

Foreword

The Department of Philosophy of Addis Ababa University organized a one-day conference with the support of the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences to mark the centenary of the birth of Prof. Claude Sumner. Sumner, a Canadian by birth and Ethiopian by choice, as used to call himself, spent nearly half a century in the Department of Philosophy teaching and doing research. It is fitting that the Department wanted to honor the person that made immense contribution to African philosophy in this way. It is very commendable that the *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities* is making a special issue out of the papers presented in the conference. It is by selecting four papers from those presented in the conference that this special is made ready for publication after the papers were refereed. The fifth article is a reaction to a book that critically questioned the authorship of Zera Yacob's *hatetas*.

Sumner identified three major components of Ethiopian philosophy. These constitute the written, oral and sapiential sources of Ethiopian philosophy. Under the written sources he introduced the works of Zera Yaacob and Welda Heywat to the world. He also tried to identify affinities that are found in what he sees as the rationalist tradition that finds expression in philosophers like Kant and Descartes on one side and Zera Yaacob on the other.

His studies also focused on the oral sources of Ethiopian philosophy, particularly as they are found in what he called "Oromo wisdom literature." Being expressed in the form of sayings and aphorisms, such a philosophical wisdom contains mainly moral teachings.

Sumner also believed that foreign philosophical wisdom that is critically appropriated in the Ethiopian soil could be regarded as another major aspect of Ethiopian philosophy. Such investigations into Ethiopian philosophy still shouldn't give one the impression that Sumner was not interested in other philosophical traditions. He firmly believed that philosophy has a universal dimension and his exposition of the different philosophical traditions in his series on *The Philosophy of Man* is a testimony to such an interest.

The articles in this special volume demonstrate the immense contribution that is made by Sumner to the field of Ethiopian philosophy. The articles approach the contribution of Sumner from four major angles. Odomaro Mubangizi's paper gives a general insight into Sumner's contribution to the world of knowledge. Mubangizi thinks that Sumner's contributions must be situated in the context of current changes in Ethiopian politics and also the debates on African philosophy. He also asks what philosophy can contribute to the public sphere. He tells us that

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Sumner was well versed in different philosophical orientations. Sumner, for Mubangizi, was someone who had a huge interest in studying Ethiopian culture. He also states that Sumner believed that there are things that unite rather than separate us humans and it is such a common ethos that makes comparison among different philosophical traditions possible.

Fasil Merawi's article tries to situate Sumner's contribution in the context of the rationality debates in African philosophy. He also shows how Sumner demonstrated the usage of different modalities in order to have an access to philosophical forms of expression that are found in Ethiopia. Fasil thinks that Sumner's studies into Ethiopian philosophy must be evaluated against the charge of ethno philosophy and affirming the colonial bias that degraded non-western knowledge systems. Alongside these lines, Sumner's major contribution is seen as introducing a reconstructive project that gives an access to Ethiopian philosophical wisdom.

Bekele Gutema sees Sumner as the one philosopher who introduced the field of Ethiopian philosophy to the world in a time in which huge skepticism existed towards the very idea of African philosophy. Initially Sumner's investigations are situated in the written accounts of Ethiopian philosophy and gradually seen as branching into the oral sources. Bekele believes that Sumner's study of oral philosophical wisdom that is found in the knowledge system of the Oromo demonstrates the usages of narrative forms as a way of studying philosophy. It could also be used to show the limitations of the logocentric conception of philosophy as a written, individualistic and western practice. Bekele thinks that through Sumner's studies one can have an access to conceptions of reality and moral goodness that are developed by the Oromo.

Theodros Assefa Teklu recognizes that little attention has been given so far to Sumner's moral/social philosophy. Theodros demonstrates how we can appraise Sumner's philosophical contribution by situating his views on the Golden Rule as being grounded in a religious perspective and involved in a transition from a teleological into duty-oriented moral teaching (deontology). Theodros thinks that the Golden Rule has a comparative advantage over the Kantian formulation of the categorical imperative and that the role of such a moral precept in the areas of pluralism and peaceful coexistence needs to be further explored.

The final article by Fasil Merawi and Setargew Kenaw highlight Daniel Kibret's scrutiny of the authorship of the *hatetas* and its implication to the world of knowledge production in Ethiopia.

The articles that are found in this special volume contribute to the debate on African philosophy and Ethiopian philosophy. They show us that Ethiopian

philosophy is a vast terrain that is still left unexplored. Most importantly they point to a future research project that can situate the problematic of Ethiopian philosophy in the world of knowledge production and predicaments that are haunting the nation.

Bekele Gutema and Fasil Merawi, Guest Editors