

Out of the Woods: Tsimshian Women and Forestry Work

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Introduction

The story of work on the west coast of Canada has traditionally been one of rugged (white) men in fish-boats, mines and forests. The experiences of Aboriginal peoples as laborers and producers in resource industries have rarely been the focus of mainstream historical accounts (Knight 1996: 5). While such gaps in historical and ethnographic records are being tackled by contemporary scholars, many of the less conspicuous stories of resource work in British Columbia remain untold. Recent research has tended to focus on Native men's experiences as fishers (Menzies 1992, Stevens 1992) and on Native women's wage labor in salmon canneries (Newell 1993, Muszynski 1992). Aboriginal women's long and complex history of involvement with the forest industry in British Columbia remains largely unexplored. In this article we will discuss some of the key social and economic processes at work during the colonization and industrialization of western Canada that have affected Aboriginal women's involvement in the forestry industry.

The experiences of women of the Tsimshian Nation on the north coast of British Columbia offer a case study that spans over a century and a half of involvement in forestry work. In this case study we describe an alternative, gendered history of forestry and also highlight the forces working to dispossess Aboriginal peoples and, specifically, to disadvantage Aboriginal women. Tsimshian women's early involvement as laborers and producers, and their subsequent exclusion from both wage work and independent harvesting, illuminates the way that colonialism and capitalism have cooperated in the economic marginalization of Aboriginal women.

Drawing from archival sources and life history interviews,¹ Tsimshian women's involvement with commercial forestry is traced from the establishment of a Hudson Bay trading post in Tsimshian territory in 1834 until the present time. The exclusion of women from forestry, coincident with the shift from an Aboriginal economy to industrial resource extraction, will be related to the social and economic changes encouraged by church and state and dictated by the needs of capital. The shifting position of Aboriginal women in the resource

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economy throughout the last century illuminates the instability of their status as women and as workers during the period of colonial and capitalist expansion.

Background: Tsimshian Territories and Communities

The traditional territories of the Tsimshian peoples stretch from the Nass River in the north to Douglas Channel in the south, and from the coastal islands several hundred kilometers inland. This broad territory includes the linguistic subdivisions of Nishga, Gitksan, Coast Tsimshian and Southern Tsimshian (Seguin 1983: ix); the current political divisions are reflected in the separate treaty negotiations of the Nisga'a, Gitksan and Tsimshian Nations. Here we focus on communities traditionally identified as Coast Tsimshian, whose treaty rights are currently being negotiated by the Tsimshian Tribal Council, based in Prince Rupert.

Human habitation of the Tsimshian lands dates back approximately thirteen thousand years, and the cultures encountered by European colonizers were developed by about 2,500 years ago (Marsden et al 1996: 99). Europeans first visited the Tsimshian people at the village of Kitkatla in 1787 by the trading vessel *Princess Royal* (Halpin and Seguin 1977: 281). During the next half-century, a few villages became the main settlements for the Tsimshian tribes, marking a shift from the frequent moves required by the Aboriginal subsistence cycle. Today the 10,000 Tsimshian Nation members reside in the Native communities of Lax Kw'Alaams, Metlakatla, Kitkatla, Kitasoo, Kitselas, Hartley Bay and Kitsumkalum, and the towns of Prince Rupert, Port Edward and Terrace, as well as various other parts of the province.

Commercial Forestry in Tsimshian Territory

While lumber may have been an occasional trade item before European settlement, commercial forestry as a source of income and regular employment in Tsimshian territory began with the establishment of Fort Simpson in 1834 by the Hudson Bay Company (Marsden and Galois 1995). The Hudson Bay Company (HBC) needed a great deal of both building lumber and firewood for the development of the fur trading post. The HBC journals from 1834-64 indicate the significance of Tsimshian labor in procuring wood for the fort. Tsimshian men were hired for logging expeditions and to cut firewood; Tsimshian families also independently harvested and sold wooden pickets and shingles used in fort construction.

The Hudson Bay Company ceased to be a significant employer of Native labor by the latter part of the nineteenth century and was replaced by the many sawmills established through the encouragement of local missionaries. Evangelism was closely related to the development of the forestry industry in Tsimshian territory prior to 1900. Anglican missionary William Duncan founded a mission at Metlakatla in 1867 and immediately built a sawmill to encourage the

community's economic independence. Duncan also considered the traditional large houses of the Tsimshian antithetical to Christian living and insisted on the construction of single-family dwellings. This mill was a significant employer of local men and a buyer of independently logged lumber. Similarly, Thomas Crosby, the Methodist missionary at Fort Simpson, encouraged the construction of Georgetown sawmill (near Fort Simpson) in 1875 to provide lumber for new, "Christian" houses and to encourage Aboriginal industrial participation (Bolt 1992: 66). Georgetown mill employed Tsimshian sawyers and loggers until 1967.

As well as running their own logging camps, local mills purchased logs from independent handloggers. Handloggers worked alone or in small teams, usually using their fishing boats to reach the logging claims and to transport the log booms to the mill. Tsimshian families registered logging tracts on their traditional family territories as well as working claims owned by the mills. Although handlogging ceased to be a common activity for non-Natives in the early part of the twentieth century, Native families continued this practice much later. McDonald suggests that Aboriginal loggers' integration of logging with subsistence activities helped them to persist in independent production, while those totally dependent on market commodities could not (1984: 358). Until the middle of the century the Tsimshian were engaged in a seasonal round, which included several months of wage labor, various independent harvesting enterprises (fishing, logging, beachcombing), and non-market subsistence food gathering.

The growing monopolization of timber resources by a few large companies throughout the twentieth century inhibited this economic mix and initiated a shift to wage labor. Since the 1950s men from the Tsimshian communities of Lax Kw'Alaams and Kitsumkalum have been heavily involved in industrial logging, both on reserve lands and elsewhere. Consolidation of the industry has resulted in the closure of the smaller, local logging operations; increasingly, the large companies based in the south have brought their own crews up to the Prince Rupert region. Employment opportunities for local loggers have been significantly curtailed.

Currently, the treaty process and the growing recognition of Aboriginal rights are transforming the nature of logging operations in Tsimshian territories. Bands of Aboriginal men are establishing their own development corporations to organize resource use and are also entering into joint ventures with large logging companies. The real benefits of these shifts are as yet uncertain.

Tsimshian Women and the Forest Resources

Tsimshian women have perhaps been less prevalent participants in the forest industry than their husbands, fathers and brothers; however, they have been involved in forestry in various ways since contact. The nature and extent of their involvement have changed throughout the course of the last century and a half, and it is these changes that are important to understanding the significance of colonialism in transforming the relationship between Aboriginal women and the resource base.

When Fort Simpson was relocated to Tsimshian territory in 1834, the fort residents were fearful of the Native community camped outside the fort walls. The Hudson Bay Company hired Tsimshian men to cut wood for them, even though the men were not allowed to bring the wood inside. Instead, Native women were hired to carry the firewood and lumber inside the walls of the fort. Women were also hired to cut firewood when there was a shortage of male labor during fishing season.

Tsimshian women's wage work in forestry declined with the shift to lumber production in mills during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. There is no indication that women were employed in any of the local mills at the turn of the century; however, the proliferation of mills did expand the opportunities for handlogging, and Tsimshian women were part of the kin-based production of saw logs. While the actual felling of the trees was predominantly, if not always, done by men, the female kin of these loggers were involved in the process of handlogging: trimming the logs, making the boom, driving the boat, gathering and preparing food for the loggers. Aboriginal involvement in primary production in the form of handlogging for mills continued into the 1940s. While we do not have life history material for the first part of the century, Tsimshian Elders have shared with us their experiences handlogging in the 1930s and 1940s.

Mabel Baxter's family continued to follow the traditional seasonal round of temporary subsistence camps until the 1950s, and she recalls the details of food gathering and timber production with her parents and grandmothers.

When I was in grade four I figured I knew all I needed to know in school. So we moved with [father] wherever he needed to go, all year round. He did handlogging, and logging to the Native people and all the old people, Native and non-Native, having a logging claim was just like having money in the bank. They get what they need and leave the other standing.

We would pack wood, saw wood. Do all the other household things. We never go right out to the bush, we go to the camp. Every so often he would bring a long round and we would chop the limbs off. I remember one time he had a great big log and my mother was sitting on the top chopping the limbs off—she was about six months pregnant.

Mabel's family used the money from selling their timber to supplement the food they gathered throughout the year and to buy supplies and gas for fishing and hunting. During the course of the year, the Baxters visited seven different camps, which they shared with their extended family. Their subsistence round included the harvesting of salmon, halibut, mountain goats, crabapples, cranberries, clams, crabs, seal, deer, mussels, sea cucumber, herring eggs, seaweed, abalone, and octopus. This continued into the 1950s, when the large logging companies began to monopolize timber claims in the region; this disrupted handlogging and its monetary support of subsistence and also impacted Tsimshian ability to gather other resources.

At the end of his logging season, he'll boom it up and take it in. Get a little bit of money, pay off the winter bills, stock up on more groceries. We never worried about bank accounts. His bank account is in the goods. But when they brought in the big

companies, that did away with the bank account. Someone else took it. So they lost all their logging claims.

Mabel's brother Andrew suggests that industrial logging has limited the availability of bush food: "We followed the cycle of food. So we find that the circle is broken by logging. The trees are missing. So much of our food is in them."

After losing their handlogging claims the Baxters beach-combed for a few years but found it hard to make a living. The eventual licensing and territorialization of beachcombing further inhibited their ability to obtain the necessary cash income to supply their subsistence activities. Mabel started work at the cannery in Port Essington at the age of twelve. Her sons are all industrial loggers, and her daughters are married to loggers.

The end of kin-based timber production meant the end of any significant female involvement in the forest industry for several decades. Women were not hired as loggers by logging companies and were not employed in the local sawmills. However, one momentary exception occurred during World War II, when male labor was suddenly less available.

Wanda Lester was born in 1918 in Kitselas and married a Kitsumkalum man, Jake Walton in 1934. Jake started working at Brown's mill in 1935 as a slabman and later as an edgerman. Wanda lived at Brown's mill with him and, by the outbreak of the war, had four small children. In 1942, the internment of the Japanese workers caused a critical labor shortage. The owner of the mill asked Wanda to work as a planer. Wanda was one of the few women living at the mill site (3 hours by boat from the village), because her children were not yet school-aged. She worked at the mill until the end of the war when the servicemen returned home. Wanda made 35 cents an hour, as did her husband, which was 10 cents more than the Japanese workers had been paid. There were two other women working in the mill during the war. After the war Wanda moved back to the village for her children to attend school, and she babysat to make money; her husband took a job with an industrial logging company.

After the war women found little employment in the local forest industry until Columbia Cellulose built a large sulfite pulp mill in Port Edward, just outside of Prince Rupert. The first mill was built there in 1951, but a large, automated facility was built in 1967 (Marchak 1983: 104). The mill has employed a small number of women over the past three decades.

The shift to industrial production led to fewer jobs for Tsimshian women; major companies do not hire women in great numbers as loggers. The large automated mills offer only limited employment. The more recent shift in control of logging operations on reserve lands back to First Nations does offer some potential opportunities for Aboriginal women. Hartley Bay band member Debby Stout works part-time on the administration of a joint-venture logging project, and full-time for the Lax Kw'Alaams fish processing plant. Local and Aboriginally-controlled resource enterprises may thus offer some opportunities for women outside of the actual production process. Whether they will provide more direct forestry employment is unclear.

The Paradox of Women's Labor

The pattern of participation for Tsimshian women in the forest industry is in some ways not surprising—a steady decline of involvement in forestry related to the shift from primary production to wage labor, reflecting an exclusion of Aboriginal women from the industrial workforce. More recent openings in the pulp mills can be related both to automation reducing the association of millwork with physical strength, and to the liberalization of views regarding women and work. This pattern of employment is extremely similar to that experienced by women in mining in the United States (see Moore 1996), including the temporary opening of the industries to women during World War II.

This pattern is, however, complicated by the fact that Tsimshian women were highly involved in wage labor in another sector of the resource economy. Native women provided the bulk of the labor force for salmon canneries on the north coast of British Columbia from the 1880s until the mid-twentieth century. Native women were waged workers in the resource economy, just not in forestry.

The differential integration of female Native labor into the fishing and forestry industries reflects the complex interaction of material and ideological forces in the construction of the economy of British Columbia. More specifically, this paradox of Aboriginal women's experience as resource workers illuminates the inconsistent and unstable position that Native women held in the social structure of the province throughout the last century and a half. Their status as women and workers was significantly impacted by the forces of colonialism, industrialization, European gender ideology, and the varying collisions of these forces over time.

The Marginalization of Native Women Workers

Tsimshian women's experience as workers reflects the larger transformation of Aboriginal economic and social structures by the forces of colonialism and capitalism. Colonization and capitalist expansion both demanded the transformation of independent Native producers into wage laborers. Both required the alienation of land and resources from Aboriginal control. Both benefited from the assimilation of Native peoples to European values and economic structures. These goals were achieved through the inhibition of Native subsistence activities involving large territories, the establishment of male-headed single family households, and the segregation of male and female labor.

The subsistence cycle of the Tsimshian encouraged a flexible gender division of labor in which women and men worked cooperatively and performed complementary labor to produce food and trade goods. Mabel Baxter's stories of handlogging reflect this complementarity; women and men were involved in different aspects of the production process. McDonald suggests that this flexible and complementary gender division of labor creates a situation where members of one gender labor with and for the other gender, promoting social unification (1984: 87).

However, by the 1980s McDonald noted an ethic that dictated that married women should not need to work outside the home (1984: 66). During the twentieth century, the male breadwinner ethic had become internalized within a commu-

nity that had formerly valued both male and female labor as crucial to family production and reproduction. Furthermore, this ideology reflected an eclipse of Tsimshian women's significant role as wage laborers in canneries for several decades at the turn of the century. During the last five decades, Tsimshian women became dislocated from their identity as waged workers. This shift is related to both the decline of the Aboriginal economy brought about by colonial and capitalist efforts and a changing gender ideology within indigenous communities.

Nineteenth-Century Economic and Social Change

The colonial state and missionaries worked together as both proponents of patriarchal ideology and initiators of economic change to shift women's social and economic positions at the end of the nineteenth century. During the 1880s missionaries began to discourage seasonal migration and to demand permanent settlements centered around church, school and industry. Simultaneously, the government reserve system began to concentrate indigenous populations on small pockets of land, alienating the bulk of Native territory to industrial interests. State education policies, although lax until the mid-twentieth century, gradually began to limit families' seasonal migrations. McDonald relates residential schools directly to the decline of the Aboriginal economy; Tsimshian children who attended these schools never returned to the forest as independent producers (1984: 353).

These economic and social changes were accompanied by cooperative efforts by state and church to assimilate indigenous peoples to European gender ideology. Fiske relates Tsimshian women's gradual exclusion from property ownership and resource control to missionization (1989: 523). Missionary efforts to eradicate multi-family dwellings encouraged the male-headed nuclear family as the primary social and economic unit; reserve allotments also worked to reify the patriarchal household and male property control (Garfield 1939: 279). The school system sought to instill Victorian values and European ideals of "civilized" occupations for men and women. Girls learned to become homemakers and boys learned farming and other manual skills (Barman 1996: 161, Knight 1996: 103). Barman asserts that European uneasiness with Aboriginal women's agency and independence was a major reason for the development of the residential schools system (Barman 1997: 240).

By the turn of the century, shifts in Native social structures and the economic system had laid the foundation for women's exclusion from forestry work. A rigid division of productive and domestic spheres began to replace the flexible division of labor based on the subsistence round. Native families became separated into male-headed households, gradually experiencing a growing dependence on a male wage. These changes in the economy and social structure were supported and reinforced by the ideological efforts of church and state to establish European values. Capitalist development in British Columbia necessitated the reorganization of Aboriginal communities around European ideals regarding male and female economic contributions. The rigid separation of the sites of production and reproduction was imposed upon the more flexible and integrated economic

system of the Tsimshian in order to create a male work force and to channel female labor into supportive domestic work.

Twentieth Century Transitions

A complete shift to dependence on male wage work, however, was not immediate. The Aboriginal economy continued to articulate with commodity production and wage work until the middle of the twentieth century. Tsimshian families combined various resource use and income-earning activities to make a living. Thus, while women were excluded from forestry wage work, they continued to participate in the independent production of timber. The co-existence of male wage work in sawmills and kin-based production of timber for these mills highlights the conflicting gender relations and ideologies of the capitalist and Aboriginal economies. The first half of the twentieth century can thus be considered an era of transition, of the Aboriginal economy and of indigenous gender relations.

This transitional period continued until Aboriginal hand-logging ceased in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Hand-logging was only profitable to Tsimshian families because it was combined with, and supported by, their subsistence activities. After World War II, Native families found it increasingly difficult to maintain this integration of different modes of production. Large companies gained control of most of Tsimshian traditional territories, undermining both subsistence and handlogging activities. Local sawmills began to close, reducing the viability of small-scale logging. Mandatory schooling reduced the ability of families to migrate year-round; often, families became split when mothers located near schools and fathers worked at mills many miles away. This reinforced the separation of productive and domestic spheres encouraged by missionaries and the state and worked to shrink women's direct economic contributions.

The post-WWII decline of handlogging and subsistence coincided with the development of industrial logging and sawmilling, which opened up employment opportunities for Tsimshian men displaced from subsistence activities. Particularly, many Kitsumkalum and Lax Kw'Alaams men were employed in logging territories close to or on their reserves and worked in the newer mills nearby. Aboriginal women were not incorporated into the new industrial forestry labor force.

Logging and sawmilling have been relatively high-paying work since the 1950s, due primarily to union efforts. Since the 1950s there has been a steady decline in employment due to mechanization, thus shrinking the pool of available jobs. It is increasingly difficult for Aboriginal men to find local work, and there is a high degree of competition for logging jobs. The literature on job segregation indicates that women are traditionally excluded from high-paying jobs and are often excluded during times of industrial crisis (see Kessler-Harris 1983, Reskin 1984). Male-dominance in forestry employment in British Columbia is congruent with employment patterns in other resource industries (see Moore 1996, Knight 1996). The resource economy in Tsimshian territory by the latter half of the twentieth century thus began to mirror the work patterns and social structures favored and demanded by Western industrial capitalism.

Simultaneous with processes making forestry employment highly competitive and increasingly skilled, conditions that favor exclusion of female labor (Kemp 1992: 15), ideological shifts have altered Tsimshian ideas about male and female economic contributions. As noted above, the contemporary ethic is one that tends towards household dependence on a male wage and female domestic work. A century of missionary efforts and state assimilation policies have worked toward the establishment of a patriarchal nuclear family structure in Native communities and the ideology of the male breadwinner. By the time industrial logging and milling opportunities developed, this system was fully developed and was reinforced by the emphasis on women's domestic responsibilities that dominated 1950s North American culture.

The reversals in the 1970s also relate to both economic and ideological shifts. More recent employment in pulpmills reflects a shift in the needs of capital for a cheaper, lesser-skilled workforce, a shift generally associated with increased female employment (see Braverman 1974). This coincides with both decreasing male employment opportunities and liberalized ideas regarding women working outside the home. Native women are thus returning to forestry work after decades of exclusion. They do so, however, at lower wages than men and in low-status jobs.

Solving the Paradox

Over the course of the twentieth century, one can see a progressive shift in Tsimshian communities towards the family wage structure and ideology. The process was gradual, starting in the 1860s and culminating in the 1940s with the dominance of the capitalist economy over the Aboriginal economy. This shift was encouraged by colonial and capitalist interests. Colonial processes encouraged male-headed single family households, male wage labor and female domestic work, permanent settlement and the alienation of Native lands and resources. Industrial capitalism in the form of forestry corporations also worked to curtail Native subsistence activities, to limit female employment, to alienate Native land, and to establish a socio-economic structure dependent on the male forestry wage.

Native women's exclusion from forestry appeared as something of a paradox when compared to their widespread employment in salmon canneries. However, an analysis of the forces transforming the Tsimshian way of life reveals that differential use of female labor in the resource economy fits into the general pattern of change.

The canning industry required a large, cheap, unskilled labor force primarily in the four decades surrounding the turn of the century (1880-1920). The forestry industry required a smaller, skilled labor force after WWII. The labor requirements of the two industries were extremely different. Furthermore, there are several decades separating the widespread employment of Native women in industrial wage labor in canning and the exclusion of Native women from industrial wage labor in forestry. This half-century was the period of crucial social and economic change in Tsimshian communities.

Salmon canning was a high-risk venture, with low rates of profit (Newell 1993, Muszynski 1992). The industry was labor intensive and therefore required a large, seasonal labor

force hired at extremely low wages.² During the late nineteenth century, the remote location of North Coast canneries, the seasonal nature of the work, and the low wages limited the labor force to Asian immigrants and Aboriginal people. Muszynski emphasizes that the payment of low wages to cannery workers relied upon the continuation of subsistence activities to supplement these wages (1992: 89). Aboriginal women provided a cheap labor force because of their association with a male producer and their access to non-monetary resources. Their attractiveness to industrial capital lay in the persistence of their subsistence activities.

By the time the forestry industry had developed the need for a large wage labor force, Aboriginal women did not represent such a labor bargain. The diminishing significance of bush food in the diet of the Tsimshian and the availability of government transfer payments meant that Aboriginal women could not and would not work for pennies after WWII. Furthermore, forestry capital was in a very different position from that of cannery operators. Where canneries both paid for the harvesting and processing of fish, forestry companies primarily exported raw timber, so their labor costs represented a much smaller portion of their investment. When capital is not under serious pressure to limit wages, men tend to be preferentially hired (Kemp 1992: 26).

The diminished significance of the Aboriginal economy between the eras of cannery and forestry wage labor is a major aspect of their differentiation. The contribution of subsistence to Native households was a precondition for Native women's employment as cheap labor. This precondition was absent during the development of industrial forestry. Full-time wage work by men, rather than the combination of family production and wage labor dominant prior to WWII, encouraged the dependence of the family unit on the male wage and the association of female labor with the domestic sphere.

Conclusion

Native women's cannery work has been the primary focus of research on Aboriginal female wage labor in British Columbia. Their exploitation as a cheap labor force is a popular example of the structural disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal women. However, the exclusion of Native women from other wage work also illuminates Native women's economic marginalization.

Since the initiation of commercial forestry in Tsimshian territory by the Hudson Bay Company, Native women have been increasingly excluded from forest production. This process was gradual, culminating with the dissolution of handlogging activities at the end of the 1940s. The end of family-based timber production was effectively the end of Tsimshian women's direct participation in forestry until employment in automated pulpmills in the last decades of the century. What pushed Tsimshian women out of the woods was the transformation of a complementary division of labor into a rigid separation of productive and reproductive spheres. The shift from independent production of timber to wage labor marked a shift from family labor to male labor and was related to both material and ideological forces of change.

The changed mode of production experienced by the Tsimshian during the last hundred years has major implications for gender ideology and the division of labor.³ Furthermore, structural changes curtailing women's economic contribution and participation in production reinforced the gender ideology promoted by missionaries and the colonial state. The gendered economic and ideological forces of industrial capital undermined and effectively excluded Native women from logging and sawmilling in the twentieth century.

The differential integration of Tsimshian women into the canning and forestry labor forces is a product of changing economic and social structures. However, it is important to emphasize that the major force in determining the economic and social roles of Native women has been the demands of capitalist expansion. Specifically, the brief use of female labor in sawmills during World War II indicates the selective transformation of the sexual division of labor to suit the needs of capital. Native women's labor was exploited by capital in different ways throughout the development of British Columbia's economy; they were created and un-created as laborers as the needs of capital dictated. ■

Notes

1. The interviews were conducted in October 1997 by a research team under the direction of Dr. Charles Menzies (UBC) for the Forest Renewal BC-funded project "Communities in Transition: Tsimshian and the Forest Industry" in collaboration with the Tsimshian Tribal Council. Interviews were conducted in the communities of Lax Kw'Alaams (Port Simpson), Kitsumkalum, Prince Rupert, Kitkatla, Hartley Bay, and Metlakahtla. The names of participants have been changed.

2. Although mechanization slowly decreased labour needs in later years, during the early period of canning—the period significant to this discussion—the industry had high unskilled labour requirements.

3. Sally Cole's research with fisherwomen in Portugal suggests that gender ideology can be transformed by changing economic conditions, and that this change can be relatively rapid. In coastal Portugal, the alienation of productive work from the household unit was accompanied by the a new social construction of women's roles in the space of three generations (1989:145). Both women's roles, and ideas about women's work have changed as the local economy as changed. Leach suggests than new or changed markets for crops can significantly alter gender relations and the gender division of labour (1992:144).

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