Cheetah (and Dog) Politics

Interspecies Relations and the Colonial Legacy of Cheetah Conservation Programs in South(ern) Africa

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Abstract

Cheetahs have been used as hunting comrades and exotic pets for millennia. In the colonial state, they served particular functions, some of which, as this article aims to demonstrate, have survived into post-colonial society. Looking at conservation and relocation programs in Southern Africa that have been established from the 1990s onwards, this chapter argues for a multilayered approach that also takes interspecific relationships seriously. In the case of the cheetah, livestock guarding dogs have been used to protect both the herds as well as the cheetahs that were casualties of farmers safeguarding their property. However, these dogs had to play a role that went far beyond the mere guarding function: they were used as stand-ins for colonial (and Apartheid) control. Looking at current debates about species survival and repatriation also helps to uncover these long-lasting colonial topics of exoticism, "wildness" and cultivation.

Figure 1 | Promotional Photo for the Cheetah Encounter. © Courtesy of Cheetah Outreach, South Africa, Photo from Website, Visitor Information, https://www.cheetah.co.za/co_visitorinformatio.htm

Introduction

Approximately fifty kilometers outside of Cape Town lies the city of Somerset West, named for the former governor of the cape colony, Lord Charles Henry Somerset (1767–1831). The city is populated by 55,000 people, most of them white, with Afrikaans as the majority language. Somerset West is also home to Cheetah Outreach, a wildlife conservation park, which houses cheetahs (*Acinonyx jubatus jubatus*) and other animals, and which aims "to promote the survival of the free ranging, South African, cheetah" by ensuring its "co-existence" with humans and other animals "on farmland areas in South Africa".¹

To reach this goal, they provide an "educational program for learners in the Cape Town area" and foster "public awareness at our facilities, and research projects".² Cheetah Outreach, one can say at the outset, is a complicated, multi-layered place: it promotes conservation efforts for wild animals, while at the same time raising animals in captivity. Like exotic pets, those non-traditional or unusual animals kept for companionship, entertainment, or aesthetic purposes are not commonly domesticated, yet are meant to serve as "ambassadors" for the organisation. Visitors can book "encounters" with the animals within their enclosure (Fig. 1).³



"For those who desire a far more exclusive and intimate experience," Cheetah Outreach advertises,

we offer a VIP Private Cheetah Encounter with an adult male cheetah. Here we bring the cheetah to a private area, and your group will be able to spend some special time with the cheetah and have their photos taken with him. You will have the privilege of having the cheetah and his handlers to yourselves for the best part of 30 minutes. Children of all ages are able to participate.⁴

Petting the animals is also part of this special VIP encounter. To make things even more interesting in this multi-species assemblage, Cheetah Outreach hosts a programme to breed Andalusian guard dogs. These dogs are placed on farms to assist farmers in protecting their livestock from cheetah attacks. On top of this, Cheetah Outreach supports (even if not enthusiastically) a programme to translocate cheetahs from Africa to India in order to replace the Asian cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) that is now extinct on the Indian subcontinent.⁵ The multi-species assemblages of cheetah-human-dog relations are more complicated than they seem at first, making them all the more worthwhile for historians to look at and further concentrate on the different forms of (bodily) practices involved.⁶

The objective of this contribution is to examine these inter- and multispecies relations and to analyse how they have been shaped by a colonial legacy that promoted certain concepts of the "wild" as in need of protection, conservation, or annihilation. It also traces the influence of a global wildlife trade that has always particularly valued cheetahs for their exotic and charismatic nature, making them desirable as status symbols, pets, and attractions. Applying recent approaches in animal history that are sensitive to the power dynamics of colonial pasts, this paper highlights the role of the animals and their complicated agencies. Using Cheetah Outreach as a starting point, it looks at cheetah conservation (and dogs!) in southern Africa, particularly South Africa and Namibia, in the later 20th and early 21st centuries, to see how the ideas about the exotic pet trade, colonial land access, and (post-)colonial conservation programmes have shaped ideas about who should be protected and why.

Cheetahs as Domesticates: Just a Wild Little Thing to Pet

Of all big cats, cheetahs are the easiest to tame, making them a seemingly perfect pet for the status-conscious. Throughout history and across cultures, cheetahs have been associated with royalty and nobility. In some regions, wealthy elites used them as hunting companions, cementing their image as creatures of the upper class. Yet keeping cheetahs as pets can also be seen as a form of colonial continuity, as this practice featured prominently in the historical exploitation and exoticisation of African wildlife by Westerners. The demand for cheetahs as exotic pets has led to a thriving (and now mostly illegal) trade, which threatens the survival of wild cheetah populations in Africa and led to their extinction in India. In addition, the trade of cheetahs has often been facilitated by Western tourists and expatriates in Africa, perpetuating the notion that wild animals can be commodified and exploited for entertainment. This close entanglement can be seen today as well: even though Cheetah Outreach's mission statement clearly condemns the exotic-pet trade as wrong and dangerous for the survival of the species, their message is delivered by making individual captive cats available. They therefore follow an animal-individualising approach that emphasises the emotional connection between humans and cheetahs. Romeo, one of the cheetahs currently housed by Cheetah Outreach, is introduced as being "extremely affectionate and [loving] all the attention he gets during encounters as well as from staff and volunteers".8 Ebony, another cheetah, is described as having "a sweet and easygoing [sic] temperament".9 Furthermore, we learn that "he enjoys interaction with everyone and has turned into a wonderful ambassador for Cheetah Outreach."10 Naming the cheetahs reflects the human-centric perspective in which humans assign meanings, labels, and identities to animals based on human understandings and cultural contexts.

Being an ambassador for their own extinction thus only works if the cheetahs also entertain the visitors by being friendly, docile animals that are precisely not "wild". Indeed, a recent study based on interviews conducted with people in Europe found that the perception of undomesticated wild cats as approachable, cuddly, tameable, and controllable objects of human desire increases as a result of this sort of representation.¹¹

As one visitor from the United Kingdom wrote in their Trip Advisor review in 2022: "I got to meet Romeo......WOW what a handsome and well behaved

[sic] boy! He was so chilled! It was dream come true to hear him purr loudly as I stroked him."¹² In a way, then, Cheetah Outreach reproduces a colonial image of dominance and desire, in which the animal "other" is forced to become an exotic, yet governable image of itself. Representing the subjects of colonialism, including the native animal populace, as in need of "proper governance" was a common justification for controlling and exploiting colonised territories. This narrative was a significant tool in justifying colonisation and maintaining imperial control.

The exotic pet trade itself, of course, has a and complex history. Exotic animals have long been kept as symbols of power and wealth, and cheetahs, as mentioned above, were often used as hunting companions. Indeed, next to the dog, the cheetah is said to have the longest hunting relationship with humans, having been used as a companion hunter by the Sumerians around 3,000 BCE.¹³ Ancient Egyptians may have also kept them as pets, as did the Greeks and Romans.¹⁴ After arriving in Western Europe around the turn of the 12th century, thousands of cheetahs were housed at European, North African, and Asian royal courts, where they were used as hunting comrades alongside dogs or falcons (Fig. 2).15 Hunting cheetahs were usually caught in the wild as pups, having received initial training from their mothers, before being further trained in European hunting styles with horses.¹⁶ With the growing trade in the 19th century, when Europeans brought back exotic animals from their expeditions to display in zoos and private collections, cheetahs no longer signified the power of the monarch, but the might of the colonial state. Unsurprisingly, the exotic pet trade grew in parallel with the expansion of colonialism; colonial powers established trading relationships with regions where exotic animals seemed abundant, particularly on the African continent.

In the first half of the 20th century, the trade in cheetahs expanded rapidly with the growth of global transportation and tourism. The demand for exotic pets fuelled a thriving illegal trade which has been linked to the exploitation and trafficking of wild animals.¹⁷ Although the legal trade in wild cheetahs diminished after the passing of the CITES agreement in 1975, cheetahs were "still taken from the wild to be exploited as pets or tourist attractions, entered into illegal captive breeding operations, killed in illegal trophy hunts, or their body parts sold as ornaments, traditional medicines, and clothing".¹⁸ In addition, they were caught legally "to begin new breeding programs".¹⁹ Especially on the Arabian Peninsula, owning cheetahs as pets has kept its



Figure 2 | Hare-chasing with cheetahs and dogs. Jan Collaert, carton of Jan van der Straet (Stradanus), 1594–1598, Amsterdam. © Trustees of the British Museum, London

attraction to this day. Most of the animals that are held there in private, more or less as house cats, have made their way from Africa via illegal traffickers.²⁰

While cheetahs in the West may no longer be royal property, the legal trade from Africa to the Global North continues to capitalise on audiences' desire for a rare, exclusive experience. The San Diego Zoo, for example, advertises its "Animals in Action Experience" by promising that visitors will be able to:

see exotic cats climb and jump, and much more! Bring your camera to this fun and interactive experience, as we bring the animals out to you for an up-close view. Our expert wildlife behavior specialists will also take you behind the scenes to learn more about some of our wildlife ambassadors. You will hear amazing stories about each animal you meet, and find out how San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance is helping to save species here and around the world. Some animals are unique to this experience and can only be viewed by attending Animals in Action.²¹

In turn, the Wingham Wildlife Park in Kent, UK, makes its cheetah encounter all about the shared time together:

This experience is about spending some time with this amazing cat to get a feel for their temperament and intelligence. To do this, the keeper will introduce you to the cats and get you to help them do some training. This will involve a chance to give them some treats.²²

Here, just as in numerous other zoos, the protection of cheetahs relies on their status as easily individualised, charismatic animals willing to participate in efforts to save their species, even if only indirectly. As conservationists claim, the presentation of cheetahs in live-animal displays is vital to the success of these efforts. However, they do have clear recommendations on which animals should be displayed. As veterinary scientist Hendrik Jan Bertschinger and his colleagues from the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre, known as the Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre since 2010, stated in 2008: these animals "could be pre-breeding age animals, males with poor semen quality or animals that are past their prime". ²³ It is the tranquil, docile animal that is in demand.

Cheetah Conservation: Breeding, Catching, and Relocating

Until 1900, cheetahs could be found in the wild in India, the Middle East, and particularly in northern and southern Africa. Since cheetahs were not only used as hunting companions, but were also hunted themselves, the species came to the brink of extinction several times in the course of the 20th century. In India, the last wild specimen was killed around 1950.²⁴ In southern Africa, the animals did not fare much better: until the 1970s, cheetahs were frequently killed in order to protect livestock. As cheetahs are the prey of other big cats, they are seldom found in large national parks that are also home to lions and leopards. Instead, they look for "ecological niches" that suit their dietary needs. These happen to be mostly privately-owned commercial farms.²⁵

The struggle for ownership of these commercial farms is itself a result of the colonial legacy. In Namibia, for instance, land reforms that were rolled out after the country's independence in 1990 and that aimed at distributing land ownership among the population largely failed. As a consequence,

white Namibians still possess most of the agricultural land in Namibia.²⁶ The same is true for South Africa: after the end of the apartheid regime and the passing of the Restitution of Land Act in 1994, only a minor part of the commercial agricultural land, almost exclusively owned by white South Africans, was redistributed.²⁷ As a result, cheetah attacks against livestock mostly occur on land owned by white farmers. In this light, the conflict with cheetahs reveals a continuation of colonial mindsets: only "wild places" are reserved for wild animals; agricultural land, now "civilised", no longer belongs to wildlife. As both Jane Carruthers and Jules Skotnes-Brown have pointed out, cheetahs are seen and treated as "pests" or "vermin" that have no place on agricultural land.²⁸

Interestingly, the dispute over ownership is also associated with a notion of caretaking. It depends upon ideologies of European racial superiority as well as upon legal narratives that equate civilised life with English concepts of property. Property rights thus came with the obligation of civilising the land and to take "proper" care of it.²⁹ The legacy of this colonial mindset can be seen in discussions around conservation and environmental protection to this day: in a 2010 article, conservation scientists Kenneth Buk and Kelly Marnewick viewed land reallocation as a possible threat to cheetah survival.³⁰ Giving back land in order to right former injustices and colonial dispossession is then depicted as mixing up or redrawing the boundaries of civilisation, in which animals have distinct places.

Furthermore, the allegedly "uncontrolled" increase in human population has been frequently regarded as a risk to cheetahs. This trope of unrestrained population growth among African peoples harkens back to claims about the "oversexed" Black population central to colonial biopolitical regimes of control. In this view, the threat of social disruption resulting from decolonisation apparently includes the disruption of human-animal relationships, particularly those with flagship species status. Plenty of scholarship is dedicated to the mechanism behind the making of colonial nature and colonised land. As a result of this reorganisation and redefining of land, certain places are no longer seen as the habitat of Africa's wild fauna. The formation and institutionalisation of national parks, to which the wild fauna have now been relegated, have received particular academic attention.

As these works show, the establishment of national parks was accompanied by the institutionalisation of conservation societies that aimed at protecting certain species. With a growing awareness of their possible extinction, a number of societies and refuges targeted cheetahs specifically. The

first of these, the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre, was founded near Pretoria in 1971, and has since developed into the primary breeding institution for the species.³⁵ The founding of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF) in Namibia by American zoologist Laurie Marker in 1990 was another major step in establishing the cheetah as a vulnerable, if not endangered, species.

Along with these institutionalisations, ideas about the translocation and reintroduction of cheetahs to the "wild" also became more popular. Private game reserves saw cheetahs as charismatic species that were useful for advertisement. These reserves started to blossom in South Africa from the 1960s onwards, after a set of legislation gave private landowners utilisation rights over the "wild" animals on their land as "instruments of nature based tourism development". These reserves were seen to have "big potential" to make these reserves more attractive to visitors. A programme started in 2000 relocated cheetahs from ranch land to enclosed reserves to form metapopulations. Like some national parks, those reserves became confined enclosures surrounded by "predator-proof" fencing that largely prevented the big cats' escape. The translocation and, eventually, exchange of cheetahs between these reserves in South Africa (72 out of roughly 300 had cheetahs among their animals in 2016) also served another goal: guaranteeing genetic diversity.

In 1989, zoos in the Global North, with American zoos leading the way,³⁸ had established a stud book for breeding cheetahs held in captivity. However, most of the individuals displayed in the zoological gardens had been caught in the Namibian wild, out of a desire to prevent a genetic bottleneck. Even after the CITES agreement was firmly in place, until 1994, 28% of all cheetahs in those zoos were still wild-caught.³⁹ The Cheetah Conservation Fund has since pressed zoos to exchange breeding animals to "create new bloodlines" and "optimize genetic diversity",⁴¹ and thus to ensure the species' (genetic) survival. Zoos and rescue centres, both products of the colonial era, were portrayed by the CCF as safe havens on which the species' continuation relied. Zoos, in particular, still claim to be an "excellent resource for conservation efforts" by providing "conservation support for dwindling populations in the wild through awareness raising, fundraising, education, and research".⁴²

Today, 7,000 cheetahs are believed to live in the "wild", most of them in Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa.⁴³ By 2014, the captive cheetah population registered in the International Cheetah Studbook – only listing those used for breeding – totalled 1,722 individuals: "87% captive born, 12% wild imports, and the remaining 1% of unknown birth type".⁴⁴ With this in mind, the conservation of the species – apart from the efforts

of several NGOs founded in South Africa and Namibia – is still very much in the hands of zoos, the same institutions that capitalised on the animal trade in previous centuries.

The Hamerton Zoo Park in Huntingtonshire, UK, a latecomer to the game since it was founded in the 1990s, boasted that:

the management of the animals and the arrangement of enclosures is based on that developed by the most successful breeding programme for Cheetah ever undertaken, formerly located at Wassenaar in The [sic] Netherlands.⁴⁵

Its "Cheetah Country" enclosure, as the website declares, has successfully provided an enriched environment where the second generation of the cats enjoys their time away from their "nomadic and stressful lifestyle" in the wild. 46

Cheetahs as Problem Animals and Their Canine Handlers

The cheetahs' "stressful life" in the wild was caused by being potential prey to lions and hyenas as well as farmers, and by the need to find food for themselves and their offspring. The latter brought them into conflict with farmers of livestock and farmed wildlife, especially ostrich and antelope. As a solution to this conflict, in 1994 the Cheetah Conservation Fund proposed that Anatolian Shepherd Dogs be brought to Namibia. The Livestock Guarding Dog programme was established to deter cheetahs from approaching flocks, as the dog would react with "loud barking and attentiveness to the herds". The programme offered training to both the dogs and the farmers. Initially, the dogs were given free of charge, but after 2003, farmers had to pay around 130 US dollars per individual. 48

In a way, these dogs were a living reminder of the shift from "colonial dog" to "post-colonial dog", as Sandra Swart and Lance van Sittert have called it. 49 This shift was characterised by introducing European breeds to South Africa and nationalising them through breeding. The Rhodesian Ridgeback is one notable example from the first half of the 20th century; it is no coincidence that these dogs were cross-bred with the Anatolian Shepherd. Rhodesian Ridgebacks were not only used to protect farms and livestock, but also helped to control and suppress insurgences against white rule. They, "as much as

people, patrolled and maintained the white cities and countryside of post-colonial South Africa and time and again were catalysts and actors along its social frontiers".⁵⁰ They also "became an easy metaphor for apartheid".⁵¹ In Namibia, too, dogs served as vehicles of colonialism and representatives of colonial control.⁵² As European breeds were favoured, the native wild dog population was nearly entirely eradicated,⁵³ illustrating that clearly not all dogs were equal.

Why was the Anatolian Shepherd chosen? According to the CCF, it was "due to certain characteristics such as its large size, short coat, and independent nature". This independent nature, i.e., the ability to make decisions and to be active and not indolent, is deemed a good trait in a shepherd dog. At the same time, the fact that Eurasian dogs were privileged over native breeds does reveal the persistence of tropes central to the colonial mindset: native breeds were seen as not trustworthy enough. In particular, European shepherds were preferred in the control of "problematic" exotic animals such as cheetahs. Since cheetahs were already considered problematic when they encroached on livestock herds and farmed wildlife, not just when excessive killings occurred, the DeWildt Centre, on top of its guard dog initiative, claimed to have "successfully captured over sixty cheetahs that were considered 'problem animals'" and relocated them into protected areas. The multispecies assemblage of control, dominion, and submission was therefore built on multiple bodily practices: breeding, training, and placing as well as replacing animals.

To prevent conflicts, the "Anatolian guard dogs successfully guard live-stock against cheetahs and other predators, and the predator populations find a balance with their natural prey", 56 claimed Buk and Marnewick, suggesting that the help of the dogs re-established a sort of natural order. However, the dogs did not fare too well in the beginning of the program:

Over a third of placed dogs died while working as guardians, mainly due to accidents such as being hit by cars, being bitten by snakes, or drowning (one dog was reported to have drowned in a reservoir) [...]. Culling by the owner, primarily in the early part of the study, also accounted for a substantial proportion of working dog deaths, particularly on commercial farms, usually as a result of the dog chasing or harassing stock. We received no reports of livestock guarding dogs being killed either by predators (i.e. cheetahs or leopards) or by other dogs, although there were two reported incidents of young dogs being killed by baboons.⁵⁷

The CCF's attempt to train the dogs and to "civilise" them is thus reminiscent of the colonial settlers' attitude towards those dogs used by the lower classes or native inhabitants. Indeed, as Swart and van Sittert write, they "likened them instead, in both discourse and action, to the indigenous wild canids". Se Bringing in new breeds could therefore be seen as an extension of this dismissive attitude towards the local dog populace even if these new dogs also had to be trained first.

As a result of the Anatolian Livestock Guarding Dog project, and the introduction of the "cheetah-friendly" farmer boards by the National Cheetah Conservation Forum of South Africa founded in 2002, 240,000 hectares of farmland have been converted into areas "that demonstrate that the cheetah and farmer can live together". ⁵⁹ As an incentive for participating, landowners get a badge for their gate that marks their business as "predator friendly", which was advertised to create new "marketing opportunities" for their property, especially for lodging tourists. Eco-labelling their products in this way, as conservationists suggested in 2015, could also help farmers "to receive a premium for the meat or other animal products they sell". ⁶¹ The CCF even promoted their own brand of meat products called "Cheetah Country", which they claimed was "helping to conserve threatened wildlife while contributing to the economic vitality of rural communities". ⁶²

In South Africa, Cheetah Outreach adopted the CCF's guard-dog programme in 2005, breeding dogs that were predominantly used in the north of the country.⁶³ Cheetah Outreach offered the same services as CCF, taking over most of the costs involved with keeping and feeding the dogs. A 2015 report, however, showed mixed results, just as in Namibia. Not all farmers were content with the dogs, prompting trials with other breeds, such as the Boerboel.⁶⁴ As Swart and van Sittert argue, the Boerboel stood for the "defence of white privilege and property" and "as deterrent to the real and imagined threat of black revolt and redistribution".⁶⁵

At this essay's time of writing in 2023, only one Anatolian Shepherd, Juliet, born in 2015, is housed at Cheetah Outreach. Her biographical notes state that she has "remained with Cheetah Outreach as an ambassador of the Anatolian Livestock Guarding Dog Programme" and that she was "raised alongside [...] Romeo" and "sometimes accompanies him on walks". 66 Apparently, the more "easy-going" approach of the Anatolian Shepherd is no longer in demand.

Outlook: Cheetah Politics in the 21st Century

On 19 February 2023, twelve cheetahs from the north of South Africa were translocated not to a reserve or game park, but to India—more specifically, to the Kuno National Park in Madya Pradesh. They were eagerly awaited. The Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi rolled out the red carpet and rejoiced that "India's wildlife diversity receives a boost with this development".67 The Hindu, the largest English-language newspaper in India, reported that the move was made possible by a law that the South African government had passed under the Mandela presidency. Because India was at the forefront of leading the international fight against apartheid, so they claimed, they wouldn't have traded with the former regime anyhow.⁶⁸ Earlier in the year, both governments had signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation on the Re-introduction of Cheetah to India. In itself, this kind of translocation was nothing new: African cheetahs had been transported to India as early as 1900 to replenish the dwindling local population.⁶⁹ Back then, however, the aim was to replace cheetahs that were used for hunting, not to halt any extinction.

In contrast, the 2023 memorandum reads:

Conservation translocations have become a common practice to conserve species and restore ecosystems. South Africa plays an active role in providing founders for the population and range expansion of iconic species such as cheetahs.⁷⁰

The cheetahs were furthermore part of an animal diplomacy between South Africa and India that helped to solidify the countries' ties in areas such as trade and investment, defence and security, science and technology, and culture and education. Together with Brazil, the two countries formed a "South-South" cooperation in 2003 based on the premise that the three nations are dominant players in South Asia, Southern Africa, and South America.⁷¹ As a sign of mutual understanding among the nations, more than a hundred additional animals are planned to be transferred to India over the next few years.⁷² The CFF and the Namibian government, another important player in South-South coalition attempts, had already shipped eight animals to India in September 2022 to a grand welcome.⁷³

In Somerset West, the plans for translocation to India were addressed by the volunteers of Cheetah Outreach, though the organisation has no part in the programme. Enthusiasm was limited, unlike in the South African Department of Forestry, Fishery and the Environment, which organised the deal. According to their statement from February 2023, the cheetahs chosen were well prepared for the task, as

concerted efforts were made to select the best possible cheetah for the reintroduction effort. All 12 cheetahs are wild born, have grown up amongst competing predators including lion, leopard, hyena and wild dogs. They are considered predator savvy and should respond appropriately when they encounter a new predator guild in India that includes tigers, leopards, wolves, dholes, striped hyena, and sloth bears.⁷⁴

They did not need dogs to show them how to behave.

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- 2 On: Cheetah Outreach, https://www.cheetah.co.za, accessed 7 March 2023.
- 3 On: Cheetah Outreach Trust, https://cheetahoutreachtrust.co.za, accessed 8 March 2023.
- 4 On: Cheetah Outreach, https://www.cheetah.co.za/co_visitorinformation.htm, accessed 5 March 2023.
- 5 There is only a small number of "wild" specimens surviving in Iran. For a critique on the translocation plans, see Gopalaswamy, A. M.; Khalatbari, L.; Chellam, R.; Mills, M. G.; Vanak, A. T.; Thuo, D.; Broekhuis, F. (2022): "Introducing African Cheetahs to India is an ill-advised Conservation Attempt", in: Nature Ecology & Evolution, no. 6, p. 1794–1795.
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- 15 Ibid.
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