

Dag Herbjørnsrud

Preface

This volume makes fully available to global audiences two texts of early African philosophy. Ralph Lee and Mehari Worku, working with Wendy Laura Belcher, have translated and annotated the remarkable *Hatata Inquiries*, composed in highland Ethiopia in 1668 and around 1693 by the critical thinker Zara Yaqob and his student Walda Heywat. These autobiographical and philosophical investigations into the necessity for independent thought and ethical action have never been as timely as they are today.

Unfortunately, these two African texts have frequently been excluded from histories of philosophy. This is partly due to challenges to their authenticity (about which, see Belcher's persuasive introduction) but also due to Western prejudices. The exclusion of African and non-European philosophy from the canon of philosophy is no surprise. During the heyday of European colonialism in the early 1800s, central Western philosophers began to define philosophy so narrowly that only the thinking of white Europeans met the definition of 'true' philosophy (Park 2013). The rest, outside of 'the West', were dismissed as irrational thinkers, lesser beings to be colonized and civilized. This colonial mindset remains, directly or indirectly, embedded in philosophical studies, as demonstrated by an even cursory glance at reading lists of university philosophy courses worldwide, especially in Western Europe and North America.

As a leading scholar of Chinese philosophy bluntly concluded in 2017, 'Philosophy as it is practiced professionally in much of the world, and in the United States in particular, is racist. . . . To omit all of the philosophy of Asia, Africa, India, and the Indigenous Americas from the curriculum and to ignore it in our research is to convey the impression—whether intentionally or not—that it is of less value than the philosophy produced in European culture, or worse, to convey the impression—willingly or not—that no other culture was capable of philosophical thought. These are racist views' (Van Norden 2017).

This attitude has impoverished philosophical studies. For instance, it was not until recently that the first two works of the eighteenth-century African philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo were translated from Latin and became commonly available in the US and Western Europe (Amo 2020; 1968). Born around 1703 in Axim in what is now Ghana, Amo moved to what is now Germany and grew up in a wealthy European family (Lochner 1958; Abraham 2004). In 1729, Amo defended, likely orally, the law thesis 'On the Rights of Moors in Europe', based on a study of Roman law (now lost)—possibly the first thesis in Europe arguing against the enslavement of Africans. In 1734, Amo defended his inaugural dissertation *On the*

Impassivity of the Human Mind at the University of Wittenberg, and in 1738 he finished his *Treatise on the Art of Soberly and Accurately Philosophizing* (Amo and Nwala 1990). He then began teaching philosophy at the University of Jena before he, in 1747, chose to take a ship back to Ghana, where he continued his philosophical work.

Even though Amo wrote his theses in Latin, in the heart of Europe, where they were known as a vital contribution to Cartesian discourse, his work was erased from the European canon after the early 1800s. In his own time, in the early German Enlightenment of 1733, the rector of the University of Wittenberg, Johann Gottfried Kraus, declared about Amo that he came from a continent, Africa, that had ‘great . . . fertility in human natural aptitude, devotion to letters, or religious teaching’ and that had produced ‘a great many very eminent men’ (as translated in (Amo 2020, 191)). Kraus then praised such African thinkers as Terence of Carthage, Tertullian, and Augustine, stating that ‘liberal learning’ in Europe only became possible due to Africans who ‘crossed from Africa into Spain’ with books by ‘ancient writers’. He concluded that all European scholars ‘owed a debt to Africa’.

However surprising such a non-colonial way of thinking might seem today, this was a rather typical worldview before the 1750s and the development of ‘scientific racism’ during the late Enlightenment. To find another example, we need look no further than the English thinker Thomas Hobbes, a contemporary of Zara Yaqob and Walda Heywat, and his main work, *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes matter-of-factly writes that philosophy began in Asia and Africa long before the discipline spread to the Greeks: ‘Where first were great and flourishing *Cities*, there was first the study of *Philosophy*. The *Gymnosophists* of *India*, the *Magi* of *Persia*, and the *Priests* of *Chaldaea* and *Egypt*, are counted the most ancient Philosophers; and those Countreys were the most ancient of Kingdomes’ (Hobbes 1968 [1651], 186).

Indeed, attributing the origin of learning to Africa was even more common among the ancients. For example, the Greek rhetorician Isocrates, Plato’s senior peer, wrote that ‘all men agree’ that the Egyptians ‘introduced philosophy’s training’ for ‘their soul’ (as translated in (Isocrates 1966, 115, Ch. 11.22)). Recent research supports this view, as it has found that the ancient Egyptian text of the *Book of Thoth* ‘forms a source of the Platonic text’ *Phaedrus* (Poetsch 2021, Abstract). After all, in this dialogue by Plato, Socrates also states that it was the Egyptians who ‘invented numbers and arithmetic and geometry and astronomy, also draughts and dice, and, most important of all, letters’ (as translated in (Plato 1947, 561, 274d)). In addition, twenty-first-century scholarship has demonstrated how even the term ‘philosopher’ (Greek: *philosophos*, ‘lover of wisdom’) seems to stem from an ancient Egyptian language and its term *mr-rḥ* (‘mer-rekh’, ‘lover of wisdom’), as attested in the *Book of Thoth* (Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 13; Rutherford 2016; Herbjørnsrud 2021a). In other words, philosophy is not a European invention.

Meanwhile, contemporaneous but separate philosophical traditions were active outside early modern Europe. For instance, in the 1530s, the Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún crossed the Atlantic and began a five-decades-long study of the thought systems of the Nahua people of Mesoamerica in today's Mexico. Writing decades before the birth of Descartes, Spinoza, and the modern European philosophical tradition, Sahagún noted that the Nahua (misleadingly known today as 'the Aztecs') had devoted philosophical scholars (*tlamatinime*, 'knowers of things')—both women and men. These thinkers taught girls and boys to consider the world's existential questions in dedicated schools (*calmecacs*), where the students enrolled from the age of eight. Sahagún wrote admiringly that, like the Greeks, it was 'the custom' of the Nahua to hold in 'high esteem' whatever was 'wise, eloquent, virtuous, and courageous' (as cited and translated in (Portilla 2002, 116). His bilingual work in both Nahua and Spanish, written after a detailed co-operation with Nahua scholars from 1540 to 1585, covers some 2,400 pages and 2,000 illustrations (by Nahua artists) over 12 books; one of which is dedicated to *Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy* (Sahagún 1969).

Even cherished views that Europeans alone developed scepticism and rationality have been disproven. Atheism and the critique of religions predate Europe and even Greece. Some 2,700 years ago, Indians had entire schools of thought developed to such. The atheist Lokayata and Carvaka schools were not just a crucial part of Indian discourse; they influenced the ancient Greeks and Epicurus (for example, via the Greek philosopher Pyrrho [365–270 BCE]), who travelled to India) and the early modern Europeans (for example, via the Jesuits, who from the 1580s reported on the philosophical and religious discussions at the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great, where the atheist Carvakas participated) (Gokhale 2015; Herbjørnsrud 2020).

The Chinese also were active in developing philosophy schools, including one that 'advanced the earliest form of consequentialism' (Fraser 2002). The philosopher Mo Zi (400s BCE) founded the Mohism school, which advocated a radical altruism of 'universal love'. In it, people 'would view other people as they view themselves' and thus combat the tragedy that 'the strong inevitably dominate the weak, the many inevitably plunder the few, the rich inevitably ridicule the poor' (as translated in (Mo Zi 2013, 77)).

Neither were anti-slavery polemics the invention of enlightened Europeans. In the early 1600s, the Timbuktu scholar Ahmad Baba (1556–1627) argued for an end to 'racial slavery', the enslavement of Black West Africans, by rejecting the 'Ham theory' that intelligence and skin colour were correlated. 'In this respect [of intelligence], there is no difference between races', Baba concluded (Barbour and Jacobs 1985; Cleaveland 2015). Before Baba, in his *Introduction* (Al-Muqaddimah, 1377) to his *Universal History*, the North African scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406)

stated that peoples' intelligence and character had nothing to do with their skin colour, an insight sadly lost to Hume, Kant, and the pseudo-scientific 'race studies' of the 1800s and 1900s (Abdullahi and Salawu 2012). This conclusion is in line with Khaldun's argument, written down five centuries before Darwin, that all humans are one, as there is 'a gradual process of creation' from apes: 'The higher stage of man is reached from the world of monkeys, in which both sagacity and perception are found, but which has not reached the stage of actual reflection and thinking. At this point we come to the first stage of man' (as translated in (Gribbin and Gribbin 2022, 10)).

Thus, this English translation of the Ethiopian *Hatata Inquiries* is part of a larger, rewritten canon that helps us to counter colonial narratives of the history of ideas and philosophy. Scholars, students, and the public now have access to the vast riches of a more global intellectual past. Through these texts, they will better understand highland Ethiopian intellectual history and its written tradition of many centuries.

Far from being a backwater outside the sweep of global history, Ethiopian scholars were in dialogue with scholars throughout the old world, including ancient Greek authors, the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers of Egypt, the medieval sages of Syria, Byzantium, and Arabia, and the early modern linguists and historians of Europe. Zara Yaqob and Walda Heywat often quote from the Bible, which was translated into Ge'ez by 600 CE. Walda Heywat references the sixteenth-century Ge'ez adaptation of the ninth-century Arabic book *The Sayings of the Philosophers*, composed by the ninth-century Arab scholar Hunain Ibn Ishaq, who in turn cited Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and relayed stories dating to fifth- and fourth-century BCE Egypt (Sumner 1974; Pietruschka 2005). Both Ethiopian authors would have known of the sixth-century Ge'ez translation of the third-century Egyptian *Physiologus*, a literary work on the natural world (Weninger 2005). Both would have known the fourteenth-century Ge'ez adaptation of *The Life and Maxims of Skendes*, purportedly the work of the second-century Greek philosopher Secundus (Weninger 2010; Perry 1964). They were part of the early global exchange of ideas.

The *Hatata Inquiries*, as texts questioning religion and the status quo, were not unique in Ethiopian intellectual history (as laid out in Belcher's introduction). The fourteenth-century Ethiopian monk Ewostatewos (1273–1352) led a radical movement 'in complete defiance of the rest of the Ethiopian Church' (Tadesse Tamrat 1972, 211), and his words are preserved in his hagiography (Fiaccadori 2005). The fifteenth-century followers of Abba Estifanos (known as Stephanites) were persecuted for arguing that monarchs had no 'natural or divine property' but rather 'the government belongs to God' and that monarchs should 'obey the law and govern

according to the law' (as cited and translated in (Mennasemay 2010, 11)). Their values, theories, and arguments are also preserved in texts. In other words, the *Hatata Inquiries* stand in a long history of critical thinking in Ethiopia. For all these reasons, they deserve to take their rightful place in the global canon of significant philosophical texts and can now do so with this vital new translation.

