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UNEDITED

Introductory note to "Silent trade with outsiders: Hunter-gatherers' perspectives"

James Woodburn, *London School of Economics*

I welcome the publication of this previously unpublished conference paper which I wrote in 1987 and 1988. I would like to make two comments on the content of my paper. The first is that the examples of silent trade which I cite were drawn from the published sources that I was able to locate before the use of internet searching became commonplace. I would expect that today several hours of expert internet searching could yield more examples, perhaps better examples, than those that I found and used after months of intermittent library searching and talking to anthropological colleagues and students. My second comment is more important. The very harmful effects of direct personal contact between groups of people who previously had no contact with each other are now much better understood by anthropologists than they were in 1988. From extensive South American and other research we now know that such contacts often result in a large increase in the incidence of disease and death. The small scattered groups of the more remote nomadic hunter-gatherers are particularly vulnerable because of their lack of contact with density-dependent infectious diseases. It seems probable to me that people in many of these groups will have been well aware from past experiences of their own and of others that such contacts threaten their health. If I were to rewrite this paper now, I would stress the entirely rational desire of isolated hunter-gatherers and others to keep their groupings healthy and free from deadly diseases by systematically

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avoiding direct contact with outsiders. Fear of illness could have been a significant factor favoring such avoidance when trading, exchanging, or sharing goods with outsiders.

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Silent trade with outsiders

Hunter-gatherers' perspectives

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This article, an unpublished essay delivered at the Fifth International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, Darwin, Australia in 1988, focuses on the mystery of what has been known as "silent trade"—the direct exchange of goods conducted between groups with no face-to-face interaction or communication. Given that the instances of this phenomenon between nomadic hunter-gatherers and pastoral peoples, which emphasize a regularity of status inequality between participants, cannot be explained as literary borrowings from Herodotus and others, this article uses comparative material from the historical and ethnographic record to test three hypotheses: (1) silent trade is an early academic myth deriving from the view, especially characteristic of the nineteenth century, that "civilization" must have evolved stage by stage from some type of society representing an antithesis to "civilization"; (2) silent trade is a myth propagated by the neighbors expressing the social distance they perceive between themselves and the hunter-gatherers; and (3) silent trade is a real phenomenon to be understood in terms of the special nature of the political and other ties associated with the encapsulation (enclavement) of such hunter-gatherers by their neighbors.

Keywords: sharing, exchange, silent trade, strangers, outsiders, hunter-gatherers, economic anthropology

This article is about an intriguing mystery which is very difficult to explain. The mystery is the nature and significance of what in the literature is known as "silent trade." The reason why this remains a mystery is that although we have many

Editors' note: We are very grateful to James Woodburn for extending his permission to republish this unpublished paper, which was written in 1988 under the title "Hunter gatherers' silent trade with outsiders and the history of anthropology," and was delivered at the Fifth International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, Darwin, Australia. We also thank Professor Woodburn for his generous addition of an introductory note, and we extend our gratitude to Rita Astuti and Rane Willerslev for their brilliant assistance in recovering the manuscript. Alongside changing the title of this article, we also have adapted the original text to match Hau's style guidelines, including replacing all UK English with US English spelling.

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descriptions of silent trade, we have scarcely a single eyewitness account, and most of the descriptions are old, fragmentary, and in one respect or another questionable.

By "silent trade," I mean a direct exchange of goods between two parties who keep apart and don't encounter each other face to face. They don't communicate verbally or using gestures (or, needless to say, in writing). If they see each other at all, it is only at a distance. The term "silent trade" is actually not a very appropriate one and I retain it only because of its widespread use in the literature. The common factor in the accounts in the literature is deliberate avoidance of face-to-face contact and deliberate avoidance of discussion. But as we shall see from an account of silent trade with the Kubu, the participants were in some instances said to be quite noisy while avoiding contact and discussion. Secondly, the term "trade" is particularly unfortunate because it suggests that for the people involved the focus of the transaction was commercial, was in the goods given and received. But we must be alert to the possibility that in some instances the accounts may be about gift exchange or mutual sharing rather than trade. I suppose we should really be talking about transactions in which the participants avoid each other.

When the term "silent trade"' is used, there is an implication in the descriptions that we are talking about institutionalized transactions occurring between members of different groups. The term does not seem in the literature to be used for intrasocietal transactions between, say, a mother-in-law and a son-in-law, who by custom avoid each other.

I became interested in the subject because the first European to encounter the Hadza, the nomadic hunter-gatherers in Northern Tanzania whom I have studied during many visits since 1957, records that in the past they traded with their agricultural neighbors by silent trade (Obst 1912: 17–18). I have been wondering whether such trade did indeed occur or whether it is some sort of myth. As myth, or as reality, how might we understand it?

The notion of silent trade has a long history. According to Herodotus, writing about 2500 years ago, such trade occurred between the Carthaginians and an African people beyond the Pillars of Hercules (which are, I think, supposed to be the Straits of Gibraltar). The place where the trade is supposed to have occurred is presumably the Northwest or West African coast. When the Carthaginians arrived by ship,

> they unlade their wares, and having transposed them after an orderly fashion along the beach, leave them, and returning aboard their ships, raise a great smoke. The natives, when they see the smoke, come down to the shore, and, laying out to view so much gold as they think the worth of the wares, withdraw to a distance. The Carthaginians upon this come ashore and look. If they think the gold enough, they take it and go their way; but if it does not seem to them sufficient, they go aboard ship once more and wait patiently. Then the others approach and add to their gold till the Carthaginians are content. Neither party deals unfairly by the other. (Herodotus, cited by Grierson 1980: 22)

Here we have not merely silent trade but also a means of reaching an agreed price if we assume, as seems reasonable, that if the amount eventually provided by the other side is insufficient, then one would simply withdraw one's own goods.

There are many similar accounts of medieval and more recent long-distance trade by Arabs across the Sahara to West Africa who, we were told, traded by silent trade when they reached their destination. Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias of the Centre of West African Studies in Birmingham reviewed the historical evidence for this West African trade in a useful article in the journal *History in Africa* in 1974. He cites with approval an earlier critic who pointed out that "it is actually the more detailed and comprehensive Arab sources that fail to record silent trade in West Africa, leaving to those that are more vague and sketchy the task of expatiating upon the exotic characteristics of [this] form of trade." Moraes Farias argues that the historical evidence for stereotypical silent trade in West Africa in the past is weak. He suggests that the various sources represent a chain of literary borrowings which repeat what he calls "a misleading combination of a mythical stereotype with concrete evidence about the traditional trade-through-broker pattern of exchange."

Now I don't know enough about trans-Saharan trade to comment on this discussion. Moraes Faries and the others who have also cast doubt on the reality of West African silent trade may well be right.

But nowadays there seems to be a more general tendency among historians and anthropologists to dismiss the whole range of accounts of silent trade, to treat them as just curious stories endlessly repeated but with no substance to them, as an exotic cul-de-sac in the history of anthropological ideas with no relevance to the history of real peoples in the real world or to the study of socioeconomic organization.

But it has been treated very seriously by others, and most strikingly by Philip James Hamilton Grierson, who wrote a fascinating book on the subject which was first published in Edinburgh in 1903, and more recently by John Price in an important article published in 1980. Grierson brought together large number of references to the practice and makes the important point that in the great majority of instances, in his words, "one of the parties represents a relatively high, the other a relatively low, type of culture" (Grierson 1980: 28). In other words, rephrasing his statement in more acceptable terms, the great majority of cases of silent exchange occurred between two parties, one of which regarded itself as being of much higher status than the other. These cases mostly fall into two categories:

1. Long-distance traders—Europeans, Chinese, Arabs, etc.—trading with members of tribal societies (as in the case described by Herodotus). This is often beach trading or trading across a river boundary.
2. Agricultural or pastoral peoples trading with nearby nomadic hunter-gatherers (or nomadic fisherman or nomadic potters—that is, with non-pastoral nomads).

I think this regularity—the status inequality between the parties—should cause us to pause before dismissing the phenomenon. If, in general, rather than just in the West African case, the accounts were to represent no more than a chain of literary borrowings, of repeated retellings of the Herodotus and other similar traditions, then surely either one would expect this type of trade to be attributed simply to trading of the sort Herodotus described—long-distance trade by members of literate state societies with tribesmen—or one might expect the notion to be extended rather randomly to dealings with and between all sorts of exotic tribal peoples in different parts of the world. It would be hard to account for the relative specificity

of the attribution of silent trade to dealings between hunters and farmers in terms of a chain of literary borrowings.[1]

But if a simple process of literary borrowing is not adequate to account for the many descriptions of silent trade between hunter-gatherers and their neighbors, how are we to explain them? I shall say no more about the long-distance trade cases—the West African trade, the cases of Arab and of Chinese traders, which have been discussed with insight by Price (1980). Instead, I intend to seek to test three hypotheses about claimed instances of silent trade between hunters and their agricultural neighbors:

a. Silent trade is an early academic's myth deriving from the view, especially characteristic of the nineteenth century, that "civilization" must have evolved stage by stage from some type of society representing an antithesis to "civilization." Do accounts of silent trade (or, at least, of certain apparently bizarre characteristics of silent trade) derive from the search for such an antithesis?
b. Silent trade is a myth propagated by the neighbors expressing the social distance they perceive between themselves and the hunter-gatherers.
c. Silent trade is a real phenomenon to be understood in terms of the special nature of the political and other ties associated with the encapsulation (enclavement) of such hunter-gatherers by their neighbors.

But first I shall seek to present some of the data, several of the many instances I have tracked down, in which it is claimed that hunter-gatherers, nomadic fishermen, and potters traded with their agricultural neighbors by silent trading.[2] I would like to give as clear an idea as possible in the limited space available of the sort of data that exists.

The Kubu of Sumatra

This account comes from a book by Henry Ogg Forbes, a well-known naturalist who travelled in Indonesia between 1878 and 1883.

> Here I made my first acquaintance with the *Kubus*, a race of whom I had heard much in the southern parts of my journey as a wild tribe living houseless in the forests, covered with hair, and altogether so peculiar a people as to be famous far from their own regions. As I approached nearer to their haunts the exaggerated tales about them became reduced nearer to the bounds of truth: but still then little reliable information could be obtained: so that it was with extreme satisfaction that I learned one day that in their wanderings, a small company of them had come into

1. There is, however, evidence of literary borrowings, even in some cases blatant unacknowledged copying, from earlier sources *within* the corpus of writings on Vedda silent trade and *within* the corpus of writings on silent trade among African Pygmies (see below).

2. I would particularly like to thank Elena Kingdon for the very great help she has given to me in finding African Pygmy cases. The task of excavating such data from a mass of dubious sources is very laborious and her help has been invaluable.

the neighborhood, to whom I sent the head of the village to call them to speak with me.

The Kubus are a small tribe of people inhabiting the central parts of Sumatra, and it has been claimed by some for them that they are the remnants of the pristine indigenes of the country.

. . . The Dutch Government some years ago began the attempt to teach these people the rudiments of the art of agriculture, and have after much difficulty succeeded in getting a few families in several districts to assume in some degree a settled residence in villages made for themselves.

. . . In their wild state they live in the deep forest, making temporary dwellings, if their rude shelters can be called such, in which they stay for a few days at a time, where food is obtainable, or for the purpose of collecting beeswax, dammar, and gutta-percha. Their dwellings are a few simple branches erected over a low platform to keep them from the ground, and thatched with banana- or palm-leaves. They are so timorous and shy that it is a rare circumstance for anyone to see them, and of course an extremely rare one for any white man. In fact, I doubt if any white man has ever seen the uninfluenced Kubu, save as one sees the hind-quarters of a startled deer. In the small trade carried on between them and the Malay traders of the Palembang and Jambi Residencies, the transactions are performed without the one party seeing the other. The Malay trader, ascending to one of their places of rendezvous, beats a gong in a particular way to give notice of his arrival. On hearing the signal, the Kubus, bringing out what forest produce they may have collected, and depositing it on the ground at this place, hastily retire into close hiding, beating a gong as a signal that all is ready. The trader then slowly and cautiously approaches, lays down on the ground the cloth, knives, and other articles of barter he has brought, to the amount which he considers an equivalent exchange, beats a gong and in like manner disappears. The Kubus proceed then to examine the barter offered; if they think the bargain satisfactory they remove the goods, beat their gong and go away; while the trader packs up the produce he finds left lying on the ground. If the bargain is not considered by them sufficiently advantageous, they set on one side a portion of their produce, to reduce it to what they consider the value of the barter offered; and thus the affair see-saws till finally adjusted or abandoned. They are so afraid of seeing any one not of their own race that, if suddenly met or come up with in the forest, they will drop everything and flee away. They cultivate nothing for themselves, but live entirely on the products of the forest—snakes, lizards, grubs, fruits, an occasional deer, pig, or tapir, which a happy effort has rewarded them with—and what they purchase by barter from Malays. (Forbes 1885: 233–36)

The Negritos of Northern Luzon

This description comes from a paper published in 1925 by the Rev. Morice Vanoverbergh, a Catholic missionary and long resident in the Philippines.[3]

3. I am grateful to Dr. Thomas Headland for drawing my attention to this reference.

> All Negritos trade, as I had learned long before I met them. Christians in the lowlands told me that the custom of secret barter prevailed among the Negritos; they said it was their custom, when they went to the Negrito country for commercial purposes, to go to the brink of the forest and there to deposit the products they wanted to sell, clothes, rice, etc., as it was impossible to approach the Negritos on account of their timidity. The Negritos would come at night, place alongside whatever they had for sale, beeswax, rattan, etc., and set apart the things, they desired in exchange. Then the Christians would go, take the Negrltos' products, if they wanted them, and leave their own wares; else they would take these back and leave the Negritos' property untouched.
>
> What I personally observed is that the Negrito very often goes to town himself with the products he desires to sell, and barters them for anything he might need or covet. Christian merchants and Isneg traders very often go up the river or approach the nearest Negrito settlements with a view of bartering their wares. And, although the simple blacks are often fooled, they rest contented, if their wants are supplied.
>
> Clothes, rice, salt, iron, knives, jars, dogs and sometimes ornaments are what a Negrito is most in need of. What he regularly has for sale consists of rattan, beeswax, honey, meat, and sometimes fibers, which the other tribes use in weaving hats, mats, etc. (Vanoverbergh 1925: 431)

The Semang of Malaya

According to P. J. Begbie, writing in 1834, the Semang traded with the Malays in the following manner:

> The usual method of barter prevailing between the Malays and these aboriginal tribes is for the former to bring their commodities, consisting chiefly of coarse cloth, tobacco and knives, to any open space in the vicinity of the places known to be the resort of the Semangs, and retire to a convenient distance as soon as they have deposited them. The Semangs then approach, and, having selected such articles as they either fancy or require, bear them off, leaving in their room whatever they may deem an equivalent: this consists chiefly of elephant's teeth, gahru, dammar, canes, rattans, etc.; of which, from ignorance of the value which they bear in the market, they always leave an ample return. (Begbie 1834: 8–9, cited in Endicott 1983: 228)

Endicott draws attention to the fact that Paul Schebesta, who worked among the Semang, "could not find any Semang in 1924 who had any recollection of such a method of trade ever having been used. He [Schebesta] concludes that the silent trade was merely a figment of Malay legend, although he allows that it may not have been wholly fabrication (1954: 158)" (ibid.: 228). Endicott himself seems inclined to treat silent trade as possibly a real phenomenon.

The Khā Dong Lüang of Thailand

The Khā Dong Lüang (the withered leaves' savages) were described by Major E. Seidenfaden of the Thailand Provincial Gendarmerie in 1919. He described them as hunter-gatherers who did not cultivate and lived in mountain forest in leaf shelters (hence the name) which they used for only a few days before moving on. They hunted rhinoceros, wild ox, deer, and wild pig using a wooden spear with a fire-hardened point and gathered wild bananas, li-chis, yams, and edible fungi.

> The Khā Dong Lüang are very shy and timid, afraid of meeting people not belonging to their own tribe, but as they want certain articles as tobacco, salt and perhaps a piece of cotton to swaddle a child in they are forced to make some barter. This they do in the following manner: in a certain place well-known by the Lāo they place different things which they know are appreciated by the Lāo traders such as rhinoceros horns, antlers, skins etc.; the Lāo traders in turn give the Khā those things wanted by them; it is seldom that even these traders see anything of the Khā themselves who hide in the jungle close to the place of the barter. (Seidenfaden 1919: 50)

Seidenfaden apparently didn't see this for himself but heard about it from hunters of some neighboring (presumably farming) group. He gives their location and tells us that he has confirmed all information with a Thai Governor (presumably a Provincial Governor).

The Poliars of South India (these may be the people now known as Paliyan)

Sir Clements Markham, in an account of his travels in Peru and in India published in 1862, provides the following information:

> In the more inaccessible forests [of the Pulney hills in South India] are the Poliars, a race of timid wild men of the woods. Chenatumby [his low-caste Protestant guide—see pp. 401–2] told me that they have no habitations of any kind, but run through the jungle from place to place, sleep under rocks, and live on wild honey and roots. The women run with them, like wild goats, their children slung in rows on their hips. The Poliars occasionally trade with the country people, who place cotton and grain on some stone, and the wild creatures, as soon as the strangers are out of sight, take them and put honey in their place, but they will allow no one to come near them. (Markham 1862: 403–4)

The Veddas of Sri Lanka

James Brow, the author of *Vedda villages of Anuradhapura*, published in 1978, is skeptical of the merits of many of the writings on the Vedda. "Among more recent writers," he tells us, "the few valuable reports are swamped by numerous and often secondhand statements of superstition and prejudice" (Brow 1978: 5).

However, he says that Robert Knox, author of *An historical relation of the island Ceylon in the East-Indies*, first published in 1681 soon after the author's escape from

eighteen years of captivity on the island, was "a reliable and perceptive ethnographer . . . a scrupulous and thorough reporter, observant and skeptical . . . his dry, matter-of-fact reporting is convincing: he was obviously a man not easily fooled" (Brow 1978: 7). For this reason it is Knox whom I shall quote rather than the many other writers who have provided accounts of Vedda silent trade.

> Of these Natives there be two sorts, wild and Tame. I will begin with the former. For as in these Woods there are Wild Beasts, so Wild Men also. The Land of Bintan is all covered with mighty Woods, filled with abundance of Deer. In this Land are many of these wild men; they call them Vaddahs, dwelling near no other Inhabitants, they speak the Chingulayes Language. They kill Deer, and dry the Flesh over the fire, and the people of the Country come and buy it of them. They never Till any ground for Corn, their Food being only Flesh. They are very expert with their Bows. They have a little Ax, which they stick in by their sides, to cut hony out of hollow Trees. Some few, which are near Inhabitants, have commerce with other people. They have no Towns nor Houses, only live by the waters under a Tree, with some boughs cut and laid round about them, to give notice when any wild Beasts come near, which they may hear by their rustling and trampling upon them. Many of these habitations we saw when we fled through the Woods, but God be praised the Vaddahs were gone.
>
> Some of the tamer sort of these men are in a kind of Subjection to the King. For if they can be found, tho it must be with a great search in the Woods, they will acknowledge his Officers, and will bring to them Elephants-Teeth, and Honey, and Wax, and Deer's Flesh: but the others in lieu thereof do give them near as much, in Arrows, Cloth etc., fearing lest they should otherwise appear no more.
>
> It hath been reported to me by many people, that the wilder sort of them, when they want Arrows, will carry their load of Flesh in the night, and hang it up in a Smith's Shop, also a Leaf cut in the form they will have their Arrows made, and hang by it. Which if the Smith do make according to their Pattern they will requite, and bring him more Flesh: but if he make them not, they will do him a mischief one time or another by shooting him in the night. If the Smith make the Arrows, he leaves them in the same place, where the Vaddahs hung the Flesh.
>
> Formerly, in this Kings Reign these wild men used to lye in wait, to catch Carriers people, that went down with Oxen to trade at the Sea-Ports, carrying down Betelnuts, and bringing up Cloth, and would make them to give them such things as they required, or else threatening to shoot them. They fearing their lives, and not being able to resist, were fain to give them what they asked; or else most certainly they would have had both life and goods too. At which this Kings sent many Commanders with their Soldiers to catch them, which at length they did: But had not some of themselves proved false to them, being encouraged by large promises, they could never have taken them. The chief being brought before the King, promising amendment, were pardoned: but sent into other Woods with a Command not to return thither any more, neither to use their former courses. But soon after their departure, they forsook those Woods they were put into, and came to their old haunt again, falling to their former course of Life. This the King hearing of, and how they had abused his

> Pardon, gave command either to bring them dead or alive. These Vaddahs Knowing now there could be no hope of Pardon, would not be taken alive, but were shot by the Treachery of their own men. The heads of two of the chiefest were hanged on Trees by the City. And ever since they have not presumed to disturb the Country, nor the King them he only desiring their quiet and not to be against him. (Knox [1681] 1966: 116–18)

African Pygmies

Among the many different groups of Pygmies living in symbiosis with their Bantu farmer neighbors in West and Central Africa, tales of silent trade have frequently been reported.

Sir Harry Johnston, writing in 1908 about what he calls "the wilder Pygmies," tells us that:

> These little people, unless they are in intimate relations with kindly big neighbors (as they are in Bakubaland, or among the Manbettu or Mbuba), creep into the banana plantations at night, or into the maize fields, take away as much as they can carry, in loads of plantains or of corn cobs, and leave behind a present of game—meat from the bush (often very high)—which they know will be appreciated by the owner of the plantation or cornfield.
>
> The latter winks at the procedure and tacitly accepts the exchange. Perhaps in time he gains the confidence of the little people (who if offended can be nasty enemies), and a more direct system of barter may spring up. (Johnston 1908: 789)

Emil Torday, who wrote extensively on the ethnography of Congolese peoples, gave an account in 1925 of silent trade between the Pygmies and their farmer neighbors. He tells us that they use the following procedure to obtain vegetable food or iron (required for their arrows, or knives or, spear-heads):

> An animal they have killed is deposited at night near the entrance of a village; next night they come to fetch the price, which they expect to find in the same place where they have put their game. No villager would dare to take some of the meat without paying its full value: for, unseen by him, he is watched by the little men, and should he defraud them he is sure to be found dead a few days later with a tiny poisoned arrow in his side. The pygmies are a serious people and will not allow any jokes that interfere with their rights. (Torday 1925: 57)

J. Warolus, in a somewhat journalistic account published in 1952, claimed to be an eyewitness. He tells us that one morning, at dawn in the village of Eleko in Lomela territory:

> I heard a chorus of shouts and protestations from the village square. Curious, I hurried out toward a gathering of black men in white loincloths who were milling around, shouting, stamping about, and asked questions. At night, a group of Pygmies had ravaged several maize and banana plantations. But in exchange, these devils had elegantly placed three enormous reddish-grey forest antelopes on the village square.

> I laughed to myself. This commercial method was certainly original but did it please the villagers?
>
> As I returned toward the hut I was staying in, the noise of conversations, of disputes, became even louder. Fighting raged around the joints of meat. Pieces of meat, streaked with blood, flew through the air in all directions and landed in the sand, where they took on a beautiful ocher color. Loincloths were torn off and handfuls of frizzy hair were torn out. Shouts and blows redoubled in intensity every time that a "capita" sought to impose silence.
>
> I had my answer. The Pygmy method was not disliked by my Bakelas because it gave them the opportunity not only to eat meat but above all to make a noise and to indulge in a boisterous public palaver, a pastime fit for gods. (Walorus 1952: 15; free translation from the French)

The Rev. Gustaaf Hulstaert, the author of many important publications on the language and custom of the Mongo, wrote in 1978 as follows about a small group of Pygmoids called the Bafoto living near Basankusu in Zaïre. He had visited them in 1939, when he met a few old people who were able to talk about the past when they cultivated no fields and lived by hunting large animals, particularly elephants but also wild pigs, with spears. One of the old men, who seemed to him to be the best informant, told him how:

> They exchanged their hunting yields for cassava and especially for bananas, without seeing the Mongo (whom they called Bageba or Bangemba) or the Ngombe (whom they called Mpámá). They were content to come furtively into the plantations to cut bananas and to hang up in exchange a corresponding piece of game meat. . . . Unlike the Pygmoids living in the South in symbiosis with other Mongo tribes, the Bafoto were totally independent. (Hulstaert 1978: 113–14; free translation from the French)

In 1981 Ntole Kazadi described relations between the Bacwa Pygmies and the Bahemba of Southern Zaire. In his account, Kazadi describes how, according to the Bahemba villagers:

> The Bacwe used to bring meat, which they deposited at the edge of the village before retreating. The villagers, alerted by a sound signal, arrived, evaluated the product, and left in exchange some manioc roots, some maize cobs, and some metal and pottery objects. (Kazadi 1981: 840; free translation from the French)

Kazadi reports, however, that the Bacwa themselves denied this story, saying that there was contact and communication.

More recently, Espen Waehle, writing about the Efe Pygmies, describes how the latter part of the nineteenth century is remembered by the Efe as period of violence, raids, warfare, and uncertainties. The slave trade and the ivory trade were penetrating into the area and there was conflict with the villagers. Silent trade occurred between the Efe and the Mangbetu, one of the villager tribes (Waehle 1986: 395).

It should be stressed that these various descriptions relate to many quite different groups of Pygmies, all in present-day Zaïre, but spread over a vast area.

The Hadza of Tanzania

Three brief mentions of silent trade between the Hedza and their neighbors stimulated my interest in this subject.

Erich Obst, a geographer and a careful observer, writing in 1912 reports:

> Only after the last decades, in which elephants became rarer and rarer, did the fights with the Waissansu [neighboring Bantu farmers] cease. Silent trading led to an exchange of the natural and cultural riches of the two peoples and to . . . peaceful invasion by the Waissansu. (Obst 1912: 17–18; translation from the German original)

Otto Reche, who apparently drew most of his information on the Hadza from Obst (but not only from Obst's published material), writes:

> Earlier only silent trade with their more civilized neighbors was known with whom they exchanged skins and horns in return for iron, pots, gourds, etc. Now with prevailing peaceful conditions, trade with the Isanzu has increased markedly: apart from the things already mentioned, the main objects that they want are iron knives, axes, and old hoes as raw material for their arrowheads, and tobacco, European cloth, and beads. (Reche 1914: 19; translation from the German original)

Jäger reports that:

> Whoever wants to buy honey from the Kindiga (Hadza) places an axe at a particular spot and at after a time finds a suitable amount of honey in its place. (Jäger 1913: 133, cited in Reche 1914: 19; translation from the German original)

I am not able to confirm or deny the past existence of Hadza silent trade from my researches among the Hadza, which started in 1957 and have continued up to the present.

The Wanahoza of Tanzania

The Wanahoza are nomadic fishermen and potters of the Malagarasi swamps. Macquarie, writing in 1940, describes the way in which they trade their pots:

> They have . . . evolved a system of marketing which I thought unique: they are too shy to peddle their wares or even to barter should they by chance meet a customer and as the tribe has no fixed home customers cannot visit them. They have, therefore, established, doubtless over a long period of years, a regular kind of annual trade route. All the people living near the shores of these waters, and even many distant ones, are familiar with the routine. As the time draws near housewives take stock and decide what replacements are required for the next twelve months. The food exchange value of each requirement is then prepared and packed ready in separate units. A large company of Wakiko (Wanahoza) women and girls set off laden with pots of all descriptions, in time to arrive near the selected village during the dark hours. They arrange their wares on the ground near the spot where paths converge on that leading to the

> huts. When all are ready they wail in concert for a few minutes and then disappear into the bush. This signal is recognized and immediately all intending purchasers snatch up what they have to offer in exchange and hurry to the showroom. As each pot is selected, its value in food-stuffs is placed exactly on the spot from which the pot had been removed. I had heard of the market before I met the Wanahoza but they corroborated it, adding that they had never been swindled. (Macquarie 1940: 66)

Procter, writing in 1960, and using information given him by a traditional chief of the neighboring farmers, describes a form of trading in which there is contact and communication but in which avoidance and separation are much stressed:

> They are skillful potters and barter their wares with the Baha. If you want to barter you come to the edge of their camp and leave your goods, returning later for the pots. If you ask them for a drink they will bring you water in the shell of a certain fruit, which they will break when you have finished. Even today they keep themselves strictly segregated from the Baha, with whom they will not willingly eat or drink beer. There is no mixing of blood in either direction. Nowadays they do a little cultivating—but only a very little, and haphazardly. (Procter 1960: 50)[4]

Now, you may well ask, what on earth is James Woodburn doing in citing this set of cases? Are we back in the nineteenth century, where anthropologists picked out tantalizing tit-bits of information from travelers' tales and other implausible sources, presented them out of their social and cultural context, and sought to build general theories with them? And even if the accounts were reliable, isn't the bringing together of material from such a widely scattered set of societies totally discredited as a method? Wouldn't it be far better to start by taking a single well-documented case and examining it in detail?

Sadly this latter procedure is not open to us. Melville Herskovits in his textbook *Economic anthropology,* in which there is a short discussion of silent trade, wrote:

> What is needed to give us an understanding of the nature, if not the origin, of the phenomenon is a full description of some instance of the silent trade, including a detailed statement of what is traded, and when, and under what conditions, and how often, together with an analysis of the manner in which this particular form of trade fits into the entire pattern of tribal exchange. (Herskovits 1965: 187)

Herskovits was, of course, right. Far more could be done if one were able to start with data of the sort he prescribes. But his prescription is an unrealistic one. As far as I am aware, no descriptions are available of silent trade between hunter-gatherers and their agricultural neighbors which give much more detail than the ones I have provided. And it seems unlikely that they ever will be available, for silent trade in the form in which I have described it here seems to be extinct. We cannot even follow Evans-Pritchard's (1981) advice that comparative studies should be carried out within a small area of culturally related societies, because there simply isn't enough data in any such area.

4. I am currently investigating the possibility of field research among the Wanahoza.

I think that, in spite of the manifest weakness of some of the reports, plausible inferences *can* be made by examining this wide range of data which could not reasonably be made if each of these fragments of information were simply to be considered on its own in relation only to the other available data on each specific pair of societies that is supposed to have practiced silent trade one with another. It is near certain that some of the accounts given are bogus—are invented or exaggerated out of all recognition or are a product of misunderstanding information obtained through an interpreter. We should be very suspicious. I think the starting point should be to look for bias, to look for factors that might have led writers, or writer's informants, to conjure up evidence of silent trade out of little or nothing.

Let me then return to the hypotheses mentioned earlier in this article.

Could silent trade be an early academic's myth deriving from the view that "civilization" must have evolved stage by stage from some type of society representing an antithesis to "civilization"?

When, at an earlier stage, I was thinking about this topic, I conjured up in my mind the idea that "silent trade" might be just such a construct. One of the characteristics widely believed in the nineteenth century to be central and essential to "civilized" societies was the growth and elaboration of trade. If it was so important in "civilized" societies, then in societies which were considered to be the least "civilized," trade would have to be absent (or near absent) or, at any rate, radically different and bizarre. When I started my investigation of this subject, I expected to find widespread evidence of such pigeonholing in nineteenth-century writing, but in the work that I have done so far, I have found far less evidence for this than I had expected. Much of the generalized discussion of trade in tribal societies, and of the place of silent trade in particular, is late—written this century and long after many of the instances listed here were published. I have much more reading to do, but at present I do not think that the notion of silent trade was artificially created in this way.

There is little sign in the cases that I have cited of manifest commitment by their various authors to an evolutionary schema that might have prejudiced their reports, that might, consciously or unconsciously, have led them to create or distort data into a form demanded by their preconceptions. An important exception here is Sir Harry Johnston's report on the Pygmies (see above). Accompanying his report of silent trade is the following observation:

> Perhaps trade began in the Congo basin, as in the development of human intercourse elsewhere, by the methods adopted at the present day on the part of the wilder Pygmies. . . . The Sudanese or Bantu negroes of the Congo basin had advanced far beyond these timid, suspicious tentatives of the exchange of commodities, before the white man, the Hamite, or the northern Moslems influenced their domain. (Johnston 1908: 789)

The idea seems to be that in the beginning was primal isolation. The Pygmies, with their "timid, suspicious tentatives of the exchange of commodities," are, for Johnston, apparently just emerging from this primal isolation and setting out on the road to what he calls "a more direct system of barter" (ibid.). Given this context and the fact that the name and location of the "wilder Pygmies" is not given, I do have doubts about the credibility of Johnston's report.

A similar objection might be made to Emil Torday's report (see above). He describes silent trade as "the most primitive form of barter known," and he too is unspecific about which Pygmies he is writing about.

One very important piece of evidence that makes it unlikely that descriptions of silent trade are a product of doctrinal evolutionary thinking by European writers is that this type of trade does not seem to be normally attributed to Australian Aborigines, who for so long were forced into the unenviable role of being categorized as at the bottom of the ladder of social evolution. One hope I have for my attendance at this conference is that other participants who know the historical sources on Australian Aboriginal trade will be able to give me more information about sources for good descriptions of exchanges in the past between Aboriginal groups and between Aborigines and Malays or other outsiders.

Could it, though, be another sort of Western myth? Silent trade is attributed to mysterious elf-like creatures who hide away from other people in the mysterious forest. Isn't this reminiscent of European folklore?

Silent trade is a recurring theme in European folklore in the dealings between people and fairies and other similar supernatural beings. In England when a small child's milk tooth comes out, it is left under the pillow at night and is supposed to be mysteriously silent traded for a coin by the fairies, although in fact exchanged by the parents. Hunter-gatherers in general, and forest-dwelling Pygmies in particular, perhaps were seen as having romantic, quasi-supernatural qualities that fitted them for the role of silent traders in travelers' tales by a kind of analogy with the linked literary folktale or fairy story genre. I do think that such ideas may have had *some* influence, may have made stories of silent trade more popular, may have led to some exaggeration and distortion of the strangeness, isolation, and wildness of the hunter-gatherers, but most of the accounts I have cited are not couched in an idiom which suggests that such ideas provide the main, or even a major, source for the material that is presented.

The second hypothesis that I suggested should be considered is that silent trade is a myth propagated by the neighbors of the hunter-gatherers expressing the social distance they perceive between themselves and the hunter-gatherers. Are the accounts a way of saying that the huntergatherers are alien, asocial, and animal-like?

In almost every one of the cases described, information will have been obtained by the writer not from the hunter-gatherers involved but from the more accessible neighbors. Interestingly as noted above, Ntole Kazadi (1981: 840) reports that the Bacwa hunter-gatherers specifically denied that they had ever traded in this way. Whether the Bacwa's denials were true or not, Kazadi's material strongly indicates that stories of silent trade were seen by the Bacwa as insulting and as serving to stigmatize them.

In a paper written for the last international conference on hunters and gatherers (Woodburn 1988), I described at some length the wide variety of ways in which African hunter-gatherers are treated as inferiors by their neighbors and how this treatment is backed by powerful stigmatizing ideologies. There is little doubt from the ethnographic literature that such actions and attitudes are as widespread in Asia as in Africa, and I would take it as almost certain that they apply in all or almost all the Asian as well as the African instances that I have cited.

How, then, could neighbors have distorted the accounts? The most obvious way is by overemphasizing the isolation of the hunter-gatherers and by stressing silent exchange when, in fact, there were many concurrent modes of exchanging with them. I am particularly suspicious of some of the Pygmy instances. Could it be that some of them fall into what I shall for convenience call the milkman syndrome? In England milkmen often come at night, or very early in the morning before people are awake, to leave bottles of milk on the doorstep, and money or a check may be left out for them in exchange at the end of the week. One may sometimes not see the milkman for weeks on end. But there is no question of milkmen and customers deliberately keeping apart and not communicating. It is just that many milkmen come, for reasons of convenience, at times when they are unable to communicate with their customers. It seems probable that in some of the instances when meat is left in exchange for vegetable food, the Pygmies are not systematically avoiding the farmers at all and are, in fact, interacting with them in other contexts. Perhaps to harvest plant crops for a low-status Pygmy is in any case seen as demeaning for the grower of the crops. All this suggests that some minor embroidery of descriptions of actual exchanges in which communication *happened not* to occur might all too easily convert them into descriptions of exchanges in which communication *ought not* to occur.

I certainly think that stories of silent trade are likely, for these reasons, to be often exaggerated and distorted. But, interestingly, the very reasons which could be said to foster such exaggeration and distortion could also be said to foster the actual practice of silent trading itself. The serious discrimination practiced against hunter-gatherers in both Africa and Asia would be likely in certain situations to lead them to wish to isolate themselves from their neighbors. So, while I think it very likely that some of the cases of silent trade in the literature, and probably including some that I have described, are bogus and a product of prejudice, I also think that it is very probable that some of them are accurate descriptions of real events.

As European history has repeatedly demonstrated, discrimination and prejudice are potentially lethal at times of war or political unrest. In the areas we are concerned with, enslavement was a particular hazard for politically weak stigmatized groups. Endicott has treated silent trade by the Semang with the Malays as a possible response by the Semang to the fear of being enslaved (Endicott 1983: 226). Presumably, similar risks may have applied to the Kubu of Sumatra at or shortly before the time at which their silent trade is described. For the Efe Pygmies, Waehle provides a rather similar explanation. In the area in which the Efe live, the latter part of the nineteenth century is remembered as a period of violence, raids, warfare, and uncertainties. Slave and ivory trading were penetrating into the area and there was conflict between villagers and the Efe. "Silent trade between the Efe and the Mangbetu was explained in Efe accounts as being based on fear of cannibalism and general suspicion" (Waehle 1986: 395). Both Obst's and Reche's accounts of Hadza silent trading link it with a time of conflict; also Knox's account of Vedda silent exchange shows that they, too, had cause to fear their neighbors at that time. The general run of the evidence suggests to me that silent trade is a specialized form of exchange involving avoidance practiced by vulnerable stigmatized groups at times when they had every reason to fear closer contacts.

If, then, silent trade is a real phenomenon in at least some of the cases I have given, if it is in these cases and at the time it occurs almost the only form of regular economic contact between the hunter-gatherer groups and their agricultural neighbors (a much more questionable matter), then what sort of transaction is it? And why do people transact in this way?

In trying to establish what sort of transaction it is, we ought first to consider whether in silent trade the emphasis is on the messages that are conveyed in exchanging or on the goods themselves. In one type of silent trading which I haven't mentioned yet, the messages are overwhelmingly important. In South America silent trading has been widely used to establish friendly contact with isolated, hostile forest Indian groups in order to pacify them (see, e.g., Cowell 1973). Adrian Cowell describes how the Villas Boas brothers, in their many expeditions to pacify Brazilian forest groups, used to hang up beads, machetes, and other objects in the forest which the Indians might be expected to want, in the hope, sometimes realized, that they would regard the goods as a sign of friendly intentions, would take them, and would reciprocate with goods of their own. The Villas Boas brothers also sought to protect their expedition camps by hanging up such objects immediately outside their camps as a possible means of deflecting attack.

Terry Turner confirms that this technique of establishing contact is very widely known in Brazil and that it is of unquestionable authenticity. He adds, very importantly, that it is not a technique that mutually hostile forest Indian groups, whether or not they share the same language and culture, use in the process of establishing friendly relations with each other (Turner, personal communication, 1987). One might imagine that peoples like the Yanomamo of Brazil and Venezuela, whose groups constantly move between mutual hostility and unstable mutual alliance, and who use exchanges of goods to establish and reinforce their alliances, might find a place for silent exchange in the process of alliance building. But apparently they do not (see, e.g., Chagnon 1968), and our attempts to explain the phenomenon ought to take account of the fact that they do not.

Similar methods are, I understand, today being used by the Indian government in their attempts to establish friendly relations with and to pacify the two groups of Andamanese Islanders who, at least until recently, remained very hostile to outsiders—the Jarawa and the North Sentinelese (Singh 1975a, 1975b; Whitaker and Whitaker 1986; Cooper, personal communication, 1988).[5] Indeed, I would imagine that many times in history similar techniques have been used in many parts of the world. The essential difference between such techniques and the examples of silent trading that I have given lies in the fact that once the objects given by one side are accepted and reciprocated by the other side, pacification is likely to occur and the exchanges are likely to cease. This seems to me to be quite different from

5. Unless very elaborate precautions are taken, which to be effective would have to be monitored by an international committee of the very few people who have the knowledge to give effective advice, these initiatives are likely to result in the short term in the death of many of the Jarawa and North Sentinelese. In my opinion, this avoidable in the light of modern knowledge and I would hope that all here at this Conference would join in trying to persuade the Indian authorities to accept the real assistance that I believe some of us could make available.

institutionalized silent exchange, where regular patterned exchanges occur over a period between two parties. Although we cannot be certain, it seems likely that at least several of the instances I have cited earlier in this article are of institutionalized silent exchange.

In an institutionalized long-standing series of transactions between silent exchange partners, what scope is there for an emphasis on messages? The very existence of silent trade certainly conveys the message that there is some trust, but only a very small amount indeed, between the two parties. If there were no trust at all, if the parties regarded each other as totally untrustworthy, then presumably even silent exchange wouldn't occur unless the value of what could be transacted were so great that the risks of trading with totally untrustworthy people were seen as worth taking. If both parties trusted each other, then presumably they would use a more direct and less cumbersome means of exchanging with each other unless there were some other important reason for keeping apart.

Apart from this very simple message that we trust you a little but not much, silent trade does not seem to offer great scope for the two parties to develop elaborated mutually consistent meanings for the transactions that would allow effective social and cultural messages to be transmitted through them. Unless the two parties share the same cultural background, or communicate verbally or in writing or by gestures outside the context of the silent exchange (which, of course, by definition excludes such communication within it), then genuine shared understanding by the two parties of complex meanings and messages encoded in the transactions seems unlikely.

Without the words, gestures, and other formalities of personal interaction, the significance of what is given has to be contained in the quantities and qualities of the things given, in the ways in which they are arranged or decorated, in the place at which they are given, or in the timings of the transactions. If these transactions are the only way in which the partners interact, they are likely to have nothing apart from the content and context of the transactions themselves to guide their interpretations. The likelihood of a quite different understanding of what is going on is very great. A gift of meat by African hunter-gatherer donors may be a gesture of egalitarian friendly intent, an attempt to show willingness to share, using the substance which is the essential representation of both domestic and extra-domestic mutual bonds. To the agriculturalist recipient, on the other hand, the meat could be perceived as a payment of tribute, a recognition of the farmer's claim to superior status, analogous to the recognized right of a farmer chief to certain portions of game animals killed by his subjects. Or again, giving in silent trade as an act of charity or as some other form of gift may well not be perceived in this way by the recipient.

Because the likelihood of different understandings and misunderstandings is bound to be so great and so obvious to the participants in silent trade, the chances seem high that the interpretation of the transaction by both parties will tend over time toward seeing it as a simple, unelaborated form of commodity exchange. As the transactions are, in any case, depersonalized by the fact that the parties don't come into contact and the objects transferred are alienated from the donor, any treatment of the objects as gifts, or shares, or anything more than mere commodities is redundant because this extra component could hardly be put to work socially

unless there were other contacts between donor and recipient. The types of thing exchanged in the instances I have cited certainly suggest a down-to-earth concern with objects which have practical uses.

Even as commodity trading, it could not have been easy to maintain silent trade as an institutionalized practice over a long period. Since there can be no easy method for the silent trader of showing what he wants in exchange for his goods, since usually all he has available to choose from is what happens to be offered by his opposite number, the chance of mutual satisfaction cannot be very high.[6] What is exchanged would inevitably have to be very limited in type, in quantity, and in quality. And, of course, in the absence of other contacts, it would tend to be dangerous particularly at the start. The goods offered by the donor might be destroyed or stolen by the intended recipients or by others coming upon them; food received might be poisoned or clothing received might be contaminated with disease. The exchange site might be ambushed.

So why should people go to all the trouble of combining keeping apart and exchanging goods? Wouldn't it be much easier to find some means of establishing closer contacts or simply not to have any contacts at all? Can we discern whether the trade is mainly in the interests of the farmers or of the hunter-gatherers? And can we tell which party is more actively concerned with maintaining the separation?

The second question is easily answered, indeed has, in effect, already been answered. Not one of the accounts suggests that the initiative for the separation comes from the farmers. Separation is maintained as a political act by politically vulnerable groups whose legal rights over their own persons and their own property is at risk. This type of situation could readily become one in which the stigmatized group is contaminating to the politically dominant one which might then itself seek to perpetuate the separation but I have no evidence to suggest that this applies in any of the cases cited.

In whose interests are the exchanges which occur in silent trading? Interestingly, in all the Pygmy cases, the initiative comes from the Pygmy side. Indeed the exchanges are not, in general, voluntarily entered into by the neighboring villagers. They are imposed on the villagers by the Pygmies. If the recent work by Terese and John Hart (1986) is correct, and the Pygmies cannot easily survive in their habitat without regular access to cultivated vegetable food, this would provide some explanation for the fact that the Pygmies force the exchange and vegetable food is in every case mentioned as the intended yield.

Actually, judging from the following quotations from Colin Turnbull's work, what is described by others as silent trading is not much of a step from the way in which they normally obtain much of their cultivated food:

> From the Pygmy point of view, the village is merely another source of food—acquired by another form of hunting as often as not. For if the villagers do not give of their free will, then the Pygmies are not above raiding the plantations and stealing what they want. (Turnbull 1965b: 287)

6. The Vedda means of obtaining arrows made to their own design through silent trade is a nice, but unusual, exception (see above).

> There is no system of equivalents, only the obligation to reciprocate. Indeed it is doubtful if we can really even talk of it as theft when the Mbuti raid a plantation and carry off what they want, back to the forest, without leaving anything for the villagers, whom they may or may not even know. The villagers recognize their need of the Mbuti if they are to be spared the necessity of going into the forest themselves. They also recognize that the territory, even that on which the village and plantation are built, was formerly, and in a sense still is, all Mbuti territory, and that they therefore have special privileges. When a raid takes place, the established villagers assume that a reciprocal presentation of forest foods, other forest products, or of service will be made at a future date. (Turnbull 1965a: 177)

The one real difference is that in silent trading reciprocation is given immediately. Debts and other commitments are avoided in politically dangerous situations. Autonomy is stressed.

In a number of the other instances—the Kubu, the Negritos, the Semang, and the Poliars—the initiative is said to come not from the hunter-gatherers but from the other party. It seems on the whole likely that the initiators of the exchange are obtaining more from the exchange than the party which is being induced to take part in it. At the same time, the exchange will not persist—except when it is forced, as in some of the Pygmy instances—unless both parties derive real benefit from it. The fact that it is particularly in the Asian cases that the initiative usually comes from the outsider traders and in the African cases the opposite is usually true may be linked with the much wider range of commercially viable forest products in the Asian forests.

If silent trade was indeed a real phenomenon, its implications for the current debate about the degree of isolation of African and Asian hunter-gatherers in the recent past is considerable. If silent trade occurred often, continued for long periods, and was an effective means of obtaining such important goods as iron for knives and for arrowheads, then some African or Asian hunter-gatherers may have been able to live autonomous lives in relative isolation from external influences for far longer than nowadays people seem willing to allow.

For hunter-gatherers the political choices in recent African and Asian history have been very limited. Almost everywhere that they have lost space to retreat to, and lost the capacity to provide most of their own requirements for food and other necessities without entering into dependent relationships with neighboring farmers, their relative status has declined and discrimination against them has increased (Woodburn 1988). In Burundi, for example, where the forests have mostly been destroyed and the possibility for the Batwa to live by hunting and gathering is in most places nonexistent, discrimination appears to be exceptionally severe (Carolis 1977). Even in those countries where large areas of forest or bush remain, the modern exploitation of these resources sadly seems to have destroyed the possibilities for relative political isolation and autonomy and for the practice of silent trade.

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Un commerce silencieux avec des étrangers: La perspective des chasseurs-cueilleurs

Résumé : Cet article, un essai non publié présenté à la cinquième conférence internationale sur les Sociétés vivant de la Chasse et de la Cueillette, à Darwin en Australie en 1988, s'intéresse au mystère du "commerce silencieux"—l'échange direct de biens entre groupes n›ayant aucune interaction ou communication directe. Etant donné que les instances de ce phénomène entre chasseurs-cueilleurs nomades et peuples pastoraux, qui confirme le caractère établi d'une différence de statut entre participants, ne peut être expliqué comme un emprunt littéraire à Hérodote et autres auteurs, cet article a recours à des matériaux comparés issue de sources historiques et ethnographiques pour tester trois hypothèses: (1) le commerce silencieux est un mythe académique qui dérive de l'idée, particulièrement caractéristique du 19e siècle, que la civilisation a évolué étape par étape à partir d'un certain modèle de société représentant l'antithèse de la "civilisation"; (2) le commerce silencieux est un mythe propagé par des voisins exprimant la distance sociale qu'ils perçoivent entre eux et les chasseurs cueilleurs; (3) le commerce silencieux est un phénomène réel qui doit être compris en rapport avec la nature spéciale des liens politiques et autres associés à l'enclavement des chasseurs-cueilleurs par leurs voisins.

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