Rubbed the Wrong Way: Making Ethnographic Film against the Grain

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> The real 'crime' of representation is representation itself. It is no coincidence that some people fear photography as a theft of the soul, or that some religions forbid the making of human effigies. By freezing life, every film to some degree offends against the complexity of people and the destiny that awaits them.

> —David MacDougall

Several years ago, under the auspices of a small Ethiopian-American NGO, I traveled to Bonga, Ethiopia—the capital of the Kafa region—and collaborated with members of the local Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism on an ethnographic video about their cultural preservation endeavors. The Kafecho community does not have significant access to a global venue where capital, identity, and representation can compete and commingle. And yet, they see it as an absolute imperative for them to emerge from "backwardness." Members of this community are actively trying to set in motion a plan that will allow them to enter the world "stage" and thus benefit from its perceived resources. This effort is premised in part on their cultural claim to be the "ancestral homeland of coffee." Economic investment, eco-tourism, and scholarly research are perceived to be key means for accessing global resources in order for modern development to take hold locally. Unbeknownst to me (albeit naively so), these individuals saw my research project as one way of achieving this aim.

The cultural brokers of the Kafecho community have adapted a Western ideology of culture that engages with both generic notions of indigeneity and claims to cultural exclusivity, a combination deemed ideal for marketing their cultural resources to an international audience. In this article, I explicitly deal with the reordering of Kafa culture and identity that is taking place in order for the Kafecho to compete for global capital. I am especially concerned with the anthropologist's perceived role as the cultural conveyor in this process. As disadvantaged cultural groups increasingly incorporate cultural self-commodification in order to access resources they are otherwise denied, how might a reflexive anthropology challenge and disrupt these cultural transformations? What role does contemporary cultural theory play when confronted with this paradox? What are the mutual benefits for the anthropologist and the indigenous population? In what ways are these benefits made explicit?

Accepting Invitations

In the year that I began searching for graduate programs that would enable me to combine anthropological studies and ethnographic film production, I became acquainted with the Kafa Development Association and was subsequently introduced to Bishaw Woldeyohannes. Bishaw was in the United States by invitation of the KDA to receive corrective eye surgery for blindness caused by many years of undiagnosed diabetes. Bishaw was introduced to me as someone who has championed cultural preservation efforts in his home region of Kafa. Bishaw saw cultural preservation and development as inseparable aims:

> Without self-pride, without preserving identity, I don't think development is achievable. So my focus is on making the Kafecho understand themselves and then change their attitude to change. There are two aspects, cultural preservation and the second is the human resource development aspect. What our intention or goal is making people ready to development.[1]

The preservation efforts by Kafecho community members working for the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism included, among others, video documentation, museum exhibition, and oral language transcription. The use of technological devices and modern methods of documentation enabled the preservation of a cultural identity that was perceived to be integral to a successful future.

My interest in this project stemmed from a curiosity to learn specifically about the endeavors of these people. I was especially interested in their use of video for self-representation as an instance of "indigenous media." Consequently, I was rather surprised when, in the course of a meeting, some of the KDA members informed me, "We have decided to accept your offer to make a documentary film in Kafa." As I had not, to my knowledge, extended this offer, I was taken aback at first, but quickly accepted. During this meeting the merits of Kafa were highlighted in a manner to suggest that this "unknown culture" would be of interest, not only to an aspiring anthropologist, but also to audiences worldwide. Kafa was entirely different from the dominant portrayals of Ethiopia. I learned that Kafa was believed to be the "ancestral homeland of coffee," coffee production being a benefit of the region's lush natural resources. And yet no one, it seemed, was taking advantage of these resources. Later I would realize how my film project, intended to globally disseminate their cultural claim to coffee's ancestry, was also believed to be able to lure investors able to tap the growth of coffee and other resources. While I entered a site where these individuals were actively remaking their culture for participation in the global flows of capital, they were invested in advancing a fixed cultural identity of authenticity to the world. They perceived "culture" to be a universal construct they could exchange for developmental resources.

Indigenous art circulates in a market dominated by Western standards, where it is believed that only unique qualities can give value to cultural commodities. For the African artist to access the Western "marketplace," Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, "one must, above all, clear a space in which one is distinguished from other producers and products . . . by the construction and the marking of difference" (1991:342). Kafa is self-consciously positioned as coffee's ancestral homeland in an attempt, not only to stake a claim to cultural uniqueness, but also to insert their cultural rights into a globally lucrative cash crop. By infusing this commodity with a universalized aesthetic of "cultural uniqueness," the Kafecho make it labor for "traditional" or "authentic" status, thereby participating in the normalizing flow of exchange between "developing" non-Western locations and "developed" Western ones. Their cultural claim to the ancestry of coffee employs modernity's power that "has turned every element of the real into a sign, and the sign reads 'for sale' " (344).

While the recent project of cultural preservation in Kafa had already employed the use of video documentation, my involvement carried the expectation of encapsulating the Kafa culture for Western audiences. The underlying assumption in our agreement was that a camera in the hands of a Westerner had the power to deliver the Kafa message farther than their indigenous media. Such expectations were accompanied by the hope of having the final product broadcast on *Discovery* or a channel like it. (Need I remind the reader that I had yet to actually begin formal training in ethnographic filmmaking?) Despite the fact that I expressed an interest in *their* efforts to promote cultural legacy, rather than being a part of the promotion itself, the KDA was intent that I convey their unique culture in a traditional and romanticized manner, one which they perceived to be highly marketable. So not only did my notions of what the project entailed diverge significantly from those of my collaborators, but my understanding proved to gravely underestimate their stakes in my project.

While many filmmakers and film theorists advocate indigenous self-representation and heavily critique the visual representations created by outsiders (see Gabriel 1982; Pines and Willemen 1989), Bishaw and the KDA saw a benefit in appropriating the Western ethnographic film genre (albeit of the cable television variety). In our now ultra-mediated world, ethnographic filmmaking can no longer presume, as in early encounters, that the "primitive" is ignorant about cameras and image-making (see Ruby's (1991) critique of Robert Gardner). On the contrary, these individuals were explicitly aware of the power of the image, an awareness which begins to reveal a shifting desire by ethnographic subjects for an intentional and motivated relationship with the documentary film genre. Unlike indigenous self-representation, ethnographic film in the hands of a Western anthropologist may actually be desired by subjects who wish to deliver their inscribed message to a place they may not be able to access otherwise. In other words, Bishaw and the KDA members recognized the benefit of connecting an "old responsibility with a new technology."[2]

We arranged another meeting to further discuss the project and to allow me to interview formally Bishaw before he returned to Ethiopia. During the interview with Bishaw I spent less time enquiring about the Kafa culture in-and-of-itself, than exploring his role in the development of Kafa's modern identity. This interview became the structure for a thirty-minute video I produced at the local community access station (Westmoreland 1999). Through the interview with Bishaw and further research into his country's past, I began to learn how discourses and images of complete deprivation have worked to elide the disunity and diversity at the core of Ethiopian nationalism. Delving into Ethiopia's past we discover "the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny" (Anderson 1991:12).

Two schools developed in relation to the interpretation of Ethiopian history and represent an ongoing polemic. The first school traces Ethiopian nationalism to a legacy of the Axumite Empire "symbolized by the monarchy" (Bariagaber 1998:1059), with an emphasis on the unity of the peoples of Ethiopia. The second school posits a more critical approach to the historical hegemony of the Amhara ethnic group based on "the exclusionary nature of the Ethiopian political system" (1059). The ruling Amhara elites created and perpetuated a mythical history to legitimize their right to power (Sorenson 1993:10). Through this mythical creation, "the image of Ethiopia was constructed on the basis of an already-existing discourse of domination, that of the Amhara elite" (19). In reaction to this history of dominance, many groups challenge the first school and called for the reconstruction of the unifying discourses of Ethiopian history.

Kafa was also subjected to the colonial encroachment of the Amhara. Gano (1996) notes that "King Menelik of Shewa was carrying out his plan for a centralized Ethiopia and started his invasion of the southern Kingdoms in 1883" (4). Kafa was itself a powerful empire, however, and it took four years for Menelik to finally defeat King Chinito, the last of the Kafa kings. The period following the Kafa defeat until the ousting of Emperor Haile Selassie has been characterized by "a gradual change from identification with the emperor of Kafa to that of the emperor of Ethiopia" (Orent 1969:56).

In the West, Selassie came to signify the whole of the Third World, "assuming a proper role in international hegemonic order" (Sorenson 1993:36). When the socialist military, known as the Derg, seized power in 1974, the West saw the alliance with the Soviet Union as a loss of control over the Third World: "freed from the order imposed by Western hegemony, the Third World erupts into chaos, Africa's savage essence is unleashed, demons emerge from the heart of darkness, all with terrifying results" (37). Thus, Ronald Regan attacked the Derg as part of the "Evil Empire," and the media immediately linked communism to famine (13). Overnight the image of Ethiopia transformed from an emblem of African pride to an emaciated, helpless famine victim.

In an effort to maintain control over Ethiopia, the Derg dictatorship perpetuated the strong-arm unification tactics initiated by Amhara emperors. Internally, however, oppositional groups burgeoned throughout the country in resistance to the state's control and mass riots frequently erupted in the capital. During this early resistance, Bishaw had been attending Addis Ababa University and had participated in many student protests. He was arrested three times, spending several weeks or months in prison on each occasion. These riotous times spawned Bishaw's dedication to Kafa's self-identity.

Since the establishment of democracy in 1991, Ethiopia has struggled to come to terms with its multiple personalities. Resistance to movements of independence continues, as evidenced by the recurring warring between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The state continues to rely on unification propaganda, but now recognizes itself as a state with many national identities. "Unity through Diversity," the dictum goes. In a clear move to appease divergent national identities, cultural celebration programs have been initiated across the country. The program developed by the Kafa division of the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism capitalizes on this endorsement.

"I think it is a good approach"

I arrived in Kafa during the summer of 2000, where I became acquainted with a cultural group actively resistant to the existing stereotypes of Ethiopia on the whole and yet invested in advancing reified notions of cultural "authenticity." My video production, largely driven by the desires of my contacts and informants from the Kafa region of southwestern Ethiopia, was to be a visual representation that transcended the negative depictions unwillingly inherited by them and their community of Ethiopia as drought- and famine-stricken. Moreover, there was an implied agenda to attract the economic interest of the outside world through the medium of ethnographic film/video that went beyond a mere celebration of a previously undocumented culture. This video production established my own complicity in the tradition of ethnographic representation. Unlike my predecessors who have made ethnographic films in Ethiopia, I did not enter a pastoral, drought-threatened landscape. The region of Kafa sits securely within a lush and bountiful highland, home to some of the last existing rainforest area in this part of Africa (so I was told). Furthermore, I had been invited to come and make a film about the Kafa culture by indigenous members of this group, rather than arriving unannounced. This invitation carried a mixed blessing. For an aspiring ethnographic filmmaker the serendipitous offer was rich with opportunity, but also rife with unexpected challenges for the uninitiated.

When I arrived in Bonga to begin the video project I was taken to meet with Bishaw and Tesfaye Woldemichael, the Chief Administrator of the Kafa-Sheka Zone, to discuss our project.[3] I explained that I intended to develop a collaborative video production with members of the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism, specifically naming Yacob Woldemarian, Assefa Gebremarian, and the cameraman,

Tadesse Gebretsadik. Each of these individuals had been recommended to me by the KDA. I explained that I wished to focus on the cultural preservation pursuits of this office. As I did not feel qualified to make a documentary on the whole Kafa culture, I hoped that choosing this one element of preservation would still allow the spirit of Kafa to flow through. I wanted to ensure a reflexive, self-critical approach, and suggested that we have a public screening at the end of the shoot. Feedback from the audience would provide additional opportunity for the collaborative process to account for the views of the indigenous population. All my suggestions seemed well received and Yacob and Assefa were assigned as my crew's hosts.

As trained professionals in their respective fields of linguistics and history, my crew recognized Yacob and Assefa as essential figures of Kafa cultural authority. Yacob and Assefa, along with Tadesse, instructed us in their trade and introduced us to a varied assortment of projects that negotiate the place of tradition within the project of development. They possessed an immense amount of knowledge about their culture, and their work attempted to engage the whole process of Kafa's "coming of age" in the modern world.[4] Their work as cultural preservationists provided a poignant inlet into the society and culture, and Yacob and Assefa unwittingly became the focus of our video. We developed a shooting schedule that incorporated what they felt was essential to incorporate in a documentary about Kafa. As they became our vehicles into Kafa culture, we arranged nearly all of our filming around their positions within the culture. At the outset, the collaborative component of the project seemed to ensure their mutual support. As a Western anthropologist, I was believed to be well-versed in the same paradigm of cultural representation as they were. Furthermore, anything extra I brought to the project helped convey my academic authority. I had offered them a three-page proposal of the work, which Yacob had pored over making extensive notation. I asked him what he thought, not sure if he was able to decipher all my jargon, and recall him proclaiming, "It is very interesting. I think it is a good approach." It seemed that every suggestion I made was adopted without question. Of course, their cooperation implied that I would make a video that conveyed the same cultural identity that they were invested in promoting.

Tadesse, the cameraman, did not necessarily share their reverence for the Western filmmakers. In fact, he did not express interest in our project at all as he did not see us as authorities of image-mastery—this was already his task. Indeed, the excessive attention displayed toward my crew and project could easily symbolize for him the preference for the Western film crew and their presumed ability to succeed where he was ineffectual. He was friendly with us, but it was only when we wished to see and use his work that he became excited. Tadesse had a locked cabinet with dozens of tapes recorded within the Kafa region. When we inquired, he would slowly but eagerly search through the collection until he came to the exact one he was after. I asked Yacob and Assefa how the tapes were used. They gave a vague answer about future generations. The videos, it appears, lay stagnant, awaiting a purpose for their existence. For now they were unsure what to do with this collection of images. So

while this archive of videos remained dormant, Yacob, Assefa, and the others still saw value in bringing a Western anthropologist to make new images.

Preserving Authority

During our first week in Bonga, the capital of Kafa, Yacob wanted to show us the lushness and beauty of Kafa, at least in part to show its dissimilarity with the image of a barren Ethiopia. After a 45-minute hike up to the famed Barta waterfall, we interviewed Yacob standing on the crest of a hill with verdant foliage all around and two waterfalls streaming in the background. The camera bore witness as Yacob rejected the common portrayal of Ethiopia as drought- and famine-ridden. "We say no!" Unlike these stereotypical portrayals of Ethiopia, Kafa was rich with natural resources, eagerly awaiting the development of industries to garner them. But more than mere landscape, Kafa's ecology proffered lush cultural heritage as well. After all, Kafa was claimed to be the ancestral source of one of the world's most recognized cash crops: coffee. Kafa was different from much of Ethiopia and my collaborators believed that the production of a film in Kafa could rectify the world's misconceptions and lure audiences from far and wide.

The discourse of famine and drought has to a great extent narrated Ethiopia as a void, and part and parcel of this depiction is Ethiopia as the quintessential locale for the distribution of foreign aid—aid to be thrown, seemingly, into the insatiable void. The months preceding my departure for Ethiopia had provided another wave of reports on drought-stricken Africa. The heavy cloak of famine cast across the whole of Ethiopia, indeed the whole of Africa, acts to conceal the diversity of experience within that country and continent, respectively. Kafa has unwillingly inherited these representations. The Kafa region never experienced problems with drought and Yacob and others necessarily rejected these well-known characterizations. That Kafa was missing from the international reports of famine ironically meant that it was absent as a site for the distribution of international aid. Being fully aware of the stereotype their country evoked, my informants resisted the image of barrenness, as if to both quell the fears of investors and entice the fantasies of tourists.

Since the beginning of my acquaintance with the Kafa region and the Kafecho people nearly two years earlier, I had been repeatedly reminded that Kafa had fallen between the cracks. Kafa was a place neglected by the government, non-governmental organizations, and researchers alike. My invitation to make a film was meant to help change this. Since I was to make a movie that would reveal the wonders of Kafa to the world and attract some to visit Kafa, including investors, researchers, and tourists, we developed a plan with Yacob and Assefa that incorporated what they felt were the essential elements of Kafa culture. Trips to the "rural area" were arranged for us to meet representative members of the Kafa culture, figures that visibly embodied "traditional" cultural knowledge. For them, these locations embodied the "true Kafa culture" they wanted us to document. For me,

these were locations of contact between them and the people they were trying to "preserve."

One such trip took us to meet a *gepata*, a traditional local leader, literally translated as "king of the hill." The *gepata* and his entourage, which ranged from 30-50 people, took us on a survey of his land, a grand expedition that lasted several hours. Through Yacob and Assefa, we interviewed the *gepata* about his role in Kafa culture as he sat in one of his sanctuaries with his followers standing around. He believed his duty was to preserve the culture of his people by encouraging participation in traditional holiday rituals. We later learned from Yacob and Assefa that his authority was weakening and that farmers were defacing his ancestral land. He asked for their office to help him protect the sacred plots.

As evidenced in the *gepata*'s plea, Yacob and Assefa now held positions of power far greater than his own. Their position as government workers, however, placed Yacob and Assefa in an ironic insider-outsider position to their own culture. They embodied the very predicament addressed in their work, the challenge to engage both traditional and modern modes of existence. Since they believed "culture is dead in Bonga," an urbanizing town, and that it now only exists in the rural areas, they could not constitute Kafa culture from their positions in Bonga, but could only record and represent its death by entombing it in an archive and museum. Yet as cultural workers their task was to help integrate traditional ways into modern life. For me, this put them in a position of immense cultural authority and responsibility in the Kafa community. Since all significant decisions in the Kafa-Sheka Zone, including job postings, were presented for council approval, Yacob and Assefa were recognized as members of the Kafa educated elite due to their vocations. Following the work of Ali A. Mazuri (1980), Roy Armes argues that the acquisition of Western education has supplanted the traditional basis of social stratification. Mazuri argues, "Instead of status based on, say, age, there emerged status based on literacy. Instead of classes emerging from the question, 'Who owns what?', class formation now responds to the question, 'Who knows what?' " (1987:16).

Kafa culture was busily being made anew by a leadership and social structure that privileged modern educational status. During my first days in Bonga, a Kafecho schoolteacher living in Addis Ababa presented the "first written history" of Kafa to an assembly of elders and officials. Though critiqued for not being thorough enough, his work was generally praised for collecting the history in writing. From these positions, the educated were actively restructuring the mode through which heritage was passed on. As government authorities enacting Western modes of cultural archiving, however, their acts were precariously similar to the previous regime's mode of cultural oppression. Since the Derg regime confiscated cultural objects, the *gepata* and others had remained suspicious of artifact collecting.

After the Amhara army defeated King Chinito in 1897 and more acutely after the socialist takeover, cultural diversity and uniqueness were repressed actively in favor of creating a unifying whole. The current condition of the Ethiopian National Museum makes evident the remnants of this ideology. Whole sections contain cultural artifacts placed randomly together, making one amorphous whole without any form of geographical, chronological, or cultural identification. Ironically, the former authoritarian tactics of suppressing cultural identity and confiscating cultural equipment has increased the value of the artifacts for their cultural inheritors, necessitating a mode of preservation which perpetuates the process of removal in order to place the artifacts in the "safety" of the museum.

This, of course, broke with traditional modes of preserving cultural heritage. During our meeting with a Kafecho bard, he suggested that recorded documents were inherently inferior. As was translated for us, he said that rats could get into the archive and eat the cassettes and then the songs would be lost forever. He maintained that passing historical knowledge from person to person was the best way. However, this elderly man had been unsuccessful in finding an heir to continue this tradition.

The Kafa office of the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism employed several methods for preserving the Kafecho traditional past. The most obvious site was known as the Kafa Transitional Museum, a title I took to mean both that the museum was temporary (awaiting the building of a new museum) and that this was a site of cultural becoming. When asked about the best means for preserving culture, Yacob and Assefa acknowledged the benefit of artifacts remaining in the home, but professed the museum's ability to protect the artifacts and make them available for study. Although the artifacts exhibited were contained for their safety, the placement within the museum reinscribed them with a new cultural logic. Far from being "complete," they were in the process of becoming, being made anew. The artifacts moved from the paradigm of sacred *use* to one of sacred *exhibition*. Martha Norkunas (1993) reminds us that the museum becomes a new cultural and historical artifact itself, created "in the present to legitimize contemporary personal, social, and political circumstances" (6). The museum itself becomes a monument, embodying particular notions and objects of the thing it represents. The museum-artifact becomes an extension of the larger project of nationalism—the making of the nation as an artifact (Anderson 1991). In this way, the Kafa Transitional Museum serves to establish Kafa's cultural and ethnic independence within the Ethiopian project of unified diversity.

The collection of cultural artifacts for display in the museum was not the only project of the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism. Most striking to me was their system of adult education. It was common for Yacob and Assefa, both of whom worked at the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism in Bonga, to conduct meta-cultural workshops that distinguished between "beneficial traditions" and "harmful practices." The two men would travel throughout the region by vehicle or

horseback to discuss a wide range of issues with the people, from female genital circumcision to the idioms and riddles of the Kafanoonoo language. Combining cultural preservation and community education—or as Assefa puts it, "preservation and promotion"—they aimed to invoke a sense of cultural identity and instill self-pride.

While it was believed that self-pride could bring the peasantry from "backwardness" to a state of "development," it was also necessary for them to be trained to perform their culture in new ways. Though the tourist industry was nonexistent at the time of this research, they had already begun informing and training rural inhabitants in the ways to best interact with foreigners. Furthering Van den Berghe and Keyes's argument (1984), Norkunas (1993) writes, "Indigenous peoples began to shape their identities according to what they believed tourists wanted to see ... [as] a kind of participation in stereotyping, a tacit agreement to domination" (7). The risk of this performance becomes evident when the "native" begins to accept the altered identity as true.

This dynamic, of monumentalizing some aspects of Kafa culture while filtering out particular types of traditions for the benefit of development, warranted acute attention from my point of view. How I directed the camera and what types of questions I asked aimed to highlight this phenomenon. The Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism tacitly endorsed these principles and ideologies as absolutely essential to their community's self-betterment, adopting Western modes of cultural representation and championing liberal notions of correcting "harmful practices." As a novice filmmaker and anthropologist, my ability to negotiate this complicated terrain was made more difficult by the presumption that I endorsed all their efforts.

Anthropological Fame

One morning in the village of Mera, Yacob, Assefa, my crew, and I waited to meet with a Kafecho bard, whom they wanted to include in the film. We huddled together out of the rain. Turning on my camera, I took advantage of the pause to ask Yacob and Assefa what they thought we would achieve by making this video in Kafa. Yacob responded by reversing the direction of the question:

> You as a professional, you are the one to make this film good or bad . . . but in general, I'm sure that you'll achieve great fame in this work. I'm sure these crewmembers, you three, will be famous in filming these things. And I'm sure that the Europeans or the Americans will be happy in your filming . . . The approach what I have seen 'til now, in these last weeks, I think it is good. You've been filming nicely, but the final product will be the one to decide your work. Not only, finally I can say, you'll come again and do other things, which are left professionally. You'll be famous, I see in the future.

Assefa continued in Yacob's direction, but then more centrally addressed my initial question:

> This is very interesting resources for the Europeans or Americans, because very rural areas, which is I think not there [in Europe and America] to see the people, for this you'll be famous people. Or something what I say, you'll be a good worker to go deep with unexploited culture; unexploited in the sense which is not done for and exposed for the people of the different corners of the world.[5]

My initial reaction was that they just didn't get it: I wouldn't be achieving fame! But these statements reveal the different ways in which we approached the project. I was restricting myself to a Hollywood notion of fame. On the other hand, they had every reason to suppose I would gain fame, assuming that recognition by my peers, an advanced degree, and future career in film production and anthropology would all follow. Lurking within these expectations is the presumed cultural capital of combining the ethnographic image and the Western-dominated devices for visual representation. I did not interpret their answers as resentment; rather, we were entering an exchange of services. I would get the anthropologically rich Kafa culture for my research and they would get the recognition available through Western channels of scholarly and visual representation. They believed that I had the ability to master the image's power for mutual benefit, while they had the wealth of an authentic culture to exchange for my presumed abilities. In his answer, Yacob inverted the intention of my question in order to draw attention to our responsibility for the film to be a success as well as for the conveying of Kafa to the world. There was a trust implied, but not a blind trust.

While I had been under the impression that we were the first foreigners to come to Kafa to produce a film, we soon learned that a Dutch team had undertaken another project a few years earlier. This film, titled *Kafa Maybe Tomorrow*, focused on the efforts of a Dutch NGO working in the region. A great deal of negativity had come to surround this film, because no word about it had been received since the filming a couple of years earlier. As this was the precedent we were facing, the film was mentioned frequently. We made light of the situation in a running joke that it would arrive "maybe tomorrow," but this situation shows the importance of return in an image-making relationship.

Notions of accessibility, power, and capital all informed the workings of our technological interaction and within the trans-cultural setting these factors affected our collaboration. My relationship with Yacob and Assefa formed around the making of technologically produced images and we developed mutual expectations of these images. While they actively videotaped cultural events throughout the region and had produced a two-part program in conjunction with Ethiopian Television (ETV), there was a peculiar reverence for the image in the hands of a Westerner.

I marveled at the weight Yacob and Assefa bore with their responsibility, but I could not help but notice the contradictions they faced in entombing their culture in order to ensure its survival. I felt that their task was of incredible significance, and so we began focusing the film almost entirely on these two men. They were busily taking us to the "true" areas of Kafa culture in order to document cultural practices and indigenous people uncontaminated by modernization, yet we persisted in filming these modern cultural brokers interacting in these "pure" locations. They soon became concerned about this focus of the film. While there was strong interest, on the part of Yacob, Assefa, and others, to adopt technologically advanced image-making apparatuses in order to make representations that would entice foreign investment, the idea of being positioned in the line of sight, being made an image, was another matter.

While casting any individual in the role of *the* Kafecho is inherently problematic, the opposing perspectives reveal the crux of our miscommunication. I was approaching the project with a notion of culture as dynamic and perpetually becoming. Yacob and Assefa were positioned in a state of flux trying to negotiate a dialogue between tradition and modernity. This endeavor required that they seek stable ground. The two perspectives of tradition and modernity are not mutually exclusive and do not follow a linear narrative of progress. For if the notion of becoming is cast with tradition and modernity as endpoints, we fall back into a hierarchical model of primitive and civilized. And yet, while I could express comfort in my position of fluidity, Kafa was inevitably mired in a state of "underdevelopment" and non-becoming. While I championed the dynamics of culture, I risked naïvely missing the precarious spectrum in which their identity must operate. In this context, my concentration away from the "authentic culture" must have been disconcerting. Indeed, I was disregarding the implied exchange.

On several occasions I was told that only after solidifying pride in one's cultural identity could one successfully move toward development. This pervasive rhetoric had become official ideology, reiterated by nearly every government bureaucrat I met. The parameters of cultural pride, however, do not lend themselves to easy definition. I tried to understand the process of remaking Kafa culture so that it could both instill self-pride in its members and help deliver them to a state of development. And, as my key informants, Yacob and Assefa became the site of closest scrutiny. After some initial concern about focusing the project around them, we were finally able to explain the prominence of their presence in the film. Interestingly, this was communicated by analogy to the movie *Titanic*, which had become popular even in this unsuspecting locale.[6] We explained that this movie was about more than just a ship and that we learn about the broader event through engagement with specific characters. They would be the narrative-source for a story about Kafa culture. They immediately identified with this analogy and seemed relieved. Rather amazed at the instant transformation, I could not be sure how they related their experience to this Hollywood blockbuster.

I don't think Yacob and Assefa believed that I had the means to make a movie like *Titanic*, but the technology of image production had long been exclusively limited to Western control. While our negotiation demonstrates how culture is no longer the providence of the Western anthropologist, there remained recognition that a message in the hands of a Western anthropologist may be conveyed to places otherwise inaccessible. As was being demonstrated to me, they believed that the Westerner had intimate knowledge of this technology and knew how to make it labor on his or her behalf. Unfortunately, Yacob and Assefa had expectations about the message this film would convey that did not sync exactly with my own. We were negotiating the film project from different positions of authority within Mudimbe's ambiguous realm of the postcolonial "in between." In *The Invention of Africa*, Mudimbe (1988) calls attention to the dichotomizing system set forth by the colonial structures: "traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies" (4). He thus illustrates how Kafa, like many postcolonial communities, has entered into the diffused space between dichotomies. He suggests that this position "in between" can be identified "as the major signifier of underdevelopment. It reveals the strong tension between a modernity that often is an illusion of development, and a tradition that sometimes reflects a poor image of a mythical past" (5). Yacob, Assefa, and I were struggling to find a means for communicating within these positions. Ironically, the roving Hollywood image of *Titanic* offered such a means.

The Final Screening

All of Yacob and Assefa's projects had the wonderful ability to demonstrate a culture in the process of change. Though Yacob, Assefa, and others would often remark to us that culture was dead in Bonga or that only the peasants possess the Kafa culture, I did not understand the full concern of the community until the final screening. At the end of our filming, Andrew, a member of my crew, and I prepared a rough edit the night before the screening to demonstrate our focus and to outline the theme of our production.[7] I announced to the crowd of over 400 of the community's leaders (government officials, church leaders, education heads, and so forth), invited by Yacob and Assefa, that this was a project about cultural preservation. Despite this introduction, these elite members of the community expected instead to see culture preserved. This slight variation between the act and the object of preservation proved the most significant point of contention.

During the screening, the crowd seemed to enjoy watching people they knew and these scenes would frequently evoke laughter and smiles. After the screening, however, the mood shifted radically. Though only about six members of the audience spoke out, as figures of authority they largely dictated the audience's mood and perspective, as would later become more evident. To analyze the act of cultural preservation—the remaking of the self as an other—strikes deep into a public secret,

"that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated" (Taussig 1999:5). The defacement of this public secret struck most dearly these elite members of society, for they were no longer the bearers of culture but its defenders. They were the ones most invested in perpetuating an image of their culture that they no longer fit into. And yet the film was largely about them. Not just Yacob and Assefa, but the emerging culture—the educated, acculturating, and urbanizing Kafecho of Bonga— precariously dependent on a traditional notion of Kafa culture. But they did not want this emerging culture presented as *the* Kafa culture.

I debated with them that culture should not be viewed as a static entity only available outside of the "developing" urban areas. The people spoke openly and vigorously about Kafa culture, revealing their sensitivity to the idea that culture is dynamic. While on the one hand it means that Kafa culture is resilient and transferable (as demonstrated by the work of Yacob and Assefa trying to carry the culture into a new and changing future), dynamics also implies a loss of something or a rupture in the structure in which a community bases their identity.

The members of the audience that commented after the screening showed exclusive concern about "whose culture" this footage represented. They claimed it to be inauthentic. As one participant asked me, "Preserving whose culture? The culture that is artificially or the film that is artificially made here? . . . It lacks genuinity [sic]."[8] While Ukadike may have denounced ethnographic film's propensity to seek out the idealized "primitive" body as a connection to a perceived past that ignores urban African life (1994:46), the remote location of cultural study has become reified for these Kafecho. The notion of anthropology is well known in Kafa and carries with it certain expectations. I was asked, "How can one study culture without going to the rural areas?" Referencing a well-known trope in anthropology, Assefa had been fond of reminding me, "The anthropologist must endure hardship." Their ability to utilize my professional position depended on me working within these confines. The "hardship" associated with anthropologists "roughing it" in undeveloped "primitive" locales was understood to confirm their ethnographic authority[9]—Bonga did not qualify.

While the nature of cultural change can never be divorced from the social and political structures affecting it, a close tracking of the audience's grievances reveals a propensity to critique the minute details of errant traditions. Their concern emerges at the intersection of act and object, where modern materials get used for traditional practices. For example, we recorded a "coffee ceremony" conducted by Assefa's wife.[10] Believing the "ceremony" conducted in its everyday setting to be the most "authentic," we failed to realize how this setting would be deemed inappropriate for a film on cultural preservation. Showing this silent woman dutifully go through the arduous process of preparing the afternoon coffee, while we sat around awaiting the rich stimulant, was criticized for the use of modern artifacts: a steel rod to crush the beans, glass cups to serve the coffee, and refined sugar, rather than the traditional salt

or butter, to flavor it. Shot after shot failed to show this "ceremony" in its authentic context. Since Kafa claims the status of being the ancestral homeland of coffee, much of the traditional identity relied on pristine notions of Kafa's coffee culture. Nevertheless, coffee continues to play an integral role in the daily existence of the urbanized Bonga Kafecho. Coffee is consumed after every meal (around three to four cups per meal) and for coffee breaks between meals. Needless to say, cafés abound in Bonga, but the busier ones employ large Italian espresso machines. And when made at home, the women use the modern artifacts mentioned above. By bringing together things constituting "traditional" and things constituting "modern" into the same image, it became explosive. As Mudimbe suggested, the space between these dichotomies is "the major signifier of underdevelopment" (1988:5). To show these elements together is to conjure the extreme tensions inherent in this in-between space.

In early Soviet cinema, Sergei Eisenstein developed a filming and editing theory called "dialectical montage" that utilized the mixing of opposites to create a collision effect. Be it separate shots or elements within a frame, he developed montage as a political aesthetic of pairing that contrasts two elements. This pairing ultimately subverts the subdued but unique qualities that distinguish them as separate opposites, thus creating a unique and more powerful synthesis—one intended to provoke. But more than mere collision, "montage is conflict" (1977:38). By concentrating on the work of cultural preservation rather than preserved culture, I had unintentionally evoked the power of montage and thus composed an image of conflict. After all, cultural preservation is a mode of cultural production that joins the traditional and the modern in the practice of archiving, yet with the presumption that the former maintains its qualities independent of the latter. It appeared that I had haphazardly paired these qualities, thus destabilizing both.

This mixing of cultural elements emerged repeatedly in the footage. Yacob and Assefa's work and statements consistently evoked the stagnant images of the "primitive other" to constitute the purity of Kafa culture, and yet I insisted on mixing these images with scenes of their "modern" refashioning of Kafa culture. If Mudimbe is correct in his assessment, these reified representations have an implicit safety, but anything dabbling in between the notions of traditional and modern would be marked as unsafe. In the representation that I created, I tried to show the fluidity of culture across dichotomies, thus failing to distinguish between them. As Taussig tells us, "defacement is already inscribed within the object" (1999:43). Furthermore, I suggest that the textures of the modern mixed with the traditional may reveal this inscription.

While I became intrigued with the processes of cultural change, the audience desired emphasis limited to traditions. While I moved through and between localities, they wished for more situatedness. Though incredibly challenging, the interaction after the screening provided the most poignant material of everything shot.[11] Indeed, it provided a perspective counter to my own, one I had said I desired as part of a reflexive, self-critical, and collaborative approach. Nevertheless, as Yacob and

Assefa both spoke in defense of my project, they revealed a strong shift in their own perspectives. Assefa remarked in Kafanoonoo:

> First, we should note that the man [Mark] is doing his Ph.D. Therefore, he has his own techniques of collecting the data/information. The academic significance of the film is also important . . . They view culture from two perspectives. One of the questions they asked me was, "You guys said that a true Kafa culture exists in the rural area of the region. In your opinion does that mean the rural people do not want modern technology?" We don't think that the rural population will continue to live in the same way forever. Where is our culture heading? On one hand we are trying to preserve the existing culture, and on the other, the existing culture is being eroded by new technology . . . The other thing we should note is that every culture has its own bad sides. There is no perfect culture. That is why we have worldwide movement to get rid of some harmful cultural practices. Defining culture is really difficult. It has many different definitions. Culture is everything about life. It is intertwined with human life. It is everything, and everything has its own good and bad sides. Therefore, our understanding about culture should not be such that culture has always good things.[12]

In fact, during the final screening to the community, Yacob and Assefa fell back on the *Titanic* analogy to explain to the audience the intent of the film. The others in the audience, however, did not clamber aboard this ship. No longer able to be traditional yet unable to be modern either, they appeared to be unprepared to see themselves in the horrifying "Third World" position of perpetually "becoming." By making images of these urbanizing rather than rural figures, I risked inappropriately ossifying their representation and thus also revealing the public secret of their slipping cultural identity.

Although I have been trained to scrutinize the essentialized deployment of cultural identity and modes for commodifying it, a dogmatic stance on these issues would ignore the subtleties of their efforts to negotiate the visual consumption of their culture. Furthermore, an ultra-critical approach within the video would sabotage their efforts to assert their agency. Perhaps more difficult to articulate is how these postcolonial individuals enable themselves to work within the essentializing structures and yet against the deterministic flows of global capital for their own betterment. Yet as the pieces of magnetic tape come together, I am unable to make the film desired because it does not exist in the strips of images I collected. There is no scene of an "authentic" coffee ceremony. The video inextricably portrays Yacob and Assefa as existing both within and without the Kafa culture. Notions of authenticity and tradition become porous as a viable construction of Kafa attempts to emerge.

In a discussion about postcolonial African art, Appiah notes a Yoruba sculpture of a man on a bicycle. He observes how this piece of art gets distinguished from "authentically traditional" African art as "*neotraditional*." "*Traditional* because

it uses actual or supposed precolonial techniques but *neo-* . . . because it has elements that are recognizably colonial or postcolonial in reference," but the distinctive factor "is that it is produced for the West" (1991:346). In order to operate within the global flows of capital, the Kafecho find their heritage the most viable product for exchange, but if this heritage gets cast as a "neotraditional" product for the West then the "aura of authenticity" that gives it value becomes threatened. Although Kafa is publicized as the "ancestral homeland of coffee," the lucrative coffee industry has completely bypassed this region. A perceived lack of foreign investment and local development has cost Kafa their "ancestral" right to benefit from the coffee trade.

Returning to the notion that "culture is dead" in Bonga, we must remember that "dead" does not equal "non-existent." The dead culture is an absent presence, rather like a corpse or ghost, another symbol like underdevelopment, not yet existing with development but no longer existing with living culture. For the Kafecho, the return of the image (video) may speak to their desire for revival, but it invariably risks evoking the feelings of "self-inauthenticity" (Barthes 1981). While the desire for the image to return complicates the flow of "exotic" image consumption, it also attempts to repossess one's image, thus appropriating and challenging the alienating forces of commodity fetishism. As MacDougall acknowledges, "These are spaces charged with ambiguity, but are they not also the spaces in which consciousness is created" (1998:25). The Kafecho intentionally appropriate the dominant modes of representation in order to assert their own agency in the production of cultural representation, but their efforts also actively recreate their position in the world and at home.

The farewell dinner we had with Yacob, Assefa, and the others who assisted with our project went far in reassuring me that the entire project had not been abandoned as a failure. Yacob and Assefa asserted that the final discussion proved beneficial for them as well. Assefa remarked during the after-screening discussion, "What finally made me happy is that all these comments came up because we started doing something. We will continue to do similar things and you continue to criticize or give us your comments and suggestions. We will eventually come up with something good. Therefore, we should see this whole discussion from this perspective." Their boss asked me to send an audiocassette recording of the community discussion so that they may better assess the community's understanding of their own project over time. They felt it was revealed that the community did not understand the nature of their cultural preservation and hoped to better communicate this to them in the future. Yacob also felt that it became apparent that their work must not neglect the Kafecho of Bonga through the presumption that they are already "lost." While the film project may not have transcended the negative depictions of Ethiopia according to these naysayers, the scene described to me immediately following the screening discussion suggested otherwise. That evening at the farewell dinner, Mamo, a colleague of Yacob and Assefa's at the Ministry of Agriculture in Bonga, told me that when the screening let out, people poured into the streets debating

with each other about the meaning of culture and about the meaning of Kafa. Had this screening somehow prompted engagement in the public sphere?

When we left Bonga the next day, I was emotionally ambivalent and as yet unable to make sense of the project. Trying to assure them of my commitment, I reminded them that it may take at least a year for me to complete the post-production process, but by all means the video would return and so would I. Despite the unfavorable response to the video presentation, an expectation that I would return was as consistent as an expectation that the video would return. The last comment at the screening articulated this feeling, "You have done this work, you must be also, should I say, indebted to Kafa people, because we want to see something positive come out of this piece of work in the future . . . Finally, we expect that you will return to Kafa to continue this work." I came across this statement when reviewing my footage recently and my heart swelled with emotion. Through the trust and expectation that commingled in this statement, I felt endeared to Kafa. Unfortunately, my letters of progress on the video have gone almost unanswered. I have not heard from Yacob or Assefa at all and most of the letters I have received from various people are limited to requests for some sort of financial assistance. In a revealing indication of the community's opinions, Andrew received a letter several months after our return from a student we met, but whom I don't remember:

> I am a student of Addis Ababa University. I was born in Bonga—and I genteelly Kafa people—you and your friends pictured film about Kafa culture—and you showed for us that film in Bonga hall but most of university students (my friends) denounce that film but I don't support them because anyone couldn't express our culture before and now.[13]

Anthropological Reflexes

James Clifford notes that throughout the twentieth century, cross-cultural representations have perpetuated an ideological pattern of "discovering" cultures just as they are about to be "lost" for all time. Clifford traces the "theme of the vanishing primitive . . . [and] the end of traditional society" in the ethnographies of several prominent anthropologists including Boas, Malinowski, and Lévi-Strauss, as a means for establishing authority (1986:112). Kafa's cultural preservationists reiterated this perspective by positioning the educated elite as the internal purveyors of Kafa culture. In the urbanizing regional capital of Bonga, where I was frequently reminded, "Culture is dead," these urban elites not only marked the disappearance of "authentic" culture but also positioned themselves as outside collectors of that culture.

While Clifford critiques the ethnographic authority that depends on the "translation of the research experience into a textual corpus separate from its discursive occasions of production" and that is subsequently reformulated so that it "need no longer be understood as the communication of specific persons" (1988:39),

the members of Kafa uncritically accepted these conventions as normalized modes of cultural representation. Moreover, there was an implied preference for the lack of distinct voices—both of their own and those of their rural counterparts. The prominence of Yacob and Assefa's voices in the video proved to be an unexpected burden for them, first because of the weight of responsibility they held for representing the Kafa culture and second because of the suspicion towards the project's misdirected attention. The camera should have been more interested in the rural bearers of culture than in them. When the rural Kafecho did appear, only male figures of importance were given the opportunity for on-screen identification and, due to language barriers, gained voice only in mediated interviews with Yacob and Assefa translating. With the marketing of a cultural whole, individual identities may threaten to distract from the unifying project. This simplified construction of culture works hand-in-hand with the essentialized notions that ossified traditions are more digestible for Western audiences. While I had turned the camera to the urbanizing Kafecho in Bonga, they told me that I was pointing the camera in the wrong direction. They had appropriated the reverence for the non-modern, non-urban peasant body. Kafa's cultural brokers choose to point the camera at their own "others," preferring that the peasantry carry the responsibility of authenticity.

For the educated Kafecho I worked with on this project, Bonga represented the underdeveloped condition of existing "without culture" and yet also without modern development. Underdevelopment is an uncomfortable position for them, one without value. Their project of cultural preservation extended from a belief that it could reassert a cultural identity that would allow for the necessary self-confidence needed to move on to a developed state. Concern emerged when they realized they had been cast as central characters in my project. I did not realize immediately that these urban preservationists found it impossible to valorize their own cultural identity. The position within the community's elite stemmed from the Western conventions of status based on education and vocation, elements of status deemed external to cultural identity. In other words, they utilized their elite position to justify their authority as preservationists of "authentic" culture, yet this position necessitated a recognition that they existed outside any such definition. Interestingly, their position "in between" culture and development is a position anthropologists have now attempted to valorize. This stems from the recognition that "the West can no longer present itself as the unique purveyor of anthropological knowledge about others" (Clifford 1988:22). Yet the West irrevocably informs the paradigm of anthropological knowledge and it continues to dictate the consumption of that knowledge as evidenced by Kafa's adoption of these principles.

Yacob and Assefa and the other Kafecho elite, however, are making use of the discourses available to them. Their cultural inventiveness borrows from normalized perspectives about tradition and development, claiming a position within these ideological structures. While I tried to be respectful by not essentializing their culture and self-consciously not acting as though their culture was dead, this now

conventional understanding of culture in academic anthropology jeopardized their efforts to engage and ultimately lure the West with their culture. They implicitly understand Clifford's critiques: "The ethnographer always ultimately departs, taking away texts for later interpretation . . . The text, unlike discourse, can travel" (1988:39). Recognizing these integral characteristics of ethnography, Kafa's own authorities relied on my "text" traveling. Toward the end of my stay in Bonga, I was informed that I would need to sign a form of agreement. The primary interest in this agreement, as so stated, was to provide the Zonal Council, "free of any charge, with one original copy of the work after completion and with the right to show it within Kafa Sheka Zone."[14] The engagement with this production was necessarily contingent on making the image labor for them as well, but the return on their investment had to be realized as an actual return of the image.

Yacob and Assefa became the focus of my film because they represented the changing nature of culture, not only by their positions as heads of a cultural preservation project in Kafa, but also as individuals intentionally trying to craft a cohesive connection between tradition and development. My informants and I had differing agendas and perspectives on how best to approach this project that extended beyond mere miscommunication. From our respective positions, as indigenous cultural preservationists and as a Western anthropologist, we had completely different understandings of culture in general and how theirs should be represented in particular. This is especially interesting, though complicated, considering the efforts made to form a collaborative project designed to ensure the transparency of ethnographic methodology and intent. These differences, however, were not realized fully until we had a public screening of our video. Unwittingly, my crew and I had created a visual construction of Kafa culture that fostered deep ambivalence. Ironically, the critiqued weakness of the video, according to the members of the Kafa community, was the inappropriately missing essentialism that is supposed to define their anthropological identity. While I had concentrated on the dynamics and fluidity of the Kafa culture, they desired the stability and marketability of traditional authenticity.

I entered this project interested in how a self-aware and collaborative video documentary might be combined with indigenous cultural preservation to provide a more holistic approach to the act of cross-cultural representation. After the project had ended, a more poignant question emerged. How can ethnographers, who recognize the tendency of anthropology to essentialize and commodify culture, work with cultures that make use of these conventional discourses and negotiate access to global capital by commodifying their own culture?

While I endorsed reflexivity, my Kafecho collaborators did not subscribe to this framework. To do so would undermine their project and authority. Of course, one cannot expect this sort of mutual relationship with reflexivity in the field, nor should a reflexive approach presume mutual intentions. At the core of the reflexive

critique one finds the more crucial issue of responsibility, something much more volatile and without a prescribed methodology. For a reflexive approach to be truly responsible, contingency must be at the forefront of any research design. One must be prepared to acknowledge divergent intentions on site as well as in texts and films produced thereafter. As for my film shot in Kafa, *A Bright Future*, it is in the final stages of post-production. After nearly a dozen dissatisfying versions, I resigned myself to tell multiple stories that elucidate their desire to enter the global market as well as their issues with my approach.

Notes

[1]Bishaw Woldeyohannes, interview with author conducted in English, October 28th, 1998 in Denver, Colorado, USA.

[2]Haile Gerima (1984) advocated a similar approach of combining modern means with traditional cultural practices, but his approach denounced rather than appropriated Western involvement.

[3]The distinction "zone" constitutes an administrative area. In the Kafa-Sheka Zone, the Kafecho were the dominant ethnic group and the Kafecho occupied the majority of zonal administrative posts as well.

[4]Their office was responsible for research in indigenous linguistics, history, and culture. This broad range of issues included the development of a museum, instituting a written form for a traditionally oral language, recording aspects of the language and culture with audio and video devices, conducting field research, offering adult education workshops, and creating a tourist industry.

[5]Yacob Woldemarian and Assefa Gebremarian, interview with author conducted in English, July 19th, 2000 in Mera, Kafa-Sheka Zone, Ethiopia.

[6]Bonga did not have a cinema, but there were several businesses that nightly screened pirated videos of popular and not-so-popular Western films. We had previously come to realize that *Titanic*'s popularity extended to Bonga, which helped initiate the comparison. A Leonardo DiCaprio *Titanic* T-shirt had become a ubiquitous presence nearly every day at the hotel in which we stayed, as it migrated between the three teenaged daughters of the hotel owner.

[7]We took block sections from over twenty hours of footage and attempted to create a rough structure of vignettes without aid of commentary or intertitles for the audience to watch.

[8]Discussion comments with author made in English, August 4th, 2000 in Bonga, Kafa-Sheka Zone, Ethiopia.

[9]Gupta and Ferguson (1997) offer significant investigation about the authority and expectations associated with research locales.

[10]Ethiopia is well known for the elaborate preparation of coffee that begins with roasting the beans, then pounding them, then mixing the grounds with water, and finally serving.

[11]Andrew was recording the discussion on video.

[12]Discussion comments made in Kafanoonoo, August 4th, 2000 in Bonga, Kafa-Sheka zone, Ethiopia, later translated by Taddese Addo and Amanuel Gano.

[13]The letter was written in English and postmarked April 2001. For the sake of confidentiality the author remains anonymous.

[14]Cited from the agreement I signed along with five witnesses.

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