

Transformation of Sacred Sites into Human Settlements in Cameroon: The Case of Gouache in the West Region

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses recurring societal problems resulting from the transformation of sacred sites into human settlements in Cameroon. In Cameroon, like in other parts of the world, industrial development, construction projects, agriculture and other factors have caused significant harm to sacred sites. Though many of them still exist with the taboos and norms surrounding them still respected, many of them are under threats of extinction due to the decreasing cultural values attributed to them. In Cameroon, sacred sites are found in almost all communities though with varying significance and representations. While some sacred sites are reserved for the gods through the institution of worshipping shrines, others are sacred forest for performing rituals, rites, taking oath and swearing. This paper focuses on Gouache in the West Region of Cameroon, which was a sacred site reserved for the dumping of corpses of people considered unclean by the society. Today, Gouache and other sacred sites in Cameroon are gradually being transformed into human settlements, but not without grievous consequences. The study made use of both the qualitative and quantitative research approaches, with in-depth interviews, observation, focus group discussions and questionnaires as our main data collection techniques. Our findings show that there is need to identify the sacred sites in Cameroon and preserve them not only as a strategy to preserve our cultural heritage, but also as a way of minimizing the consequences of destroying them.

Key words: Sacred sites, settlements, representations, transformation, Gouache

INTRODUCTION

Sacred sites are places that have specific meanings, representations or significance in a culture. They are often considered important, with a lot of cultural values attached to them. According to Wild and MC Leod, 2008, sacred sites are defined as areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities. Josh (2015) defines human settlement as a form of habitation which ranges from a single dwelling to large city. It is the process of opening up and settling of people in a previously uninhabited area. The greatest problem affecting Cameroon today is urbanization as cities are fast growing at the detriment of the sacred sites and agricultural lands. Faced with population growth, the poor and venerable have occupied marginal and suburban areas, some of which are risk-prone environments (Tiafack and Mbon, 2017). Internal movements caused by crisis in the country coupled with migration caused by wars in neighbouring countries have contributed to expansion and congestion of cities in Cameroon. Towns are therefore growing to meet the ever increasing demand for habitats. Due to high rents, people are forced to buy land even on areas considered risky to construct their houses. According to the UNESCO (WWAP) 2014 facts and figures, the world's population was estimated to be divided into two equal parts between the rural and urban areas in 2008. Due to rapid evolution, it is now estimated that by 2030, the number of urban dwellers

will be about 1.8 billion more than 2005 and will constitute 60% of the world's population. About 95% of this increase in urban population is expected to occur in the developing countries, especially in Africa and Asia where the urban population is projected to double between 2000 and 2030. This assertion by UNESCO is true in the case of Cameroon where the urban areas are currently experiencing a rapid growth. This explains why a sacred site like Gouache which was far off from the Bafuossam town has linked up with the town and has been transformed into a human settlement.

All sacred sites are considered vital to the identities, histories, religious practices and wellbeing of indigenous people (George, 2017). Sacred sites represent ancient and deep cultural values. They are connected to human spirits and immaterial heritage. They are also traditionally education sites and associated with human well-being as well (Verschuuren et al., 2011). Many Sacred sites have high biodiversity and cultural values but despite its importance, many have been destroyed, while others are under severe threat of destruction. These threats are posed by human induced-global change (Verschuuren et al., 2011). Due to the importance of sacred sites in safeguarding cultural heritage, there is urgent need for action to preserve them.

According to Ruthe 2011, by protecting sacred sites, people in the community derive benefits in addition to the spiritual rewards of serving their faith. Sacred sites may serve important health needs of the people by providing medicinal plants, protect the soil and water and serve as sites for important socio-cultural events such as religious festivals, lifecycle rituals and sacred society meetings. Sacred sites are therefore considered an additional pillar of biodiversity conservation (Ruthe, 2011). Sacred sites in Cameroon are often not necessarily conservation areas, but exist for cultural and social reasons. The reasons for sacred sites are embedded in the culture of the people and these reasons are often

culture specific. In most African societies different sacred sites exist in the same communities and serve diverse purposes. In the West Region of Cameroon for example, there exist sacred sites for lifecycle rituals, some for worship and others for cultural manifestations in the same community. In many communities in Cameroon, areas considered sacred are protected through social norms that are based on spiritual values. Sacred sites are areas with special spiritual significance in most societies. It is believed that human activities such as cutting down of trees, digging the sacred ground or clearing grass from the sacred site disturbs the spirits of the ancestors and this may have consequences not only on the person who did the act, but also on the people who occupy the land, not leaving out the custodians of the land. In most cases, harvesting of herbs or picking of leaves for treatment of illnesses is allowed in the sacred sites. This is because the herds may no longer be found in areas that have been used for agriculture or for construction. In some cases it is believed that only herbs harvested at the sacred sites can be effective when used for treatment, meanwhile the same herbs harvested from agricultural lands or habitable environments are not effective at all.

According to Mbang 2018, every human settlement undergoes a process of dynamism resulting from Socio-economic factors. He added that, farm lands are gradually reducing and being transformed into human settlements and this is due to a nonchalant implementation of legislation and control mechanisms. This will go a long way to increase informal, unplanned and even risky settlements. Davis et al (2000) on his part holds that, poverty can drive people towards settling and working in precarious location such as unstable river banks in farming areas. This can be same for sacred sites because most people who buy land from such areas are probably not wealthy enough to buy from less risky areas. Most of the sacred sites are located near river banks, in the forest or other risky areas which are

considered not good for human settlement. In most cases, settlement in sacred sites is influenced by expanding cities caused by increased urbanization. New settlements areas (quartiers) develop as the town expands. The further people go the more likely the opportunity to acquire cheaper land.

METHODOLOGY

Study site

The study was carried out at Gouache which is found in Bafoussam III Sub Division, in the Mifi Division of the West Region of Cameroon. The choice of the study site was influenced by the landslide that occurred at Gouache (sacred site), claiming more than forty lives and injuring many. Several agricultural activities such as farming, piggeries and poultry were also lost to the landslide. The people who lived at Gouache before the landslide occurred were mostly people who migrated from Dschang still in the West Region in pursuit of better living conditions. These people who are considered strangers in the area were most hid by the disaster. The land at Gouache was said to be very fertile and good for agriculture, probably because it never used to be cultivated like other agricultural lands in the area. Most of those who were residing at Gouache were therefore farmers who were involved in crop cultivation or animal rearing, and goods produced could easily be sold in the Bafoussam main market.

Methods of data collection

The study made use of both the qualitative and quantitative approaches with in-depth interviews, direct observation, focus group discussions, and questionnaires as our data collection techniques. Open interview questions were prepared and administered to community leaders at Gouache. We also organized a focus group discussion with the affected population. It was thanks to observation that we noticed the level of damage caused by the landslide as well as the misery and feeling of frustration on the faces of those who were

affected. We randomly selected people living around Gouache and some of the victims of the landslide as our study sample. The study draws its theoretical orientation from the symbolic and interpretive theories of Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz. This is because symbolic anthropology studies the way people understand their surroundings, actions and utterances of the other members of the society (Des Chene, 1996). The interpretations of what Gouache represents and how deadly the area is, represents a shared cultural system of meaning and understanding among members of that society. There are two premises governing symbolic anthropology. The first is that beliefs, however meaningless, become comprehensible when understood as part of a cultural system of meaning. The second premise is that actions are guided by interpreting conceptual as well as material activities (Des Chene, 1996). Despite explanations given by Geographers and other scientists on the cause of landslide which occurred at Gouache, the people had their own explanations which are so different and their interpretations are influenced by the beliefs and meanings that they attribute to the actions and happenings around them.

Study sample

The study informants were made up of 23 men and 11 women. The gender disparity was due to the fact that more men were available and ready to give out information than women. The researchers went to the field barely a few days after the incident and giving that women are often more emotional than men, many were still crying and mourning thus were not ready to talk to anyone. A questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was designed to evaluate why people constructed houses on a risk prone area like Gouache, the causes and the consequences of the disaster. The questionnaires were randomly administered to people who live close to or at Gouache, especially those who were not affected. We also had interview conversations with four community leaders, one Sub Divisional

Officer, one Mayor and seven community members at Gouache. It was noticed that 80% of the population do business and farming, while only 20% are solely involved in business. About 75 % of those studied said they were Catholic Christians, 15 % were Pentecostals, while 10% of the study sample attested to the fact that they did not belong to any Christian denomination.

Data management and analysis

Content analysis and the descriptive statistics data analysis methods were used in analyzing the data collected in the field. In order to manage the qualitative data, all recorded interviews were transcribed and field notes jotted during the focus group discussions. The field notes were later on verified and completed to avoid throwing away useful information. The transcripts which all captured emphasis, speed, timing, tone of voice and pauses were typed into word processing software. The data from transcripts were read transcript by transcript while making notes. This permitted the researchers to identify ideas, make observations and get insights, and extrapolations which were useful for the study.

Management of quantitative data

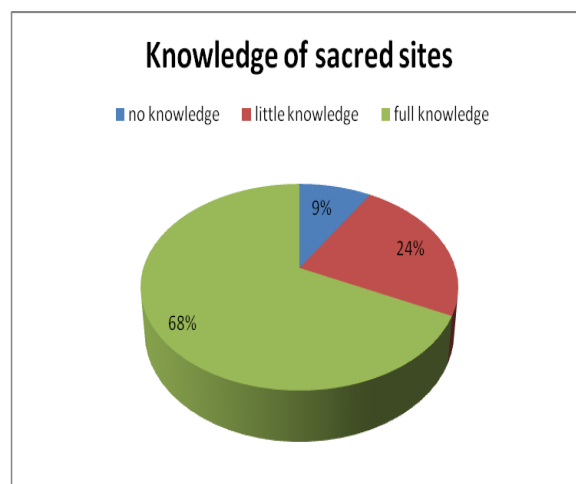
The descriptive statistics method was used to describe the quantitative data collected in the field. The characteristic of descriptive statistics considered in this study was description which is a summary of the frequency of individual values for a variable. Distribution was therefore represented in diagrams using percentages.

RESULTS

Knowledge of sacred sites

Out of our total sample of 34 informants, only 3 people said they did not have a good knowledge of sacred sites. These three people who are Pentecostal Christians, acknowledged that they did not grow in the village and that they were brought up by their parents to believe that sacred sites are evil places that must not be visited by God's children. Out of the total

sample, 8 people said they have a good knowledge of sacred sites, but do not take part in the rituals or spiritual activities connected to the sites.



The rest of the people in our sample had a good knowledge of sacred sites. According to this category of informants, sacred sites are part of the culture of the Bamileke people of the West Region of Cameroon. Every village has a sacred site and in some villages there are several sacred sites that serve different purposes. Some are owned by individual families. They either serve as family shrines or places where the skulls of dead ancestors are kept. These are sacred places where the family head offers sacrifices on behalf of the entire family. It is believed that the destinies of all the family members depend on those sites and this explains why the ancestors are consulted before any major decisions are taken in the family. When children want to travel out of the village in pursuit of education, business or any life opportunities, the sacred sites are visited and the ancestors are informed. Another reason for the visit is to plead with them to protect the children. Similarly, when a family member dies, has an accident or a mishap of any nature, the sacred sites are also visited and this time the purpose of the visit is to seek for reasons or explanations to why the mishap occurred. The Bamileke people therefore have sacred sites that have existed for a very long time and are handed down from one generation

to another. They believe in these sites and trust on the continuous powers of the ancestors who can bless as well as punish them for an offense or crime committed.

Meaning of Gouache

According to our informants, *Goua* means throw, while *che* refers to water. Gouache therefore means throw in water. Gouache is a piece of land with a hilly landscape and a running stream at the base. Formally, the land was not habitable because it is considered sacred by the indigenes of the area. According to our findings, this land was reserved for victims of abnormal dead. These categories of persons were never buried but simply dumped in the land (Gouache). Kinds of corpses that were dumped at Gouache were defined by the community and the norms set by the community were respected by its members. The dead bodies dumped at Gouache were those of people who were considered as bad dead and thus treated as such. It was a kind of societal rejection and in such cases, victims were not buried in an honorable way. These categories of persons included those who committed suicide, thieves who beaten to death, those who suffered from a dreaded disease, those who had swollen stomachs before dying, cases of witchcraft and corpses of those considered to be political criminals called the “makizars”.

In cases of suicide, the victim suffered from societal rejection and nobody was allowed to touch the corpse with bare hands in order not to acquire ill luck. Formally, the community members used to device a way of discarding the corpse at Gouache without touching it. Today, a grave is dug just below the area where the person committed the suicide and corpse is dumped inside without anyone touching it. The victim is considered a bad person because he has no right to take his own life. In such cases, the family of the victim has to be cleansed from the ill luck to avoid any further suicide cases in the family. The cleansing is done by the herbalists. In many communities in Cameroon, suicide cases are

treated with contempt and there exist norms that guide how such cases should be handled.

Thieves were and are still being considered as an embodiment of evil and threat to societal security. In most of the communities in Cameroon, thieves are feared by the people and when they are caught stealing, they are beaten and burnt alive or they are punished grievously by the community. Most often, the punishment include paying of fines in cash, carrying of sand and gravel to be used in executing community projects or just physical torture. If a thief is killed steal, his corpse, just like that of someone who commits suicide, is rejected by the community. In the past, the corpses of thieves were dumped at Gouache, but today things have changed as even Gouache has been transformed into a settlement.

Those who suffered from dreaded diseases or whose stomachs were swollen at dead were considered abnormal cases and their corpses treated as such. In most cases, the victims suffered from rejection and stigmatization. In some instances, people close their eyes to avoid seeing or greeting the patients. This is due to the community perception of such illnesses. While some are seen as consequences of certain crimes they committed in the past, others are seen as the outcome of witchcraft. Different interpretations are given to such cases and due to these interpretations; the people are rejected by the society. Consequently, when they die their corpses are simply thrown away. With the development in medicine and health facilities in most communities in Cameroon, the people’s perceptions are changing as hospital diagnosis now give names to some of the diseases. Despite the presence of medical records and diagnosis in some cases, other causes of the diseases are attributed by the community. Today, corpses are not just thrown away but the perception that people have about a particular disease determines how the corpse of the victim is being treated.

In the case of political opponents (makizars), we found out that they were those considered criminals because they picked up arms against the government. Due to their activities of kidnappings and killings, they were perceived by the society as bad people. Their corpses were therefore considered bad and suffered from rejection.

In most societies in Cameroon, anyone who deviates from the norms of the society is considered bad or an evil person. It should however be noted that Gouache had completely been transformed into a human settlement before the landslide which occurred and caused loss of lives and property.

The Disaster Site (Gouache)

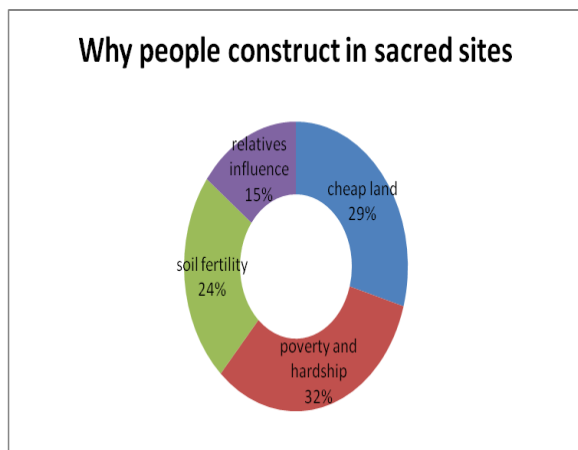


Source: fieldwork by Norah Aziamin Asongu

How Gouache became a human settlement

Gouache had been experiencing high pressure for development due to rapid growth with no building regulations enforced to guide and regulate the construction activity. Due to urban growth and extension, the Gouache area which was formally far away from the residential area is now found very close to town. It is due to urbanization that Gouache which is a natural space was transformed into an impermeable surface and fit for settlement. The land at Gouache is traditionally considered not habitable and this explains why those who were living there before the landslide were strangers who bought the land from some opportunist who claimed that their ancestral land extended to that area. Consequently, those who died from the landslide were not

natives, but people who had migrated from other villages to live there. Human settlement at Gouache was therefore based on both Sociological and Economic considerations. This is because the people were attracted not only by the economic opportunities provided by the area, but also by the need to live with their relatives who had already constructed houses in the area. When asked why the people constructed in that area, 29 % of our informants said the land was cheap, 32 % said, due to poverty and hardship they could not go for better land. 24 % said it was due to the soil fertility of the area and 15 % said they were influenced by relatives who had bought the land and were living there already.

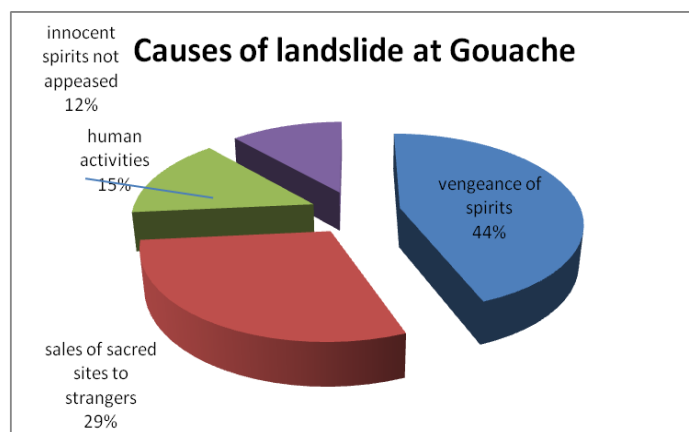


In most cases, as seen in the case of Gouache, poor people are significantly more vulnerable to disasters. They bought land at very cheap and affordable prices to construct houses for their families. Sacred sites normally do not belong to individuals, but to the community with the Chief as the custodian of land in the entire community. In the case of Gouache, the people who claimed ownership of the land sold it out. We noticed that those who constructed their houses were not indigenes of the area. This implies that they bought the land and constructed their houses on it without being aware of the consequences. The people who sold the land to them who are quite aware of the consequences were interested in the money probably due to poverty. Before the landslide occurred, many economic activities were being carried out at Gouache such as rearing of pigs and poultry farming.

Causes of landslide at Gouache (sacred site).

Gouache which is a sacred site was transformed into a human settlement with more than 250 families residing in the area. The area is sloppy with a running stream at the base of the slope. It can be geographically explained that the landslide was caused by human activities in the area. That is to say, the continuous digging of the land destroyed the soil base of the land and due to continuous rainfall, the soil which had become loose could easily slide off.

Anthropologically, we found out different causes of the landslide. Given that sacred sites are cultural sites, the cause of the landslide is also cultural. In the field we were told that the land slide occurred after several signs and warnings which the people residing in the area either did not understand or refused to respond to the warnings. Some of these warnings or signs were the constant presence of rainbow on the site whenever it rained. According to our informants, rainbow signifies eminent danger. That is, rainbow is said to swallow people and is considered as a manifestation of witchcraft by some people with the intension to harm others. Another warning was the presence of a very big python at Gouache the day before the landslide occurred. When the snake appeared, it wanted to swallow a child, but we were told that it was thanks to the intervention of people who saw it, that the snake disappeared. According to our informants, it was a bad sign and that if the snake had swallowed the child, the landslide would not have occurred. This is because; the child would have served as a sacrifice to the gods who would have in turn prevented the disaster. The occurrence of the landslide was therefore a consequence of the invasion of the sacred site by the inhabitance who were disturbing the spirits at Gouache. Our informants reported that the spirits of those whose corpses were dumped at Gouache lives on and those of the innocent are seeking for revenge. In the field, 44 % of informants attributed the disaster which occurred at Gouache to vengeance of the spirits of those whose bodies were dumped there, 29 % said that the disaster was due to the fact that a sacred site was defiled and sold to strangers; 15 % said the landslide was caused by too many human activities on a sloppy land; while 12 % said the disaster occurred because the spirits of the innocents were not appeased.



Still on the causes of landslide at Gouache, we were made to understand that when humans do not respect their culture, nature reacts and that the landslide was just one of such reactions. We were also informed that Gouache harbors a lot of spirits and blood. That is the spirits and blood of those whose bodies were dumped in the area. Some of the spirits are those of the innocents. That is, those who were falsely accused of committing crimes or breaking the norms of the land. The spirits of the innocents are therefore seeking for revenge. This makes the area not habitable giving that tradition does not act fast, but it is obvious that it will one day react. In the same culture, there is always a means of appeasing the spirits- by offering animal and food sacrifices. In the case of Gouache, these spirits were not appeased. Instead the land was sold out to total strangers who are not the indigenes of the area. Some of our informants ascertained that nature or culture had to react the way it did, even though scientists are attributing the landslide to other causes.

In an interview conversation with one of the community leaders at Gouache who blamed the cause of the disaster to cultural change, he said *“culture is fast changing with people violating the cultural norms of the society. Due to cultural change, people do not respect the cultural norms. Culturally acceptable behaviour and prescriptions are looked upon as archaic, while new behaviours that violate the cultural norms are seen as modern”* This

community leader attributed the cause of disaster that occurred at Gouache to the non-respect and disregard of cultural values by the members of the community. Other informants blamed it to the influx of churches, religious groups and the presence of strangers which is a consequence of the weakening of cultural values in the community.

Consequences of transforming Gouache into a human settlement

Many of our informants believe that, the disaster which occurred in the area claiming more than forty human lives and hundreds of animals was the consequences of transforming Gouache into a human settlement. In the field, we were made to understand that, the forty lives were just the corpses that could be seen. Some people were buried in the soil and their corpses were never found. Many who settled at Gouache had piggeries, goats and poultries. All the animals were buried by the landslide as the area continued to smell weeks after the disaster. According to our informants, many people were unable to save their lives or that of their family members because the disaster occurred at night and neighbours got up the next day only to find the situation the way it was. From observation, the people were very miserable as they recounted how it happened to us. We observed others still crying, displaying the photographs of their departed family members. We saw families dressed in black, singing dirges while crying as it is the tradition in the Bamileke land.

We also noticed that many other people were visiting the area and planting peace plants where victims were covered in the soil. The peace plant is a shrub associated with peace and highly cherished by the Bamileke people. The peace plant signifies the wish for peace to reign at Gouache. Planting of peace plants by the visiting population was a way of wishing that a disaster should never occur at Gouache and that the souls of the departed rest in peace. We equally observed people kneeling and raising their hands and eyes up to call on the gods to intervene. Another major consequence of the disaster is that the survivors are very traumatized. In an interview with a woman who survived the disaster she said *“since that day I have not been myself as I am frightened with the least noise. Even though I am not more living at the disaster site, I still cannot sleep at night and most often I relive the terrifying experience in my dreams and at times during the day”*. Most of the victims equally acknowledged that the trauma they are going through has further been aggravated by the fact that they are homeless and have to beg for where to stay with their children. Many said they now sleep on mattresses in neighbour’s floors while waiting on the government or charitable organizations to help them. The landslide therefore did not only lead to loss of human lives, but also loss of economic activities and livelihoods. The area has however been deserted as the government is breaking down the houses which were not affected by the landslide, thus rendering Gouache not habitable once more.

CONCLUSION

The colonial land use policies of grabbing the best land which have been vigorously maintained by the post-colonial leaders has helped to relegate the population who end up building in risky zones in Cameroon (Ambe, 2002). Urban planning is done without taking into consideration the sacred sites. The privileging of development projects and commercial interests over the

protection of sacred sites is often too common in Cameroon. When indigenous heritage sites, burial grounds and sacred places, or other types of indigenous heritage are intentionally disparaged, damaged or seized, it is both a form of violence and a human rights violation (George, 2017). It is true that housing is a basic need which is next only to the need for food, but the houses could be provided on sites with secured land tenure and facilities like potable water, sanitation and electricity (Khoshoo, 1886). To prevent the population from constructing on risky zones and sacred sites in Cameroon, the housing needs of the population should be met by the government. This will entail the provision of houses to rural workers, villagers, slum dwellers, and squatters. The government and stakeholders must therefore take particular action to provide her citizens with shelter and the choice of settlement should take into consideration various socio-economic and cultural factors like the site, the type of house and facilities available at the new settlement sites. All cultures are integrally predisposed to change and at the same time to resist change (Steward, 1955). Sacred sites are cultural sites and preserving them is also preserving the cultural heritage of the people. Apart from the fact that serving as conservation areas where medicinal traditional herbs are found, sacred sites also help to meet the cultural needs of the people. In most communities in Cameroon and in the Bamileke society in particular, sacred sites are used for rituals, taking of oaths, swearing to proof innocence, offering of sacrifices to ancestors and treatment of some diseases. These sites must therefore be preserved as they serve as continuity between the living and the dead. Besides, preserving the sacred sites will certainly reduce the consequences of destroying and thereby help to avoid future occurrences as in the case of Gouache.

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