidating the European understanding of man.

Second, it will be argued that the ideas that are found within the *Ḥatäta*s are not properly philosophical but rather need to be understood as attempts to reform the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. What is found in these texts is an attempt to reform the teachings of the church rather than a fully developed philosophy that has the power to interrogate the nature of the world through the use of rational categories.

Third, it will be argued that those who defend the authenticity of the *Ḥatäta*s have failed to prove that the texts are authored by Ethiopians and not by Giusto da Urbino. As a result of this, most commentators on the *Ḥatäta*s have accepted the validity of the *Ḥatäta*s without properly explaining the striking similarities that are attested between the personalities of Zär'a Ya'əqob and Giusto da Urbino.

The Eurocentric Background of Ethiopian Philosophy

As proponents of African philosophy have long pointed out, dominant conceptions of philosophy are permeated with the Eurocentric bias that philosophy is a unique cultural product that is exclusively possessed by the Western world.[6] According to the Eurocentric conception of philosophy, philosophy emerged in ancient Greece and is closely tied with the rationalist-instrumentalist form of thinking that sup-

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6 Bodunrin (1981).

posedly developed on Western soil; Western society allegedly represents the highest form of civilisation, and the developmental path of the West is something that needs to be followed by others. Equally, it is assumed that other cultures and societies have no contribution to the development of a refined philosophical tradition.[7] In such a context, non-Western societies are depicted as living in a state of superstition and underdevelopment.

In an effort to reject this kind of approach, various attempts have been made to demonstrate the existence of African philosophy, with two major goals in mind. The first was to counter the Eurocentric discourse that had relegated Africans and non-Western societies to a position of otherness. The second involved demonstrating the existence of rational modes of thought in non-Western cultures globally, each with their own specificities. This led to a presentation of African philosophy as a unique intellectual tradition grounded on, for example, a relational ethics that is not subsumed within the binary relationship between subject and object. This is the background against which the current idea of an Ethiopian philosophy needs to be understood.

The idea of an Ethiopian philosophy therefore did not emerge as an attempt to characterise ways of looking at and reflecting upon reality or to denote a rational form of criticism that tries to question accepted views of reality in general. The concept is not the product of a philosophical culture born out of wonder and the need to offer rational explanations of the mysteries that we encounter in the world. To the contrary, it is rooted in the attempt to demonstrate the existence of an African and an Ethiopian thinker that is able to think just like a Western man. What is presented in the name of Ethiopian philosophy is an attempt to identify a Black man that can think just like a Western man. It is an attempt to show that Ethiopians also have canons of thought that can be compared to the Western conception of philosophy. This is seen in the fact that whenever discussions of Ethiopian philosophy are conducted, the main focus is on generating a comparison with the ideas of Ethiopian thinkers on the one hand and Western ones on the other. The tendency is to frame Ethiopian philosophy either as radically distinctive from Western philosophy, or, at the opposite extreme, as being identical to it. In the latter case, the conception of the human subject that is read into the written sources of Ethiopian philosophy is the modern, Western European subject who exercises instrumental rationality in order to control and subdue the natural world around him.

As mentioned earlier, the main scholar to have popularised the idea of a written Ethiopian philosophy is Claude Sumner. Sumner is a thinker who was interest-

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7 Sogolo (1990).

ed in finding the philosophy of other cultures comparable to the ideas of the greatest Western thinkers, like Kant and Descartes. He believed that within each and every philosophy, there is a universal element that makes it possible to engage in a comparison among different philosophical cultures.[8] With regards to the written sources of Ethiopian philosophy, Sumner argued that there are two texts that are of greatest importance and that the ideas that are found within the texts are philosophical and the product of individual thinkers. For Sumner, the *Ḥatäta*s are of a philosophical nature in virtue of the method of presentation they follow and the rigorous form of reasoning used to establish key arguments.[9] Sumner did not consider the fact that the method of the *Ḥatäta*s takes its cue from the *qəne* tradition in Ethiopian culture—an artistic form of criticism that does not have the capacity to develop a critical inquiry into reality, since it is made up of poetic language that only posits imaginary possibilities. Sumner equated the nature of philosophy with the broadest sense of wisdom; and because of this, he did not demonstrate the existence of a rational tradition in Ethiopia.

Sumner recognises that the *Ḥatäta*s of Zär'a Ya'əqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät originated in the context of religious debate and controversy. He depicts Zär'a Ya'əqob as someone who was trying to develop a rational articulation of the situation with which he was dealing, since rather than approaching the truth of God from the point of view of faith and belief, he tried to develop a rational articulation of God's existence.[10] In the *Ḥatäta*, Zär'a Ya'əqob says that "there is only one truth".[11] This is taken by Sumner and others as a commitment to philosophical inquiry, which has the aim of discovering the truth through rational inquiry. It is also argued that Zär'a Ya'əqob introduced a system of ethics that is grounded on the relationship between the existence of God and the harmony exhibited in nature. For Odomaro Mubangizi, Sumner "demonstrated that the modern Western era of rationalism with Descartes has its equivalent in Ethiopia".[12]

Sumner also presents Zär'a Ya'əqob as a rational thinker who had a religious upbringing, who was thus intimately familiar with the teachings of the Orthodox Christian tradition. This account of Zär'a Ya'əqob has been questioned by Daniel Kibret, on the grounds that Zär'a Ya'əqob, as he is portrayed in the *Ḥatäta*, is not someone who has an adequate grasp of the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.[13] Additionally, Getatchew Haile has argued that the argument which

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8 Sumner (1996).

9 See further Teodros Kiros (1996).

10 Sumner (1976a).

11 Zara Yaqob, Walda Heywat, Lee, Mehari Worku, and Belcher (2023, p. 71).

12 Mubangizi (2019, p. 6).

13 See Daniel Kibret (2011 E.C., 2017).

Zär'a Ya'əqob uses to prove the existence of God suggests a heavy influence of Catholicism on his teachings, such that his arguments are not uniquely Ethiopian.[14]

In discussing the *Ḥatäta* of Zär'a Ya'əqob's disciple, Wäldä Ḥəywät, Sumner contends that this second text is more centrally devoted to social and moral questions.[15] What Sumner does not address in detail is how similar the ideas and methods of Zär'a Ya'əqob and Wäldä Ḥəywät are, especially in their common identification of the will of God as the basis for the intelligibility of the truth. His contributions laid the foundations for subsequent attempts by thinkers like Teodros Kiros, who went so far as to argue that the *Ḥatäta*s are unique in overcoming the classical dichotomy between the mind and the body that was introduced by the Cartesian tradition. It was also the work of Sumner and Teodros Kiros that established the parallel between the *Ḥatäta* and Descartes' methodic doubt. It has thus been claimed that Zär'a Ya'əqob "is roughly contemporaneous with Descartes, and their methods are strikingly similar".[16]

In all such celebrations of the *Ḥatäta*s, what is neglected is an analysis of the *Ḥatäta*s within the context of the quest for a philosophy that is driven by the search for an "Other" that is able to participate in the European conception of the subject.

Is There a Philosophy in the *Ḥatäta*s—And Are They Even Ethiopian?

Written sources of Ethiopian philosophy are identified by Sumner either as having a foreign origin but as having been adapted to Ethiopian soil, or as having been written by individual Ethiopian authors of a philosophical stature. Sumner argues that in such cases one is able to identify the existence of a philosophical culture that deals with issues around the nature of knowledge, reality, and social values. Sumner further argues that the philosophical nature of these texts should be approached from the point of view of the kind of method that is being utilised in them. The method that the *Ḥatäta* picks out consists of an analysis of fundamental "natural" truths, by which we can evaluate received, "human" truths. This method is even compared to the tools of analysis that are utilised by rationalist thinkers like Descartes in their quest to find a kind of knowledge that is firm and reliable in its nature, which might in turn serve as the foundation of all philosophical pur-

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14 See Getatchew Haile (2017), reproduced as Chapter 1 of this volume.

15 Sumner (1976a).

16 Verharen (2006, p. 15).

suits.[17] Still, it is worth noting that Zär'a Ya'əqob never questions all aspects of received wisdom and that his thinking still takes place under the religious belief that there is an overall harmony in the world that is grounded on the existence of a creator-God. In the eyes of Zär'a Ya'əqob, "the intelligence of every human being knows that everything that we see is created".[18] Comparing the ideas that are found in the *Ḥatäta*s to the thought of Descartes is also problematic since within the *Ḥatäta*s, we do not find an explicit and rigorous analysis that interrogates *all* possible aspects of human cognition.

One might be inclined to suggest that Zär'a Ya'əqob as he is presented to us in the *Ḥatäta*s presents himself as someone so dissatisfied with the teachings of the major religions that he decides to embark on a rational pursuit of the truth. He is thus arguably depicted as a person who believes that there is only one truth, which becomes apparent to us through rational analysis. This picture still sits in tension with the fact that the nature of the individual is not discussed in a way that guarantees the autonomous nature of the subject in the *Ḥatäta*s. The essence of individual existence is confined within "the Creator's established order".[19] The subject and the individual that is given to us in the *Ḥatäta*s is an agent that is subsumed under the will of God.

The ideas that are presented in the *Ḥatäta* of Zär'a Ya'əqob are indeed founded on the assumption that our intellect is given to us by God.[20] It is argued that the power to discover the nature of the world in which we are living is made possible by a God that is all-powerful and all-loving in its nature. The human subject is seen as a fragile and finite being that requires the will of God in order to lead a meaningful form of existence. In the *Ḥatäta* of Zär'a Ya'əqob, we find a cosmological argument whose aim is to prove the existence of God on the basis that there must be a being that is not itself created but which is responsible for the whole of creation. As the *Ḥatäta* puts it: "Because we exist and are not creators but rather are created, we have to say that there is a creator who fashioned us".[21] Zär'a Ya'əqob proceeds to argue that this is the God that gave us the power of rationality and that we come into a contact with such a God in the process of praying, which is identified as a rational undertaking.

One of the central elements that are presented as the unique qualities of Zär'a Ya'əqob's philosophy is the idea that Zär'a Ya'əqob's journey can be seen as an individual quest for the truth that is made possible through the power of rationality. In

17 Teshome Abera (2019).

18 Zara Yaqob, Walda Heywat, Lee, Mehari Worku, and Belcher (2023, p. 82).

19 Zara Yaqob, Walda Heywat, Lee, Mehari Worku, and Belcher (2023, p. 84).

20 Sumner (1976a).

21 Zara Yaqob, Walda Heywat, Lee, Mehari Worku, and Belcher (2023, p. 70).

order to strengthen such an assumption, it has been argued that Zär'a Ya'əqob was contemplating in a state of seclusion in a cave and that his whole philosophy is the result of such meditation.[22] It has been suggested that he developed radical views on the relationship between the two sexes, the nature of fasting and monastic life, and also the injustice that is found in the world. What is lacking is an analysis that shows how Zär'a Ya'əqob was able to introduce a critically-oriented system of thought that concentrated on the classical questions of reality, knowledge, and human values. Instead, we find a system of thought that subsumes the existence of the individual under a divine force that presides over the whole of existence.

One argument that Sumner presents in order to demonstrate the philosophical nature of the *Ḥatäta*s is the idea that the *Ḥatäta*s deviate from the teachings that are found in the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.[23] But this argument can be questioned based on three major observations. First of all, as Daniel Kibret has shown,[24] there is a profound form of rational criticism that runs through the teachings of the church; even teachings that are considered radical are still debated and analysed within the tradition. And yet, no mention of the *Ḥatäta*s is made in the teachings of the church, even though there are far more radical ideas that are discussed within the bounds of the church when compared to those of the *Ḥatäta*s.

Secondly, it must also be recognised that the ideas that are used to prove the existence of God in the *Ḥatäta* suggest the presence of a foreign influence on the thoughts of the thinker. Getatchew Haile argues that the argument for the existence of God that is found in the *Ḥatäta*s likely does not emerge from within the Ethiopian tradition but is probably influenced by the Catholic tradition,[25] building on the Aristotelian idea of the prime mover. Given that even Zär'a Ya'əqob in the *Ḥatäta*s admits to being in contact with the Catholics, it is difficult to regard the argument for the existence of God that is presented in the text as a unique idea formulated by Zär'a Ya'əqob.

Finally, the question of the authorship of the *Ḥatäta*s is not settled at all. The evidence shows that there are striking similarities between Zär'a Ya'əqob and Giusto da Urbino that cannot be ruled out: starting from the language and the modes of expression all the way up to details like the parallel dates of birth,

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22 Teodros Kiros (1996).

23 Sumner (1976a).

24 Daniel Kibret (2011 E.C., 2017).

25 Getatchew Haile (2006 E.C., 2014); see also Getatchew Haile (2017), reproduced as Chapter 1 in this volume. For a discussion of the cosmological argument, see also John Marenbon's essay (Chapter 4)—which addresses in detail the possibility of a link to Aquinas—as well as Henry Straughan's and Michael O'Connor's essay (Chapter 12).

names, and their travels from Aksum to Gondär.[26] Because of this convincing evidence, it is the proponents of an Ethiopian authorship of the *Ḥatäta*s who need to come up with evidence that shows that it is indeed Ethiopian authors who wrote the texts. All these limitations point towards the realisation that there is no mature concept of an Ethiopian philosophy and that Ethiopian philosophy is still looking for its own identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a need to question the idea of an Ethiopian philosophy that is founded on the *Ḥatäta*s for three major reasons.

First, we must interrogate the epistemic context within which the idea of Ethiopian philosophy as an intellectual tradition originated in the first place. Such an analysis will show that it developed in a context where there was a search for an African philosophy that takes place through a written medium and through the agency of an individual thinker. The *Ḥatäta*s were believed to fulfil the criterion and because of this, commentators failed to take note of their real philosophical worth and the validity of the ideas that are found in the texts was never the major object of attention. Instead, they sought to use the texts as a way of refuting the colonial prejudice that denied the existence of a philosophy in Africa. In doing so, they failed to see whether or not there is anything else that is worthy of importance in the Ethiopian tradition, thus reinscribing the old Eurocentrism.

Second, these commentators sought in their interpretations to demonstrate the existence of a Black man that emulates the Western concept of the subject. However there is no Cartesian subject in the core of the *Ḥatäta*s. While the texts deal with diverse questions like the nature and the existence of God, the problem of evil, the relationship between men and women, the nature of social justice and the discovery of truth, still, these questions did not result in the development of a philosophical criticism since they all take place under a fundamentally religious outlook. Therefore what is found in the texts is an attempt at religious reformation rather than a mode of philosophical criticism.

It must finally be noted that those who defend the authenticity of the *Ḥatäta*s have not yet convincingly shown that the texts are authored by Ethiopians. Yet it is crucial to ask whether or not the texts are written by a foreign writer. And even if it were shown that the texts were in fact written by Ethiopian authors, still the texts do not convincingly attest to a distinctively philosophical outlook.

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26 See especially Wion (2013a; 2013b) and Daniel Kibret (2011 E.C., 2017) in recent literature.

For all of these reasons, Ethiopian philosophy is still in the making, and there is a fundamental need to question received conceptions of it.