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Romancing Rapport: The Ideology of 'Friendship' in the Field

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There is a contrast between the taken-for-grantedness with which the friendship label is often used in accounts of ethnographic fieldwork and the actual complexity of cross-cultural friendship and its imbroglio of race, nationality, ethnicity, education, class, age and gender. This paper explores the ambiguity that arises when fieldworkers seek both working relations and friendship with their informants. It argues that the rhetoric of friendship while employed to claim purity and authenticity of ethnographic material, masks the power differential between fieldworker and informant.

The complexity of the ethnographic fieldwork experience calls for ongoing reflection and discussion. Try to describe some days in the field — not just thinly as a train of events, but also thickly as interaction and meaning-making — and you find yourself confronted with an embarrassing cornucopia of features and themes. In my view, every fieldworker must at one time or another address questions regarding fieldwork in the ongoing debate on the research strategies of anthropology. The *ethnography of ethnography* should not become the domain of specialized reflexionists but must remain an integral part of any ethnographic project, be it short-term or long-term, at home or abroad, by junior or senior researchers, an activity of each and every fieldworker.

In spite of the flood of what has been called confessional or autobiographical accounts of fieldwork from the 1970s through the 1990s, there are numerous relevant issues of fieldwork which have been ignored, overlooked or forgotten in written reflections. Elsewhere I have dealt with some of them

(Driessen 1996, 1997). For instance, I have argued that laughter and the humoresque are important ingredients of the cultural confrontation which is fieldwork. This should come as no surprise given the many ambivalences inherent in the role of the fieldworker. One of these ambiguities is that anthropologists seek both working relationships and friendship with their hosts within a veiled context of power differentials.

Some colleagues have claimed that the interaction between anthropologist and informant is so unique that there are no conventional terms available for their relationship, particularly when a 'key informant' is involved (cf. Prell 1989). I think it is an omen of profound ambiguity in the anthropological profession that after a century of fieldwork there is still no uniform vocabulary for the people studied (cf. Crick 1992). We have 'native', 'subject', 'local', 'collaborator', 'respondent', 'informant', 'assistant', 'narrator', 'interlocutor', and 'friend' to mention only the most frequently used terms in ethnographies. Relationships in the field have indeed been depicted in a variety of ways, but one constant is either the use or the avoidance of the friendship label. It has often been pointed out that the exchanges between fieldworker and key informant develop into ties of close friendship. Some anthropologists, however, have warned against a confusion of the roles of friend and informant. The relevance of the Aristotelian motto that 'a wish for friendship may arise quickly but friendship does not' is affirmed by Paul Rabinow (1977) in his portrait of one of his Moroccan hosts who consistently refused to work as an informant but whom he saw as his only friend during fieldwork.

In writing a recent review of two volumes on fieldwork experiences which focused on close relationships between anthropologists and some of the people among whom they worked (Grindal & Salamone 1995; Kulick & Willson 1995), I was struck by the apparent ease and casualness with which most of the contributors used the notion of 'friend' or 'friendship' to define some of their relationships with individuals in the communities studied. Although I already knew from my own field experiences in Spain, Morocco, Algeria and Jordan as partner-anthropologist and from accounts by others that the term 'friend' is often used as a synonym for 'key informant', I began to reflect more systematically on this crucial aspect of the field experience. There seems to be a contrast between the taken-for-grantedness with which the notion of friendship is used and the actual complexity of cross-cultural friendship and its intersection of race, nationality, ethnicity, education, class, age and gender.

In order to further explore this discrepancy, I read field confessions, personal accounts, and prefaces for the ways the friendship notion has been used, abused or avoided. Given the overwhelming production of such accounts during the last three decades, I made a selection, irrespective of regional focus, from mostly Anglophone volumes and monographs, but also include some German and Dutch fieldwork accounts as controlling instances.

Fieldwork and Friendship

There are at least four major problems involved in discussing the nature of fieldworker-informant relationships. First, there is an obvious bias or one-sidedness of the assessment. It takes at least two to form and define a relationship but, except for rare cases, we do not know how the people whom anthropologists categorize as 'friends' perceive and classify their ties with fieldworkers. Second, there are many different ways in which the terms 'friend' and 'friendship' are used, even only in Dutch or English. A third major problem in defining the nature of relationships in the field is that the term 'fieldwork' is used for various kinds of research strategies and practices. And, finally, fieldwork as ethos should be contrasted with fieldwork as praxis. But this is virtually impossible as there are no outsider reports available on how anthropologists actually work in the field. So we must mainly rely on introspection and second-hand accounts.

Let us take a closer look at this four-fold problematique. Most fieldwork experiences seem utterly disparate in aims, human relationships, research techniques, physical and social proximity, commitment, immersion, and mastery of the local language. Fieldwork ranges from the Lévi-Straussian *voyage philosophique*, the expedition-like fieldtrip and the recording of lengthy native texts in the Boasian tradition to the study of 'speech-in-action' and the intensive long-term participant observation in one locale. The dominant credo of anthropological fieldwork remains that of research done by a single individual over at least one year, focused on wide ethnographic aims (a form of holism), involving the learning of the local language and establishing 'rapport' (an almost magical act), and the forging of an identity with increasing empathy and interpretive ability as the fieldwork unfolds. These ingredients of fieldwork hint at a peculiar combination of subjectivity and objectivity, adventure and routine, romanticism and pragmatism (cf. Peacock 1986:54). Moreover, fieldwork has often been described as a self-transforming rite of passage in which the inevitable culture shock ostensibly plays a crucial role in the production of ethnographic knowledge. To put it somewhat bluntly, without culture shock there is no sound ethnography.

There is at least one basic division within anthropology concerning the fieldwork ethos. On the one hand, we have the scientific, quantitative and formal approaches in which the subjective and interactional element in participant observation is played down or even written out of the ethnographic account. A good example is Jürg Wassmann's cognitive study of the Yupno of Papua New Guinea (Wassmann 1993). Here no mention is made of personal relationships with Yupno, only of 'Hauptinformanten' ('main informants'), 'die Rest der Dorfbevölkerung' ('just plain folks') and 'Versuchspersonen' ('test persons'). On the other hand, there are the humanistic and interpretive defenders of participant observation as the discipline's core practice and, by

implication, of the interpersonal nature of the fieldwork encounter. The Dutch medical anthropologist Jacques van der Geest revealed his friendships, including a sexual relationship, during his fieldwork in Ghana (Geest 1978). In brief, following Van Maanen's (1988) differentiation of styles of ethnographic writing, the friendship ideology is more likely to emerge in 'confessional', 'impressionist', and 'jointly-told' tales than in 'realist' tales.

Yet, irrespective of such divisions, one of the forms assumed by the use of the 'friend' label is the widespread convention in the ethnographic monograph, particularly in the United States to use the preface of the book to thank the local friends among the people studied. Let me give some examples. Jane Collier (1997:23), conducting fieldwork in Andalusia in the early 1960s with revisits in the 1980s, writes: 'I particularly appreciated the opportunity to make friends with people who, like me, had been young adults in the 1960s...Their insights on change complemented the views of older friends'. Marvin Harris (1956:vi), who carried out a community study in Bahia in 1950-1951, acknowledges in the preface: 'I am indebted to my friends who live in the beautiful little town where this study was made'. Fred Myers (1986:7-8) mention his: 'Pintupi friends', 'friendship', 'these people [who] made me their kinsman and their friend'. Pat Caplan (1997:7-8), who carried out fieldwork in 'her' village for almost thirty years and like the villagers has been passing through the life cycle, notes that:

In all of this situation of flux — in persons, places and questions — there have remained areas of continuity provided by friendship and, in some instances, adoptive kinship between myself as ethnographer and certain people of Minazini. This has enabled each new encounter to possess a greater depth than previous ones [...] it is perhaps remarkable that Mohammed and I developed such a close relationship, given not only the difference in our backgrounds, but also in our genders.

Harald Prins, a Dutch-American ethnographer, writes: 'Special thanks must go to my numerous Mi'kmaq friends in northern Maine. It has been a privilege to work with them for a noble cause' (Prins 1996:xi). Napoleon Chagnon (1968:13) states that with one of his two key informant he 'evolved a very warm friendship and a very profitable informant-fieldworker relationship...We became very close friends.' His French colleague Jacques Lizot (1985:xiv) in the preface of his book states that he was: 'able to establish bonds of friendship with these men and women and they confided in me...' Such examples could be multiplied at length.

Anthropology, fieldwork practice and field conditions have also changed over the past five generations. Whereas the fieldwork ethos was developed in (internal) colonial settings and has more or less remained the same, fieldwork praxis has changed considerably. We have fieldwork in post- and neo-colonial contexts; 'at home' in metropolises; fieldwork of some weeks in gay saunas or

at airports; of two years in a dispersed settlement of 200 people in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea or of 13 months in an agro-town of thirty thousand in the plains of southern Spain. And then there is fieldwork conducted by insider and outsider anthropologists, male and female, black and white, gay and straight, young and middle-aged, single or with spouse and children, in a team or as a lone wolf.¹

Perhaps even more tricky than the many different faces of fieldwork is a second problem of categorisation: the notion of 'friend' having several meanings. There may be equivalents or non-equivalents in the official and vernacular languages of the communities and groups studied. Several degrees of intimacy may be involved in the use of the term 'friend', depending on the degree of emotionality involved, the extent of mutual obligations observed, and whether the private domain is implicated.

Until recently, friendship in general has hardly been seriously studied in anthropology, that is, as a topic in its own right. It has been treated as a subject of minor importance and viewed predominantly as an appendix of kinship in tribal societies. In Western society, friendship was taken to be too informal and personal to be treated as a main research topic.² The few studies available stress the instrumental, as opposed to expressive, functions of friendship (Barcellos Rezende 1996:246). According to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, values about friendship vary less than actual friendship relationships. These values include: closeness, solidarity, absence of ulterior ends, reciprocity, impulsiveness in mutual choice, and, independence of social distinctions such as age, sex, class. This definition is a normative one reflecting a prevailing popular Western view that 'real' friendship is devoid of material interests. I will nevertheless use it as a touch-stone for the discussion of the use of 'friend' in renderings of fieldwork.

The Sentimentality of Rapport

In one of the founding texts of the fieldwork credo, there is already a hint to the role of friendship in the field. In his introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* Malinowski (1984:21-22) writes: 'Out of such plunges into the life of the natives -and I made them frequently not only for study's sake but because everyone needs human company'. Reading his (in)famous diary (Malinowski 1989) the frustration of this need is paramount, and there is no mention at all of 'friendship' formed with 'the natives'. Three decades earlier, Franz Boas during his field research among the Baffin Island Inuit from 1883-1884 wrote in his letter-diary: 'Evenings my good friends came to tell me something or sing to me. Whether I wished to or not I had to write down what they told me' (quoted in Sanjek 1990:193). On the other hand, Boas's life-time association with his northwest-coast collaborator George Hunt never developed into friendship: it was a tense relationship (ibid:199). We will, of course,

never know what Boas precisely meant when he wrote about his 'good friends'. In spite of this, it is interesting in itself that he used this category.

The literature on research strategies reveals widely diverging opinions about the role of friendship in fieldwork. Spradley (1979:26-28) warns against making and/or transforming friends into informants because of a confusion and potential conflict of roles. In another well-known field guide, there is also a warning against forming too close friendships with informants. There is a dilemma here since fieldwork involves the whole person:

winning trust, respect and friendship. Friendship, however, even where it is offered, morally requires reciprocal friendliness. This is where the problem begins, because friendship requires loyalty, and loyalty may have to be demonstrated by taking sides, and taking sides will prejudice relations with other people' (Ellen 1984:102).

Let us now make a brief *tour d'horizon* concerning the relationships between fieldworkers and informants over the past four decades. Joseph Casagrande's classic *In the Company of Man* is one of the earliest examples of revelations focused on fieldwork as a human experience. In his introduction, the editor writes: 'The relationships between the anthropologist and a key informant has many of the attributes of other kinds of primary relationships: between student and teacher, employee and employer, friends or relatives – as a matter of fact it is often assimilated to the latter' (Casagrande 1960:xi). What follows are twenty portraits of persons who played a crucial role in the anthropologist's fieldwork. Most of these portraits are full of friendship rethoric. Several points were left unreflected. In most cases, relationships with informants shifted and changed in the course of fieldwork, as did power differences. Most of the local people who played important roles in the fieldwork were paid informants or servants. Several of them came into conflict with their communities because of their ties with the anthropologist. Payment, explicitly mentioned in the accounts by American anthropologists, in fact seems to contradict the friendship ideology so often evoked, at least in the definition borrowed from the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.

Hortense Powdermaker's widely read *Stranger and Friend* is an extreme case. On almost every page she uses 'my friends', 'trusted friends', 'my good friend' in order to characterize her relationships with main informants in several research settings. In Melanesia she had a female servant: 'She and I became friends' (Powdermaker 1967:69). After a few weeks, however, this woman was dismissed. The new servants were a married couple ('we became friends'). Powdermaker claims that 'my Melanesian friends liked me' (ibid:114). In a mixed rural Mississippi community she interviewed many people, also 'negroes', and 'became close friends with a few' (ibid:198). This inflated and indiscriminate use of the friend label makes a patronizing impression on a reader in the 1990s.

Peggy Golde's seminal *Women in the Field*, first published in 1970 and reissued in 1986, offers a wide range of field experiences of female fieldworkers, most of them now deceased. Almost half the contributors embrace the notion of friendship to qualify relationships with informants, the other half seem to avoid this concept. A major difference between the 1960s and 1990s is that in the 1960s the informant's life constituted the heart of the narrative, whereas in the 1990s both the ethnographer's experience and the complex interaction between anthropologist and informant are more focal.

Bruce Grindal and Frank Salamone's *Bridges to Humanity* is a case in point. The editors contend that the acquisition of knowledge, meaning, and truth is intimately tied to 'friendships' formed in the field. Fourteen vignettes are presented in order to substantiate this claim. Don Kulick and Margaret Willson's *Taboo* shows how fieldworkers 'go native' in the sexual domain, establishing sexual relations with 'friends' in the field.³

Taking these field accounts together, we may point out that ever since the invention of ethnographic fieldwork there has been a strong, ideologically motivated, constraint on fieldworkers to phrase their relationships with important informants in the cultural idiom of friendship. It seems to me that this idiom is also used to combat loneliness and replace ties left 'at home'. Presenting themselves as 'friends' reflects the belief and the ideal that the relationship between the ethnographers and their informants is one of equality. I suspect that in several of the cases dealt with in *Bridges to Humanity* and *Taboo*, the notion of 'friend' (and sexual partner) disguises obvious power imbalances. For instance, Sandstrom's relation with his 'friend' Bartolo, formalized by the tie of co-parenthood when he accepted the role of godfather to Bartolo's son, was in fact 'lop-sided friendship', a phrase coined by Julian Pitt-Rivers for patronage. There was not only a deep economic divide between the American anthropologist and the Indian peasant but also a formidable barrier of linguistic and cultural differences.

The studies mentioned so far are overwhelmingly authored by American anthropologists. Let us now consider some examples from Europe. An important book is Judith Okely and Helen Callaway's *Anthropology & Autobiography*, a critical attempt to theorise the fieldwork experience. The editors immediately bring to the fore the issue of the quality of the relationships forged in the field:

Analysing relations with individuals encountered in fieldwork raised sensitive questions. What was an appropriate term for an assistant working with an anthropologist over a long period? The term 'informant' was inadequate. 'Friend' was problematic, as some of the essays in this volume reveal. Other words proved unsatisfactory or misleading (Okely and Callaway 1992:xii).

In this volume there is a balance of positions for and against the view of main

informant as friend. Bill Watson holds that shared experience and the mutual exchange of personal knowledge through friendship constitute the bedrock from which 'the rest will follow naturally'. Julie Marcus who worked among Australian Aboriginals in a constrained, racialised, and politicised setting, claims that this made a relationship of close friendship almost impossible. Pat Caplan's assistant and his wife in Tanzania became 'her friends as well as informants'. Margaret Kenna developed 'long-term personal friendships' during her research on a Greek island in the 1960s and 1980s. Joy Hendry demonstrates both the fundamental incompatibility in the roles of 'friend' and 'informant' and the benefits for the anthropologist to combine these roles. Malcolm Crick concludes that interdependence may produce a strong bond in the fieldworker-informant relationship, but that 'it invariably entails a deep ambivalence and a smouldering explosive potential as well' (ibid. 187).

Hans Fischer's Introduction to his *Feldforschungen* (1985) depicts the conventional fieldworker as a lone wolf with his or her 'key informant'. On the latter he writes:

Es scheint einen etwas negativen Beigeschmack zu haben, von heimlicher Weitergabe, von Polizeispitzel. Nichts davon ist allerdings gemeint (...) Ein "Informant" ist jemand, von dem man eine Information erhält. Meist ist aber mehr damit gemeint: Es ist jemand, mit dem man systematisch arbeitet, systematisch Informationen aufnimmt, jemand der Kenntnisse und Fähigkeiten hat. Im Extrem wird daraus der "Hauptinformant", diejenige Person, mit der ich hauptsächlich arbeite (...) Je stärker eine Forschung sprachlich orientiert ist, je spezifischer die Fragestellungen sind, umso wichtiger werden "Hauptinformanten" (1985:19).⁴

What follows are twelve contributions relating fieldwork experiences. Only two authors, Ludger Müller-Wille and Thomas Hauschild, use the friendship idiom to define relationships with informants. Other designations employed are 'acquaintance', 'advisor', 'informant', 'mediator', 'interlocutor', 'collaborator', 'teacher and counsellor', and 'field assistant'.

There are also interesting contrasts to be found within regional ethnographic traditions. Dutch anthropologist Mart Bax's research in rural Bosnia, based on a number of weeks every year for more than a decade, represents local people exclusively as 'informants'. On the other hand, the Norwegian anthropologist Tone Bringa, who conducted a village study in Central Bosnia before the ethnic war broke out, writes about developing rapport: 'The villagers' distrust of the foreigner, however, slowly turned into trust and warm friendships' (Bringa 1995: xv). This contrastive evocation of fieldworker-informant relationships may be attributed to different research strategies and styles. Although Bax remains silent about his research, one may deduce that his short periods in Medjugorje, mainly devoted to interviews and archival research, contrast with the prolonged and intensive participant observation by Bringa. Differences in age, gender and temperament may of course also

explain the contrasts in fieldworker-informant representation. That there is an uneasiness about how to designate informants in the work of post-modern anthropologists can be illustrated by the case of the young Dutch ethnographer Mattijs van de Port in his work on unreason and Gypsy cafés in Serbia. On a single page he writes about his informants as 'a good friend from Novi Sad', 'my Serbian interlocutors', 'the people I interviewed', 'acquaintance', and 'many of my informants' (Port 1996: 245-6).

Another example concerns indigenous ethnography in the Basque Country. Joseba Zulaika carried out two years of fieldwork in the village where he was born and raised. He writes: 'Throughout this work I came to better know and appreciate many of my fellow villagers, who shared with me their friendship and life experience' (Zulaika 1988:xv). On the other hand, his Basque colleague Teresa del Valle (1994) does not evoke informants as friends in her book on *Korrika*, a new ritual of Basque identity, although it is also based on participant observation. This may again be accounted for by differences in research strategies: del Valle's team research consisted of short periods of data gathering in several communities, whereas Zulaika spent two years in his native village.

Discussion

The notion of fieldwork as a process of exchanges and transactions or negotiations became popular in the 1970s. Colby Hatfield (1973) is one of the few anthropologists showing the other side of 'rapport' in the field. He pointed out that fieldwork demands large (I would say almost superhuman) amounts of empathy, understanding, tolerance, patience, friendliness, vigorousness, a continuous smile, tirelessness, in sum, social graces at much larger quantities than required 'at home'. Almost all fieldworkers ignore asymmetrical transactions or exploitations which Hatfield sees as inherent and unavoidable in fieldwork. It is striking indeed that Hatfield's essay hardly figured in the discussions about fieldwork in the 1970s and 1980s. Was it ignored because it questioned the dominant view of rapport? Or did an uneasy conscience play a part in this silence?

One of the taboo themes of fieldwork accounts is the remuneration of informants, which is, at least implicitly, seen by many anthropologists as 'buying friends'. In the United States, working with paid informants was completely acceptable fieldwork practice well into the 1950s, as demonstrated in Casagrande's 1960 volume. More recently, it has become a source of embarrassment, probably as a result of decolonisation and the ethics discussion. On the other hand, in Great Britain there always has been a dictum never to pay for information. Writes Oxford-educated Joao de Pina-Cabral:

The practice of training people to work as paid informants has long been discouraged. It is felt that the ethnographer should engage the society as a whole and that he should derive information from people in the course of their daily activities and not in the artificial isolation of paid employment (1992:19).

One may well wonder whether de Pina Cabral's dismissal of paid information as epistemologically unsound on grounds of research strategic considerations does not conceal ideological concerns about the purity and authenticity of ethnographic material that is not spoilt by the mechanism of monetary exchange.

Several accounts of fieldwork indicate that emotional involvement sometimes becomes so strong that the fieldworker regards the friendships made in the field as deeper and better than those formed at home. But the question remains whether the perception of fieldworker-informant relationships as friendship is not dependent upon the very perpetuation of a gulf between fieldwork and deskwork. It seems to me that there is a paradox here: the relationship between ethnographic fieldworker and key persons in the field is labelled 'friendship' precisely because of the distance between 'home' and 'field'. I doubt whether most such relationships would survive in a 'home' setting. Friends for the field-time-being?, one might ask.

At the level of the anthropological discipline there is a kind of romantic longing to fully know the Other by becoming friends. At the individual level of fieldwork practice in an alien setting, there may also be a need to find some comfort, relief, and relaxation in a close bond with a local person. This need is intimately linked to expectations about friendship rooted in the fieldworker's society, expectations that in most cases will not coincide with the expectations of the counterparts.

Conclusion

If we use the Western definition of friendship presented above — stressing closeness, solidarity, absence of ulterior motives, reciprocity, impulsiveness in mutual choice, independence of social distinctions such as age, class, sex — only very few relationships in the field would qualify as such. There is an element of mystification in the use of the notion of friend in the field, which to my view operates to conceal the strains involved in the unequal power balance between fieldworkers and informants, and in the Herculean task to accommodate the conflicting demands of involvement and detachment. Moreover, the notion of friendship may be used to claim ethnographic authority and authenticity.

American anthropologists seem to be more prone to employ the notion of friendship than their colleagues in Britain, the Netherlands, Germany and probably also Denmark. Differences between Europe and America in the emphasis placed on the constitutive values of friendship seem to be involved

here. For one thing, in Europe there seem to be more gradations between 'stranger' and 'friend' than in the United States. Moreover, the strong egalitarian ethos of mainstream American society with its high value on informality and casualness may determine the pre-perception of the fieldworker-informant relationship in terms of equality and friendship.⁵

Volumes such as *Bridges to Humanity*, although sympathetic in evoking the ideal of friendship, fail to discuss in a critical way the many ambivalences and complexities of the relationships anthropologists maintain in the field. The metaphor of 'friend' is not only too simple but also carries too many ideological connotations to be casually used in the representation of informants in the field. This is not to say, however, that the experience of friendship during ethnographic fieldwork is completely impossible.

NOTES

This article is a sequel to a paper presented at the symposium 'Reflecting Cultural Practice: The Challenge of Field Work', Institut für Kulturanthropologie und Europäische Ethnologie, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main, 30-10/1-11-1997.

1. Of course, there still is a division between the short-term team fieldwork of 'native' ethnologists and the long-term solitary fieldwork of the social anthropologist (cf. Driessen 1993).
2. A seminal essay is Eric Wolf (1966) in which friendship is defined as an interstitial, supplementary and parallel structure in complex society. Wolf opposes instrumental to expressive friendship. The latter is devoid of immediate interests.
3. A similar recent study is the collection *Out in the Field*, containing 'coming out' confessions of lesbian and gay anthropologists, edited by Ellen Lewin and William Leap (1996). Almost all contributors to this volume talk about their friends in the field, some of them about their sexual involvements with them.
4. On the other hand, his American colleague Roy Rappaport who conducted fieldwork in Papua New Guinea from 1962-1963 expresses his gratitude "to many Maring and Narak friends and informants" (Rappaport 1968: xvii).
5. This argument finds some support in the following statement by James Peacock: 'Perhaps owing to egalitarian biases drawn from Western and especially American culture, the aim of many fieldworkers is to become something like a friend' (Peacock 1986: 64, my emphasis). I discussed this matter with George Marcus, who agreed with me on this point.

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