Archaeology and Afrocentrism:

An Attempt to Set the Record Straight

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It is important to make one thing absolutely clear at the outset of this discussion: essayist Kwame Nantambu (1997) is precisely correct in the assertion made in his article in this journal (*Egypt and European Supremacy: A Bibliographic Essay*), that European and Euroamerican scholars—including historians and archaeologists—were, in the past, guilty of racist or race-based pseudoscience, especially, but not exclusively, regarding the history and prehistory of Africa.

The Curse of Ham

For example, though Nantambu does not mention it in his article, European thinkers in the fifteenth century initially explained the existence of the dark-skinned people of Africa within a biblical framework that reified and justified the subservient status of all Africans. Some of these thinkers suggested that black Africans had descended from one of Noah's sons, Ham, whom Noah had cursed because of a minor transgression committed after the flood (Cohn 1997).

Essentially, Ham saw his father drunk, naked, and passed out in his tent, and then convinced his two brothers, Japheth and Shem, to go into their father's tent and cover him up. In so doing (and in waking up Noah in the process) the writers of the Bible maintained that the sons dishonored their father, but only Ham is blamed in the biblical account.

As a result of Ham's seemingly sensible behavior in persuading his brothers to cover their undressed and unconscious father, he and his descendants are cursed to be "a servant of servants….unto his brethren" (Genesis 9:25). For some European thinkers, this small transgression on Ham's part explained the dark skin of Africans (a visible mark of the curse) and justified their enslavement; after all, Noah had cursed the descendants of Ham to serve the descendants of his two other sons. Clearly this is racist reasoning and only served to rationalize the oppression of African people in the centuries before our own.

Denying History: Eurocentric Views of Zimbabwe

Some European thinkers were no better in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when considering the source of the historical African civilization of Great Zimbabwe. The stone structures of Zimbabwe, especially the Great Enclosure and the Hill Ruin, exhibit a level of skill and artistry in stone masonry that was deemed far too sophisticated and impressive for native Africans, especially sub-Saharan Africans, to have constructed. As prehistorian Graham

Connah (1987:183) suggests, the assumption that sub-Saharan African natives were incapable of producing such a remarkable and technologically sophisticated culture was racist to its core. Some European thinkers went so far as to suggest that the ruins of Great Zimbabwe represented all that was left of a colony from the Middle East, built, perhaps by the same people who had constructed Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Even into the 1960s and 1970s, a few European writers continued the attempt to disassociate Zimbabwe from the native people of sub-Saharan Africa (see the discussion in Garlake 1983).

The archaeological record is absolutely clear on this point: the builders of Great Zimbabwe, the bearers of ancient Zimbabwe culture, and those responsible for the civilization that produced the ruins that can be seen today were native Africans, the ancestors of the modern people of south-central Africa (Ndorro 1997). The present generation of Zimbabweans has reclaimed its ancient heritage and native scholars and researchers are investigating the ruins of Great Zimbabwe with fresh eyes.

Clearly, European scholars even well into the twentieth century have much to be contrite about when we look at their long and unfortunate record of racist or race-based interpretations of history, both ancient and recent. Together, however, European, and Euroamerican scholars, working alongside African scholars are, at last, abandoning racist or race-based histories to approach the entire story of ancient Africa with new perspectives.

Racist Pseudoscience In Many Guises

To truly abandon racist pseudoscience, however, it is not sufficient merely to rectify or debunk individual cases of the race-based misrepresentation of the past. It is necessary to go further and challenge and then dismantle the very idea that underpins racist history, the demonstrably false assertion that rests at its core: that a particular group within the species *Homo sapiens* is in some way fundamentally superior—genetically and/or culturally—to any or all of the other groups. Modern anthropology rejects cultural hierarchies and sees all cultures as representing unique adaptations to a particular set of environmental circumstances. In this modern view, there is no single cultural font, no single source for cultural achievement—nor could there be.

With this in mind, I read Nantambu's essay hoping to see a deservedly strong repudiation and rebuke of racist history and prehistory in *all* of their guises. Disappointingly, however, Nantambu's approach does not really challenge the fundamental or essential racist assumption that is at the heart of Eurocentrism. Rather remarkably—and certainly ironically—in a basic way, it embraces the same axiom. In fact Eurocentrists and, if Nantambu can be used as a standard, at least some Afrocentrists seem to agree on one essential point: they share in the assumption that some people and some cultures are superior to others. Ironically, they disagree primarily in the details; they differ in their assertion about which particular culture has primacy, which human group has been the creator of humanity's best ideas. At the same time, they also differ in

their assertions about which cultures are only, at most, the borrowers of such ideas or achievements—and whose borrowings are, after all, only pale, tepid imitations of the mother culture of us all, whether that source is Greek, Roman, Egyptian, German, or, for that matter, Atlantean, or perhaps even extraterrestrial. In other words, and very unfortunately, the essential difference between standard Eurocentrism and, at least Nantambu's brand of Afrocentrism seems merely to be geographic.

Was Africa First?

Indeed, it is the consensus of paleoanthropologists that humanity's first evolutionary steps were, in fact, literal steps taken through the woodlands and out onto the savannas of Africa. As much as 4.4 million years ago *Ardipithecus ramidus,* known from fossils recovered in Ethiopia, possessed a bipedal stride that was a harbinger of our uniquely human mode of locomotion (White et al. 1994). Later, larger-brained bipedal primates including the 4.2 million-year-old *Australopithecus anamensis*, found in Kenya (Leakey et al. 1998), and the 3.9-3.0 million-year-old *Australopithecus afarensis* (the species of the famous "Lucy" fossil [Johanson and Edey 1982]) were exclusively African hominids. Our first stone tool-making ancestors, *Homo habilis*, with a brain close to one-half the modern size also evolved in Africa some 2.5 million-years ago and lived only on that continent. The 1.8 million-year-old evolutionary descendant of *habilis*, now generally called *Homo ergaster* with a brainsize about two-thirds the modern

human mean and the maker of symmetrical stone handaxes, also evolved in Africa and initially inhabited that continent exclusively. It is only the descendants of *ergaster* who expanded out of Africa into Asia (where they became *Homo erectus*) apparently quite soon after 1.8 million years ago and into Europe, perhaps by as much as a million years ago (where they became *Homo antecessor*).

Though there are a number of models proposed to explain the evolution of anatomically modern human beings, one common view is that between 400,000 and 200,000 years ago the descendants of *Homo ergaster* in Africa made incremental steps towards a more modern morphology and, in fact, made the evolutionary jump to a fully modern human brain size and configuration, and, presumably, attendant intelligence, exclusively in Africa, sometime between 200,000 and 100,000 years ago.

The evidence is undeniable that the nursery of human evolution was Africa. It remains a viable view that the initial jump to modern humanity also occurred only in Africa, and that these first modern humans spread out to colonize the world, eventually replacing populations of pre-modern humans where they encountered them in Europe or Asia (Stringer and McKie 1996).

Fundamentally then, *we are all Africans*; some of us simply have been transplanted. It should be pointed out here that the science that supports an African source for us all has been carried out by a large contingent of European, Asian, Euroamerican, Australian, as well as native African scientists. One would be hard-pressed to claim that this ecumenical research and the consensus that

traces all of humanity back to Africa has been Eurocentric. A Eurocentric view would labor mightily to maintain a privileged position for European hominids like the Neandertals, but this has not been the case. In fact, it has been primarily European scientists who have pushed the Neandertals of Europe off the main line leading to modern humanity.

But what does this essential fact of an African source for humanity mean or imply in the present? Certainly not the superiority or even the priority of any *modern* group of human beings, including the people who today live on the continent where these important evolutionary steps took place. Modern native Africans are as far removed from those times and ancestors as are any of us who live in the Americas, Europe, Asia, or Australia, whatever our ethnic heritage.

Today, all humans are members of the same species and we exhibit a remarkable degree of genetic homogeneity (Cann, Stoneking, and Wilson 1987; Marshall 1998). Our differences are primarily geographic and, as such, are trivial. We may look a bit different on the outside, but genetic evidence indicates that we are all quite similar within. The actual evidence produced by researchers concerning the relatively small amount of genetic variation in the human species renders statements about negative "genetic and social traits selected for" in the "hostile environment" (Nantambu 1997:369-370) of Pleistocene Europe moot.

Is Africa the Source of Civilization?

It is important to remember that historians and archaeologists refer to the development of complex societies exhibiting social stratification, large, dense population centers, a formalized government, a system of record keeping, the communal construction of monumental works, and so on as the "*rise* of civilization" not the "race" toward civilization. A fundamental lesson taught by the investigation of cultural evolution is that many different peoples in different parts of the world developed so-called civilized (probably more appropriately called "complex") societies independently and at different times (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff 1995).

Though there are no "points" awarded to those who developed such societies before others, even if ancient Egyptian civilization had been the first, so what? Diffusionist views once prevailed in history and anthropology (see Harris 1968 for a discussion of the history of anthropological thought and the diffusionist perspective) and may have been logically viable when little was known of the evolutionary sequences of the world's primary civilizations. However, the view that there was or even could have been a single source for the myriad complex societies that developed throughout the world in an expansive array of widely varying habitats has long since been abandoned. Even if Egyptian civilization developed first, complex societies also developed, almost certainly entirely independently, in China, in Pakistan, in Mesoamerica, in South America—and yes, in Europe as well—in habitats so different and in places often so distant from northern Africa, that the transplantation of ancient Egyptian, or any other presumed source civilization, simply could not have occurred. The proof—or lack

of proof—is in the pudding and there simply is no evidence whatsoever for these other complex societies having been catalyzed by ancient Egyptian civilization.

As an aside, Nantambu begins his essay with the rather mysterious assertion, replete with italics, that the river that nourished Egyptian civilization and that was its main artery of transportation, the Nile, is "the only river on the planet that flows from south to north" (p. 356). Even if this were true, I think the readers of this essay still might deserve an explanation of what possible significance this bit of trivia has. Is Egyptian civilization fundamentally different or more advanced because of the direction of the flow of the Nile? Is the south to north flow of the Nile somehow responsible for the purported superiority or primacy of ancient Egyptian civilization?

We do not learn the significance of the direction of the flow of the Nile, but the point is moot anyway. I invite Nantambu and the readers of his essay to consult an atlas where the will find, for example, that the major river systems of northern Germany all flow from the south to the north as well: the Rhine, the Elbe, the Oder, and the Weser. So what? The only significance of the direction in which a river flows is rather obvious: water flows downhill.

Of far greater importance, the assertion that ancient Egyptian civilization has chronological priority over all of the other complex societies that human groups developed in antiquity is unequivocally false. For example, Nantambu's assertion (p. 361) that Egypt "gave to the world," among other things, "pottery… domestication…writing" can easily be proven wrong with archaeological data that

have long been available. In each of these claims, Nantambu ignores archaeological and historical evidence to the contrary.

For example, the world's first pottery is 11,000 years old and credited to the Jomon culture of Japan, not, for example, to the much later pottery makers of Hierakonpolis in Egypt. Fired ceramics, in fact, first appear in Upper Paleolithic Europe close to 30,000 years ago in the form of fired clay Venus figurines at Dolni Vestonice. No such evidence at such an early date has ever been found in Egypt.

Writing is another instance in which Egypt, though developing an important early system of written record keeping, simply was not the first society to do so, nor did their system serve as the inspiration for other writing systems. In actual fact, clay tokens bearing the first symbolic representations of objects (olive oil jars, cattle, etc.) and, therefore, the earliest written record keeping, are known to date to 10,000 years ago not in Egypt but in Southwest Asia (Schmandt-Besserat 1992). The first true written script is cuneiform inscribed onto clay tablets in Mesopotamia beginning close to 6,000 years ago, substantially predating the oldest known Egyptian writing which dates to 5100 years ago.

If cuneiform could not have been inspired by Egyptian writing for the simple reason that it is, in fact, older, other, later systems of record keeping in the ancient world were most likely not the result of Egyptian inspiration for the reason that they bear no relationship to the Egyptian system. For example, the script of the Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley (Parpola 1993), the Chinese Shang

Dynasty bone inscriptions (Chang 1986), or the Maya system of hieroglyphics (Coe 1992; Harris 1991), though all later than Egypt's first hieroglyphics, have virtually nothing in common with Egyptian writing. They do not share symbols in common, grammar, or syntax. Any suggestion that writing was invented once, in Egypt, and then shared with the rest of the world makes absolutely no sense when one actually looks at these other systems of writing.

Perhaps the most important in Nantambu's list of intellectual gifts ancient Egypt supposedly bestowed on the world is domestication—the cultivation of plants and animal husbandry. As we know understand it, the domestication of plants and animals, however, was a process, not a revolution, with many independent regional hearths (Smith 1995). Contrary to Nantambu's assertion, there was no single "genius" people who developed domestication and then inspired the rest of the world to adopt this mode of subsistence. Archaeological evidence readily dispels such a myth.

Archaeologists have uncovered, in several different world regions, entire evolutionary sequences representing the lengthy process by which many different peoples molded the characteristics of plant and animal species through the operation of artificial selection. In many world areas, at different times in prehistory, and often entirely independently people recognized that by protecting and tending those individuals within certain malleable plant and animal species—and by disposing of those individuals in those same species that possessed unappealing characteristics—a population could be pushed toward a desired set of traits. The plant and animal species that were domesticated in the distant past

differ in these different regions, rendering moot any notion of a common source for them all.

Even if Egypt had domesticated plants and animals first, therefore, it is nonsense to suggest that they then introduced this practice to the world. Under such a scenario, one would have to explain how a society (Egypt) that planted wheat and sorghum neglected to introduce those crops to, for example, the ancient people of the Americas who, instead, planted maize, beans, and squash, or the Chinese who planted rice. To credit the Egyptians as the source of domestication for the entire world does an enormous disservice also to other Africans who independently produced their own agricultural revolutions. Various sub-Saharan African systems of agriculture that depended on crops like pearl millet, African rice, fonio, tef, enset, and ground-nut owe nothing to the agricultural practices of their powerful neighbor to the north which was based on an entirely different suite of crops (Harlan 1992).

Is it even correct to assert temporal primacy to Egyptian agriculture? In fact, the answer is no. Take, for example, one of the earliest and certainly one of the most important crops domesticated in the ancient world: wheat. Genetic evidence indicates that einkorn wheat was domesticated first in southeast Turkey in the area of the Karacadag Mountains. Researchers have examined the DNA of 261 lines of the wild einkorn including 11 lines that grow abundantly in the Karacadag Mountain region (Heun 1997). Next, they compared the DNA of these stands of wild wheat to that of 68 lines of modern, domesticated einkorn wheat. They found that, not only were the 11 lines of wheat from the Karacadag

Mountains the most genetically distinct of all the wild wheats, of all the wild varieties sampled, the Karacadag wheat was the most genetically similar to the modern domesticated varieties examined.

Archaeological evidence is abundantly clear on this point: the earliest evidence of domesticated plants and animals has been recovered in southwest Asia, not northern Africa. The presence of archaeological sites in the same region with evidence of the very early domestication of einkorn (dating to about 10,000 years ago at, for example, Abu Hureyra and Cayönü, far earlier than it shows up in Egypt), lends further support to the hypothesis that the Karacadag wild wheat is the ultimate source for the einkorn domesticated about 11,000 years ago in southwest Asia (Miller 1992). At other archaeological sites such as Netiv Hagdud and Gilgal in Israel and at Ganj Dareh in Iran, domesticated barley kernels have been dated to 11,000 years ago (Zohary and Hopf 1993). At Aswad in Syria, kernels of two kinds of domesticated wheat—emmer as well as the previously mentioned einkorn— have been recovered and dated to 10,000 years ago. Aswad has also produced evidence of the probable domestication of lentils.

The oldest evidence for the domestication of plants or animals in Egypt is more recent by at least two to three thousand years. Nabta Playa in Egypt shows evidence of the possible early stages of domestication of sorghum and millet (Wendorf et al. 1992). The site is only about 8,000 years old. Both crops appear to the naked eye to be indistinguishable from their wild versions, but chemical analysis of the fats contained within the seeds indicates a closer match to domesticated varieties (Wendorf et al. 1992:724). Unequivocal evidence for

the presence of domesticated plants in northern Africa, including Egypt, is even more recent, dating to approximately 7,000 years ago.

Interestingly, and quite to the contrary of Nantambu's assertion that Egypt is the world's source of domestication, north African pastoralists relied on domesticated sheep and goats that were not native to Africa but were most likely imported from the Middle East where the evidence of their domestication is clearly present in lengthy archaeological sequences illuminating the many steps taken in the process. On the other hand, the bovid species that served as the source for domesticated cattle in northern Africa has been shown through the application of DNA analysis to most likely have been native to Africa (Bradley et al. 1998; Zimmer 1994). This evidence implies that cattle domestication took place independently in Africa, as it also did in Europe and eastern Asia.

The archaeological evidence for the development of complex societies after the invention of agriculture shows much the same thing. There was no single source for such a process and Egypt was not the first in the sequence anyway. With the development of agriculture and the ability to produce a storable food surplus, complex stratified societies developed in many parts of the world; many of these developed independent of any outside influence and certainly were not inspired to such developments by civilization-proselytizing Egyptians. In fact, the initial development of writing, cities, social stratification, monumental architecture, and the like, occurred first in Mesopotamia, hundreds of years before it did in Egypt (Postgate 1992). The origins of temple-based, complex societies can be traced to the Ubaid culture dating to 6300 years ago (Lamberg-

Karlovsky and Sabloff 1995). These ceremonial centers grew and by about 5800 years ago at least one of them, Uruk, has a large and dense enough population to deserve the title “world’s first city” (Crawford 1991). A unified Egyptian polity under a single pharaoh probably occurred by 5100 years ago under the ruler Narmer (or Menes), about 700 years *after* the evolution of the first Mesopotamian city-state (Kemp 1991).

Though Nantambu refers consistently to Greece in attempting to make that point that European civilization is derived from ancient Egypt, he neglects even to mention the far older European civilization that developed on Minoan Crete. Located on an island in the Mediterranean, between mainland Europe and the older civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, complex culture developed there beginning sometime after 5000 years ago.

Almost certainly, the geographic location of Crete served as a catalyst for the development of complexity there. In a sense, of course Egypt played a role, at least indirectly, in the development of Minoan Crete—as did Mesopotamia. However, when the palace at Knossos was built 3880 years ago, it bore no resemblance to Egyptian architecture—there are no pyramids or sphinxes on Crete—nor is there evidence of the worship of Egyptian deities or the practice of Egyptian ceremonies. The complex society that developed on Crete had its own unique flavor and style, with little direct control or apparent inspiration from Egypt (Castleden 1990; Warren 1987).

The assertion that Egypt is the source for the development of complex societies throughout the world diminishes the cultural achievements not just of

Europeans, it also ignores and, by implication, lessens the cultural accomplishments of other ancient Africans. For example, the Egyptians called the land to their south Kush. If you travel south past the so-called first cataract near Aswan in modern Egypt (the first extensive rapids encountered moving along the Nile from north to south) into the modern nation of Sudan, continuing to the sixth cataract, north of the Sudanese city of Khartoum, you have traversed Kush, the territory of the ancient Nubian culture.

To be sure, Nubian civilization developed, at least initially, in response to the impact of having one of the world's first great civilizations literally just downstream. But, it must be understood that ancient Egyptian civilization was not merely imported upstream, nor do we see Egyptian culture grafted wholesale onto an indigenous population's culture. Rather, developments to the north seem to have inspired the evolution of, not an imitation of ancient Egyptian civilization, but, as archaeologist David O'Connor (1993) characterizes, a remarkable and distinct civilization that "Egypt's rival" in ancient Africa.

Finally, is Nantambu correct at least in his assertion that the ancient Greeks, often credited as being the source of modern civilization, actually borrowed extensively from ancient Egypt, learning at the feet of Egyptian sages? Some Afrocentrists are even stronger in their claim, accusing the Greeks not just of borrowing, but of stealing all of their ideas from Egypt; note the title of one of the key Afrocentrists' early works: *The Stolen Legacy* by George James (1954).

In actual fact, there is little direct evidence that any such thing occurred. The great irony here is that though it is true that the ancient Greeks wished

people to believe that they were the intellectual progeny of ancient Egypt, their supposedly first-hand accounts of Egyptian society are often so vague, jumbled, and flat-out wrong, it is unlikely that many even visited Egypt, much less spent years there learning from Egyptian teachers. Plato himself never claimed to have traveled to Egypt and there is no reason to believe that he did. The standard Afrocentrist claim that Aristotle secretly visited the Egyptian city of Alexandria, and pillaged the great library there, taking the best ideas of African thinkers and then presenting them to the world as his own is an chronological impossibility. Aristotle died in 322 B.C. but the library at Alexandria was not established until 297 B.C., twenty-five years *after* his death (Lefkowitz 1996). In fact, we know that the library was assembled by one of Aristotle's students and that most of the works there were written in Greek, not Egyptian. Anyone interested in a factual discussion of the relationship between the philosophers of ancient Greece and Egypt should read Mary Lefkowitz's 1996 book, *Not Out of Africa* and follow up on many of the standard sources that she cites.

If I might digress here to make a few final points about ancient Egypt. Nantambu is quite critical of ancient European society, asserting that the rigorous environment of Europe during the Ice Age led to genetic and social selection for the traits of "force, domination, theft, and violence" (p. 369-370). Nantambu's claim that these traits led to the "custom sacred to the European—hoarding, or the endless accumulation of material things" is an incredible claim especially coming from an author hoping to elevate ancient Egyptian civilization. After all, the archaeological hoards of Europe are pretty pitiful and meager when

compared to the astonishing array of goods accumulated by the Egyptian nobility and, especially, by the pharaoh. When considering the hoard of grave goods even of a historically insignificant ruler like Tut-ankh-amun, one is hard pressed not to wonder if Nantambu is joking after all.

On another point, Nantambu is concerned that people take it for granted that astrology is an invention of white people because of the fame of syndicated columnist Jean Dixon who is, after all, "a blond, blue-eyed female" (p. 362). Nantambu, jealously guarding the honor of ancient Egypt, claims that the "original" horoscope was, in fact, Egyptian, dating to 300 B.C. The absurdity cannot get much worse here; arguing over who should get the credit for the mind-numbing mumbo-jumbo of astrology. I don't know the color of the late Jean Dixon's eyes (I will accept Nantambu's assertion, but I will bet that Ms. Dixon's hair color came from a bottle) but I do know that zodiacs and the depiction of astronomical phenomena date back to about 4,000 years ago in Mesopotamia (Krupp 19XX), long before it appears in Egypt. The Egyptians did have a zodiac, but so did the ancient Chinese as well as the Aztecs. None of these zodiacs are the same or even similar and none are historically connected and they are certainly not traceable to Egypt.

Were the Egyptians a Black-Skinned People?

It has become part of Afrocentric dogma that the ancient Egyptians were a black-skinned people, ethnically the same or similar to more recent Africans living south of the Sahara. Is this true? The Egyptians depicted themselves and their

neighbors in various artistic media and such depictions provide insights at least into how the Egyptians perceived themselves. The Egyptians portrayed themselves as a brown-skinned people—often darkly hued but not black. When depicting Nubians, on the other hand, Egyptian artists clearly presented their neighbors to the south as having darker, in fact, black skin and tightly curled hair —in other words, more recognizably Sub-saharan African. Egyptians were, of course, geographically African, ethnically north African, and culturally unique.

Conclusions

History and archaeology should represent the objective study of what happened in the past and why. Ethnic boosterism, no matter how well-intentioned, has no place in the pursuit of the past. Besides, the irony behind whichever "centrism" is being touted is extreme; no human group needs fabricated claims of superiority, priority, or primacy and to promulgate such claims ignores or diminishes the actual achievements of ancient people. Modern Africans and others of African descent do not need preternaturally gifted, ancient Egyptian übermenschen bestowing their intellectual gifts upon the world. Such a fabricated history is doubly harmful in that it denigrates the histories of all the other people of the world—including other, non-Egytptian Africans—and, in its fabrication it is tacitly assumed that the genuine history and achievements of ancient Egyptians need any such amplification. The ancient civilization of Egypt indeed represents *one* of the most splendid cultural achievements of humankind. But so do the civilizations of Minoan Crete, the Chinese Shang, the Indus Valley

Harappans, the Nubians of Meroe, Great Zimbabwe, the Maya, the Aztecs, the Inca, the Moundbuilders, etc.

European scholars in centuries past and even in the present century have much to apologize for. Many of them are guilty as charged. On the other hand, we must not and we cannot eliminate race-based pseudoscience of the past simply by replacing it with a different version, reversing the roles of the actors in the drama of history. We can achieve a true history of the ancient world—and of the modern world as well—only by freeing ourselves from this nonsense.

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