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Cultural Anthropology Studies of Conflict

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Culture The customary way in which groups organize and understand their behavior in relation to others and to their environment.

Language A flexible complex system of communication that incorporates structure, sound, meaning, and practice and which can be used to describe conditions internal or external to people.

Meaning Systems The process, signs, and symbols used to create a coherent picture of reality.

Place A given space/environment on which groups project, as well as obtain, cultural meaning.

Reciprocity Exchange of services and goods.

Reversal Theory A field of study which explores how individuals' internal motivational states are structured, and which investigates the occurrence of cultural inversions, periods of time during which otherwise inappropriate behavior is acceptable and valued.

Symbolism The use of symbols to create and maintain political and social realities.

Introduction

This article reviews selected cultural anthropological approaches to the study of conflict. Anthropologists view conflict as a general state of affairs in a relationship or as some basic incompatibility in the very structure of the relationship, which leads to specific disputes and sometimes to violence. Anthropological work treats conflict within the context of general ethnographic accounts as well as in situational settings such as war. The contribution of anthropology in understanding conflict is broad, reflecting the multidisciplinary of the field of conflict studies. Anthropological approaches to conflict include systems of meaning, ritual and symbolism, language and communication, ethnicity and identity, gender, environmental stress, and sense of place.

Considered as whole, the anthropology of conflict includes a wide range of interrelated but analytically distinct

approaches to the analysis, management, and resolution of conflicts, including violence. These include perspectives on the relative importance of the human biological heritage; psychological factors; social, organizational, and cultural aspects that promote conflict or violent behavior; the dynamics of ethnocentrism; the nature and course of warfare, both 'primitive' and contemporary; the lived experiences of individuals and groups in settings of violence; the examination of factors promoting nonviolence as a social and cultural norm; and the dynamics of disputing and dispute settlement.

Because of the wide-ranging anthropological interests in conflict studies, a full review of the literature is not possible here. Rather this article provides a synthetic overview of selected topics in the anthropology of conflict. Extensive, but not exhaustive, it relates scholarly interests in conflict within anthropology with areas of historical interest in the discipline generally.

Cultural Analysis and Conflict

Edward Tylor's definition of culture in 1871 as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" was embedded on the basic belief that humans were bound by a "psychic unity," that people's minds everywhere operated the same way and all people had the same potential for development.

Evolutionary thought dominated much of early anthropology from the late nineteenth through the early part of this century largely through the efforts of American anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan.

By the 1920s anthropological thought had developed a substantial critical reaction to evolutionary models led earlier, largely by Lewis Henry Morgan. In the United States, Franz Boas developed historical particularism – sought group cultures only within broad categories of "cultural areas" on the basis of shared traits that often reflect adaptive responses to natural environments. These groupings, however, provided no explanatory model, only a means of comparison.

At the same time period, British functionalists opted for detailed studies that attempted to understand 'primitive' culture on its own terms. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski, understood culture in more mechanical terms and took as their metaphor the living organism. Like any organism, it is the individual parts of a culture – specific customs or institutions – that are interconnected and 'function' to maintain the total system.

Functionalism, however, treated cultures as closed systems in timeless equilibrium, despite ongoing change and contact with other cultures. Furthermore, tautologically, cultural traits were explained by their functions, which in turn were explained by the traits.

Today anthropologists recognize that 'culture' consists of both structures and patterns that orient what people see as the important physical and social elements in their world, establish norms for proper and improper ways of acting, and create emotional patterns which contribute to individual motivation. Anthropologists recognize that these structures and patterns vary within a society and that they are interdependent, thus constituting culture as emergent in the sense that it is always being reproduced and revised. Linkage between these 'levels' of organization is made through the study of meaning. An emphasis is placed on understanding social patterns and institutions in terms of how people make their daily experiences meaningful and productive. 'Meaning-centered' approaches can be traced to the mid-1950s and 1960s and shifts toward anthropological approaches to the study of symbols and symbolism.

By using the culture-as-meaning approach, anthropologists have collected information on institutions, rituals,

norms, and other cultural patterns and processes. This approach has allowed them to better understand how these dimensions of human and social life relate to collective violence and to social violence in general.

The main cases where anthropology has focused primarily on social conflict and collective violence include early on the so-called primitive warfare, in the 1970s mainly, ethnocentrism and human universals, and more recently the effects of violence on individuals and groups. Furthermore, anthropology in conflict studies grows through the increasing use of ethnographic study as a methodology of choice in research with combined methods design for other fields such as psychology, sociology, and international relations.

For example, in the 1980s, a focus on issues regarding the threat of global destruction through thermonuclear means produced literature theorizing on the concept of risk-taking and its associated behaviors. Margaret Clark traced four traditional motivations for "risk-seeking:" the elements of play, the involvement of social stratification, the incorporation of supernatural elements, and finally the promise for secular rewards. She provided examples of rituals, institutions, beliefs, and behaviors from a variety of cultures, including those with capacity to engage in nuclear warfare, in order to expose the cultural patterns of risk-seeking in our society and show that radical changes are required to eliminate such patterns.

In a similar analysis, Mary L. Foster demonstrated that risk-seeking behavior exists at the group level, as well as individual level, where it is socially supported and collectively sanctioned through psychological reversals and cultural inversion. This conceptual structure entailing periodical 'shifts of power' was developed by Gregory Bateson in order to explain the conciliation between the complementary (leader to follower) and the symmetrical (members of the same team) interaction, coexisting within societies.

Douglas Fry's research demonstrates that conflict and violence are not the result of inbred patterns. Rather he shows that conflict, violence, and war, and the management of these processes are the result of the complex interaction of 'nature' and 'nurture'. Thus, we see that participation in institutionalized forms of violence and conflict requires culturally patterned methods of motivation. Walter Goldschmidt traced the relationship between personal motivation and institutionalized conflict in both tribal societies and the American society. Goldschmidt suggested that the benefits of such a career motivate the individual to participate. Such benefits include enhanced social standing, social gratification, personal pride, prosperity, and strength. All of these contribute to preserving what he called "vicious cycle" between popular action and war. Carol Greenhouse has helped to recast militarism as something other than social disorder. Rather, she argues that when militarism is understood as a component of the same social order that keeps vital other social institutions

such as religion, kinship, and the law, we are better able to explain why joining the military is often an act that is taken for granted by many state societies.

Symbolism, Ritual, and Conflict

In Anthropology both conflict and violence are understood as shaped in response to culturally specific norms, values, ideologies, and worldviews. What motivates societies in conflict arises out of institutionalized social interactions that are mutually defined by members of that society. Often, however, the cultural knowledge that forms the basis of what justifies conflict in one setting and condemns it in another is taken for granted and is assumed to be an objective fact by the participants themselves.

In terms of how conflict and violence are institutionalized within cultures, anthropologists have looked at ways in which conflict relations are maintained, expressed, or as is often the case, masked, by means of symbolism and symbolic behavior. The early work of anthropologist Abner Cohen has proved particularly insightful for the understanding of the relationship between symbolism – the expression or manipulation of symbolic forms and patterns of symbolic action – and the struggle of groups for economic and political power.

As Cohen argued, symbols do not arise spontaneously, but rather are produced through a process of continuous restructuring in relation to the distribution of resources found in society. The careful study of the interrelationship between these two domains yields important information regarding motivations for conflict and violent behavior.

The study of ritual has provided a fertile territory for analyzing the relationship between political struggle and symbolic behavior. Political speeches, national demonstration, public executions, all examples of political ritual, draw upon meaning structures and symbols to convey powerful messages of legitimacy and to ensure the mandate to exercise power. David Kertzer observes that the meaningful content of ritual is encoded in symbols. Symbols are the words through which rituals make sense to societies. Their weight, sequence, and presence – or absence – help to ensure that the message is delivered.

In the realm of politics, anthropologists note how symbols and symbolism generally operate in such a way to construct social unity where otherwise diverse interests and needs may be present within a single society. Symbols are, in Victor Turner's words, "multivocal," thus any symbol or set of symbols can encode a variety of different meanings. Because they possess a certain "condensation" of meanings, feelings, and emotions, symbols can speak simultaneously to people differently situated within society.

More than carrying messages, symbols instigate social action and define an individual's place within society. In

her exploration of Iranian popular culture, Mary Catherine Bateson identifies different normative themes of choice-making, which she argues can affect international affairs. Through an analysis of popular stories and films, Bateson draws a distinction between two Iranian approaches to decision-making. One form is rooted in pragmatism and the rules of compromise and calculation and the other in the preservation of honor in spite of the possible negative consequences. Bringing such forms to bear upon understanding international relations between the United States and Iran demonstrate the future need to focus on motivations rather than simply the outcome for political behavior. More recently, William O. Beeman uses a discourse analysis approach to show how the United States and Iran have engaged in a cycle of mutual demonization and misunderstanding. In a wide-ranging analysis, Beeman shows how each side automatically discounts the presentations of the other simply because what is being said comes from the other side. This process, called reactive devaluation, is a frequent element in escalating conflicts. As well, Beeman's analysis explicates the symbolic bases for the mutual demonizing of the United States by Iran and vice versa. Beeman's analysis is especially relevant to the geopolitics of nuclear proliferation in the early twenty-first century.

Language, Communication, and Conflict

Language is a human universal – all people use a spoken symbolically based system of communication. Indeed, one of the fundamental characteristics of culture is that it is communicated among its people. Language can create boundaries. It can signify membership in the same culture, or it can denote difference and play a serious role in framing the 'other'.

Ethnolinguistic analysis yields large amounts of often subtle information about the culture under study. Language, in the broad sense of the term, reflects one or another element of a community's social life, including social stratification, sense of space or time, and most of all, narration. For the study of conflict, examination of communication patterns in society can illuminate the subtle ways intracultural conflict is dealt with through language. In her study of the *baladi* women in Cairo, Evelyn Early explores how quarrels between women serve as vehicles for the transmission of important cultural expectations concerning respectful and appropriate behavior; what is being said, when, and by whom, plays a decisive role in *baladi* conflict management.

Lawrence Fisher's study of the Barbadian communication strategy of 'dropping remarks' demonstrates how beyond the speech act itself, careful attention must be paid to the context of discourse. Dropping remarks is a subtle form of a triangular speech event. They are

triangular in the sense that speakers 'drop' insults to a target individual through conversations overheard with a third party not directly involved in the dispute. In other words, a speaker's intended audience is not the person directly spoken to, but rather an onlooker. Dropping remarks operates to escalate dormant conflict that may or may not break into direct quarreling by allowing a speaker to state a position in a dispute. As aggressive acts that are packaged as relatively harmless, they allow accusations to be made without leading to the necessity of outright quarrel.

The study of ethnolinguists demonstrates how language can serve to both accelerate and ameliorate conflicts within societies. Similarly, the study of language can reveal the sources of conflict between societies. Much of the scholarly work on language and conflict between cultures has benefited from insights of anthropologist Edward Hall's distinction between 'high' and 'low' context speech communities. In the case of the former, discourse is indirect, with ideas often expressed in abstract and metaphorical form, and favoring broad frameworks rather than minute details. In contrast, low context represents communication predicated on the direct delivery of information, without ambiguity, and often neglectful of particular idiosyncrasies of communication styles.

In an effort to account for the continued failures in negotiation between Israelis and Egyptians for nearly 50 years, Raymond Cohen plumbs the social, cultural, and historical differences between the two cultures to demonstrate how different conceptions of time, the role of violence, and the community impede the negotiating process. In addition to the contrast between a high-context Egyptian communication style and an Israeli form of direct 'low-context' discourse style, Cohen notes how different conceptions of time inform the pace and schedule of negotiation.

Looking at competing notions of argument and persuasion, Barbara Koch's analysis of rhetorical speech in contemporary Arabic texts shows that Arabic writers construct "proof" through such high-context forms of persuasion as repetition, paraphrasing, and the structuring of argumentative claims in recurring syntactical patterns. This systematic valuing of linguistic forms and actual words in rhetorical speech, Koch claims, runs counter to Western modes of discourse and rules of argument, which privilege the logical structure of arguments over the particular way in which they are packaged.

Reciprocity, Environmental Scarcity, and Conflict

In their studies of so-called simple societies, early anthropologists noted a fundamental process where even small surpluses are shared with other members of a community. This observation provoked anthropologists to consider

how all surplus production is invested in human relations and translated into social assets. The exchange of scarce goods creates bonds of indebtedness between community members, which reinforces the cohesion of society. This process anthropologists label 'reciprocity'. In the history of anthropology, reciprocity has become one of the ethnographic categories *par excellence*.

As inhabitants of ecosystems, humans are vulnerable to environmental changes that threaten lifeways. Climate change, for example, has gradually driven populations from one geographical region to another, in search for what ecologists term 'ecological niches', a new location abundant in space and resources. In the modern era, migration due to social and environmental pressure has become a fundamental force in the transformation, creation, and destruction of cultures.

In studies of conflict, the concept of reciprocity has been an important way to understand how societies negotiate and adapt preexisting social relations to accommodate periods of resource scarcity brought about by these changes. Under conditions of scarcity, social relations are at their most strained, calling upon a society's ability to adapt to new situations. Reciprocity often reflects a society's effort to convert a lack of economic resources into a system of mutual assistance. Residents of marginalized communities, for instance, manage to survive by establishing social networks that ensure the exchange of goods, services, and information otherwise unavailable in society. In her study of shantytown dwellers in Mexico City, Larrisa Lomnitz noted that patterns of reciprocity were anchored in a series of spatially oriented clusters. Within each network, women engaged in daily exchanges of favors, including borrowing food and money, assistance in child-rearing, and the exchange of gossip. Men assisted each other in finding jobs, shared labor, and helped one another with expenses to cover emergencies and fund important community celebrations. Lomnitz found that "reciprocity frequently appears in situations that lack many alternatives and this is a source of its strength and persistence."

Environmental stress, disaster, or prolonged scarcity may challenge the adaptability of systems of reciprocity. Charles D. Laughlin and Ivan Brady reviewed the ethnographic evidence from societies undergoing such environmental stress. They found that under such extreme conditions, the bounds of exchange and reciprocity may restrict, causing transactions to be more negative and self-interested in nature. Colin Turnbull's study of the Ik in northeastern Uganda, a people who had experienced such severe and prolonged environmental scarcity provides an exemplar of those processes. Among the Ik, reciprocity relations had become so restricted that food-sharing between parents and their children and between husbands and wives had become the normative exception.

Through a broader definition of the environment, one to include more than natural resources, anthropologists have looked at the environment as a source and vehicle of meaning. Tim Ingold, in his work on ways that certain Native American groups relate to space, demonstrated that the natural environment can be a vehicle of meaning, not merely a canvas on which human cultures project their own cultural constructs. One can argue that nature, seen in that manner, should be valued also as an autonomous spring of culture, instead of only natural material. The geographic overlap between cultural diversity on the planet and biodiversity recorded by Garry Nabhan may only strengthen this point.

Gender and Conflict

Cultures have systematized, ritualized, and even institutionalized women's unequal position to that of men in almost every domain, from language to political power. This 'cultural dimorphism' is more exposed today than ever in human history and has become a subject of slow cultural change as well as a source of several conflicts.

Catherine Lutz examined the effect of a community hosting a military base. She shows that the result is a general militarization of society that distorts the social fabric of the community. Especially effected are gender roles which, in response to military life, are altered through the increased attention paid to maintaining boundaries of race and gender in the community.

Dorothy Thomas and Michele Beasley raised the issue of domestic violence from the perspective of human rights. They identified patterns of double standards on law application, as well as patterns of nonprosecution against this widespread crime. By identifying those patterns, they exposed the state as responsible for the frequency of rape and domestic violence. By doing so, they transferred the blame from the man in the street to the man in the uniform, and from the unknown thousands of offenders to the well-known formal institution. From a common crime, Thomas and Beasley brought domestic violence to its real dimension, the sociocultural dimension, and to this point the issue of human rights violation has a serious standing. They also applied their model in Brazil, providing a useful account of the methodological limitations they faced and the 'human rights approach' as one substantially potential method of challenging social structures that subject their people to inhuman conditions.

Some of the most sensitive issues of gender include genital circumcision, abortion, and domestic and even ritualized social violence. Lori Heise demonstrated very graphically the variety of culturally "justified" violence against women using the general term "crimes of gender" and including social inequities and cultural beliefs that leave women economically depended on men. Sandra D.

Lane and Robert Rubinstein go beyond condemnation of the ritual of circumcision.

They argue for an approach that respects local practices, not independently of local resources for cultural self-examination. They claim that ethical universalism and cultural relativism have framed the debate into their own sphere of polarized conflict. They warn that intervention always involves claims about legitimacy, standing, and authority that are socially constructed and culturally mediated and that it takes place within a complex communicative web. They argue that efforts that address such difficult issues must be done in the context of local available resources that should be explored first as means of change, referring to individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions that have already started a campaign to abolish the practice within their own cultures.

In the case of birth control and family planning, especially when precipitated by discourse on overpopulation and the spread of AIDS in most developing countries, anthropology can provide policymakers with substantial knowledge about what seems probable to work or is doomed to fail, what is supported by or lost in the cultural web of the region under question. Caroline Bledsoe demonstrates the cultural limitations that cause African peoples to rise against the introduction and advertisement of the use of condoms in their societies, even under the shadows of threat from the fast-spreading disease, AIDS.

Gender conflict is a good example of how cultural patterns reflect societal, economic, and political power stratification in a social system, and the opposite. This discussion may mark conflict between gender as a 'cultural' phenomenon, but in the eye of an anthropologist it implies neither legitimization nor contingency of the condition of women. Quite the opposite, it implies that this very condition is in transition, because of changes in the societal structures and processes that sustain it. Anthropologists can suggest and advise policy makers of where 'normative minefields' are hidden on the path to constructing the new 'realities'.

Human Rights

The debate on human rights does not have to be seen as a challenge to moral standards but as part of a process of change that is already on the way. Thus, the wording in human right declarations is based not on its morality but on the descriptions of generally undesirable human conditions. If such conditions are recognized as universally undesirable, then further substructures are expected to reevaluate, modify, and even replace if not abandon practices that drive toward such undesirable human conditions. The issue is that no culture considers itself a

subculture, and changes 'from outside' are seen (and legitimately so) with suspicion.

Robert Edgerton has recently shown that anthropological discussions of issues of human rights have too often been paralyzed by an inappropriate understanding of cultural relativism – the view that cultures must be judged only in terms they themselves set. This has led to a false dichotomy between a kind of moral universalism and a moral isolationist position.

Sandra Lane and her collaborators use Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence to reveal the various societal racial and cultural structures that may contribute to the unequal distributions of the spread of human immunodeficiency virus against minority groups and African-Americans in particular. They, in fact, used a conceptual framework from peace studies to produce an anthropological peace by revealing structures and processes of discrimination. Such intersections are not uncommon in anthropology, and the truth applies also in reverse, where ethnographic methods, the flagship of anthropological methodology, are used as, for example, by Bernina Gould in understanding the indigenous typology of depression symptoms after the Rwandan genocide as a prelude to a larger epidemiological study. Gould discovered that symptomology of depression in Rwanda was somewhat different from the one suggested in American psychological literature and therefore she used an anthropological tool to trim her methodological sensitivity for a more rigorous monitoring of the effect of genocide on Rwandan population.

Today more than ever, institutionalized structures have replaced the norms in the complex and inflexible webs of administrative and bureaucratic monsters, products, and heritage, or even the ghosts of the industrial revolution: the nation-state. Drawing the borderline, the new structure occasionally succeeded, but most frequently it failed to deal with the issue of ethnic identity.

Ethnicity and Identity

National borders and ethnic boundaries are not necessarily coterminous. Like many human boundaries they can be either rigid or highly flexible. Frederick Barth showed that ethnic boundaries are also extremely persistent despite the movement of people across them, and that such boundaries can be purposefully manipulated. The concept of 'ethnic groups' is complex and difficult to approach, and it is the source of much debate in anthropology. Sometimes ethnic groups are treated as identical to religion and/or language groups. People of different ethnic groups may share 'a' culture, a broader level of a meaning system. Self-ascription may be a distinct, representative feature of ethnicity. Ethnicity is not defined or limited by physical borders, and unlike nation-states, it

can exist as minority within, or can be spread over a number of states, depending also on the historical circumstances.

In any case, ethnicity is not temporal, transitional, or circumstantial, but imperative in the same fashion as is gender to religion. Even in multiethnic communities, ethnic identity persists and is strategically manipulated. These societies exist based on the complementary relations of their ethnic group members. However, such relationships can be challenged by an external change to which the ethnic group will respond, either by becoming integrated into a broader entity, by existing within the entity as minority, or by deciding to take its own course and breaking off from the multiethnic society to become a distinct entity of its own. The combination of all of these courses is most probable, as in the case of the Balkans, with emerging issues of irredentisms and overlapping territories.

Ethnological accounts of multiethnic societies provide invaluable information about hot-spot areas that are about to explode or those that are about to form a new shared future cultural experience. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse – or transformation – of the two major alliances, the 'periphery' has expanded so rapidly that time for gradual transition is simply unavailable. The avalanche of restructuring of the new 'order' is far from over, and strategic models developed that are based on political realism can only work under a certain degree of complexity. Today, there are more players than ever, in number (e.g., more separatist movements), methods (terrorism), objectives (religious, nationalistic, etc.), and potential firepower ('home-made' weapons of mass destruction). To leave the process of restructuring the new order in the hands of chaos is a dangerous policy whose consequences we are witnessing already. The dynamics of change in an ethnically diverse environment are based on cultural identities of several different and overlapping kinds; of these, the social sciences are only now developing some understanding. More information can help us facilitate the transitions of multiethnic systems to minimal cost in human and natural resources.

The effects of conflict on traditional societies have been studied. Remi Clignet has identified the effects of modes and production, of rules and descent, of the structure of matrimonial exchanges, and of modes of political integration. He also identified conditions that favor a potential integration of conflict, including the sharing of the same territory between ethnic (or tribal) groups that compete for resources; asymmetric interethnic marriages in which one group is 'expanding' over the other; conditions under ethnic, residential, and occupational differentiation; the effect of social boundaries as such under certain circumstances. He indicated the role of time, given also its cultural dimension. Eventually, he called for the need for further understanding, for example, of conflict-triggering conditions. People give a variety of meanings to their ethnic

identity. Anthony Smith classified the different theoretical approaches to ethnicity and nationalism. He described 'primordialism' and 'instrumentalism', and their variations, as the two basic doctrines of nationalism; the former perceives ethnic ties as universal and ancient, and the latter perceives them as a tool – a means to an attached end. Another distinction is between the notion that nationalism has always existed and the belief that the modern nation is a relatively new phenomenon. According to Ernest Gellner, it is only during the so-called modern era that conditions existed in which local cultural groups would join together in a mobile, nation state.

Eric Wolf, after reminding us of Boas' premise on the 'plurality' of social patterns, introduced the issue of the ambiguity of the terms related to culture, including ethnicity and ethnic groups. For methodological purposes, anthropologists may divide groups according to one or another 'cultural', 'racial', 'gender', 'ethnic', or other classification, but we should always bear in mind that such classifications can be exploited politically, one way or another, and the experience from such eventualities in the past has gravely marked our history.

Increasingly, cultural anthropological studies of violence take place in the context of violence and ongoing strife. Jeffrey Sluka's study of Divis Flats and Carolyn Nordstrom's work on "fieldwork under fire" exemplify this emerging generation of studies. This new context of anthropological work also calls forth new theoretical and moral dilemmas. As in considering issues of gender and conflict, work in settings of ongoing violent conflict calls upon anthropologists to accept new levels of political responsibility. Like everybody else, anthropologists are the products of cultures and nations and all the other social structures. They are accountable both to their discipline and their own community. Lines can and must be drawn in order to protect both roles. However, the result is more than rewarding, for every study on human conflict may bring us one step closer to the level of understanding required to avoid unnecessary violence and human suffering.

At the international intervention scale Robert Rubinstein in his work on culture and intervention, and on peacekeeping operations in particular, showed that peacekeeping is linked to the root metaphor of the United Nations as an institution serving a particular narrative – of a force maintaining a world where collective action is placed above mere national interests and real-politic. This root metaphor is essential for the peacekeeping operations to maintain their source of its standing and its authority, according to Rubinstein, the essential elements of legitimacy. Signaling the importance of such root metaphors might be a useful guiding principle not only to peacekeeping operations but any large-scale mili-

tary intervention where legitimacy depends on the existence of such critical source of standing and authority.

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