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POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY:

SYSTEMS, TRANSACTIONS AND REGIONS

by

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Richard F. Salisbury saw himself as an economic anthropologist and, later, as an applied anthropologist. However, in pursuing the empirical and analytical agenda which underlay such designations, Dick invariably explored the political dimensions of social and economic life. This was because of several factors. In part it came out of an anthropological holism which typified the structural-functional paradigm that dominated social anthropology in his formative years: the economic system, and the *political system*, were seen as unquestionably interconnected. In part, too, it resulted from the ethnographic context in which Dick did field work. In his earliest field research, the nature of Highland New Guinea societies made the analysis of *local-level politics* a necessary component of any ethnographic endeavour. In part, also, Dick's concern with the political emerged from the way in which he constructed economic anthropology. His early commitment to formalist theory and the central role played by individual decision-making and entrepreneurship led him to analyse *leadership*, that is, the political dimensions of economic activity. In part, as well, his exploration of the political sphere developed logically out of his interest in applied and development anthropology. His concerns with innovation, economic change, and the conditions which permit indigenous, self-sustained development led him to consider the rôle of *regional political structures*.

In this essay, I explore the changing ways in which Salisbury approached the political sphere during his anthropological career. In so doing, however, I must also construct a more general history of political anthropology itself. This is because Dick's work is an integral part of that story: his research and writing both reflected and created it. What is perhaps most striking about this is that the analysis of the political sphere was never Dick's primary concern. He remained, throughout, an economic and development anthropologist.

What then did Dick do that was seminal to political anthropology? A way to answer this is to view the history of political anthropology as a movement through successive paradigms: from structural-functionalism in the 1940s and 1950s to

transactionalism in the 1960s and 1970s and, thence, to regional analysis in the 1980s. Dick, in his efforts to understand economic innovation and development, began first by exploring political systems (via structural-functionalism), then local-level/transactional politics and political leadership (via transactionalism), and then, finally, regional political structures. He became, as a result, an integral player in the growth of political anthropology.

POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND THE STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL PARADIGM

When Dick did field work for his doctorate among the Siane of Highland New Guinea during 1952 and 1953, the viewpoints in *African Political Systems* (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940), the first effort by British social anthropologists to define the nature and scope of non-western political systems, were highly influential. These viewpoints were rooted in a structural-functional paradigm in which the political sphere was conceptualized as a system which functioned to maintain order within society. As Salisbury worked within this paradigm, and as he taught an undergraduate course on political organization to budding Canadian anthropologists at McGill in the mid-1960s, he approached the analysis of political systems through four issues: how disputes were settled and order enforced in society; the ideologies which underlay legitimacy and authority; the kinds of representative headship which typified the groups which made up the society; and the way inter-group relations were managed. Underlying any political system, however, its structure and functions, was the economy: modes of livelihood profoundly affected these components of the political system.

Such viewpoints both drove and constrained his political analysis in his earliest ethnography, *From Stone to Steel* (1962). On the one hand, in *From Stone to Steel*, Dick described the Siane political system in a formulaic way which mirrored most anthropological analyses of stateless societies at the time: formal, kin-based levels of territorial segmentation, of ever-more inclusive layers (lineage, clan, phratry and tribe),¹ each with representative heads, formed a structural skeleton upon which hung both the system of land tenure and the political system – that is, the formal mechanisms for settling disputes and enforcing order within and between groups.

On the other hand, because Dick conceptualized the Siane economic system in a somewhat radical way for his times, and because of Siane life itself, Dick intuitively recognized that such a description of the political system was insufficient. He saw the economy not simply as the systematic allocation of resources for production, distribution and consumption, but also as the sphere within which individual choice and decision-making operated. With a concern for the extent to which Sianes' activities were "based on a rational calculation of quantities so that scarce

resources are allocated between competing ends" (1962:83), Salisbury concluded that these independent "nexuses of economic activity" co-existed (1962:105-6). First, in subsistence activities, most decisions were "made on traditional or technological grounds." In contrast, in the second and third nexuses, rational calculation was key. Thus, there was much competition between ends in the production, distribution and consumption of luxury goods (tobacco, nuts, oil, salt) and of valuables (pigs, shells) (1962:84). In the former, it was individuals, not groups, who were involved in the exchanges of what were in effect personal goods; and they acted in terms of personal self-interest in a way which "almost paralleled a system of free market exchanges" (1962:90). In the latter, entire groups were involved in public, large-scale exchanges of these valuables on ceremonial occasions (*gimaiye* exchanges). Through success at these exchanges, and by setting up reciprocal exchange obligations both between clans and among men within clans, "men gain power within their community, a reputation for public spiritedness, and indirectly, more relations outside their own clan" (1962:104).

Such men were called "big men," and they spent a great deal of time in corporate clan work" (1962:110). Indeed, the presence of such big men in economic exchanges brought to the fore, for Salisbury, an essential problem with structural-functional interpretations of political systems. How could these big men be function? They were individuals with influence in economic and political affairs whose positions, titles and authority were achieved – through knowledge, age, industry, wealth and bravery. Each men's house and each clan had several such big men, "all equals and all jealous of the power of others" (1962:30). In other words, men's houses and clans were represented not by those who inherited headships but by the most successful political and economic entrepreneurs. Moreover, it was not norms and custom which were central for settling disputes, enforcing order and mediating inter-group relations, but the entrepreneurial actions of big men.

A second contradiction, and limitation of structural-functional interpretation, also surfaced out of the Siane data. At the local level were cross-cutting inter-personal relations which also had a direct impact on dispute settlement, order and inter-group relations.

The individual has a network of personal kinship ties which cross-cut the clanship relations. ... These relationships are close and affectionate, and often involve the giving of mutual gifts and assistance. It need hardly be pointed out that any conflict between two clans involves many individuals of those clans in a conflict

between their loyalty to their clan and their affection for friends in the enemy clan (1962:38).

Underlying Siane political organization, and the interplay between group dynamics and individual choice, was ideology. It too contained contradictions which created, for Salisbury, other analytical dilemmas. On the one hand, because the Siane had an ideology of clan unity and because they "set great store by maintaining good relations with other people" (1962:31), the pressure to settle intra-clan disputes was strong. This meant, too, that in inter-clan relations, lineage heads and big men represented their groups. This was classic structural-functional interpretation. On the other hand though, Dick also recognized that the Siane ideology had a deep-seated notion of "individual autonomy": an ideology "that all individuals are their own masters, acting autonomously and subject to no man" (1962:31-2).

These contradictions, on both the ideological and material planes, and the tension between conventional political analyses of group relations as distinct from a view of the machinations of individuals, emerged both because of Salisbury's approach to Siane economics and because of the Siane themselves. In *From Stone to Steel*, however, Dick aimed to explore economic change. He therefore was led to analyse the nature of political development associated with such change and, yet again, of individual machinations.

Specifically, it was big men who, according to Salisbury, made the first "indirect contact" with Europeans, received the new valuables which penetrated, and introduced these into ceremonial exchanges. Simultaneously, the introduction of steel axes allowed more leisure and enabled the Siane to expand their ceremonial and political activities. A "greater velocity of circulation" for an increased number of valuables ensued (1962:121-2). This

strengthened the position of the "big men." Previously, a young man could hope to "produce" a few valuables, through the pigs his wife raised, and these would steadily repay the contributions he had received towards his bride-price. Now the numbers he could produce were swamped by the disproportionate numbers flowing in as ceremonial payments to those already participating in *gimaiye* activities – the "big men." They could make larger payments, and more grandiose gestures of reconciliation

at peace makings, from what they received. Their reputations for generosity increased, and as result they received even larger payments from others. Their stocks of valuables grew as the inflation grew, while the stocks of less venturesome, younger men remained static. Although the "big men" produced nothing, their wealth and power grew (1962:117).

Later contact with Europeans, and the introduction of indentured labour on the coast, brought "other goods, new attitudes, and new habits" into the central highlands (1962:126). However, resources brought back from the coast by labourers were again absorbed into the *gima* system (1962:126) and benefited "those who are active in *gima* activities" (1962:132), that is, the big men. Indeed, the continuing dependence of youth on older men to procure bridewealth payments not only allowed big men to maintain control over youths, but also forced the young "to distribute the very valuables which [were] the basis of the older men's power" (1962:133). The political future, as Salisbury saw it, was ever increasing power for big men.

Thus, in the tension between the systemic, normative viewpoints of structural-functionalism and the analysis of individual decision-making in the political sphere, it gradually becomes apparent, in hindsight, that in *From Stone to Steel*, Salisbury was moving towards favouring the latter. However, the tension highlighted the interpretative problem of how choice intersected with structure and how the individual was located in society. It was a problem which engaged not only Salisbury but most of his generation and, until the late 1980s, most of my own.

TRANSACTIONAL POLITICS, BIG MEN AND POLITICAL PROCESSES

The dependence of the political on the economic persisted as a central theme throughout Salisbury's career. What did change, however, after the publication of *From Stone to Steel*, was the importance which he gave to the individual's place in both spheres. In this, Dick helped to wean social anthropology away from the structural-functional paradigm and to a transactional one.² In the political sphere, it meant that he helped to displace the analysis of the so-called political system with what became known as "local level-politics." This was manifested in two interrelated ways: first, in detailed discussions on the nature of big men and, second, in analyses of local-level "political processes" (Swartz et al. 1966:1).

Already in the 1950s, it was becoming apparent that so-called African models of segmentary lineage systems, as defined in structural-functionalism,

did not quite fit the New Guinea Highlands. Segmentary levels did not seem to dovetail neatly with Highland territorial groups; Highland descent ideologies were poorly developed; inter-group relations were far more complex than segmentary, fission-fusion models allowed; warfare was endemic; and leaders were not the representative heads of pre-existing groups but men who achieved their roles and who recruited groups of followers, often beyond the boundaries of their own group. Salisbury's very early concern with delineating the similarities and differences (1956) was soon superseded by clear evidence and argument that New Guinea social systems were different in kind: segmentation was not inevitable; choice about group affiliation was key; and cognatic (rather than patrilineal) principles operated (Barnes 1962). In addition, residence was more important than descent as a basic organizing principle; warfare directly affected local group composition; and, ultimately, big men were the pivots of the system. As the decisions-makers, it was they who recruited followers and so created local groups whilst managing external relations through warfare and exchange (de Lepervanche 1967; 1968).

Central to this formulation was Salisbury's work, particularly as the focus on big men became more explicit, leading to explorations into their political careers and into their authority – as consensus (Read 1959; Strathern 1966), as anarchy/satrapy (Brown 1963), or as serial despotism and bureaucracy (Salisbury 1964). These issues also became linked at this time to questions of social change: how contact and Australian administration had affected leadership in the Highlands (e.g. Brown 1963; Salisbury 1964). As part of this discussion, Salisbury (1964), with Sahlins (1963) and Meggitt (1967), pointed to the wider political implications of big men activities. They showed that the rise and fall of big men occurred in cycles, and that these cyclical patterns, over time, directly affected the structure of the political sphere as political groups, or factions, (re)formed and (re)dissolved according to the dynamics of inter-group and intra-group exchanges which big men organized. In this way, some of the more insightful analysts, such as Salisbury, were able to reincorporate individual leadership back into a broad view of how the political structure worked.³ This view was one which Dick, in latter years, attempted to expand.

At the time, though, this work on big men articulated with a second major field project which Dick carried out amongst the Tolai of New Britain in 1960-61. It also articulated with the growing influence of the transactional paradigm through which leading anthropologists not only analysed the machinations of leaders but also explored, more broadly, local-level political processes. And there were none better than Melanesian politics, and Dick's work, to serve as exemplars.

In a 1966 article for a volume on political anthropology which aimed to explore the "wind of change [which] was invading political theory" (Swartz

et al 1966:1), Dick provided a classic description of those economic machinations of Tolai big men in exchange networks which underwrote their political leadership and, in so doing, perpetuated a system of economic inequality through which "the rich become richer and the poor remain poor." This political process was rationalized by an ideology which promised success to the individual efforts of the many whilst masking the ways in which resources actually were appropriated by the few.

This focus on entrepreneurial strategies and on local political processes comprised essential elements of the transactional paradigm in the field of political anthropology during the 1960s and 1970s. Salisbury was more and more drawn in, through his own interests and through those of his doctoral students at McGill. With their concerns with leader-follower relations, the "game" of politicking and the nature of factions (Salisbury & Silverman 1977:2), Dick himself began to explore more deeply the world of micro-political processes. He did so, however, in a theoretical way, using the data from a burgeoning number of ethnographies, mainly by his own students, in order to find regularities in what he labelled "transactional politics" (Salisbury 1977; Chapter III.7, this volume).

Transactional politics [is] the study of how individuals within particular institutional systems, exercise political power through transactional behaviour which may be described as the transmission of goods and services by leaders in exchange for acceptance of their power by supporters who grant them authority (1977:111).

In seeking regularities, Dick focussed on factionalism, a political phenomenon which had by then become a central topic, and on developing typologies of "factional sequences" (Salisbury & Silverman 1977:2) and of the "institutional environments" which affected factionalism and local politics (1977:111-2). For Dick, factionalism, like the careers of big men, had "an inherent dynamic." Factional "confrontations were rarely balanced," factional cycles ensued as a result and the cycles could propel the society (Salisbury & Silverman 1977).

For the Introduction to *A House Divided: Anthropological Studies of Factionalism*, which Dick and I wrote (Salisbury & Silverman 1977), it was he who suggested that we look at the different ways factions had been studied within the transactional paradigm: through the analysis of networks, of political strategies and of their class bases. For Dick, these seemingly distinct ways were not only interdepen-

dent but, he argued, by viewing them as such, factional patterns and, then, "factional sequences" could be extracted.

Thus, factions could be built using one of three types of network structure (establishment-opposition; multiple clusters; open), of transactional strategies (patronage; group mobilization; opportunistic) and of class participation (elite; class-based; bourgeois). The most common patterns were as follows:

We could classify factionalism as *conservative* if it is marked by establishment-opposition networks, by patronage transactions and by elite participation; as *revolutionary* if it combines group mobilization transactions, participation by class and multiple clustering of networks; and as *progressive* where strategies are opportunistic, participation bourgeois and networks open (Salisbury & Silverman 1977:16).

Each pattern, however, was only to be found at particular junctures because each was invariably succeeded, in dialectical response, by a different one. That is, depending on what actors do, and how they respond to the networks, strategies and class recruitment patterns of others, a different pattern will emerge. Factionalism, and political processes more generally, therefore, moved in cycles, propelled by the dialectical responses of the actors. In so doing, predictable sequences emerged which could give a "net movement to the whole society."

In true transactionalist mode, however, Dick never argued that actors were free agents. Rather, goal-based behaviour, competitive relationships and micro-political processes were always dependent on, and constrained by, the environment or context. Dick in fact became particularly concerned to describe the resources, rules and stratification patterns which comprised the environment (1977; Chapter III.7, this volume). This is not surprising. For despite Dick's central place in political anthropology through his innovative work, he remained an economic anthropologist who was drawn to the political because it was a key variable in the issues which most interested him: the economy and development.

HISTORICAL ANALYSES AND REGIONAL POLITICAL STRUCTURES

In *Vunamami: Economic Transformation in a Traditional Society*, published in 1970, Salisbury expanded on the economic concerns which he had first explored in *From Stone to Steel*: economic innovation, development models derived

from the micro-analysis of small societies, and how non-industrial countries can "achieve sustained economic development using their own resources." For Dick, Vunamami town and region was yet another example of successful indigenous development, in this case, among the Tolai of New Britain (Papua-New Guinea). To explain why, he was again led into politics: because "pre-existing local political organization contributed to economic development" (1970:13), that is, "internal political changes" turned "conditions conducive to development, and available technological knowledge, into the reality of development" (1970:1). To show this, not only did he collect economic data, as for the Siane, but also "the changing political structure needed to be reconstructed" as did "the history of each technological innovation" (1970:14; see Chapter IV.11, this volume).

Salisbury thus moved into history: into exploring the chronology of change among the Tolai as it had been recorded by Europeans, and into exploring Tolai history as it would have been "written by the people themselves" as they are seen "trying to make rational choices in situations of great novelty" (1970:7,8). It was the interplay of history, ethnohistory and an economic anthropology that used formal micro-analysis which, together, concerned Salisbury: for "these techniques ... give insights that are not available to workers relying on written history, on macro-economic analysis, or on descriptions utilizing only the concepts of the discipline of economics" (1970:9). Indeed, in a 1967 conference paper which he never published, and which is included in this volume (Chapter III.6), Salisbury provided cogent arguments about the value of introducing historical work into anthropology. It presaged what would become a fundamental part of socio-cultural anthropology two decades later.

At the time, however, Dick was concerned with history for a particular reason: "to relate [the Tolai] pattern of successful economic development to the political events that accompanied each economic change." Thus, whilst using historical and ethnohistorical data, Dick was concerned with two interrelated issues. First, on a micro-level, he used life histories of economic innovators to show "how their innovations fitted within their political careers, and within the options of choice open to them at different ages." He therefore explored the ascent of big men in the system of "shell money [*tabu*] finance." Seen as a "quaint survival" by Europeans, Salisbury argued that shell-money finance was "the mainspring, not only of inter-Tolai trade and business enterprise, but of a critical area of entrepreneurship." Traditional "entrepreneurs are 'big businessmen.' They also are politicians, and their skills are those of organizing people and finance to realize large collective projects" (1970:275). Thus, Vunamami big men were innovators who "appear[ed] as staunch traditionalists," who "always occupied positions of importance ... within their clans; ... in ... rituals; ... in land matters; ... [as the] foci of residential groups of clansmen and [as the] upholders of tradition." (1970:313). Salisbury thus showed how "pre-existing local political

organization contributed to economic development, or to phrase it more dramatically, the way in which 'tradition' ensured successful change" (1970:13-14).

However, a more macro-level view of successful development was also necessary; and Dick located the political innovations of entrepreneurial big men in the context of "changes within a total political" structure (see Chapter III.5, this volume).

Economic factors are ... vital [in] providing the possibility for self-sustained growth. ... But the main precipitant cause, triggering off the growth made potential by technological innovations in societies which, like Vunamami, are relatively affluent and not agriculturally involuted ... is, I maintain, one of *organization*. By this term I mean much more than merely economic entrepreneurship. ... Growth requires that individuals must be able to invent organizational forms. ... In a word, growth requires political development. On the broad level, this may well be a matter of the consolidation of small, quasi-autonomous political units into larger wholes. ... [It could also] imply the involvement of a greater number of people in the policy decisions of that society, by means of an improvement in the administrative structure. In either case, political activity provides the improved security and communications that are required for economic development. It is also vital in providing the 'spur of leadership, the opportunities for mobility, and the managers to cope with *organizing* economic production (*italics mine*) (1970:349).

It was this latter idea, particularly on political organization, which Dick used when trying to explain successful economic development amongst the Cree in the James Bay area of Canada. Here again, in *A Homeland for the Cree* (1986), he used secondary materials. In this case, a massive amount of field data were available from the numerous anthropological studies which came out of the so-called McGill Cree Project which had begun in the mid-1960s. What Dick drew out from this material was a description of how Cree society had changed, between 1971 and 1981, from

being fragmented, and based on relatively unconnected village-bands, to a "regional society." It was a process of continuity combined with growing complexity through which the "mechanical solidarity" which had typified the Cree region in 1971 was transformed into "organic solidarity."

Central for this change were two factors. First, in 1971, the very survival of the Cree was threatened by the building of a hydro-electric dam. Negotiations ensued, the state proved ready to decentralize, and the James Bay Agreement, which provided money and use rights in exchange for allowing natural resource development on Cree land, was signed. Second, the crisis provided the necessary ideological shift.

For regionalism to exist, as it did by 1981, ... people had to become conscious of regional unity, to feel that they were "Cree," and to feel that they had common interests. The crisis of 1971 ... created unity because for the first time an issue emerged in which the interests of the previously fragmented Cree villages were all alike. ... [A]nd it used a highly valued traditional symbolic language, that of the animals, the land and the hunter, to articulate ... opposition. Without a crisis it would have been impossible for the Cree to rise above factionalism and the everyday problems of existence, and to proceed to the creative and innovative activity which ensued (1986:147).

The growth of the regional society was characterized by the growth of an indigenous regional bureaucracy, an indigenous, social-services economy, and an "ethnic strategy" focussed on Cree political-administrative structures, language and culture. In the political sphere in 1971, "informal politics," typical of "a stateless society," predominated: "factions" and transactional politics, led by "important men exercising authority" and managing brokerage relations between the village-band and state were key. Collective action was precluded. As of 1981, the political sphere had been transformed. Numerous pan-regional administrative bodies had been founded, and village councils and policy-making committees formed the local nodes of regional administration. All were run by Cree. For Salisbury, this signalled a change from informal to formal politics, from "traditional politics" to "modern bureaucracy." A "single political society" had been created.

Though these viewpoints, in this final major work, can be seen the essential threads which had been developing since Dick's earliest work: the search for the reasons behind successful innovation and for models of economic development through the analysis of micro-phenomenon and the role of the political sphere. In this final vision in 1986 of how the economy and political structure had to be constructed, Dick explicitly opted for a wide regional structure, dependent on organizational innovation and collective consciousness. It was an elegant viewpoint which had long been implicit in his work. It represented the culmination of his thinking about the political sphere – always in the context of economic and applied anthropology.

CONCLUSION

In the context of how ethnography was conceptualised in the late 1950s and early 1960s, little criticism had yet been made of the dominant structural-functional approach which typified social anthropology. One of the earliest and major critiques, by Leach on Highland Burma, was published in 1954; Turner's classic Ndembu study came out in 1957. Richard Salisbury had already been in the field and, as of 1956, had begun to publish. By the time that Barnes' seminal article was published in 1962, Salisbury too was a major agent in what was to become a major paradigm shift in social anthropology: from structural-functionalism to transactionalism. If Barnes' article suggested ways in which New Guinea ethnography might articulate with, and differ from, the dominant Africanist tradition, it was Salisbury's work which provided a good part of the ethnographic and analytical base from which both the African-Melanesian distinction could be made and the paradigm shift accomplished.

In the domain of political anthropology, Salisbury's work reflected and advanced this change in several, inter-related ways. Most generally, he provided a way by which anthropologists could make the crucial connection between the allocation of economic resources and the structure of the political sphere. He did this by focussing on entrepreneurial careers and by showing how the individual actions involved in career-building were related to the emergence of leadership, the allocation and use of power, the structuring of socio-political groups, and the development of society. His work was (and is) an exemplar. The notion of "big man" is a classic concept which came out of this viewpoint and Salisbury's work provided for much of its elaboration. Indeed, so central are big men for understanding not only Melanesia but also other areas that, if they are not found in a particular locale, today's ethnographer has to explain why.

Once, when speaking with him about my own PhD work in a Guyanese village (1979; 1980), I said that I was somewhat dissatisfied with my study of local politics because it seemed to involve only the elites, only the big men, only the

entrepreneurs. Dick looked at me quizzically and said what clearly to him had long been self-evident: "But these are the people who get involved in politics." Clearly Dick saw the political sphere as too small: his concerns were broader – with "the politically weak" as well as with "the power of the politically strong" (1966:127). He also was guided by a more holistic ethnographic tradition and the view that close and detailed ethnographic description made no sense if compartmentalized, *a priori*, into discrete pieces. As a result, when political anthropology declined as a sub-field in the 1980s, precisely because it was seen as too elitist, Dick had already taken his political interests in another direction. He had always been concerned with the wider society, with context, with the economic bases of political behaviour and with development. These interests ultimately led him to explore the ways in which regional political systems – their growth and structure – were related to successful, sustained economic development. It was a distinctively novel approach, and it remains so today.

Most generally though, Dick was an anthropologist who was able to move between the political and the economic, between social structure and individual choice, and between the local and the regional with an ease and comfort which, today in socio-cultural anthropology, remains a goal for most of us. His theoretical contributions were immense; his ethnographic insights irreplaceable; and his legacy, through and to his discipline and students, profound.

NOTES

1. The lineage was the basic economic unit; the clan, coterminous with the corporate village, was the sovereign, blood-feud unit; the phratry was the exogamous and ceremonial unit within which warfare was forbidden; and the tribe was a territorial unit within which all members had land-use rights.
2. In general, transactionalism posited the view that structure was generated by individual choices made within the constraints of previous and/or external structures, norms, rules, ideas, resource availability, and so on. A key figure in defining the contours of the paradigm was Frederik Barth (1959; 1963; 1966)."
3. I am grateful to Malcolm Blincow, Department of Anthropology at York, for the long discussions which culminated in much of the above analysis of big men.

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