

A study of literacy in Pre-Hispanic Philippines

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Abstract: There are two theories concerning the literacy rate of the indigenous people before the arrival of Spaniards. The first theory asserts that the Philippine people had a high literacy rate and they enjoyed a high civilization. The second one claims that a high literacy rate was unlikely and, if any, limited to a small number of the population. This paper compares these theories and discusses the spread of the writing system at that time. We conclude that the second theory is more plausible, even though the first one has been preferred by Philippine historians and scholars.

Key words: Baybayin, literacy, writing system

1. Introduction

The colonization of the Philippines by the Spaniards began in 1565, when Miguel López de Legazpi arrived in Cebu. At that time the indigenous people (the ethnic Tagalog people) who lived around Manila used a writing system, usually called *baybayin*¹. Pedro Chirino, a Jesuit missionary, wrote about the spread of these writing systems in *Relación de las Islas Filipinas* [*Reports of the Philippines Islands*] in 1604. In this book, he said that most of the people in the Philippines were capable of reading and writing. Furthermore, Antonio de Morga, a high official and historian, described Filipinos as highly literate people in his *Sucesos de las islas Filipinas* [*Historical events of the Philippine Islands*](1609).

Based on these reports, many history books written by Filipinos have asserted that literacy was spread widely throughout the Philippines before colonization. José Rizal, who was the most influential thinker in the Philippines Revolution, was convinced that a civilization with a high level of culture had existed in the early days of Philippine history before the coming of the Spaniards. He believed that “the fact” of high civilization was proven and verified by Morga’s book. He stated, “After the colonization by the Spanish started, Filipinos started to forget old traditions and old memories, and eventually they lost writing systems, songs, poems and laws (Rizal 1976).” He advocated that Spaniards should be expelled from the country and a pre-colonial “utopia” should be restored. He found that Morga’s book could be made use of for boosting the morale of people for the purpose of the

Philippine Independence Movement.

Reid (1988) has also advocated a theory of widespread literacy in his studies on the commercial history of Southeast Asian. But some historians claim that a high literacy rate was unlikely in the sixteenth century and, literacy, if any, would only be limited to a small number of the population. This theory is also mooted by Scott (1984) and Corpuz (1988).

Thus, there are two opposing theories concerning the literacy rate in the Philippines in the sixteenth century or before the colonization. The purpose of this paper is to compare these theories and discuss the degree of spread of the writing system at that time. It will also describe how baybayin developed and declined in the sixteenth to seventeenth century.

2. Lifestyles and Languages during the Period of Baybayin Use

Due to a lack of historical literature, there is insufficient detailed information about the lifestyle of the indigenous people at the time when the Spaniards arrived. However, some archeological data indicate that people at the time depended on primitive fishing and farming, and lived in small communities called *barangays* which were located near the seaside or riverside.

From the fifteenth century, the influence of Islam from the Indonesia islands became stronger. At the time when the Spaniards arrived, Mindanao Island and the Sulu Islands of the southern Philippines were already under the influence of Islamic culture.

Most languages of the Philippines belong to the Austronesian language family. In the Philippines, hundreds of languages were spoken at that time and this multilingual situation continues even today. In terms of phonological features of the Philippine languages, their sounds commonly had three vowels (a, e/i, o/u)² and 14 consonants (b, d, g, h, k, l, m, n, ng, p, s, t, w, y). The root words were usually made up of two syllables. As for word formation, words were compounded by a repetition of the same sounds and by inserting an infix (an affix appearing in the stem). These are also common characteristics of modern Philippine languages.

Tagalog borrowed more than 340 loan-words from Indian Sanskrit through traders and migrants from Indonesian Islands and other islands (Zaide 1994: 54). The Chinese languages also had an influence, and currently 1,500 or more words are of Chinese origin (Zaide 1994: 59).

3. Contemporary Writing Systems

3.1. Two Writing Systems

According to Postma (Casal et al. 1998: 224), two writing systems were brought to the

Philippines at different times; the first one was brought from Java Island before 900 A.D. One of its features was that there was a vowel killer³ in that system. This writing system disappeared sometime after the tenth century.

Subsequently, a second writing system was brought from Sulawesi Island or Sumatra Island. This writing system did not have a vowel killer, so it was not able to express the actual sounds as accurately as the first one, since the Philippine languages have many words with “closed” syllables. This alphabetic system was called “baybayin” and it was the most widely spread system across the Philippines when the Spanish arrived.

3.2 Baybayin

Baybayin was used mainly for the purpose of singing songs, personal communication and courtship rituals. It was chiefly used between individuals but occasionally used for public purposes such as writing the history and legends of the tribe or the community. According to Santos, Fr. Juan Francisco de San Antonio mentioned in his book⁴ (1735) “up to the present time there has not been found a scrap of writing relating to religion, ceremonies, or ancient political institutions.” Diego de Bobadilla also said in his report⁵ (1640) that the people only used writing to communicate with one another and that they did not have manuscripts relating to history or science.

However, Slacedo (Casal et al. 1998: 222) suggested that baybayin might have been originally used to record commercial transactions, because the indigenous people lived near the coast or along rivers, and that there had been a certain amount of trade activities, in the form of barter trading. According to his analysis, baybayin was first used for these transactions and later came to be used to record folklore, poetry and songs.

After the introduction of Latin characters by the Spanish, the use of baybayin gradually faded out. It came to be used only for decorative or magical purposes. According to Scott (1984: 48), a piece of bamboo whose surface was engraved with written blessing or songs in baybayin was put at the entrance of residences. Scott (1984: 56) also said that wills were usually written in Latin characters but signed in baybayin until the middle of the seventeenth century. This custom gradually became obsolete, and the last case was recorded in 1792 in Mindoro Island. Thereafter its use was not reported at all.

3.3 Other Existing Characters

Robert Fox (Casal et al. 1998: 223), in a comparative study of the writing systems of the Philippines, hinted that there had been at least sixteen kinds of alphabetic systems⁶ and that they had been derived from a common source.

There is a case where ancient alphabets have survived and actually been used even in the Philippines today. According to Scott (1984: 56) and Salcedo (Casal et al. 1998: 225), in the colonial days, a particular tribal population was isolated and kept its own alphabetic system. At the end of the nineteenth century, a Frenchman, Alfred Marche, explored the Tagbanwa (Tagbanua) community in the Palawan Island, and he found that they kept its own alphabetic system. In addition to that case, three German researchers, Meyer, Schadenberg and Foy investigated the Mangyan community in Mindoro Island, and they reported that the tribal community was using an ancient alphabet for actual communication. Furthermore, in Mindoro Island, another alphabetic system was found in 1971.

Currently, it is reported that two Mangyan communities⁷ in southern and northern Mindoro have developed two different alphabets. Their systems have been at a risk of extinction, but in the Mangyan community in southern Mindoro, children are taught traditional Mangyan characters in elementary schools, so its status is relatively stable. However, it is not a mandatory subject in schools, so it is uncertain how long this writing system will survive in the future.

4. An Affluent Culture in Pre-Spanish Times

4.1. Description by Chirino and Morga

There were some reports that most of the people in the Philippines at that time, at least in the vicinity of the Manila, were able to read and write. Among those reports, those by Chirino and Morga were conspicuous. The oldest description about the spread of writing systems among Filipinos appeared in “*Relación de las Islas Filipinas*” by Jesuit Pedro Chirino, which was published in Rome in 1604. The relevant parts are as follows:

Of all those languages, it was the Tagal which most pleased me and which I most admired...I found in this language four qualities of the four greatest languages of the world, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Spanish: it has the abstruseness and obscurity of the Hebrew; the articles and distinctions in proper as well as in common nouns of the Greek; the fullness and elegance of the Latin; and the refinement, polish, and courtesy of the Spanish...(DS 3. 368)⁸

...and there is hardly a man, and much less a woman, who does not read and write in the letters used in the island of Manila (DS 3. 370).

A similar description was found in the report by Morga. Morga played an important role

in the administration of justice in the Philippines, as councilor and deputy governor-general of the Judicial Executive. He wrote *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* in 1603, which was published in Mexico in 1609. It is a very important document for understanding the situation of the people of Pasay Island and Cebu Island. The description is as follows:

The language of all the Pintados and Visayans is one and the same, by which they understand one another when talking, or when writing with the letters and characters of their own which they possess. These resemble those of the Arabs. The common manner of writing among the natives is on leaves of trees, and on bamboo bark. Throughout the islands the bamboo is abundant; it has huge and misshapen joints, and the lower part is a very thick and solid tree (DS 4.46).

Morga made very flattering remarks about Filipino literacy in *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, as shown in the description that follows:

The inhabitants of the province of Manila, the Tagals, have their own language, which is very rich and copious. By means of it one can express elegantly whatever one wishes, and in many modes and manners. It is not difficult to learn or pronounce. The natives throughout the islands can write excellently with certain characters, almost like the Greek or Arabic (DS 4. 46).

4.2. José Rizal's Findings

While José Rizal was staying in Europe, he found Morga's book at the British Museum and was very much impressed by his *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*. He introduced this book and it has become well-known among Filipinos. At first Rizal read the English version translated by Stan Lee and, recognizing its value immediately, he found the original Spanish version. He also tried to annotate the original version. The annotated edition was published in Paris in 1890.

Rizal regarded Morga's book as a proof that there had been cultural excellence in the Philippines before the arrival of Spaniards. Description of *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* became a strong source of moral support for the Philippine Independence Movement.

The reports by Chirino and Morga have been appropriated by modern historians and linguistics. For example, Bernabe (1987: 8-9) states, "According to historians, most of the time in the Philippines, the residents, both men and women, were known to read and write"

In a series about the history of the Philippines titled *Kasasayan: the Story of the Filipino People*, the second volume mentioned that all of the residents had reading and writing ability, which surprised the Spanish chronicler, and also added that after Spaniards had replaced traditional Filipino characters with Latin characters, Filipinos became unable to read and write, adding that because of this change, the mistaken idea that Filipinos had been savages was promulgated (Casal et al. 1998: 221).

Another researcher, Santos, also advocated the theory of widespread literacy among the then Philippines.

In most ancient cultures, the art of reading and writing was reserved for the few who belonged to privileged classes. In ancient Egyptian, Mayan, and Indonesian civilizations, writing was in the hands of priests and scribes. The culture that the Spaniards found in the Philippines was unique in that the art of reading and writing was in the hands of everybody (Santos).

The priestly class and its related class of scribes existed mainly to glorify and perpetuate the reign of the ruling king. They were employed to record history, the glorious deeds of the king, and keep track of tributes and taxes that were expected from the governed. In contrast, accounts of the use of writing in the Philippines indicate that they were not used to record history and tradition but simply for personal communication and writing poetry (Santos).

What Santos emphasizes was that the Philippines before the colonization was not only highly a civilized society but also enjoyed unparalleled democratic circumstances. Its culture was supported not by the privileged class but by ordinary people. These claims can be called “the dissemination theory.”

5. Some Questions on the Dissemination Theory

5.1. Lack of Extant Materials

Some researchers insist that it is implausible that most of the population was able to read and write in the sixteenth century. They question the reports by Chirino and Morga.

It cannot be denied that extant materials are almost non-existent. If literacy among residents had been widespread, materials would have been written in baybayin, and a considerable number of literature items should have existed. However, it is next to impossible to find any. According to Scott (1995: 212), all that remains of material from the

sixteenth century or before is a single document of baybayin that Father Juan de Placencia, a Spanish friar of the Franciscan Order, recorded in the *Doctrina Christiana*.

5.2. Lack of Collateral Reports by Chinese or Spaniards

The dissemination theory has also been questioned from a different point of view. Corpuz (1989) points out the following facts. (1) In the reports of the Chinese tradesmen who had often visited the Philippines before the sixteenth century, nobody referred to the presence of an alphabet (pp.20-21), (2) The fleet of Magellan arrived in 1521 and his registrar, Antonio Pigafetta described the linguistic situation of various parts of the population which he visited, but he did not mention the presence of the characters in his record (p.21). (3) During the expedition by the Spanish in 1565, many reports and letters were sent to Spain and Mexico, which described a number of events, but none of them referred to the presence of indigenous people's writing systems (p.21). (4) The reports of Chirino and Morga were written circa 1600, but the previous records by Spaniards did not mention literacy in the Philippines (p.25).

At that time, the Spaniards made exhaustive records about the new colonies. As nothing was mentioned about literacy, Corpuz surmised that literacy among the residents was not widespread.

5.3. Other Documents Suggesting a Lack of Universal Literacy

Pigafetta recounted an episode of recording a conversation between Spaniards and the natives during an encounter with the inhabitants. At that time, he took notes of the content, and read back the content while looking at his notes, which surprised the natives greatly (Columbus other 1991: 538). This anecdote clearly indicates that literacy was not known to those Filipinos.

Another document said that it was only recently that the literacy had spread among Bizaya people. A century later, Francisco Alcina wrote as follows:

The characters of these natives, or, better said, those that have been in use for a few years in these parts, an art which was communicated to them from the Tagalogs, and the latter learned it from the Borneans who came from the great island of Borneo to Manila, with whom they have considerable traffic... (Morrow) [underlined by the author].

From these Borneans the Tagalogs learned their characters, and from them the

Visayans, so they call them Moro characters or letters because the Moros taught them... [the Visayans] learned [the Moros'] letters, which many use today, and the women much more than the men, which they write and read more readily than the latter (Morrow).

It can be said at least that literacy was not spread all over the Philippines; similar descriptions were seen in large numbers. For example, Miguel de Loarca, a landowner of Panay Island, reported there was no writing system in the Bizaya district in 1582 (Corpuz 1988: 30). Even Chirino himself reported that people of Bizaya had just started to use the alphabet two or three years before (Corpuz 1989: 32).

According to Santos, in Francisco Colin's report (in 1663) and Francisco Ignacio Alcina's report (in 1668), the residents in Bizaya had just taken the alphabet from Tagalog people. According to accounts of the Recollect Missions (Corpuz 1989: 27), "the people of Mariveles in Luzon and Caragua in eastern Mindanao conducted their suits verbally and without writing anything." If people did not leave a written record even during a court suit case, it is implausible that alphabetic characters were widely used among the population.

5.4. Questions about Morga's Reports

Serious doubt was cast on the credibility of the accounts in Morga's book. His book is divided into eight chapters and Chapter 8 deals with the customs and manners of the inhabitants, including literacy. The problem is that the description in the Chapter was not based on direct contact with residents. Yanai (1978: 18) remarks, "Morgan, who was living in Manila as administrative officer and judicial officer, did not have the opportunity to have contact with the natives or to travel in the Islands, so most of his descriptions depended on hearing a third party, and as a result of that, his descriptions were considered to be incomplete narrative." Thus, Morga did not write his descriptions by witnessing and hearing directly what inhabitants did and said.

How about Chirino's report? With respect to the literature of Chirino, Yanai (1978:19) maintains, "Although Chirino's report was the first article on the Philippines and some parts were well written, the basic description was written from the standpoint of a history of the Jesuit missionary and so its content was manipulated and simplified accordingly." He pointed out that its historic value should be considered dubious.

Similarly, Scott (1984: 53) said "This description was written in an exaggerated way in order to refute the contempt of the Spaniards for the Philippines' culture. In any case, it is highly unlikely that inhabitants of the Philippines in the sixteenth century had a far higher

literacy rate than other countries.”

Both Chirino and Morga reported to their own organization, the Society of Jesus, King of Spain, and emphasized their own achievements. Corpuz (1988: 27) suggested that reports of Chirino and Morga were based on common materials, or that one borrowed data from the other, although he was not sure who borrowed from whom.⁹

5.5. Diacritical Code Not Developed

As mentioned in Section 3, a vowel killer (one of the diacritical marks of baybayin) did not develop sufficiently to accurately express the pronunciation of the languages in the Philippines. However, in other neighboring languages such as Buginese, Makassarese, and Mandarin language, the diacritical marks developed enough to be able to accurately express actual pronunciation. In terms of the existence of a vowel killer, this contrasts with baybayin (Scott 1984: 61). Thus, baybayin had been relatively recently introduced to the Philippine archipelago at the time of the sixteenth century. Baybayin did not have enough time to develop a vowel killer to adjust to the actual sound. This fact casts serious doubts on the reports by Chirino and Morga.

6. Further Examination of the Dissemination Theory

An earlier section of this paper examined a theory which questioned the possibility of the dissemination of reading and writing in the Philippines. This section examines evidence to support the dissemination theory.

6.1 The Dissemination Theory

In addition to Chirino and Morga, Father Francisco Colin reported that literacy was widespread among residents. Francisco Colin wrote as follows in his *Labor Evengélica* (1663):

... the people cling fondly to their own method of writing and reading. There is scarcely a man, nor a woman, who does not know and practice that method, even those who are already Christian in matters of devotion (DS 5. 6).

Francisco Ignacio Alcina also reported as follows (1668):

Today they [Visayans] use them [Philippine characters] a great deal, and the women much more than the men. The former write them and read them much more fluently

than the latter (quoted in Reid [1988: 216]).

The literacy level of men and women was different. Women were reported to have been more literate than men. It suggests that the society was democratic, rather than a despotic nation with male clerks, priests and secretaries, as is usual in a male-dominated society.

In Southeast Asia before colonization, some level of literacy was reported to be spread, and this phenomenon was also found in the Philippines. Reid (1988: 216) referred to the record by van Goens (in 1656) who pointed out that the majority of the people in Java and Bali Island were able to read and write. Reid (1988: 220) said, “Virtually everywhere in Southeast Asia there was a strong tradition of contests in poetry, usually of the four-line pantun¹⁰ type, between men and women as part of the courtship process. He said this indicates some level of spread of literacy among people in the Philippines.

6.2 Accounting for the Lack of Physical Evidence

The question of why so few materials remain can be answered as follows: most writing was recorded on bamboo, barks and leaves, and so they were so fragile that almost nothing has survived.

Another answer is that the Spanish friars thought these were symbols of paganism and they destroyed them systematically. Spanish friars carried out large-scale destruction of the natives’ writing at Azteca in South America. Although there was no direct evidence of such systematic destruction in the Philippines, it can be surmised that similar destruction could have happened in the Philippines (Hernández 1996: 13).

As a counterevidence of the statement above, Corpuz (1988: 29) pointed out the fact that only a few Spaniards were in the Philippines throughout colonial times; for example, in 1588, only 800 Spaniards resided there, against more than one million Filipinos. According to Corpuz, so few Spaniards could not destroy the native literature so exhaustively.

Some may argue that non-existence of literature materials does not necessarily indicate the low literacy rate. Filipino did not establish statehood and did not need to develop professionals such as secretaries, priests and accounting clerks who dealt with written documents. The purpose of writing was limited to personal use and therefore its preservation was not paid serious consideration.

However, if the writings were used for ceremonial purposes such as inscriptions on buildings and monuments, or practiced as a traditional art like calligraphy in other Asian countries, some could have survived. However, few documents remain, so a plausible

reason needs to be postulated. The fact may be explained by the premise that most forms of indigenous art in the Philippines were abandoned wherever the Spanish influence was strong, and only exist today in the regions that were out of reach of the Spaniards. Santos thought that obligations (tax and servitude) to the Spanish conquerors prevented Filipinos from maintaining their traditions:

Tributes were imposed on the native population. Having to produce more than they used to, they had less time to pass on traditional skills to their children, resulting in a tightening spiral of illiteracy in their ancient script (Santos).

6.3 The Arrival of Islamic Culture

The advent of Islamic culture had a negative impact on the literacy of people. Before that time, women were regarded as an active force in both commerce and society, and they initiated the spread of characters. However, with the propagation of Islamic culture from the south and a decrease in the social status of women, women's reading and writing ability could have waned.

According to Reid (1988), Arabic characters were intended to be used to read the Koran, and writing ability became monopolized by clergy. The general public, especially women, became estranged from writing and reading.

7. Conclusions

If we compare these two theories, the dissemination theory raises serious questions. One possible answer as to why Chirino and Morga made such reports is the following: Westerners were fixated on the East, which they believed might be a land of gold or fortune. This belief was one of the driving forces for explorers and tradesmen in the Age of Discovery. They speculated that there was a utopia with a well-developed civilization and rich wealth beyond the sea, and they were determined to embark on extremely dangerous voyages. They were in search of wealth and civilization, and therefore, they were very sensitive to related information. Sometimes such information was requested, chosen and distorted unconsciously. In this sense, reports by Chirino and Morga should be understood within the framework of the common shared illusion in Western culture.

Scott (1984: 53) interpreted their intention differently, "probably this is a pious exaggeration intended to counteract scorn for civil authorities' Filipino culture since it is unlikely that the sixteenth-century Philippines was more literate than any other nation then or now."

For Filipinos, it is natural to interpret the significance of those reports positively. The Philippines before the arrival of Spanish could be the utopia that José Rizal discovered or tried to believe in. It was the very image that the Philippine Independence Movement needed. In a country whose image was of a backward country in the nineteenth century, they need to transform the country's self-image in order to win independence. They were in search of such an image at any cost to successfully realize Philippine Independence. Descriptions by Chirino and Morga functioned well to contribute to this purpose. It is no wonder that many history books in the Philippines appropriated Chirino and Morga's stance.

The significance of the dissemination theory can be reiterated here. It is generally considered that the dissemination of writing system is possible only after the establishment of nationhood. If literacy were spread among inhabitants in the Philippines, it would be counterevidence to the belief that literacy could only be possible in a nation which had clerks and secretaries, or court poets. Rather than these professionals, the ordinary people shouldered the responsibility of spreading writing system. It might indicate that Philippine people historically lived in a more democratic way than those in Western countries.

People in the Manguin community in Mindoro Island still use traditional characters in order to learn courtship songs at festival times and celebration of the harvest (Reid 1988: 219). The tribal population in Palawan writes traditional characters mainly for personal communication and poetry (Santos 1996: 40). These facts shows how baybayin was used at the time the Spaniards arrived. The peoples collectively known as Mangyans still use their own form of the baybayin in Mindoro (Morrow).

Literacy was disseminated to some extent across the Philippines, but not so widespread as Morga, Chirino or José Rizal had thought.

With the introduction of colonization by Spain, the collapse of the traditional education system and forced labor, people's literacy decreased. There is no doubt that the traditional Philippine society in the sixteenth century was forced to change due to the double impact caused by Spain and Islam. They influenced the literacy of the population.

Notes

1. Baybayin comes from the word *baybáy* which means spelling. (...) the baybayin possibly came directly from the ancient Kavi script of Java, Indonesia. Alternatively, it may have its roots in Kavi but was introduced to the Philippines by way of the ancient script used by the Buginese people of Sulawesi, Indonesia. (Tagalog, Baybayin).
2. In those days vowels e/i and o/u were not recognized as clearly different phonemes.

3. In Philippine languages, consonants were usually pronounced accompanied by vowels but sometimes consonants were pronounced without vowels. A *vowel killer* is a diacritical marker which indicates the non-existence of a following vowel.
4. Francisco de San Antonio. 1735. *Cronicas de la Provincia de San Gregorio Mangno*
5. Diego de Bobadilla. 1640. *Relation of the Filipino Islands. By a Religious Who Lived for Eighteen Years.* in B&R (Blair and Robertson), *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898.* vol.29. p.283
6. Concerning baybayin's variations, Morrow mentioned "Some writers have claimed that there were several different ancient alphabets in the Philippines, which belonged to different languages and dialects in Luzon and the Visayas. The number of scripts mentioned usually ranges from 10 to 12. However, none of the early Spanish authors ever suggested that there was more than one baybayin script." Thus there are several theories as to the number of writing systems in those days.
7. Out of all the regions and the 110 indigenous peoples (IPs) groups in the Philippines, only the Hanunuo and Buhid Mangyan of Mindoro, together with the Tagbanua and Palawan of Palawan Island, kept alive their pre-Spanish syllabic scripts. The preservation of their scripts was largely due to their isolation from Christianized Filipinos (Catapang, p.4).
8. There are two compendiums of historic sources which collected all the important documents and translated them into English. One of them is the 55-volume work by E.H. Blair and J. A. Robertson in 1903-1909, *The Philippines Islands, 1493-1898* (Ohio: Arthur Clark Co.). The other is a 12-volume compendium published in 1990, edited by G. F. Zaide, *Documentary Sources of Philippine History* (Manila: National Book Store). This study owed much to the two compendia and each quote from them is marked "B&R" for Blair and Roberson's work and "DS" for Zaide's work for convenience.
9. There is a possibility that Chirino took some ideas from Morga's book. "He (=Morga) was generous in showing the rough draft of his manuscript to other scholars in Manila (including Father Pedro Chirino)." (DS. vol. 4: 29)
10. A Malay poetic form.

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