



Briefing 211

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Article Category:

BfK Briefing

Byline:

Elizabeth Laird introduces **The Ethiopian Story Collecting Project**

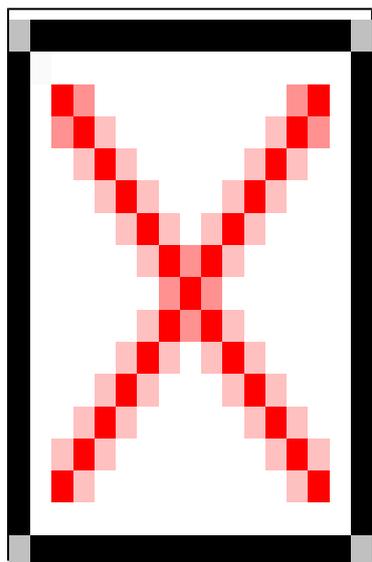
The Ethiopian Story Collecting Project

Award-winning author Elizabeth Laird introduces the new website, dedicated to stories from Ethiopia

Everyone loves stories. They're fundamental to our humanity. We all know, of course, the great compendia of written stories: the *Shahnameh* from Iran, the *Panchatantra* from India, the *Thousand and One Nights* from Arabia, Aesop's fables and Grimm's tales from Europe. The Bible is one vast storybook and there are marvellous stories in the Koran.

In many parts of the world, however, stories only exist in the memories of storytellers. These tales are in great danger of being lost for ever. Young people, exposed to western culture and education, find them dull and even embarrassing compared with the lure of Disney and his ilk.

For two years in the 1960s, I was a teacher in Ethiopia, a country of great cultural diversity.



On a visit thirty years later, I was walking on a mountain above Addis Ababa with an Ethiopian friend. We crouched down to look at a groove in the soil, made by the feet of thousands of ants en route from their nest to their food source. A pair of bare feet appeared on the far side of the ants' motorway. An old farmer was staring down at us with concern.

'Have you lost something of value?' he said. We explained that we were admiring the ants. 'The ant is very remarkable animal,' he said, 'and I will tell you a story about him.'

He settled his shawl comfortably on his shoulders and began. It was a great story. We listened with delight. I made myself a promise to write it down as soon as I had the chance. But when I finally had a pencil in my hand, I found I had

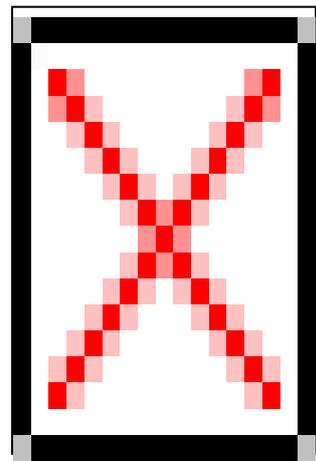
completely forgotten it. It was then, though, that I had my Big Idea, and the next day I went to see Michael Sargent, the Director of the British Council in Addis Ababa.

‘Could you possibly,’ I asked him, ‘supply me with a Land Rover, a driver and a translator? I would like to travel about the country and collect folk stories. I will then produce a couple of books in simplified English so that they can be used in schools to help children with their English reading while at the same time acquainting them with their oral heritage.’

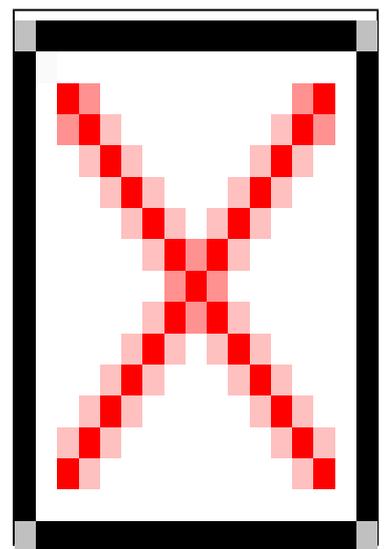
He thought. ‘A couple of books won’t be enough,’ he said. ‘You’ll need to produce two for every one of the fourteen regions. Which means travelling to every part of Ethiopia.’

‘OK,’ I said. And so began the Ethiopian Story Project.

Michael Sargent then took over. With much persistence, he set up a project with the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and the British Council, and miraculously found funding through the Foreign Office. I returned to Ethiopia a few months later and set off on the first of five extraordinary journeys to every part of that wonderful country.



There’s not enough space in this short article to describe the fascinating variety of people who told me stories. There were sessions with former guerrilla fighters in Gambela on the steamy Sudan border, farmers and a Coptic nun in the cool highlands, camel traders in the blistering Danakil desert, a cloth merchant in the ancient walled city of Harar, a village of hunter gatherers in the far west, and a young descendant of the bard of the last king of Bonga.



The stories ranged from animal fables, to scary tales of zombies, witches and jinns, to myths of tribal origins, to ‘how things began’ stories, to tales of pranksters and jokers and famous wits. Along the way I found fascinating resonances with the Bible, the Koran and many other story cycles.

Eight little books were produced in the end and distributed to schools, but sadly the money then ran out. In the UK, Oxford University Press published a selection of the stories entitled **When the World Began**, beautifully illustrated by Emma Harding, Griselda Holderness, Yosef Kebede and Lydia Monks.

For years my cassette tapes and notebooks gathered dust in my study. Then I met a man whom I had taught in Addis

Ababa in the 1960s. He now worked for the Christensen Fund, a charitable foundation. Thanks to him, Michael Sargent and I were able to create [a first website](#) [3] containing all of the 300 stories I'd collected, in the unedited language of the translators. It can be read in both English and Amharic. The grant also enabled me to write **The Lure of the Honey Bird**, an account of my journeys, the storytellers and the stories they told me. A second website followed. This contains a selection of 88 of the stories, which I've rewritten in simplified English. There are comprehension exercises to go with each story as well as artwork and recordings.

I'm delighted to say that the original aim of the project, conceived nearly twenty years ago, is at last being fulfilled. The stories are being downloaded now by teachers and individuals not only in Ethiopia but elsewhere in the world. Children are enjoying their wonderful oral heritage, and improving their English at the same time. It's been quite a journey, and it's wonderful to see it now bearing fruit at last.

Elizabeth Laird has travelled round Ethiopia collecting folk stories from traditional storytellers. Her latest novel [The Fastest Boy in the World](#) [4], Macmillan, 978-1447267171, also set in Ethiopia, is shortlisted for the 2015 CILIP Carnegie Medal. **The Lure of the Honey Bird** is published by Polygon, 978-1-8469-7246-1 £12.99.

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