

Memories of a Generation

By Chris Beckett

Before Christmas, I was invited to the Refugee Workers Cultural Association in Stoke Newington, to see a documentary film about the experiences of an Ethiopian political dissident, Mr Ali Saeed.

The film, entitled *Memories of a Generation*, tackles head-on the uncomfortable subject of political repression, disappearance and torture in Ethiopia. It is especially uncomfortable for a British audience, because our government, though distinctly uneasy at the behaviour of Meles Zenawi's regime, continues to remain largely silent.

The film takes the form of a long interview with Mr Saeed about his life and experiences (in Amharic with English subtitles). But the strange thing is that his voice and manner are so calm and straight-forward that the horror of what he recounts – torture, murder, ghost prisons and dungeons – appears even more stark and upsetting.

Mr Saeed is a poet, and secretary of the *Solidarity Committee for Ethiopian Political Prisoners (SOCEPP)*. He grew up in a poor suburb of Addis Ababa in the 1960's, before the Revolution of 1974 that ousted Haile Selassie and the campaign of murder and mayhem unleashed by the Derg, the military regime of Colonel Mengistu (the so-called Red Terror). Mr Saeed joined the EPRP (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party) and agitated for trades union rights. He, together with many others, was jailed without trial for seven years. After his release, in the mid 1980's, he fled to Somalia on foot, where he was then arrested and condemned to death as a spy for the same Ethiopian military junta that had imprisoned him! The UNHCR in Mogadishu campaigned for his release, and he was finally allowed to emigrate to Canada.

Since the overthrow of the Derg in 1990, Mr Saeed has still not been allowed back to Ethiopia by the current regime under Meles Zenawi, because of his links to the political opposition. Even his poems are banned and he cannot visit his 94 year-old mother who appears in the film to recount her sorrow.

Ali Saeed is therefore a man who has been unlucky enough to live under three regimes where any dissent however peaceful is treated with suspicion and forcefully repressed. Of course he is not alone; his fellow Ethiopians have all endured a similar fate. He tells his story not for its own sake but as an example of what happened and is still happening in Ethiopia.

His narrative is supported by flashbacks, and there are some grainy photos of him as a young man meeting Haile Selassie at a trade fair. Other photos show prisoners of the Derg digging a trench into which Mr Saeed tells us they were all shot and dumped. There are short interviews with other political prisoners now living outside Ethiopia, who show us their tortured feet, toes missing, soles completely whipped away. There is also the humour and pathos of his new life in Canada, for example the job interview where he follows advice to the letter and fixes his potential employer with huge unblinking eyes (he is not hired!).

But against all the odds, *Memories of a Generation* is not a depressing film. It is a quiet but determined call to arms against injustice and repression. It is a joyfully

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charismatic call to openness and plurality for a beautiful African country which prides itself on its lack of a colonial past, but seems to be perennially incapable of treating its own citizens with the most basic trust and decency. It is a film which I can heartily recommend to anyone interested in truth and humanity.

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Ethiopia will prevail !