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Angolan Women in Search of Peace

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Abstract
The paper deals with the multiple wars against the Angolan people, and the central role being played by Angolan women in developing new forms and initiatives for peace. It shows how Angolan women have had to draw on the historic memory and practices of resistance and survival to maintain their dignity and pursue peace. It concludes that the success of any peace initiative would require a fundamental transformation of politics and society to give voice to Angolan women, and not simply the reconciliation of warring military factions.

Introduction
Ten years ago the combined forces of the Angolan army, the Cuban internationalist forces and elements of the South West African Peoples Organisation (SWAPO) defeated the forces of South Africa and UNITA at Cuito Cuanavale in Angola. However, the continuing bloodshed in Angola four years after the Lusaka Accords (of 1994) and ten years after the peace accords on Namibia compels progressive scholars to fully examine the meaning of peace and to attempt to understand the cultural, ideological and military forces that rob African people of their humanity. This devaluation of the lives of Africans is most keenly felt by African women who have borne the brunt of masculinity and violence that are celebrated in the warrior traditions in Angola. Progressive African women and feminist scholars have made it clear that it is not simply enough to understand the military defeat of South Africa. It is also necessary to understand the ideas and cultural practices that validate violence and war. Our knowledge of the linkages between direct violence, structural violence and the ideas of cultural domination has been enhanced by the work of researchers and scholars who seek to move beyond a superficial understanding of war and peace in Africa.
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According to Johan Galtung, "structural violence exists when social and economic conditions are such that people die or suffer as a consequence of the unequal distribution of resources, not as the result of physical violence". This concept of structural violence as a component of warfare is very critical to the wars against the Angolan people. African women, who bear the brunt of the structural and cultural violence, have been in the forefront of the struggle to redefine peace in a way that transforms the total reality of domination in Africa. The whole experience of Angola points to the need for more profound transformations in the society than merely silencing guns. Africans embarked on struggles of liberation to end the arrogance of Europe that is inscribed in the whole colonial project. Unfortunately, this struggle was not predicated on transforming the colonial ideas of capitalist relations, patriarchy and the warrior traditions in politics. The icon of the African soldier with the gun was supposed to be the hallmark of liberation and revolution. But now, in the aftermath of the end of formal apartheid, it is clearer that replacing colonial overlords with African males without changing the economic and social structures can only lead to entrenched exploitation.

In Africa where the nationalist ideology of male leaders has negated the positive aspects of the struggles for self determination, African feminists have deepened our understanding of how ethnicity and nationalism, as backward looking ideologies were anchored in a past which was based on male domination and masculine prowess. These scholars have been able to outline how African women experience "nationalism and ethnicity as violation, war and conflict between men who appropriate the female body as the territory upon which they fight their vicious and destructive games – often in the name of national sovereignty and the search for peace among themselves" (McFadden 1994: 33).

Angola provides a compelling lesson of nationalist and ethnic identifications that seek to appropriate the female body. In Angola, peace today, like the pacification campaigns of the colonial era, provides the context for warfare, rape and destruction. Since the anti colonial war (1961-1974), the war of destabilisation (1975-1991), and the destruction of the country by UNITA from 1992 to 1994, millions of the Angolan peoples have been uprooted from their village communities and over a million lost their lives. Angolan women have been affected disproportionately by the warfare, exploitation and violence.

On top of the misery and the massive loss of life in this rich but under-populated society, the living conditions of the Angolan producers deteriorated according to every index of quality of life: health care, access to water, infant mortality, access to primary education, nutrition and food security, pre and post natal care and household incomes. In the pervasive climate of devastation and degeneration, women were more susceptible to multiple assaults and attacks. Increased violence in the society meant that there was more sexual abuse and beating of women. In the midst of the war the Organisation for Angolan women had to set up a special hostel
for battered women. With the collapse of the economic infrastructure (other than the extraction of petroleum products) the survival techniques, remnants of the matri-centric production unit, of the African women on the whole kept body and soul together. The large scale movement and dispersal of population which had been precipitated by war and violence imposed more grievous responsibilities on them. It was in this context of war and dispersal that Angolan women were searching for levers of participation in their society to end militarism, violence and oppression.

The renegotiation by Angolan women of their place in society has been facilitated by the destruction caused by war and the breakdown of the village as the social unit. Millions of poor people were dispersed from their village communities and "rendered displaced" persons in the statistics of the United Nations. For example, Luanda, a colonial city constructed for less than 200,000 people, was now bursting with a population of more than 2 million. In the midst of such massive urbanisation, women engineered new survival strategies while maintaining those aspects of African culture which served the requirements of social reproduction. As was evident in the Luanda wars of October 1992 and January 1993 women demonstrated new forms of solidarity and comradeship. In the rural areas of Angola the struggles for food and life distinguished women who crossed military lines to forage for food and to ensure the survival of their children. The women of Kuito – Bie in particular, who organised the resistance against UNITA in the nine month siege, stamped a new image on the society and forever buried the myth of ethnic loyalty to UNITA.

This paper deals with the multiple wars against the Angolan peoples and the centrality of African women in moving away from warfare to new forms of social interaction. Angolan women have had to draw on the historic memory and practices of resistance and survival to maintain their dignity as human beings. The record of the spiritual, military and cultural resistance of the peoples is manifested in the songs, dance, art, drawings and other areas continues to inspire large sections of the population. The spirit of resistance has been manifest in numerous ways but nowhere as evident as in the forthright emergence of Angolan women on the centre stage of the economic life of their society. Despite the noteworthy presence of women in all spheres of existence, in the discussions on peace and reconstruction, women are still marginalised. If one were to measure the resources invested into reconciling warring parties as the basis for peace, one would then understand the limits of the present peace accords on Angola. This is evident from a study of the United Nations and its peace efforts in Angola.

Two Scenes of War and Resistance

Scene 1: Kuito, Bie
The battle for Kuito, Bie in the heartland of Angola, raged on with artillery
bombardment and a siege of the main urban administrative area for nine months (January to September 1993). The Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FALA), the army of UNITA and Jonas Savimbi, trained and equipped by a dying apartheid regime, had laid siege to this city in the central highlands of Angola. The peoples of Kuito, whose memory of African military and cultural resistance to colonial pacification campaigns was still fresh, shared a history of resistance to colonialism with the other peoples of Angola. These people had voted for UNITA in the 1992 elections. Jonas Savimbi, the leader of UNITA, claims his lineage from Kuito and had pinned his hopes on a quick victory in this town to reinforce the military occupation of over 65 per cent of the administrative centers of Angola. After the 55 day siege of Huambo, from January to March 1993, UNITA had dithered in the “peace talks” in Abidjan hoping to take Kuito in order to boost its bid to seize power by force. The army of UNITA had controlled most of the barrios of this city but there were three barrios which were not taken. The barrio of Katonge struggled to remain free and it was from this community that the women organised to stay alive.

The women of Kuito demonstrated exemplary courage in breaking the siege by going out at night to forage for food, transiting land mines, and using different techniques of dress, language and trading patterns to bypass the soldiers of the government and UNITA. The army of UNITA had bombarded the city indiscriminately in the military confrontation and on the radio deployed the ideals of Umbundu identity and family to legitimise the war. The civilian population lived in underground bunkers by day only to seize the night to find ways of living. The indiscriminate bombardment had killed thousands and it was unclear why UNITA wanted the kind of victory at the expense of the lives of the very people that they claimed to be fighting to defend. So many people died in the sieges of Kuito and Huambo that the dogs died from overeating cadavers. Bodies piled on the streets and the scenes of death forced the living to draw on their innermost strengths to find ways of survival. This sense of survival and solidarity by the women of Kuito assisted in the weakening of the army of UNITA and forced UNITA to bargain for a cease-fire that was called the Lusaka Protocol of November 1994.

While walking through the rubble of Kuito and Huambo in 1986, it became clear to this author that the opposition to militarism had to be deeper than simply signing peace accords. This understanding was sharpened by the ways in which, in the process of cementing the identity of survival, the women and men of Kuito were at the same time unmasking the myth of ethnic solidarity and ethnic identity, which had been unleashed to demobilise and divide the peoples of Angola by militarists who had internalised from their colonial education that Angola was a society of deep “tribal” rivalry.

African peasant women were clearly responsible for the defeat of Jonas Savimbi. The women of Kuito, as did the women of Uige, Malanje, Huambo and
other cities invaded by UNITA, deepened the consciousness of resistance and struggle in order to be able to breach battle lines to break the fetishism of war and masculine power which came to characterise the war of 1992-1994 after UNITA lost the elections and resorted to war. Women in Kuito, like women all over Angola, fell back on their knowledge and skills of plant medicine and empirical sciences to subsist in a society where the governmental apparatus had been forced to deploy the resources of the society in the purchase of artillery pieces and jets. This became clearer as the women explained how pumpkin leaves became so central to the diet of those under siege. It forced this author to look again at the knowledge that African women had in relation to food plants and medicine.

**Scene 2: Courtroom in Luanda**
The scene is the courtroom in the overcrowded city of Luanda in February 1996. On trial was the police chief for Luanda, a woman from a distinguished family in Cabinda, who had achieved a very high rank and had been tried for corruption and extortion. There was a rally in support of her in the court on the day of the sentencing, by a coterie of professional women who declared that she was a scapegoat for the widespread corruption in the police and security forces. It was a contradictory moment in the history of the society for the professional women, many of whom had been active in the Organisation of Angolan Women (OMA): they were determined to defend the independence of a police chief who was a woman even if she was corrupt.

When the sentence was passed (a five month jail term) there was an uproar in the court and the small group of articulate women shouted that they would go on strike. There would be no cooking, no washing, no preparation of food and no provision of other support services in the home (apparently a reference to sexual boycott). The cry in the courtroom was not followed up by any concrete action because the women attending the court did not have organic links with the working women of Luanda who struggled on a daily basis to survive in the stalemate of ‘no war no peace’. The women of the professional strata did not have the material or political resources to effect their threat. In fact, many of them in the courtroom disposed of the labor power of other women who worked in their household, hence their capacity to carry forward a strike over housework was limited.

The same women did not lend overt support to the industrial action which was then underway by teachers who earned less that US$10 per month. This strike by SINPROF, the first independent trade union in Angola in the aftermath of the one party government since independence, was led in the main by women who dominated the teaching profession. In the same month, there had been a strike by health workers, the majority of whom were also women. The professional women were themselves searching for new levers to escape the ideas and practices of male domination and wanted to oppose the fact that the police chief was being made a
scapegoat for the widespread corruption which had taken over the society. Their socialisation and education had demobilised them in the sense that they did not see their task as building concrete political links with working women who were then involved in an industrial dispute. Twice in the previous year there had been calls for a general strike by elements in the society who wanted the government to spend money on social services instead of the farcical ‘no war no peace’ stand off and meetings to conciliate Savimbi. The ruling party had warned that only UNITA would benefit from a general strike.

Their connection to the ruling party played a role in the lack of follow up by the professional women who had organised the mass Organisation of Angolan Women (OMA). It reflected the reality that when one speaks of women in Africa, one must grasp the social and class differences. Thus, though all women suffer from gender violence, the producers and women from the oppressed classes have a more vested interest in struggling for thorough social transformation.

Resistance and The Military Struggles in Angola

These two incidents capture the contradictions and challenges involved in the search for peace and a new mode of existence beyond warfare. In many ways the two scenes were connected by virtue of the centrality of the women in Angola in the history of resistance. This resistance has made women very visible in public spaces, in trading, in the teaching and medical professions. In the written accounts of the wars and meetings for peace, Angolan women are quite invisible.

But the various “peace accords” that were signed, from the period of the Alvor agreement in 1975 to the Lusaka Accords of 1994, never ushered in peace in Angola. In most cases, peace was an effort to create a government of national unity (in practice bringing two armies together); the well being of women and the general population was never a consideration in the formulation of strategies for peace. The accords simply meant the continuation of cultural violence and other covert and not so covert forms of warfare. Typically, the Lusaka Protocol formally marked the end of the war of 1992-1994 and in February 1995 the United Nations agreed to continue the “peacekeeping” operation in Angola, authorising a contingent of 7000 personnel who constituted the United Nations Angola Verification Mission, UNAVEM 111.

The Lusaka Accords were signed in 1994 to end the war that killed more persons in the two year period than in the previous wars. The looting and destruction carried out by soldiers of both armies in Huambo exposed the extent to which the MPLA had lost its political direction in the period of liberalisation. The indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombardment by both sides exposed the disregard for human life. The government expended its energies on weapons and did not seek to use political measures to isolate UNITA. Instead, it employed a private military company, Executive Outcomes, to give support in the war. Executive Outcomes
comprises ex-soldiers of the apartheid army. After 1992 when UNITA lost the elections, their war strategy intensified to involve all levels of society, and led to the revulsion which propelled women to the forefront of the struggle for peace. The way in which the war was carried to the civilian areas of the country exposed the way in which the leaders of UNITA had internalised the total war concept of the South African militarists.

The Armed Struggle for Independence in Angola
The history of the Angolan independence battles is central to rehabilitating the sense of survival and struggle by all classes of Angolans and to begin to understand the gendered meanings of nationalism. All over Southern Africa there has emerged a gendered analysis of the liberation process which explores not only the contradictions between the colonialists and the colonised, but the gendered roles and values set in motion and accentuated by colonialism. This analysis has focused our attention on the images of masculinity and valour that has become part of the history of liberation. Some of the movements celebrate women who dedicated their lives to the liberation struggle. The MPLA, for example has underscored the importance of Angolan women in struggle by affirming that:

the role of women, and the need for them to mobilise on their specific questions, was recognised from the start. In 1962, one year after the MPLA launched the armed struggle, the OMA was set up.¹

This statement on the formation of the Organisation of Angolan Women (OMA) and the legal initiatives of the MPLA on sex discrimination at work and in the payment of wages had underscored the prevailing position of Angolan women, especially in the analysis of the importance of mass organs of the MPLA. The MPLA had been proud of its record of legislation with respect to the equality of women in the society. As one of the mass organs of the period of the single party, the MPLA, the Organisation of Angolan Women had been established in 1962 to mobilise support for the national liberation struggles. All the written accounts of the war of national liberation pointed to the active participation of women in opposing colonial rule. However, the available literature tends to have essentially two depictions of women in resistance: aiders and supporters and as victims. The former refers to women’s roles as couriers, providers of protection, resources and food for the guerrillas. Women formed networks of caching and transporting supplies. The roles of care, providing food and transporting weapons were crucial to the success of the liberation movement.

While it is important to demonstrate how women were central to the liberation process it is equally important to break the sense of liberation that was tied to armed struggle. In many senses, the representation of the women in both UNITA and
MPLA tended to concentrate on women only in supportive roles – i.e., that women were supporters of the male actors. More and more African feminists have drawn our attention to the deficiencies of the past writings on African liberation in general and the struggles for peace in Angola in particular. The incomplete nature of this process forces a critical appraisal of how the concept of liberation has been presented; for it is implied that since women were only supporters, men were responsible mainly for the success of liberation movements.

The second characterisation of women in liberation literature presents women as victims; victims of male sexual needs and desires for power, whether through rape by the guerrillas or the forces of the oppressing regime. Women are positioned as helpless and powerless in the face of men’s drive to dominate and colonise them. The portrayal of women as victims implies helplessness and powerlessness, and reinforces the view of women as “booty” or “canon fodder” for men in war.

For a short period immediately after independence in 1975, the MPLA had sought to change this image and definition of women. The formation of the OMA had created a positive force for the intervention of women in the politics of the society. The legal initiatives of the government on sex discrimination at work and to provide equal pay for equal work had underscored the central place of women in the struggle for a new society. But the fact that the government was the largest employer meant that abolishing sex discrimination by legal edicts was far easier than laying the foundations for the reversal of the colonial ideas. By 1985, under pressure from women, the Angolan government enacted one of the most progressive family codes in Africa. The Family Code granted equal rights to women in matters of employment, the household, inheritance and in all aspects of public life. However, “progressive” legislation by the MPLA did not deal with the varied forms of family life that existed beyond the city. From the outset, the MPLA had underscored the importance of women in the military and cultural confrontation between colonialism and self determination but it did not seek to deal with the complexity of the position of women, especially in the rural areas, of Angola.

UNITA, on the other hand, excelled in the forthright manipulation of African women to serve its interests. It in many ways manifested attitudes to African women that were based on a conception of patriarchy and ethnic nationalism. The radio station of UNITA, Radio Vorgen, up to this day calls on Ovimbundu women to be bearers of Umbundu identity. UNITA fought its military battles by making explicit ethnic and masculine/militaristic appeals (with the symbol of jongwe—rooster). The leaders of UNITA sought to mobilise women as mothers and the concept of the rooster was a powerful symbol of male sexuality and superiority. Young chicks were fair game for the rooster and the top rooster could have any hen in the coop. There have been numerous episodes and reports in the history of the party where the top rooster took away the hens of other roosters and disposed of
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the competing roosters. Sexual abuse and violence were thus the norm in the military camps where women, especially the younger ones, had to be made available to the commanders. The traditional reproductive roles of women were seen as an extension of the war effort since women produced the human labor necessary for UNITA to continue fighting. Their roles as mothers were seen as essential in fostering the “ideals of ethnic solidarity”.

War and Ethnic Identities in Angola

Penetrating the images of civil war

Despite the spectacular failure of the policy of assimilation, one of the most enduring aspects Portuguese colonialism has been the masculinised version of citizenship and modernity, which reinforced racial and gendered identities. The policies of assimilation and ethnic demarcation have created a base in the politics of Angola, providing scope for manipulations and compounding the ethnic constructions which served to divide the working poor.

The construction of ethnic identity is very much a component of the militarisation of the Angolan society. During the anti-colonial war, ethnic identities were constructed as a component of the counter-insurgency warfare of Portugal. After 1975, The South African military inherited the counter-insurgency tactics and the propaganda infrastructure of the Portuguese. South African think tanks, strategic institutes and media built upon the myth of ethnic chaos in Angola. The description of the military confrontations has been that of the clash of ethnic nationalism to delegitimise the liberation process in Angola and the rest of Africa. When UNITA made an alliance with the apartheid regime of South Africa and elements from the Cold War in the USA, the representation of the war by many authors used the language of “civil war” to characterise the war against the people of Angola by UNITA. Even during the period of apartheid South Africa’s invasion, the nomenclature of “civil war” was communicated to underscore the subtext of the importance of ethnic identities in Angola: the subtext was really that the Angolans were involved in a “tribal war”. This official position of the National Security Review No. 30 of 1991 has been popularised by journalists who write about “The Coming Anarchy”. In the period after the Cold War, there has arisen a plethora of institutions of conflict management whose mandate is to “manage chaos”. Managing chaos is the new narrative for “managing ethnic conflict”. The authors of the tribal war narrative fail to connect the massive military industrial complex of Europe and North America to the carnage in Angola and other parts of Africa.

The educated class of Angolans are also implicated in the game of ethnicity, employed principally as a means to buttress the search for power. For instance, despite the evidence of external manipulation of the constructed identities, Bakongo nationalists are still at the center of fanning the flames of ethnicity in the
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context of the “no war no peace” situation. Their active manipulation of ethnic consciousness arose in the context of the pogroms against Angolans of Bakongo origin in 1992 and January 1993. The government had broadcast the news that Zaireans were fighting with UNITA in Huambo. In the heightened sense of insecurity generated by the occupation of over 60 per cent of the municipalities by UNITA, passions were inflamed and Angolans from the provinces of Zaire and Uige were attacked as Congolese. The women of the market organised to protect other women (who were being attacked for allegedly being Congolese) by changing their dress and sheltering them. This act of solidarity by women in the market, Rocque Sentiero, was built upon by women seeking to develop associations for their protection.

This solidarity by women in the midst of the provocations by both the government and the defenders of Bakongo traditions can be contrasted to the recent spate of activities by elements in Brazzaville, Kinshasa and Paris calling for an independent Bakongo kingdom incorporating the regions of Uige and Zaire (with the oil deposits of Soyo) and Cabinda. In all societies, ethnic consciousness is greater among exile elements than with the ordinary people who have to live with each other on a day to day basis. This class appeal by males calling for separation from Angola was fueled by provocative stories in the government controlled newspapers which suggested that the Angolans of Bakongo descent lived in the area of Palanca (an area of Luanda known for citizens with keen entrepreneurial skills) as if they were in a separate country.

One can also hear the ethnic chauvinism of the educated communicated via the radio station of UNITA, Radio Vorgen, with its appeals to Ovimbundu identity. Through its manipulation of nationalist symbols and language, UNITA had mobilized the rural population on the basis of ethnic exclusiveness. When UNITA originally broke off from the FNLA in 1966, it had accused the leadership of practicing tribalism and nepotism. However, in order to consolidate itself. UNITA has carried the language and ideas of ethnic rivalry to new heights. This policy has had its successes. Up to the present, the church of Angola has been split down the middle by the ways in which sections of the church leadership internalised ethnicity to the point that while UNITA held thousands under siege, there were religious leaders providing spiritual guidance and comfort to UNITA.

The ethnic paradigm has also been accepted as a working basis by the foreign 'peacemakers'. The international organisations, in reproducing the ideas of sharp ethnic identities, continue to conceive of peace as a form of ethnic balancing in Angola, and this is manifest in the peace accords with respect to the technical details relating to control over the government and the instruments of force. Leaders such as Savimbi negotiate on the basis of defending their ethnic communities. In this sense, the peace accords seek to reinvent a tribal loyalty that has been swept aside by historical and material changes in the society. The multiple
identities of Africans, associated with age sets, totemage, secret societies, religion as well as gender and class distinctions, are reduced to one element — that of ethnicity — by the peace brokers.

The documents of the UN agencies and the humanitarian organisations in Angola continue the process of classifying the population according to ethnic groups. This is despite the fact that the war has created a kind of mobility that has integrated the people more than when they were atomised in the village communities. These international humanitarian workers have re-divided Angola in the name of peace to the point where the Department of Humanitarian Affairs could draw an administrative map of the society that made foreign agencies central to the administration of the country.

Today, the tribal African who is always engaged in civil wars provided the basis for the modern humanitarian worker who is akin to the missionary of yesterday. Modern humanitarian workers are more sensitive to the artistic values of African art and culture and do not represent African sculpture as devil images cut in wood. In fact, the opposite is true in so far as many peace keepers go to remote villages to collect rare art pieces. Notwithstanding the appreciation of African sculpture and masks, the rituals and spiritual practices which are initiated from childbirth to death to protect Africans were considered quaint if not satanic. Christian fundamentalists who present themselves as non governmental organisations continue the ideas of the 19th century missionaries in the countryside. The protective spiritual strings around small African children were simply seen as praising the devil and only Christian baptism could provide spiritual and physical protection.

Angolan Women Searching for Peace

Angolan women have forced a rethinking of the colonial ideas which devalued their skill and centrality in their society. The struggles for survival, for life itself in the context of wars which took thousands of lives, reinforced the argument that the structures of subordination of women in both the domestic and public spheres are negotiated and transformed over time. Women, though not holding formal political power, through their knowledge, skills and strategies for self-reliance, have emerged as a force in the body politic to interrogate the hollow conception of peace promised by the militarists and their international humanitarian allies. They have penetrated and exposed the propaganda of peace which is a component of the psychological warfare in Africa.

Women have inspired meetings and debates aimed at bringing an end to the war in the country. Overt demands for peace have been made by women in Angola since 1990, and particularly in 1995 when an ecumenical meeting of women made a strong case for urgent action by the international community to give meaning to the Peace Accord of Lusaka of 1994. The commitment of Angolan women to peace was demonstrated most dramatically by the woman who gave birth to her child
while waiting in the line to vote in the 1992 elections. These voices have been ignored by those who hold power inside and outside of Angola. These and other actions – e.g., by the women of Kuito and by the women in the market – demonstrate the determination of the women of Angola in the search for peace and security. But the stakes for peace in Angola are such that the preliminary forms of organisation among working women are insufficient for intervening decisively at this historical moment. Peace in Angola requires a fundamental transformation of politics and society and not simply the reconciliation of military forces. From the experience of Angolan women one can conclude that when dealing with peace in Africa today it is imperative that one considers the effects of both direct violence (such as war) and structural and indirect violence such as the violence unleashed by structural adjustment programmes. The strike by Angolan teachers in 1996 led by women underscores the demands by women – that women wanted the resources of the country spent on social reproduction.

Notes
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2 Ibid.

References