

**The Contribution of Native Ethiopian  
Philosophers, Zara Yacob and Wolde  
Hiwot, to Ethiopian Philosophy**

**By: Tassew Asfaw  
Department of Philosophy**

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## **Introduction**

Zara Yacob was born from poor farmers in Aksum. He studied the books of the psalms of David and the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. This experience helped him to begin his philosophy during his two years time in the cave near the Tekeze River to escape from the accusation of king Susenyos for his position of being the enemy of Catholic faith. Wolde Hiwot was tutored by Zara Yacob in grammar, quine, and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, and he also became Zara Yacob's confidant. This helped him to write his philosophy following the philosophical system of his teacher. The original works of these two Ethiopian philosophers was translated and introduced to the philosophical world by Claude Sumner, an Indian professor who was teaching at Addis Ababa University.

Here, I would like to introduce the contribution of these native Ethiopian philosophers, Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot, through referring to different branches of philosophy. Thus, I will explain the contribution of these philosophers to metaphysics, epistemology, Ethics, Aesthetics, and logic. In addition to this, their contribution to gender issues will also be discussed.

### **1. The Contribution of Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot to Metaphysics**

Metaphysics can be defined as the study of reality in broad sense. It can be also defined as the study of transcendental reality, which lies beyond the physical world and cannot be grasped by means of empirical observations. Super naturalists understand Meta physics in its broader sense

because they raise questions of reality like ‘what is reality?’ What is real/, is it one or many? And so on. They also understand metaphysics in its narrower sense because they believe in supernatural or transcendent reality, say God. Zora Yacob and Wolde Hiwot raised those and similar questions because of this they can be categorized as super naturalist philosophers. Let us first look at the method of Zara Yacob, which was used to prove the existence of God. He raised metaphysical questions like, “How does God know; or is there any one in heaven who knows? Or if there is one who knows, why does He remain silent on men’s depravity while they corrupt His name act with iniquity in His holy name?” (Sumner, 1985, P.232). Zera Yacob raised these questions because he observed that the followers of every religion argued as if their faith was true and the other’s faith was false. They were defending their own faith while rejecting other faiths. Moreover, he was praying that his God would make him intelligent and reasonable in order to be able to know the hidden wisdom of God. He tried to prove whether there is God or not using his own metaphysical theory as follows:

*One day I said to my self in my own thought ‘whom am I praying to or is there a God who listens to me?’ At this thought I was invaded by dead full sadness and I said: ‘In vain have I kept my own heart pure (as David says). Later on I thought of the words of the same David, ‘Is the inventor of the ear unable to hear?’ and I said: ‘who is it that provided me with an ear to hear, who created me as a rational [being] and how have I come into this world? 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 of 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 themselves 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 himself be without them? For he created us as intelligent beings from the abundance of this intelligence and the same one being comprehends 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. (Sumner, 1985, P.233).*

The long paragraph above shows the method of doubting used by Zara Yacob to prove the existence of God. And it also shows that Zara Yacob didn't accept God as unquestionable entity because of this it may be possible to say that Zara Yacob's God wasn't the same as that of the Christian's God, which is unquestionable and blindly accepted through faith.

After proving the existence of God, Zara Yacob questioned whether every thing that is written in the Holy Scripture is true or not. He wanted to consult scholars and thinkers but he realized that these individuals would tell him only what they were supposing as true or they would tell him only the rightness of their own faith. Because of this they can't be taken as neutral judges. He also examined the written documents of other religion and concluded that, there are true as well as false concepts so that we have to distinguish falsity from truth through rationalization of these concepts. This shows that Zara Yacob didn't accept the Christianity and the Holy scripture as they are. He rejected some of the points, which don't have any rational basis. Because of this, Zara Yacob's religious ideology as well as his God was to some extent different from Christians, and other religious ideologies. Therefore, he has his own Meta physical foundation for the existence of God.

Wolde Hiwot also raised Metaphysical questions on the existence of God. He used empirical method to prove the existence of God. According to him, all things we see in this world, including ourselves, are transitory and created. But how can they be created without a creator? Because each creature is finite and weak; it has no power to be created from nothing. Therefore, there needs be one essence, that existed before all creatures, without beginning or end, that created from nothing all that is dense and thin, visible and invisible- i.e. God. For him the perfection of God can also be understood from his creatures. All that has created is very good in the way He created it. Some people may classify things as useful and useless because they are unable to understand in the way God created them. Hence, some things, which were considered as useless in the past, become useful in the present. This shows that human mind is less perfect than God. Because of this, people can't understand every thing in the way they are created. Therefore, for Wolde Hiwot, God is created out of nothing and every creature of his has purposes. But since human mind unable to understand the whole works of God, people may consider some of the creatures as useless.

Descartes also used this method of proving the existence of God by negating the finite. According to Descartes, more reality is found in the infinite substance than in the finite. Moreover, the idea of God existed before the idea of human being. Doubting and desires in human being implies lack of something. This recognition of defects for man himself resulted from some idea of a more perfect being. (Maynard, 1952, P.86).

## **2. The Contribution of Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot to Epistemology**

Epistemology can be defined as the theory of knowledge. It attempts to answer questions like where does knowledge come from? What is the

basis of knowledge? And so on. For rationalist philosophers the source of knowledge is reason while for empiricist philosophers the source of knowledge is experience. Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot can be considered as rationalist philosophers in loosen sense because rationalism, in the loosen sense, is the belief that at least some knowledge about reality can be acquired through reason independent of sense experience. And Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot believed God as the source of knowledge and this knowledge, to some extent, is found through reasoning.

For Zara Yacob, reason and faith are inseparable because God is embodied in absolute reasonableness and the only everlasting thing in this world is the knowledge of God. Like Descartes, for Zara Yacob, faith could be superior to reason if it is first examined and pass through reasoning other wise it is inferior to reason. According to him, it is possible to arrive at truth through critical inquiry. He said, “To the person who seeks it, truth is immediately 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”. (Sumner, 1985, P.236). Even though human being are created with less perfection than God, they have the capacity to strive perfection. Therefore, they can practice their own investigation using their intellect for reasoning.

Like his master, Wolde Hiwot also gave priority for reasoning than faith. Faith must be based on a rational and critical analysis. According to him, faith without inquiry is not demanded by God and doesn't be fit the nature of a rational creature. Hence, it is not fitting that we believe in the faith of our fathers before we enquire and come to know that their faith is true (Sumner, 1985 P.259). For him, knowledge is an endless phenomenon, one wouldn't be exhausted in having the knowledge of every fields of study.

He said, “don’t become disheartened with having to go on learning and don’t give it up during all your life. Even if you learn the teachings of all men, there are many things you don’t know. (Sumner, 1985, P.261). He took the analogy of the bee to explain the need of hard working to human being in order to have knowledge of every sorts of thinking. The bee collects the raw materials from all flowers and from different fields to produce honey and wax. The honey used for food while the wax used for light. Likewise human beings have to learn different kinds of knowledge from different fields of study in order to be intellectual for them or to get mental satisfaction, and to serve as light for illiterates. They have responsibilities to educate the illiterates and to avoid ignorance through having knowledge of different fields of study.

He also argued the advantages of reason over emotion. Many scholars from the west argued that African preferred emotion to reason. But Wolde Hiwot’s work can be taken as evidence to say that African preferred reason to emotion. Wolde Hiwot said, “one who is patient has more value than one who is powerful and a Wiseman is preferable to an angry man. In all difficulties make use of patience, because although patience is bitter when it is exercised, it turns out later to be more pleasant than honey and sugar.” (Sumner, 1985, P. 283.)

Therefore, he gave priority for reason than faith and emotion. Form this, one can say hat Ethiopian philosophers were rationalist thinkers and they contribute critical analysis and the method of inquiry to the philosophical world. They contributed this without influenced by the view of the traditional society. They also weren’t influenced by any foreign philosophical concepts rather they provided their own original philosophical

speculation. In line with this, Workineh Kelbessa, an Ethiopian philosopher, also stated as follows:

*The 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian thinkers Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot however, were not influenced by foreign culture. As we have stated earlier Zara Yacob reveals his ability and inclination to apply his own independent critical objection to the beliefs of his people. He was a critical independent thinker who guided his thoughts and judgments by the power of reason. The implication is that Ethiopians without foreign influence are not innocent of logical and critical inquiry. Of course; religious outlook exercised a profound influence on Zara Yacob's thought. That is why we label him as a rationalist philosopher in the religious Sense (1994, P. 449).*

This is also true for Wolde Hiwot because he applied his own independent critical objection to the beliefs of the society and he also wasn't 'influenced by any foreign culture.

### **3. The Contribution of Zara Yacob and Wold Hiwot to Value Theory**

Value theory includes the theory of ethics, which studies moral values, and Aesthetics, which studies aesthetical values. Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot contributed a lot to these value theories.

#### **A. The Contribution of Zarayacob and Wolde Hiwot to Ethical Values**

Like Kant, Zara Yacob considered God as a moral lawgiver. For Zara Yacob, human beings have the free will to do right or wrong. Of course, God can guide us in the way He likes but he doesn't want to deprive our freedom of using our mind. Thus, individuals interpret the laws of Christians and Muslims and the laws of God corrupted by these individuals. They use their intellect and free will to decide what is true and what is false. But the followers of these individuals are unable to use such opportunities rather



they accept what their religious readers told to them. He said, “God indeed has illuminated the heart of man with understanding by which he can see the good and evil, recognize the licit and illicit, distinguish truth from error, and by your light we see the light, oh Lord! If we use this light of our heart properly, it cannot deceive us, the purpose of this light, which our creator gave us, is to be saved by it, and not to be ruined [by it]. Every thing that the light of our intelligence shows us comes from the sources truth”. (Sumner, 1985, P.237). This shows that we have the right to choose between good and bad even though the criterion to be right or wrong is set by supernatural power (God). And we choose the right or wrong action by calculating the consequence of our action. According to him, people hastily accept what they have heard from their fathers with out any critical examination. But God created man to be the master of his own actions; so that he will be what he wills to be, good or bad, if he chooses to be wicked he can continue for his wickedness (Sumner, 1985, P. 235). This is related to modern teleological theory of morality, which stresses on the consequences of actions, and even makes the consequences of actions the criterion, or test of rightness.

In line with this, Wolde Hiwot argued that since God is a perfect essence, He doesn't punish us on account of his becoming angry but it is we who bring punishment upon ourselves when we violate the laws that the Creator set up for all his creation (summer, 1985, 262). Thus, God doesn't enforce us to do well and not to do badly. We can practice evil actions if we want but such actions will have punishment as its consequences. Or God doesn't oblige us to accept his orders or laws, we have free will not to accept it if we have reason that those laws written in books are not given from God.

And even if we accept these laws and if we don't want to practice them, God doesn't feel angry but we may not get the rewards from Him.

Wold Hiwot also attempted to give ethical advice for the people to avoid weakness and to work hard. If there are individuals who are poor due to other factors rather than their laziness, it is advisable to help them. He said, "don't be harsh towards your fellow man; if your possessions are greater give out much; if you have only a little, share it with those who are needy and who are poorer than you, and God's blessing will dwell upon you: he has created together the rich and poor, strong and weak, so that we may help one another and strengthen ourselves with mutual charity" (Sumner, 1985, P.274.). He distinguished to whom help is needed. Helping those lazy individuals, who are able to work, is meaning less according to him.

He also explained the method of bringing up children. According to him, parents have moral as well as religious obligation to bring up their children in such a way that they will become knowledgeable, responsible and good citizen. To do this, ethical and religious education is the most important and when parents teach their children, they have to be taking care of giving good examples. If children listen bad examples from their parents or from their teachers, they will be initiated in doing evil so that the kind of examples, which are proposed by parents or teachers, have impacts on the future character of children since they are premature to critical examination of a given example.

## **B. The Contribution of Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot to Aesthetics.**

It is the value involved in art and our experience of beauty. According to Zara Yacob, all things in the universe are great and admirable. They are created with great wisdom; they needed especial artist to be made orderly

and beautifully. He said, “with these words was I praying day and night: I was admiring the beauty of God creatures according to their orders, the [domestic] animals and the wild beasts. They are drawn by the nature of their creation towards the preservation of their life and propagation of their species” (Summer, 1985 P. 246). Like any artist Zara Yacob admired the beauty of nature, or the beauty of power of the sumperem artist i.e..God. Every thing in the universe is put purposely and orderly. The living things as well as the non-living things are respecting their order and this makes them attractive to human being. Wolde Hiwot also attempted to correct the misconception of art in Ethiopia. In the history of Ethiopia, there was a tradition, which discouraged the handicraft or arts. The people of Ethiopia were considering the potters and the black smiths as the evil eyes or as individual who affects others by staring at them. This tradition is still existed in some parts of Ethiopia. But the works of potters and blacksmiths are necessary for traditional society of Ethiopia. Because of this, Wolde Hiwot tried to appreciate handicrafts in his philosophy. He said, “love to work with your hands as much as your life allows, and be expert in this work that you may gain a profit from it; don’t be ashamed to work with your hands, because it is God’s precept; without working of their hands all human creatures perish and their whole life is destroyed”. And he added, “ He who lives on the works of anther man while he has himself the capacity to work is a thief and a plundered” (Sumner, 1985, P.271.). This shows that Wolde Hiwot argued on the advantages of the handicraft, which are designed by good Artist. It is an art, which is used to gain profit and to make life possible for peasants because local artists produce most of the tools of peasants.

Another contribution of Wolde Hiwot to aesthetics is his view of love. According to him love is the basis of every beautiful things because of this it

makes all things beautiful. In line with this Plato also explained the relationship between love and beauty. According to him, one can ascend from these earthly things under the influence of true love. And begins to perceive that beauty which is ever lasting. For Wolde Hiwot, love is more valuable than great riches and all the honors of this world. It is perfect and real and perfect love is not restricted to words and lips. It must be practicable (Sumner, 1985, P.268).

But unlike Plato, for Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot it is not necessary to go beyond this world to find beauty because they were admiring God's creatures in the universe. More over, love is not ideal for them rather it is some thing practicable.

#### **4. The Contribution of Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot to Gender Issue**

In Ethiopia until recent time, monastic life was preferred to marriage for religious values. The justification for this may be the beliefs of the society women as impure. And if a man who is considered as pure concluded marriage with woman, who is considered as impure, he would lose his purity and become impure. Because of this most Christians preferred monastic life to marriage. But on the contrary to this, Wolde Hiwot and Zara Yacob raised an important gender issue. Zara Yacob believed in the equality of men and women. According to him the teachings of Christians appreciated mastic life and indicated the impurity of marriage wrongly. He said, "the law of Christians which propounds the superiority of monastic life over marriage is false and can't come from God." (Sumner, 1985 P. 236). He criticized monastic life and advocated the equality of husband and wife at marriage. When Zara Yacob asked, his master, Habtu, for his willingness of Hirut for marriage, Habtu replied, "Here after she is not my maid servant,

but yours.” But Zara Yacob didn’t agree on the idea of the relationship of husband and wife as master-servant relationship because of this he replied to Habtu, “I don’t wish her to be my maid servant, but my wife, husband and wife are equal in marriage; we shouldn’t call them master and maidservant; for they are one flesh and one life” (Sumner, 1985, P.248). This shows that Zara Yacob was released from his hermeneutic background, the beliefs before cross examination, and became sensitive to gender issue.

According to Belai Giday, an Ethiopian historian, Zara Yacob was struggling for the rights of women. He said, “Zara Yacob believed in the necessity of a matrimonial relationship between man and woman for the continuity of the human species and he didn’t approve of the monastic way of life. He also spoke against the domination of women by men.” (1991, P.162)

Wolde Hiwot also raised an important gender issue. He advocated the necessity and superiority of marriage over monastic life. He said, “If you lack a wife, look for one, and if you lack a husband, marry one: such is the precept of the creator, who created man and women with the desire for marriage. Don’t be like those fools who declare that marriage is impure.” (Sumner 1985, P.275) According to him, monastic life destroys the order of the creator and opposes the creation of our nature. According him, marriage is the most beautiful and the greatest of all the mysteries of nature. And men and women are equal after marriage, they become one and the same. Moreover Wolde Hiwot can be taken as an extremely feminist because he argued the need of mutual satisfaction even during conjugal acts. The man has to keep the interest of his wife and the woman has to also keep the interest of her husband. If there is no such mutual satisfaction, there will be adultery so that greater care has to be taken for mutual satisfaction of

conjugal. He said, “Draw near your wife marveling at and praising your creator, and when you sleep with her, don’t seek the pleasure of the conjugal act for you alone, but render it also pleasant for your wife and don’t deprive her of the portion of pleasure that God gave her: therefore, don’t be hasty, but act, so that her pleasure will not remain less than yours or be weakened.” (Sumner, 1985, P.278.). This shows that Wolde Hiwot attempted to solve the problems of women in detail.

### **Conclusion**

Ethiopia has its own unique and indigenous culture, language and philosophy. Zara Yacob and Wold Hiwot were the two independent thinkers of Ethiopian in the seventeenth century. They contributed their own philosophical inquiry to the philosophy of their native country. They can be considered as all rounded philosophers because they contributed their own philosophical inquiry to each branches of philosophy-to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and logic. Like-Descartes, these philosophers used methodological doubting and raised metaphysical questions to prove the existence of God. They were not influenced by the existed traditional faith of Christians or Muslims because for these traditional religions God (Allah) is unquestionable transcendental reality moreover; faith is the way to believe the existence of God (Allah) for these religions. But Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot didn’t accept such blindly acceptance of supernatural power. They doubted the existence of God as well as the Holy Scriptures and other religious documents. Because of this it is possible to say that these philosophers have their own Meta physical foundation to prove the existence of one transcendental reality (God). They also believed in the superiority of reason over faith. For them, faith could

become superiority to reason if and only if it fulfills the criterion of rational reasoning and passes the test of critical examination. According to them, reason and God are inseparable because God is embodied in absolute reasonableness. And philosophical knowledge is endless phenomenon. Since human being is not completely perfect, we have to strive for knowledge continuously. Thus Zara Yacob and Wold Hiwot can be categorized under rationalist philosophers in loosen sense, because they believed God as the source of knowledge and this knowledge is acquired to some extent through reasoning independent of sense experience.

Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot also contributed their own philosophical inquiry to ethics and aesthetics. Almost all ethical principles are included in the works of these philosophers. They agreed on the necessity of altruism, which is the belief that every one ought as much as possible to seek the good of others, to explain their guiding principles of good personality. According to them, God doesn't punish us on the account of his becoming angry rather we punish because of our own violation of the laws of God. Even though God is considered as religious as well as moral lawgiver, He doesn't deprive off our free will to calculate the consequence of our action. Thus, we have the right to do good or bad, but if we do well we will get our reward from God while we will punish after death for our wrong dong if we do bad. In this sense, Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot can be considered as utilitarian philosophers. They also admired the beauty of nature, which is done orderly and purposely. Every thing in the universe is shaped and ordered beautifully by their creator. For Wolde Hiwot, love is the basis for every beautiful thing. It is perfect and real because of this it is more valuable than any honorable things in this world, and it is also practicable. He also criticized the traditional misconception of Artists (potters and

blacksmiths), as evil eye individuals. He appreciated these professions because they are necessary for the survival of peasants in Ethiopia since most of the tools used by these peasants are product of traditional artists. And handicrafts can be also used as income generating activities. Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot also used logic to reason out their thought throughout their works. Logical reasoning is the central part of their philosophy. But they didn't formulate logical calculation of western system rather they used logic to formulate their philosophical inquiry. In this sense, it is possible to say that they used logical reasoning practically.

In addition to their contribution to different branches of philosophy, Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot also contributed their philosophical inquiry to gender issue. They tried to avoid the traditional view of women as the servant of men. They also criticized the existed monastic life and appreciated marriage as the order of God for the continuity of species. Thus, men and women are equal because they are created with intelligence and with other structures equally without any discrimination. Even though gender issue seems more of sociological inquiry, it has philosophical foundation and application. Moreover, some scholars from the west criticized African philosophers since these philosophers didn't raise any gender issue in their philosophy. However, the works of Zara Yacob and Wolde Hiwot can be taken as evidence to overcome such problems of African philosophy in addition to solve the traditional views of gender inequality.

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