

# ‘My name is Maya Lama/Hyolmo/Syuba’: Negotiating identity in Hyolmo diaspora communities

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## Abstract

Hyolmo communities have resided in the Lamjung and Ramechhap districts of Nepal for at least a century, and are part of a historical trend of group migration away from the Hyolmo homelands. These communities have taken different approaches to constructing their identities as belonging to the Hyolmo diaspora; in Lamjung, people readily identify as Hyolmo, while in Ramechhap people accept their Hyolmo history, but have also developed an identity as Kagate (and now Syuba). In this paper I trace these groups’ migration histories. I then look at the variety of names used in reference to these communities, which helps us to understand their historical and contemporary relationships with Hyolmo. Finally, I examine contemporary cultural and linguistic practices in Ramechhap and Lamjung, to see how communities perform their identity as Kagate or Hyolmo, and as modern Buddhists of Tibetan origin in Nepal.

## 1. Introduction

The majority of Hyolmo speakers reside in the Nuwakot, Sindhupalchok and Rasuwa districts of Nepal, to the north of Kathmandu, but there are also sustained populations that have lived in other areas for several generations, including Lamjung, Ramechhap and Ilam in Nepal, and Darjeeling in India. In this paper I discuss the Hyolmo<sup>1</sup> community in Lamjung, and the *Kagate* community

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I use the spelling Hyolmo as the default variant in keeping with the other authors of this volume, although in my own work I use the spelling *Yolmo*, particularly in relation to the Lamjung community. There are a variety of different spellings in Roman script, including Hyolmo, Yohlmo, Yholmo and Yolmo. The first three options all attempt to use ‘h’ to capture the low tone,

in Ramechhap, and how they negotiate their identities as both separate groups and members of the Hyolmo diaspora. The quote in the title of this paper is taken from an interview with a Ramechhap woman and demonstrates that current self-identification in these communities is anything but straightforward. I start with an outline of the political context of ethnicity in Nepal (Section 2) and the histories of Hyolmo migration (Section 3). I then look at how community labels serve as an important tool for identifying shifting attitudes towards ethnic identity (Section 4), before illustrating these attitudes with illustrations from contemporary cultural practices and language use (Section 5).

With this contextual information in mind, I look at the nomenclature that each community uses, and how it highlights the attitudes of each community to their relationship with the main Hyolmo population. In Lamjung, Hyolmo speakers have sought to strengthen their identity as Hyolmo, while in Ramechhap many are engaged in constructing a new identity as *Syuba* or *Kagate*, which is also strongly grounded in their Hyolmo roots. Overall, in this paper I demonstrate that Hyolmo identity as a modern Tibetic ethnicity in Nepal is still actively negotiated by its speakers, by drawing on history, geography, religion, language and self-identification. I focus in particular on the linguistic manifestation of ethnic identity, both with regard to what names speakers use to identify themselves, and how they use and perceive their mother tongue.

The Lamjung community is comprised of around 700 people living across half a dozen villages a few hours walk to the west of Besisahar, the main city of the Lamjung district. In the last few years, there has been heavy attrition in the number of speakers living in these traditional villages, as recent migration patterns have seen speakers move to towns and cities, as well as overseas, for employment. This community now identify themselves as speakers of Hyolmo. In Ramechhap the language is more often referred to as *Kagate* (or *Syuba*), although as I demonstrate in Section 5, this language is mutually intelligible with, and can be considered a variety of, Hyolmo. The Ramechhap population is much more stable than in Lamjung, with around 1000 speakers in ten villages, and

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which gives words a breathy quality. As the degree of breathiness varies with different pronunciations, I choose to omit it from my orthography.

there is much less long-term or permanent migration away from these home villages. There also appears to be less erosion of Kagate as the language of daily use.

Speakers from these regions appear to have always been aware of their Hyolmo origins, although in many ways the assertion of Hyolmo identity is either relatively recent, or in a state of concerted negotiation. This fits within a model of identity as a production that is never complete (Hall 1993: 392), but instead is constructed, and emerges from choices people actively engage in (Bucholtz 2003: 408). Drawing on the linguistic histories of these communities we can see how diasporas are constructed and conceived by communities that are building ethnic identities that also reflect their role as modern-day Nepali citizens.

In this paper I consciously choose to refer to these groups as *diaspora* communities of the main Hyolmo community. Although many researchers working in diaspora studies focus on a definition that includes transnational movement of peoples (Clifford 1994, Cohen 2008), the ethnolinguistic heterogeneity of Nepal means that moving away from the traditional homelands *en masse* resulted in these Hyolmo people being in an environment that was alien in terms of linguistic, religious and cultural features. Instead of thinking in terms of home nation and host nation, I prefer the practice of referring to homeland and host land (as per Butler 2001, Coupland, Bishop & Garrett 2003). As Lavie and Swedenburg (1996: 15) note, diaspora studies are about people living in border zones which are not necessarily nation-state borders, but the cultural sites of 'creative reimagination... conflict and loss.' Section 5 of this paper illustrates how Hyolmo speakers are demonstrably different to their neighbours in both Ramechhap and Lamjung, and how they use this difference in construction of their ethnic identity.

As this paper demonstrates, even though many Hyolmo still reside in Nepal, they meet many of the other definitional features of a diaspora community, as per Butler's (2001) extended discussion of the definition of diaspora; they consciously identify themselves as a distinct ethnic group, and the development of that identity has been an important feature of their survival as a cultural unit. They also fit the definition of comprising more than one group of

'outside' people, and while I don't believe this feature is as important for diaspora studies as some of the literature has argued (Butler 2001: 192), in this particular case it is important as these previously isolated Hyolmo diaspora groups begin to develop new links amongst themselves.

## **2. Ethnicity and identity in contemporary Nepal**

Group self-identification in terms of ethnicity is an important feature of social life in Nepal. This ethnic identity comprises of a series of features, including religion, language, dress, traditions and homeland. These identities do not have to be simplistic or reductive, although communities often see an appeal in easily identifiable features that differentiate them from other groups (see Shneiderman & Turin 2006, and Shneiderman 2015 for discussion in relation to Thangmi). The focus on ethnic identity is worth considering in the light of historical and contemporary events in Nepal.

Nepal as a political state has long been concerned with the ethnicity of its populace, especially in relation to their social role. The *Muluki Ain* of 1854 was the national legal code, which sought to classify the population of Nepal based on labour status within a Hindu caste system (Höfer 1979/2004). From the perspective of Tibetan ethnic groups like the Hyolmo, the *Muluki Ain* gave very little recognition of their ethnicity. All Tibetan groups were subsumed into a single *Bhoṭe* group with the status of enslavable alcohol drinkers. Lecomte-Tilouine (2009: 292) argues that this was an intentional act on behalf of the Hindu rulers to simplify social structures for national coherence instead of acknowledging the diversity of Nepal's population. The current focus on ethnic identity and rights in Nepal can be seen as emerging, in part, from objections to the simplifying hierarchy codified in the *Muluki Ain* (Shneiderman and Tillin 2015, Lecomte-Tilouine 2009), and the exclusion of many of these groups from the official accounts of the country's history (Gellner 2009: 13).

Following the end of the Monarchy in 2005, Nepal has been on a slow path towards democracy. As Shneiderman and Tillin (2015) note, the preference for a model of federalism in Nepal is unusual in that it is not a unification of previously separate states, but a devolution of central power to what will be newly-created states, similar to the process that occurred (and is still occurring)

in India. One suggested model for federalisation is to create states along ethnic boundaries, giving groups with shared ethnic identities a shared political boundary. Thus communities have a strong incentive to present a unified ethnic identity to increase their chances of official recognition. As I demonstrate in this paper, people with a demonstrated attachment to an ethnic identity do not always live in places that are geographically contiguous, and may also have long-standing attachment to a host land as much as to their homeland. For a model of ethnic federalism to work in Nepal, consideration needs to be given to the long history of internal migration for communities like the Hyolmo.

The process of drafting a new constitution and moving to federalised states has included a positive increase in recognition of Nepal's multi-ethnic makeup, and the rights of minority groups. This has included the interim government signing a series of agreements regarding some form of territorial autonomy with *madhesi* and *janajati* organizations in 2007 and 2008, and the ratification of the International Labour Organization's Convention on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 (for more on these events see Shneiderman and Tillin 2015: 29-31). In this time of flux there has been an 'explosion of public debate over the nature of social difference' (Shneiderman 2014: 282), with ethnicity playing a major role (Hangen 2007, Shneiderman 2012, Lawoti and Hangen 2012). The Hyolmo have been part of these discussions. They were recognised as one of the 59 *janajati* ethnic groups as part of a government list published in 2002 (see Gellner and Karki 2007) and are a recognised group in the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities<sup>2</sup> (NEFIN), an umbrella organisation for the rights of *adibasi janajati* (indigenous nationalities) that is one of the most dominant voices in ethnic discussions in Nepal.

With these recent events bringing discourse around ethnic identity to the fore in Nepali political life it is perhaps unsurprising that in the diaspora groups discussions of identity such as Hyolmo have become more frequent. As Shneiderman and Turin (2006: 102) note, recognition can lead to 'political rights and development dollars'.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.nefin.org.np](http://www.nefin.org.np)

Nepal's internal political status is one important factor in the recent drive to more, and more overt discussions of ethnicity and identity in the Hyolmo diaspora communities, although Nepal's relationship with neighbouring territories is also worth considering. It was not until the 1960s that the northern border with the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was formally codified, for many years the border had been much more diffuse. The Himalayan region has historically been a zone of transitions rather than clear boundaries (Owen-Smith and Hill 2014), and Tibetic peoples have always seen themselves as belonging to a larger area bound by shared geography, history, language and religion. The formalisation of the border meant that people living in that area became more conscious of which side they lived on (Shneiderman 2005). This formalisation of a boundary between Tibetan peoples living in the TAR and Tibetans living in Nepal means that Nepali groups whose ethnic identity includes recognition of themselves as Tibetan have both a supranational identity as well as an identity that exists within a particular nation-state. These identities can be nested, with Hyolmo ethnic identity felt to be part of a larger Tibetan identity, and an even larger Mongol identity (see Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 292), or they can overlap, such as identifying both as ethnically Hyolmo and also as a Nepali citizen. There are other identities that individuals in these communities hold; I touch on some of these below.

### **3. A history of migration**

The migrations to Lamjung and Ramechhap appear to have occurred around the same time period, at some point in the opening decades of the twentieth century. One Lamjung Hyolmo speaker who was born in 1920 (now deceased) reported that it was his grandparents' generation who moved from the Hyolmo homelands, so we can assume that it was around a century ago that speakers settled in the area. This means that the migration was long enough ago for there to be no living recollection of the events anymore. The migration from the original Hyolmo area is part of the communities' narratives of identification, however people also strongly identify as belonging to the villages and communities in which they currently reside. These are not the only stories of migration, with a similarly sized population also moving to Ilam at around the

same period (Thokar 2009). I have met two members of the Ilam Hyolmo community (who refer to themselves as *Ilam Yolmo*) in Kathmandu, and we have discussed their language and culture, and how they choose to identify themselves. I mention the Ilam context in passing throughout this paper, although more sustained attention needs to be given to this community before anything of detail can be said. Finally, there are reports of sizable populations in Darjeeling, India, this last group appear to have more ongoing contact with the main Hyolmo community.

The Hyolmo origin story is often told as one of migration, with the population in Sindhupalchok and Nuwakot citing an earlier migration event for their origins. Some two to three hundred years ago their ancestors, Buddhist Lama males, made the journey from Kyirong in what is now Southwest Tibet across the Himalayas, to settle in the Helambu and Melamchi valleys, and married women from the local Tamang communities (Clarke 1980a: 83, van Driem 2001: 864, Desjarlais 2003: 7). There is a great deal of lexical and grammatical affinity between Kyirong (Huber 2005, Hedlin 2011) and Hyolmo, which provides linguistic evidence to support this history.

Some speakers who migrated away from the Melamchi and Helambu areas recall the names of villages their ancestors are said to have come from. Hari (2010: 1) reports that Kagate speakers refer to the Pawa Kohmba area, and Hyolmo speakers in Lamjung have told me that their families originally came from Mane Kharka and Thola Kharka. Thola Kharka is not apparent on any maps, but given that *thóla* means ‘above’ in Hyolmo, it may have been a separate settlement in the Mane Kharka area. Ilam Hyolmo speakers I spoke to also identify themselves as coming from this area. Mane Kharka is east of the Melamchi valley, and Hari (2010:4) observes that the western language varieties, from villages such as Sermathang, are considered to be more prestigious. This is relevant to the discussion of social status in Section 5.

It is not known why these groups left the original settlements in the Helambu and Melamchi valleys. It would appear that the most likely reasons for migration were either to reduce population pressures in the area, or to seek new opportunities for those who migrated. Many references to diaspora communities note that there is often an element of not wanting to move away from the

homelands (Clifford 1994, Butler 2001, Gilroy 1997). It would appear from the scant evidence and the recollection of community members that this was also the case for the groups discussed in this paper. Figure 1 is a map of Nepal with the Hyolmo homelands indicated as Melamchi and Helambu Valley Yolmo and the Lamjung and Ramechhap (Kagate) varieties also marked. The Ilam variety is also indicated. All of these diaspora communities live at lower altitudes than those settlements in the Helambu and Melamchi Valley from where they migrated.

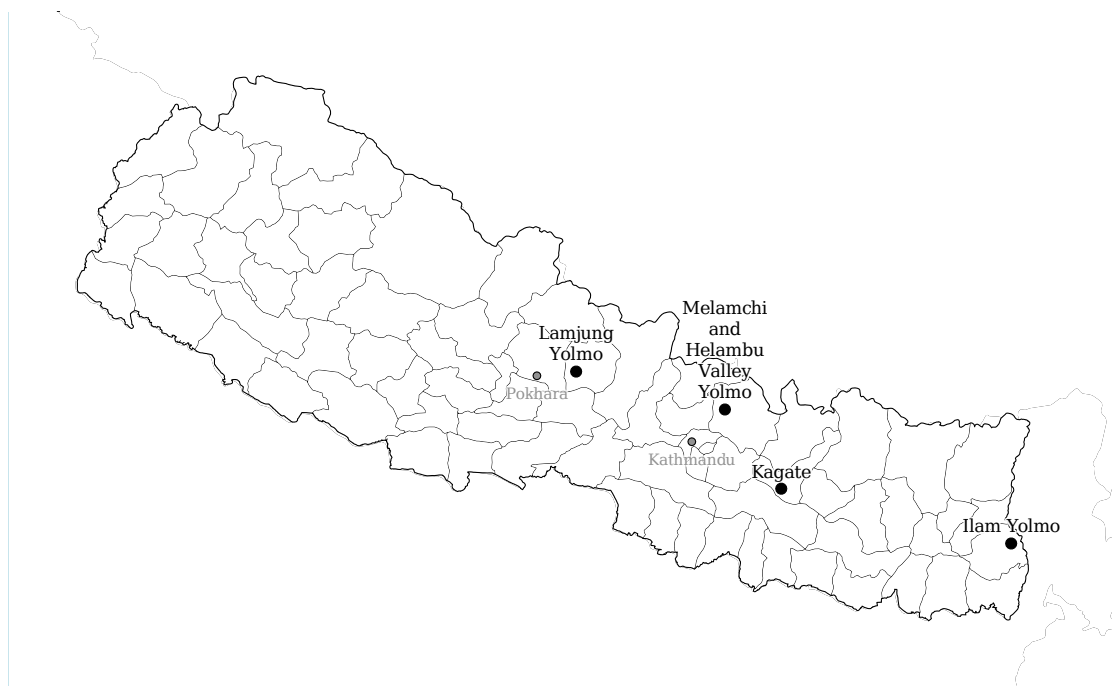


Figure 1. A map of Nepal with the different Hyolmo varieties marked.

The communities in Lamjung and Ramechhap do not have any direct connections to anyone residing in the Hyolmo homelands today. When I asked AM Lama from Lamjung about the Helambu area she opined that it was a 'lovely place'<sup>3</sup> where women still wore traditional clothing, and a preferable locale to Lamjung, although she had never visited there. This attitude demonstrates the idealisation of the homeland for this diaspora community. In Ramechhap, the Kagate identity is more specifically grounded in their current location, suggesting a somewhat different relationship to the homeland area.

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<sup>3</sup> Original in Nepali 'Ramāilō ṭhāum'.



The earliest reference to Kagate in Western literature is in Grierson's (1909/1966) linguistic survey of India, much earlier than the first mentions of Hyolmo, which was not discussed coherently as a distinct cultural group until the anthropological work of Clarke in the 1980s and 1990s (1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1983, 1985, 1990, 1991, 1995). Bonnerjea's (1936) survey of the phonology of several Tibeto-Burman languages also makes mention of Kagate. He refers to speakers as living in the east of Nepal and in Darjeeling, India. An initial look at the lexical items used in Grierson and Bonnerjea's work indicates that they are at least mutually intelligible with the language that is currently identified as Kagate. As I discuss below, the name Kagate is related to a profession-based status, so it should not be expected that all references to Kagate definitely have an origin in the Hyolmo language-speaking community. I have been in contact with Kagate speakers for the last six years, and for the last two years I have worked with them to record their traditional narratives and history.

Lamjung Hyolmo is a variety that was previously unattested in the literature. This variety has been the focus of my own documentation work, which I started in 2009. There is a short dictionary of the language available (Gawne 2011) and a grammatical description (forthcoming). Although I have found little documented evidence to support the oral history of the Hyolmo speakers in Lamjung, there is corroboration of my findings in the field diaries of the legendary anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf. In 1957 von Furer-Haimendorf spent a period of time in the prosperous Gurung village of Ghalegaun, which is one of the highest villages of the area near the Hyolmo villages and a regional centre. He recorded that '[o]n the land of Kapurgaun there are three Tamang settlements, only some 25 years ago... [t]he Tamangs came from the east of the Nepal valley' (von Furer-Haimendorf 1957: 89). The villages he lists are the Hyolmo villages of today, and most probably the reference to Tamang relates to the Hyolmo population. There is no record that there were ever Tamang speakers in the Hyolmo villages, and as I discuss in Section 3, the reference to Tamang suggests that Lamjung Hyolmo speakers may share a common history with the Ramechhap Kagate, rather than any relationship with Tamang communities. The Kagate have been known to refer to themselves as Tamang when talking to outsiders (Höhlig and Hari 1976: 1). Von Furer-

Haimendorf's report would place the migration some time around 1932, whereas the report of the 92-year-old Hyolmo speaker I interviewed would put it around 1920 at the latest, and quite possibly earlier.

Von Fürer-Haimendorf (1957:306) writes in a later section of his notes that there are Lamas residing in Maling, who were quite different from Gurung Lamas, and came across from 'Yelmu' [sic] three generations earlier. He reports that some twenty to twenty-five households migrated but that there were around 120 households at the time he wrote. It is possible that von Fürer-Haimendorf received two different reports on the same community of Hyolmo speakers, but it is unlikely we will ever know for certain. Von Fürer-Haimendorf's notes also suggest that this was not a single migration event, but a slower process whereby more families arrived after an initial wave of settlers. This may explain why groups dispersed to Lamjung, Ramechhap and Ilam from the same area at around the same time, as different families sought opportunities in different places.

There appears to have been no contact between these groups of speakers until recently. As has been observed for many other communities (Clifford 1994: 304), the rise in online communication, particularly for urban and educated speakers, as well as the ability to travel more within Nepal and spend less time on subsistence farming activities makes it easier for geographically disparate communities to interact. A growing interest in group narratives and identity means that members of different communities are also motivated to seek each other out. In recent years, Hyolmo speakers from Lamjung and Ramechhap districts have had contact with Hyolmo speakers from other areas through the Yolmo Social Service Association, which was formalised in 1998.<sup>4</sup> This society distributes calendars and organises occasional events, in which members from Lamjung, Ramechhap and Ilam also participate. While the diaspora communities have connected with those Hyolmo who still live in the homelands, they have also spent a lot of time building relationships amongst themselves; they see a connection in their Hyolmo-ness but also in their migration history and diaspora status. As I demonstrate in Section 5, this is partly because these communities

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<sup>4</sup> [www.hyolmo.org.np](http://www.hyolmo.org.np)

share some cultural practices that diverge from the communities in the homelands, and as I discuss in the next section, it is also a function of the labels their communities have been given.

#### 4. Names and their social implications

The quotation in the title of this paper comes from a recording with a Kagate speaker from Ramechhap. At the start of the recording I asked her to state her name and village. Speakers of Kagate are currently going through a period of identity negotiation, meaning that the way they identify themselves and their language is in a state of change, and that different people will provide different names. Sometimes the same person will give different answers at different times; in a later recording the same woman introduces herself as Maya Lama. In this paper I talk about a number of different names that have been given to the people and languages of Lamjung and Ramechhap. Each name has its own connotations and associated values, and some are currently being used by some people but not by others. In this section I introduce these terms and their associated values.

The current fluidity of naming in the context of determining identity is possibly best illustrated by Mitchell & Eichtenopf's (2013) sociolinguistic study of Kagate. The study included a language usage and attitudes survey of 49 Kagate-speakers. The speakers were asked a number of questions about themselves, including their 'caste' as identified by themselves. The answers they gave are listed in Table 1, with spellings of Yholmo standardised.

<b>Name of caste</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
Yholmo	19
Kagate	6
Syuba	6
Tamang	5
Syuba Kagate	5
Kagate Yholmo	4
Syuba Yholmo	1
Kagate Tamang	1
Sherpa Yholmo Kagate	1

Langanga	1
<i>Total respondents</i>	49

Table 1: Self-identification of caste for Kagate speakers in Ramechhap, from Mitchell & Eichentopf (2013: 42)

I discuss all of these terms below, including their associated connotations and current patterns of usage among the groups in Ramechhap and Lamjung. The only term not included in the present discussion is *Langanga*. This is the name of one of the patrilineal clans that can be found in all of the Hyolmo communities, and is sometimes used as a preferred form of identification, particularly within Hyolmo society.

### *Hyolmo*

Hyolmo refers to the area in the Helambu and Melamchi Valleys north of the high Himalayas, which cuts across the Sindhupalchowk, Nuwakot and Rasuwa districts of Nepal. The name Hyolmo has been used for centuries to describe this area as a hidden area of peace and fertility in Tibetan literature (see Gelle *inter alia*), and has come to refer also to the Tibetan peoples who settled there, as well as their language. There is some orthographic variation in the spelling of Hyolmo in the Latin script, with *Hyolmo* (Torri forthcoming), *Yholmo* (Mitchell & Eichentopf 2013), *Yohlmo* (Hari 2010) and *Yolmo* (Desjarlais 1992, 2003, Gawne 2011) used by different academic authors. The forms that include ‘h’ do so to reflect the low tone of the word, which often has a breathy quality (Hari 2010: 1).

*Helambu* is said to be a corruption of the term *Hyolmo* (Hari 2010: 1), although Goldstein (1975: 69) and Clarke (1980b: 4) give a less reliable etymology, deriving from a combination of the Hyolmo words *hee* (potato) and *laphug* (radish), supposedly in reference to the main crops of the area.

Connected to Helambu is the term *Helambu Sherpa*, which is still occasionally used to refer to Hyolmo people from the homeland area, and this is the name linked to the ISO 639-3 language codes. This is a reference to the cultural and linguistic similarity with the relatively prestigious Sherpa of the Solu-Khumbu region. The Hyolmo people aligned themselves with the Sherpas in the 1970s and 1980s to benefit from this prestige (Clarke 1980a). With the rise

of interest in smaller cultural groups in Nepal since the introduction of democracy (see Section 2), the Hyolmo people no longer identify themselves as Sherpa and see themselves as being a distinct cultural unit (Desjarlais 2003: 8), but the transitions over time indicate that Hyolmo identity is constantly being reevaluated.

As I illustrate with the discussion of the other terms in use, the diaspora groups have not always referred to themselves as Hyolmo, even though the majority of Lamjung speakers now do. This return to a rediscovered identification with a homeland is not uncommon. Hall (1993) discusses the communities of the African diaspora in Kingston in the 1940s and 1950s who did not reflexively consider themselves to necessarily be African, instead this identity was discovered in the 1970s along with their identity as children of slaves. In much the same way, the gap in Hyolmo-ness does not diminish the current claims to a Hyolmo identity for the diaspora communities.

### *Kagate*

This term is still used to refer to the variety of the language, and its speakers, in Ramechhap. This name comes from the Nepali term for paper, *kagate*, and refers to the profession of papermaker that both the Kagate of Ramechhap and the Hyolmo of Lamjung often held, although neither group regularly produces paper today. The profession of papermaker is considered to be a low caste occupation in Nepal. The Lamjung Hyolmo and Kagate populations were treated as Tamangs (and also sometimes called Tamang, as is discussed below), and as enslavable alcohol drinkers, one of the lowest of the 'clean' castes in the *Muluki Ain* (discussed in Section 2, see also Gellner 1995, Holmberg 1989: 26).

The speakers of Hyolmo in Lamjung and Ilam have also historically been referred to by other ethnic groups in their area as *Kagate*, like the speakers in Ramechhap, which, given their historical occupation, is not unexpected. Von Fürer-Haimendorf observes that the Lamjung group were 'sometimes described as "Kagate Bhote"' (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1957: 278),<sup>5</sup> reflecting their occupation.

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<sup>5</sup> *Bhote* means 'people of Tibetan origin' in Nepali (Adhikary 2007: 270).

Speakers in Lamjung have actively tried to move away from this identity towards something with a less negative connotation. During a recorded group discussion I asked A. Lama (female, 50 y/o) about the name “Kagate”. She exclaimed, ‘For me, our forefathers they were Kagate... now we are Hyolmo.’<sup>6</sup> During the conversation one man observed: ‘Now people are searching from where this language has originated. And now they have found that it is from Hyolmo. And so in this present time they are saying it is from Hyolmo.’ (14/09/2009). These two quotes demonstrate the conscious and active choices that members of the Lamjung community make to align themselves with a Hyolmo identity, with regard to both their language and their ethnic identity.

Even today the Hyolmo in Lamjung are occasionally referred to as *Kagate Bhote*, although even non-Hyolmo speakers consider this to be pejorative. I faced problems when I referred to Kagate in the blurb of a Lamjung Hyolmo dictionary; even this allusion to the Kagate was considered distasteful enough for the reference to be removed from the next edition (Gawne 2014). Ilam speakers also appear keen to distance themselves from this name.

Although Hyolmo speakers in Lamjung and Ilam have sought to distance themselves from an identity with a historically negative caste basis, and Ethnologue (Lewis et al. 2013) now acknowledges *Kagate Bhote* to be pejorative, many members of the Ramechhap Kagate group I have spoken to are proud of their name and their heritage. There are many factors that may account for this difference with their Lamjung counterparts, which I tease out in the sections below, including previous interactions with linguistic researchers and a more secure social and economic position than speakers in Lamjung. Although Kagate is mutually intelligible with Hyolmo, it has its own ISO 639-3 code (SYW), thanks to an accident of history where they were identified prior to the main group of Hyolmo. Many Kagate speakers are proud of their small language and unique identity, while also accepting their Hyolmo origins. This is not unusual for

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<sup>6</sup> The first half of this comment was in Hyolmo: *ɳála ɳí-i mème tà dì kàgat ná...* (for me, our forefathers they were Kagate). The second half was in Nepali: *āhīle yolmoba* (now [we are] Hyolmos).

diaspora communities: As Butler (2001) notes, they must have a connection to their homeland, but they are also their own unique communities.

It should not be assumed that everybody in Ramechhap is equally happy to maintain a Kagate identity. As can be seen in Table 1, many more people identified themselves as Hyolmo than as Kagate when asked. The village of Nobra upset some of the other villages five years ago when they decided that a recently built *gompa* (Buddhist temple) would be an explicitly Hyolmo gompa to build their links with the homelands, rather than a local Kagate gompa. It appears that particular preferences may be stronger in certain villages or families. People often engage in prolonged discussions of these matters, and it does not appear that a consensus will be reached any time soon.

Whether the name Kagate is a remnant of a historic social position within Helambu society or came about as a result of travels has not been established. Perhaps it was the non-landowning skilled papermakers who left their original settlements to move to Lamjung, Ramechhap and Ilam, and had to contend with a new social status in a new place. Speakers of Kagate from Ramechhap who have met Ilam Hyolmo speakers say that the Ilam community was also historically referred to as Kagate, but like the Lamjung community they have chosen to be identified as Hyolmo. If this is the case, it is interesting that the three groups that migrated from the Hyolmo homelands around the same time were all called Kagate.

To complicate the relationship between Hyolmo and Kagate in the historical narrative, earlier anthropological work by Clarke (1980a: 79) and Desjarlais (1992: xiii) also referred to Helambu Valley Hyolmo people as speaking Kagate, although as Hari (Hari and Lama 2004: 701) notes, this should not be taken too seriously as there was little ethnographic work at that point that established Yolmo as a separate group from Kagate.

As it is a name that refers to an occupation, it is possible that there are other groups in Nepal that have been given the exonym *Kagate*.

### *Syuba*

The Kagate of Ramechhap also refer to themselves internally as *Syuba*, which in their own language, also means paper, like *Kagate*. This name has gained ground

with many speakers of the language in recent years, as it asserts a unique identity that is separate from Hyolmo, without the negative connotations of the name Kagate. Several of the people central to the documentation of the language have also started to refer to the language as Syuba. The term has not yet gained any ground with the communities in Ilam or Lamjung, which appear less concerned with creating an identity that is distinct from Hyolmo beyond the inclusion of their own location, e.g. Ilam Hyolmo, Lamjung Hyolmo.

The fact that the Ramechhap community have their own endonym indicates a complex attitude to their diaspora status. As mentioned above for the term Kagate, having a separate name does not exclude them from their alignment with a larger Hyolmo ethnicity, just as being Hyolmo is part of a nested identity in a larger Tibetan ethnicity. It does indicate a more nuanced diasporic status than is found in the Lamjung community.

### *Lama*

The people of Lamjung are often referred to as *Lama*, and their language referred to as *Lama Bhasa* in Nepali (*bhasa* being the Nepali word for language) or *pèpa tám* ('Tibetan people' and 'language' in Hyolmo). The name Lama is given on their official identification documents, is the most common local exonym now, and avoids the historical form Kagate, which they find to be very negative. This term is related to their Buddhist faith and is a term used for, and by, many other Buddhist groups as well. In Ilam this nomenclature does not appear to be used for family names, ethnic or language labelling. Ramechhap people take the surname Lama if they are patrilineal village *lamas*, or their family, such as Maya from the title of this paper. The village *lamas* are discussed in Section 5 below.

### *Tamang*

The Tamang are a separate group with their own Tibeto-Burman language that is not mutually intelligible with Hyolmo (although there are many lexical similarities, likely as a result of sustained contact in the Hyolmo homelands). Tamangs are found across Nepal's low hill-lands, and were historically mistreated as a convenient labour pool by the ruling classes (Tamang 2009). There are populations in both Lamjung and Ramechhap as well as in Nuwakot



and Sindhupalchok near the Hyolmo homelands. In Ramechhap almost every Kagate speaker is given the surname Tamang in their national registration, even though they have never identified either themselves or their language as Tamang. Tamang scholars also note a lack of clear government acknowledgement of the distinction between Tamangs and other proximal Buddhist ethnic groups (Tamang 2009: 273), indicating that this is not exclusively a one-directional problem. It is not uncommon for small or under-recognised communities in Nepal to co-opt the identity of other ethnic groups when dealing with government officials who have constrained ideas and expectations of ethnic categories, as discussed by Shneiderman and Turin (2006: 103) in relation to Thangmi community members who often represent themselves as Rai or Gurung. When I asked the Ramechhap Kagate speakers why this was the case, I received a number of different answers. The first reply was that the government simply required them to have an identity, and as there were Tamangs nearby and they were similarly Buddhist, they were given the name Tamang. The other answer I was given was that they chose the name Tamang, as it gave them a better chance to enter the army than the name Lama (the rationale being that the name *Lama* might give the impression they would not be good at killing people). This anecdote may be apocryphal, but it is interesting because beyond this, references to Tamang are mostly negative, both from Ramechhap and Lamjung communities. Kagate community members are now moving to have their children identified as Kagate or Syuba on their identity documents.

## **5. Cultural practices in Lamjung and Ramechhap**

Above I traced the names and labels that frame much of the discussion about identity for these diaspora groups, and the historical narratives that ground their understanding of their origins. In this section I turn to contemporary cultural practices, and how these influence understandings of identity. This section is not intended to be a detailed ethnographic description of life for Hyolmo speakers in Lamjung and Ramechhap, but a summary of features of life in these areas that relate to the themes of this paper. Some of these topics have to do with conscious social actions on behalf of community members to align themselves with a Hyolmo identity, such as wearing Tibetan dress, even if some of those features

are at odds with a larger understanding of Hyolmo identity, such as the practice of basket-weaving in Lamjung. Other features of their social life may not be consciously regarded as part of a Hyolmo identity by community members. Similarly, these two groups do not put emphasis on exactly the same things in their discussions and practices around ethnicity. As I have started to tease out above, the Kagate have a clear specific local identity as well as a Hyolmo identity that connects them to the larger Hyolmo group. The features discussed in this section are intended as illustrations of the social context in Ramechhap and Lamjung.

The Hyolmo diaspora communities retain practices from their homelands that demonstrate notable differences with practices from neighbouring communities. I highlight these practices to demonstrate how groups can be seen as diasporic even when migration occurred within a single nation-state. I also point to the ways in which Hyolmo practices have changed, or are different to those in other areas, which demonstrate the negotiation of their role both as modern Nepali citizens and as members of the dispersed Hyolmo ethnic group.

#### *Local social status*

The social environments in Lamjung and Ramechhap are quite different, and appear to have influenced attitudes towards speaking the Hyolmo language. In Lamjung the Hyolmo speakers are surrounded by Buddhist Gurung and Tamang villages as well as smaller numbers of Hindu Chetris and Brahmins. The Gurung have the highest prestige and live in the most elevated villages in the area. In earlier times, Hyolmo speakers in the area were not allowed to enter the Gurungs' houses. This may be because Gurung were afforded a higher status in the *Muluki Ain* as 'non-enslavable alcohol drinkers', or because of their own internal social stratification rules (Höfer 1979/2004: 120-121).

In comparison, the Kagate of Ramechhap live at the highest elevations in their area, with Hindu Sunwar, Brahmin and Chetri living in villages at lower altitudes. Although there are Brahmins and Chetris in the area who are of a higher social status, the Kagate of Ramechhap are not in direct contact with these groups as frequently as the Lamjung Hyolmo are with the local Gurung, and they do not share a religion with them. The general effect appears to be that the

Kagate of Ramechhap have had fewer direct social interactions that could have resulted in them considering Kagate to be a negative social status. It also allows them to construct their Buddhism as a positive point of difference with their neighbours. In contrast, renegotiating their identity as *Lama* or *Hyolmo*, instead of the caste-based *Kagate*, has allowed the community in Lamjung to reposition itself within a post-caste Nepal and align with a homeland ethnicity with greater social prestige.

### *Labour, food and village life*

In Lamjung and Ramechhap, subsistence agriculture has mostly focused on millet, potatoes and corn. In Lamjung small quantities of rice are also cultivated in the lowest fields. These villages are not high enough for yak herding as was done in the homelands (Bishop 1989, 1998), although for many decades the Kagate in Ramechhap kept large flocks of sheep, until the Nepali government recently banned forest grazing. A move away from some features of traditional agriculture has been a necessary feature of agricultural survival.

The communities in both Ramechhap and Lamjung have moved towards a more general Nepali diet, eating predominately rice and lentils instead of millet meal. This involves transporting large quantities of white rice to the villages, since it does not grow at that altitude. Like people in other parts of the country, eating rice is seen as a positive attribute of being Nepali - N. Hyolmo in Ramechhap often admonished me for being unable to eat rice in the same quantities as his family, saying that Nepali people must eat rice to feel that a meal has been satisfactory. People in Lamjung and Ramechhap also drink sweet milk *chia* rather than the salted butter tea, as is traditionally found in Hyolmo villages further north.

In labour beyond agriculture, Lamjung people also weave bamboo baskets to sell. Today these are mostly made for people's own use and for selling in nearby villages, but previously this was one of the main forms of industry of Hyolmo speakers in this area. According to older speakers they also traditionally made paper for export to Tibet. In Ramechhap there is no tradition of bamboo basket-making, however the memory of being papermakers is strongly present, which is possibly part of the more positive associations of the Kagate name in

this area. This form of labour possibility facilitated the division of these groups from the primary Hyolmo area (see section 3), and is one clear difference between these communities and the Hyolmo homeland villages. Although these trades are not considered to be part of a broader Hyolmo identity, they are positively identified attributes of the local identity in the diaspora groups.

### *Dress*

In the communities in Lamjung and Ramechhap married women are most likely to wear long, straight cotton *lungi* of Malay or Indonesian design, with t-shirts, cardigans or Nepali blouses. Younger women wear *kurta surwal* or readymade Western clothing. Some of the oldest generation of women in Lamjung may even wear Gurung style shawls and triangle back aprons, as for many years these were the most readily available clothes. Older menfolk may wear *durwa surwal* or *dhoti* while younger men are more likely to wear Western t-shirts and pants.

In both communities people have begun to acquire traditional Hyolmo costumes, particularly the long straight *chuba* dresses for the women. These dresses are usually only worn to weddings or other festive social occasions. As Lamjung speakers of Hyolmo become more aware of their roots they are beginning to embrace more aspects of their language and culture. At least one Lamjung Hyolmo woman in Besisahar is reported to have recently started a group for people to perform traditional *çàpru* <zhab bro> dance, including wearing traditional Tibetan dress.

For the communities in Lamjung and Ramechhap, wearing traditional dress is a conscious choice to engage with a symbol of their ethnic identity as Hyolmo. Access to these costumes has been facilitated in part because of greater access to cash through labour work, easier access to Kathmandu, where these dresses are purchased, and stronger interest in actively performing their identity as Tibetan peoples in Nepal. Wearing these outfits at weddings and other group events is a way for the community to build self-recognition of their Hyolmo identity.

## *Religion*

When talking about Hyolmo religion there are two traditions that must be taken into account, the first is Buddhism and the second is Shamanism, the two having long existed in synchronism in Hyolmo society. In both Lamjung and Ramechhap there is an active practice of institutionalised Nyingma Buddhism. As in the Hyolmo homelands, there are local *lamas* who inherit their role and title. Historically these were the only people in the community who would be sent away to be educated, in Lamjung they would most likely attend *gompas* in Manage, north of Lamjung. Today they are the only people in these communities who are literate in Written Tibetan, with all other community members gaining Nepali literacy through the national education system.

In Lamjung two small, non-residential *gompas* have been built; one shared between Nayagaun and Toljung, and an older one in Pondri. The Hyolmo in Lamjung are proud of their status as Buddhists of the Tibetan school, but it appears to be in a general sense, like their surname *Lama*, rather than specifically relating to their Hyolmo origins.

In Ramechhap there is one active *gompa*, but tensions have risen in the last few years as the village in which the *gompa* was built has decided that it will be a Hyolmo *gompa*, while other villages that assisted in the construction would like to see a specifically Syuba *gompa*. For the community that maintains the *gompa*, being Hyolmo is part of the prestige of being Buddhist, while for others their identity as Syuba or Kagate is part of a general pride in their Tibetan Buddhist heritage.

The Buddhist Kagate narrative is complicated by the fact there is a small, but sustained, group of Kagate who are practicing Christians since contact with Christian missionary linguists in the 1970s. This group is committed to the Kagate identity, in contrast with the wider Ramechhap community where some align more with Hyolmo. For this group, the Kagate identity is separate from any sense of being Buddhist (other than historically). This again illustrates the complexity of the relationship between the Ramechhap diaspora community and their conception of a Hyolmo identity. Although many members of the community see Buddhism as a central feature of their ethnic identification, not everyone believes that it has the same prominence.

As these diaspora communities make more links with the Hyolmo from the homelands, the Hyolmo *Gompa* in Kathmandu is central to this connection, and Buddhism is an important shared identity. Hyolmo identity also allows both communities to align themselves with a larger Himalayan-facing Tibetic identity. This is part of a larger ethnic identity, that in many ways goes beyond national borders, as it links the Hyolmo with Tibetic people in TAR and India. In other ways though, this is a local identity, as it allows communities in both Lamjung and Ramechhap to have an identity in opposition to the overwhelmingly Hindu governing class in Kathmandu. In Ramechhap it is also a more immediately relevant identity demarcation, allowing them to contrast themselves to the Sunwar Hindus who live further down the hills from them.

Unlike the communities in Ramechhap and the Hyolmo homelands, the people of Lamjung do not maintain a culture of shamanism. Although they are aware of the idea of shamanism, the practice is restricted to the local Tamang and Gurung people, indicating that it is a feature of Hyolmo culture that did not make the transition when Hyolmo speakers immigrated to the Lamjung area. Indeed, the lack of shamanism is one feature they use to identify themselves as *Lama* in contrast to the other communities in the area. The absence of shamanism for Lamjung Hyolmo speakers is, for them, a positive signifier of their Hyolmo identity. While the role of shamanism in the Hyolmo homelands is contested (Torri forthcoming), it is, for many, an important part of life in the region, and in Ramechhap people seek assistance from both the village *lama* and the village *pombo*. The different status of shamanism in each of these areas demonstrates that diasporas identify with an idea of an ethnicity, rather than the realities of life in the homelands.

Lamjung Hyolmo also participate in clan activities. One of these is a triennial prayer ceremony called *kàn púza*. Two men of the clan are trained to lead the day-long ceremony, which involves sets of chants in front of a prayer place set with white rice *tórma* statues, incense, unhusked rice, and jugs of water. This is the closest thing I have observed to the shamanic culture mentioned by Desjarlais (1992). In Ramechhap, shamanism is still very much active, with people seeking guidance from the local shaman, particularly in matters of health, as well as the local *lama*. Buddhist Kagate people see themselves primarily as

Buddhists, but also actively engage with the local shamanic practice, and appear to be proud of the skills and knowledge of the shamans, who still participate with other community members in Buddhist funeral rites and other *pujas*.

### *Language*

Language has often been seen as a powerful vehicle for identity construction, particularly in diaspora communities where it can serve as one of the most important links with the homelands (Carter 2013, Coupland et al. 2003: 153). There is a strong level of similarity between the Hyolmo spoken in the homelands and those varieties spoken in the diaspora communities. Hari (2010: 1), who worked extensively with both the Hyolmo spoken in the Melamchi Valley and Kagate, observes that 'to quite a large extent they are mutually intelligible dialects.' This assertion has been supported by my fieldwork with both of the communities in Lamjung and Ramechhap and my brief interactions with speakers from Ilam. I have been present while speakers of the varieties from Lamjung, Ilam and Ramechhap carried out an extended conversation, and speakers report that when they gather for Hyolmo Society events everybody speaks their own variety to each other. As these previously isolated varieties of Hyolmo language come into more frequent contact it will be interesting to observe whether a preferred standard emerges, or whether each group will continue to speak their own variety and the small number of salient differences will remain and be tolerated.

My small-scale survey of the lexical similarity of the main branch of Melamchi Valley Hyolmo, Lamjung Hyolmo and Kagate, indicates relatively minor lexical variation (Gawne 2010). Ongoing documentation of these Hyolmo varieties also indicate that there are some variations in the verbal system and nominal morphology that would make it easy for speakers to distinguish between someone from Lamjung, Ramechhap or Sindhupalchok (cf. Gawne 2013). Everyone in Lamjung and Ramechhap is also proficient in Nepali, with younger speakers also literate in Nepali. Even when they speak amongst themselves, people Lamjung and Ramechhap include Nepali lexical items. They also speak or comprehend varying amounts of other local languages (Lamjung: Gurung, Tamang; Ramechhap: Sunwar), although they feel no ownership of these

languages in comparison to Nepali and Hyolmo/Kagate. The prevalence of Nepali literacy and lack of Tibetan literacy means that the majority of speakers prefer to write their own language in a modified form of Devanagari. My interlocutors requested me to use this script when I published the *Lamjung Yolmo – Nepali – English dictionary* (Gawne 2011), and it is the script selected by Kagate speakers at an orthography workshop they held in 2013. Although this choice is one of convenience, as it expedites the number of people who can quickly adopt the orthographic standard through previous literacy, it is also a reminder that while these communities see themselves as Buddhists of Tibetan origin, they are also contemporary Nepali citizens who are proud of their nation.

In both communities almost everybody is at least bilingual in Hyolmo/Kagate and Nepali, which is used for speaking to people outside the community. All Hyolmo in Ramechhap and Lamjung are educated in Nepali. Children enter early primary school around the age of 4 or 5, which for some children is their first sustained contact with the Nepali language, particularly in Ramechhap where there is stronger transmission of their own language to children. In Lamjung more parents speak Nepali to their children, citing ease of starting school as a major reason for doing this. Education is viewed positively in both communities as a way of economic self-betterment, however beyond 5<sup>th</sup> grade, students in Ramechhap have to travel several hours a day on foot, and it is unusual to complete high school.

While the language varieties are very similar, if easily distinguishable, there is obvious variation in language attitudes. Although people in Lamjung are not negative about their own language, nevertheless they increasingly speak Nepali with their children in the hope of improving their educational opportunities. I agree with Mitchell and Eichertopf's (2013) claim that Ramechhap speakers have generally highly positive attitudes towards their language and strong intergenerational transfer of language to children. Speakers of the Ramechhap variety see their language and culture as being separate from that of Hyolmo, but closely related. This is possibly the effect of contact with missionary linguists several decades ago. Although Kagate speakers can easily communicate with speakers of Hyolmo varieties, they often overstate differences between the varieties. When I was talking with S. Syuba about his language he



said it was at best eighty percent the same as Lamjung Yolmo, which is a much weaker estimate than could be expected, indicating a desire to exacerbate linguistic differences to maintain a separate identity. While Kagate is mutually intelligible with, and from a linguistic perspective can be treated as a dialect of Hyolmo, the beliefs of the speakers in the different status and name of their language, and recognition as such in the SO-639 list have helped the shaping of their unique social identity. For researchers the linguistic status of Kagate is a good example of the need to weigh speaker attitude against evidence. Community members have a right to decide how they conceive of their language and their ethnicity, but to understand the relationship between individual groups we also need to look at their linguistic practice. The similarity of Kagate and other Hyolmo varieties is clear. The claims of difference and the need for separate nomenclature reveal more about speaker attitudes than about the language itself.

## **6. A broader account of Hyolmo identity**

These communities are good examples of Hall's (1993: 394) observations that while cultural identities have histories, they also 'undergo constant transformation' as they are subject to the continual play of time. Hyolmo in Lamjung and Ramechhap have not just recovered an identity from their past, but have drawn on their historical narratives of migration from the Hyolmo homelands to incorporate this into their own identities. Their construction of Hyolmo identity is not necessarily the same as it is for Hyolmo in the homeland areas. For example, in Lamjung the lack of shamanism is a positive identifying attribute for being Hyolmo, and in Ramechhap many see being Hyolmo as a larger set of which they are specifically Kagate or Syuba.

These identities are still being negotiated, within each group and, more frequently, within a unified diaspora including community members in Ilam and further afield. I have focused on how the communities in Lamjung and Ramechhap perceive and perform their own Hyolmo identities, and how in doing so, they are actively building a collective experience as a diaspora group. I have also touched briefly on how each of these groups is perceived in relation to its neighbours in their host lands. One group whose experiences do not feature in

this article is those Hyolmo from the homelands around the Helambu and Melamchi Valleys. As the consciousness of a wider Hyolmo identity continues to be strengthened, and as the main Hyolmo group continue to push for recognition in a new federated nation, it remains to be seen how the diaspora groups are accepted by the Hyolmo from the heartlands, as authenticity is conferred both by the Hyolmo diaspora and also their audiences (Bucholtz 2003: 408). Recent cross-group interactions, such as social events organised by the Yolmo Social Service Association indicate that positive relationships are being built.

As Nepal negotiates its new political identity as a multi-ethnic federation, communities are also negotiating how they talk about and demonstrate their identity, both in terms of their ethnicity as Hyolmo and as citizens of Nepal. Researchers need to be aware of local attitudes and practices, but also how these operate within the larger national discourse and the political climate. Hyolmo language speakers in Lamjung are increasingly looking to the Hyolmo homeland as part of their ethnic identity. Kagate speakers see their Hyolmo origins as an important feature of their identity, but they are building a new identity that is grounded in their circumstances as residences of Ramechhap.

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