



## **Philosophy in Zara Yacob's ሐተታ “hatata”**

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### **Abstract**

This article is intended to explore Zara Yacob's Ethiopian philosopher, the philosophy which embodies metaphysical, epistemological and ethical position as an effort to add to the development of Ethiopian philosophy. The philosopher who played a leading role in introducing the works of the Ethiopian philosopher to the world of philosophy is Claude Sumner. Hence, based on the works of Sumner, this article focused on the philosophy of Zara Yacob of Ethiopia as an intention to disclose the philosophical questions his philosophy attempted to answer and problems that it aspired to solve. In Zara Yacob's ሐተታ "Hatata" the conflict among religion is addressed with the 'truth' for which Zara Yacob criticizes different religions and underlines the universality of truth.

In “Hatata” Zara Yacob presented his philosophy in written form. This written philosophical work is translated and deeply analyzed by Claud Sumner and handed down to the present generation. The works of Zara Yacob reveal that Ethiopia has a written philosophical tradition.

The basis for Zara Yacob's philosophy is his surroundings which proves the beginning of philosophy is a wonder. Zara Yacob observed the experiences of people with whom he was living in how they act towards reality. Therefore, the philosophy of Zara Yacob is from the real experiences of his and the people with whom he was living. Zara Yacob's philosophy is grounded in the social, cultural and political environment of his time.

However, Zara Yacob's philosophy would be nothing without the contribution of Claude Sumner in translating and analyzing the work into English.

In this study, the method involved to study Zara Yacob's philosophy in the “Hatata” is philosophical which depends on the analysis of arguments on the principle of logic. It involved a critical analysis of the Zara Yacob's philosophy in ሐተታ “Hatata” as translated and presented in Sumner's work.

**Keywords:** Zara Yacob, ሐተታ “Hatata”, Sumner, Philosophy

### **1. Introduction**

The main objective of this article is to analyze the philosophy of Zara Yacob in "Hatata". The main reason is that Zara Yacob is the principal founder of the written philosophical tradition in Ethiopia (Teodros 2004: 183-190) [12]. In this philosophical work, the contribution of Sumner, who is a Canadian by birth in translating and analyzing many of the Ethiopian philosophical works, including the philosophy of Zara Yacob in “Hatata” is immense. Sumner is the leading scholar in introducing Zara Yacob philosophy to the world ([www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Afri/AfriKiro.htm](http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Afri/AfriKiro.htm)).

Like many parts of Africa, the Ethiopian philosophical tradition is dominated by the tradition of orality (Teodros 2004: 183-190) [12]. However, Zara Yacob's work which is translated and analyzed by Sumner is an original philosophical work that begins with Zara Yacob's life History (Sumner 2004: 172-182) [8].

Verharen (2013) [15] in his critique of, Messay's refutation of Zara Yacob as a philosopher is simply based on Messay's notion of philosophy as a way of basic knowledge of the initiation of scientific knowledge. For Messay the work of Zara Yacob is simply focusing on the country's unity and solidarity. Zara Yacob's work for Messay is not a philosophical critique of the reality of the time (Verharen, 2013: 71) [15]. For Verharen, Messay *failed* to understand that science stranded in faith (Ibid).

According to Sumner and Vernharn, in the work of Habte,

the philosophy of Zara Yacob is much better than other European philosophers (Habte, 2012: 131) [3]. He is the most prominent philosopher of the seventeenth century (Hallen, 2002:7 and Tassew, 2004: 13) [11].

Zara Yacob's ሐተታ “Hatata” and how he critically involved in studying the philosophical questions he raised through the rule of logic as a documented evidence is an emblem for the argument that Africa has a philosophy (Hallen 2002: 12) [4].

Ethiopians have their scripts for centuries before some of today's developed countries are not known on the world map. Geez which is an ancient Ethiopian language was used as a written language by the Ethiopian in which Zara Yacob himself wrote his ሐተታ "hatata" or treatises and studied the "Zema" (sacred music taught in church schools), the "Qene" ("poetry" or "hymns"), and also the "Sewasew" ("The interpretation of Scripture") in the ancient school of Ethiopia using this ancient Ethiopian language. As most of the Ethiopian written work Zara Yacob's philosophy is an undeniably original work, the fruit of his thinking and not a translation or an adaptation from foreign sources (Sumner 2004: 172-182) [9].

It is important to notice here that there were lots of philosophers in the ancient Ethiopian education tradition which need further study. This is because in ancient Ethiopian education curriculum philosophical study is the kernel of the system of education.

### Philosophy in ሐተታ “hatata”

Like many philosophers in Zara Yacob's philosophical journey, he questioned many things that he observed in his surroundings. Some of these issues are the question of reality, truth, morality and how people interpret the issues from their viewpoint. Wondering about the behavior of people following different religions, he tried to answer the entire question through his methodological investigation called ሐተታ “hatata”.

ሐተታ “Hatata” according to Sumner is “to question bit by bit, piecemeal; to search into or through, to investigate accurately; to examine; to inspect” (Sumner, 1986) <sup>[10]</sup>.

This method of inspection about the various questions he raised as philosophical questions help him to prove the existence of God, truth, and ethical life. The method of inquiry which Zara Yacob used to prove the existence of God, the nature of truth and moral life is critical. This is because critical thinking is thinking based on a systematic investigation. That is, through reasoned thinking.

Even though, there is no consensus on defining what rationality exactly is. For a philosopher to be a rationalist, he/she has to give priority to reason over the experience. He / She is one who exercises the rule of logic and logical consistency (Dancy et al, 2010, 663) <sup>[11]</sup>. Sumner defines rationalism as "... as the view which recognizes as true only the content of faith which can be appealed for reason (Sumner 1986: 36) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Reasoned thinking is the central theme in Zara Yacob ሐተታ “Hatata”. In his work, he critically investigates how emotional expression has an impact on worldly experiences, especially with the community we live in. This is revealed in Zara Yacob's work in explaining the faith of different groups of people. Zara Yacob questioned why a group of people behave in the knowledge, faith or experience they directly gain through life experiences instead of questioning it through reasoned thinking.

He asked a group of people such as ‘Frange’ (foreigner), Islam, the Jews, and respected educated Ethiopians all responded and interpreted all things according to their faith. Zara Yacob questioned which one's faith is true? Having only one true? Who is the arbiter or judge who tells us the one truth from all this faith? (Zara Yacob in Sumner 1985: 234).

For philosopher Zara Yacob truth is one and universal to know this truth, it is important to use reasoned thinking that is ‘the light in our heart’. This light can help us to know the existence of God instead of relying on what others tell us and heard from a structured religion.

How did Zara Yacob try to investigate the existence of God? He passed through different steps based on reasoned thinking. The method he used is the method of doubting as it did by Descartes. He critically examines where does he come? Though not doubting his existence as Descartes did. Zara Yacob asked himself several questions and tries to answer the questions through reasoned thinking. He tried to answer the existence of God through reasoned thinking in the following way.

*"Where do I come from? Had I lived before the creator of the world, I would have known the beginning of my life and of the consciousness [of myself] that created me? Was I created by my own hands? But I didn't exist before I was created. If I say that my father and my mother created me, then I must search for the creator of my parents and the*

*parents of my parents until they arrive at the first who were not created as we [are] but who came into this world in some other way without being generated. For if they have been created, I know nothing of their origin unless I say, 'He who created them from nothing must be an uncreated essence who is and will be for all centuries [to come] the lord and master of all things, without beginning or end, immutable, whose years cannot be numbered.' And I said: 'Therefore, there is a creator; else there would have been no creation. This creator who endowed us with the gifts of intelligence and reason, cannot he be without them? For he created us as intelligent beings from the abundance of this intelligence and the same one being comprehended all, creates all, is almighty.' And I used to say: 'my creator will hear me if I pray to him,' and because of this thought I felt very happy."* (Zara Yacob in Sumner, 1985:233).

The philosopher even asked himself who provides him with an ear to hear?, Who created him as a thinking being and how he existed on this planet? (Ibid). All these things are impossible for him and so the creator must exist before him. Zara Yacob after proving the existence of God. He started to admire all that is created by God by saying that nature and reason are good because they are created by God. According to him, we know the existence of an uncreated being who created him and his parents by the gift of light provided in our heart which is the “the light in our heart”. Hence, Zara Yacob felt happy and started thinking that he can communicate with the creator which the uncreated is being the almighty through praying.

Zara Yacob's understanding of reality in ሐተታ "Hatata" can be explained by placing his metaphysical investigations in the cultural forces of the time. One can observe his idea about reality and the cultures of society; he is living in the way they perceived reality. As Zara Yacob mentioned individuals are making sense of reality simply by what they heard from forefathers without investigating through the intelligence endowed by the creator in human beings. According to philosopher Zara Yacob, our conception of God must be based on reasoned thinking. The reason is that God created a human being as an intelligent being. The Creator existed and this can be known by reason that He endowed of all men to understand all things that they perceived is created, and for creatures to exist there must be a Creator (Zara Yacob in Sumner1985:239). Finally, he concluded that the existence of God is "pure truth"(Ibid).

Zara Yacob tried to disprove the relativistic interpretations of truth developed through organized religion. For the philosopher ‘truth is one’. It is possible to search for this universal truth through reason alone. The reason that Zara Yacob propounds about is ‘the light of reason’ located in our hearts. Zara Yacob said, "When all people agree on one thing, that thing appears to be true; but not all men may agree on falsehood..." (Zara Yacob in Sumner 1985:239). In the organized religion, according to Zara Yacob all are behaving in the way the Holy Scriptures are interpreted in the group to which they belong. He reached this conclusion while he interviewed different people such as the foreigner, indigenous scholars; those belong to Islam, Jews, Catholics and the like. This helps Zara Yacob to develop a solid methodology which he calls ሐተታ “Hatata”. ሐተታ "Hatata" is reasoned thought by classifying different issues, critically examining them and search for universal truth. Hence, according to the philosopher God endowed us the power to search for truth and to choose either truth or falsehood as we

all wish. In the philosopher's word "God has indeed given reason to all and everyone so that they may know truth and falsehood, the power to choose between the two, as they will"(ibid240). It is reason which helps individuals to be free from subjective understanding and a group of believers from relativistic interpretation relying simply on what they heard from others. To be sure about something that they simply inherited without critically examining by the power endowed with them is improper for the philosopher. For him instead of relying on what we heard from our father, mother or other relatives, it is important to investigate by our Gods have given intelligence through reasoning alone (Teshome 2016: 431-439). It is unquestionable to use the intelligence human being gifted by God to hunt for the truth. He explained it in this way "... to the person who seeks it, truth is revealed. Indeed, he who investigates with the pure intelligence set by the creator in the heart of each man and scrutinizes the order and laws of creation will discover the truth"( Zara Yacob in Sumner, 1985:236).

God endowed all, people reason to differentiate truth from falsity and the willpower to choose from them. It is those people who are reluctant from critical examination or reasoned thinking that prefer falsity over truth. The nature of man led him/her to choose falsehood from truth. The main reason is the unwillingness to use the intelligence gifted from the Creator. However, the creator who endowed human beings with such gifts, intelligence and reason He works with them (Zara Yacob in Sumner, 1985:233). The idea is similar to the verses in the Bible "God created man in his image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them"(Genesis 1:27). That is why according to the philosopher God endowed all men with intelligence and reason that He uses.

It is always a question for Zara Yacob why all men prefer falsehood from truth. He answered in his word, in the following way.

*... I said to myself: 'why is that all men do not adhere to truth instead of [believing] falsehood?' [The cause] seemed to be the nature of man, which is weak and sluggish. Man aspires to know the truth and the hidden things of nature, but this endeavor is difficult and can only be attained with great labor and patience... Hence people hastily accept what they have heard from their fathers and shy from any [critical] examination. But God created man to be master of his actions so that he will be what he wills to be...(Zara Yacob in Sumner 1985:235)*

The reason that human being adheres to falsehood is that they overlooked the willpower to choose the truth by the God-given intelligence that enables to think critically about all things. According to the philosopher God created a human being as unique beings, hence if they use their willpower to the maximum level, it enables them to differentiate truth from falsehood, and can reliably choose truth over falsehood (Teodros 2004: 185) <sup>[12]</sup>. The problem is men pretend as if he knows all things. However, he knows nothing that is why preferring a lie over truth at the level of destroying themselves from this planet (Zara Yacob in Sumner1985:234).

The other issue of part of philosophy which Zara Yacob is concerned about is morality. The philosopher gives a high emphasis on the law of God than the law of man. The law of man is inadequate compared to the law of God. It is mainly

because human being gives priority to the law of man that forces him to choose falsehood over truth.

According to the philosopher, the only way to act correctly is through the guidance of the law of God, it implies that what comes from God is long-lasting but for the things in which the source is from the man, it is temporary (Teodros 2004:185) <sup>[14]</sup>. For Zara Yacob truth can be reached only through the order and laws of God (Teshome2016:434). That is why Teodros(2004) <sup>[14]</sup> said "by recognizing Zara Yacob as inspiring philosophical figure, I may more genuinely appreciate his true philosophical contribution, in the traditional classification of philosophy, one of which is the great contribution he has made to the knowledge of ethics"(Ibid 435).

The principle of harmony, the equality of human beings, the right of women, respecting living by the fruit of work, the badness of slavery, respecting one another, and eating habits are some of the ethical principles that Zara Yacob dealt with in his philosophy of ethics.

One of the ideas in his ethical philosophy is his statement about human nature for him human being by nature is liars. As a result, it is difficult to depend on the doctrine of man to reach the truth (Zara Yacob in Sumner1985:240). He advised it is essential to rely on God's guidance through reasoned thinking. Leading by the doctrine of man will destroy not only the order that God set in nature but also man's order. Zara Yacob's basic principle supports the law of God over the law of man. In the principle of harmony, he dictated that human being is responsible for his action. It is his action that makes him responsible for both the bad and good things to happen (Zara Yacob in Sumner1985:235). If bad things happened due to the action of men, according to the philosopher the action is inconsistent or against the law of God resulted in punishment. It is good actions or practices by men that resulted in good health, peace, and happiness. For things in which the action is against God's law will result in instability.

According to the philosopher When God created human being he created all equal. The differences that exist are not because of God, but because of the imperfection of human beings. God is perfect and created all equal and all are equally gifted. He did not ascribe one to life and the other to death, one for compassion and the other for judgment (Zara Yacob in Sumner1985:239). It is only through reasoned thinking that we can understand the equality of men. It is the reason that can tell a human being that God created all equal, the inequality that prevails is not the will of God who is perfect (Ibid). In the question of equality, Zara Yacob also affirms gender equality. For him, both men and women are created equal. There are no differences, all human beings in the eyes of God are equal.

Zara Yacob while he was teaching in his district, he disliked by many. During that time, according to the philosopher, there was no real friendship on our planet one is bitter over the other. However, he exceeded the other in knowledge and the principle that he followed is the love of one's neighbors. This helps him to live peacefully with both the foreigners and Copts (Ibid). One can learn from this that we only have to use reason to behave with others by loving them truly. This is the knowledge that we exceed from others who are jealous and led by what they heard from others without using reasoned thinking.

Living by the fruits of one's work is one of the principles that Zara Yacob gives a value which is the dignity of work.

It is when he started living by the stipend paid to him by the rich man Habitu, in teaching his child and the work he provides him to copy David from Bible is one of the days that he felt happy in his life and praise God. Sumner (1978) stated in the work of Zara Yacob and his disciples the value of work has an important place in their essay.

The philosopher is against the superiority of monastic life recommended by Christians over marriage. It is against the law of nature created by God. Marriage life is not impure. However, it has to be monogamous which human being is destined by God for the continuation of generation (Zara Yacob in Sumner 1985:236). He also refuted the religion which propounds slavery.

As a life principle, Zara Yacob advocates the Golden rule. Accordingly, for him killing, stealing, lying and adultery has to be illegal. However, earning by the fruits of work, monogamous marriage and educating children is a key principle of harmony. He is generally against corrupt lives which spoil God's law.

In general, the definition of philosophy as "love of wisdom" by Greek thinkers Pythagoras and philosophy is a critical enterprise that is revealed in the works of Zara Yacob. In his philosophical thinking, he employed reason to critically investigate truth and wisdom. The role of Sumner in introducing the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosophy and philosophers like Zara Yacob, Walde Hywot, Skendes to the world of philosophy is very important (Masolo 2010:5). This exemplified Sumner contributed a lot in introducing different philosophical thoughts produced in Ethiopia (Fasil 2017:1-10).

### Conclusion

What is expected from a philosopher is doing things within reasonable bounds by thinking deeply about significant issues (Obenga 2004:35)? Zara Yacob begins his ሐተታ "hatata" by telling the story of his life (Sumner 2004:173). He discussed important issues that the different branches of philosophy dealt with by thinking profoundly about the issues. His ideas are developed through critical thinking and systematically classified issues of reality, knowledge, and values. Zara Yacob critically examined all the issues. It is possible to say that the approach he focused on is the most abstract and philosophical issue which makes him a philosopher. Moreover, he employed reasoned thinking by the 'light in the heart' which is endowed by God to investigate the truth.

No doubt, the work of Zara Yacob is the prominent figure in the written tradition of philosophy. However, the Ge'ez language in which Zara Yacob used to write his treatise had a long history in Ethiopia, and I expected that other written philosophical work also existed before Zara Yacob from the nature of ancient knowledge in Ethiopian history and church tradition of the time which the present philosopher has to dig out.

It is possible to conclude that Zara Yacob's philosophy would lead directly to understanding the most abstract and complex philosophical issues that were raised by African philosophers to understand the universe. Thus, to promote a wide understanding of Ethiopian philosophy in particular and African philosophy in general in the written tradition of philosophy, it is important to study the works and contributions of African philosophers like Zara Yacob. His work disproved the idea of the West that philosophical work is unique to the western tradition.

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