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A Century of the *Ḥatäta Zär'a Ya'äqob* Authorship Debate: Outlines of an Intellectual History

Abstract: In 1852, the Capuchin missionary Giusto da Urbino discovered a remarkable text in highland Ethiopia. The work was the *Ḥatäta Zär'a Ya'äqob*, a philosophical autobiography containing a supposed 'rationalistic' system of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics subsequently lauded as the foundation of African Philosophy, but also dismissed as an elaborate forgery. In this talk I present an overview of the reception history of the work in three key historical moments of the controversy. We begin in the earliest, 'colonial' period of the debate with the early translations of Boris Turayev and Enno Littman before examining the pivotal point in which Carlo Conti Rossini suggests that the works are forgeries, written by their supposed discoverer Giusto da Urbino. I connect Conti Rossini's rejection of the Ethiopian authorship of the *Ḥatäta* to his writings in favour of Italian colonialism in East Africa, and to a 'Hegelian' strand of the historiography of philosophy. I then turn to the next important stage in the debate over the authorship of the *Ḥatäta*, the 'decolonial' period, including the anti-imperialism of Sylvia Pankhurst that used the *Ḥatäta* to present a 'developed' Ethiopia to British audiences in the 1930s; the 'African Philosophy' debates in the first post-colonial African states from the late 1950s which tended to bypass the *Ḥatäta*; the development of academic philosophy in Addis Ababa before and after the 1974 revolution as Ethiopia moved from an empire to a socialist republic. The final 'postcolonial' section examines the bifurcation of the reception of the *Ḥatäta* in the twenty first century into an Ethiopian context, in which religious and ethnic-political considerations became increasingly important, and a Euro-American context, in which the *Ḥatäta* is primarily deployed in debates concerning the diversification and decolonisation of philosophy and the university. I conclude by outlining the 'state of the debate' in the 21st century, and with some suggestions as to the continued relevance of these seemingly obscure works.

Biography

Jonathan Egid is a Lecturer in Philosophy at SOAS, University of London. He received his PhD in Philosophy from King's College London in June 2024, writing a thesis on a 17th century Ethiopian philosopher named Zär'a Ya'əqob and the question of whether or not he existed. This research was funded by the London Arts and Humanities Partnership, and the British Society for the History of Philosophy, for which he was a postgraduate fellow 2023-24. He received his BPhil in philosophy from Wadham College Oxford, and his BA from the University of Kent in Canterbury and Université Paris IV – La Sorbonne. He has held research fellowships at the Freie Universität in Berlin and Addis Ababa University. His first edited volume (with Lea Cantor of Cambridge and Fasil Merawi of Addis Ababa), *In Search of Zär'a Ya'əqob* was published by De Gruyter in September, and a second volume is under contract with Oxford University Press. He is a BBC New Generation Thinker for 2024, and his essays on philosophy, art and politics appear regularly in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Literary Review* and elsewhere.