



The Philosophy of Zara Yakub

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The Enlightenment:

The Conventional Story

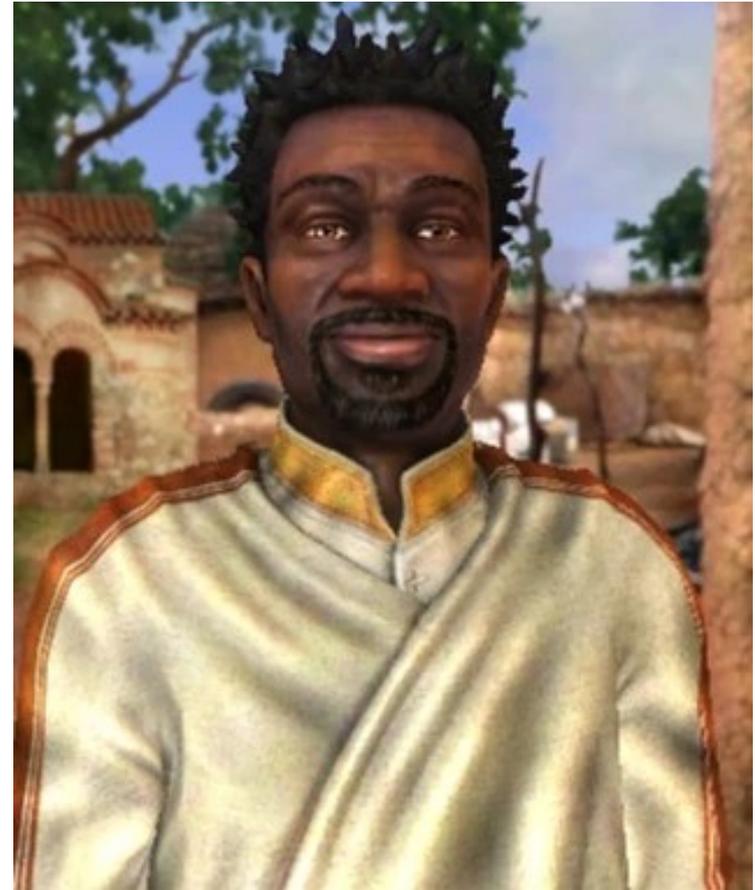
- Modern democracies and universities cite the ideals of the Enlightenment as their basis: secularism, equality, reason, skepticism, science
- The story is the no other era compares to the Enlightenment
- Enlightenment began with René Descartes's *Discourse on the Method* (1637)
 - Continued on with Locke, Newton, Hume, Kant, etc., and ended with the French Revolution of 1789.
 - Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1794) telling of it after it had peaked
- Shift in the story? → Recent studies in African philosophy suggest that there might be something interesting in the writings of Zera Yakub, a seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher.



Zara Yakub (1599-1692)

Ethiopian philosopher

- Born on a farm in poverty in Axum (northern Ethiopia, former capitol)
- Was not uncommon for children to attend school → education system run by Orthodox Church and existed since the introduction of Christianity in the 4th century (one of the world's oldest Christian nations)
- Yakub attended school and impressed his teachers → singled out for advanced education in rhetoric, poetry, and critical thinking
- After four years, he continued for another ten years in biblical studies → teachings of the Catholics and Coptic Christians, also Ethiopia's Orthodox traditions.



Local conflict, persecution, and exile



- When Yakub was still young, a Portuguese Jesuit named Manuel de Almeida convinced Ethiopia's King Susenyos to convert to Catholicism in 1622
 - Became Ethiopia's official religion in 1626
 - Persecution of non-Catholics and anyone critical of Catholicism followed → got worse in 1630, before stopping in 1632
- Yakub was teaching near Axum → declared no religion should have any rights over another
 - He was already well known for his learning at the time, and there were many who disliked him because of his humble beginnings → these people brought charges against him before the king
- Yakub fled at night, taking with him only some gold pieces and the Psalms of David → went south to the region of Shewa to the Tekeze River
 - Found a "beautiful cave" at the opening of a valley, built fence of stone → lived in the wilderness there for two years

Writing of *Hatata* (Inquiry)

Published 1667



- Lived in the cave as a hermit between 1630-1632, until the death of the king
- While in the cave developed his rationalist philosophy → praising the superiority of reason and the equality of all humans, regardless of gender
- Argued against the heightening slave trade; was critical of all established doctrine and dogma
- Had a foundation in belief in God as creator → this is the most rational conclusion based on the world's order
- Many of the highest Enlightenment ideals are found in a work by a single man living and thinking in an Ethiopian cave.

Ethiopian predecessors & European contemporaries

- Ethiopia had philosophical texts circulating before Yakub's work
 - c.1510, *The Book of the Wise Philosophers* → collection of saying and quotations from the Pre-Socratic philosophers, some Plato, Aristotle (through Neo-Platonic dialogues)
- Yakub's *Hatata* is critical of his contemporaries for not being skeptical and for not thinking independently from traditions which elevated the claims of soothsayers over enquiry based on reason → every human is born with intelligence and equal worth
- In France, Yakub's contemporary Descartes (1596-1650) is wrestling with similar questions and themes

Zara Yakub & Rene Descartes & John Locke

On Religious Tolerance

Rene Descartes

- In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641): condemned “infidels” and non-believers, who are “more arrogant than learned”
- Dedicated book to “the dean and doctors of the sacred Faculty of Theology in Paris”
- Argument was “to accept by means of faith the fact that the human soul does not perish with the body, and that God exists”

John Locke

- *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689): atheists “are not at all to be tolerated”

Zara Jakub

- Much more agnostic
- Method more about inquiry, even showing an openness to considering the arguments of atheism
- Chapter 4, *Hatata*, radical opening: *Is everything that is written in the Holy Scriptures true?*
- Wants to note that each of the world’s religions all think theirs is the true faith:

Indeed each one says: ‘My faith is right, and those who believe in another faith believe in falsehood, and are the enemies of God’...As my own faith appears true to me, so does another one find his own faith true; but truth is one.

Religious subjectivity

- Yakub is opening up discussion on religion and subjectivity in a way that might be considered part of the Enlightenment tradition
 - Still believes in a universal creator → seems to be more open-minded about what form that might take
- Also more open-minded than thinkers like Descartes when considering the possibility of whether or not there is a God
- Asks profound questions:

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. Who created me?

Zara Yakub and the equality of women

In philosophy and in life

- In Chapter 5 of the *Hatata*, uses rational inquiry to investigate religious laws → comes to unorthodox conclusions → is critical of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism
- On menstruation: God made (in his wisdom) blood come from women's wombs each month so they may bear children
 - The Law of Moses considering menstruation impure, therefore, is against nature and the Creator
 - The Law of Moses “impedes marriage and the entire life of a woman, and it spoils the law of mutual help, prevents the bringing up of children and destroys love
- Philosophical arguments include perspectives of affection, solidarity, and women
- Personal life:
 - Proposed to a poor woman named Hirut, servant of a rich family
 - Family opposed her marriage on the grounds that Yakub was educated and she was a poor servant → Yakub argued with her master and prevailed
- When they married, Yakub told her she was no longer a servant, but his peer, because “husband and wife are equal in marriage”

Zara Yakub vs. Kant

Two thinkers on women

Kant

- “A woman is embarrassed little that she does not possess certain high insights” (*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, 1764)
- Lectures on ethics (1760-1794): “The desire of a man for a woman is not direct to her a human being, on the contrary, the woman’s humanity is of no concern to him; and the only object of his desire is her sex”

Zara Yakub

- Saw woman as a potential philosophical peer
- About Hirut: she “was not beautiful, but she was good-natured, intelligent and patient.”
- Often expressed his love for his wife’s intelligence
- Wrote of their mutual love: “Since she loved me so, I took the decision in my heart to please her as much as I could, and I do not think there is another marriage which is so full of love and blessed as ours”

Zara Yakub vs. Locke

Two thinkers on slavery

John Locke (1632-1704)

- Wrote that “all men are equal”, but this did not apply to everyone
- He was secretary during the creation of *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (1669) → gave white men “absolute power” over their black slaves.
- Invested heavily in the English Trans-Atlantic slave trade via the Royal African Company.
- *Second Treatise* (1689): God gave the land and the world for the “use of the industrious and rational” → many interpret this as colonialist rhetoric to justify the theft of indigenous lands

Zara Yakub (1599-1692)

- Compared to European Enlightenment contemporaries, Yakub’s writings seem to epitomize Enlightenment ideals
- Chapter 5, *Hatata*: confronts slavery
- Argues against the idea that humans should be bought and sold, that one can “go and buy a man as if he were an animal”.
- Believed this was because all humans are created equal and with the capacity to reason
- Puts forward a universal argument against slavery based on reason:

All men are equal in the presence of God; and all are intelligent, since they are his creatures; he did not assign one people for life, another for death, one for mercy, another for judgement. Our reason teaches us that this sort of discrimination cannot exist”