

Trinity Church Sutton

Oral History Project – Selemawi Zere

The following is a transcript of a video interview with Selemawi Zere recorded in October 2015. The video can be accessed from our [web site](#).

Transcript

Hello. I am David Jones and this is the first in a series of interviews in the Trinity Oral History Project.

We are talking to a number of people who live in Sutton about their lives and things that have been important to them and today I am talking to Selemawi about his arrival in Sutton having grown up originally in Eritrea.

So Selemawi, tell me, how did you come to come to Sutton?

Well before we moved to Sutton we used to live in Clapham Common area so we had very small accommodation, we were searching for a place to live, we were looking for extra room. So we were searching for suitable accommodation everywhere round the country.

The main reason is because our family is growing. My wife Feven was expecting twin daughters in addition to our other two daughters so we felt we need more space to live in and around June times we found this property in Sutton which is very suitable for our family size.

Did you know anyone in Sutton before you arrived?

No that was the first difficulty because we didn't know anyone when we moved into Sutton.

And then we thought the only place we could go and meet people was the church.

So on our first Sunday in Sutton the first thing we did was just to go and find the right church for us and then we came across to Trinity, and we had a brief chat at the end of service and we explained to Martin that we just newly moved to Sutton and he took an interest and Martin, our previous, former minister, said that he would organize some dedicated volunteers to help out as much as they can.

And when were your twins born?

Our twin daughters born in September after nineteen days, after we arrived in Sutton.

One of the things that I think people notice when they meet new people from other countries is that names are sometimes very different.

Can you tell me something about your name?

Yes indeed because as you probably know, myself and Feven, we don't share the same surnames, which is very uncommon in England, and then some people think - "Oh are you married? Why are you not having the same surname?"

But traditional in Eritrea we don't share the same surnames.

Our names could go... We can write our names up to first name, father's name and grandfather's name.

You can write up to three names. When you get married, the wife is entitled to keep her names as well...

There is no such a system in Eritrea so even though we are married we don't share the same surnames.

Another thing that I want to mention as well, about names. The name is very important in Eritrea.

Because in Eritrean tradition when they give a name for the child it has to be a reflection of their hope, aspiration or sometimes to reflect also the religion they follow.

We have a lot of biblical names given to children. When it comes to my name, Selamawi is a typical Eritrean name which means "peaceful". That also it reflect the era where I was born. It reflects the hope and aspiration of my parents, because I was born as Eritrea fought for liberation.

So my family was hoping for one day to be peaceful and then they gave me a name "peaceful" - Selamawi means peaceful. So that reflects the aspiration or the hope of my parents.

You have four daughters. Yes I have.

Would you like to tell us about the names you chose for them?

The first name we chose for our first daughter was Sinit. Sinit is an Eritrean name which means "Harmony". Because we almost knew... we were hoping to live in harmony with each other.

So that's why we chose Sinit. And then Selah is the second daughter, which means "Amen".

It's a reflection of our belief. It's from the Bible, from the Psalms. Selah. It's a Hebrew name which means "Amen".

And then the next is our two daughters we give them "Milcah" and "Rinah".

We didn't really typically follow the Eritrean tradition, we just thought these sound great! We give those two names but those two names were from the Bible too. They are of Hebrew origin.

Selamawi not many people in Sutton have been to Eritrea. Can you tell us something about what it is like?

Eritrea is found in the northeast of Africa in the Horn of Africa. It is bordered to the West with Sudan, South to Ethiopia and South East with Djibouti. Across the Red Sea also it faces to Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Eritrea has got about 1000 kilometer sea coast along the Red Sea.

The capital of Eritrea is called Asmara, it is located about 1,500 meter above sea level.

The climate there is very mild - it's not hot compared to other part of Eritrea, and it's only about 100 kilometers from the coastal area. The climate is moderated in the capital but in other parts of Eritrea it could be hot and humid especially toward the border of Sudan toward the western part of Eritrea.

The capital city itself is mostly founded or built by the Italian Colony so when you look at some of the architecture in Asmara Eritrea it resembles mostly to the architecture of Rome.

The capital city is very clean and looks like the typical European city.

So you grew up in Asmara Selawawi, what can you tell us about that time?

I grew up in Asmara during the Ethiopian occupation. so my primary and secondary Education was given in, was instructed in Ethiopian language called Amharic.

So when my age was right I was sent to the Lutheran Church School, because my family originally came from the Lutheran church so there was a Lutheran church school, so I went there for my primary education, and then for my secondary education I went to a Catholic school, called Cambone, so I completed my secondary school in Cambone.

This happens during the occupation of Ethiopia. At the time Eritrea was under then Ethiopians so I was made to study the Ethiopian language.

All my primary education was instructed in the Ethiopian language called Amharic, but when we go to secondary school the means of instruction was English so I was taught in English beginning from grade 9 up to grade 12.

And then in 1990 as Eritrea became independent, at that time, right before the independence, I joined the University of Asmara.

So I studied from 1990 to 1994 in the University of Asmara.

I did the degree in chemistry, major chemistry, and minor physics.

In 1994 I graduated from the University of Asmara and then I went to do 1 year's National Service.

As part of my National Service I was assigned to work in secondary school and taught chemistry for one year and then that followed by six months military training.

And then after that, once I completed my National Service, I was free to look for a paid job so my first paid job was with United Nations as a research assistant which is completely different from my educational background.

I was adapted to work in social anthropology.

I was working as a research assistant in food security and social reintegration so most of my research was conducted in the lowland area of Eritrea which is predominantly occupied by many refugee returnees and ex-fighters, repatriated fighters, so I was conducting research among those peoples. So I was so much interested in the project that I have undertaken with United Nations because it bringing me closer to the real issue in the country at that time, because Chemistry is a bit foreign subject to the needs of the Eritrean people at that time.

I was so interested on the research, so I have been able to produce a lot of good work.

Because - 1 - I know the people, 2 I can change the research method according to the cultural needs,

Because there are so many illiterates in Eritrea, it is very difficult to collect empirical data using questionnaire-type of forms, because you wouldn't get the real information you need, but by adapting the cultural... by just engaging people into discussion you can extract a lot of information according to the need... So I thought I have the biggest tool to get the good outcomes of the research.

It helps in a way to reform the means of collecting data.

So that gives more insight to the main researchers. There was one head of research who was really impressed with that idea.

So I thought it could go beyond that, that was my hope and aspiration at that time.

While I was in the middle of this assignment, I got to know one professor from Norway who came to do research so I was also assisting him in collecting some data from the lowlands of Eritrea.

Because of the travel difficulties he had had - so he had to rely on me for data collection.

So he was residing in the capital city Asmara but had to travel to the lowlands about 100, up to 200km away from the capital. But the road is a very, very rough road... It takes about 2-3 days to get to some places...

So it was not convenient for him to do so, so I was covering part of his work.

Through that connection I got a scholarship in Norway and I was given a chance to go to Norway and do my further education in Norway between 1997 up to 1999. I have done my studies up to 1999 and then went to Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, to work there in Addis Ababa and do more research in the area where I was studying in moral education. The research I'd done in Norway was about moral education in Eritrean schools.

So I was going to look at the comparative studies in Ethiopia, just to come up with some comparative studies between Eritrea and Ethiopia because cultural-wise they are very linked and close, and different countries use moral education in schools differently.

In that time, second ground war between Eritrea and Ethiopia erupted, that moment, the problem was there was an ethnic element conflict, so all the Eritreans who were residing in Ethiopia was expelled by the Ethiopian government and a large portion of the Eritrean land was also acquired by Ethiopia - Ethiopia invaded part of Eritrea.

So there was a bit of a chaotic situation at that time, and then I managed to get out of the country and arrived in the UK in 2000.

Since 2000 I have lived here in the UK, in 2002, granted refugee status.

So in 2002 I was able to travel to Eritrea, because my mother was very, very ill. So her only wish was (for me) to go there and she wants me to come back to Eritrea and get married because I was the last member of my family who was not at that time.

So I went in 2002, and she had chosen Feven to be my wife.

So we knew each other - with Feven - because we lived in the same area and we go also to the same Lutheran church of Eritrea.

So I decided to go back and marry to Feven in 2002 so in August 2002 we got married - with Feven.

At the time Feven was also doing her National Service duty. There was some difficulty with her. One thing was she was in prison at the time because she was found reading the Bible!

So the government of Eritrea was not allowing people to practice their own religion...

So after a few days she was released from prison and she came down to the capital city of Asmara and then we got married, and then I came back to England and a month later she got her own visa and she can follow me to England.

At that time I was living in the Brixton area, Brixton Hill.

We had a studio flat in Brixton Hill. I was also teaching in Lambeth College.

The place where I was staying was very close to my work place

Then we had our first child in the studio flat and from there we moved to Clapham Common.

In Clapham Common we had our second child Selah, that's the time before we moved to Sutton.

And that's where we came in, at the beginning of the story.

Selamawi, thank you very much for telling me about your life, and your ... how you came to Sutton.