

Moral Pluralism in Debus Performing Arts: Phenomenological Analysis of Cultural Communication in Banten

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Abstract - The Debus performing art of Banten, which has existed since the Sultanate era, now faces complex challenges. On one hand, there are issues of preserving traditional values, while on the other there is the pressure of modernization. Moreover, Debus, which is often associated with magical elements, frequently triggers negative stigmas, whereas the moral pluralism inherent within has not been thoroughly explored. This problem is the focus of the current study. This research applies a qualitative phenomenological approach through participatory observation of Debus performances, in-depth interviews with 10 informants (Debus artists), focus group discussions, and literature studies. Data analysis employs *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)*. The findings show that Debus artists construct the meaning of moral pluralism through the integration of Islamic spiritual values, cultural resilience, and symbolic negotiation. These findings are consistent with Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism and Rawls's moral pluralism theory regarding the coexistence of values in multicultural societies. Negative stigma against Debus mostly stems from a gap in understanding (*stock of knowledge*) between the artists and the public. The study concludes that Debus represents a unique model of moral pluralism through dynamic and complex practices of cultural communication. Public education and progressive cultural policy are required to reduce stigma and support its preservation as Indonesian cultural heritage.

Keywords: Cultural Communication; Debus; Moral Pluralism; Phenomenology; Symbolic Negotiation.

Introduction

Indonesian traditional performing arts have undergone significant transformations in the era of globalization, particularly in the context of the tension between traditional and modern values (Smith,

2023:56). Debus, as Banten's cultural heritage, faces a paradox between the preservation of cultural identity and adaptation to social change (Heryanto, 2022:112). This performance not only represents artistic expression but also serves as a medium of complex cultural communication, integrating spiritual, historical, and cultural elements (Renda, Mawardi & Biagi, 2024).

In its development, this art is often linked with magical elements that trigger negative stigma in society. Such stigma impacts public perceptions of the artists, and potentially undermines the inherent moral pluralism within the art. Previous research by Thresnawaty (2012) examined Debus in a socio-historical context but was limited in exploring communication dimensions and meaning construction phenomenologically. Sartika's (2022) study identified the magical stigma but was limited in its deeper analysis of meaning construction.

This study stems from the need to understand how Debus artists interpret and communicate moral pluralism values through their performances. Adopting Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach, this research focuses on the subjective experiences of Debus actors in interacting with audiences and the wider community. This study fills a literature gap by exploring the communicative dimensions of a often-stigmatized cultural practice, while offering new perspectives on moral pluralism in the context of Indonesian local culture. The purpose is to analyze the construction of moral pluralism meaning in Debus performing arts based on the lived experiences of its practitioners, integrating phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and theories of moral pluralism.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the integration of three main theoretical frameworks, chosen for their strong relevance to the phenomenon and research objectives. Firstly, Alfred Schutz's (1967) phenomenology with concepts of "lifeworld" and "stock of knowledge" is used to understand the subjective experience of Debus practitioners. Schutz emphasized the significance of how individuals construct social reality through direct experience (Creswell, 2021:78). The concepts of "typification" and "stock of knowledge" from Schutz are utilized to analyze how Debus performers interpret their world and share meanings with the audience.

Secondly, George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism (1934) views society as a product of continuous symbolic interaction. Concepts such as "significant symbols" and "generalized other" are used to analyze communication processes in Debus performances (Blumer, 2020). This theory helps explain how symbols in Debus (such as machetes, almaddad, dzikir) are interpreted and form shared social realities between performers and audiences.

Thirdly, John Rawls's (2001) theory of moral pluralism discusses "overlapping consensus" and justice as fairness. This theory provides a solid framework to understand how diverse values can coexist in a plural society (Parekh, 2022). For analyzing the moral dimension in Debus, Rawls's moral pluralism theory regarding how different values can coexist in a just society is applied.

The integration of these theories results in a comprehensive analytical framework for studying the dimensions of cultural communication in Debus performing arts. These theories complement each other in explaining how specific cultural practices such as Debus can act as channels for communication that reflect and build moral pluralism in Banten's multicultural society.

Cultural practices in traditional stage performances involve active interaction with the audience, resulting in a dynamic message exchange between the actors, the audience, and the cultural context within the performance space. The interaction of these three components within the cultural stage space is a dimension that emerged as an interesting finding after data collection. Therefore, this theoretical framework section also needs to include the proxemic dimension as a theoretical overview used in the analysis of the findings.

The study of spatial settings, or proxemics, frequently appears in various studies of nonverbal communication. Proxemics serves as a subcategory of nonverbal communication studies, along with haptics (touch), kinesics (gestures), vocalics (paralanguage), and chronemics (temporal structure). This subcategory, which Hall later divided into eight dimensions of proxemic perception, refers to Sapir (1927) and Whorf (1956). Hall (1964) explained that proxemics can be processed along eight dimensions:

(1) postural-sex identifiers; (2) sociofugal-sociopetal orientation (SFP axis); (3) kinesthetic factors; (4) tactile codes; (5) retinal combinations; (6) thermal codes; (7) olfactory codes; and (8) loudness scales.

To bridge the gap between performers and audiences from different cultures, the adaptation process is embedded in the symbols used in the performance narrative. Furthermore, Tobing (2022) found that this process of cultural adaptation and negotiation is heavily influenced by spatial perception, or proxemics. He emphasized that proxemics, as part of nonverbal communication, is not simply about physical distance, but rather the study of the perception and use of culturally internalized space.

This phenomenon of cultural transformation and communication in Debus performing arts can be found in various cases. For example, a similar phenomenon is also found among alumni of Indonesian international programs. Tobing (2022) identified the unique characteristics of Indonesian "new cosmopolitans" who, despite gaining a global perspective from their education abroad, choose to return and contribute to their homeland based on a sense of community and family values, as reflected in the principle of "eating or not eating, the important thing is to gather."

Material and Methodology

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, which departs from the view that social reality and knowledge are the result of individuals' subjective constructions through experience, interaction, and the negotiation of meaning in everyday contexts. The constructivist paradigm rejects the notion that reality is fixed and objective; instead, it acknowledges the plurality of interpretations and the contextual and situational validity of truth. Within this approach, the researcher acts as both a facilitator and the main instrument, collaboratively building a critical understanding with the research subjects about meanings, experiences, symbols, and values that live within the community of Debus performing artists in Banten (Neubauer et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This paradigm is highly relevant to understanding how the meanings of moral pluralism in Debus art are not singular but are instead produced and debated through processes of social interaction, cultural communication, spiritual experience, and collective reflection among performers and audiences. Constructivism encourages the researcher to explore processes of meaning negotiation and reinterpretation of local values, especially in performing arts such as Debus, which are often subject to stigma and transformation. Thus, the findings of this study do not represent a single "truth," but rather a representation of constructed meanings, experiences, and living, dynamic realities within the research community.

The characteristics of constructivist research include: the depth of exploration of subjective meanings, multiple perspectives from various actors, flexibility in research design, and openness of interpretation based on dialogue and collaboration (Creswell, 2021; Neubauer et al., 2019). In this study, reflection between the researcher and the informants was continuously developed through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, group discussions, and cross-source and cross-method validation, so that the meanings produced genuinely represent reconstructed experiences from the field.

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative design with a phenomenological framework based on Alfred Schutz. The descriptive qualitative design aims to narratively and systematically describe the characteristics, symptoms, or phenomena under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this context, the design is operationalized through Schutz's phenomenological lens to describe the essence of the experiences of Debus practitioners. The focus is on how they interpret spiritual practices, negotiate cultural symbols, and respond to stigma within their everyday lifeworld.

The selection of this research design is based on several fundamental considerations. First, epistemological alignment: this design is consistent with an interpretative research objective to understand social reality as subjectively constructed (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019). Second, theoretical relevance: Schutz's phenomenological approach specifically provides key concepts such as lifeworld, stock of knowledge, and typification that are powerful for analyzing how Debus practitioners classify their experiences—for instance, distinguishing "*ilmu Putih (ketuhanan)*" (white/divine knowledge) from "*ilmu hitam*" (black/mystical knowledge)—and for constructing meaningful social reality (Eberle, 2022). Third, practical feasibility: this design guides researchers in collecting rich and contextual data through

techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussion, allowing the uncovering of meaning behind observed rituals and performances (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023).

Population and Informants

The population of this research consists of the Debus art community in Banten, spread across three main regencies: Serang, Pandeglang, and Lebak. The population includes active Debus performers from various Debus art organizations and martial arts schools, where they learn and develop their skills in mastering the art of Debus (Sartika, 2022; Thresnawaty, 2012). This population was selected theoretically to capture the diversity of perspectives and experiences, ensure inclusivity of backgrounds, and reflect various constructions of moral pluralism practiced within the Debus community (Nasution, 2023). The involvement of both senior and younger generations also provides an overview of the evolution of values and preservation strategies of Debus art amid the social dynamics of Banten society.

The purposive sampling criteria included: (1) Debus performers who have been active for at least ten years; (2) Individuals possessing deep knowledge of the history of Debus practices; (3) Involvement in the preservation and transformation of Debus rituals; and (4) Commitment to active participation and the ability to narratively reflect on personal experiences. Snowball sampling was used because the Debus community tends to be closed or exclusive, making access to key figures more effective through informal internal networks and personal recommendations (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Consequently, the overall sample ensured representativeness in capturing the phenomenon under study in depth and across diverse roles within the Debus art ecosystem.

The informants in this study consisted of ten individuals, all of whom are Debus performing artists in Banten. All informants were selected based on their level of experience, knowledge, involvement in the Debus art ecosystem, and willingness to share personal stories and reflections (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Suryadi, 2021). Informant validation procedures were complemented by role triangulation to ensure diversity and richness of data. The researcher conducted member checking both before and after interviews to ensure that the interpretation of data remained consistent with the informants' original experiences and perceptions (Denzin, 1992).

Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were obtained through four data collection techniques: participant observation, focus group discussions (FGD), interviews, and document study. Participant observations were conducted on August 17, 19, and 27, 2025, at five debus performances. These events were held to commemorate Indonesia's 80th Independence Day. The performances were located at Serang City Square, Kiara Ciruas Village, Serang Regency, and at Banten University.

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was held on August 31st. All participants were Debus artists, including all the administrators, Prof. H.E.R. Taufik, Ph.D., Nasrullah, and M. Syukur. Participants included Abah Sakum, Ewa, Uyut, Wahyu, Cetuk, Misnani, Yayat S, Burhanudin, Akhmad, Umagdi, and Rudi. It lasted approximately three hours, beginning with a prayer (*sholawat*) followed by several Debus performances, followed by a discussion, interspersed with Debus performances. FGD used to elaborate on sensitive issues and test data validity among informants.

In-depth interviews were conducted on the same day as the FGD activities on August 31, 2025, the interview session was conducted after the FGD activities, with the Advisors, Management of the Indonesian Banten Debus Association, Mr., Prof. H.E.R. Taufik. Ph.D., Nasrullah, and M. Syukur. This interview using semi-structured guides that allowed reflective dialogue and deeper exploration of the informants' subjective experiences. Documentary studies are mostly conducted when making proposals and initiating research, namely by examining historical archives, classical and modern literature, preservation regulations, and relevant documentation from the Debus community (Creswell, 2021; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023).

Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources (cross-verifying and comparing data from different informants), triangulation of methods (testing consistency across observation, interviews, FGDs, and documentation), and periodic member checking throughout the research process (Denzin,

1992; Kuswarno, 2009). Ethical principles of qualitative research were strictly adhered to, including written informed consent, confidentiality of identities, right to anonymity, and mechanisms for clarification of data interpretation for all informants (Neubauer et al., 2019). This ensured that the findings were not only methodologically valid, but also ethically sound, grounded in a relationship of mutual trust between the researcher and participants.

Results and Discussions

Construction of Spiritual Meaning in Debus Artists' Life Experience

The study found that Debus artists view the magical elements in their performances as part of a spiritual tradition handed down through generations, with deep historical roots as a medium for Islamic preaching since the 15th-century Banten Sultanate era. They emphasized that physical immunity and dangerous attractions do not simply originate from supernatural power, but are the results of intensive physical, mental, and spiritual training through strict ritual processes. As one informant stated:

“This is not black magic, but knowledge derived from Islam. We learn Debus not for pride, but to preserve ancestral cultural heritage.” (Interview with AS, August 28, 2024).

This statement demonstrates how Debus artists typify their practice as “divine knowledge,” distinct from the notion of “black magic” within society, as Kuswarno (2009) explained in phenomenological studies of local cultural practices. This aligns with Schutz’s (1967) view that social reality is essentially constructed through the subjective experiences structured within “stock of knowledge”.

Subjective experiences of the artists reveal the complex meaning of spirituality in Debus. AS explained:

“To sustain strength, there are taboos that must be observed. Not only those forbidden by Allah, but also specific ones from the teacher.”

Learning Debus involves high spiritual discipline, including a week-long vow of silence, seclusion in the forest, and abstaining from various taboos known as the “3 M”: drinking, adultery, and gambling. The ditalek ritual or bai’at is a pivotal moment where students swear not to be arrogant, vain, and must honor the teacher and parents.

These findings show how Debus artists reconstruct the magical stigma into spiritual value. In Schutz’s phenomenological framework, the lifeworld of Debus artists is shaped by direct experience and intersubjectivity within their spiritual community. RK stated:

“The most important thing is prayer composed by religious experts or those at the maqam ijahab. That is what makes it work.”

At the very least, Debus is understood as a manifestation of tawhid, where the displayed strength comes from faith in Allah, not just the physical act. The concept of “divine knowledge” becomes the philosophical foundation differentiating Debus from magic or black art.

The ritual of ditelek or bai’at for members of silat and debus schools serves as a mechanism for the internalization of spiritual values, shaping the habitual knowledge of Debus performers, as explained by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their theory of the social construction of reality. The active process of reconstructing stigma to establish a positive identity is also found in different research contexts. A phenomenological study of female legislators in Surabaya by Maella et al. (2023) revealed that female politicians construct their reality and identity through four main categories: female fighters, people’s fighters, competent women, and superwomen as a response to stereotypes and the burden of double roles.

This classification shows a pattern that is almost similar to Debus performing artists, where individuals in challenging social systems actively negotiate meaning to define themselves against the negative labels given by society.

The concept of "*makom ijalah*" as expressed by RK shows the existence of a system of relevance specific to the Debus community, where prayers processed by worship experts become a source of spiritual legitimacy, in accordance with the concept of taken-for-granted reality as stated by Schutz (1967).

Symbolic Negotiation in the Construction of Meaning in Debus Performances

Debus functions as a communication medium that conveys moral, spiritual, and cultural messages through a complex symbol system. Through symbols such as the *golok* (cleaver), needles, *almadad* (iron rod), and bodily invulnerability, the art practitioners convey values of courage, endurance, and faith in divine power. This reality, according to Mead's symbolic interactionism theory (1934), is described as an exchange of symbols to create shared meaning about strength and spirituality.

The *golok* (cleaver) is not merely a weapon but becomes a symbol of spiritual endurance, while *dzikir* (remembrance of God) represents transcendental connection. This meaning negotiation process can be observed in the adaptation of Debus performances for modern contexts, where UM reveals that there are currently efforts to develop more dynamic performance formats through more flexible and entertaining choreography, different from traditional formats that generally emphasize extreme attractions that only invoke audience horror. This aligns with Mead's concept of the *generalized other* (1934) where Debus performers adapt their performances to modern society's expectations. The transformation from closed ritual to open performance demonstrates the *self's* ability to adapt to a broader *generalized other*.

Analysis of the performances reveals a multi-dimensional communication structure involving dynamic interaction between performers, audience, and cultural context. As expressed by UM:

"Now, Debus is also packaged as a performance. We insert humor into the martial arts so that the audience is not only tense but can also laugh and understand the storyline."

This phenomenon of cultural transformation and communication in Debus performing arts can actually be found in many different cases. According to Tobing (2022) that proxemics is not merely about physical distance but a study of the perception and use of space that is culturally internalized. This understanding is highly relevant for analyze how Debus performers and their audiences mutually interpret the performance space, where physical symbols such as the *golok* and stage distance become media for complex cultural and spiritual meaning exchange.

The complexity of the communication structure involving interaction between performers, audience, and cultural context that occurs in Debus performances can be illustrated as in Table 1.

Table 1. Communication Dimensions in Debus Performance

Dimension	Form of Expression	Symbolic Meaning	Negotiation Process
Visual	Physical immunity acts	Physical and spiritual resilience	Interpretive adaptation
Auditory	Sholawat and music	Islamic spirituality	Symbolic integration
Kinesthetic	Pencak silat and dance	Strength and beauty	Cultural resonance

Additionally, Debus performances serve as arenas for symbolic negotiation, where cultural meanings are continuously updated. This aligns with Mead's emphasis on symbol in social meaning. Symbolic exchange and negotiation in Debus performing arts can be seen in the following matrix:

Table 2. Symbolic Negotiation Matrix in Debus Performance

Symbol	Traditional Meaning	Contemporary Meaning	Negotiation Process
Machete/Almaddad	Spiritual power	Cultural resilience	Interpretive adaptation
Sholawat, Prayer, Dzikir	Islamic spirituality	Collective identity	Symbolic integration

From Rawls's perspective of moral pluralism, Debus performances become spaces where local cultural values, courage, and Islamic religiosity can coexist and be accepted by audiences of diverse backgrounds. AU expressed: "There is no black or white magic, it depends on intent and use." This illustrates Debus's ability to accommodate various value interpretations without losing its identity, demonstrating high reflexivity as discussed by Denzin (1992) on contemporary symbolic interactionism.

Moral Pluralism as a Cultural Framework in Facing Stigma

The research reveals that the stigma against the art of Debus arises from a clash between different stocks of knowledge (Schutz, 1967) held by the practitioners and the general public. The public often perceives Debus through a skeptical lens, viewing it as a practice of black magic, while the practitioners interpret it as a legitimate expression of Islamic spirituality. As revealed by informant RK:

"Many outsiders still consider Debus to be black magic, whereas for us, this is a spiritual heritage that actually strengthens our faith in Allah."

This stigma has tangible social consequences for the practitioners. The experience of discrimination faced by KE illustrates the depth of societal prejudice:

"I also faced rejection from my prospective in-laws because of my profession as a Debus performer. They were worried about the family's economic future and considered this work to have an unclear status."

This statement shows how the stigma not only affects cultural perceptions but also impacts the personal and economic lives of the practitioners.

Within Rawls' (1971) theoretical framework, this condition reflects the absence of an overlapping consensus regarding the value of Debus in a pluralistic society. The lack of this consensus, as explained by Parekh (2022), often stems from the inability of various groups to find common ground in interpreting complex cultural practices.

However, this research identifies active strategies employed by Debus practitioners to counter the stigma through a transformative cultural communication approach. As explained by UM:

"Nowadays, we don't just perform the attractions, but we also insert explanations about the spiritual meaning behind every movement. Debus should be able to become an effective medium for Islamic proselytization (dakwah)."

This approach demonstrates significant cultural agency in transforming negative narratives into positive values.

This stigma transformation strategy operates through several mechanisms. First, educational framing, where practitioners actively provide historical and spiritual context for the performance. Second, adaptive performance, integrating modern elements that are more acceptable to the wider society. Third, dialogue initiation, which opens spaces for discussion between performers and the audience. These mechanisms align with Rawls' (1971:156) concept of justice as fairness, which emphasizes the importance of creating an inclusive public space for diverse values.

This finding strengthens Schutz's thesis on the role of stock of knowledge in the construction of social reality. The gap in understanding between practitioners and the public, as expressed by informant AS: "The public only sees the outer layer, they do not understand the spiritual philosophy behind the Debus attractions they see," can only be bridged through intensive and sustained communication processes.

The study by Maella et al. (2023) on female legislators in Surabaya provides a relevant comparative perspective. The female politicians in that study constructed their identities through categories like female fighters and competent women in response to negative stereotypes. A similar

pattern is observed within the Debus community, where practitioners actively reconstruct their identity from "practitioners of black magic" to "preservers of cultural spirituality."

This stigma transformation process also demonstrates the dynamics of moral pluralism in practice. As explained by Madung (2014), Indonesian society needs a moral framework that can accommodate diverse values without sacrificing cultural identity. Debus, with its ability to adapt while maintaining core values, represents a contextual and dynamic model of moral pluralism.

The success of this strategy is evident from the gradual shift in perception occurring within society. Informant UM noted:

"Lately, there has been beginning to be better appreciation from the community, especially among the younger generation who are more open-minded."

This transformation not only changes negative perceptions but also opens space for a more inclusive redefinition of cultural meaning.

Thus, Debus not only merely survives the stigma but actively shapes a new overlapping consensus through transformative cultural communication practices. This process demonstrates how moral pluralism can operate as a dynamic cultural framework, capable of responding to the challenges of modernity while preserving essential traditional values.

Value Transformation through Cultural Communication

Debus represents a unique model of moral pluralism, in which different values coexist harmoniously. This research finds that Debus practices integrate Islamic values, local traditions, and modernity in an inclusive cultural framework. As AS expressed:

"Debus in its history was a means for Islamic propagation, not just culture."

Value transformation occurs through several mechanisms of cultural communication. Firstly, the adaptation of performance formats from closed rituals to open shows accessible to all audiences. Secondly, the integration of modern elements, such as narrative and comedy, without sacrificing core values. Thirdly, public education through channels including social media and educational performances. This process demonstrates Debus's adaptability in the modern era. RK stated:

"Thank God, in Banten we are still committed to preserving Debus cultural arts."

This adaptability supports Rawls's theory of overlapping consensus, where Debus successfully creates value consensus acceptable to diverse societal groups.

Through education and cultural dialogue, Debus artists foster new understandings of the magical element in contemporary contexts. This transformation not only alters public perception, but also enriches the meaning of Debus itself, from mere immunity acts to a medium for propagation, education, and highly valued cultural preservation.

Value transformation through cultural communication in Debus requires integrative analysis of the three theories. Schutz (1967) provides a framework for understanding the Debus practitioners' lifeworld, Mead (1934) explains the process of symbolic negotiation, while Rawls (1971) offers perspectives on value coexistence in plural societies, as integrated in communication studies by Nasution (2023).

The transformation from immunity attractions to propagation and educational media shows a complex social construction of reality, as proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966). The ability of Debus to maintain relevance in the modern era—highlighted by RK and his fellow Debus artists' commitment within the Indonesian Debus Association (PDBI)—demonstrates success in creating "overlapping consensus" through adaptation of traditional values to modern demands, as explained by Heryanto (2022) regarding Indonesian cultural transformation.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives enriches understanding that Debus is not merely cultural

heritage, but a living tradition that continuously evolves through dynamic processes of communication and meaning negotiation, as emphasized in Smith's (2023) study on globalization and cultural identity.

Therefore, theoretical analysis shows that Debus is a complex cultural phenomenon in which spiritual, symbolic, and moral dimensions intertwine to shape inclusive and adaptive cultural identity, as stated in frameworks of contemporary cultural communication (Sihabudin, 2021:56; Suryadi, 2021:34).

Conclusion

This study concludes that Debus performing arts represent a unique and dynamic form of moral pluralism in Banten society. Through phenomenological approaches, the research has uncovered the subjective meanings constructed by artists in responding to the magical stigma attached to their practices. The main findings are: (1) Debus serves as a medium for constructing integrative spiritual meaning through transformation of Islamic values; (2) the process of symbolic negotiation enables traditional values to adapt in modern contexts by exchanging meanings between artists and audiences; (3) the moral pluralism framework in Debus demonstrates the capacity for coexistence of diverse values in multicultural society, and (4) stigma transformation via cultural communication paves the way for inclusive cultural meaning redefinition.

The novelty of this research lies in the integration of Schutz's phenomenology perspective with cultural communication theory to analyze the construction of moral pluralism. Theoretical implications enrich the understanding of cultural communication in traditional societies undergoing modernization. Practically, this research recommends developing cultural education programs, collaboration between the government and artistic communities, and responsive preservation policies to contemporary social dynamics to support the sustainability of Debus arts as Indonesian cultural heritage.

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