

Efficacy of Dance in Tanzanian Films: A Quest for the Intentional and Desired Effect in Local Productions

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Abstract

This article argues that the depiction of dance in Tanzanian films, popularly known as Bongo movies, can be intentional and achieve the desired effect when correctly depicted, which appears to be lacking in some of the locally-produced films. The inclusion of dance in films is a common practice in many film-making traditions across the world. Dance in film serves both aesthetic and practical purposes. This qualitative study applied a descriptive survey and multiple case study research designs to collect data using analytical viewing, interviews and Focus Group Discussions. The data were then subjected to thematic coding and interpretation. Guided by the Symbolic Interaction theory (SI), the study advances a triad of dance functions evident in Tanzanian films: Base of a plot, dream sequencing, and picturisation. The study determined the dance's role in these films to be somewhat incidental than intended even though the dances featuring in Tanzanian films have use-value. Thus, there is a need for filmmakers to ensure that the dance is intentional and correctly depicted to achieve the desired significant use in communicating salient ideas.

Keywords:

Dance, Tanzanian films, filmmaker(s), Tanzanian filmmaker(s)

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Introduction

Dance—a rhythmical body movements within a given space for social interaction in a spiritual or performance setting to express ideas or tell a story (Nyoni 1998; Mackrell 2018)—is conceptualized based on its function and perspective of the performers' body movements in response to rhythm. As cultural artefacts, films are made of a series of still images called frames, that create an illusion of moving images, usually taken using motion-picture cameras and shown on the screen to communicatively and entertainingly reflect cultures that made them (Benyahia, Gaffney & White 2006; Cook 2007; Verhoeve 2010; Books\ 2016;

Smith 2017). In the same vein, Tanzanian – locally-made – films are broadly conceptualised as those produced by Tanzanians or in collaboration with Tanzanians to reflect the Tanzanian culture (Shule 2011).

The production of local films in Tanzania – as opposed to imports – started between 1935 and 1936 as the British colonial government began to produce short films through L. A. Notcutt and his team (Mbogoni 2013; Otiso 2013). Globally, the tendency for filmmakers is to include dance in their films for varied reasons (Chopra 2012; Courtney 2012; Marcoux 2012). According to Njewe (2006), Tanzanian filmmakers similarly include dance features in a number of their films. In fact, nothing is included in the films without any specific reasons (Brockett & Franklin, 2007). Informed by Blumer's (1969) Symbolic interaction theory, this study set out to determine how the Tanzanian films utilise dance aspects. The symbolic interaction theory has to do with the process of interaction in the formation of meanings. The theory focuses on how people interact through symbols such as words, gestures, rules, and roles. As such, this study holds that dance in films should be regarded as a symbol. This theory illuminates on how dance also embodies symbolic language for communicating ideas. Indeed, dance uses movements, gestures and songs that contain elements relevant for the viewer to engage in thought and discourse.

Usually, the depiction of dance in Tanzanian films raises pertinent questions particularly those pertaining to its efficacy. And yet, this area of enquiry has hardly attracted systematic and critical scholarship to shed light on the nature of dance usage in Tanzanian films and the efficacy of such usage for communication purposes, particularly with the intended purpose in mind. This study, therefore, set out to fill this knowledge gap in the context of Tanzania's use of dance in its brand of local movies popularly known as 'Bongo' movies.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Dodoma and Dar es Salaam regions where most of the research participants/informants were located/ found. The two regions of Dar es Salaam and Dodoma are home to two of the significant urban centres in Tanzania, the former is home to the largest city in Tanzania which also serves as the commercial hub of this sprawling nation, whereas that latter is hosts the country's capital city. Moreover, the two country's largest public universities the University of Dodoma (UDOM) and University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) offer dance and film related studies

to students. Currently, UDOM and UDSM are leading institutions in Tanzania in offering both dance and film studies at the university level, hence the selection of the two regions for this study.

The qualitative research gathered in-depth data largely of subjective judgment of attitudes, views, and even behavioural traits (Kothari, 2004). Such qualitative research is usually a function of the researcher's insights and impressions (Cohen, Manion & Marrison 2007) that help to learn about the subjects in-depth. This approach helped this study to scrutinise issues from in accordance with the focus of the study (Patton 1990). Specifically, the study employed descriptive survey and multiple case study research designs. The cases were films entitled *Chausiku* and *Odama*. The combination of these research designs was necessitated by the researcher also integrating other units of analysis that were not part of the case study to obtain more data regarding the role of dance in Tanzanian films. The data for this study were collected from interviews held with the producers and directors of *Chausiku* and *Odama* films, analytical viewing of the two films, and Focus Group Discussion conducted with film viewers. The following description of the two films – *Chausiku* and *Odama* – situates the them in the discourse in addition to highlighting issues that made them suitable for selection to fulfil the objective of the article on the efficacy of the use of dance in Tanzania's locally-produced movies. This films' plot presentation is followed by the analysis and discussion of the findings on the efficacy of using dance in Tanzanian films.

Film Synopses

Chausiku

Chausiku is a 2014 film produced by Jerusalem Films and directed by Jacob Stephen. It presents a story about how Dick and Chausiku fall in love and get married despite coming from different socio-economic backgrounds. Dick is a man from a royal family and lives at Masaki one of the affluent neighbourhoods in the metropolitan Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He has just returned to Dar es Salaam from the studies in United States. On the other hand, Chausiku is a girl of a relatively low socio-economic status and resides at Magomeni, one of the not-so-upscale high density residential area of Dar es Salaam. Comparatively, Masaki and Magomeni largely have nothing in common in terms of socio-economic lives of their residents.

Such differences notwithstanding, and to Chausiku's disbelief, Dick still insists on Chausiku his god-send choice. This decision shocks Dick's parents who had in mind another girl (Grace) as their preferred marriage choice for their son. Dick's parents dismiss Chausiku as untutored, hence, unsuitable for their lifestyle. However, Dick obstinately sticks with Chausiku and tries to elevate her to a somewhat reverent lifestyle but fails. The relationship between Dick and the two girls – Chausiku and Grace – witnesses ups and downs with his parents particularly on Grace's side; meanwhile, Dick clings onto his unchanging position on Chausiku. Amidst the plans for the wedding between Chausiku and Dick, a realisation dawns on everyone including Dick's parents that their son would not budge on Chausiku. Nevertheless, Grace informs Chausiku about her irrepressible decision to marry Dick irrespective of the ongoing wedding preparations. To the surprise of everyone who had attended the wedding day, Grace arrives dressed casually but with a bitter-sweet message that upsets the apple-cart. She presents Chausiku as the bride of the day, mesmerising Dick and shocking everyone at the wedding venue including his anxious parents. The film concludes with the bride and groom, leaving the scene heading to the hotel for their honeymoon. Thus, Grace allows love to triumph over socio-economic preconditions and differentials. What makes this movie qualify for analysis in this article, however, is its use of dance and an integral part of its didactic and communicative agenda.

Odama

Odama is a 2008 Farhad Mohamed Film Company production with Mussa Banzi (Tanzania-based film director) as its director. Banzi also owns the film production company. The story is about twin girls, Adama and Odama, and how the latter escapes to avoid forced marriage to crooked Adumba, a son of the late Mbambadu king. However, Odama cannot marry Adumba as earlier planned but marries Kantala instead, the love of her life. In the narrative, Adumba must marry before ascending to the throne and inherit his late father's kingdom. Implicitly, both movies – Chausiku and *Odama* – share the theme of marriage, hence having a basis of comparison. More significantly, however, is the use of dance in *Odama* notable for its expressive function.

Before the king-to-be or crown prince could pick a marriage partner, girls of marriageable age perform the Ngotengote dance. The future queen will come from the girls performing the dance. During the dance, Adumba

learns from his guard that an eligible girl is missing from the performers. He also learns that this girl would be a perfect match for him. Having been informed about the missing girl, Adubato's the dance and decides to find her. Upon finding her, he discovers that Odama is with Kantala, a man of her choice. This scenario enrages the prince and he harbours motive of murdering Kantala to get him out of the way for him to marry Odama. His obsession results into Adumba's guards kidnapping Kantala to Igita forest and throwing him into the rocky waterfalls. Believing Kantala is dead, Adumba proceeds with his wedding plans to marry Odama.

However, Odama flees to Igita forest where she meets her long-lost twin sister, Adama. Odama narrates the incident to the twin sister, Adama. Having realized that his queen-to-be went missing, Adumba orders his guards to search for her and bring her back Odama. The guards kidnap Adama without realising that it is Odama's identical twins. Adama exploits the situation to become the queen by pretending to be Odama. She accepts and marries Adumba at a party marked by a dance performance.

When Kantala who has survived the murder attempt ordeal returns to Mbambadu, he finds his lover 'Odama' married to Adumba. Broken-hearted and amidst this confusion, Odama returns home only to confuse Kantala who is unaware of her having an identical twin sister. Kantala and Odama decide to confront the King and reveal the whole truth before the public. As Kantala and Odama arrive at the palace, Adumba is shocked and orders to have Adama killed for being an imposter for Odama whom he still wants to marry. The ensuing conflict between unprepared Odama, Kantala and Adumba arises but Odama's father, Msisi wa Msisiri resolves the matter by suggesting a fight between Adumba and Kantala, with the winner could marrying his coveted daughter, Odama. During the wrestling bout, Kantala spears Adumba in the chest and he dies. The film concludes with Kantala marrying Odama and the coupled ascending to the crown King and Queen during a ceremony exhibiting another dance performance. The fairytale-like ending, however, is not what qualified the film for this study; instead, it is its use – like Chausiku – of dance as an integral part of the production.

Findings and Discussion

As already hinted at, the presentation, analysis and discussion of the findings are organised around three functions of dance as they manifest in the two Tanzanian films under review.

Dance as a Base of a Plot

A plot is a sequence of events constituting the film narrative, which affects the course of other events under the cause-and-effect principle; it is what engages the viewers and keeps them interested in continuing watching a film (Chatman 1978; Verstraten 2009; Villarejo 2013; Spadoni 2014). Implicitly, when an event forms a significant part of how the narrative unfolds in a film, it becomes an integral part of its base. As such, when the dance forms a significant part of the event commanding a film narrative, then the dance becomes a base of that particular film.

In the two films under review, the dance features as the basis of their respective plots. Throughout the *Chausiku* film narrative, the plot unavoidably rests on the dance that allows the characters either to dance or talk about dancing from the beginning of the film to its logical conclusion. The narrative in *Chausiku* revolves around a female character, Chausiku, and her lover and companion, Dick. Chausiku comes from an impoverished family among the Indian Ocean coastal ethnic group of the Zaramo in Tanzania whereas Dick comes from a well-to-do family, hence creating a gulf in wealth between the two families. Their relationship naturally contends vicissitudes because of the gulf in socio-economic class; however, and significantly for this article, most of the events that unfold in the film centre on the dance or need to dance, hence making dance a major component of their social lives (Tsuruta 2003).

Despite the expressed importance of dance in the social lives of the Zaramo, the director of *Chausiku* film does not intend to position dance similarly in his film. When asked about whether starting the film with dance with an opening scene is centripetal to understanding the narrative of the film, he replies thusly:

... To be honest, I only thought that dance would give viewers a reason to watch the film. I did not consider dance as a major component in this film, and its relationship to the Zaramo is only emerging now after people have commented positively about it (Personal interview, May 17, 2016).

Although the director precluded considering the aspect of dance in his film as a base of the plot, various pieces of evidence contradict him and, hence, support this view. To begin with, the film itself opens with a dance, which does not appear accidental in the larger schemes of things. In the scene, Chausiku talks to her friend Vumi before they hear dance music at a distance and they instinctively respond by joining in this dance.

As the film unfolds, Dick invites Chausiku with her three female friends to dinner. Their dialogue also centres on underscoring the importance of dance while at the hotel, implying that the film's use of dance is not accidental but intentional. In fact, Chausiku confronts the hotel waiter to demand a livelier dance. In another incident, Dick suggests to Chausiku that they go for an outing but Chausiku insists that she could not return to the previous hotel. She advises him to visit Tandale, as a better option. Implicitly, whereas the hotel is a drab place, with an almost death-like absence of lively music and dance, Tandale is awash with music, dance and nocturnal escapades that enlivened night life. The following is an extract from the scene's dialogue as Chausiku attempts to convince Dick to grant her wish:

... Ah! Just take me to a livelier place. The other one was too boring. You feel like you are at a funeral ... eeh! In Tandale, there is a joint called Vegas ...it is an excellent place, especially in the evening hours from 4 pm. Sometimes, *baikoko*, *taarab*, or *kiduku* dances are performed. You can enjoy yourself. You can drink your beer without feeling drunk. It is a very delightful place; you will see it. Next time, you will personally ask me to take you there (*Chausiku* Film, 2014).

Impliedly, Chausiku (the film's main character, whose name means "born at night") is trying to convince her boyfriend to go to a place where she can experience different dance styles, a place with proven active dancing among both the performers and patrons as opposed to one where socialites are shackled by their social status and moral etiquette – a rather dead social space. The boyfriend is receptive to embracing various dance styles to make their evening cheerful. In this regard, dance is a necessity in and integral to Chausiku's life. In another scenario, she asks Dick whether he finds her lowly socio-economic status to be an impediment to her becoming his wife and suggests that he could find the high-class girl to marry instead and

allow her to also get a man of her social standing. In this regard, she visualises her wedding as one full of various dance performances. The film ends with a mega-dance performance as Dick marries Chausiku.

Observing the characters' actions closely reveals that most of their talk correspond to some dance movements. In fact, the whole film is about Chausiku trying to convince Dick to dance with her, to bring him into her active world as opposed to the drab life that he could otherwise experience – one devoid of dance and merry-making. This thrust resonates with her name "Chausiku" (born at night), when nightlife is active. Apparently, in the film the dance aspect serves as a base of the plot to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich, as manifested by the couple dancing joyously dance together to mark the end of an otherwise antagonistic relationship between two classes of people at the two sides of the rich-poor divide. To make this sound clear, one can imagine the situation in which the bride comes in the wedding venue without dance performance.

Similarly, in *Odama* (2008), the aspect of dance forms a significant segment of the plot. In this film, the prince (Adumba) whose father (King Gala Galauka Adumba) has just passed away wishes to marry Odama, a pre-condition before ascending to the crown as new king of Mbambaduland. However, Adumba cannot marry Odama before the *Ngotengote* dance competition. Before the dance, the mothers prepare their daughters of a marriageable age to compete in dancing for the prince's attention to choose the one to marry and become Queen of the kingdom. However, when the dance is performed, the prince does not identify any of the girls to marry because of the desire of his heart, Odama, is not one of the performers as his guide aptly informs him. As other events unfold, Adumba unwittingly marries Adama, in a case of mistaken identity believing he is marrying Odama oblivious to the fact that this is actually her long-lost identical twin-sisters. Again, the dance plays a significant part during the event.

The dance is inevitable even in moments when the scenario was expected to be secretive. This is revealed when Kantala returns to Mbambaduland from Igita forest unnoticed to meet his friend Baya. At the peak of the film, Kantala and Adumba wrestle in a dance-like manner with the latter vanquished with Kantala marrying Odama following his demise in the duel. Fittingly, the couple becomes King and Queen of Mbambaduland,

with their wedding and crowning are all marked by a gigantic dance performance.

In the *Odama* film, the dance aspect determines most of the film's actions, hence a major component of the plot. Adumba cannot marry Adama without the dance performance. Equally, the girl in Mbambadu cannot marry the prince without participating in the dance competition. The instructions from mothers to their single of marriageable age daughters cannot also materialise without the dance. In other words, dance epitomises the effects that occur in the film. In fact, dance serves a catalyst for the actuating of all the events in the *Odama* film. As one respondent observed in one of the FGDs:

Dances employed in *Odama*, to a great extent, help to push the story forward. For example, the dance performed when Adumba, the late King's son, chooses a fiancée emphasises the message and connects the events because the flow of the story itself needs a dance for the next event to occur (FGD with film viewers, May 12, 2016).

Further analysis of the two films shows that Tanzanian filmmakers wittingly or unwittingly apply the dance aspect as a plot base. The effective use of the dance in films as intended by filmmakers can offer numerous advantages. Indeed, the dance aspect has functions in the lives of the film viewers outside the film. As such, the integration of such functions intentionally to form the base of the film plots could help the film serve the functions that it does in the day-to-day lives of the viewers. Consistent with Blumer's (1969) Symbolic Interaction theory, objectively merging aspects of social life into films can allow one to directly address social issues through dance in films for the betterment of the society in question.

The following analysis and discussion constitute shifts to the second function of dance in Tanzanian films, which seem to serve as dream sequencing.

Dream Sequencing

Chopra (2012) describes actions that are otherwise verbally unexplainable for various reasons such as dance as utilised in the film. Moreover, dance allows something that cannot happen to an actual situation or life within the film. Dance aspect help to communicate incidents that cannot otherwise be communicated verbally. In numerous instances of the film, some people

may feel uncomfortable explaining specific facts to their colleagues who may also feel the same. As such, some cultures invented symbolic objects to fill this gap. In Tanzania, the Zaramo from the Indian Ocean coast use the highly stylised *Mwanahiti* figurine to explain their female siblings' matters related to sexuality. Instead of using words, the little sculpture pieces are carved to summarily instruct girls who have become of age about their femininity (Swantz, Nyema & Wild 1995; Mshana 2016). Under this set-up, dance becomes a medium for expressing the inexplicable can be actualised. Similarly, film directors may also be uncomfortable with embedding particular messages into the film's dialogues. In the African context, traditional dance particularly has always helped to express sexuality non-verbally among performers. Usually, people would prefer other means of communication other than direct conversations when it comes to erotic issues that are often taboo in many an African cultural milieu. Desai (1990), Desmond (1997), Edmondson (2001), Hanna (2010), and Harding (2013) relate dance in Africa to sexuality and affirm that dream sequencing has been an integral part of dance practices among the Africans. These writers suggest that dance in Africa has expressively helped to narrow the gap between verbal and symbolic communication regarding sexual feelings that are often taboo in the often-conservative African public domain.

In the films under review, there is dance for dream sequencing since some dances carry symbolic movements that represent what should have been verbal communication. To begin with, the performance of dance in *Odama* film Adumba needs to select a wife after the *Ngotengote* dance performance as sanctioned by the mother. However, the practice creates necessary conditions for the prince to get a spouse, which is not verbally explainable. The clue that supports the conclusion that such movements symbolise the prospects of being selected as queen is embedded in the instructions of the mother:

... You are so inflexible in your hands and waist dance movements. How do you expect Adumba, son of the King, to select you with such a dancing manner? (*Odama* film, 2008).

The *Ngotengote* dance in this particular piece conveys the instructions that the mother felt uncomfortable telling her daughter. In the scene, the mother wishes to see her daughter master the art of "waist wriggling"; however, she does not verbally explain why it is so vital in the marriage between the prince and her daughter. However, words that can be translated '... keep

practising so that you can please your husband if he chooses you (*Odama* film, 2008)'. The dance contains movements of the mother that does not verbally explain the whole meaning of the *Ngotengote* dance. The practice between the mother and the daughter seeks to ensure that what a man needs to see from the prospective wife is achievable. In some other dance instances, movements have replaced the words. All the performances in the selected films where girls danced shaking their waists meant representing their sexual abilities.

In other words, the dance aspect can help deliver messages to the viewers without using words. This dance function is even more appropriate in the Tanzanian context where many people feel uncomfortable explaining verbally some of the societal concepts. Since the films constitute the popular medium of communication, particularly among Tanzanian youth (Kasiga, 2013), the filmmakers should treat it as an opportunity for addressing issues to the effect that the community would otherwise feel introverted to explain verbally. The issues such as menarche, courtship, sexuality, reproduction, STDs, and other venereal-related matters are unpopular topics for discussion between parents and children. Nevertheless, the children with proper instructions or not will always learn. The film that consists of dances strategically addressing these matters would fill this gap in communication among the viewers. Instead of the parents communicating reclusive matters verbally, they would require obtaining the films with such messages hoping the dance aspect would draw their children's attention. Thus, the message would reach the target audience without the practical involvement of the parents. The same approach would be done in political, religious, cultural, and other social spheres. The dream sequencing in films can be helpful. However, filmmakers may not have sufficiently ventured into this possibility despite its huge potentials in symbolic interaction. This study also found that the dance aspect in Tanzanian films also serves the picturisation purpose.

Picturisation

Chopra (2012) describes picturisation as the use of dance in films based on beautiful surroundings to show beautiful environments. In this regard, the viewer may release her/his stress by viewing these carefully selected environments in addition to taking the viewer away from within a film for a moment into exciting environments. In the two films, *Odama* (2008) and *Chausiku* (2014), the filmmakers used dance for picturisation. Three of the

four dances in *Chausiku* are performed outdoor with viewers focusing on the streets for the shooting of the film. In the first dance piece, as people dance through streets, the viewers consider the infrastructure and flora and fauna of the area. Since it was hard to control the movement in the street as the shooting progressed, the people's dressing in the area was also captured even though they were not part of the narrative. The shooting also suggest the economic status of dwellers of the street in which the dance took place. Evidently, in the fourth dance piece the dance was performed in an environment showed the owners' better economic status. In other words, the dance aspect picturised the infrastructure, biota, dressing, and the general economic statuses of the dwellers.

In the *Odama* film, most dances are performed next to the traditional huts made of purely vegetal materials in the romanticized Mbambadu land. Even though the kingdom is ideally non-existent, the huts are typical in most remote areas of Tanzania and Africa generally. The dance performances make the viewer get the glimpse of the architecture of the land. Filmmakers reported that they felt comfortable leaving such environments in their films. To some people, the traditional huts sound like something not to be proud of compared to the storey buildings emerging in various towns. *Chausiku's* first dance could have been performed in modern streets but the filmmaker opted for shabby streets to depict the actual environment that the people of Chausiku's calibre live.

However, there are environments within these films that could have been more strategically used for picturisation. Such picturisation calls for the dance to occur in environments that could allow people to appreciate them as they watch the dance. As the dance materialises in the gardens, it gives the viewers more eyes to see contrary to when the same is done in an empty dark room. For instance, beyond the architecture displayed in *Odama*, the Igita forest and waterfalls indicate that there could have been ideal dance performances for the picturisation to be fully actualised. Implicitly, one or more dance performances could have been performed there and not necessarily as part of the narrative. Tanzania has many forests and mountains with waterfalls where the dance could have been performed for picturisation. Such areas include Kakombe, Mkenke, Materuni, Mount Meru, Sanje and Udzungwa waterfalls. The filmmaker bypassed these fabulous environments and overlooked dance performances pertaining to such beautiful landscapes. Since the dance attracts viewers significantly, it

can showcase specific aspects of touristic interest. Yet, picturisation is incomplete by showing environments. The intentional placement of dance performances in the areas of interest can lure the viewers to seeing them.

The filmmakers in Tanzania can, therefore, equip themselves with this dance function. If used appropriately, filmmakers may not only identify their films as Tanzanian but also serve as touristic and psychological purposes among the viewers. Various cultural aspects in Tanzania and the beautiful natural and man-made scenes of the country can serve as dance performances in films for local and foreign viewers. The features such as bridges (Kigamboni, Kilombero, Kikwete, Kyaka, Kirumi, Mkapa, Rusumo, Selander, Songwe, and Unity), the national parks (Manyara, Mikumi, Ngorongoro, and Serengeti) and mountains (Kilimanjaro, Meru, Udzungwa, and Uruguru) are identifiable for picturisation. Various lakes (Nyasa, Tanganyika, Victoria), shores of the Indian Ocean, the historical sites (Amboni, Kondoa-Irangi), different historical buildings (both traditional and modern) and many other areas are also identifiable for picturisation. Those areas would not only be publicised to the broader audience but also help relax the minds of the viewers as they wait for the next scene when watching Tanzanian films. Those who treat these sceneries in which the dance is performed within Tanzanian films would, perhaps, develop a more pleasant perspective towards Tanzania. According to the interactionists, people tend to derive meaning from a complex set of symbols evolving from interactions with the environment and the people. Regarding picturisation, as the function of dance in Tanzanian films, the analysis and discussion has attested to how the dance aspect serves as a social bridge in Tanzanian films.

Conclusion

The dance aspect, as a tool for symbolic interaction, serves as a means for creating a better social world. Evidently, symbols in films convey meanings that the viewers may subjectively interpret through language and they may, in turn, construct more pleasant social world. This article, therefore, calls for the filmmakers to maximise the use of such potential functions of dance in their films hoping that they can be helpful to viewers when applied in the real life because viewers learn from films and wittingly or unwittingly imitate some of the characters' behaviours and attitudes.

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