

## The Representation of Africa's Intangible Heritage in *Madagascar Escape 2 Africa* (2008)

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### Abstract

*This study explores how the Western animated film Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa (2008) portrays African cultural themes and how intangible aspects are represented. The study employs a qualitative research approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The research purposively sampled key scenes that depict African cultural narratives; these scenes were transcribed, taking note of verbal utterances, and visual cues were annotated and thematically coded to identify patterns relating to stereotypes and counter-narratives by focusing on the examination of power dynamics. The key findings reveal a troubling trend of misrepresentation, where African spirituality is often depicted through superstition and inferiority, and oral traditions are wrongly associated with illiteracy. However, the film also offers glimpses of African community values, suggesting that despite prevalent stereotypes, a counter-narrative exists that deserves attention. These findings encourage us to adopt a more nuanced perspective on African representation in media, advocating for self-representation that genuinely reflects the richness and diversity of African cultures.*

**Keywords:** intangible cultural heritage, animation, Africa, media representation, stereotypes

### 1. Introduction

The representation of Africa in Western media, particularly in animated films, remains a complex and often contentious issue. This study specifically examines *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (2008). The animated film remains relevant due to its enduring popularity and cultural impact. The study comes from a background that commercially successful animated films usually inspire trends in media and entertainment after them (Suntai & Tordue, 2020). Lee (2015) further reiterates that the ideas of friendship and self-identity portrayed in animated movies resonate with all generations, contributing to their ongoing appeal. The great recognition and influence of the film have also been supported by recent studies that state that nostalgic animations play a large role in shaping childhood entertainment preferences (Brown & Davis, 2018). Thus, the immense popularity and thematic nature of the film places it squarely in the foreground of contemporary media discourse. This study explores how the film both engages with and misrepresents aspects of African intangible cultures. While there is an extensive academic analysis of cultural representations in animation, specifically on Japanese, Chinese, and Korean contexts (Izang Azi, 2012; Qingshan et al., 2025; Roy & Sahharil, 2020), inquiries into African

cultural depictions remain scarce, especially when it comes to intangible cultural heritage (Eichler, 2021; Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023; Innovation in Cultural Heritage, n.d.; Waelde et al., 2018). The now broader definitions of cultural heritage include living traditions such as oral traditions, performing arts, and social practices that media images seem to neglect.

The existing literature provides a foundation for understanding the unintended consequences of cultural misrepresentation in media; notably, Baah-Acheamfour (2024), Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (2025), Obia et al. (2022) and Thomas (2024) cite stereotypes that have perpetuated Africa as a land of savagery as opposed to one of varied or complex cultures. This investigation examines the stereotypes presented in *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* and analyzes any counter-narratives purportedly offered by the film. The study found that the film often portrays African spiritual practices as superstition and oral traditions as a sign of illiteracy, thereby belittling and marginalising Africa's rich cultural heritage and cultures with their richness and wisdom.

## **2. The Plot**

In this animated film, the producers, Mark Swift, Mireille, and Soria, and the directors, Tom McGrath, Eric, and Darnell, embed several African cultures that are worthy of consideration to determine if it is indeed a true reflection of the continent. The animation is a story of four young outlaw animals: Marty the zebra, Alex the lion, Melman the giraffe, and Gloria the hippopotamus from the Central Park Zoo in New York who embark on a vacation, and upon return to New York on a plane, crash land in Africa, to meet several of their kind. The events that follow here in Africa, most of which are not only negative but also unfortunate at first, greatly contribute to projecting the rich thematic endowment of the film. At the end of the dark tunnel, one is shown how the quartet overcomes their numerous challenges in unity, and most importantly, how the characters use dancing (which is a cultural setting) to restore the lost glory and pride of their family. This theme has informed this interesting academic inquiry.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1 The Visual Representation of Africa**

Africa, as represented in early Western films and literature, was often depicted through colonialist lenses, painting the continent as a “dark continent” that is filled with bizarre wildlife and primaeval societies that needed European civilisation to bring them up to standard. This is, for instance, captured in so-called classic adventure novels like H. Rider

Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885/2002) and *She: A History of Adventure* (1887/2001), as well as in films such as the *Tarzan* series. These works have created enduring but problematic visual tropes of Africa as a wild, feral frontier waiting to be explored and conquered. Some of these stereotypes are discussed below.

### **3.2 Stereotypes in Visual Language**

Global studies highlight prevalent misrepresentations of Africa in films. Notable films include *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1981) and *Out of Africa* (1985). Many studies, such as Dokotum's (2020) and Nwobodo's (2025), critique the portrayals of Africa as a dark continent inhabited by illiterates. Recent productions often depict Africa as barbaric and a place of violence (Mboti, 2016). Such misrepresentations influence perceptions of Africa's setting and the underlying themes within these stories. Such fallacies make it hard for the audiences to sustain genuine perceptions regarding African-centred films and their intangible cultural heritage (Njambi & O'Brien, 2019). African heritage has been represented through stereotypes, mostly as poor and underdeveloped, of regression and backwardness. These narratives and framed realities, coupled with the subtle rhetoric of poverty, suffering, and helplessness, have also remained static in Western media platforms, even in this contemporary time. Taoua (2018) submits that the Western media, from its infancy to date, has inherited a tradition that stereotypes, gives biased accounts, and portrays Africans as subjects. Afolabi (2017) postulates that images of good infrastructure, such as skyscrapers, good roads, and luxurious cars, are often absent from the mindset of Western audiences when it comes to Africa.

### **3.3 Violence and Poverty Tropes**

Recent scholarship, for instance, Frankema (2025) has criticised the one-dimensional image of Africa as a war-torn, suffering, and underdeveloped continent common to media and film. Such representations reinforce stigmatising projections of weakness and primitivism that, in their turn, affect understandings of African social and cultural environments. There have been attempts to push back against these narratives in African advertising industries, seeking to portray the continent's societal development, modernity, and technological progress (Bhanye & Shayamunda, 2021; Goodluck, 2021). They aim to dismantle stereotypes and bring a more complex vision of the continent to the forefront.

### **3.4 Animation and Cultural Identity**

Anime is at the centre of significant innovations and cultural debates in Japan. Japan has one of the richest cultures in the world. Abu Backer (2023) and Alsubaie and Alabbad

(2020) posit that Japanese anime only reflects the present but also heavily relies on the past. Anime is the abbreviated term for animation, but in Western countries, it has become closely associated with Japan and Japanese culture. Anime has made Japanese culture available to the world. This research aims to delve deeper into the creation of animation related to the representation of culture in animation and the reasons behind its deep roots. Sharin (2021) contends that anime is used to safeguard martial arts styles in Japan. They are portrayed as being informed by animals and birds. This view is supported by Yamamura (2019), who notes that Japanese anime enforces the ideals of nationalism and patriotism on issues of protecting the country's martial arts heritage and sometimes educates the audience on historical stories.

The most notable scholar who has given an account of African animation, Callus (2012, 2018), argued that African animation is largely influenced by anthropology. The scholar discusses how anthropological models can be drawn upon when reading animation, and she utilises supporting examples of sub-Saharan animations to promote the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach to reading animation. The production of animations in this study is influenced by local practices of animation. In another view, Coetzee (2016) argued that African animation has since transitioned from depicting realities rooted in traditional culture to the development of superheroes analogous to those of the Western world. Fendler (2022) is of the view that creating superheroes in African animation is a counter-hegemonic move that has, in past productions, presented Africans as weak and volatile. Whilst Afrofuturism is important in the global animation market, it is also important that the stories presented not only give a positive image about the continent, but should as well be coined with true representations of intangible cultures, so that communities learn and safeguard them. The animation genre has become popular in recent years. Countries such as Kenya and Zimbabwe have also used animation methods to create music videos, educational and health campaigns (Allela, 2013).

#### **4. Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative research paradigm to explore how *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* constructs representations of African cultural elements. Qualitative research is a form of social action concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena (Tilman et al., 2025). The primary research question is:

1. How does *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* portray African culture, and what counter discourses are evident in these representations?

To address this, the research employs a qualitative approach rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the analytical method to examine the representation of African cultural

heritage in the selected animated film. CDA was chosen as a primary methodology because it allows for a nuanced understanding of how both linguistic and visual elements within selected scenes perpetuate cultural hegemony, power dynamics, and post-colonial narratives (Sveinson et al., 2021). The film was chosen because it is a well-known animated comedy that presents a stylised African reality, making it very relevant for the discussion of cultural stereotypes and ideological messages in contemporary media. Considering the apparent reference to the date, the event holds significant temporal relevance, as the film was released in 2008 to ideally reflect contemporary postcolonial representations and global perceptions of Africa. This process analysed purposively sampled key scenes, highlighting African cultural themes (Stratton, 2024). The data were subsequently transcribed in their entirety, and annotation of verbal utterances and visual cues was conducted, and the information was thematically coded to identify patterns and themes concerning stereotypes, exoticization, and counter-narratives. Creswell (2009, 2014) states that thematic coding helps develop patterns among qualitative data. The coding process was iterative, allowing the definition of themes to be adjusted as new patterns emerged. In the interpretive phase, the intent was to analyse how these themes are related to wider racial, cultural, and power discourses (Fairclough, 1995, 1999). Some of the limitations of the study regard focusing on a single film, which may not account for all of how media representation of Africa is presented, as well as the possibility of the researcher's bias at the time of interpretation. Yet, triangulation of verbal and visual data contributed to the enhanced reliability of our findings and resulted in an in-depth understanding of the cultural narrative of the film. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

## **5. Results**

### **5.1 African Knowledge Systems, Leadership and Spirituality**

This section presents how the selected scenes portray African spirituality as influenced by abject poverty. The film *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (2008) offers a critical examination of African spirituality and cultural heritage, often portraying it through a lens of poverty and superstition. For example, King Julien's dependence on ritualistic practices during crises highlights a stereotype that links African spirituality to backwardness and irrationality. This portrayal can be further examined through Ngugi wa Thiong'o's perspective on the colonisation of the mind, where he points out that African cultures are frequently oversimplified and misrepresented in Western narratives (Demissie, 2024; Kaur, 2024).

Portraying King Julien and other African animals as naive can hurt perceptions of African leadership and intelligence. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argues that these media portrayals reflect colonial stereotypes that suggest Africans are incapable of self-governance, a narrative that persists in both historical and modern discussions. Consequently, the film misses a chance to highlight the complexity and richness of African cultures, which are traditionally based on governance systems that prioritise community involvement and consensus, described as Ubuntu.



**Figure 1:** *King Julien arrives at the middle of a crisis with escort: Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa (2008)*

Figure 1 portrays Africans as overly credulous and vulnerable to manipulation, portraying their participation in spiritual gatherings as uncritically accepting of ritualistic practices. This framing raises questions about the portrayal of cultural adherence as potentially irrational, especially when contrasted with available pragmatic alternatives. The governing system of African kings is ridiculed. For example, King Julien, a raccoon, is a depiction of a pompous African leader who, amidst crisis, chooses a grand entrance. The depiction of African meetings emphasises disorganisation and chaos, which can be interpreted as a visual reinforcement of stereotypes concerning the inefficiency of traditional governance structures. Such portrayals may serve to justify colonial narratives that depict African political systems as inherently unstable, thereby undermining the

diversity and resilience of indigenous administrative practices. This view is corroborated by Kumari, who noted that Africa's governance systems are characterised by bad governance, centralised power, and corruption, impacting public administration (Kumari, 2021)

The film's portrayal of African spiritual rituals tends to emphasise their exotic and primitive aspects, framing them as irrational or threatening. Such representations contribute to stereotypes that characterise indigenous practices as savage, thus marginalising authentic spiritual expressions and reinforcing biased perceptions. To counteract the problem faced by Melman, the Giraffe, he is forced to be burned in the huge furnace as a sacrifice to appease *the gods* without considering other, more logical, civil, or less brutal alternatives to global warming and climate change. The film suggests the idea that Africans themselves are stupid and will believe anything they are told when faced with dire situations.

On the contrary, African rituals are derived from African spirituality to address problems (see Ndemanu 2018; Singh & Bhagwan, 2020). There are different rituals designed for different plights in society, for instance, the rain-requesting rituals misrepresented in the animated film. The representation of rain-requesting rituals is dramatic and entails exaggerated dancing, gestures, and spectacular visual effects meant to elicit divine intervention. The film takes matters further by implying blood sacrifice as a necessary ingredient, an element that is certainly alien to the real practices, further fueling the stereotypical notion of African rituals as violent or barbaric. King Julien's leadership style exhibits authoritarian qualities, a stark contrast to many African models wherein leadership is exercised with a high degree of communal consultation or participation from those to be governed. This contrast gives the impression of a dichotomy that might dim the intricate reality of native leadership traditions. Ncube and Tomaselli (2019) note that African societies have historically adopted a *dare-dariro* approach, which encourages democratic participation.

## **5.2 The Misrepresentation of African Oral Heritage and Culture in Media**

This section provides a closer examination of how the studied animated film simplifies and misrepresents the rich oral heritage of Africa, subtly suggesting that oral traditions are somehow less valuable than Western literacy. The film appears to portray these practices as primitive, which aligns with certain stereotypical representations of African oral traditions in popular media (see Asiimwe, 2023). The film tends to overlook the central role that oral stories play in African communities, where they serve as vital mechanisms for transmitting history, cultural values, and ecological knowledge. The character of

Gloria, who hails from the New York Zoo, serves as a prime example of the problematic *white saviour* narrative. This narrative implies that African characters cannot take charge of their cultural practices. Such portrayals reinforce the damaging idea that African societies are incapable of self-governance and need outside help to tackle their challenges. This notion is intertwined with how the West has pillaged African cultural heritage, filled its museums with stolen African Art under the guise of preservation (Batt, 2021). The film suggests that African leaders are unaware of their communities' needs, perpetuating a harmful stereotype that separates African cultures from stories of self-determination and resilience.

The film, unfortunately, keeps alive some harmful gender stereotypes, especially in how it portrays African men and women, which only serves to reinforce old biases in popular culture. African men are often portrayed as physically strong but not very intelligent, a stereotype that is evident in Gloria's unkind comments about Moto Moto, a character intended to represent this idea. For example, Gloria often calls Moto Moto "dumb" and makes fun of him for being gullible, implying that just because he is strong, he cannot be intelligent. These portrayals echo a troubling narrative that paints African males as strong but stupid, which oversimplifies their humanity and contributions to society (Chiumbu, 2015). This narrow view promotes a simplistic understanding of masculinity that fails to capture the rich diversity and intelligence found in African cultures.

On the other hand, the film tends to portray African women as less attractive than their Western counterparts, a point that is underscored by how easily Gloria wins over Moto Moto. Take, for example, the way the film portrays Gloria, a character from New York, as the gold standard for beauty and desirability, which ultimately overshadows the appeal of the African female characters. When Gloria shows up in Madagascar, her confidence and Western beauty are front and centre, and it does not take long for her to catch Moto Moto's eye. This creates a stark contrast between her allure and that of the other female characters, who appear less sophisticated and appealing. This dynamic not only undermines the representation of African women but also reinforces a damaging narrative that ties beauty to Western ideals, which can foster a sense of inferiority among African women (Patterson, 2018).

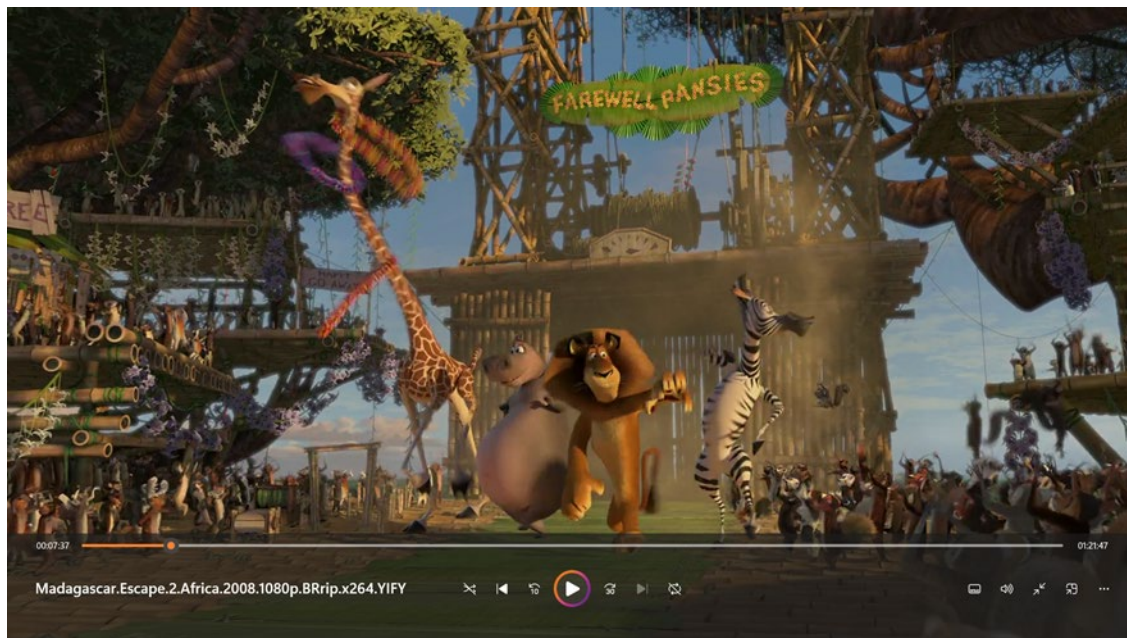
These portrayals contribute to the idea that African societies are marked by unequal gender dynamics, where women are not shown as leaders or complex individuals with their intellect and agency. Instead, they often end up as comedic side characters or love interests, primarily serving the storylines of the male characters. The lack of strong, intelligent African female figures in the film perpetuates the stereotype that African women



are subordinate or dependent on their male counterparts for validation and success. This kind of representation not only misrepresents the rich diversity and strength of gender roles within African cultures but also reinforces a colonial mindset that views African societies through a narrow, Westernised perspective (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

### 5.3 Positives in the Film's Representation of Africa

It is essential to highlight the moments in the film that showcase positive representations of Africa. Take, for instance, the animals in *Madagascar*; each has its unique personality, hinting at a rich narrative that can truly resonate with viewers. Figure 2 below shows that the way animal characters celebrate community and friendship mirrors the importance of communal ties in many African cultures, reflecting the concept of Ubuntu, as discussed by African thinkers such as Mogobe Ramose. This concept emphasises how individuals are interconnected within a society (Ramose, 1999).



**Figure 2:** The animals in *Madagascar* celebrating together, *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (2008)

While the portrayal of Africa's vibrant landscapes may be a bit romanticised, it does capture the continent's incredible diversity and beauty. The colourful animations create environments that can spark awareness and appreciation for Africa's ecological wealth, potentially encouraging viewers to explore its culture further. This celebration of nature aligns with the views of scholars like Wangari Maathai, who emphasise the importance of

environmental conservation and the crucial role of African communities in preserving their natural heritage (Maathai, 2004). Some humorous moments stemming from cultural misunderstandings provide valuable insights into the universal aspects of human experiences. The shared laughter among the characters illustrates how different cultural backgrounds can come together, showing that even in the face of misrepresentation, there is a shared humanity that fosters laughter and understanding.

## 6. Discussion

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the way Africans were portrayed as *wonderous on a prehistoric earth* reveals a colonial perspective that views them as primitive (Min, 2022). This portrayal implicitly justifies Western intervention as a so-called civilising mission. The ongoing misrepresentation and the imposition of Western ideals on Africa highlight the need for what Mignolo and Walsh call *epistemic disobedience*, which is essentially a deliberate rejection of dominant Western ways of knowing (Laakso & Adu, 2023). Building on this idea of epistemic disobedience, it is crucial to take a closer look at how Africa and its people are portrayed in popular media, especially in animation. As Gonesse (2019) points out, African societies have a deep-rooted tradition of storytelling that has been passed down through generations, reflecting cultural values, ideological beliefs, and artistic principles. This emphasises the importance of self-representation, free from the distortions of colonial history. The decolonisation of animated imagery related to Africa should be seen as a vital ideological goal. Some creators are eager to use animation as a platform to showcase African mythologies, philosophies, rich traditions, cultural expressions, and languages.

Take, for instance, the opening scene of the animated film *Madagascar Escape 2 Africa* (2008), where a reporter breaks the news about *troublesome animals* escaping from the New York Zoo to Africa:

... On the loose, several animals, including the world's famous Alex the lion, escaped from the Central Park Zoo tonight. The escapes were cornered in Grand Central Station. Animal rights activists who convinced zoo officials to have the animals sent to Africa ...

This narrative subtly portrays Africa as a haven for outlaws, portraying it as a dangerous and underdeveloped place where unwanted elements are sent. This view conveniently overlooks the historical truth of colonial expansion, during which Western powers unleashed violence and control in their quest for resources and cultural dominance. Scholars have documented that these actions were marked by annihilation, plunder,

enslavement, racialisation, and dehumanisation (Laakso & Adu, 2023). This scene exemplifies how Western animation studios frequently produce content that reflects and reinforces Western perspectives, often marginalising authentic African voices and cultural representations

Driven by a decolonial perspective, this analysis aims to challenge and push back against the images and ideas that strip Africa of its humanity. It rejects the colonial power dynamics woven into the film's narrative, embracing decoloniality as a fresh perspective and way of understanding. Grosfoguel (2007) emphasises that adopting a decolonial mindset means making visible, opening up, and promoting radically different viewpoints that challenge the notion of Western rationality as the only lens through which to view existence and thought.

The animation industry acts as a potent cultural entity, sculpting societal values and perceptions through the stories it tells. Large studios like DreamWorks often lean toward a Western paradigm; thus, African cultures especially come under its gaze. According to Adorno and Horkheimer (2007), Hesmondhalgh (2024), Mato (2009), and Murdoch et al. (2024), the cultural industries produce standardised content meant to uphold dominant ideologies and thereby maintain cultural hegemony. This view theorises that Western animators likely encode stereotypes or exoticise non-Western cultures, contributing to Western cultural hegemony instead of genuine representation. From that standpoint, the critical look into the industry uncovers how these productions are ingrained in a wider ideological hegemony that shapes the global worldview regarding Africa and other disenfranchised cultures.

While Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) points out that African decolonisation has mostly been a political process, the portrayals in the film suggest that mental, cultural, and social representations are still hindered by Western influence. Applying a decolonial lens reveals the persistent dominance of Western narratives in animation, underscoring the urgent need for more authentic, self-represented African stories that challenge these colonial legacies and foster genuine cultural sovereignty. Ultimately, a decolonial perspective highlights the need for animation to serve as a platform for African voices, challenging colonial stereotypes, promoting cultural sovereignty, and reshaping global perceptions of Africa.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study underscores the pervasive issue of vague and stereotypical representations of African cultures in Western animated films, exemplified by *Madagascar: Escape 2*

*Africa* (2008). The very broad terms, such as real stories or true representations, cover all manner of inaccuracies and perpetuate colonial stereotypes that shape audience perception and reinforce power disparities. Such talk threatens to ignore the richly nuanced and evolving realities of African intangible cultural heritage in the form of oral traditions, spiritualities, and communal values. Linking these findings to current debates in heritage conservation and media regulation drives home the pressing concern for more conscious and responsible representations. The contemporary discourse now favours media literacy efforts and regulatory measures that will encourage authentic self-representation and counter imprints of colonialism. Practically, filmmakers and media regulators must foster collaborations with African communities to create folklore based on indigenous narratives. As a result, the representation will be accurate, respectful, and empowering. Studies should move beyond 2008 to see how recent trends in animation and digital media either promote or fight stereotypes. Investigating how Africans represent themselves and how globalised media might affect cultural sovereignty remains owing to such efforts fostering decolonisation of media narratives, meaningful cultural agency, and representations of Africa that are born out of reality rather than stereotypes. Thus, from these considerations, a responsible approach can hopefully lead to building a more mature and equal cultural dialogue that underlines the promotion and celebration of Africa's intangible heritage in its immense diversity.

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