

Goats and beads and elephant dung

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This Christmastime, there seems to have been a welcome move by organizations to persuade shoppers to buy gifts that directly help people in Africa and South Asia.

It began, in our family, with my son Toby and his wife Narissa (who were both born in Africa) purchasing a goat for my recent birthday at Mother Tongue bookstore. Well, the goat wasn't actually in Ottawa South, but in the Masai village of Longido in northern Tanzania. An organization called Project Tembo says it would help a woman start a small business "so she can provide food for her family and send her children to school."

Project Tembo is a youngish Ottawa-based charity whose acronym stands for Tanzania Education and Micro-Business Opportunity and, besides distributing goats, it helps girls in high schools and supports adult literacy. Jo Marchant, its co-founder, says they are also raising funds to build a culture-rest-house in Longido for revenue from tourism. (The Canadian Hunger Foundation has also been collecting for goats, but theirs are in northern Pakistan.)

Over in Brandon, Manitoba, the Marquis Project, which survived the Liberal massacre of Learner Centres in the 1990s, has a Worldly Goods Shop offering somewhat unworldly gifts. The oddest is tree-less paper made out of elephant dung and rice paddy grass from Sri Lanka. The Brandon people explain that the 40,000 elephants left on that island are running out of protected space; they come into conflict with farmers and are wantonly killed.

How to get farmers viewing elephants as "a sustainable economic resource"? Elephant dung, they say, may be that resource and it is "freely available. On average, an adult elephant produces 180-200 kgs of it a day." Since they are vegetarian, the

waste produced is basically raw cellulose and acid-free. A bright local group, Project Maximus, is cleaning and processing it into linen-like papyrus-type paper, and thus into notebooks, cards and so on. They are calling it "Pachyderm Paper," to give it dignity, but the North American distributor calls himself "Mr. Elie Pooh." I ordered a beautiful wallet from Marquis containing 10 envelopes and 20 sheets of fine writing pooh paper "ensconced in the beautiful dress of a typical Sri Lankan princess." It cost \$14 – just think of all the employment created back there.

Here in Ottawa, we are into beads and brooches. In 2000, Dr. Peg Herbert, an Ottawa University professor specializing in child psychology and working with disadvantaged children, was supervisor for Sister Alice Mputsoe, who completed her MA with sponsorship from the Sisters of Charity who have worked for 74 years in Lesotho. In 2004, Peg was hosted around Lesotho by Sister Alice, and learned how that mountain kingdom had the world's third highest HIV rate, and in remote villages few were left except orphans with grandmothers. Mainly because of AIDS, the population has since declined from 2.2 million in 2000 to 1.8 million in 2007, with a life expectancy of 31 for men and 36 for women. On the plus side, because Basotho men traditionally head off to work in South Africa's mines, women are used to running affairs.

Peg returned, resigned from the university and founded Help Lesotho (HL) (www.helplesotho.ca). Its success has been meteoric. Its budget in 2007 was \$706,000, and likely to pass \$1 million in 2008. It has some 60 projects in 10 remote villages. She deliberately set up office at Leribe, away from the capital where "people just talk to each other." Projects involve child sponsorship, stoves and other supplies for 14 schools that are twinned with Canadian schools, including Corpus Christi in the Glebe; leadership training among youth and orphans; and support for 400 grandparents and hundreds of orphans, especially in Thaba Tseka district, where the HIV rate is an appalling 43 per cent. In all, HL supports 7,500 orphans and vulnerable children.



The Queen of Lesotho, M'e Masenate, surrounded by school children

Cindy May, the present "parent leader" for HL at Corpus Christi, tells how the school has, for three years now, used the six weeks of Advent to raise funds – calendars sold at the kindergarten concert, coin drives, grade six making Christmas angels to sell for \$3. In response, they received "57 amazing letters in September" from students at Katlehong Community School.

Beyond Corpus Christi, the big seller (at \$25) this past Christmas were bead brooches that were made by M'e (Mrs.) Mabataung Mtholo, who cares for three sons, an adopted orphan and an out-of-work husband. She has made thousands of brooches over the last six years to raise the level of HIV/AIDS awareness. The three girls on the brooch

symbolize AIDS, orphaned and abused children. Queen Masenate and her daughters wear them to support the campaign. Another Glebe connection: Nathalie Szabo, founder of the Sassy Bead Company, donates a five-kilo package of beads twice a year for M'e Mtholo.

Although Peg stays as much as possible in the background of local partners, she spends four months a year in Lesotho and is known as M'e Mathuso ('Mother of Help'). This month she will be off again, with Dr. Bob Birnbaum, a veteran Flying Doctor, to help run a 'leadership camp' for 250 orphans and vulnerable children from 10-12 years old. The youth are where Lesotho's hope lies.