

Generosity, gift giving, and gift avoiding in southern Oman

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Summary

Gibali (Jibbali/Shahri) is a Modern South Arabian language spoken in the coastal plain and mountains of the Dhofar region of southern Oman. Although there are researchers actively documenting Gibali, there has been little anthropological work on the speakers of this non-written language. Building on nine years of research about, and interactions with, Gibali speakers the author describes the concept of the gift in the Arab, Muslim, tribal culture of Gibali speakers. This article tries to form an appreciation of Gibalis by explaining their understanding of the definition of gifts as well as gift giving, receiving, reciprocating, and avoiding. From the field of gift theory, the author draws on Mauss, Godelier, Bourdieu, Appadurai, and Godbout and Caillé, to create a framework for the ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘why’, and ‘how’ of gifts. From the fields of travel writing and history, examples from Wilfred Thesiger and the memoirs of soldiers from the Dhofar War (1965–1975) are used to provide a historical perspective. The result is an insight into a culture in which gifts are, for the most part, not necessary as there are many limits placed on who can give/receive, the time to give/receive, and the kind of object that is considered a gift.

Keywords: Oman, gift, Dhofar, Gibali, Shahri

Introduction

Gibali as a noun refers to a language and the groups of people who speak it. It is a non-written, Modern South Arabian language, from the Arabic *jabal* ‘mountain’, and can be spelled in English as Jibbali, Jebbali, or Gebali (Hofstede 1998).¹ The word can also be used as an adjective, as in ‘a Gibali house.’ In the Dhofar region of southern Oman, the coastal and mountain towns and villages are almost exclusively Gibali.

Gibali is also referred to (in some academic contexts and by older generations) as Shahri, which is an approximation of the word ‘mountain’ in the Gibali language, but the people I know, work with, or have interviewed refer to themselves and their language as Gibali.

When I say a person is ‘Gibali’, I mean a person who has one or both parent(s) who spoke/speak Gibali as a first language, who themselves speak Gibali as a first language, and who identify themselves as Gibali, understanding that within Gibali speakers there are linguistic and cultural divisions, for example between the Shahrah, Al Kathiri (al-Kathīrī), and the Hakli (al-Ḥaklī) tribes, etc.² There is some intermarriage between Gibali

and non-Gibali Dhofaris; an easy way to differentiate them is by the tribal name of a person because women keep their own tribe name (used as their last name) when they marry. The visible differences between the two sets are slight but recognizable.

I have lived in Salalah (Ṣalālah) for nine years and am currently at Dhofar University (Jāmi‘at Ḍufār). There are very few Westerners who have long-term, established friendships with both male and female Gibalis and thus have significant access to daily work (fishing, milking camels) and family life (family dinners and celebrations such as marriage and getting a job).

My level of Arabic is low intermediate and I do not speak Gibali. I understand this might be seen as problematic, but knowing that they can, whenever necessary, ‘retreat’ into their language has allowed me (a single, Christian, American woman) slowly to join three different groups of Gibali men, most of whom have never spoken to, much less befriended, a woman they are not closely related to. In situations such as camping for several days with different groups of Gibali men and meeting the mothers/fathers/wives/husbands of various

¹ I use the spelling ‘Gibali’ as my informants say ‘g’ (as in goat), not ‘j’ (as in jeep) and without lengthening the ‘b’, i.e. gi-ba-li, not gib-ba-li.

² The correspondence between language and culture is usually

automatic. All the Dhofari examples I know of are men who are not Gibali but speak the language learned from playing with Gibali neighbours as children. Miranda Morris and Janet Watson are currently working on a book and website devoted to the translation/transcription of MSA languages (www.dhofari.com/showthread.php?t=202462). Other researchers include Rubin (2014) and Gravina (2014).

friends and informants, it is helpful for them to be able to have brief conversations which I am not privy to (but which are usually told to me later) such as: can we pray with her sitting here? Can she eat with her hands?

Furthermore, I often share research I have read and/or done with my Gibali friends and informants and sometimes these friends/informants will say ‘you know us too well’ — at which point I remind them I do not know the language and this restores a perceived power balance between us. The concept of ‘balance’ is key because Gibali culture is largely non-confrontational and Gibalis will usually pull back from situations when they feel uncomfortable or unsettled.³

Background

This paper is based on nine years of research into the history and culture of the Dhofar (Zufār) region, informal discussions with Gibali friends, as well as twenty-one formal interviews with eleven Gibali informants, nine from Hakli (al-Qarā) tribes, one from the Al Yafi (al-Yāfiṭ) tribe, and one from the Shahrah.⁴ The interviews were held in offices, my house, friends’ houses, coffee shops, and on research trips and were conducted in English, slipping occasionally into casual Arabic. When I have quoted friends and neighbours, from the Qara and Al Saada (Sādah) tribal groups, I have received permission; I have only described actions they or I have participated in and/or witnessed.

Gifts

Gibalis state that gifts are a signal of a friendship and/or family relationship and are ‘not very important’ in Gibali culture. When I asked one informant about gifts, she mentioned seeing an episode of *Friends* about giving and receiving gifts for Christmas. She laughed at how important the ‘right gift’ was to the characters and said that in comparison ‘we are easy.’

In the following discussion, ‘gift’ was the word used corresponding to the Arabic word *hadiyyah*. As explained

³ I understand the necessary caveats that the term ‘culture’ is somewhat ineffectual or imprecise; that describing how people think or act is always a moving target; and that no one person or practice can encompass or define a culture, etc.

⁴ Their ages ranged between 24 and 49. I saw no difference in how the word ‘gift’ was explained and/or used between men or women or between people of different ages. As noted by this article’s reviewer, it would be interesting to interview older Gibalis to see how or if the word has shifted meaning after modernization.

below, for Gibalis a ‘gift’ means an item that is given without any expectation of return.

Gifts are usually given at the two Eids (‘īd), after returning from travel (especially hajj [*hajj*] and umrah [*umrah*]), and family events: weddings, the birth of child, a new house, or ‘just like that’ as a surprise. Gifts to children are usually cash, toys, sometimes a goat, cow, or camel (and its future offspring); gifts to women usually take the form of cash, gold, perfume, watches, cell phones, purses, and *thiyāb* (sing. *thawb*) the loose dresses Dhofari women wear at home. Gifts to men are usually the embroidered headscarves that men wear (*maṣarr*, pl. *maṣarrāt*), watches, silver rings, perfume, and football paraphernalia including balls, shirts, and shoes. Men can also be given knives, guns, swords, and (for older men) throwing sticks made of *mīṭān* wood (*Olea europaea*).

Furthermore, as the gift’s value is in the symbol, not in the object itself, it is possible in Gibali culture to express dissatisfaction with the gift in a way that can be construed as quite rude in Western terms. There are many examples from travellers of this being a common trait across southern Arabia. Thomas records a conversation with one of his travelling companions in the Empty Quarter:

‘Here,’ I said, ‘you have no rifle. Take this one. It is a small present for you.’ ‘What,’ came the reply as he took it from my hand and examined it critically, ‘you are not going to give me any ammunition with it?’ (1932: 6).

Freya Stark, who also travelled in southern Arabia, notes that Arabs ‘take a gift and with one swift appraising glance, put it aside, nor ever refer to it again, so that there is only a shade or so in general behaviour to tell whether they are pleased or no’ (1948: 101). Thesiger says of his travelling companions, ‘often he will look at the gift which he has received and say, “Is this all that you are going to give me?”’ (1991: 63).

Generosity⁵

Generosity is highly valued in Gibali culture. The understanding is that good people will give possessions to, and/or allow possessions to be taken by, close relatives and friends. Godbout and Caillé state:

⁵ The word my informants understand as the English equivalent of *karāmah*; a word with many meanings but I can only give a brief overview in this article.

The social sciences have accustomed us to interpreting history and social interaction as the products of strategies employed by rational individuals who try to maximize the satisfaction of their material interests. This is the dominant vision, 'utilitarian,' and optimistic. It is counterbalanced, but only slightly, by the darker, complementary vision, Machiavellian and Nietzschean, that attributes everything to a quest for power...there are two, and only two major systems of social action: the market system...and the political system (2000: 14).

This in no way characterizes the Gibali understanding of maximizing 'satisfaction'; being generous is not linked to any tangible benefits accrued. Indeed, Gibalis will be generous to people of whom they know that they will not be generous in return. This is because self-respect is based on a personal sense of good behaviour, rather than engaging in systems of reciprocity. A brother will not complain if another brother takes his *dishdāshāt* (sing. *dishdāshah*), the long white or coloured shirt that men wear on all formal occasions, or other personal belongings such as shoes and shirts, constantly without ever repaying in kind or in another manner.

Generosity is not predicated on respect for the recipient. If a Gibali man asks for money, he does not need to defend the validity of the request and even if it is not immediately clear, the giver should make no attempt to establish the validity of the need. If they want to give, they will give, without judging the person or the result of their generosity; givers will hand out money to people they do not respect and/or to people they know will waste the cash without complaint. This understanding contrasts with the idea explained in Lancaster and Lancaster's *People, Land and Waters in the Arab Middle East* (2013) that 'The response to demands for money, credit, work and resources is not automatic but measured on the known needs and reputation of the asker, the probable response from other sources open to him, and the likelihood of success' (2013: 324).

Gibalis are aware that some of their actions and beliefs are at odds with other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. This is explained not in terms of a hierarchy (they or other people being better) but simply as 'different language, different culture'.

Proper, appropriate Gibali behaviour is both to give and to receive effortlessly; the situation is reminiscent of Emerson's injunction: 'Let him give kingdoms or flower-leaves indifferently' (1997: 7). Cars, for example, are seen as belonging to one person, but there is assumed access

for all of the family. One informant said that his father had copies of the keys to all his sons' cars and could take whichever one he wanted. I have also seen many examples of a younger brother taking a car belonging to an older brother and not returning it for several hours — to the great inconvenience of the older brother — without being scolded or punished, even when the younger brother was in a minor accident and did not tell the car's owner.

The sharing also is evident at the micro-level; for example, if you are in a group of Gibalis and are handed something (e.g. a slice of cake or a cup of tea), the well-behaved person immediately looks around to pass it to someone else instead of keeping it.

Payback

Once one has received a gift, what is owed in return? Between friends and close family members, there is no obligation. If one brother takes a bottle of cologne from another, there is no need for 'repayment.' For most gifts given, to receive the gift is the appropriate, and only, return gift. One does not stand in debt. There is no concept of tracking the gift and one should not even mention it again.

There is, however, a system of payback for specific kinds of gifts that are attached to specific events, for example a gold ring given to a sister at her wedding. A gift of gold should be kept in the sister's (or friend's) memory and returned when the woman marries or has a child. A female Gibali informant mentioned a woman who told her to 'hurry up and marry so I can give you gold', that is, repay the gold she was given at her wedding. Camels or cows slaughtered at a wedding also fall into this category; it is normal for a man to say 'X gave me a camel when I married so I will give him one'.⁶

Gifts that were given repeatedly over a long period of time are also kept in mind. One friend mentioned that her uncle always gave her gifts of money at Eid, so she remembered this and is careful to give that uncle's children gifts at Eid.

Godelier states that, 'In accepting a gift, one accepts more than the thing, one accepts the fact that the giver

⁶ 'Giving a camel' means giving a camel to be killed and eaten at the men's gathering. If it is possible, a Gibali returns the same — a camel for a camel. If a man does not have enough money he can, for example, give a cow instead of a camel. Giving more than the opening gift (i.e. two camels in return for one camel) is seen as positive if the giver is wealthy and a close friend or relative. Giving more than was given, giving extravagantly, or giving beyond one's means is seen as potentially suspect, i.e. the object is *not* a gift, but a precursor to asking a favour or creating an (unwanted) closer relationship.

has rights over the receiver' but this understanding of a connection between gifts and debt does not correspond to Gibali culture (1999: 45). In any of the above cases of giving, there is no reminder, stigma, or discussion about a perceived lack of a return gift. Neither the giver nor the receiver feels that there are 'rights over' either one.

As such, this runs contrary to Godbout and Caillé's ideas on gifting and counter-gifting. They explain: 'If the gift and counter-gift are unequal, then there's a winner and a loser, and possibly exploitation and trickery. If, on the other hand, they are the same, then there's apparently no difference between the gift and a rational, self-interested mercantile exchange.' (2000: 5). Gibalis, however, see very few exchanges as 'mercantile.' Most exchanges are predicated first on respect and honour; money is secondary. For example, one friend had a windfall of cash and was then asked for the majority of it by a friend of his father. He gave it and, several years later in great need, asked for a percentage of it back and was refused. He spoke of this to me once and without anger. The result was he drove an old, often broken-down car but in his eyes, he had done the correct thing by honouring an older man and a friend of his father. This self-respect (seeing himself as acting correctly) was more important than the money.

Thus, although Gibali culture is not a monolithic or unchanging edifice, and neither would it be described by all Gibalis and non-Gibalis in the same way, the norm is for Gibalis to owe nothing and many things at the same time. There is perhaps no gift owed at *this* particular time, but at some point in the future, a person might need to give a gift if there is enough money at *that* particular time.

Escaping gifts and generosity

Although generosity and spontaneous (no strings attached) gift giving are valued, some Gibalis attempt, as far as possible, to escape these cultural norms by asking for or taking money or items, but never giving on their own initiative or giving if asked. As with any culture, there are both praised behavioural patterns and what people actually do. Individuals and/or families who are not generous are known as 'mean' or 'stupid'; the two English terms are used as equivalents for people who are not munificent in the culturally appropriate ways.

Yet even a person who is, or wants to be, thought of as 'good' needs a way to save for large expenditures such as a house, car, or wedding, and there are a few ways to protect one's wealth while navigating the family, friends, and societal expectations. One is to take a loan for a car

or house, or just a lump sum and spend it all immediately. As is well known in Dhofar, the bank takes the repayment monthly from the bank account into which the salary is deposited, and the money is gone before it can be asked for.

A second option is a *jam'iyah*, a group of friends who agree to give a certain amount every month into a 'pot'. As with most issues relating to money, the 'pot' does not shift from person to person in an organized manner. For example, one person may refuse to take the pot for a year or two in order to accumulate a much larger sum.

Some Gibalis try to avoid routine sharing. For example, a man who has a job and/or 'has money' but never 'picks up the bill' or consistently brings nothing to group picnics will continue to be included and invited, although his behaviour will be noted.⁷ For the person who ducks requests and/or asks but does not repay, there is no direct reprisal but among close friends and family his attitude will be joked about. As I have explained elsewhere, given the continuing strength and importance of the family and tribe in Gibali culture, opportunities for personal choice and freedom are closely guarded, even if a person is acting in a way that is not culturally condoned (Risse 2013).

But what happens when someone offers something that is not wanted? All my informants agreed that a gift cannot start a relationship or friendship. A gift given by a stranger is an unwanted imposition, an attempt to create a closeness that does not exist, or a bribe and as Godbout and Caillé state, 'to accept it would be to tacitly endorse an unwanted relationship' (2000: 9). Men would try to duck out of accepting gifts from other men often by swearing, for example a man saying "'w-*Allāh* [by God]" I will not accept' before the other can say "'w-*Allāh*" you will accept'. With reference this kind of situation, one friend said 'I got my "'w-*Allāh*" in before'.

Among all the informants, an unwanted gift that cannot be avoided by swearing has to be accepted in order 'not to shame' the giver, but is then countered if possible. Men can repay with attention (e.g. a phone call) or estimate the cost of the gift and then give it back through a cash gift at the time of a marriage, sickness, or death in the original giver's family. As Bourdieu states, quick and equal repayment negates the attempted gift: 'the immediate return of an exactly identical object clearly amounts to a refusal' (in Schrift 1997: 198). If the person

⁷ When a man routinely avoids paying the bill, sometimes his friends will engineer an occasion where the meal is very expensive and the 'mean' one must pay. This is part of the Gibali concept of teaching by teasing.

is not respected, the gift will sometimes be accepted but then forgotten, and there is no payback.

Women treat unwanted attempts at gift giving by women in the same manner as men do with items from men. Items (such as a cassette, watch, or perfume) given to a male by a non-relative female are accepted in order 'not to shame her', but my informants said they have made or would make it clear that they saw the woman 'as a sister' in order to stop any 'thinking' on her part.

Thus an unwanted gift is dealt with quickly and with care to equal the cost. A gift from a friend or family member will be remembered but the repayment can wait for an extended period of time and may never be repaid. Furthermore, there is no need for the repayment to equal the value of the original gift.

Linking gifts and generosity to social credit

Bourdieu is helpful when discussing Gibali culture as he argues that economic capital can become social capital, which can then be transmuted back into economic capital (see Johnson 1993: 6–7). Wealth distribution is built into the Gibali culture. A wealthy man often will not 'open the book' for his wedding, using it as an occasion to show generosity by hosting hundreds of people rather than a chance to gain money. If the evening women's party is held at a hotel or other venue, towards the end of the night, women who were not invited and not wearing decorated wedding clothes but plain 'abāyah (pl. 'abāyāt) and shaylah (coll. shayl, pl. shaylāt), are invited to eat the remainder of the food and see the bride.

On the other hand, a poor man who is judged as good or as having a good father will collect a large sum of money at his wedding, enough not only to cover wedding expenses but also to buy a car or a house. For example, one Gibali friend told me about a Gibali man who is from a poor family but whose father has a good reputation; at his wedding he was given 60,000 Omani Riyal, approximately \$156,000. It is not quite as straightforward as Bourdieu's assertion that 'a good repute constitutes the best if not the only, economic guarantee,' but in Gibali culture, social credit can be linked to economic credit (in Schrift 1997: 212).

Gibalis do not explain this redistribution as a way to gain rights to another's future abundance but as sharing what one has. This understanding is in clear contrast to the idea, stated well in Freire:

Having more is an unalienable right, a right they acquired through their own 'effort,' with their

'courage to take risks.' If others do not have more, it is because they are incompetent and lazy, worst of all is their unjustifiable ingratitude towards the 'generous gestures' of the dominant class. (1996: 41)

'Having more' for Gibalis usually means 'giving more', specifically giving gifts without concern for how the gift will be used and giving money when asked for it, without thought of repayment. This is quite different from, as Schrift says, 'proper economies...[which] are driven not so much by the desire to appropriate; they are structured instead around the fear of loss, the fear of losing what is already possessed' (1997: 11). Economic capital can become religious and/or social capital in both large (building a mosque) and small (giving a phone to a cousin) ways.

Thus Gibalis do not have 'the fear of loss' as gifts given are transformed into a personal, positive religious and/or social credit. The concept of 'personal' is essential as others are not (should not) be aware of giving, whether or not the object is designated as a gift. In the example of the informant who gave his windfall to a friend of his father's, no one, except me, knew what he had done and I was only told because I was an outsider and was asking specific questions about giving and receiving gifts, and even then I was not told the name of the man. Only under direct and repeated questioning would informants give examples of what gifts they have given to others.

Discussion

As Mauss has said, discussing gifts affords insight into 'all the threads of which social fabric is composed' (1954: 1). In looking at gifts, one finds a paradox. In addition to 'generous', an adjective commonly ascribed to men in Arab tribal groups is 'independent'. Yet tribal members are extremely reliant on family and tribe members. How do independence and dependence play out in terms of gifts as a part of the larger issue of generosity?

First, independence from ones' possessions is highlighted. Gibalis make a clear demarcation between what a person has and what a person is. Wealth cannot be taken at face value; a very wealthy person may drive an old and inexpensive car because he is paying college tuitions for younger siblings or building a house for a parent. A man who is shaykh of a sub-tribe might live in an old, decrepit house because his widowed mother refuses to move and he will not live apart from her. In fact the man who has 'nothing' might in fact be wealthy

as he has lent or given large sums of money to others and thus has unstated reserves.⁸ In opposition to the (Western) idea of scarcity of goods, for Gibalis, if a close friend or relative has X, access to X is assumed.

Furthermore, people are seen as independent from gifts in that the gift as an object is not important in and of itself; hence women giving perfume will often go to a store and buy whatever perfume is 'new', making no attempt to find out what type of scent the recipient likes. Watching a group of Gibali sisters sort through their gifts for a sister who was getting married, there was no discussion of 'she will like this' or 'this is her taste' — the volume of gifts showed their solidarity with and concern for her.

Another aspect of independence is that once a gift is given it belongs entirely to the new owner. The giver should not, within Gibali culture, ask for proof of the gift's use. When Gibali friends visit my office or house, they make no attempt to see if I have on display the 'small things' (such as decorated bottles of perfume) they have given me. Moreover, if a female friend or sister gives a gold ring to a friend or sister, the receiver may bring the ring to a jewellery store with other gold items to exchange for a new necklace. This is not usually done with 'heritage' items inherited from a mother or grandmother, but there is no social pressure or understanding that jewellery given must be kept.

Often the value of owning something is the right which ownership brings in being able to give it to others.⁹ For example, when a man gets a job he will often set out how much he will give to certain family members such as his mother or an unmarried sister. One is often given things that can then be given again: one Gibali friend was given an immense amount of chocolate as a graduation gift; this was immediately redistributed to various friends and relatives.

Lastly, there is independence because if one receives a gift, there is no pressure for repayment. As one informant said, 'I hold the return for the right time.' One should only repay 'at the time' and if the time turns out to be 'never', having the intention to repay is the essential factor, not the actual fact of repayment, which might be forestalled by death or lack of money 'at the time'.¹⁰

⁸ See the discussion of 'tokens of value' in Appadurai 1986: 19–21.

⁹ See the discussion on reciprocal rights: 'Like the participants in the *kula* studied by Malinowski the value of owning something is the right which ownership brings to give it to others' (Layton 1997: 178).

¹⁰ The concept of 'at the time' is very important as giving gifts too early can be seen as worse than giving too late. For example, a Gibali friend once spoke disparagingly in equal terms of a man who gave presents to his fiancé (beyond the agreed upon *mahr* "bridal gift") before their marriage — he was wrong to give and she was wrong to accept any gift before the wedding.

This set of Gibali beliefs contrasts with, for example, W. Lancaster's discussion of the Rwala (al-Ruwalah) Bedouin, when he writes, 'How do you most easily persuade someone to do something? You give him a present'; and for 'the generous man...his past generosity will ensure that others will, in turn be generous to him and/or his group, if they are in real need' (1997: 142, 147). Although having been generous or given a present might make it likely that there will be return generosity at some point, it in no way 'ensures' reciprocity will be forthcoming.

Conclusion

Mauss and others focus on certain kinds of gift exchanges, such as the *kula* ring, a system of exchange in part of Papua New Guinea, which highlight the enmeshing aspects of gift giving, how a gift creates a continuing link between two people. Godelier states:

...a gift creates a debt that cannot be cancelled by a counter-gift...The debt creates an obligation to give in return but to give in return does not mean to give back, to repay; it means to give in turn...The giving of gifts and counter-gifts creates a state of mutual indebtedness which presents advantages for all parties. To give therefore is to share by creating a debt or, which amounts to the same thing, to create a debt by sharing. (1999: 48)

There is another, opposite, theoretical movement that gift giving has become impersonal, disassociated with any one individual as we 'brave little moderns' give anonymously to charity (1999: 4). As Godelier explains, 'In a word, it is not only the sufferings of friends and relatives, it is the sufferings of the world at large that cries out for our gifts, our generosity. Of course, in this new context, it is no longer possible to give to someone you know, and even less to expect anything other than impersonal gratitude'; 'Charity has become a secular affair, and once it turned to the media, it became part game-show as well' (1999: 5, 13).

The Gibali cultural understanding is that while generosity is valued, gifts are largely unnecessary. There are very few times when a gift might be expected and if the person does not have money at that time, then the gift is not required. Although sometimes the recipient is working to remember the certain kinds of gifts that might need to be repaid, friends or close family members should be working to forget they ever gave a gift.

I envision the Gibali society as a series of ‘escapes’ from attempts to feel and cause others to feel gratitude. To escape being seen as generous, one never anticipates another’s wants. To escape the moment of generosity, one gives and accepts a gift quickly with no following discussion. To escape causing feelings of gratitude, one acts as if the gift given is not important and never mentions it again. To escape receiving unwanted gifts, one chooses one of a series of culturally appropriate dodges. To escape from giving gifts to or asking for gifts from family members and close friends, the understanding is ‘what’s mine is yours, what’s yours is mine’ as Gibalis are explicitly and implicitly taught to have a lack of concern for one’s possessions.

There have been many times while I have been living in Salalah that I felt I was trapped in a culture full of *Candide* fanatics, as every piece of news was transformed

into a blessing. A sister likes your new shoes, so you give them to her — no problem; she looks better in them than you do. A brother borrows your car and has an accident — no problem; at least he is not hurt. A friend ends up with your new camping stove at the end of a camping trip — no problem; you hope he enjoys it. It is the best of all possible worlds.

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