

Zera Yacob's Hatata and the vitality of an Indigenous Ethiopian Philosophy

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Abstract

In today's globalized world, indigenous knowledge is seen as a way of mediating the gap between foreign and local forms of knowledge, envisioning a holistic and sustainable form of development and exploring the wisdom of indigenous cultures. To this extent, it develops a severe critique of programs of modernization and westernization, in return emphasizing the value of artistic, literary, environmental and ethical systems of thought extracted from local communities. Some of the contending labels through which the quest for indigenous knowledge finds expression include indigenous culture, art, environmental ethics, governance, conflict resolution and philosophy. This paper explores primarily the possibility of an indigenous Ethiopian philosophy through an analysis of the ideas of a modern Ethiopian philosopher, Zera Yacob. Animated by the religious controversies and disputes over the nature of true faith in modern Ethiopia, Zera Yacob developed a unique indigenous philosophy in his work- the Hatata. In this work, he grappled with questions of religious disputes and mutual coexistence, the relation between ethics and rationality, the laws of man, reason and God, and social and political issues amongst others. Through an interrogation of Zera Yacob's Hatata, this paper argues that, (1) Zera Yacob's philosophy, by developing a system of philosophy guided by the light of reason challenges Western conceptions of Africa and Africans as pre-logical, barbaric and uncivilized, (2) the Hatata introduced a rational foundation for ethics that could be used to analyze everyday moral dilemmas, and (3) the Hatata emphasized the notion of religious pluralism which could be used to settle religious disputes and controversies at this point in time.

Key Words; Indigenous Philosophy, Hatata, Religious pluralism.

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Introduction

There is a growing discontent with conventional models of development and modernization being founded exclusively on material progress and the application of science and technology. Such criticism view these conventional developmental theories as Eurocentric for setting Western cultural values and instrumental rationality as the goal of all civilizations. The attempt to seek a resolution usually concentrates on what is neglected, suppressed and discarded out of the conceptions of western modernization.

An alternative approach is found in the idea of affirming indigenous, local and traditional forms of life and visions of development. The idea of the indigenous further emerges in different forms encompassing the areas of knowledge, values, development, politics, and culture and alternative modalities of existence. This paper focuses particularly on the vitality of an indigenous philosophy that not only seeks to provide logical answers to some of the most fundamental questions individuals face in their lives but also attempts to offer an alternative platform for development. After attending to the question, is philosophy ever indigenous since it tries to contemplate the universal, the paper looks at an indigenous Ethiopian philosophy finding expression in the ideas of the seventeenth century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob's work the Hatata.

The Hatata is a philosophical treatise that emerged in the background of religious disputes and controversies and introduced a philosophy that is critical of religion, conventional conceptions of knowledge and truth, and has serious implications for social, political and ethical philosophy. The work also demonstrates Zera Yacob's personal journey as a thinker and the importance of developing a rational foundation for issues of truth and values in any society. The Hatata also emerges as a unique text in having affinities with the ideas of modern Western philosophers and in developing a written and individualized philosophical tradition within the African context.

I will start off my discussion by highlighting the recently growing interest in indigenous knowledge and culture, and its implications for indigenous philosophy. Next, I will describe the background that engendered Zera Yacob's the Hatata and the historical and political context that animated his philosophical pursuits. In the third section I will identify and discuss the basic tenets of Zera Yacob's philosophy in terms of metaphysical, epistemic, social, ethical and religious considerations amongst others. Finally, I will highlight the significant relevance and potential the Hatata has for countering eurocentrism and the imposition of western values, for developing a rational foundation for ethics, and for enriching the dialogue on religious pluralism.

The idea of indigenous knowledge and philosophy

According to Brouwer (1998) there is a current emphasis on the role of local indigenous knowledge for global society, hand in hand with exploring the technical aspects of indigenous knowledge and the centrality of local wisdom in proposing alternative versions of development and relations to the physical environment. Here, the major alternative conceptions of indigenous knowledge are "academic (ethno science and human ecology) and development focused (farming systems and participatory development)" (Brouwer, 1998, 351). He further observes that indigenous knowledge, through an emphasis on sustainable development and harmonious coexistence, is seen these days as the solution to the contradictions of development. In the process, it is redefining the very notion of development

driven by capitalism and is universalistic, consumerist and instrumentalist in its orientation. Thus, "in contrast to the past, when traditional knowledge were typically seen as obstacles to development, it is now claimed by some that these are pivotal to discussions on sustainable development resource use and balanced development."(*Ibid*, 661)

Upon a recognition of the failure of developmental schemes, the limits of quantitative models of development and the problems in the adoption of developmental schemes, indigenous knowledge is presented as an alternative paradigm that is inclusive in realizing participatory development. Thus, the "recognition of indigenous knowledge presented the development community with alternative experiences with which to challenge conventional development praxis." (*Ibid*, 662) In order to add a holistic dimension to the conception of indigenous knowledge, there is a need to mediate the conceptual quest for knowledge with instrumental considerations and fine-tune theoretical frameworks with technical efforts. Furthermore, a methodological orientation that seeks a genuine appropriation amongst indigenous and other systems of knowledge as well as translation must be practically instituted. There is a need for instituting legal mechanisms to protect indigenous knowledge from piracy in the world of global capitalism and also for assessing the validity of indigenous knowledge in a fresh eye that goes beyond the Eurocentric perspective.

In considering the utility of indigenous knowledge, Morris (2010) argues that the essence of indigenous knowledge must be contextualized in the various practices of a culture towards the immediate environment. Upon recognition of the failure of conventional and Western systems of education, there is a current focus on indigenous knowledge and local philosophical thoughts and ideals. Still a lack of conceptual clarity exists in the field. Going beyond the ideological usage of indigenous knowledge as a category to degrade Non-Western cultures, Morris argues that indigenous knowledge "simply means the knowledge that ordinary people have of their local environment: environs meaning what is around us" (Morris, 2010, 1). Some of the main features of indigenous knowledge include local cultures and their crucial role in the construction of ideas, its dissemination to local cultures, verifiability, practical utility, non-systematic nature, dynamism and furnishing either a man-centered or bio-centered approaches toward the environment. Here one needs to ponder the viability and practical utility of indigenous knowledge in the African context.

For Derman(2003) the prospect of indigenous knowledge in Africa is presented in terms of the opposition between progress and tradition, modernity and culture. In Africa, the indigenous knowledge of local communities is associated with oneness with nature, sustainability as an alternative model of development and resisting of Western influence. Thus, "development has overwhelmingly been viewed as antagonistic to indigenous peoples and knowledges" (Derman , 2003, 68). Furthermore there is an emphasis on the peace and harmony brought by indigenous knowledge sharply contrasted to the conflict and chaos brought by Western technical knowledge. Going beyond mere imitation, there is a need to understand the emergence and function of indigenous knowledge as well as its dynamism with alternative modes.

From a philosophical point of view, the existence of an indigenous philosophy reflecting on the fundamental questions of knowledge and born out of the local is questionable. Here, whereas the Universalist position claims that all philosophy as a rational exercise is global in its nature, the historicists emphasizes the local, cultural and relative experience. Thus, one should ask, "Is the nature of philosophy purely speculative, practical, or both?"(Medina, 1992,

373) What further complicates the issue is the fact that whereas culture is necessarily bound to a temporal location, the philosophical quest always contemplates the universal.

Exploring the background to the Hatata

Concerning the possibility of an indigenous philosophy in Africa, the question arises, is philosophy a mere contemplation that is purely abstract, or is it dictated by cultural constructs? To what extent are philosophies driven by modes of cognition, and not by external social and political considerations? The conception of indigenous philosophy in Africa is mostly narrowly conceived as a situated form of knowledge limited by space and time. Thus, one asks how independent indigenous knowledge is from culture and local values. Furthermore, indigenous philosophy in Africa is part of a critique of colonialism where the indigenous is the foundation of uniqueness, freedom and emancipation. Thus, "the debate over the role of indigeneity in African philosophy is part of the larger postcolonial discourse." (Masolo, 2003, 22) Resisting the attempt to confine indigenous philosophy to the local, all philosophy including the indigenous one for Masolo (2003) should be founded on our experience, interaction with others and the rational accounts of the human condition.

For Teodros Kiros (1996), any analysis of the role of philosophy on the Ethiopian soil must underscore the contributions of the Canadian philosopher Claude Sumner to Ethiopian philosophy. Sumner introduced a large philosophical scheme which managed to analyze the indigenous, traditional, oral, written and modern philosophical approaches on the Ethiopian soil. Sumner studied indigenous, oral wisdoms reflecting on societal values, critical philosophical adaptations into the Ethiopian soil as well as original philosophical works. Here, "assessing the contributions of Ethiopian philosophers, he contends that these modalities of philosophizing are of two kinds [i.e., broadly focused, and strictly focused]. The broadly philosophical are also unoriginal but adoptive and creatively incorporative. The strictly philosophical are distinctly original." (Kiros, 1996, 41) Particularly belonging into the written Ethiopian philosophical traditions, Zera Yacob's Hatata constituted a philosophical biography and methodology that sought a rational analysis for religious disputes through a rational model, having implications for social and political philosophy and serving as a model of religious pluralism.

As Mudimbe (1988) explains in his work *The Invention of Africa*, there are unique features that only belong to Ethiopian philosophy. Being an area of critical synthesis, the critical adaptation of foreign philosophies into the Ethiopian soil and original philosophical treatise are identified as the main corpus of Ethiopian philosophy. Specifically the philosophical investigations of Zera Yacob and Welda Heywat demonstrate the value of local contexts of knowledge and space in philosophical pursuits. As such, "one cannot ignore that some of them, such as the books of Zar'a Yacob and Walda Heywat, witness to a regional inspiration" (Mudimbe, 1988, 203) Zera Yacob's philosophy originated in the context of religious controversies and disputes. Growing up in a religious setting, Zera Yacob passionately enquired into issues of truth, differences of opinions amongst the followers of different religions and the ability of the rational human heart to discover the nature of knowledge. As a religious teacher Zera Yacob engaged in a continual dialogue amongst the members of different religions, but always faced difficulty in trying to find a medium that could settle religious controversies once and for all.

After being charged for heresy and for trying to dismantle the status and legitimacy of the Christian religion during the time of Emperor Susenyos, Zera Yacob found himself in exile retreating to escape persecution. Such a retreat allowed Zera Yacob with the time and space to contemplate about the extent of destruction perpetuated in the name of religion, the harmony between the will of God, nature and human rationality, and the need to devise a philosophical understanding of everyday issues of human existence. Hence, for him “truth and morality are universal and cannot be attained through the directives of organized religion.”(Teshome, 2016, 232) Zera Yacob's Hatata emerges as a form of meditation where the secluded thinker reflects on the nature of truth, reality and the nature of human cognition. It shows that a detachment from society and everyday life could be a prerequisite for reflecting on the nature of truth, and the idea that one must always distinguish between opinion and knowledge, popular wisdom and firm ideas, in order to discover the nature of reality and existence.

The personal journey of Zera Yacob as an individual served as a major element of his philosophical engagements. In the Hatata he details his background in the Christian faith, the religious teaching that he went through as a student, his encounter with the members of different religions, his forced exile life, and subsequently the formation and maturity of his philosophical ideas. As such, his philosophy is an autobiographical exercise where daily problems like the nature of evil and human nature, conflict with other members of different religions and the despair that one feels in trying to contemplate the nature of truth served as motivations for philosophical analysis.

Transcending the bounds of one's tradition and custom, questioning mythology and superstition as well as popular interpretations of religious truth are key elements of Zera Yacob's philosophical system. On the other hand, he believed that it is only reason that illuminates the nature of truth and sheds light on the darkness of humanity's predicament state of living in conflict, mutual animosity and destruction. The method that Zera Yacob introduced in his philosophy is the Hatata. This constitutes a detailed analysis of claims to truth, analyzing opinions, seeking to analyze texts and lived experience as well as studying what is required for the human mind to discover the nature of truth proceeding through different levels of awareness. This led Zera Yacob to argue that prayer is a way of preparing one's soul to discovering the truth, and that there is no antithesis between faith and reason, since prayer itself is a kind of rational contemplation where God reveals his essence to the individual, and the rational human heart understands the nature of human reality.

Basic tenets of Zera Yacob's philosophy in the Hatata

Organized and structured as an autobiography, Zera Yacob's philosophical work the Hatata deals with diverse topics. It begins with a brief recounting of his life history: his background in religious teaching, his quarrels with members of different religions and his subsequent forced exile. Once Zera Yacob situates his philosophical origins, he goes on to discuss the nature of knowledge and everyday opinion, the problem of theodicy. He also examines the doctrines of different religions and investigates the role of prayer and the human heart in the understanding of ultimate reality. Finally, Zera Yacob discusses how he eventually met his master and produced his philosophical treatise motivated by one of his disciples.

Zera Yacob starts his Hatata by asserting that God reveals His wisdom to those who approach Him and seek knowledge. Here, he relates his background to the influence of both indigenous as well as foreign religious teaching. He claims, “I learned the interpretations both of the Frang and of our own scholars”. (Sumner, 1976, 4) His philosophy is as such influenced by

the introduction of Catholicism in Ethiopia during the reign of Susenyos and the resulting religious disputes and conflicts. In the Hatata Zera Yacob asks, all proclaim to have the truth, but truth is one, so how could one discover the nature of ultimate truth? He assumes, "the Frang say this and this" or "the Copts say that and that", and I did not say "This is good, that is bad" (Ibid, 5). Due to his enquiries and investigations, he was charged with heresy and trying to dismantle the power of the king. Fearing persecution Zera Yacob flees, retreats into a cave and begins to contemplate the nature of truth and human nature.

One major issue that he raises in the Hatata has to do with the nature of evil. Formulating his propositions in terms of the problem of theodicy, Zera Yacob asks, "If God is all good and all loving; then, why doesn't He interfere in the face of evil? Why is there destruction and suffering in the world? What accounts for the differences in faith in the world?" As a way of finding answers to his investigations, he asks "What is the object of prayer, and whom am I praying to?" Here he arrives at the conclusion that there must be a creator to account for thought and consciousness and to explain the nature of the origin of life and everything else that exists. Thus, "he who created them from nothing must be an uncreated essence" (Ibid, 6). Avoiding infinite regression and recourse to unlimited causes, Zera Yacob finally arrives at the conclusion that God is the final cause that is not caused and the source of motion and life.

Once Zera Yacob offers a rational argumentation for the existence of God, he next asks, which faith and religious script is right, given that all religions claim to have truth. He states, "later on I thought, saying to myself, is everything written in the holy scriptures true" (Ibid,7). Here, he contends that the nature of truth must be explored by reason than by an appeal to customary interpretation or the doctrines of a given religion. For Zera Yacob everything that has intelligence has a purpose, and human beings are only immersed in the world of opinions because they are after earthly rewards and shun rational analysis. As such, mankind is more interested in material goods than truth and wisdom. They believe in popular mythology and superstition than the will of God.

Zera Yacob is highly critical of the idea that God discriminates amongst individuals and cultures and is only revealed to some people and cultures. According to him the teachings of religions are more ideological and involved in power relations than truth and so the faithful must discover the truth by reason which God has endowed them with. Here he assumes that fasting is anti-nature; slavery goes against the fundamental equality of men; and polygamy disrupts the principle of harmony in nature. As Hallen remarks, "In Zar'a Ya'aqob, reason is presented as a light which sheds clarity on the object it focuses upon. It is God-given, and belongs to all men. It enables them to distinguish truth from falsehood" (Hallen, 2002, 9) For Zera Yacob all men are equal either in terms of their rational capabilities or in terms of possessing intelligence. In his view, God gave us freedom of the will, and truth could only be discovered by reason alone. He argues, "To the person who seeks it, truth is immediately revealed" (Sumner, 1976, 9). He believes that ultimate wisdom resides in belief in God, respecting others and affirming the principle of mutual recognition. This provides the foundation for human labor, industry and material relations.

After the death of emperor Susenyos, Zera Yacob comes out of the cave, yet he didn't want to return into teaching since he believed that his views were at odds with the existing beliefs of the society. During the same period he also witnesses the persecution of foreigners by Fasiledes and the famine that spread throughout the land. Zera Yacob wrote his philosophical treatise at the request of his student and his master's son Welda Heywat. Zera Yacob didn't

identify himself as a Christian and saw his work as unfinished and as one that lays the ground for further investigation and scientific investigation.

Lessons from the Hatata

In the previous sections, I discussed the origin of Zera Yacob's philosophy, the major philosophical problems that he grappled with and the major areas of concern in his philosophical output. Here, I will identify some key lessons from the Hatata that could be used in developing an indigenous philosophical tradition that refutes the Eurocentric conception of humanity which degrades Africans, establishing a rational foundation for ethics that facilitates an analysis of everyday moral problems and finally could contribute to the dialogue on religious pluralism and guide the relations amongst different religions with the idea of rational analysis and dialogical encounters.

The eurocentrism of Western philosophy resides in proclaiming that Europe and the West are the origins of human civilizations and that human history is a movement towards imitating the superior cultural values of the West. Simultaneously, this view assumes that non-western cultures have no contribution to human civilization. The proponents of this view contend that western philosophy is individualistic and a rational exercise; whereas, other societies are communal, pre-logical and dwell in non-rational modalities of existence.

There are different ways of countering such eurocentrism. One counter narrative is found in African philosophy which emerged as part of the attempt to facilitate the process of mental decolonization within the African psyche. African philosophers in many ways tried to show that philosophical wisdom and categories indeed exist amongst African cultures and communities. This was carried out in terms of extracting indigenous philosophical wisdom, studying programs of political liberation and also looking for original thinkers in African traditional communities.

Zera Yacob's philosophy contributes to this project of mental decolonization and self-affirmation of Africans in a number of ways. First, it provides evidence for the existence of a philosophical approach that is comparable with mainstream western philosophy. The tools of analysis used by Zera Yacob are comparable to Descartes' methodic doubt; furthermore both Descartes and Zera Yacob appeal to rational categories of analysis to prove the existence of God. Second, Zera Yacob's philosophy constitutes a fully developed and systematic philosophy including ontological, ethical and social teachings amongst others. Here, recognizing the valuable contribution of Ethiopian philosophy to African philosophy, Bell argues the discourse on African philosophy must accommodate "the recent translations and availability of Ethiopian written philosophical texts from as early as the third century BCE, the important texts of the early sixteenth century, *The Book of the Philosophers*, and from the seventeenth century, *The Treatise of Zär'a Yacob and of Walda Heywat*." (Bell, 2002, 31). Such contribution is also witnessed in the area of ethics and religious pluralism.

Significant aspects of Zera Yacob's philosophy are devoted to the analysis of ethical dilemmas and moral problems. He analyzes the nature of abstract moral issues like the nature of evil, human nature and their compatibility with the essence of God on one hand and particular questions like the nature of fasting, marriage, slavery and relations between men and women on the other.

He refuted divine command theory by arguing that reason alone and not faith must be the foundation of morality. As such he tried to formulate a set of moral principles based on the

harmony between laws of nature and human intellect. As Teshome sees it, the “ethical philosophy for which Zera Yacob is most noted was the principle of harmony.---The other ethical principle, which was dictated by Zera Yacob is respecting living by the fruit of work.”(2016, 436) Zera Yacob believed that tradition, custom and mythological accounts cannot serve as foundations of ethics. In stead he advocated for mutual benefit, reciprocal relations and a life of virtue and moral excellence for the individual. Such moral aspirations also guided Zera Yacob's analysis of religious coexistence.

There is an existential threat posed by extremism, fundamentalism and nationalism in today's world. This challenges the move towards universal and secular forms of life by seeking a refuge in particular forms of life and identities. Some of the solutions that are proposed to counter such challenges include instituting a culture of rational dialogue and secularism. Here Zera Yacob's Hatata exemplifies the usage of rational mediums in settling religious disputes.

The issue of religious pluralism is a central element in Zera Yacob's philosophy. His philosophy is developed in such a way that particular answers regarding the nature of fasting, marriage and women as well as general concerns of the existence of God are used to realize coexistence amongst members of different religions. Rather than subscribing to one religion, he tried to introduce a secular model that equally appeals to all humans. Such a philosophy appeals to the contemporary world where religious pluralism is one major challenge. Following the ideas of the philosopher of religion John Hick, one can safely contend that religion served as a source of conflict in the past as well as in the present world of globalization. What aggravates dispute over religion for Hick is the fact that each religion gives itself a task of illuminating the truth and in return other religions are treated in relations of inferiority. (Hick, 2005, 1) Zera Yacob overcomes such an insistence in introducing a model that equally actualizes the rational faculty of individual human beings.

As Zera Yacob rightfully shows in the Hatata, we transfer our religious values from one generation to the other. Here each culture elevates the religious value it inherits into the level of universality. Zera Yacob's philosophy emerged in a context where people's lives were marked by large differences in geography and spatial location, yet his work is still immersed with the power relations, the religious disputes and the realities of the day. Such a philosophy even finds more credibility in today's world that Hick describes as a stage where people are aware of the existence of different religions and the fact that developing a response to other religions and worldviews is a crucial task. (*Ibid*, 2)

Zera Yacob's background served as a motivation to his philosophical endeavor. Having a crisis of faith regarding the basic tenets of his religion and highly desatisfied with the major religions of the day, Zera Yacob argued that if truth is left to the religious scholars and to common sense it becomes relatively determined by a particular religion, whereas if it is analyzed through the power of reason, a universal model of settling all disputes could be developed. Through this and similar philosophical investigations, Zera Yacob resisted the exclusivist tendency to posit one's religion as the only pathway to the truth.

Zera Yacob also didn't embrace the inclusive approach which identifies religious truth as having specific forms of expression on different religions. In return he argued that reason is the only way for settling religious disputes. For him individual religions are not partial representations of a general truth but distortions where interpretation shadows the nature of truth. Zera Yacob's version of religious pluralism is unique because rather than recognizing the truth of different religions he tried to introduce the rational human heart as a model that

transcends earthly interpretations. Such an approach assumes that once reflected on the nature of truth, God emerges as the source of life, faith as a harmonious aid to reason, and universal truth as being accessible to the human mind.

Conclusion

Zera Yacob's Hatata is a methodological tool and rational analysis that originated in the context of religious disputes and controversies in modern Ethiopia. Fueled by religious quarrels, Zera Yacob tried to introduce a systematic philosophy that primarily reflects on inherited religions and differences amongst different religions, the role of the intellect in disclosing the nature of reality and the existence of evil promoted by diverging interpretations of religious truth.

For Zera Yacob, there is only one truth, and the different interpretations of religions emerge not from cognitive truth but particular interests and the aspirations of men. Furthermore, the nature of truth is to be discovered by reason and human intellect alone. In the course of his philosophical investigations, Zera Yacob developed a philosophy with profound implications for ontology and metaphysics, social and political philosophy, ethics, and religious pluralism.

Most of all, one could grasp the lessons of resisting Western cultural influence by analyzing and exploring the philosophical wisdom found in the Hatata. Besides this, the Hatata also provides key lessons in the ethics of virtue and mutual coexistence as well as coexistence amongst different religions.

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