

Cultural exchange

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [January 20, 1999](#) issue

Today another package arrived from Ethiopia. I handed the post office clerk the yellow claim slip and he handed me the brown paper package with the exotic stamps on it. Inside, wrapped in old plastic bags, I found 12 exquisite icons on tanned goat skins. Each is about a foot square, painted in primary colors that range from egg yolk yellow to royal blue. The subjects include the Trinity, Christ the Pantocrator, the Virgin and child, St. George and the dragon (an Ethiopian favorite), plus a national saint who looks for all the world like Daniel, with tamed leopards and lions lying at his feet.

All of the eyes are perfect round circles, so there is no escaping them. There are also lots of angels--angels stationed in the four corners of the paintings, angels peeking out from behind trees, angles hovering in the air above Jesus' head. The canvases are stiff and bumpy, like old maps on thick parchment, with tufts of goat fur still visible around the edges. According to my dog, they smell good enough to eat.

This is the fourth package of icons I have received from Agegnehu Kebede, a young man I met in Ethiopia in 1995. His home is on Lake Tana, near Bahir Dar, where the ark of the covenant was supposed to have been kept for several hundred years between its theft from Jerusalem and its eventual arrival in Axum, the capital of Ethiopia. Lake Tana is dotted with many islands, many of them with their own ancient monasteries. On the island where Agegnehu lives there is a particularly beautiful one--a round thatched structure surrounded by fruit trees where Orthodox priests still celebrate the holy mysteries. Inside, the walls are covered with larger versions of the paintings Agegnehu sends me.

His father, the artist, is also one of the priests (a "regular" priest, Agegnehu explained, who may marry and have children, as opposed to a "real" priest, who may not). When I visited the monastery, Agegnehu appointed himself my personal tour guide. He was 15 at the time, with the slight body of a ten-year-old. He stuck with me until I boarded the ferry to leave the island, when he pressed a slip of paper into my hand. "Do not forget me," he whispered, and stepped back into a crowd of

solemn children who waved good-bye to us.

His name and address were on the piece of paper, along with his shoe size. "Shoze size 37," he had written with a blue ball-point pen. When I arrived back in the States I sent him the shoes and eight weeks later the first three icons arrived. "If you like these," Agegnehu wrote, "I can send more. In return you will please send me some black Levis size 30 and another pair of shooze. The others were too large. My brother now wears them. Please send me Adidas and I will send you icons."

The terms of this cultural exchange have haunted me ever since. I went to Ethiopia to visit the medieval stone churches of Lalibela and the monasteries on Lake Tana. I wanted to encounter a form of Christianity that has all but disappeared from the earth, and in many ways Agegnehu embodied everything I was searching for. He knew all the old legends about how Menelik, the son of Solomon and the queen of Sheba, stole the ark of the covenant from Jerusalem. He helped his father care for the ornate processional crosses and illuminated manuscripts that were stored in the monastery treasury. He could explain the meaning behind every icon he sent to me.

In my own fashion, I embodied everything he was searching for too. He wanted name-brand shoes and clothing. He wanted a raincoat for the rainy season. He wanted to come live with me in the United States or, if that were not possible, then at least a money order for \$50 per month to pay his family's rent and his own school fees. To prove he was a good student, he sent me a copy of his report card. If one can believe a document copied in a student's own hand, he received a 91 in English, an 82 in home economics, a 90 in general commerce and a 93 in electricity. He would also like a clothbound Webster's encyclopedia and a waterproof watch.

From his perspective, ours is a match made in heaven. He is as covetous of my culture as I am of his, and the fact that he can barter his father's smelly old paintings for brand-new merchandise strikes him as the best kind of luck. The specificity of his requests reveals his image of America, and of me. America is a vast mall, which I roam each day with pockets full of money.

Our correspondence, which has lasted for over three years now, remains a kind of torture for both of us. I wait in vain for any details about his life in Bahir Dar or a single question about mine in Clarksville. His letters, addressed to "My dearest Mother," are a litany of material needs. Since I am reluctant to become an automatic cash machine for him, I respond slowly to only a portion of his requests. Recently he

became so frustrated with my lassitude that he asked me please to give his name and address to some other rich person who might do more for him. I vacillate between wanting to end the relationship and berating myself for not doing more to help the boy. Mostly I am haunted by my reflection in his eyes.

Meanwhile, he says, he has many religious paintings he will send me as soon as he hears from me about his school fees. He also wants me to know that he now wears size 42 shoes. Agegnehu is growing up.