

Striving for Unity: A Conversation with Roy Rappaport

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“I’ve tried for unification with everything from weighing sweet potatoes to God Almighty... that’s what I’m interested in.”

Introduction

During my second and third years in graduate school at University of Michigan, I transcribed 21 taped conversations between Roy Rappaport, who his friends call “Skip,” and Tom Fricke that took place from May 1996 to February 1997. The content of these conversations, as well illustrated in material excerpted here, is of value not only to established scholars but also, most appreciably perhaps, to those in training. In my own case, planning for fieldwork and beginning preparations for my preliminary exams, the unique insight I gained through detailed recollections and comments of this major figure was immensely influential to my emerging understanding of the development of an intellectual life and professional career in anthropology. Based on his 1960s fieldwork

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with the Tsembaga Maring of the north Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea and his principle ethnography to which nearly all later work returned, *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* (1968, Yale University Press) offers scant insight to the ethnographer himself as participant–observer. The conversations between Tom and Skip help shed light on the experience of Skip as ethnographer in the field in ways that are always immensely instructive and frequently entertaining. Students of anthropology are especially fortunate to have this rich documentation of personal field experience.

I first got to know Skip through his signature course, “Anthropology of Religion: Ritual, Sanctity and Adaptation” (Anthropology 448), during my first year. Taught since 1970, this course was a place where a student not only witnessed but could also actively participate in the evolutionary process of his ideas on religion and its place in human life. I remember being impressed not only with the greatness of his intellect and the quality of his arguments, but also by his unwavering dedication to students. This showed in his teaching, which he saw as an essential part of scholarly life, and his genuine interest in our ideas and individual well-being.

As an incoming faculty member in 1985, the Department paired the junior Tom with a more senior Skip to teach one of the graduate level “Traditions in Ethnology” core courses. They taught Anthropology 527 together twice, including once as Skip’s last course at the University in Winter Term 1996 before taking his planned retirement. It was toward the end of that semester that Skip was diagnosed with the cancer that took his life less than two years later. In addition to the core course, Tom and Skip also taught Ecological Anthropology (Anthropology 541) together on two occasions. Tom recalls how Skip retained the old-fashioned sense that it was necessary to give full-fledged lectures, writing them out longhand on a yellow legal pad and reading them to students, but with frequent anecdotes and asides throughout.

As in Skip's career as an anthropologist, and reflected in the frequency that they appear in the transcripts, discussion in the taped conversations with Skip and Tom circled principle themes and ideas of his career while drawing on the rich experience of his varied life to provide powerfully illustrative examples to make arguments. As one might expect, coming at what was then increasingly apparent would be the end of his life, the conversation was oftentimes one in which Skip self-consciously pondered the impact of his work and the nature of his legacy. As such, there are intensely personal and at times painful reflections on what he both did and did not do in this life. Having access to such an account of a life's work is a rare privilege for which I am honored.

During late spring of 1996, Tom started stopping by Skip's comfortable home in the wooded hills west of Ann Arbor to talk. At some point, these visits evolved into going through Skip's collection of papers and writings with an eye to a possible edited volume. The two of them went up to his study with the intent to go through old papers for possible pieces to be included in the volume. Both Tom and I remember his office as a beautiful and book-lined space with a window overlooking a wide field that rolled away into woods. As Tom had been taping interviews for research during that same period, he happened to have a tape-recorder and blank cassette in his pack. Spotting the recorder, Tom pulled it out and turned it on as they went through Skip's many files. That first tape is remarkable for the sheer spontaneity of it. It is the two of them tearing through Skip's office, going through files, throwing papers around, making small remarks as Skip recalled the time, place and circumstances under which he wrote something. Tom's visits continued fairly regularly. Many of their conversations were taped; some were not.

The material reproduced here is drawn primarily from a single conversation that took place in early December 1996. This forms a core in two recognizable parts. Like bookends to a professional life as an anthropologist, the first half of the conversation deals with Skip's

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formative fieldwork with the Maring while the second discusses ideas that evolved over time, beginning with this fieldwork experience, and with which he was engaged at the time of his death as he worked through debilitating illness to finish his final book. It was clear to me from doing these transcriptions that thoughts begun in one conversation were often finished in another. While maintaining the integrity of that particular conversation, I selected additional verbatim transcript material from several other thematically connected conversations to further enrich and complete points. Tom took these selections and put them together in a final edit, removing redundancies and artifacts of speaking such as pauses and stutters and inserting clarifications and citations based on his memory of the conversations themselves.

I learned many details about Skip's life listening to these tapes, from being born Roy Abraham "Skip" Rappaport in New York City in 1926 to enlisting in the Army and serving as an infantryman in Europe during World War II where he earned the Purple Heart after nearly dying on the battlefield. I found that he returned to civilian life to earn a degree in Hotel Administration from Cornell University. Had I not already heard this from Skip, I would have surely been surprised, as so many others, to learn that anthropology was not his only career. For years, he operated a very successful country inn named Avaloch in the Berkshire region of Massachusetts near Tanglewood until selling the business in 1959. No doubt, it was in this enterprise that Skip cultivated his tremendous generosity, hospitality, and love of good food, drink and entertaining friends. Returning to New York City to define his second career, he began his graduate studies in anthropology, working with such luminaries as Marvin Harris and Margaret Mead at Columbia University where he earned his Ph.D. in 1966. He conducted his first empirical research in Polynesia in 1960. This archaeological work did not satisfy him, however, and his interests become more broadly human-ecological.

At the 1964 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Detroit, Skip presented a key paper that introduced themes that would define much of his career. The presentation titled “Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations among a New Guinea People” was later published by the journal *Ethnology* in 1967. He would eventually publish four books and over 60 articles, reviews and book chapters. The book *Pigs for the Ancestors* established Skip’s reputation and helped define the field of ecological anthropology. First published in 1968 and revised for a second edition released in 1984 with extensive comments by Skip in response to criticism, *Pigs* is a rigorous collection of empirical data and landmark ethnography employing systems theory to demonstrate the role of ritual practice in the management of resources.

During the final year of his life, like Tom, I had the opportunity to spend time talking with Skip in his office at home and was afforded a look at what would be his final book while I helped to verify and sort out references for the manuscript he then called “Holiness and Humanity.” This book, published posthumously in 1999 as *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, represents a summary of the evolution of Skip’s thinking on themes that were his intellectual preoccupation for some 30 years. It is thus on a scale and with a goal of synthesis, in the tradition of grand theory, entirely unfashionable among anthropologists today who tend to severely limit the scope of their commentary to discrete bits of human experience rather than tackle something like the human condition, which was Skip’s predilection. *Ritual and Religion* demonstrates how religion and ritual practice link the individual and everyday to the collective and metaphysical. It is his bold attempt to forge a union between religion and a post-modern science. As evidenced in the transcripts of these conversations, that unity was something he strived for in his life’s work.

As with my own experience with Skip in the classroom as a student, Tom was able to see Skip work as a teacher and mentor and to appreciate his

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emphasis on thinking about “the big things” while teaching with him on several occasions. Skip was fond of using a notion borrowed from Isaiah Berlin’s *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953). Berlin employed a metaphor meant to call attention to tension between monist and pluralist visions of the world and to use this to characterize different authors and philosophers. The “hedgehog” was a thinker with one big, systemizing idea, a principle that would direct his or her life. Contrastingly, the “fox” was a thinker, in it for the details, traveling many roads, going from thing to thing for their particularity. Tom recalls how Skip liked hedgehogs and was often more than a little disdainful of foxes. For Skip, anthropology was to be defined by no less than the study of the human condition and that everything followed from developing the fundamentals—the biological, cultural, epistemological, and historical–archaeological—of what it was to be human. Skip especially liked Gregory Bateson’s article “The Pattern which Connects” (1978) as a set-piece for giving students an understanding of what they were to be doing: looking for patterns across domains.

Skip believed that it was human responsibility not merely to think “of the world” but also to think “on behalf of the world.” In addition to serving in numerous leadership roles during his career, including president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Anthropological Association, he also served as a distinguished consultant on a number of important social and environmental projects. These projects dealt with such matters as population increase, globalization, threats to cultural autonomy and the loss of traditional systems of meaning. His desire to shape critical public policy is consistent with Skip’s ardent support for what he termed an “engaged anthropology.” He felt that anthropology was uniquely qualified and positioned as a discipline to address “disorders,” or “inversions,” that threaten to destroy the world. Together, these disorders constitute the concern of Skip’s “anthropology of trouble.” Their basic ground is a violation of contingency relationships

such that something contingent like economics (which he sometimes called a “pseudo religion”) usurps the position of biological and ecological principles that subordinate them (see Rappaport 1994).

Skip spoke of how his broad anthropological understanding of systemic disorder gave him “a principled ground” for taking certain political positions. He thus felt strongly that it was his anthropology that grounded his politics and not the other way. Skip insisted on the moral motivation of his thinking about ecosystems as an engaged anthropologist. He said that “[h]umanity is a species living in terms of meaning in a world subject to law.” As such, he insisted that anthropology must deal with meaning and law in order to be worthy of its subject. Skip felt that any anthropology that dropped either meaning or law from its consideration is a false anthropology, a destructive anthropology. Such anthropology would dissolve the central problem of humanity which was to reconcile meaning and law (human interpretation and the way the world actually works).

Skip joined the University of Michigan Department of Anthropology in 1965 and eventually served as its Chair for two terms. He was Leslie A. White Professor of Anthropology as well as Walgreen Professor for the Study of Human Understanding and Director of the Program on Studies in Religion. He died at home with his family on October 9, 1997 from lung cancer.

The conversation

TF: I wanted to ask you about the growth of your interest in religion. We spoke about some of that coming from your experience with the Maring and I’d like you to elaborate on that.

RR: I became interested in religion amongst the Maring. I mean, there I was initially interested in ecological relations, forced to pay attention to

their rituals because their rituals had to do with their ecological and political relations. I really discovered my interest in the rituals themselves when I came back. That whole interest wasn't so manifest while I was still in the field. I came back, started to think about what I had been doing, was starting to write about it, and at that point, I found myself getting more and more deeply interested. I was thanking God that I had paid as much attention to them as I had because in the field I was saying "Oh, shit. They're having another ritual." So, I was thanking God I had paid as much attention as I had and also ruing the fact that I hadn't paid more attention! I just found myself more interested, after I finished off *Pigs for the Ancestors*, in the ritual aspects themselves than in their functions.

Interest is not the word: there was some sort of deep connection which I quickly decided, rightly or wrongly, was a function of my own spiritual deprivation from a religious training that had deprived me of meaningful religious or spiritual experience. And so this concern grew in me. Many, many years after the fact, I realized when it was that I had what I've decided was my first anthropological insight. It was a discussion that I was having at the age of about fourteen with my cousin Bob [anthropologist Robert Levy] and my mother's younger brother. I remember where we were. I think it was a Friday evening. It came to me that the problem with reformed Judaism is that in the process of reforming Judaism they had not understood the importance of ritual. So it was more important for these people who were around—my folks, my uncles, my aunts, whoever was there—to have a good time on Friday night than it was to go to Sabbath services. That doesn't work. The religion had shortchanged, and simply not understood, ritual. And that was my first anthropological insight, one that I recalled when I was wondering why I was so taken by the religious aspects of the Maring and then, more generally, questions about religion.

I think what further pushed me along was that some years later, I decided to teach a course in the anthropology of religion here at Michigan

in 1970. I had to teach it myself and I found that to be difficult, working a new course in a field in which I had more feeling for than knowledge of.

TF: I am especially interested in the relationship between the anthropologist and his or her fieldwork. We're probably rare in the social sciences in having this kind of transformative experience made possible through our key method.

RR: Well, our key method is so much more personal than anybody else's.

TF: Why don't we ease up to that transition to interests in ritual for its own sake. This connects us to an earlier conversation where we talked about the first few months of your fieldwork when you were single-mindedly trying to get nutritional data in gardens, input-output kinds of things.

RR: Well, for a good deal of that first trip of fairly hysterical fieldwork—in the sense of “My God, what am I doing here?” “Am I getting anything?” and “What does all of this mean?”—you just see sort of vast confusion. I mean, what sort of enterprise is this where you're going out and you're trying to figure out what's going on amongst two-hundred-and-some-odd people. Even when they're coordinating their activities around a periodic ritual, what would it be like at any other time? It would be a total buzzing confusion.

So, I had certain predilections about what I wanted to do. That is, I wanted to get all of this input-output stuff and I tried to do it in several different kinds of ways. One way sort of worked: I got my house built in a location that was maybe twenty-five, thirty feet from somebody's house on one side and three women's houses right above me maybe thirty-five, forty feet away on the other. So there I was right in the middle of the Tomegai. In effect, it was structurally like a sub-clan of the Tsembaga clan. They claimed separate ancestry and all of that. I made arrangements with the women from the surrounding houses so that when they came

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back at night they would yell out to me. They'd yell out to me to come and bring the scales. I'd come down with the scales and they would have dropped everything and it was sort of a little like happy hour. I mean, I'd come there and I would weigh the stuff by variety—not simply species by species, not simply sweet potatoes. So, I would weigh it all and we'd be chatting while I did this, you know? I would have a nice social time and I'd pick up some other gossip while this was happening and that worked for getting garden analysis.

I did this for ten and a half months. At any rate, I had almost a year of this thing and I had gardens from several years because each one had gardens that were this year's, last year's, and in some instances even the year before that. What they'd get out of the very old gardens were bananas and some sugar cane. It really worked out very well. From those measurements, I got garden yield data and I had all of those gardens measured so I knew how big those gardens were and how much was coming out of them. I knew how frequently they were being harvested and I knew how much food was coming into each household. I could see how frequently they'd go to each garden. Each woman had several gardens going—frequently with different partners—she'd be doing most of them with her husband but there was also maybe her single brother and her widowed father and, you know all kinds of stuff like this. So, the gardening pairs, always a man and a woman, were overlapping. You could keep track of that because you knew, for each garden, who the man was and who the woman was on that garden. And then you knew how much food was coming into the household. So you had that as well as the gardening yields. The problem then was how to get that to individual intake, okay? Particularly when nobody is doing portions. They're sitting around and everybody is...(gestures)

TF: Reaching in, yeah.

RR: Yeah. So there's no way. I finally used some formulas that I recognized were kinda cockamamie. I mean, I was using them quite

arbitrarily because I didn't have anything else to go on. World Health Organization formulas for how much an adult male eats, how much an adult female eats, and how much an adolescent boy, and an adolescent girl, and so on. And I used the ratios in those and I said, "Okay, this is what came home. So we'll divide it up amongst people this way." Now, it turned out that Georgina Buchbinder in Tuguma some years later did nutritional work. She had a Masters in Nutrition as well as a Ph.D. in Anthropology. She certainly did a better job than I did. She was sufficiently assertive that she got some things where she was sort of sticking a scale in between their hands and their mouths for a few days. And it came out that I wasn't that far off. It came out within a few percent. In fact, I don't trust Georgina's figures any more than mine but they at least corroborated them.

Now, I mention this because I had this single-minded notion about doing this kind of stuff. I knew the objection would be that I was doing this all with people from one clan. I did get the most asinine objections from some nutritionists, particularly Margaret MacArthur. I started out by making arrangements on the basis of randomness with a number of women who had plots in various places. My other method was going to be to mark out thousand-square-foot plots in various gardens and I did that with my understanding—and I paid the women and so on—that they were not going to harvest from those thousand-acre plots unless I was there with them.

But (a) they didn't understand and (b) that's not the way people harvest, you know. They don't do it that way (laughing), you know? The whole thing was nuts. There was no way that I could know whether they harvested or not. And I would then be at their mercy if they said "I'm going to go down and harvest such and such a plot" and I had something else to do. So, I just abandoned that. I gave that up. But the notion then of having a random sample—my response to that was: look, this is better than any nutritionist ever got. These are the best data on stuff brought

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into the household than any nutritionist ever got. And my results, even my individual consumption results, make much more sense than those of any nutritionist who has worked in New Guinea—some of whom had people with diets of under a thousand calories a day! All they'd be doing would be to stretch out sort of trying to keep alive at nine hundred calories a day for an adult male. Those figures appeared in the literature without anybody yelling about them. That's all in the second edition of *Pigs*. I had an appendix on those critiques. Okay, so that was what I was doing at first, single-mindedly. I mean, that was what I was there to do—to treat them like a population of animals.

TF: Well, you're more or less an ecologist here. At best behavioral, material information.

RR: That's right. I wanted to follow energy flows. The original way that I wanted to do ethnography was in terms of energy flows. As a matter of fact, there's a lot of it I never published and I should. I mean, one of the things that I should do is publish all of my garden information. I should to it in the *New Guinea Journal of Agriculture* or something like that because the original dissertation didn't get to the arguments that are in *Pigs for the Ancestors* until six, seven hundred pages into the thing.

I still have this long description of Maring horticulture as it was practiced in the early 1960s, at the time of contact. If I have time, I will put that into decent enough shape to send off to the Papua New Guinea Department of Agriculture to do what they want to do with it. Its theoretical value is zilch. What it is useful for is an account of how a particular people did swidden agriculture at a particular time. And somebody's going to be interested in that. One hundred years from now or five hundred years from now. We have some accounts, but each account is somewhat different. It could be worth doing. So I think—if I live—anyhow, I'd like to get that done. That would be part of paying my debt off to the Maring.

I have a feeling of duty to the Maring. So that if I possibly could I would go back for a month, you know? I've got lots and lots of notes and things from the last time but also a feeling of incompleteness. I want to bring it to closure. I also want to go through and line up a bunch of questions that I can get answers to quickly. So, you know, that's a kind of a duty. It's not one that I think that's deeply important theoretically or whatever, but I have the feeling that I owe it to them. Not that they much care, I think (laughs), but I think I owe it to them.

So in the dissertation, at any rate, I started out with the first chapter as a description of the environment. Then a chapter on production in the ecological sense, of what was being produced, what was coming up on the land. Then there was one on extraction which was all of the cultivation and harvesting.

TF: This is a Stewardian paradigm, beginning with the environment and moving through production to culture.

RR: Yeah, something like that. Production, extraction, distribution, consumption. Then after having done all of this background stuff, I was getting into what was finally in *Pigs*, the whole business of regulation and so on. I will never forget walking into Mort Fried's office, he was on my committee, and I had chapters about one through six, which were all these things each in a separate binding. I walked in, I left them on his desk, we chatted, and he congratulated me on getting on with it and so on. Then as I was leaving, he said, "Oh, you left some of the copies here." And I said, "No, Mort those are all for you," and he blanched (laughs). I left them off for Marvin Harris and so on. Harris told me "I'm not going to read it." Everybody said they weren't going to read it, to go home and bring them back a three-hundred-page dissertation.

I was under the impression in those days, when I was writing the dissertation, that a dissertation was a place to enshrine data (laughs). I was going to generate the whole thing right out of the dirt, you know? It was going to be taro on up. Who was going to read it through? I mean it's

boring to read how far apart they plant yams. That's not fascinating reading, except to a few aficionados. Hal Conklin would have liked that. But he would have been the only one.

Well, I brought them back a five-hundred-page dissertation three months later. I took all of that stuff from all of those chapters and reduced it to about twenty pages, mostly tables and appendices. That was wonderful. I didn't waste any time because I had to go through all of that tabulating. It was very comfortable. It's very easy to go out and do garden stuff and weigh this stuff. I mean, that's real dumb work and if you don't want to talk to people or you're scared to talk to people or can't figure out what the fuck is going on, at least you go out and measure a garden, you know? I always found that a rather relaxing thing to be doing. So that fit in nicely as a foil to everything else. But then I discovered that what I was doing, out of ethnographic duty, was keeping track of what people were doing and as near as I could figure it out, how they were trading. I was spending a lot of time on who was trading what with whom and for what and watching what they were doing with the ritual cycle. You keep your daily diary and are getting more and more confused by that. But suddenly I had some notions, vague and unclear, about the relationship of the ritual cycle to the gardening and all of that stuff.

TF: Was there any kind of "Aha!" reaction? Was there sort of a click or was it a dawning kind of awareness?

RR: Well, a couple of things that happened were important. I would have to reconstruct quite how it was, but one day I was having a conversation with an informant in front of me, a good friend whose picture is on the cover of *Pigs*. He's standing there with his foot on a pig. The pig was white—it was a pig with a lot of European blood, the biggest pig in the place. It weighed about three hundred pounds. This was one of the early "ahas" that got me onto to what the ritual cycle was about. I said, "Why is it that you guys are running a *kaiko* when the *Kaumasi* come over here? They are sort of contemptuous of you because you're having

a kaiko where people have three pigs, four pigs, and those guys over there have six, seven pigs.” And he says because they don’t have taro. Then he said, in effect, “pigs are something that eats taro” and as a matter of fact, when they sacrificed the pigs they would say to the ancestor—for whoever they were doing it—they would say, “Take this pig. I’m giving you this good taro.” This is what they would say. It’s like “...give us this day our daily bread.” Taro is the preferred food. Pigs go with sweet potatoes and the land is degraded with sweet potatoes. You get pigs, but what you really want—what is proper food—is taro. So at any rate that was something. I was confused about the *rumbim*. I had it backwards. Then one day in casual conversation about six months after being there, it became clear to me that you could not fight when the rumbim was in the ground. When you took out the rumbim, you could fight. While the rumbim was in the ground you couldn’t fight. I had it backwards. It was noticing when they were pulling up the rumbim and so on that the whole thing began to make sense.

TF: How many actual pullings up of the rumbim did you witness?

RR: I witnessed, in a manner of speaking, two. I witnessed one in Tsembaga and another elsewhere just before I left. That was next door, okay? Now, the one in Tsembaga took place three days after I got there and when I say I witnessed it, I kind of witnessed it. It was being uprooted in an enclosure. I did not push myself into that enclosure. I was not going to be that aggressively nosy at that point, when it was quite clear to me that a lot of people wished that I’d drop dead or go someplace else. So I figured, okay, I’ll try to find out about this later. But I saw them storming out of the enclosure carrying the rumbim. As a matter of fact, in the first printing of *Pigs*, on the front cover there are people beating drums and so on and that was at this event. I could see then what they did with the rumbim but I did not see them pull it out of the ground. I did not see this happen at either time. So I was I witness but at some distance. I was there at the event and with the Tsembaga one there were

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three rumbim pulled up—there were three sub-territories. When it was done they would pull up the rumbim and carry it to the corner of their territory and say some incantations and so on—sorcery and the enemy—and then they plant these things at the borders along the stakes and so on. So, at any rate, that's what happened and that's what I saw. I did not see them actually pull them out of the ground. You know, some anthropologists are pushier than others and I was as pushy as I could be. I mean, I have my limits.

TF: On day three.

RR: Yeah (laughing). You've walked into the thing and this is what's happening right off the bat. It was wild.

TF: So you dutifully wrote down what you saw and said, "Oh great a ritual is going on and I have no idea what it is." You'd asked questions but at some point you made a connection between...

RR: It was months and months before I made the connection. It was six months before I got a connection with the environmental stuff. I had a notion about the rumbim and warfare. I mean, that was patent. It was right off the bat that this has to do with war and fighting, and this that and the other thing. But I didn't see that it had anything much to do with the ecology and that's what I was interested in. So it was months and months later when I finally got glimmerings of the relationship to environmental stuff and the environmental stuff to the relationship with inter-group relations and hostilities. It was much later that I got clued in on the cosmology—that what warfare does is it tears the world apart and what you've got to do is put the world back together again. And that the whole ritual cycle is putting the world back together again. It tears the world apart. The extent to which the world is torn apart is indicated by taboos and to bring the world back together again—to mend the world, as it were—required sacrifices of pigs. Those would abrogate taboos and as the taboos got abrogated the world was more mended or healed until everybody got paid off, all the spirits got paid off and the allies got

paid off. Then you'd go do it again, tear the world apart again. That was amongst the last things to get to me. The last thing that I was interested in was anything cosmological. I mean, that was the last thing that I was interested in. But then my real or deeper relationship to all of this took place after I left the field.

TF: It did. You were just doing things...

RR: Well, when I was in the field and writing the dissertation what I was trying to do was to make sense out of data. You've got all of these data and you're trying to figure them out and trying to make sense of them and you're doing it in a very situation specific way. You don't give a shit about how this happens in, for example, what this kind of ritual would mean in Amazonia. You are interested in this amongst the Tamang or the Maring or whoever. So there you are and you're focused on it and you finally produce a dissertation and then you say, "What have I not got?" (laughs) And what I didn't have was anything specific about the ritual. I began, for reasons that we talked about earlier, feeling religiously deprived. I got interested in that, my relationship to it. My change in relationship to anthropology then was something that took place after the field. It was not there when I was in the field.

TF: You present it as an intellectual path that you tread but at the same time, as you said before, there was something emotionally grabbing and satisfying.

RR: Here I was doing all of this neo-functional or systemic stuff which was totally intellectual and sometimes pushed to dubious lengths. When I talk about, okay, here's what they do with the pig and it provides protein when people need it most. Well, that didn't turn out to be true. I mean, when I went back the second time and made notes about what I actually saw in a non-kaiko year—and this is in the nutritional appendix to the second edition—it turned out that here were some guys who were malnourished and I thought those guys were going to get the main part of the pig. I mean, they were going to get a big shot of protein. And the

sick guys got much less than I thought they would. So you finally say, "Look. Okay, that didn't work out." I'd just gotten interested in the religious aspects and very quickly that led me out of Maring religion to just religion. Generally, I realized that I was connected to it in a different, deeper and personal way. And I've been ever since.

People like the Maring don't have a particular creed. There is no creed there that I can cite, but I can cite all kinds of other things taken from a whole bunch of rituals in which they are addressing red spirits. There is a postulation of red spirits and they live on top of the mountain and they take an interest in human affairs and they can get pretty nasty on you. All of that (laughing) is there but there is nothing like the Shama [*"Shama Israelu Adonai Ila Hayno Adonai Ikbad."* "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord"], or the Nicene Creed or anything like that. There's an interesting thing about that, a bit of ethnography or a field story or something. I've been bemused by it for over thirty years.

There I was trying to figure out what the hell is going on when they're killing pigs up here and killing pigs down there and all of this kind of stuff. So, finally it came to me in sort of a revelation and I thought I figured it out, okay? I got one of my best occult informants and I said, "Look, I'm trying to understand what's going on and I think that I have it figured out. Let me give you a description." And I said it's like the whole thing, you, spirits, the land, are like one big organism on the side of a mountain, you know. So that, for instance, up there are the red spirits and they're like the head and down there are the spirits of rot and they're like the legs and you sacrifice to red spirits and you call them "head pigs" and you sacrifice pigs to the spirits of the low ground and you call them "leg pigs" and you guys are in the middle. You live in the middle, you know, everybody's living in-between. I said, "You guys are like the gut and all..." I'm going along with this and he's saying, "True. Correct. Right. Wonderful," you know (laughing)? So he keeps going on like this, but I suddenly get a little nervous and I said, "Well, don't you

have anything to say to sort of correct me?” And he said, “Well, I never heard it like that before in my life, but it’s good.”

TF: (loud laugh)

RR: Okay, now think about that. I mean, I was being, I think, a Maring theologian at the time. I was systematizing, more than they did.

TF: But it was intuitively correct to them because they had never made it discursive like you were doing.

RR: That’s right. But it was intuitively correct (laughing).

But turning directly and personally to religious interests does not mean that I abandoned the environmental stuff because it turns out that I am some sort of an environmental mystic, I suppose. In recent work I’ve been saying, “Look, the ecosystem is a religious concept.” It isn’t, you know. You can take the same data and get different things. So what you’re making is some sort of moral cum adaptive decision to choose one rather than the other and to attempt to make it true. I see my later life as a kind of striving for unification. I take seriously Heraclitus, “The wise will agree that all things are one.” And the Jewish notion of “The Lord our God, the Lord is one,” and so on. It seems all too clear to me. It should be clear to everybody. I mean, it’s astonishing to me that there is any doubt that the world is a single system of some sort. Look out the window and see the birds sitting on the trees, trees rooted in the earth, and so and so on. The whole thing is a single system but a system that can, in fact, be disrupted. This just seems to me to be so obviously the case that it’s sort of a first principle. But to express that, theorize that, expound that, promulgate that (laughing), is a little bit harder. The knowledge that you have that it is all one system is somehow tacit. I mean, to me it’s obvious and maybe it’s dangerously sentimental. In recent papers, I finally talk about the ecosystem as a sort of religious concept and bring my interest in religion and ecology together. I mean, that’s trying to bring together strands of my life that have always seemed to me

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to be related, that it would seem important to be expressed in a relationship.

TF: Yeah, it's like tightening the loop. I mean, one can look at your CV and see that there were periods when you focused on one thing or another. With this most recent period you're actually circling back to the human condition.

RR: Sure. It seems to me to be important, to be worth doing. As I approach the end of this book [*Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*], I'm back to fiddling with footnotes. I do not like the chapter I've been working on recently. The problem with this chapter is that I have been trying extraordinarily hard, throughout this book, to make it a nice read, not a highly technical read. But a nice read that will carry anybody along and will require them to think. Many people just read things hastily. So, I'm trying very hard to make it a nice, clear read. But we get to chapter eleven and the whole nature of the argument changes and I find myself getting more and more Latinate in it. I read a sentence and I say "Now, what the hell are the readers going to make out of that?" What about readers who don't know anything much about adaptation and adaptiveness and stuff like that? I was getting more and more frustrated as I continued and I finally said "Fuck it." This is the best I think I can do. I hope that although some of the central sections in this chapter are going to be really difficult for people, the last couple of sections where I finally propose what I call the cybernetics of the holy, will at least give them what they might regard as a kind of "Aha! Now I see what he's been after." But I don't like it a hell of a lot (laughing), I just didn't know how to do it.

TF: The cybernetics of the holy, that's your term—that's very much you.

RR: Yeah. The whole thing, the cybernetics of the holy, is finally rather simple. What I am proposing is that there are these expressions called ultimate sacred postulates that are, themselves, very low in specificity.

They are generally taken to be eternal but they are very low in specificity. They're very low in social specificity. They don't tell you how to run your society but they sanctify other sentences which include, and I list them at one point in an earlier chapter, what I call "cosmological axioms," things like high order rules, lower order rules, testimony, all kinds of sentences that together are statements establishing authorities by grace of God and King which then sanctifies not only Henry but Henry's directives, commandments, and the like. Sentences that, in total, constitute a regulatory hierarchy. That includes both non-discrete authorities like commandments that are located in texts, as well as discrete authorities like chiefs and things which sanctify them and indirectly then sanctify their directives—lower authorities that they might themselves appoint so that not only are Henry's dicta sanctified but the dicta of his officers and lieutenants are sanctified. Now, this is the regulatory hierarchy the operation of which cannot help but affect material and social conditions—that's what it's about.

Material and social conditions affect the willingness of the members of the community to participate in, amongst other things, the rituals that establish or accept the ultimate sacred postulates. So, what you have is a loop. The regulatory hierarchy depends upon sanctification but its sanctification, the continuation of its sanctification, is contingent upon the acceptance of those that are presumably subordinate to it. So you have a closed loop and if the regulatory hierarchy doesn't work very well there are things that happen. There are feedbacks that lead to its correction. Now, what you find in places like Polynesia is that here is a chief and if he gets a little too heavy handed, his people move out on him. They move to another district and the other district gets their manpower. You do not want your manpower to go down too much or you're going to get eaten up by your neighbors. So, that is one. In pre-Christian Germany amongst pre-Christian German kings, if the king lost his luck—as they say, "there was a weak light"—and he got beaten in

some battles, or there was a drought, sometimes it was your fault and sometimes it was not. But if the king lost his luck it was not only the right of the people but their duty to depose him and replace him with another member of the royal clan. So, whoever was running that hierarchy had to keep it in order. If they didn't there are a series of stages, you know, increasingly profound.

You have something like this fairly recently in the Catholic Church. Paul VI comes out with "On Human Life" and forty percent of American Catholics stop going to mass. Now, that is a very, very important message but it's also easily reversible—you didn't go to mass last week, okay, but you can come back to mass this week. You can go to confession and you can get back into shape. In fact, people did come back so that the Catholic Church did not suffer permanent defection in the United States. I think it suffered from some other subtler things. Everybody comes back and doesn't bother to confess birth control or anything like that. They just said "Screw it." That is a general undermining of authority. But at any rate, the thing at least continues to operate.

Now, more profound things like prophets arising and prophetic movements then do things like de-sanctify the connection of the existing regulatory hierarchy for the ultimate sacred postulates or, in extreme situations, attack the ultimate sacred postulates themselves—you don't get that very often. What you do get are attempts to de-sanctify the relationship of the regulatory hierarchy, or parts of the regulatory hierarchy, with the ultimate sacred postulates. Thus, the fourteenth century is filled with peasant revolts that were religiously motivated. You have, for instance, what is called Wat Tyler's Rebellion. Its aim was to dis-establish the aristocracy. They weren't after the king who was about eleven years old at the time. Their motto came from a sermon by one of their leaders, John Ball. He was a sort of wandering priest. The motto was "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman." They almost did it. I mean, they had the king and his supporters locked up in

the tower of London and finally poor old John Ball got hanged, drawn and quartered. I can't imagine a worse way to go.

At any rate, that is what you get in prophetic movements. Prophetic movements start much lower down. I mean, they just sort of stand there and bay against the King: "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Peres," which, I think, was interpreted as "Repent ye whose days are numbered." And sometimes they'd repent but if they don't repent they are presumably in deep shit and you finally get things. In those kinds of situations, what you have is the Tahitians moving out of their chief's territory or Catholics staying away from mass and, okay, they come back, but they come back a little different. They probably would have come back the same if Paul VI had said, "I've changed my mind. Birth control is okay."

TF: Well, he created a problem by making the announcement in the encyclical "Humanae Vitae." To rescind it now would possibly lead to losing twenty percent on the other side, another schismatic movement.

RR: You think so? I have a feeling that all the Old Italian Cardinals wouldn't have given a damn. That would be a good thing. Ratzinger would leave.

TF: Do you put all revitalization movements into this kind of frame, though? What about Wovoka?

RR: No. I don't. The cybernetics will only work in situations in which the prerogative of the authority are based upon sanctification from within the system in which they're operating. But what you've got in Wovoka's case is that against which he fought—namely the United States Government—did not depend upon sanctification for its prerogatives or its authority or its legitimacy. That is, it was independent of the need for sanctification from within the system within which Wovoka was operating, okay?

TF: In other words, he's at a sub-systemic level.

RR: Well, here's what he's got. You've got foreign oppressors. He could care less whether they were being sanctified or legitimized by the

people whom they were presiding over because they were standing on power from outside. This is not to account for those kinds of things in New Guinea. Melanesia was full of Cargo Cults and things. I make this very clear—I say this doesn't count and I use, as one of the examples where it doesn't, the Ghost Dance. The way I start Chapter Twelve is to say that all of this might sound a little crazy, or a little unfamiliar or a little unrealistic to people in the modern world. The cybernetics of the holy has been increasingly impeded since the emergence of the State. That which disrupts the cybernetics of the holy is power.

Now, what I mean by power is not what Foucault means by power. In my view, what Foucault means by power is a tautology. If somebody acquiesces it's power, that's all. In my view, that's next to useless. My definition of power depends upon a political scientist by the name of Richard Bierstadt who in 1950 said that power is power, it's physical power. Men times resources equals power. So, if you have fifty men with muskets equals a certain amount of power and you have fifty men with machine guns it's a different amount of power. He didn't take into consideration that there are other elements in that. Like I would say that men times resources times organization equals power. You had, for instance, Roman legions that had five thousand men and who were much more powerful with the same weapons than five thousand naked Gaels running around painted blue, you know? So at any rate, I think that what happens with power is the ability or the authority to aggregate men and resources, to stand on muscle rather than on sanctity.

TF: Okay, you say the rise of the State. A lot of people would say that the disenchantment of the world, the de-sacralization of the world, occurs with the Enlightenment.

RR: I think this is long before that. I think you can look at the ancient empires. Here are authorities who are able to put together large numbers of armed men, armed frequently with weapons that are not available to those subjected, and this sort of power becomes the ground of their

prerogative, the ground of their authority and legitimacy. That they can accumulate or aggregate power does not mean that they dispense with their sanctification. They do not at this point. Augustus declares himself a god, you know? He's powerful enough to declare himself divine. So they are not dispensing with their sanctity when they are in power. But what happens is that there is an inversion of the relationship between authority and ultimate sacred postulates. Previously, amongst Polynesian chiefs and so on, chiefly authority is contingent upon his maintenance of sanctity. The Germanic kings are the same. But what finally happens is that here comes the powerful authority and he reduces the sacred to his instrument.

TF: The sacred becomes contingent then...

RR: ...on him. So, that's what finally happens. I mean, people still rebel against this.

TF: And this process is formally similar to your use of the "What is good for General Motors is good for the United States," right?

RR: Well, it's an inversion of proper relations, between levels.

TF: I'm still curious about what you see happening with the Enlightenment. Toulmin pulls a lot back to that.

RR: Well, with respect to the Enlightenment, in particular, Toulmin talks about *cosmos* and I talk about *logos*. I prefer the term "logos" to "cosmos" because the notion of logos, as I put it toward the end of a number of articles, proposes that the world's order is partially constructed. The term "logos" in its guises, word as well as underlying order, proposes that it is partially constructed and that it can be violated and so on. So it has to be constructed. I think that there might be some of this in the second chapter of my new book. It's certainly in my article "Logos, Liturgy, and the Evolution of Humanity." I argue that logoi, the Heraclitian logoi, and all of those structured sets of understandings that I have called "logoi," have to do with world orders and they obliterate distinctions between the cultural, the non-cultural, and so on.

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The universality is at a higher level of abstraction or generalization. It isn't that you're going to get any specific universal doctrines. That's not what's going to be universal. What is going to be universal is that there are going to be such doctrines. Now, I'm not sure that's true. I mean, I assert it and nobody has counter-asserted it. It's slightly cheating. But I'm still amazed that I am finding examples all over the world. There's the Egyptian Maat, Zoroastrian Asha, Indian Rta, Chinese Tao...all of those things. I've argued that these things typically have a certain structure and the structure is like the structure of cognized models in my article "On Cognized Models." Ultimate knowledge is esoteric knowledge; it is knowledge of names of God. It is knowledge of ultimate sacred postulates. There are these sort of ultimate sacred postulates underneath which there are cosmological axioms that are almost as fixed and this is how the universe is put together. Under that come rules of various levels—two, three levels of rules—and under that are other kinds of information.

So, you get a structure in which down at the bottom is information and facts. Maring are very interested in the characteristics of the new taro they planted; how it's going to come up, how it's going to taste, you know? But that's ordinary kind of mundane stuff. It's interesting and it's important but everybody knows that stuff. What's important is the stuff that only the wise men know and the others have ideas about. This is the stuff about spirits and rituals. It has to do with values of various sorts or what Toulmin would call, at least partly, "cosmos." I prefer "logos" because I think it makes it clear that it's partly constructed. It is not total. As in Heraclitus, it isn't total, you know? It's partly the way the world is constituted, just the way things are, just the way the world is. But you can violate it.

What I think happens at the Enlightenment is that the structure of logoi is inverted so that ultimate knowledge is no longer esoteric knowledge. As a matter of fact, ultimate knowledge is now not knowledge, it's belief: you have your opinion; I have mine. Ultimate knowledge, regnant

knowledge is knowledge of fact. Now, facts are sometimes organized into larger bodies of discourse called theories, even if it's only implicit. But theories don't stand above facts—they yield to facts because you get a new anomalous fact and it blows the theory. So, ultimate knowledge is knowledge of fact. Now, one problem with fact, of course, is that facts breed like rabbits and you can't keep track of all the facts. The demands of a Cartesian science are such that they require different people to specialize in different facts so the knowledge of the world is fragmented. So what you have is fragmentation of knowledge of the world. And what had been ultimate knowledge is now mere belief and what had been highly sanctified values are now reduced to the status of mere preferences. That's what I think happened at the Enlightenment.

TF: Have you written this stuff in any article?

RR: I think so.

TF: The threads are connected. I know that all the threads appear in various places.

RR: Yeah, I think so. I think that some of that is in the Borofsky volume. I think it's in there. It might be in "Logos, Liturgy, and Evolution of Humanity" and it will certainly be in the last chapter of this book. So, the question then is: How to put things back together again, you know? I think the way I had done this in several articles in the past is I segue from something like this into Toulmin's notion of "postmodern science." That's an easy way to get into picking up on his notion of the ecosystem concept as the basis for a new cosmos: astronomy doesn't work but ecosystems do. But an ecosystem, this is something that's not ineluctable.

TF: Your point being that you could have the same data and come up different.

RR: That's exactly right. So, your justification for this is that it is better to think with than patch dynamics. If you think patch dynamics, you're going to get patch dynamics. These things are partly performative. Not all of those ideas are good to think. Some models, some

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interpretations, will get you into deep shit (laughing). The standard against which you finally judge it is not that the Indians think this and we think this. I mean, it's not arbitrary. Somebody is fucking wrong. And wrongness is not necessarily an empirical matter. I mean, it's not a question of who got the facts straight. The question is what is the outcome for the actor, the society, or the world, of taking one view rather than another. And if it leads to environmental destruction, that's wrong and I don't give a good fuck who thinks that they like that idea better—they're doing something that's wrong. And that's where I think evil lies and that's what I have said about economics. So, this separates me, as far as I understand it, from most postmodernists who would simply say that there is no ground for judgment, that it is all relative.

TF: It's sort of a radical relativism; on what ground do you judge and why is your ground privileged?

RR: That's right. I am saying my ground is privileged. I am saying that there is one that would get better results for the world and for you and others and some will get you dead and others will get you flourishing.

TF: It's interesting how the book sort of maps out and becomes a summa of your career. The questions that arose as a result of your initial fieldwork, that is, the fieldwork that led to your dissertation research led you into exploring ritual.

RR: That's right.

TF: ...and then going back, in fact, to the questions of...

RR: Never forgetting, never forgetting where you began. It's a holistic anthropology. I feel somewhat contemptuous of those who would want to separate out one kind of anthropology from the rest; the cultural studies kind of thing. It makes me contemptuous even of those who want to discard something like physical anthropology.

TF: Because you use it.

RR: Of course. It seems to me, for instance, when I'm talking about the numinous, I do talk about people like d'Aquili and Laughlin who are

talking about the physiology of participating in ritual and Barbara Lex and other people like that who talk about the physiology of participating in ritual. Now, the physiology is hardly part of cultural studies. And if you were not interested, if you were doing just cultural studies, you would miss all that.

TF: You're unusual because it's become unfashionable among anthropologists to talk about the human condition. I think Boas could have talked about the human condition.

RR: Sure. Well, I think that ever since Geertz you would find most anthropologists saying there is no human condition: there are only human conditions. I think that's vicious. It's vicious, illogical, and maybe stupid. Yeah, I use the word "vicious" advisedly because I think that it is immoral. I mean, it [breaks the] bounds [of] ethical concern.

The contemporary problem is, on the one hand, that we can construct understandings of the world that we take to be accurate descriptions of the world. These are constructed meanings, they are things like economics, and we go impose that on a world that isn't built that way, whose structure has to be discovered.

TF: The paradox is that an earlier condition in which logoi were people's representation of the world were in fact more true representations of the real structure of the world, which is unitary. Whereas, our more accurate grasping of facts is structurally a less accurate portrayal.

RR: I think structurally less accurate even though it checks out empirically.

TF: Exactly, that's the paradox.

RR: So the economists can go around talking about the world and acting in the world that doesn't correspond to the way the world is really structured. That's on the one hand. And on the other hand, you can take these scientific epistemologies as we all attempt to do in sociology, and in some forms of anthropology and political science, and so on, and shine them on the grounds of social life and you find that it's all fabricated.

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It's all fabricated. It shows that it's a big fabrication. Now, Vico [Giambattista Vico, author of *The New Science* in 1725] might have talked about or told us about, although he never used it quite this way, fabricated truths. Well, I guess he did. "The true and the made are one and the same," he said. Vico can talk about that but as far as contemporary thought and science and so on is concerned, fabrication and truth are making an oxymoron. So you take this scientific epistemology and shine it on the roots of human social life and you threaten to destroy the grounds of human social life. It seemed to me that we have that contradiction. Now, all of this is an oversimplification because, you know, the two kinds of discourse—the construction of meaning and the discovery of fact, as it were—don't describe pure discourses. I mean, they get a little mixed up. I take that to be the basic problem. As Frithjof [Frithjof Bergmann, University of Michigan philosopher, author of *On Being Free*, 1977, University of Notre Dame Press] said in his lecture in our class, what social science according to Hegel should be about is searching out and doing whatever it could to make possible humanity's coming to some kind of "rightness."

TF: Rightness. Realization of potential. It's very Aristotelian. His notion of "the good," in fact.

RR: Yeah, exactly so. And so that's my feeling about where social science should go. I'm trying for some sort of unification. I've tried for unification with everything from weighing sweet potatoes to God Almighty. I mean, that's what I'm interested in. I am much less interested in abstract conceptions of culture or whatever than I am in kinds of things that will (sighs) help us understand the terrible plight that is, in my view, the human condition. It's easy enough to say, and I will agree, that late-capitalism is horrendous. The whole thing is just horrifying. But there are deeper things to say. Most anthropologists would agree that contemporary capitalism is full of all kinds of terrible problems and it

doesn't seem very likely that anybody is going to do a hell of a lot about them.

TF: You have been in this sustained process of constructing a cosmology in some sense. You know, this idea of a postmodern science. What you do is continually circle around the same themes in ever broadening circles.

RR: That's absolutely right. I mean, if you were going to distinguish between Ray [Kelly] and Rob [Burling] and me, it's hedgehogs and foxes. I'm a hedgehog. I have one big thing that I'm interested in and I circle it, I try to surround it. And they are foxes: political succession, hill farms and paddy fields, Nuer conquest, inequality, origins of war. I think, those are all important and fundamental things but they're not necessarily related to each other. And they are not concerned with how they are related to each other. So when I do something, when I do something in religion, I'm concerned with how this articulates to my ecology. So I do think that I have tried to make my anthropology, somehow, of a piece. I do try to integrate things. I think I said it first in an article in Emilio Moran's last collection on the ecosystem ["Ecosystems, Populations, and People"]: that the ecosystem concept is both discovered and constructed and sort of mediates between the discovered and the constructed. And that is something that I was pushing for, I mean, an integration. So, I say that it's more a religious notion than a scientific notion.

TF: In the end, ecosystems are good to think.

RR: Exactly right.

TF: That's how you finished your last lecture [Anthropology 527: Traditions in Ethnology, Winter Term 1996], in fact. It's resounding.

RR: I've been thinking about that for some considerable time. I was thinking about all of the critiques of the ecosystem concept from both inside anthropology and, more tellingly, from outside anthropology. At which point, you ask about the nature of the thing. Now this is a whole set of relations that I have never tangled with in print and even avoided

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lecturing on, because it gets so twisted and so involuted that it becomes hard to make yourself clear—it's hard to make yourself clear because you're not clear. At any rate, it's that after all even the models through which you discover the world, through which scientists discover the world, are themselves constructed. Epistemologies are constructed. So, you construct this epistemology to discover. But I am trying to propose that this is more than an epistemology or discovery it is also an ontology of construction, you know? That it is a kind of integrating concept for me and everything I attempt to do. That's why I like Heraclitus more than I like Boas.

TF: You read a lot of stuff that everybody's sort of hot for right now and it strikes you as ephemera.

RR: I know it.

TF: It doesn't go back to basics. It doesn't go back to mapping on fundamentals. Your stuff does.

RR: I tried to do that. I mean, I tried not to break that. I try to do that.

TF: And then what happened was that for the shining moment in the sixties and seventies, the swirl of the public happened to intersect with where you were and where you stayed. I think we're getting set to circle back.

RR: Yeah, I mean, you know, all of a sudden *Pigs* came out and the next thing you knew you had a big ecology movement and so I was sort of a hero for about three years!

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