

RECONCILIATION IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS: THE RENNELL-BELLONA CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

Wherever we find a community – however primitive, however complex – we find more than an association of individuals, each pursuing his own life, and possessing his own ideas. We also find a social pattern, a coherent body of customs and ideas, an integrated unity, or system, in which each element has a definite function in relation to the whole.¹

Fundamental to every form of social organisation is the method of obtaining items essential for human survival. In other words, how do the people of a particular society produce their food, clothing, tools, and, for the sake of this article, constitute the laws they need, in order to live as human beings? These necessary conditions of existence shape the relationship of men and women to each other. With such an understanding, we must ask of every custom, what contribution does it make to the total social life, and to the functioning of the total social system? The system will then serve to regulate the relationship of all the individuals in that society. John Lewis, in his book, *Anthropology Made Simple*, referred to this notion as a "method of survival".

When we think of law, we picture the courtroom, the judge, barristers, solicitors, the jury, impressive-looking law books, and the entire trappings of a modern legal system. However, when we turn to some simple, primal

¹ John Lewis, *Anthropology Made Simple* (Made Simple Books, London UK: W. H. Allen, 1969), p. 75.

authority, we find nothing like that. Are they then without law? Is law something which appears much later in the history of humanity? Let us turn to a community, whose law on reconciliation stands out, and see what microbes of legality we may find in that context, to help us better understand reconciliation.

MUNGABA MA MUNGIKI: RENNELL AND BELLONA ISLANDS²

Rennell and Bellona, two Polynesian outlying islands, about 120 miles south of Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, enjoyed virtual isolation, until the middle of the 1930s, when missionaries attempted to establish Christianity.³ Prior to the Christian missionary entrance, the people of Rennell and Bellona were governed by its oral, traditional customs, which were not without authoritative means of redressing wrongs, and, if necessary, exercising force to do so.

Traditionally, murder demands an equivalent killing. Since this might lead to a disintegration of peace, the community elders intervene to persuade the kinsmen of the murdered man to accept reconciliation. The process is called *tanu manganga*.⁴ The procedure was the only means of reconciliation in the Rennell-Bellona community. However, the procedure was not always followed, despite the sanctity of *tanu manganga*.⁵

Tanu manganga is a process that differs from what Don Richardson elucidates in his book, *Peace Child*. Richardson, in his account of the

² For this section, I'm especially indebted to Revd Geoffrey Saueha, the Gakea tribe chief, and a prominent elder of the Rennell-Bellona South Sea Evangelical church, and Ezekiel Tuhenua of the Ngutuanga Bangitakungu tribe of Bellona Island, with whom careful, standard, sustained exploration of Rennell-Bellona tradition awakened my knowledge of the topic discussed in this piece of work. Their enthusiasm has been contagious. They have made extensive and careful comments on the topic. One could hardly wish for a better informant and elder.

³ Torben Monberg, "Crisis and Mass Conversion on Rennell Island in 1938", in *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 71-2, (1962), pp. 145-150.

⁴ Rennell-Bellona process of reconciliation – written in Bellona dialect – to blacken face with soot (*m.*), as to sue for peace (*hakaiho*), and present offering (*t.*).

⁵ A prime example of this is the story of Mauhongia and Tangitonga, from the Kungangoto tribe of Bellona Island.

honoured treachery, stumbles onto the situation. There was no contextualisation strategy, with the goal of making an explicit explanation of Jesus as the *Peace Child* of God.⁶

The principle of peace that operates in the Rennell-Bellona community is to get the elders of quarrelling factions to try to sort things out. They will invite, as an arbitrator, a neutral elder, with recognised authority. To make reconciliation and peace, it is necessary to secure the intervention of an elder from the wider group, of which both lineages are members.

Reconciliation and peace is, to the people of Rennell, and its neighbouring island of Bellona, a fundamental element in their social and economic life. According to the ethos of the culture, however, each humiliation and disgraceful act perpetrated against oneself, or one's agnatic kin, must be avenged.⁷ Killing has apparently been part of the ancient, traditional Bellonese repertoire of action.⁸ They pride themselves on never forgetting the offences perpetrated against themselves, or their kin. Rolf Kuschel, an Associate Professor in Psychology at the Psychology Laboratory at the University of Copenhagen, beautifully describes the extensive field research on Bellona Island, in the South Pacific, in 1968, 1971-1972, 1977, and 1983. He wrote, "These feelings can be spontaneously activated by any associative connection to the incident in question. Several years may pass before something triggers off vengeance for a previous offence. If an opportunity presents itself, old hatred will instantly flare up again."⁹ As mentioned earlier, reconciliation is a much-needed facet in a society, where conflicts are copious. It is imperative to a society, where conflict, as Kuschel has rightly affirmed, is: "... rarely been limited to individuals".¹⁰ There is a tendency towards a swift implication of many people, other than those who were the direct cause of the fracas.

⁶ As was indicated in his attempt to explain the *tarop* to different communities in Iran Jaya.

⁷ Rolf Kuschel, *Vengeance is Their Reply* (Kinovox Denmark: Danish Research Council for the Humanities, 1988), p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

However, practically all Rennell-Bellona people below middle age are Christian. How can we account for these remarkable changes? In most cases, it was because of the missionary's aspiration to evangelise these hermit islands. Therefore, the message of reconciliation, which has brought light to the islands, needs to be taught in the light of *tanu manganga*.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RECONCILIATION

Finding its context in the social, legal, and religious customs of the ancient world, the metaphor of reconciliation includes the idea of replacing hostility and separation with peace and friendship, setting free from captivity, and being atoned for. Reconciliation is a notion, seen in both the Old Testament and New Testament, where it is expressed in various forms and metaphors.

Reconciliation is the act of restoring peaceful relationships, where there had previously been hostility and alienation. Ordinarily, reconciliation requires the removal of whatever caused the disruption of peace and harmony. This was especially true in the relation of God with humanity. Christ, in His sacrifice, removed the enmity between God and humanity. Throughout history, early church reformers and theologians coined various words and phrases to explain the work of Christ on the cross.

"Atonement" was coined by the English reformer, William Tyndale, in 1526, to translate the Latin term *reconciliatio* (reconciliation). Atonement is often used, especially in 19th-century works of theology, to refer to the salvific consequences of the death of Christ. The phrase "theories of the atonement" is often used to refer to ways of understanding the manner in which the salvation of humanity is possible, through the death and resurrection of Christ.¹¹

McGrath further emphasised the above notion, by stressing that the term "soteriology" (from the Greek: σωτηριά = *sōtēria* = "salvation") is increasingly used to refer to what was traditionally designated "theories of the atonement", or "work of Christ". Soteriology embraces two broad areas

¹¹ Alistair E. McGrath, ed., *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), p. 20.

of theology: the question of how salvation is possible (relating it to Jesus Christ); and the question of how salvation itself is to be understood.¹²

The above comments are but a few examples of the task of finding words that adequately explain “reconciliation”. Reconciliation has brought more light to atonement and salvation, a clear indication of its coherence to existing theology, as Martin notes,

The idea of man’s enmity, and God’s provision of peace, man’s bondage to the cosmos and his “flesh” (σάρξ = *sarx*), and the divine offer of release and emancipation, man’s estrangement in a disordered world, and all that has been accomplished, to secure his pardon, and a welcome back to God’s family – as well as the universe’s restoration to harmony – all these motifs could well be subsumed under the overarching rubric of “reconciliation”.¹³

We must never divorce reconciliation from atonement, salvation, and redemption.

Before considering both Old Testament and New Testament perceptions on reconciliation, serious reflection should be given to this emblematic question of “why reconciliation?”. Why are men and women in this condition? What is the explanation of man’s condition?

Men and women, as designated in scripture, were rebellious against God, and so, received the strongest reaction from Him – this is commonly called “the wrath of God”. If we are to think of God as a righteous God, we must accept the thought that He vigorously reacts against sin. Paul refers to this notion with these strong words: “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness, and unrighteousness of men” (Rom 1:18). After the fall, mankind made many attempts to remedy his failed state; however, every effort failed. The fact that mankind “missed the mark” proves that

¹² Ibid., p. 616.

¹³ Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* (Atlanta GA: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 80.

only God, who has given us the bench mark, is able to help us through – His provision is adequate.

The stigma of sin presents a somewhat gauche situation for humanity. Mankind's strength, and modern capabilities cannot find a remedy for sin. Jesus teaches us that we are all sinners. He insists that it is a serious matter when we do not reach the standard He lays down. This means that humanity needs some kind of remedy, a therapy that is able to meet this predicament – bringing wholesome solution to humanity's quandary. Christ's work on the cross has done it all for us. Our part in this is to respond to this by way of accepting this perfect reconciliation proposal.

OLD TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation is not a derelict issue in the Bible, rather, it is God's definitive plan for humanity, a motif for salvation that rings throughout the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, *reconciliation* is from the Hebrew word כָּפַר = *kāpar*.¹⁴ *Kāpar* involved the idea of an atonement, or a covering of sin (Lev 6:30; 16:20; Ezek 45:20). In the Old Testament, the word refers to the divinely-appointed "covering" of sin, particularly by the blood of the sacrifice (Lev 8:15; Ezek 45:20). It conveys the intent of the cultic offerings (Lev 8:18; 16:1-34; Ezek 45:15-20) to restore the people's relationship to God.¹⁵ Reconciliation is the restoration of harmonious friendship and fellowship between estranged persons. The tasks of reconciliation in the Old Testament were tasks performed on behalf of the people, through the mediation of the priest, a notion accented, with significant changes, by the author of Hebrews.

NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF RECONCILIATION

The concept of reconciliation, as foretold and portrayed in the Old Testament, is emphasised significantly in the New Testament narratives of Jesus in the gospels.¹⁶ It is also explained by Paul in his epistles, particularly in Eph 2, using the analogy of Jews and Gentiles being created

¹⁴ Henry S. Gehman, *New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Reconciliation".

¹⁵ David Noel Freedman, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Reconciliation".

into a new people through the process of reconciliation – made available through Jesus Christ.

Volf expresses the work of Christ, “The cross was not a tragic result of the kind of self-denial that underwrites violence, but a predictable end to a life of struggle for God’s peace in a world of violence.”¹⁶ God’s work, and Christ’s achievement, is best described in the word “reconciliation”, a motif limited to Pauline writings (except for Matt 5:24). The notion of reconciliation is concentrated in passages, which employ the verbs *καταλλάσσω* = *katallassō* (to reconcile) and *ἱλάσκομαι* = *hilaskomai* (to expiate).

God’s purpose is spelled out, “having abolished, in His flesh the enmity” (Eph 2:15). Christ sacrificed His body, thus negating the state of war between these two divisions of mankind – Jews and Gentiles. Paul further emphasises that the intention was to reconcile Jews and Gentiles, thus creating “one new man out of the two” (NIV). Our Lord’s reconciling work is viewed in Eph 2 as the crucial factor in connection with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.

Tanu manganga was intended to do just that in the Rennell-Bellona community. Its objective was to “create one new man out of the two”, thus bringing peace to the communities involved. In the biblical context, reconciliation plays a vital role in God’s eternal plan of salvation. It is the essence of God’s plan of salvation. So, to have a handle on this important aspect, one should bear in mind the significance of the different ways used to communicate the substance of what God has done for us through the death of His only-begotten Son – Jesus Christ, our only Saviour. The Rennell-Bellona concept of reconciliation – *tanu manganga* – in its authentic form, would help convey the essence of valid reconciliation. Its God-ordained purpose is to precondition the minds of the Rennell-Bellona

¹⁶ The prodigal son, which is – as Peter Forsyth puts it – “the culmination of Christ’s grand revelation of God”. Peter T. Forsyth *The Work of Christ* (London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909), p. 106.

¹⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 291.

people, in a culturally significant way, to recognise the importance of reconciliation in a society, where “eye for an eye” is perceived to be a virtue. Given that nuance, reconciliation is crucial to the ongoing function of the church and its future, considering the amount of violence, hatred, and enmity that is evident everywhere in the world today.

In the Rennell-Bellona community, reconciliation is analogous to *tanu manganga*. Bona fide reconciliation does not repudiate the importance of a cultural analogy. As a substitute, the cultural analogy heightened insight into the scriptures and our own cultural heritage, and thus better prepared us to share Christ meaningfully with other members of our society. Within the Rennell-Bellona community, before the arrival of Christianity, killing was part of survival. Yet, in such a situation, there exists a means of making peace that requires both parties to propose for a traditional reconciliation ceremony. This ceremony is called *tanu manganga*.

RECONCILIATION: THE RENNELL-BELLONA CONCEPT

We now turn our attention to the Rennell-Bellona form of reconciliation, which vividly demonstrates biblical reconciliation. To adapt a biblical truth to a non-biblical context, one needs to account for New Testament culture, in order to have a grasp of the original emphasis. The exclusion of biblical culture, and cultural metaphors, is to fall prey to what Kevin J. Vanhoozer beautifully articulated in his discussion on method, called: “interpretative myopia”.¹⁸ In interpretative myopia, one’s interpretation of scripture is constrained by his or her own worldview. The exclusion of the significance of other cultural metaphors will certainly produce “narrow universality”,¹⁹ thus exposing our insensitivity and arrogance towards other cultures.

Christianity is remarkable for the relative ease with which it enters living cultures. In becoming translatable it renders itself compatible with all cultures. It may be welcomed or resisted in its Western garb, but it is not itself uncongenial in other garb. Christianity broke free

¹⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All”, in Craig Ott, and Harold A. Netland, eds, *Globalising Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Nottingham UK: Apollos/IVP, 2007), pp. 85-126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

from its absolutised Judaic frame, and, through a racial pluralism, adopted the Hellenic culture.²⁰

John Hitchen, in his comments under the heading “God’s truth is universally applicable, and can be known in truth in every culture”, further underscores that the Christian message, in terms of mission, “rejoices in a ‘radical pluralism’, in that every culture is equally acceptable to God as the setting in which His truth can be received and obeyed”.²¹

SIGNS OF HOPE

Is there hope? More and more people are asking why Christian theologians, teachers, preachers, missionaries from the “majority world must play by Western Christianity’s rules in order to do theology. The dividing line really is between Western culture and non-Western culture.

From personal experience, growing physically and spiritually in the Rennell-Bellona community, my culture and the church really have no connection. My ancestors were told by missionaries that our culture was unbiblical, and so must never have a place in the new community of faith.²² Therefore, to introduce our culture, identity, and pride into a church context, one has to take the risk of making meticulous articulation. This is because the above has become a stigma and a hindrance, which has persevered through generations. Kwame Bediako’s complaint encapsulates this somewhat-perturbed feeling. “Western theology was, for so long, presented, in all its particulars, as the theology of the church, when, in fact, it was geographically localised, and culturally limited, European and Western, and not universal.”²³

²⁰ John M. Hitchen, “Culture and the Bible – The Question of Contextualisation”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, 8-2 (1992), p. 43, quoting from Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²² Torben Monberg alluded to that in his article “Poetry as Coded Messages: The Kananga of Bellona Island”, in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 83-4 (1974), pp. 427-442.

²³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All”, p. 88, quoting a complaint by Kwame Bediako in his book, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 115.

For ages, the people of Rennell-Bellona were indoctrinated by the perception that Western culture is biblical, as opposed to their own culture. Torben Monberg, pointing even to revealing contents of poetry, profoundly captures a prime example of the above notion, from an anthropological perspective. “The little coded messages are nowadays considered ‘sinful’ and ‘improper’ by Christians, and, as far as we could ascertain, are no longer composed.”²⁴ *Kananga* is a form of sending coded messages, and as far as Rennell-Bellona people are concerned, it is their form of communication. Therefore, one has to consider that, in illiterate society, poetry plays a vital role in communication, and, more importantly, in preserving tradition. Hitchen mentions his similar experience, in which he was asked by the people of Papua New Guinea (among whom he worked as a missionary) “why we did not teach Proverbs as tools for pre-evangelism in their proverb-rich, orally-literate society”.²⁵ It is obvious that the early missionaries to the church of Rennell-Bellona never considered such a perspective.

It is important to find the right word to allow reconciliation to be communicated, at least with greater emancipation, both traditionally and theologically. We will now discuss the contribution of the *tanu manganga* ritual to the Christian endeavour of pursuing peace through reconciliation. To appreciate the extent of this task, we need to answer two questions in the milieu of this selected ethnic group. What is reconciliation? *Tanu manganga*? In the most frequent use of the word, *tanu manganga* means “finding lasting, peaceful means in a society, where killing is somewhat a practice”.

Why bother contextualising the concept of reconciliation? Hitchen offers a simple answer: “The nature of God’s way of salvation demands it.”²⁶ Many cultural traits serve important functions in the lives of the people. If they are removed, without providing a substitute, the consequences can be tragic. Therefore, this question remains a challenge to the church: how can

²⁴ Monberg; “Poetry as Coded Messages”, p. 428.

²⁵ Hitchen, “Culture and the Bible”, p. 38.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

Christians communicate and embody the gospel message, in terms of such a worldview?

Tanu manganga is a term, used in the Rennell-Bellona community, to express a process employed, when there is enmity between different lineages or families. This is employed, because conflict in the Rennell-Bellona community will rarely be limited to individuals.

Before we look into some details of the concept of *tanu manganga*, we should offer some observations regarding its background. This term currently denotes something more than just a tradition. It is used when there are “death threats”, intimidation, and pressure from prior killings, jealousy, land disputes, and coercion. However, matters that can be solved, do not require something of this magnitude. *Tanu manganga* can only be applied to concrete human situations, such as the above.

The process is exceptionally sensitive. Thus, it calls for proper counselling. Because of conflict, women of both tribes will either initiate, or implement, negotiation, this is called *tuku muna*. In the Rennell-Bellona community, women are ultimately untouched. To kill a woman is an undignified thing for a warrior to do, and, for that reason, a woman has the liberty to walk into enemy territory to initiate reconciliation.

When both tribes concur on the peace proposal, then the venue is sorted. Both tribes will prepare items, with which to compensate each other. The victim's tribe will first perform the ritual. They will blacken themselves with prepared soot. In the process, they will also, literally, eat charcoal, and blacken themselves. As the perpetrator's side arrives, the victim's side will crawl towards the perpetrator's relatives, who have either been sitting down, or standing up, and try to crawl in between their legs. This is in total humility, pleading for mercy and grace from their enemy.²⁷ Basically, each party is at the mercy of the other as they perform the ritual. The perpetrator's side will also perform the ritual. Traditional dance is performed to celebrate, and to sign, the peace agreement.

²⁷ This is in stark contrast to the peace-child process, expressed in Don Richardson's book, *Peace Child*.

The *tanu manganga* ritual is a heart-breaking ceremony. There are a lot of poignant speeches (*hee pongo aki*), and nose rubbing (*hee songi*), a traditional form of acceptance, and exchanges of vows towards a fragile relationship. The process of exchanging goods, to further appease the situation, is also performed. It is called *haka'ese*. The act of expressing humility, which is literally to “crawl between legs” (*uungu ba'e*), cements this once-broken relationship. The conventional understanding of accepting and protecting each other has now become their ultimate goal.²⁸

TANU MANGANGA – RECONCILIATION

To understand the imperative of the ritual, we can almost feel the sensation of Paul's encounter in Athens, when he came across an altar with the inscription “To the unknown god” (Acts 17:23). Paul was prompted by the Spirit, to find the right word to communicate the gospel to the people of Athens. In doing so, Paul used images with which the people were accustomed. In this particular encounter, Paul knew the context, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:32), which enabled him to present the gospel. Here, we find that Paul's knowledge of the cultural context played a vital role in the task of contextualisation.

Contextualisation is a term commonly used in missiology, and is defined in different ways. According to Douglas Hayward, in grappling with *The Heliand*, profoundly highlights the following: (a) ensuring that the gospel is communicated in a manner appropriate to the culture; (b) using appropriate language and imagery from the receptor culture to convey biblical concepts; (c) address the needs and concern of the people of the receptor culture.²⁹ Contextualisation is surely a tough task, a task that demands a careful and thoughtful approach.

In contrast, inadequate contextualisation is, of course, a road to syncretism. This is a term that occurs in theological literature, with strong emphasis. Hendrik Kraemer gives more light to the term:

²⁸ Special thanks to Ezekiel Tuhenua, who informed me of the actual ritual.

²⁹ Douglas Hayward, “Contextualising the Gospel among the Saxons: An Example from the ninth century of the cultural adaptation of the gospel, as found in *The Heliand*”, in *Missiology: An International Review* 22-4 (October 1994), pp. 439-453.

[S]yncretism does not simply mean the mixing of religious elements in different origins (*Religionsmengerei*), which is the usual translation, or interpretation, given to the ignorant questioner. It is in these circles, taken in the sense of a systematic attempt to combine, blend, and reconcile inharmonious, even often conflicting, religious elements, in a new, so-called synthesis.³⁰

With that in mind, the considerable task is to strike a balance between *tanu manganga* and the biblical teaching on reconciliation, eschewing syncretism. Reconciliation is central to God's salvation plan. Every culture has its own way of demonstrating the love of God. The Rennell-Bellona community expresses it through the *tanu manganga* ritual. The scripture tells us to expect this, because of God's general revelation through both creation and conscience (Rom 1:20; Acts 14:16, 17; Rom 2:14, 15; John 1:19). The dynamic of turning towards *tanu manganga* to explicate the biblical proposition of reconciliation is a significant breakthrough. It results in an expanded understanding of reconciliation. The concept needs explanation, as the biblical stance is explored in terms of Hellenistic language and thought patterns. The process may be lengthy, but there is a hint of its profound significance for the future of the Rennell-Bellona church.

Violence is alive and well in today's world, and so are the efforts around the world to see peace reign, through reconciliation. Dispute in the church is also a very common phenomenon, and, thus, is a challenge the church is prompted to deal with.

CONCLUSION: A COMMENTARY

There are Christians, who have a hard time resisting the temptation to seek religious legitimization for their need to take up the sword. There are religions, which, for the sake of religion, pursue retaliation in the name of god. Islam is a well-known and persuasive example of such thinking. Volf rightly responded to this human struggle for retaliation: "If they give in to this temptation, they should forego all attempts to exonerate their version of

³⁰ Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London UK: Lutterworth Press, 1956), p. 392.

Christian faith from complicity in fomenting violence.”³¹ This implies that the right thing to do is to take the course of humility advocated in the *tanu manganga* ritual.

In the *tanu manganga* ritual, a Rennell-Bellona warrior basically strips off his traditional attire, which denotes pride and aggression, and puts on that of humility, to seek reconciliation. In the Rennell-Bellona community, reconciliation cannot be expected when one attends the ceremony with traditional attires. In order to be accepted, a warrior has to strip off his traditional attire. This is beautifully expressed in Paul’s word to the church of Ephesus (Eph 2:14-15). Blessing is given not to the violent, but to the meek (Matt 5:5), a notion expressed throughout the *tanu manganga* ritual.

Jesus provides the supreme example, through to the cross, to replace retaliation with humility. He refused to be sucked into the world’s standard, but sought to overcome evil by doing good, which, of course, is the ultimate aim of the ritual.

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³¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 306.

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