**Parallels between Ethiopian and European philosophy**

With the friendly help of my great and learned friends, especially His Excellency – the Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Ethiopia, an Africanist PhDr. Pavel Mikeš, I found out about two Ethiopian rationalists from the 17th century, namely about Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat. It was on my first visit to Ethiopia in 2020. Time was short, the coronavirus pandemic had just broken out and all Ethiopian universities and libraries were closed. This topic was completely new to me and from a philosophical point of view I was very attracted to it. After reading the core books and some texts by Claude Sumner or Theodros Kiros, but also some older and more recent German sources, I asked myself the question: How is it possible that this philosophy arose quite independently of the rationalism of the same time in Europe? And what is actually the driving force, the original agent that conditioned the emergence of this kind of thinking?

It turns out that this critical rational philosophy that has emerged in Sub-Saharan Africa is a unique but not accidental phenomenon. It has matured as a rare fruit of the long religious, cultural and political development of the Ethiopian state. The dynamic intermingling, as well as the necessary critical reflection on the various historical influences that have guided and positively shaped this specific development of thought, created the conditions for its birth.

The history of the Ethiopian state is impressive. Its roots go back to the legendary Solomonic dynasty, that is to the 10th century BC – as *Kibre Negest* reminds us. In the early 4th century, Ethiopia embraced Christianity and became the oldest Christian state on the African continent. It rivals Armenia and Georgia as the world's oldest Christian state formations. Ethiopia's cultural legacy was influenced by the Sabean culture and the ancient Jewish tradition, which was later replaced by a specific form of Orthodox Christianity with all its ritual peculiarities and its unique literary sources. Ethiopia was influenced in no small measure by antiquity. The ancient cultural heritage entered the country through interactions with the African Northand the the other shore of the Red Sea. Antiquity permeated Ethiopian culture even later with the influences of Islam. Islamic culture, which adopted ancient universalism in its own way, also mediated Persian or Indian cultural influences on Ethiopian culture. Ethiopian culture originally incorporated all these influences into its thought – as we are reminded by some surviving literary sources, such as the translation of the original Greek text *Physiologus*, *Book of the Wise Philosophers*, or the text called *Life of Skendes* *and his maxims* - an Ethiopian version of the legend of Oedipus, most probably based on Arabic version.

Similarly, it turns out that the official orthodox tradition was not the only source from which Ethiopian Rationalism drew their philosophical reflections and critical impulses. Some heretical doctrines also had a significant influence on the spiritual development of Ethiopia – whether it was the movement of the monk Evostatevos (14th century), the movement of the monk Istifanos or the Michaelite Movement (century later). Efforts to reform the rigid religious practices of the orthodox church that alienated it from its own spiritual roots, as well as the critical and committed attitude of these teachings, can be considered as one of the defining components of Ethiopian culture. The critical approach was not something foreign to Ethiopian culture. It was part of mainstream church education, practiced mainly in *kine* schools (which focused on teaching kine poetry), and its logical reasoning was used in church disputations, which had been part of Ethiopian culture since the Middle Ages. Heretical doctrines and reform-critical currents of thought, together with the traditional heritage of some earlier extant philosophical texts, played a significant role in shaping the form of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and in their specific way they were critically reflected by Zera Yacob and, after him, by Walda Heywat. Generally speaking: Ethiopia stands at the imaginary boundary between two worlds, the European and the African worlds, as well as the Jewish and the Islamic worlds.

Out of this cultural and historical ferment grew the unmistakable cultural tradition of Ethiopia. In the 17th century, it took on a philosophical form. It is preserved in the written legacy of two Ethiopian thinkers, Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat, a disciple of Zera Yacob and his successor. The freethinking and tolerance by which this kind of critical rational philosophy was manifested had its social reasons. Its motivations were a critical anti-reaction to the escalating religious intolerance and violence in the country. Zera Yacob himself became one of the victims. Circumstances forced him to hide because of his critical views in the seclusion of a cave for two long years. There was a need to return to traditional Abrahamic roots, whose legacy called for a rediscovery of a universal religious foundation – for anchoring faith in a single truth that could not be contradicted.

I think this is the first common feature that links Ethiopian rationality with European rationality. Zera Yacob drew his "rhetorical form or figure" from the Psalms of David. Through his impressive dialogical conversations with God, he arrived at the original Abrahamic roots – in fact, like the first Christians to whom Jesus as messiah embodied the God of Israel. Protestantism, a return to the purity of the gospel, was gradually gaining ground in Europe. Ethiopian society was more tolerant than in Europe. Not only Christians but also Jews and Muslims coexisted and developed their culture. As the influence of Catholicism strengthened in the country, the disagreements between the different religions grew. Therefore, Ethiopian rationalists sought to find the root of all these monotheistic faiths.

I would also like to point out that Zera Yacob is often compared to his contemporary René Descartes. This comparison is in many ways correct, especially in terms of the choice of methodological skepticism. Both philosophers used the skeptical method to prove the existence of God and to establish the certainty of their knowledge. Descartes sought a clear and precise foundation for his scientific method. However, social problems were not his priority. Zera Yacob saw the certainty of knowledge in the "light of reason" – in the immutable laws of the divine order of nature and society. Ethiopian rationalism is concerned with the concrete practical issues of society, with the aim of improving the conditions of Ethiopian society. This concern is well evident in the thought efforts of Walda Heywat and his more practically oriented *Hateta* *(Hledání).*

It is also well known that Descartes already distinguished the subjective from the objective sphere, or res cogitans from res extensa. We do not find this distinction in Zera Yakob's thinking. We can say that his way of thinking resembles more that of the early European Renaissance philosophers (Nicholas of Cusa, Pico della Mirandola, Galileo Galilei, or Herbert of Cherbury). They did not strictly differentiate field of *faith* from spehere of *science*. In contrast to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance philosophized in a "non-accidental" context. They did not regard the earthly sphere as imperfect compared to the divine sphere. In this sense, one can speak of a "divinization or nobilization" of reality, including human reality. For these Renaissance thinkers, every thing, including man, was a unique entity defined by an original act of creation in an infinite divine universe. These were not mere random phenomena or events. They also considered the relationships binding these entities to one another to be "non-accidental." Not only can we observe the very beginnings of modern structuralist thought. Equally, the way of thinking of these Ethiopian rationalists reminds us of how far modern civilization has been taken by that form of subjectivism best captured by Bacon's statement: *science is power*. I do not mean only the loss of respect for the sacred – the natural humility before reality. The negative consequences of this loss of natural humility before what transcends us, before what we have not 'put ourselves into life', can be well observed against the backdrop of the turbulent history of the twentieth century, during which two world wars and then the Cold War broke out, just as the current war in Ukraine confirms this negative trend.

Both Ethiopian rationalists, however, point to another and, from my point of view, very interesting and inspiring moment. Quite independently of the specific development of rationalism in Europe, they point out that we overlook the simplest truths that impose themselves in such an immediate way that it does not occur to us to consider that things in the world around us might be different in their nature. Every thing becomes a "personality" for us, and by its unmistakable quality it binds us existentially as well as attaches us significantly to reality. These pre-scientific or non-experiential truths are, according to these Ethiopian thinkers, the original and real starting point as well as the natural foundation of every religion and philosophy.

But not without the necessary universalistic condition that makes the contextuality of events evident and sustainable – namely, through the assumption of original harmony. But this original natural harmony is not something irrational, a kind of metaphysical substructure or heuristic fiction divorced from reality. This natural harmony is familiar precisely because it has a "self-preserving" character. It is therefore a reality that has *self-regulating* charakter and therefore is purely *consensual* – it sustains life, but within the framework of its sustainability it also takes it away, in proportion to its quantitative weight. Moreover, through the impressiveness of its myriad transformations, it is able to awaken emotionality and transform it into an aesthetic sensibility that helps to arouse natural *sympathy*. In the words of Zera Yacob: "With these words was I praying day and night: I was admiring the beauty of God's 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 the propagation of their species."

Through original analyses, these Ethiopian thinkers came to the conclusion that human reason is part of the impressive order of divine reason. Not only could they already take an independent authoritative position, i.e., find a basis for our freedom of choice. With deepening insight into the creative dialectic of reason, they had discovered a principle of creativity from which they could justify the existence of God. They came to the rational conclusion that this principle is "the goodness of created nature." In their moral order of speech: if you will choose the positive, that is, that which helps our lives, you will participate in and co-create the harmonious order of things, and through reasoning inquiry you will clearly and distinctly differentiate good from evil. Thanks to this life-positive rationalist attitude they might have regarded – for example – fasting or celibacy as maxims imperatively false, contrary to the natural order of divine creation – that is contrary to universal self-regulatory conformity. For Ethiopian rationalists, the value of life is a sufficient condition – a condition *sine qua non*. It is the natural starting point that limits the fundamental possibilities of our free choice, and hence the continuity of the comprehension of our moral stance.

Let us conclude with a brief summary: Ethiopia has not only a unique indigenous culture and religion, but also an ancient language through which the original literary sources speak to us today. The Horn of Africa region is also special because it is the birthplace of a distinctive philosophy. It emerged in a specific cultural environment that favoured independent critical thinking. Moreover, it was formed in an environment of lively intercultural intermingling of different religious traditions, whether Christian, Islamic, Jewish or indigenous. The typical form in which this philosophy expressed itself, but also differentiated itself, can be seen as an attempt to independently elaborate these cultural tendencies and religious influences.

Although Ethiopian philosophy methodologically based its rationalism on the unquestionable principle of one truth, its formative social significance was determined by its attempt to closely link theory and practice in order to reform the Ethiopian society of the time. The distinctive degree of humanity, tolerance and sense of justice with which both Ethiopian philosophers approached reality is in many ways timeless and unjustly neglected. We must agree with the insider thinkers of our time who call for a correction. What is than this satisfaction? Nothing less than to see these Ethiopian rationalists alongside those eminent personalities who have become an integral part of the development of this modern world philosophical current. This is not only a legitimate historical challenge, but above all a significant enrichment of philosophy as such.

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