# Towards a Native Anthropology

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FIELD METHODOLOGY is currently a much-discussed subject in anthropology.¹ As usually conceived, research is a task carried out by an "outsider" or "stranger" who enters a society and attempts to learn about the way of life of its people. Thus, most discussions center on problems encountered by the outsider. But there is another vantage point from which research can be conducted—that of "insider," the person who conducts research on the cultural, racial, or ethnic group of which he himself is a member. The goal of this paper is to explore some of the problems of field work faced by such inside researchers.

The paper does not, however, focus entirely on the subject of field methodology; the epistemological dimension of field research will also be explored. I will attempt to show that the insider and the outsider do face different problems in the field situation. But as far as theory is concerned, there is as yet no set of theoretical conclusions generated from the point of view of native anthropologists. By a "native anthropology," I mean a set of theories based on non-Western precepts and assumptions in the same sense that modern anthropology is based on and has supported Western beliefs and values; for, as Maquet has pointed out:

. . . it seems clear that the existence of a particular discipline dedicated exclusively to the study of non-Western cultures reflected the Victorian sense of superiority of the 19th century Europe and was perfectly consistent with, and useful to, the colonial expansion of that period. Is it not striking that this situation persisted in Africa as long as did the Colonial system and had to wait the decolonization process to be questioned?<sup>2</sup>

So long as the use of native anthropologists does not lead to the development of a native anthropology, I disagree with the statement that "the science of anthropology has been greatly enriched by those informants who were influenced by anthropologists to become anthropologists." This is a process not yet achieved; its occurrence will benefit anthropology as a whole and may well prevent the "death" of anthropology predicted by some current writers.<sup>4</sup>

Field research is of course a process of finding answers to certain questions, or solutions to certain theoretical or practical problems. As such, it involves a series of steps from a definition of the problem to be studied through the collection of data to the analysis of data and the writing up of the results. The general philosophy in anthropology is that a graduate student should do field research for his Ph.D. dissertation. Furthermore, it is thought that his research should take place in a culture other than his own. Students are generally taught that a person working among his own people cannot maintain the degree of objectivity desirable, hence research experiences must be gained initially in another culture. Thus, a philosophical element enters into the research process. Interestingly enough, however, the rule that the student should not work in his own culture seems to be reversed when it comes to the foreign student, the "native" who is studying for a Ph.D. in the United States. It is an undeniable fact that most African students in American universities are Africanists who have conducted field work in their own society and are specialists in their own people. The philosophy concerning the field training of foreign students, therefore, is opposite to that which pertains to training American students. This discrepancy can only be explained in terms of the way in which the native anthropologist is seen by the field as a whole-not as a professional who will conduct research and develop theories and generalizations, but as a person who is in a position to collect information in his own culture to which an outsider does not have access. There is, then, the expectation that the insider will know things in a different, more complete way than will the out-

A basic aim of anthropological field research is to describe the total culture of a group of people. This description, as much as possible, should be made from the point of view of the people—i.e., the inside view. For the anthropologist to obtain such a description, he must become actively involved in the life of the people, communicate with them, and spend a considerable period of time among them. With these general goals as the primary emphasis, it seems obvious that the trained native anthropologist can produce the best and most reliable data, since he knows the language, has grown up in the culture, and has little difficulty in becoming involved with the people.

According to Lowie, Boas encouraged the training of native anthropologists on the assumption that in describing the total way of life of a people from the point of view of the people themselves, it was the trained native who could best interpret native life from within. Materials collected by the trained native had "the immeasurable advantage of trustworthiness, authentically revealing precisely the elusive intimate thoughts and sentiments

of the native, who spontaneously reveals himself in these outpourings." In the same spirit that Boas encouraged natives to become anthropologists, he also encouraged women because they could collect information on female behavior more easily than a male anthropologist. This attitude strongly implies that native and female anthropologists are seen as potential "tools" to be used to provide important information to the "real," white male anthropologists.

It is undoubtedly true that an insider may have easier access to certain types of information as compared to an outsider. But it is consistent to assume, also, that the outsider may have certain advantages in certain situations. For example, ir 1969-70, I conducted a research practicum for Health students at Denver General Hospital. The students, mostly white, were sent into the black community to inquire about health practices. One student returned with the information that some women had a craving for a particular type of dir: during pregnancy. On checking further, I found this to be quite a general practice, especially in the rural South. Although I was born and grev up in the rural South, I was unaware of the practice. None of the informants volunteered this information to me, probably because it did not occur to them that I did not already know about it, since I could be readily identified as both blac; and Southern. The crucial point is that insiders and outsiders may be able to collect different data; they also have different points of view which maz lead to different interpretations of the same set of data.

#### The Problem of Point of View

As an outsider, I have done research among the Papago Indians of Southern Arizona and among the Lahu, a hill tribe of Northern Thailand. As an insider, I have done research in a black community in Denver, Colorado. In this paper I wish particularly to compare my experiences in Denver and Thailand. In both places, as a researcher (whether insider or outsider), I began with the formulation of the problem to be investigated. In Thailand the problem was to study intracultural variation among six villages of a hill tribe. In Denver the problem was to study the relationsh r between social structure and black self-concert The logical processes of formulating a research problem were similar; however, the factor of point of view entered very strongly into the formulation of the Denver study, whereas it was virtually absent in the Thailand study. In Thailand, the questions relating to cultural variation were derived from the literature on the concept of culture and from the tendency of anthropologists to speak of a total population in terms of a study of one segment of that population. The goal was to determine and to measure the range of variation in cultural behavior among villages of the same tribal (cultural) group.

The problem formulation for the Denver study. on the other hand, involved much more than logic. It involved intuition, experience, and self-interest (or more properly speaking, group interest). Current literature is filled with discussions concerning black self-image, and the conclusions are that in general blacks have a more negative self-image than whites.7 First of all, there is some resentment over having one's own group described in this manner, although as a scientist, one must allow for the possibility that the findings are indeed correct. But as a skeptic, one can also consider the possibility that there may be something in the situation that other people are missing. For example, when I looked at my own experience of relating to other blacks within a black social context, I could not see the general conclusion of a negative self-image as being consistent with these experiences.

Before one can begin collecting data, it is necessary to gain access to the community. In this, the insider is faced with a much different set of problems than the outsider. But unless the insider returns to the same community in which he grew up, he still has the problem of developing contacts. Since I was new to the Denver area, I had to begin there (as I began in Thailand) with someone who knew someone, who in turn knew someone else in "a chain of introduction which leads at least to the threshold of his group."

In the Thailand and Denver experiences, one of the biggest differences in gaining access to the community and establishing a continuing role for myself was the nature of the two social situations. In Thailand I was dealing with a small, close-knit village; but in Denver I was dealing with an urban neighborhood with little or no neighborhood-wide social organization. Once an anthropologist is accepted into a nonurban community, he takes a role for himself within the context of the community. In the urban situation, however, the researcher may have to establish a role for himself with each individual that he meets.

In Thailand I went through a chain of introductions: a friend in the city of Chieng-mai introduced me to a person who lived in one of the outlying districts where I wanted to work. This second person took me to a Shan village where people lived who knew the Lahu villages. People from this Shan village, who were on friendly terms with the Lahu, took me to the Lahu village and introduced me. Once I had been introduced to the village in this fashion, everyone there knew who I was.

In Denver I went through a similar chain of introductions. I knew someone at the University who knew one of the leaders of the black community. After several such contacts, however, I still had not been introduced to the people I wanted to work with-the hard-core poor. One of the community leaders introduced me to people who worked for the Office of Economic Opportunity program in Denver. These were people who worked with the poor people that were the object of my investigation; but this was still not the same as being introduced into a community, for the neighborhood workers could at best only introduce me to individuals. Thus, my first step was to obtain from the community workers the names of people whom I could interview. In this manner, when I knocked on someone's door I could tell them that their name was given to me by a friend of theirs. For a while this process worked very well. But problems arose. I could not get enough names. More importantly, other researchers were using the same technique; and a small group of people were becoming professional informants. Eventually I was forced to go out into the community to make my own contacts on a more or less random basis.

Thus, where I had to go through the process of establishing a role for myself only once in Thailand, in the urban setting where people must be met family by family, I had to explain myself anew to each family. This process was somewhat eased when one informant recommended a friend for an interview; but in both field situations, the problem of establishing a role for myself was closely related to the types of strangers that the people customarily met.

The Lahu had seen only three types of outsiders: traders, missionaries, and government agencies of various sorts. When I first arrived in the village, there was immediate suspicion that I was a missionary since most of the Americans they had seen were missionaries. This suspicion was easily overcome by pointing out that many of the things that I did with them, such as dancing in their "pagan" rituals, would be considered sinful by a

missionary. The ghetto dweller, on the other hand. is faced with many different types of outsiders, many of whom are greeted with a great deal of hostility. Among the types of people who may knock on their door are social workers (perhaps checking up on the behavior of welfare recipients), bill collectors, salesmen, researchers, and representatives from various agencies such as the Office of Economic Opportunity, Department of Health, local hospital, and the like. Most of these are white. Because I am black and did not wear a white shirt and tie, I was not viewed immediately as an undesirable stranger. I could just be someone looking for a friend. Thus the reaction to me was perhaps much less hostile than it would have been to a white anthropologist. Although I have no comparison of people's reaction to a white researcher, not a single person refused to be interviewed by me.9

This is not to say that conducting research in the black community of Denver was without problems. Sometimes people were a bit suspicious. On occasions I was suspected of being a Black Panther; alternatively, I was sometimes suspected of being connected with some of the agencies of the Establishment. Thus, the problems of establishing rapport involved similar elements in both Thailand and Denver. But convincing the few people in Denver who objected to the Panthers and thought that I might be one was much easier than convincing the Lahu that I was not a missionary. In the Denver case the problem arose when I said something about political and economic oppression. People would ask, "Are you one of those Panthers?" They always accepted my reply of "No," and we got on with the interview. In Thailand, when the Lahu thought that I was a missionary, I had to demonstrate that I was not a missionary by pointing out that I participated in village activities which no missionary would ever

In order to collect data one has to communicate; but communication involves more than verbal exchanges. There are also facial expressions, hand movements, body movements, and tone of voice, to name just a few of the subtleties of communication. In my research experience among the Lahu of Northern Thailand there were certain mannerisms which I was able to understand only after a considerable amount of time. After about three months with the Lahu I discovered that I could tell when they were not telling me the whole truth by the way they answered questions. When I tried to collect information on a topic which people did

not want to tell me about, such as religion, they would answer the question very softly; and on further checking, I would find their answers to be untrue. In most situations the good researcher reaches a point at which he is able to read meaning into the way a person says something as well as to record what is said. But where this was a level of understanding that I had to achieve as an "outsider" anthropologist, it was something that I began with as an "inside" anthropologist. That is, I have a core of common understanding with most black people: I grew up in a poor black community; I have experienced discrimination; and I can speak and understand the "dialect."

One task which most researchers face is how to explain what they are doing. A stranger coming to a remote village in Thailand has to have a reason for being there. How does he explain his research? Since the Lahu had not seen many outsiders and knew nothing about research, the problem was solved by simply stating that I wanted to learn all that I could about their way of life. Although thev could not understand why anyone wanted to know about their life, they accepted the explanation In contrast, most people in the urban black community do know what research is and are familia: with some of the implications and results of research. As stated previously, various types of research have taken place in Denver. Some of the people that I interviewed had been interviewed by other researchers as well, and some researchers have appeared on local television to discuss what they have discovered about the Denver community. In addition, many people have reac descriptions of black behavior and do not like what they have read. More importantly, many persons see research as a process which takes the place of political action.<sup>10</sup> It is understandable therefore, that explaining research in a contex: such as this takes on a different complexion than explaining the purpose of research to hill people in Thailand.

Negative feelings toward research are becoming more and more common among minority groups in the United States. Still, I found no single attitude towards research in the black community of Denver. Rather, I encountered three general reactions: The majority of the people I interviewed had no opinion or commitment toward research. The problem of explaining the purpose of research to this group was minor. The only real problem with them was that some felt that answering my questions would somehow harm them. There was no specific bit of information which seemed

threatening-merely the task of giving answers. This was solved by not requiring names. The second general reaction was a feeling that research among black people by a black social scientist was a very good thing. This attitude was common among people who had read sociological discussions of blacks. They felt, for example, that the information contained in works such as the Moynihan report is distorted because reports written by whites cannot reflect an understanding of black people. Since people of this type felt that the record should be set straight and could only be done so by a black person, they were the most cooperative. The third reaction was the feeling that enough research has already been done, period. People with this attitude think that action is what is needed now; consequently, they were the least cooperative. However, because I am black, they did submit to an interview; but by and large, they made poor informants since they did not take the interview seriously.

One dimension of the Denver research experience which was completely absent in the Lahu experience was the very personal way in which many people reacted to me and the research itself. I have already explained that many people with whom I talked felt that information in the currently available literature about black people is untrue, and it is untrue because it was written by whites who were unable to understand black behavior. The desire to set the record straight, therefore, was very strong, as evidenced in one of my first encounters with a woman living in the housing project. After explaining the nature of my research project, she replied, "Finally!" And there were other ways in which people reacted to me in a very personal manner; I was, to many of them, not a social scientist but a black man who had overcome the barriers of American society and made good.

### Data Analysis and Publication

A common problem confronting anthropologists when compiling their data is whether or not to withhold certain information from publication. Many who have done research in the Third World countries have withheld from their reports information which they though would displease or embarrass the host country and jeopardize their chances of returning. As an inside researcher, I felt this emotion even more keenly than I did as an outsider. As an outsider, you work with people who, because of cultural, racial, or language

differences, are always aware that you are an outsider. As an insider, people often do not look upon you as a researcher. You may be a friend, someone who is trusted.<sup>11</sup> In this capacity, people have revealed deeply personal things to me; and in this context also, I am in a position to learn many specific things about the people. Such revelations may be related to the research, but I would be both dishonest and disloyal to reveal such information.

Thus, the researcher doing field research among his own people may feel that there are private things which should not be made public. Paul warns of the anthropologist who becomes so involved in native life that he ceases to be an observer and can no longer be considered an anthropologist; he was referring specifically to Frank Cushing, who lived among the Zuñi and became a Zuñi priest. Cushing eventually became so emotionally identified with the people that he refused to continue publishing his Zuñi data.12 A native researcher may begin at this point. A black man in this century cannot avoid identifying emotionally with his people. I am an intrinsic part of the social situation that I am attempting to study. As part of the situation, I must also be part of the attempt to forge a solution.

Because of my emotional involvement, I am also inclined to question certain conclusions which have been reached concerning the behavior of black people, such as the conclusion that blacks have a negative self-image or that Africans were easily enslaved compared to the New World Indians whose nobility led them to prefer death to slavery. It might not occur to an outsider to question this theory about slavery because these conclusions do not involve his own identity. For example, in a conversation at one time with a white historian, it was apparent that he had never considered the high rate of suicide or the high death rate in general among the early African population as an indication of resistance to slavery.

The fact that I may question many existing ideas about black people with which the white anthropologist might not be concerned is not in itself an argument for the advantages of either the inside or outside view.

To observe a way of life best, it seems, involves living that way of life. This assumption invites two criticisms, each of which has both a theoretical and a practical aspect. First, is "the inside" a privileged observation point? There is nothing especially privileged about the observations of a parade made by those in it. Spectators may be in a better

position, television viewers in a still better one. Which vantage point you choose must surely be a matter of what you want to observe and why.<sup>13</sup>

One vantage point cannot be said to be better than the other. There are logical dangers inherent in both approaches. The outsider may enter the social situation armed with a battery of assumptions which he does not question and which guide him to certain types of conclusions; and the insider may depend too much on his own background, his own sentiments, his desires for what is good for his people. The insider, therefore, may distort the "truth" as much as the outsider. Since both positions involve the possibility of "distortion," which is better? I will address myself to this question in the following observations.

## Anthropological Theory and Native Anthropologists

One of the first articles in anthropology which I read was V. E. Calverton's introduction to The Making of Man, "Modern Anthropology and the Theory of Cultural Compulsives."14 Calverton speaks of the vested interest involved in the development and acceptance of sociological theory. According to him, the evolutionary theory of the nineteenth century was not "merely an error in scientific approach." 15 but "afforded a new vista of human development . . . [and] provided a new justification of world progress in terms of Western civilization."16 He explained that Morgan had great influence in anthropology until the Marxists took over Morgan's ideas and used them for their own purposes. Then Morgan's views became "repugnant" to the conservative bourgeois mind, but not to the radical mind. "What I am trying to stress," he concludes,

. . . is that all social thought is colored by such compulsives, reactionary as well as radical, and that those who think they can escape them are merely deceiving themselves by pursuing a path of thought that is socially fallacious. . . The liberal sociologist has merely been deceived by the myth of neutrality—the belief that he can be above the battle. . . The very fact that the liberal sociologist in most instances is connected with a university, and is dependent upon a middle-class environment for his survival, is sufficient reason why such aloofness in the social sciences must of necessity rest upon false premise.

The existence of cultural compulsives . . . makes objectivity in the social sciences impossible. Indeed, the actual claim to objectivity in the social sciences has been largely a defense-mechanism, and attempts unconsciously to cover up the presence of compulsive factors and convictions. No mind can be

objective in its interpretation and evaluation of social phenomena. . . . Interpretation necessitates a mindset, a purpose, and end. Such *mind-sets*, such purposes, such ends, are controlled by cultural compulsives. Any man living in any society imbibes his very consciousness from that society, his way of thought, his prejudice of vision. The class he belongs to in that society in turn gives direction to his thought and vision.<sup>17</sup>

Anthropology is a Western science. It is a science developed in the West primarily to cope with a Western problem: how to explain the diverse variety of people with whom Europeans came into contact during the Age of Exploration. The concepts, the theories, and the approaches are based on Western precepts. Stated simply, anthropology would be something entirely different if it had developed in Asia or Africa. Since anthropology was developed by representatives of the colonizing groups, the concepts are by necessity related to the scientific and other needs of this group.<sup>18</sup>

According to Calverton, anthropology became of value not because it began to collect facts about primitive people, but because those facts began to have meaning to Western civilization.<sup>19</sup> These facts about primitive people have had various meanings to the West, one of which was to foster the feelings of superiority of Western man, since evolutionary theory placed him at the apex of the evolutionary process. But a more practical use of this information is evident: It is clearly implied that slave traders and slave owners had a considerable amount of knowledge of the various cultures of Africa and modified their treatment of Africar slaves according to their captives' cultural differ ences. If one considers the important activities which brought Europeans into contact with non Western peoples-activities such as trade and colonial conquest and administration—the practica services which anthropology has offered to it: society are evident.20

Theories and concepts in anthropology are, for this reason, formulated from the point of view of Western ideology, Western needs, and a Western style of life. The idea of sociocultural integration or harmony among the various parts of a culture is an example. A theory of society which sees the parts of a social system working in harmony like the organs of the body could never have been developed by an anthropology founded by slaves or by any group whose position is in the lower strata of a social system. Anyone who has experienced the many institutional barriers which are constructed to keep members of one's own group

in their places is more apt to view the various parts of a system as being at war with each other than as working in harmony.

Many anthropologists feel that the native's view of his own culture reflects the most accurate view. The aim of anthropological research, we are often told, is to see things from the point of view of the native. Although the inside view is loudly proclaimed by anthropologists, few go so far as to consider the belief in magic and witchcraft as an element of absolute truth. There is no escape from the idea that outsiders and insiders view social reality from different points of view and that no matter how hard each tries, neither can completely discard his preconceptions of what that social reality is or should be. From this point of view, neither is any more or less trustworthy than the other. Both have room for distortions, inaccuracies, half-truths. A social anthropologist who claims to have acquired a complete understanding of another culture stands self-condemned.21 A lesson that most anthropologists have failed to learn is that a subsequent researcher will always find errors in one's data, no matter how many years one remains in the field, no matter how well one speaks the language, and no matter how far one thinks he has got under the skin of the native.

Since both the inside researcher and the outside researcher face the same empirical problems, is there any advantage to the native anthropologist at all? My answer is yes, potentially. The problem at this point is that there are native anthropologists, but there is no native anthropology. By this I mean there is little theory in anthropology which has been formulated from the point of view of tribal, peasant, or minority peoples. Thus, the whole value of the inside researcher is not that his data or insights into the social situation are better-but that they are different. Most of the few black anthropologists operating in this country are looking for something new, questioning old assumptions about social processes, developing new ones, exploding old myths, and in the process developing new ones. The work of the white anthropologist among non-Western people is not bad because he is white, but because the field of anthropology as a whole was dull and uncreative in the 1960's. Our concepts and theories, our way of looking at people have lost their relevance.22

Lehman, in an article on the problem of minority relations in Burma, concludes that social science theory has played a major role in generating the problem of majority/minority relations in Burma or "at least [has played a part] in obscuring the

conditions required for their solution."<sup>23</sup> This is no less true of the situation in the United States. The theory to which Lehman refers is the consensus model of society which is the basis of much anthropological thinking about social problems.

In anthropology the conception of a primitive society has been one in which there is structure, function, and equilibrium. Consensus on values is the basic element which holds a society together. This means that the society operates without conflict, competition, or resentment. Everyone agrees upon the values, internalizes those values, and voluntarily follows the proper forms of behavior. Force is seldom needed to get this conformity. Everyone in the society does exactly as he is supposed to do at all times. This basic assumption about society leads to a description of the caste system of India as

. . . an organic system with each particular caste and subcaste filling a distinctive functional role. It is a system of labor division from which the element of competition among workers has been largely excluded.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the elements of oppression, frustration, resentment, aspirations, and hostility are not seen in most anthropological descriptions of social organization. The lower castes never rebel against the higher, nor do they resent their position in the system.

There is an alternative to the notion of primitive societies being held together by value consensus. Dahrendorf has written:

From the point of view of coercion theory, . . . it is not voluntary cooperation or general consensus but enforced constraint that makes social organizations cohere. In institutional terms, this means that in every social organization some positions are entrusted with a right to exercise control over other positions in order to ensure effective coercion; it means, in other words, that there is a differential distribution of authority . . . this differential distribution of authority invariably becomes the determining factor of systematic social conflict of a type that is germane to class conflict in the traditional (Marxian) sense of the term. 25

Another important dimension to this problem involves the extremely high regard with which anthropologists tend to hold the traditions of other people. Sometimes anthropologists seem more attached to traditional behavioral patterns of a group than the people themselves, though as Maquet notes:

I do not mean that anthropological writings, by enhancing African traditional values, have had a

significant bearing on the upholding of the colonial system. . . What matters is that anthropology was oriented as though it wanted to preserve the existing situation.  $^{26}$ 

Robert Redfield also recognized this in his Peasant Society and Culture.27 He wondered whether differences reported about peasant values might be due to choices made by observers and writers as to which aspects of the social situation they chose to stress. He asserted that the observer of a people's values must answer such questions as "What do these people desire for themselves and for their children? To what kind of life do they attach highest esteem?" Many anthropologists never ask these questions. They assume that peasants find rural life to be just as romantic as they do. Lopreato, who did deal with this subject, found that the Italian peasant had an intense dislike of his life-situation and a strong desire to leave the inferno of his peasant community. It is unlikely, he writes, that the Italian peasant represents a special case.28 Indeed, the concept of a culture of poverty deemphasizes the fact that poverty groups are concerned with their marginal economic position and have a strong desire for something better. This is one of the strongest elements which has come through in the interviews I have had with poor people.

It should be clear from the above that the native anthropologist should be one who looks at social phenomena from a point of view different from that of the traditional anthropologist. I feel that this point of view should be admittedly biased, in favor of the insider's own social group. Thus, when I seek to "set the record straight" about some of the things which have been written about black people, this is not only justified but necessary. It is unfortunate that Third World students who are trained in American Universities have, in the past, been unable to do this. This came about because the process of training itself eroded what could have been a distinctive native point of view. But this is rapidly changing. The students that are now being trained are becoming aware of the biases in social science and are not bound by the old values of objectivity and neutrality. This change in mood may disturb many people. But if anthropology is to survive it must respond to the changing social and technological realities of the present. It is well known that part of the process of colonization involves the distortion of social, cultural, and historical facts about a colonized people. The emergence of a native anthropology is part of an essential decolonization of anthropological knowledge and requires drastic changes in the recruitment and training of anthropologists.

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- 11. Cf. I. C. Jarvie, "The Problem of Ethical Integrity ir Participant Observation," Current Anthropology, Vol 10, No. 5, 1969, p. 505, who observes that the complete participant observer conceals his character as observer There is the problem of striking a balance between being a "good friend" and a "snooping stranger." On the one hand is the aim of participating fully, o identifying entirely with the alien way of life; on the other is the danger of betraying "trust."

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- 16. Ibid., p. 3.
- 17. Ibid., pp. 28-29.
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