

The Culture of More
Jason Bradford, November 16, 2005

I went to Madagascar, a large island in the Indian Ocean, during my years as a tropical botanist. Fascinating place, and I was struck by the oddities of a particular "cattle culture" there. The "big men" in a village are recognized by the size of their herd. These men collect cattle far beyond their needs and are rewarded with prestige and the admiration of ladies.

This is a common pattern in nature, with the peacock being the classic example. Males will ornament themselves to excess to impress females. This excess is termed a "handicap" that demonstrates the strength of a male, as in "I can beat you with one hand tied behind my back." When this gets out of control, biologists call it "runaway sexual selection." Think of Arnold and all his Hummers.

Western Madagascar is very dry half the year. When the rains stop, the cattle get hungry and thirsty. So the baobab trees are felled.¹ Baobab trees are bizarre in form and therefore famous in Africa and Madagascar. They have trunks of enormous girth, like a redwood tree, but are topped by a sprawling crown of branches. Inside the trunk water is stored in a pithy solution that the cattle love. The trees take a long time to grow and the demands of cattle, among others, are too great. There's massive loss of forest in Madagascar.

Now here's the really strange part of the story. When a "big man" dies all his cattle, perhaps over 100, are killed and burned in a great bonfire atop his grave. The size of the bone pile signifies his importance. It's another version of the motto, "He who dies with the most toys wins." This is not a culture of sufficiency; it is a culture of more.

It is obvious to anyone who looks that this is a path of self-destruction. Yet the big men are not changing, and those who reward them are not asking them to. If one big man were to reduce his herd, this would simply let others expand theirs. Mutual agreements are required.

Despite cosmetic differences, these people are just like all of us. Actions that benefit one or a few can hurt the rest. What seems to work in the short-term can be detrimental in the long-term. Recognizing a common problem and finding common solutions is extremely difficult.

Take for example our own cultural addition to "economic growth" and the assumption that this is good for us. The evidence contradicts this assumption. When I hear a report about how our economy grew during the last quarter I think, "Darn, that's bad news!" It would be like the doctor telling me my tumor is enlarged. By contrast, if my son grows between check-ups I am pleased. In any system, there's a time to stop growing or it becomes dangerous.

Our culture has so much material wealth that we are insanely wasteful--people fret over junk they wish they never bought and burn gasoline to go rent a movie. Not good for the person and not good for the planet. Furthermore, the hyper-abundance has created an illusion that other people are not required to meet our basic needs. I can order all my food on-line and have the UPS guy drop it off at my front door. Forget bumping into friends at the store. Electricity and water quietly stream into my domicile. I can download diversions to my computer. Forget the local theater and pub. While machines do the work and provide the entertainment, the social fabric of neighborhoods, service clubs, and inter-dependent local businesses withers.

So when I look at the plans for growth in the city I am reminded of these people from Madagascar. The inertia of the culture of "more" is strong, even though the signals that it is harmful and must end are so clear. Freeway bypasses, upscale housing developments, asphalt plants, etc. make no sense whatsoever in my mind. These are the plans of careless "big men" who obviously need to be told to stop.

Beyond just saying, "stop," we also need to provide an alternative. We must make the distinction between quantity and quality. Less in quantity can be better in quality. For example, building a freeway will only perpetuate the fuel inefficient, noise-and-air polluting trucking industry; it will also sap our options for investing in a wiser course. Let's get the trucks off the roads by using the more energy efficient and existing rail lines for shipping goods. And why not create good local jobs producing our basic foods, fuels and fibers right here, so we don't need so many trucks to begin with?

These economic strategies would improve the *quality* of life through strong community bonds, cooperative self-reliance, improved general health, and a less-polluted environment. And we'd do so by progressively using *less* material and energy resources.

Now that would be a culture to be proud of.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baobab>