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State, Mind, and Legibility Without Writing in the Wa State of Myanmar

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ABSTRACT
State legibility is an extended metaphor of writing, but does not have to be based on writing itself. In the Wa State of Myanmar – a de-facto state with high levels of illiteracy – state legibility is produced through a centralisation of information in military government and a grid-like re-organisation of settlement patterns. This article explores two correlations between projects of state legibility and ways of addressing others' intentions: First, centralisation of information forces subordinates to consider the intentions of the centre. Second, living in a grid forces people to consider each other's minds. State legibility, through the use of media that reference the results of action, enables verbalising others' intentions as their 'minds', that is, as the inner source of action. In a society where public mind reading has historically been discouraged, these projects have facilitated a regime of intention management in which public mind reading is central.

KEYWORDS Writing; state legibility; intentions; mind reading; Wa State

What difference does writing make to cognitive process, to the expression of intentions, and to social organization? Jack Goody and others have long argued that writing is inextricably linked to the development of de-contextualised and abstract thought (Goody & Watt 1963; Goody 1977; Goody 1986; Goody 1987). Allowing for abstraction, de-contextualisation, and formalisation, writing played a crucial role in the development of the institutions of churches, states, and law (Goody 1986). Even more radical than Goody (who always emphasised social process and historical contingency), other scholars have argued that the possibility of thinking something as abstract as 'mind' is conditional on alphabetic writing. Rotman (2008), for instance, describes how alphabetic writing detaches thought from voice and gesture, and for him, at least, the possibility of thinking totally disincarnate entities such as 'god' and 'mind' only becomes a possibility once this particular media technology (of the alphabetic script) has become routinised: 'god' and 'mind' appear like ghosts in the

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framework of a particular media-machine: the alphabetic script.[1] Alphabetic writing facilitates a radical separation of external reality and mental states, and therefore only in a world of writing is it possible to imagine a correspondence theory of truth, that is, a concept of truth that relies on the correspondence between external reality and interior 'mind'. In a world without writing, Rotman argues, intentions and sincerity (which rely on an assessment of correspondence between external reality and mental states) do not matter that much when it comes to meaningful action.

This is a very specific and strong claim coming from a mathematician and philosopher. Anthropologists, by and large, have been more careful when examining the consequences of literacy. What they have found in oral societies is not so much a total disregard for intentions, but important differences in the ways in which intentions surface in social interaction. Robert Paul (1995), for instance, discusses the different modes through which intentions are expressed and read in Sherpa society in Nepal. He emphasises in particular the importance of writing for a shift from a focus on acts to a focus on intentions. While in the absence of writing, acting in the correct way was sufficient, the technology of writing allows for and promotes self-reflexive consciousness, and thus encourages the examination of intentions: not just what someone did but what they meant and intended. Paul's argument is not that intentions do not matter in oral contexts, but rather that in literate environments, intentions become increasingly important.

The specificity with which different societies address people's intentions has resurfaced in recent debates about 'theory of mind' in anthropology; but in these debates, writing and literacy tend to be sidelined or ignored altogether. Robbins & Rumsey (2008) argue that in several Pacific societies, and specifically in Melanesia, people avoid verbalising others' intentions: and by doing so, they follow 'the doctrine of "the opacity of other minds"', or for short, the 'opacity doctrine' (2008: 408). The fact that people don't verbalise others' intentions obviously does not mean that they do not respond to acts and deal with intentions. What we call 'intention management' – engaging with others' intentions – is a human universal, and includes all kinds of gestural, non-verbal, and verbal communication (see introduction to this volume). Opacity doctrines refer explicitly to mind, and not just intention: that is, intentions, when verbalised, can be addressed as 'mind'. It is important to bear in mind this distinction between intentions (thoughts about action) and mind (the origin of thought and action), as it will be fundamental to our discussion of the political correlates of opacity doctrines, and to different 'regimes of intention management', that is, explicit and implicit rules about how to address others' intentions.

Some contributors to Robbins and Rumsey's volume do indeed speculate about the political correlations of opacity doctrines: Stasch (2008) links the opacity doctrine among the Korowai of Papua New Guinea to their egalitarian ethos and the maintenance of personal autonomy. But opacity doctrines are also reported in hierarchical and stratified societies, such as Samoa (Ochs 1982; Duranti 1988), where people sometimes refuse to speculate about the intentions of hierarchical superiors. Opacity doctrines, therefore, do not correspond in any simple way with political values, egalitarian or hierarchical, but it might be possible to relate them to local notions of authority and

accountability. Recognising as much, Alessandro Duranti has called for further research on the conditions that increase or decrease the threshold to speak of other people's intentions (Duranti 2008; also Duranti 2015: 186). The relationship between different forms of intention management and political regimes is the general topic of this special issue; here I will suggest that state legibility is crucially important for the verbalisation of others' intentions, or in other words, for public mind reading: that is, state legibility corresponds to a tendency to address others' minds directly, in ordinary language, in the presence of an audience.

State legibility refers to the ways in which populations are made legible for the purpose of government. In *Seeing Like a State* (1998), James Scott describes how states classify, simplify, and re-arrange populations so as to make them legible for the primary purposes of statecraft, which are pacification, taxation, and conscription. Writing plays an obvious role here: it is the prime metaphor motivating Scott's neologism, and some typical examples of state legibility directly rely on writing, such as the census, language reform, and the permanent family surname. But state legibility is not limited to the technology of writing: it can be also achieved by other forms of mapping, of classification, or anything else that allows a centralisation of perspectives and information. In his more recent book, *Against the Grain* (2017), Scott extends the study of state legibility to the earliest states, and discusses the roles played by sedentism and agriculture. Living in permanent settlements, as well as planting and harvesting seeds (grains in particular), creates state legibility: the 'grid' situation of tightly structured and uniform living arrangements makes populations recognisable, countable, and thus manipulable from one privileged perspective. In this last book, Scott emphasises the unintended consequences of projects of legibility in early state building, namely crowding and disease. The general point, however, remains the same: state legibility is based on the metaphor of writing, but it does not require writing per se.

State legibility can be achieved not just without writing, but also without a bureaucratic administration; for instance, by a transformation of personal relations, combining tight networks of acquaintances for a governing elite, and anonymity for the masses.[2] However it is achieved, state legibility means that some superficial information about a population is available to a centre which can use this information to manipulate the population. My main argument in this article is that this centralisation of information correlates with a tendency toward public mind reading.

The argument focuses on two correlations between state legibility and particular modes of intention management. First, a centralisation of information typical of state legibility forces those in subordinate social positions to take into account the intentions of those at the centre. Second, the promotion of state legibility leads people who live in the same grid-like situation to consider each other's minds. The distinction between intentions and mind is of central importance to my argument: 'intentions' refers to a more general level of 'thoughts about action', and there can be many different ways of anticipating other people's intentions, and then reacting to them, or engaging with them. Below I will discuss in particular flight, gesture, formal discourse, and ordinary language. Of these, only ordinary language is suitable for explicit and public mind reading, if by 'mind' we mean one specific subset of

'intentions', namely those in which thought and action are united in one inner source. State legibility makes it possible to address intentions as 'minds', by providing tools and media that serve as material references for the disincarnate source of thought and action that is 'mind'. In brief, my argument is that state legibility intensifies the need to consider others' intentions and creates conditions in which public mind reading becomes necessary. I discuss these correlations on the basis of empirical material from the Wa State of Myanmar, and specifically the village of Yaong Rai, where I have done long-term ethnographic fieldwork.[3] Even though this region is now governed by a rebel army, the creation of centralised government institutions is relatively recent, and thus the Wa State provides an excellent case study to investigate the effects that projects of state legibility have had on public intention management.

Past Autonomy and State Building in the Wa Hills

Rather than a society-wide general opacity doctrine, I found in my fieldwork that local inhabitants avoid speculating about others' minds and intentions in particular circumstances, but they do so liberally in other situations. Before I try to distinguish these situations, it is important to add another caveat: a large part of everyday life among family members and relatives who are intimately familiar with each other takes place without ever explicitly considering intentions or verbalising one's guesses about other people's mind-states: for instance, when sharing food, when coordinating work, or when caring for others, people usually do not speak about the minds of these others, but pragmatically and tacitly engage with the gestural cues they receive from others.

Voicing an interpretation about the motivations of one's interlocutor means to assess and judge the interlocutor, and in dyadic exchanges between kin and neighbours in Yaong Rai, this is generally avoided. Speaking about others' minds becomes intrusive if it happens in the presence of a third person; that is, when the speculation about someone's mind is performed before an audience. Doing so, for instance, when discussing a family affair or when addressing someone in a public assembly is considered sensitive and potentially offensive. It is particularly dangerous when done while confronting strangers and ghosts – here, most interaction uses gestures and formal speech, both of which avoid the danger by never directly addressing the mind of the interlocutor.

Yet there is another set of situations where speculating about other minds is not only allowed, but even called for. These situations generally involve hierarchical superiors and powerful strangers, or have to do with the implementation of conscription, taxation, and forced labour; in these situations, people tend to be more explicit about the intentions of others, and there is an identifiable tendency to public mind reading. The division between the first set of situations (where mind reading is either unnecessary or actively discouraged) and the second (where it is indispensable or at least encouraged), has to do with projects of state legibility. As I will argue below, the second set of situations is produced by the centralisation of personal relations and

the plotting of the social field, which are effects of the state building projects of the Wa army. Let us first have a look at the particular features of this state formation.

The Wa State of Myanmar is a de-facto state governed by an insurgent army, the United Wa State Army. The first centralised supra-village government here was established by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in China in the 1950s, and in 1969 by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) on the Burmese side of the international border that was drawn in 1959. The CPB imposed a basic structure of government, including taxation and recruitment for the continuing guerrilla campaign against other armed groups in what came to be called the 'Golden Triangle', that is, the border region between the Shan States, China, Thailand, and Laos. A few ethnic Wa and Chinese commanders who had risen through the ranks of the CPB mutinied against the headquarters in 1989 and established the United Wa State Army (UWSA). Under the leadership of these commanders, in particular Tax Luk Pang (Bao Youxiang), his brothers, and associates, the UWSA has since become the most powerful non-state armed group in Myanmar, governing two large patches of land at the Chinese and Thai borders and a population of about half a million people.

There are no detailed ethnographic accounts available describing everyday life in the Wa hills in the first half of the twentieth century. But on the basis of his review of historical sources available, and fieldwork in Wa villages in China in the 1990s, the foremost ethnographer of Wa society, Magnus Fiskesjö, concludes that before the 1950s, people generally refrained from giving orders to others and highly valued personal and collective autonomy:

> Until the end of Wa autonomy in the 1950s, in the central Wa country every man, and generally also every woman, was regarded as independent and autonomous in themselves, according to an ethos that strongly emphasized equality and that was bolstered by codes of honour and moral norms. […] Several kinds of leadership positions existed but all with limited authority. Mainly, these were the hereditary o lang, associated with pan-village rituals, and the a meang, non-hereditary individual leaders rising to contingent challenges of war and foreign affairs, but none had the power to order fellow Wa around. (Fiskesjö 2010: 244–5)

Aside from such 'powerless chiefs', there were also some 'would-be kings' in the Wa periphery (in Banhong and Mangleng), that is, individuals who were called 'kings' by their Chinese and Shan neighbours, and who had hereditary titles, and some wealth based on the exploitation of silver and gold mines in their realms. Rather than arranging the mining themselves, to a large extent their wealth relied on tributes that Chinese and other outsiders paid to them for mining permissions. Even so, Fiskesjö insists that these 'kings' never built a stable and long-term form of government, and could not order fellow Wa to do things.[4]

If we look for the classic tools and technologies of legibility, the picture is mixed, especially in regards to sedentarism and agriculture. Village groups sometimes split up, migrated, and established new villages, but the Wa were already relatively sedentary a hundred years ago (Young 2015: 16). According to most sources, the central Wa hills of the so-called 'wild Wa' were wealthier and more densely populated than the Wa periphery that was under the influence of Buddhism, the Shan states, and Chinese *tusi* (ibid.: 13). Various sources confirm the regularity with which fields were burned and

worked intermittently; this rotating system of cultivation was used as a method for counting the years and months, before the introduction of the Gregorian calendar (Wang 2003). Rotational labour-sharing in work parties is typically how farm labour took place, and is still common throughout the Wa State today. So, altogether, the regularities of settlement and agriculture created 'legibility' of the environment and certain populations, but before the arrival of modern armies this kind of legibility was not put to use for the purposes of centralised government. Instead, when such legibility was created, it was used ephemerally for coordination in agriculture and warfare, but not to establish a long-term and privileged centre of perspectives. This would change fundamentally with the introduction of supra-village government in the 1970s by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB).

From this moment onward, successive governments established what Fiskesjö calls the 'trappings of statehood (such as a hierarchical structure and a formal army)' (Fiskesjö 2010: 245). Since the 1970s, the CPB, and the United Wa State Army (UWSA), have built a complex of military and civil institutions, including schools, police, courts, and government administration. There have also been efforts to introduce permanent family surnames, though these have not been entirely successful, especially in the central Wa hills. Government and army every year administer a census of the entire population, which includes data on households, migration, production, and trade. Many of these efforts remain patchy and incomplete, and perhaps the most consequential measure of state building has been forced resettlement – including the relocation of more than 120,000 people to the Southern Command in the late 1990s (LNDO 2002). Much of the Southern Command, and many villages in the North that were removed to make space for rubber plantations, gold and tin mines, or simply because of the commanders' visions of development[5], quite literally are re-settlement camps: that is, grid models that are convenient for the purposes of taxation and conscription.

But before the extraordinary events of re-settlement in the 1990s, and far away from the garrisons and prisons that were built then, in the villages the most important change that occurred in the 1970s was that now individuals and families had to pay tribute to a central government, in rice, in corvée labour, and as soldiers.

Since the early 1970s the CPB recruited local soldiers from Wa villages, and after the UWSA took over in 1989 forced recruitment at a large scale became common practice. Taxation also spread in the 1970s with the establishment of the new government structures. Previous to the pacification of the area by the CPB, some charismatic leaders had led various villages to war, but then 'taxation' had been limited to immediate 'feeding' of the warriors (Zhang 2008: 28) rather than storing grain for various months and transporting it to far-away army garrisons. At the same time, the earlier form of labour exchange for farm work was extended to the communal labour services that villages were now forced to do. These included in particular the work required for the opening of the new roads – the roads themselves enabled the formation of new personal networks across larger distances, as well as the recognition of anonymous others, who were now connected via the road. Road building, thus, served the purpose of state legibility in multiple ways.

The establishment of supra-village level government meant that the tributes and contributions of each village, each family, and each individual had to be calculated. For this purpose, the first lists were introduced, first by Chinese scribes, and later by some literate Wa. During the time of the communist guerrilla, statebuilding efforts, specifically at the mid-level between the villages and the military command, were directly supported by the People's Republic of China with resources and manpower – several thousand Red Guards from China joined the CPB in the 1970s. Even though most of these Red Guards eventually returned to China, since then other Han Chinese and ethnic Wa have moved from China to the Wa State. While there have been efforts to promote the Wa script (based on the alphabetic romanisation invented by Baptist missionaries in the 1930s), relatively few people know how to read and write Wa. Chinese, on the contrary, is well established as a hegemonic language and as the written script of bureaucracy in the People's Republic of China. Against this background, Chinese has become the language of government and the lingua franca of the Wa State. Initiated by the CPB, with support from China, the offices and institutions of the military state carry Chinese titles, and most of the texts circulated in the Wa State bureaucracy are written in Chinese. However, a large part of the rural population, especially adult women, is illiterate in either language. For this reason, the bureaucracy is relatively inefficient and important decisions (for instance, who needs to go to the army, who will be captured, and who will be granted an exception) are made without reference to paperwork. If a list is consulted or something written down about such cases, it will be done *after* decisions have been made.

Whether or not paperwork is consulted, calculations and decisions have to be made, and they are generally done within the new networks of patronage that emerged in the army: soldiers who have spent a long time away from village and family might feel particular allegiance to their colleagues and superiors in the army. Networks of patronage formed this way could potentially override the previous allegiances of village and family, and thus create a new sense of anonymity: that is, the anonymity of ordinary villagers from the perspective of the networks of patronage built in the army. To put it bluntly, soldiers generally have not made the acquaintace of the villagers they encounter; they do not even know their names. It was generally through these new patronage networks that state legibility, for the purposes of taxation and conscription, reached the village level: local headmen helped the army to recruit soldiers, collect taxes, and arrange corvée labour.

Hence, if not in the practice of writing itself, the functional equivalent of state legibility has been achieved in the Wa State through transformations of personal relations, that is, the spreading of networks of acquaintances, and with them of relations of anonymity. On the basis of these new acquaintances, sometimes relationships of friendship and patronage were formed among the members of the army. At the same time, the transformation of personal relations, and the confrontation with new acquaintances and new patrons, sometimes require the active rejection of mutuality – for instance, when a headman rejects a relationship with fellow villagers or kin for the sake of a relationship of patronage with distant superiors. In another article, I

have outlined the relations that enable the capture of child soldiers for recruitment into the Wa army (Steinmüller 2019): relations of mutuality and patronage build on the basis of new acquaintances made in the army, and their opposite, anonymity and the rejection of possible mutuality.

These new networks – defined by acquaintances and patrons, as well as anonymity and the rejection of mutuality – achieve a management of information that is equivalent to state legibility. They facilitate a 'centralisation of perspectives' in the sense that information can be exchanged and centralised in the new networks of acquaintances and patrons. This information includes basic and superficial data about neighbours who otherwise have become anonymous; just those particulars necessary and sufficient for the purposes of taxation and conscription. The connected few manage information about the anonymous many. In the following I will deal with the further consequences of the imposition of state legibility for the exchange of information on the vertical and horizontal axis of this new world.

Pondering the Intentions of Superiors

During fieldwork in Yaong Rai, I often listened to the stories of old men who had served in the Communist Party of Burma and in the Wa Army. When talking about their leaders, the elders from Yaong Rai who had served in the army for long periods always emphasise the personal connections they had, or still have. Sam Sin for instance, a 50-year-old man from Yaong Rai, had served in the army for about 20 years. After a few years as an ordinary soldier, he became a member of a unit of personal guards led by a minor commander, Sam Rai. Sam Rai was involved in business operations to provide for the needs of the new villages in the Southern Command. In the process, he forced villagers to buy large contingents of roof tiles that he himself provided through his army unit. But then someone reported Sam Rai to the head of the 'independent brigade' and to UWSA headquarters. There it was decided that Sam Rai and everyone who was with him should be captured and put in prison. When Sam Sin heard about this, he escaped and hid in Wa villages across the border in China for about two weeks. Then he decided to go to the headquarters and report to the head of the army, Tax Pang himself. Tax Pang listened to him, and accepted that it was Sam Rai's fault alone, and his soldiers shouldn't be blamed. The general made a phone call to Wei Saitang, the head of the independent brigade, and then Sam Sin could return to his army unit.

This commander, Wei Saitang, himself fell from grace a few years later. He had played a very important role in the military operations of the UWSA at the Thai border. Most of the versions that I have heard agree that he had become too powerful and was seen as a danger by the central command of the UWSA. According to some sources, the reason behind Wei's fall was that he had tried to cut an insider deal with the Thai Third Army across the border (Pathan 2005: 114). However the high-level intrigues and politics played out, the result was that Wei was arrested, but later released and installed as a relatively powerless vice-commander in Northern Wa. Following his downfall, most of his followers were arrested or sought refuge in Thailand or China.

I have no way of knowing what exactly happened in the downfall of Sam Rai or the demotion of Wei Saitang. It seems highly unlikely that Tax Pang would have listened to Sam Sin, who was an ordinary foot soldier, rather than to mid-level colonels. Whatever else happened, and even regardless of whether Sam Sin's version was true, the story illustrates well how important the judgements of the high leaders are. Sam Sin mulled over Tax Pang's opinion on the matter and anticipated his verdict, and that's why he went to the headquarters to speak to the great man in person. Sam Sin's ambition was to know the intentions of the commander-in-chief, and maybe to manipulate them. What mattered most was, literally, what Tax Pang intended to do about this case: whether he trusted Sam Rai, how much he understood about what had happened in the Southern Command, and on this basis, how he would judge Sam Sin's case. On the assumption that Tax Pang could see more than others, what really mattered was how Tax Pang would react. If only Sam Sin could know the thoughts and feelings of the great leader, he would know what to expect and could act accordingly, whether to stay put or flee.

Only Tax Pang, as the chairman of the government and the leader of the army, had the power to overrule the decisions of lower-level commanders. At this time in the early 2000s, Tax Pang ruled over the UWSA, with a standing army of about 20,000 men governing an area of the size of Belgium,[6] and a population of about 500,000 individuals. Tax Pang's power relied on being the centre of the UWSA's information gathering apparatus. The UWSA continued the CPB's practice of having political commissars and secretaries, and the secretaries in particular were supposed to package and convey important information to higher leaders. As long as he was based in Pang Hsang – now the capital of the Wa State – the general secretary of the CPB, Thakin Ba Thein Tin, received reports every morning from his two secretaries, the political secretary Aung Htet and the military secretary Aung Min.[7] While there are formal ways of reporting back to the central government, such as regular 'work sessions' held at every government level, the most important information is conveyed in person. This was made clear to me when I sought permission to do fieldwork. I had numerous meetings with officials at different levels, but the ultimate decision – or so it seemed to me – was conveyed to me in person as being Tax Pang's decision: a minor commander mentioned to me that Tax Pang knew about my presence, and had agreed to me doing research in the area.

Within the hierarchies of the party-state, there are institutional provisions for the flow of information upward and downward: for instance, the reports delivered by secretaries and advisers to their commanders, or vice versa, the reports by higher leaders that are read out at lower level assemblies. Perhaps most importantly there are everyday exchanges that take place at visits, assemblies, celebrations, and through business contacts. Mid-level commanders typically move between the houses of higher-level leaders, local units of army and government, and villages. At the political assemblies held regularly in the district government, officials read out press releases and government documents from the central government – often simultaneously translating from the written Chinese text into the Wa dialects spoken locally. In the same assemblies, and in hierarchical exchanges in general, formulaic and ritualised languages flourish

(of which more below). In all these exchanges, the upward flow of information is privileged and directed at specific commanders, compared to the downward flow, which tends to be publicised and directed at numerous subordinates. The odds of any information beyond that which is publicly announced reaching individual subordinates are low, and for the same reason, any information about the commanders and their intentions is highly valued – the more so, given that much depends on these commanders' future actions.

In the Wa language, any guess about someone else's intention is generally expressed by reference to the heart (*rhawm:*) – the organ of thought and feeling. Talk about mental states and feelings is therefore generally expressed by reference to the heart. The following saying locates thought clearly in the heart:

> *Sum: paoxtix kah deut, keud paoxtix daux rhawm:*
>
> eat something with chin, think something in heart
>
> We use a gesture of the chin to invite each other to eat, but we use our hearts to think about each other. (Watkins 2013a:193)

Variously, people say it is crucial to understand the 'heart' of higher leaders: for instance, upon the question of what people thought about Aung San Suu Kyi, the state councillor of the Union of Myanmar, a common response was: 'She is Bamar, and we don't understand her heart' (*rhawm naw ang tawng*). When people explained to me the skills of dealing with superiors, one common challenge was to understand and to move the heart of the superior (that was also exactly what Sam Sin was trying to do). Rather than waiting for an order, a follower, a soldier, or a petitioner would ideally understand what pleased the superior, and act accordingly.

Many lower level commanders prided themselves in being particularly good at anticipating the reactions of their leaders: for instance, which food and which wine they would like, who they would like to see, when they would like to rest. Soldiers who serve as a 'personal assistant' to a commander are often adept at guessing the intentions and preferences of their commander. Commanders, in turn, often value those followers who do not need direct orders, but are able to anticipate the commander's wish. Accordingly, the superiors develop likings and preferences – distinctions that lower ranking individuals recognise with the higher ranks, but could not afford to make for themselves (commanders tend to have preferences for particular cigarettes and liquor, whereas peasants smoke and drink whatever is available).[8]

If this is obvious within the hierarchical structures of army and state, it also has repercussions on the relations between ordinary people and state representatives. Members of the elite are generally treated with utmost respect. In particular, people who have connections both to the patronage networks of the central government and to local kinship are paid homage when they visit the village. In Yaong Rai such people included, for instance, the affines of a girl who had married into the family of commander of an army brigade. When they visited the village for a betrothal party, Sam Sin and Headman Nap admonished me several times to rush when I hesitated to leave a buffalo sacrifice that was taking place at another household. Using

Chinese, Sam Sin said to me that the 'big people' (*da ren*) had arrived, implying that they were 'bigger' and more powerful than the family where I had been for the buffalo sacrifice. This might have been simply common deference toward high ranks, but in Sam Sin's case at least, such behaviour was aimed at cultivating relationships with superiors associated with the elites of army and state: for instance, talking politely – sometimes deferentially, and sometimes jokingly – to them, saluting, showing the way, bowing, offering drinks, etc.

In his reactions and gestures, Sam Sin appeared to be relatively capable of anticipating the feelings and thoughts of superiors. It seemed, in fact, as if only the intentions of the higher ranks mattered: Sam Sin's deference effectively granted the right to intentions and individuality to those higher-ranking people. The etiquette and manners he showed were not just conventional and standardised acts, but catered to the particular inclinations and desires of the superior in each case. Sam Sin's behaviour at such occasions contrasted much with the behaviour of his neighbour Tax Kat, who would on such occasions not greet the people he didn't know (and who didn't know him), would just stand there and accept any drink offered, and get drunk – something that Sam Sin would never do. Having served more than 20 years in the army, Sam Sin has learned how to read the minds of superiors, or at least how to anticipate their intentions and operate accordingly, whereas Tax Kat does not seem to be able to do the same, possibly because he has not served in the army, or maybe because he is proud and does not want to bow to the commanders. In Yaong Rai, few elders were as skilled as Sam Sin in engaging powerful outsiders, whereas quite a few others behaved like Tax Kat. There are all kinds of constraints and reasons for their respective behaviours (e.g. how long a man spent in the army, whether he is related to powerful outsiders, his skills and character). No matter whether someone like Tax Kat is unwilling or unable to read the intentions of superiors, he does so at his own disadvantage: he basically gives away the only possibility to engage with the intentions of those powerful others – intentions that might have far-reaching consequences for his life.

Perhaps this inversion – Sam Sin being forced to anticipate intentions, and Tax Pang being unable to do so – is a universal feature of power hierarchies. The situation is particularly acute at royal courts and in the military: subjects and soldiers are encouraged to mind-read, whereas kings and drill sergeants cannot afford to do so (cf. Hollan & Jason Throop 2008: 393). David Graeber has suggested that such an imbalance of the imagination is central to bureaucratic violence everywhere (2012: 118–19).[9] He cites bell hooks, feminist standpoint theory, and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiment*, who all suggest in different ways that the interpretive labour of putting oneself into someone else's shoes is more often done by those who are oppressed and disenfranchised. bell hooks says as much about Black people in the US, who by nature of structural racial inequalities are forced to consider the intentions of white people, and need to try and understand them; at any rate more so than the other way around. Standpoint theory shows the same is true for boys and girls in industrialised countries: by and large, girls are socialised to understand and anticipate the viewpoints of boys and men due to patriarchal and misogynist social structures. Graeber summarises these arguments by pointing out that structural inequality

enforced through violence (or the threat thereof) 'invariably creates highly lopsided structures of the imagination' (Graeber 2012: 119).

In the examples from my fieldwork in the Wa State, structural inequalities are predicated on projects of state legibility, that is, a simplification of a population that makes it legible and thus manipulable from one central perspective. As I have tried to show in this section, state building by the CPB and later the UWSA created new networks of aquaintance and patronage in the army that ultimately channelled information flows in this emerging state, and led to a centralisation of perspectives around core commanders. The arrangement produces a fundamental imbalance in visibility and information: the centre has privileged access to superficial information about everyone, whereas those not at the centre do not have access to the same information and cannot reach the central vantage point. This fundamental imbalance, in the Wa State, is maintained by acquaintances and patrons moving information to the centre, and the masses who have become anonymous to them. Precisely because the centre wields this information for the purpose of statecraft, and on this basis can exercise power over subordinates, the same subordinates have to do more interpretive labour to understand the intentions of those at the centre. At the end of the day, for the subordinates, everything depends on the intentions and actions of those at the centre.

The new requirement for subordinates to ponder the intentions of superiors which we have observed in this section does not necessarily imply that the same subordinates pronounce themselves explicitly about these speculations. Instead of addressing their intentions verbally and explicitly, someone like Sam Sin tries to anticipate the future actions of superiors and responds by gesture and formal discourse, first of all. Speaking one's mind too directly in the face of a leader, or worse, commenting aloud on the motivations of a leader, amounts to challenging this leader's authority. But the same speculations can and are voiced very directly when protected by familiarity and privacy; among ordinary people who are anonymous from the perspective of the powerful and centralised networks of the army, explicit speculation about the intentions of superiors is indeed very common. The expansion of state legibility, therefore, creates a division between the vantage point of the centre (the commanders) and the anonymous masses who are 'legible' for the centre; this division correlates with an increased pressure on subordinates to ponder the intentions of superiors and a tendency among inferiors to speak about the intentions of distant superiors. As we will see in the next part, projects of state legibility also correlate with a tendency to speculate about the intentions of others at the same horizontal axis; that is, among the people who are subjects of state legibility.

The Minds of Others in the Grid

Much of the debate about opacity doctrines refers to explicit language only. There is a high risk in jumping to conclusions on the basis of contingent replies to the ethnographer's question. Various researchers have shown that statements about others'

intentions, as well as responsibility and accountability, depend largely on the kind of questions asked; crucially, it is important to distinguish descriptive and explanatory levels of argumentation (Hill & Irvine 1993; Duranti 2015: 176ff.). If these warnings are not heeded, anthropologists extrapolate a general doctrine of opacity on the basis of only a few statements regarding prohibitions against speculating about others intentions. At a fundamental level, 'theory of mind' – the capacity to imagine and anticipate the thoughts and actions of others – is indispensable for language and for sociality. But there are many different ways in which humans can engage with the acts, intentions, and minds of others, and many ways such engagement informs social action. There are substantial differences between addressing others' intentions through bodily movement, versus through language, for instance.

In the following I will discuss four possible modes of 'intention management', that is, of engaging others' intentions: 1) flight, 2) gesture, 3) formal discourse, and 4) ordinary language. All four modes can indicate that someone has interpreted the intentions of others, but they do so with different degrees of ambiguity: only ordinary and explicit language unambiguously addresses others' intentions as their 'minds', and therefore only in this last case can we say mind reading has taken place. As we shall see, this bears important implications for the question of the correlation between mind reading and state legibility.

The simplest response to danger is to run away. If Scott (2009) is right, this has been indeed a common reaction to state-building in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. It can be a reaction to the intentions of others: people might take to their feet when they do not expect mercy from an enemy, for instance, or when they anticipate the intentions of soldiers or tax collectors. And the strategy was well-known in the Wa hills: for instance, when the CPB established their government in the early 1970s, those village militas who had been allied with the Chinese Nationalist Army and had fought the communist armies earlier, fled to areas West of the Salween to escape retaliation.

Another indicator is gesture: humans express themselves through bodily movement, and anticipate, interpret, and react to the movements of others. Whatever is put into language is just a minimal part of the cues that help us to interpret and anticipate the actions of others; most of what happens is non-verbal communication and body language. Gesture is thus absolutely central to the continuous interpretation of others in interaction. This might be a warning or a threat with the hand, or, in the Wa hills, a demonstration of respect by folding one's hands, or by clapping one's hands. Through the bodily movements of receiving, offering, and deference – signifying hospitality – it can be possible to placate spirit-beings and other intruders, without directly addressing their intentions. In fact, both reading their gestures and responding by gesture is preferred over verbal expression when it comes to the intentions of powerful outsiders, such as evil spirits or army commanders (as we have seen above). A response by gesture might indicate an interpretation of the intentions of the respondent; but it could also be co-reaction anticipating the respondent's actions. A gestural response, thus, avoids addressing the mental states of others and it is not self-evident that mind reading is necessary at all to communicate by gesture.

Formal discourse fulfils very similar functions in mediating social distance, for instance in the rituals of hospitality. Like gesture, formal discourse remains equivocal in its reference to the minds of others. Instead, formalisation bypasses the question of individual minds. But in this by-pass movement we can also identify intentions at work. In ritual and in public oratory, the Wa typically use highly formal language. As in many other Southeast Asian languages, Wa here make use of numerous aesthetic fillers whose main purposes seems to be general symmetry of expression (Watkins 2013b). The formal discourse that was used in the past for ritual speech exclusively since the 1970s has been adapted to public speech in assemblies. A typical opening of the public assemblies I attended during fieldwork in 2017 went like this, for instance:

Sim sikaux laux simiang

The doves, noble leaders

Paox nyiex paox yaong

People of the house, people of the village

Pux aik pux o

Older brother, older sister

Mai paox lhax sidu lawng paox grawm sidu ju

You are leaves of the same size, friends of the same age

Ku kaux ku pui

Everyone, all people

Ku plak ku vang

every place, every corner

… mhawm pex!

… be well!

It is important to note that such formal speech was adopted from ritual registers. Whereas in the past it was used to address the spirits and ancestors, now it is used to speak to large audiences of people, some of whom might be anonymous: the parallel structure thus addresses 'all the people' through abstract titles ('older brother', 'older sister', 'leaders', 'friends').

In political assemblies convened in the villages of the Wa State today, such formal addreses are typically followed by the reading of lists by a government scribe and exhortations by local leaders. The lists might be simply read out from the statistics that local officials have collected (e.g. 'in this village, there are 521 people, 42 water buffalos, 2 tractors, etc.'). The speeches then include in particular references to deserters (the names of the deserters, and warnings that if the deserters won't return, the government might take relatives hostage), exhortations against drug consumption

(‘don’t smoke opium’, ‘don’t get drunk’) and appeals to custom, morality and social order (‘listen to the words of the leaders’; see Picture 1).

Hence it is mainly in relationship to the new duties to the distant state – the duty of paying taxes to the government, of providing corvée labour to the village, and of giving sons to the army – that formal discourse is thriving. Many of the annual political assemblies that are held are full of such formal discourse. Through the symmetry of formal expression, this kind of discourse affirms hierarchy and unity. Formal discourse also reproduces anonymity and social distance; being formalised, it applies (or rather doesn’t apply) to everyone in the same way. As such, formal discourse bypasses the problem of other people’s minds; rather than addressing actual interlocutors, it addresses roles and reiterates rules.

The most explicit way to refer to other’s intentions is by putting into words one’s interpretation about someone else’s intentions. The other indicators mentioned (flight, gesture, formal speech) sideline the problem of mind reading, and it is never quite clear whether people actually address the intentions of others or avoid addressing them. Flight, gesture, and formal speech, at most may be indicators of the opacity of other minds (i.e. the general difficulty of interpreting other minds). But even that is dubious, given that we have a nonresponse bias here, in the sense that bodily movement and formal speech by themselves do not speak of ‘mind’ at all. To go further, and confirm whether intentions are addressed as ‘minds’, and whether people people engage in ‘mind reading’, we need to examine ordinary language.

Picture 1 Public Assembly in Yaong Rai

The intensification of measures of state legibility in the Wa State since the 1970s has produced an environment in which the intentions of superiors have become increasingly important, as we have seen above. People respond with new forms of 'intention management', such as gestures of deference, etiquette, and polite speech, especially in relationships between subordinates and superiors (remember the example of Sam Sin). The intensification of measures of state legibility has also been conducive to the direct verbalisation of intentions, that is, public mind reading, at the horizontal level, between the subjects of state legibility. Let me demonstrate this with the example of corvée labour.

In the past, farm labour was organised according to relations with relatives and neighbours. Even though the organisation of such communal labour has been described by outsiders as fairly chaotic and random,[10] in reality it was (and still is) based on intricate considerations of give-and-take between relatives and neighbours. If you can't make it today, for instance, you can provide some food for the workers, or you can make good by working more another time. In principle, you could also not come and pay for a day's labour, but this almost never happens for ordinary farm labour. Here labour exchange is mostly spontaneous, and the sharing is quite similar to the spontaneous sharing that happens when a cow dies unexpectedly,[11] or when a hunter comes back with some prey: there needs to be an acknowledgement of the guardian spirits (of animals and place), as well as some sharing with neighbours and anyone who might be present. Sharing in those instances follows norms that remain largely implicit, and are generally not discussed or questioned explicitly, not even in private: only if someone never participates will there be explicit criticism or judgement; in most cases, the occasion is ad hoc, the contribution has many purposes, and there are little or no measurements to calculate and fix each contribution (see Picture 2).

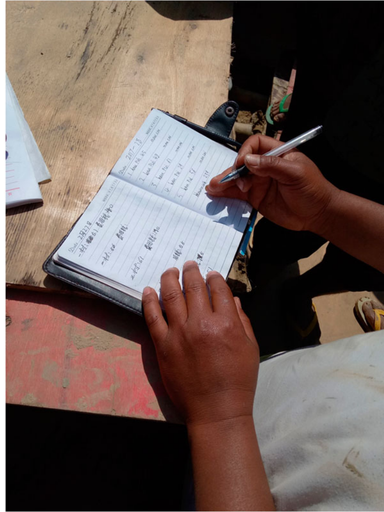
Picture 2 Spontaneous labour exchange and Meat Sharing in Yaong Rai, 2017

In principle, corvée labour is similar, and it is sometimes called by the same name (*hoik bix*). But in the case of corvée labour, new media have been introduced that have to do with calculation and counting – specifically, lists and money. People might count when dealing with spontaneous labour, but they would not produce a list of everyone who works, and generally do not pay for a replacement; both are common for corvée labour. During my fieldwork in Yaong Rai, most villagers had to participate in corvee labour about once a month: to clean public roads, to dig alluvial sand in the reservoir of a dam operated by the district government, and to work in tea fields owned by the district government, for instance (see picture 3). All the people who participated in those collective work parties were listed on papers prepared by government scribes. It was also common and acceptable for someone who couldn't participate in these communal work parties to pay a small fee to their headman as a substitute.[12]

The intensification of measures of state legibility in the Wa state since the 1970s, that is, the introduction of conscription, corvée, and taxation, have occurred in tandem with the spread of new media, including lists and money (see picture 4). Lists and money need not be used at all, but their existence suggests that each person's daily labour is measurable, as well as the presence of each soldier. Each labourer and each sack of grain can be accounted for. The lists are indeed only very rarely referred to once they are produced, and they are generally not very exact (being written in Chinese, when many ordinary people are not clear about their Chinese first names and surnames, for instance). Even so, the very existence of these lists changes the nature of the social practices and the people listed.

Lists and money, together with the other media that the armies introduced (including weapons, telegraphs, and cars), made it possible to substantially transform personal

Picture 3 Moving alluvial sand out of the dam reservoir, Taoh Mie District 2017



Picture 4 Village official keeping a list of corvée labour, Yaong Rai 2017

networks and create new acquaintances as well as new anonymity. The centralisation of information made itself felt not only in the moments where children were taken away, taxes collected, and villagers re-settled, but it became a constant presence in everyday life – in principle every act could be seen and known by the centre. The new media did not only help to maintain new networks of acquaintances, but they also provided new possibilities of 'fixing' other people's identities, positions, and actions in space and time. As projects of legibility proliferated and expanded in their intensity and reach, more actions could be compared to and measured against their mediatic representation: e.g. with someone's name on a list, it is possible to directly monitor whether or not the same person has actually appeared in the labour party. When money can be paid in replacement for someone's absence, the same service becomes both more accountable and potentially 'mentionable'.

For all these reasons, moral indignation is more immediate and direct if someone shirks the corvée labour for the government, when compared to someone shirking spontaneous labour parties among relatives and neighbours in the village. Shirking takes place in both: people sometimes don't join spontaneous work parties, and people sometimes do not come when the headman calls them to go for a government work party. In both cases, people might ask why someone didn't come, but they ask more directly for the reasons, and express moral indignation, when dealing with corvée labour. Only in the latter case would I hear direct comments such as 'What are you doing, why don't you come working with us, where are you going?' (*yuh kah mawx, ang hoek yuh kaing mai yix, hu maix tix mawx?*), or assessments of character, as in 'he's really lazy and doesn't move a finger' (*nawh nieh ngu*

gnat, patix kah ang yuh). Whereas in farm work, the typical comment would be 'he didn't come today', if an absence was noted at all.

The possibility of being named in a list, and the possibility of replacing labour duties by money payments, thus, facilitate public commentary on others' participation in communal work. The measurements of legibility introduced allow not only for naming, but also for shaming: legibility can be used to hold people accountable. Therefore the duties to the distant state that are paid in corvée are different from the duties to relatives and neighbours that are exchanged in ordinary work parties. The former are measured and therefore the intentions to fulfil such duties are potentially transparent, fundamentally because new media allow for a comparison of action and intent. The latter are ephemeral and incommensurate, and the underlying intentions thereby tend to remain opaque. Tools of legibility, in general, provide reference points to verbalise intentions. In the special case of state legibility, those tools are distributed unequally and create legibility only in one direction: that is, populations are made visible and 'legible' for the centre. As state legibility is the precondition for the exercise of violence on peripheral populations, it results in an intensification of 'intention management' at the periphery, as we have seen above: people like Sam Sin are forced to ponder the intentions of the centre. Among the people who find themselves in the grid of legibility, that is, the people who are the 'objects' of legibility, the third eye of the centre is potentially omnipresent. In principle every action related to projects of state legibility (for instance corvée labour) can be observed and recorded by the centre. Among the subjects of legibility, this favours another form of intention management: just as intense as pondering the intentions of superiors, but explicitly verbalised as 'mind reading'. This is not to say that the statements quoted above – 'what are you doing?' – already constitute mind reading, but rather that in these statements, more is at stake than just intentions. Uttered in public, they expedite further discussion of others' characters, the reasons of their actions, and thus their minds. Correspondingly, corvée labour not only increases the need to hold others accountable, but also the tendency to speculate openly and publicly about their intentions. And in such circumstances we increasingly get public and direct references to someone's 'mind', that is, explicit and public addresses of the thoughts and actions of others.

Conclusion

In my last example, lists were of central importance. The lists that are written of the people who participate in corvée labour create a fixed account of a population and make each action comparable and accountable. But state legibility is not necessarily always based on the material practice of writing per se. State legibility can be created also through agriculture and sedentism; it is re-inforced through the re-arrangement of personal relations I have described above: that is, new scales of personal connections beyond the level of kin and village, and new forms of anonymity of those who were not connected. The state building process started by the Communist Party of Burma in the 1970s created new circles of aquaintances and mutuality among soldiers, and concomitantly a new form of anonymity toward those people who

remained outside the same connections. The new elites and their entourage monopolised information about the anonymous masses, and occupied central nodes in the flow of information maintaining the military apparatus. This particular arrangement of information flows leads to a situation in which pondering the intentions of superiors becomes increasingly necessary and urgent for commoners.

The urgent need to deal with the intentions of superiors generally does not lead to explicit speculation about their minds: instead, people use bodily movement and formal discourse to deal with the intentions of superiors. Gestures, manners, and formal expression can pragmatically anticipate others' intentions; at any rate, they sideline the problem of addressing others' minds directly and explicitly – something which in the Wa context is generally seen as intrusive and potentially offensive.

With peers, however, the direct and verbal mention of others' minds becomes increasingly common with the growth of state legibility, as we have seen in the comments about people's absence at corvée labour. Projects of state legibility rely on specific media to centralise information: allowing the centre to see, to count, and to manipulate the same population. These media record individuals' actions, and make it possible to single out individuals and to hold them accountable. As a centralised information structure, state legibility creates a shadow presence of the centre that potentially can oversee all actions. It thus generalises the urgent need for intention management we have seen in the personal relations between commoners and elite. Vis-à-vis others in the grid there is less of an inhibition to speak about others' intentions, when compared with the hierarchical relation to a superior. And thus the urge to address others' intentions is given free rein. Instead of gestures and formal discourse, the intentions of others in the same grid can be referred to directly, using ordinary language. In such contexts people ask more commonly 'why don't you come working with us?' (*ang hoek yuh kaing mai yix?*), and imply that something is motivating the other's action, something distant and disincarnate, a source of their thinking and doing, i.e. their mind. State legibility, therefore, not only makes it possible to read others' minds in public, but it increasingly makes it necessary to do so.

Notes

1. Obviously there are deities and concepts of mind that have nothing to do with alphabetic writing. Rotman writes specifically about the Hebrew figure of *Jahweh* and the Greek idea of *psyche/nous*, and shows how both are ''I'-effects' of writing (2008: 118ff.). Thus, the self-designation of the God of the Old Testament as 'I am that I am' (=*Jahweh*), naming a being that preceeds and supersedes the act of naming, is itself a media effect (that is only possible in and through writing). Similarly, in Greek alphabetic writing, *psyche* and *nous* became 'mind', that is, an entity that is embodied *and* invisible, and thought to be the origin of agency. Rotman summarises: 'as hypostatizations of the 'I'-effects that writing permits, Mind and God have functioned since the beginning of alphabetic inscription as disembodied, immortal, and invisible ghosts haunting thought about thinking and the nature of being in the West from the moment of their birth' (ibid.: 130).
2. I describe these kinds of personal relations that are functional equivalents of state legibility later in this article, and in relation to the social dynamics of forced conscription in Steinmüller 2019.

3. The empirical material is based on a total of eighteen months of fieldwork in the Wa hills of Burma and China during four fieldtrips between June 2014 and November 2017. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted. Yaong Rai is a pseudonym, and so are most personal names.
4. Fiskesjö discusses the 'powerless "chiefs" of the obsessively egalitarian Wa' in terms of the frameworks suggested by Jonathan Friedman and James Scott: Wa autonomy can be explained in terms of a 'social devolution' based on the circumstances of high population density and armed autonomy. According to this explanation, the 'powerless 'chiefs' of the obsessively egalitarian Wa' can be seen as 'the shadow remnants of chieftainship whose growth into permanent authority, kingship, and state structures could not be sustained'. This is the kind of explanation that Jonathan Friedman gave, and which ultimately relies on the conditions of the 'political economy'. Alternatively, the egalitarian Wa are a primary example of the 'escape formations' that James Scott has described in the mountains of mainland Southeast Asia, and their chiefs 'represent a spectacle of pretend-chiefs, a conscious ruse, reflecting historical agency and even mastery of the situation, against many odds, when the situation demanded it, by people who purposefully avoided the road of state formation' (Fiskesjö 2010: 245). Fiskesjö discusses insightfully the kings of Banhong and Mangleng, and in conclusion pays his dues to both Friedman and Scott, without favouring either author. He praises Friedman's approach, in particular for giving reasons for the tendency toward state building or its absence, which Leach in *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954) had not given. Yet when discussing Scott, Fiskesjö himself seems to return to the voluntarism of Leach. The emphasis is clearly on Wa autonomy; an autonomy that includes, but goes beyond, resistance against state formation (Scott sometimes seems to reduce hill societies to 'escape formations'). But still, the 'last instance', for Fiskesjö, are the Wa's 'own terms'.
5. To give but one example of this vision, here is how the commander-in-chief of the UWSA, Tax Pang, explains the resettlement programmes: 'I resettled them all in the southern plains, where it is more convenient to provide electricity and water; where it's easy to invite teachers, to organise, to meet, and to spread information. In the past, we lived like monkeys, families lived far apart, and you couldn't even find anyone to talk to. Once you start walking, you start sweating, and quickly lose interest. It was no good, and we had to change.' (sina.com 2005).
6. According to official statistics of that time, the population of the Wa State was more than 500,000 individuals, separated into the Northern Command, covering an area of 18,000 km^2, and the Southern Command, with an area of 17,000 km^2. The area governed by the Wa State thus amounts to about 35,000 km2 – slightly more than Belgium, which has an area of 30,689 km^2.
7. Aung Min quoted in Alessandro Rippa's film *The Burmese Teacher* (2019).
8. Duranti (1988) explains that in Samoa, the higher up in the hierarchy individuals are situated, the more their intentions matter – in fact, it seems that only superiors are allowed to be individuals at all. Everyone else is just trying to figure out what those above really think, or reporting the words of those above, or speaking on their behalf.
9. In the cited texts, Hollan and Throop write about empathy, and Graeber uses 'empathy','imagination', 'imaginative identification', and 'interpretative labor' more or less interchangeably. My point here is primarily about the first step, which is that subordinates need to consider the intentions of those above. Whether or not they actually feel with them (that is, empathise with them), is an open question.
10. The Japanese explorer Hideyuki Takano describes communal work parties among the Wa of a neighbouring village in the 1990s as follows: 'Each Wa household had its own field, but when they worked, they all help each other. Today, they do this family's field, tomorrow, another family's – no set order. The members also changed each day' (Takano 2002: 103).
11. The communal work party for farm labour is called *hoik bix*; the spontaneous communal help in situations of emergency is called *dim coi*.
12. See Colloredo-Mansfeld (2009: 93) on the impact of lists on the organization of commununal labour in the Ecuadorian Andes.

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