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Cover Page Footnote

First of all, I would like to show my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Victor Rodriguez, a respectable and resourceful scholar of History and Southeast Asian Studies, who has provided me with valuable guidance in the preparing and writing of this article. I shall extend my thanks to Mr. Brock Erdahl, Teaching Assistant at UIC English Language Centre, for all his help, patience and kindness.

Mandala and Charisma: The Federalist Potentials in Traditional Indonesian Political Culture

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This research explores the federalist elements in the mandala (a graphic art pattern in Southeast Asia) and political charisma to discuss their constructive roles as traditional Indonesian political culture in federalizing Indonesia. Since August 17, 1945 when Sukarno declared the independence of the country in Jakarta, the newly-born Indonesia was also finalized as a centralized presidential republic. However, till today, societal diversities in Indonesian society are continuously increasing, the tendency of federalization, therefore, has never entirely faded away. Both the mandala and political charisma de facto have spontaneously generated their own initiatives for federalization since ancient times. Upon illustration of these initiatives, this paper emphasizes the significances of traditional political culture in shaping modern Indonesia's political regime.

Introduction

Even though the first and sole experiment to establish the Indonesian Federation, the "Republic of the United States of Indonesia" (1949–1950), was a short-lived product of the Dutch colonization, it seems that the Indonesian people have never given up imagining their own federal system. The diversities of their politics, economy, culture, geography and other societal and natural aspects have been too numerous that make domestic consensus difficult to achieve at a high level. In recent years, domestic callings for transferring Indonesia's current form of government from its purely presidential republic to a more federalist one have increasingly attracted attentions. Early in June 1999, D. F. Anwar, the foreign policy advisor of Indonesian President B. J. Habibie, stated in Malaysia that the future political framework of the Indonesian archipelago could be a federation.¹

Despite that, the picture of an Indonesian federalist state has still remained ambiguous with no related detailed plan. Generally in the contemporary history of Asian democratization, directly imitating the advanced Western democratic models is more common than democratic experimentation or innovation by local people. It is reasonable to think that Indonesian federalists are adherents of the federal systems of the United States or western European countries like Switzerland. However, this ignores the local federalist potentials of the Indonesian nation. By primarily adopting a historical approach of research and being based on the perspective of traditional Indonesian political culture, this paper argues that even in the pre-colonial period (before the 16th century), people in Indonesia planted the seeds for their own federation.² *Mandala* and political charisma are two far-reaching political traditions of the

Indonesian nation that spontaneously correspond with modern federalism. Thus, the logic of argument in this paper is that “some traditional Indonesian political culture is federalist” rather than “that culture is able to fit western federalist models.” Traditional Indonesian political culture in other words takes the initiative in processing the country’s federalization.

However, an open embrace of federalist ideas has still remained sensitive among the Indonesian public. In the long, glorious anti-colonial history of the Indonesian nation, a relatively unified “Indonesian-ness” in terms of ethnicity, culture and politics has been gradually generated and consolidated. It encourages people in Indonesia to feel like one. Federalism could easily be interpreted as separatism.

Common Features of Federal Systems

According to George Anderson, President and CEO of the Forum of Federations, there are two unique essences in all types of federal systems: “two constitutionally established orders of government with some genuine autonomy from each other,” and the “governments are each level primarily accountable to their respective electorates.”³ Hence, federation is not a particular mechanism with fixed political structures, but a dynamic relation between the participants in politics on state and local levels. Its purpose and also its unique advantage can be defined as an effort to ensure national unity through recognizing local diversities in a less-unified environment. Officially recognizing heterogeneities instead of imposing nationwide assimilation manifests the remarkable tolerance of the federal government in any federalist state toward its minorities.

Indonesia today is a presidential republic with one unitary national government. Structurally imitating the framework of the American separation of powers, ruling power in Indonesia on every administrative level is also divided into three parts. Executive power belongs to the government led by the President of Indonesia. Legislative power is granted to both the government and the People’s Consultative Assembly or the “*Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat*.” The Assembly has two chambers: the People’s Representative Council or the “*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*” (like the House of Representatives in the U.S.), and the Regional Representatives Council or the “*Dewan Perwakilan Daerah*.” Although it does not carry the same authority as the U.S. Senate, the Regional Representatives Council is a specific national platform to deal with local matters. Judicial power in Indonesia is independent and the highest judiciary is the Supreme Court or the “*Mahkamah Agung*.”

In terms of political subdivision, Indonesia today has five administrative levels from the central to the local. They are: state, province, regency (or city), sub-district and village.⁴ Each level has its own governing and legislative body. The further it is away from the state government, the more autonomy it enjoys. For example, compared to the upper-level provinces, both regencies and cities are more autonomous in managing their public services.⁵ Thus, any federal system that is implemented dramatically and intensively in today’s Indonesia will further decentralize the country and even has a risk of splitting Indonesia.

Literature Review

In Indonesian Studies, there are sufficient articles on the traditional Javanese political culture, the potential of making a federation in contemporary Indonesia, and the connections between Indonesia’s modernization and its traditions. Writings on the specific relations between traditional Indonesian political culture and modern Federation are still not easy to find. The following are some of the relevant ones.

Orientalism has been one of the earliest schools that worked on the political history of Indonesia. Its works are invaluable for modern scholars to critically portray the face of

Indonesian tradition and the early Indonesian community, because most of their sources are first hand materials from western adventure experiences and field works. Arthur James Balfour, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom between 1902 and 1905, suggests that it is necessary for orientals to be governed by the West, because by looking through their history, no one is able to find any form of self-government or any attempt to create it.⁶ The potential for oriental people to set up modern administration therefore is completely denied by orientalists.

In reality, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when orientalists were active, most countries in the East were still domestically chaotic with backward political regimes and intensive battles of independence. Indonesia at that time was under Dutch control. Local intellectuals there had just begun to formulate the idea of “Indonesia” as an independent country and “Indonesian” as a united nation.⁷ Hence, it is difficult for orientalist scholars to give an optimistic description and prediction of the future political progress in the Indonesian archipelago. More importantly, orientalists, by growing up in their more materially advanced society with a more industrialized civilization (mostly in Western Europe), have maintained an arrogant, western-oriented and even racist attitude toward their objects of study for a long time. One anthropological argument in their works is that orientals, from Arabic, Indian, and Javanese to other races who are in “yellow skins,” are the same everywhere.⁸ As Rudyard Kipling said in his poem *The Ballad of East and West* in 1889, “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” This attitude has shaped inequality and distinction. Consequently, it has been placed by orientalists between the East and West not only in terms of race, but also in terms of culture, politics, history and all other social spheres.⁹

Benedict Anderson, Professor of International Studies and Director of the Modern Indonesia Project at Cornell University and one of the leading authorities on Southeast Asian Studies, also shows his disagreement. In the first chapter of his prestigious book *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*, he introduces some key points of the traditional Javanese political culture. First and foremost, it does not allow any form of social contract and mutual obligation between the ruling class and the people.¹⁰ A substantially balanced reciprocal relationship across social classes in politics, therefore, is hard to build and formalize. Secondly, a society without any strict hierarchy is ideal, because each administrative level beneath the ruler would be less autonomous.¹¹ This is also incompatible with the federalist principles by giving as little autonomy to local administrations as possible. Despite all his denials, Anderson actually suggests that it is feasible for traditions and modernization to coexist when the leadership is well familiar with these traditions while not being restricted by them.¹²

Compared to orientalism, Anderson’s arguments are more objective and precise. The actual contents of the traditional Javanese political culture according to him are not capable of stimulating democratic and federal systems. Nevertheless, he has overlooked the subtle dynamics of the traditional Indonesian political structure. Even though the ruler and his officials in the centre are definitely not willing to give autonomies to the locals, the administrative structure is capable of spontaneously stimulating localization.

Gabriele Ferrazzi, Adjunct Professor on Rural Development at the Brandon University, is not pessimistic about the future of the Indonesian Federation. Federalism can fit with the long-term values of Indonesians today, especially its essence. The primary status of bargaining, negotiation and coordination among different powers in politics, corresponds well with the Indonesian idea of “consensus through deliberation” or “*musyawarah mufakat*.”¹³

Still, it will be hard for most Indonesians to welcome federalism. Pursuing a federal system will further deepen the degree of societal heterogeneity and escalate societal confrontations, which could gradually undermine the sense of being one united Indonesian nation.¹⁴ Therefore, Ferrazzi believes that the unitary state with appropriate local autonomies is a safer route for Indonesian politics in the future.¹⁵

The reason why a federation is workable in Indonesia is because it is compatible with the native social values and current social environment there. Federalist elements hence take

the initiative to enter Indonesia and federalize that country. However, Ferrazzi does not include the assumption that the Indonesian political culture also has its own motives in the path of federalization.

All the scholars listed above, with the exception of Gabriele Ferrazzi, have adopted a historical approach in their publications through generating their conclusions from the political history of Indonesia to argue that it is impossible to create a federation from traditions. This theme is not true, as this paper will illustrate. The interpretation of human history is multi-dimensional. By understanding the history of Indonesia from a new angle, this paper will predict some potential contributions of traditional political culture in establishing Indonesia's Federation today.

Methodology

Southeast Asia has long been considered as the crossroads of Asia. First of all, this is because it is geographically located between India and China, the two giants in South Asia and East Asia. Secondly, movements of people via Southeast Asia have been large and frequent. These increasing social interactions promoted the islands of Southeast Asia to rise as a centre of sea trading. The Malacca Strait, a key waterway connecting the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, was the best maritime route for transporting goods from China to India and vice versa at that time. By getting involved in this profitable business, states in the ancient Indonesian archipelago emerged as "port-polites." Islanders there did not have a clear concept of boundaries. One reason is that putting boundary issues aside could protect free navigation. This geographic ambiguity helped to shape the Indonesian archipelago, the Philippine archipelago and the Malay Peninsula into a coherent region with considerable commonalities in geography, history, politics, culture and economy.

Thus, the study of traditional Indonesian political culture in this paper also adopts a tolerant and flexible historical approach. A historical approach is an essential research method for the humanities. Based upon a historical approach, this paper firstly forms a thesis statement by looking through the history of Indonesia and Southeast Asia, and gets its evidence mainly from related primary and secondary sources. Its goal is to improve the accuracy of study through generating academic understandings of neutral, ambiguous events and ideas primarily from their respective historical backgrounds. Moreover, this paper chooses a historical approach also due to the following four reasons:

Firstly, political culture in Indonesia is inherited. Its development is a permanent accumulation of political, cultural and social elements that can hardly be cut off. The essence of the older political culture has always been inherited by the newer.

Secondly, political culture in Indonesia is dynamic. It changes chronologically along with different social and natural events. Take the interpretation of "charisma" in Indonesia as an instance. Charisma was positive when charismatic nationalists gathered public support during their confrontations with the Dutch colonization. Nonetheless, charisma may be negative once it associates with the powers of military strongmen, which could result in dictatorship and authoritarianism.

Thirdly, political culture as a macroscopic academic concept is an amalgam of multiple societal elements. It is not merely applicable to the understandings of politics and culture. Religion, economy, geographical conditions and other social and natural factors have also been involved in it.

Fourthly, a historical approach creates the potential for the significance of this study to develop beyond the field of political culture. One expectation of the argument in this paper is to construct a concept of "the traditional Indonesian political culture is unique" through expounding some traditional Indonesian political culture is federalist. This paper also hopes to

stimulate the attention of future scholars in regard to the uniqueness of Southeast Asian culture. It is inappropriate to label this culture as being subjected to Chinese and Indian culture. After explaining the theoretical foundation of a historical approach, in the following part, this paper will offer two pieces of evidence to argue that some traditional Indonesian political culture is federalist.

Ideas of Ruling in the *Mandala*

Before the overwhelming expansion of Islam within the Indonesian archipelago in 1200, the religious life of the islanders was dominated by Hinduism and Buddhism. During Islamization, these two old religions were gradually integrated as an important feature of the newly Islamized Indonesian nation. One of their essences was the concept of the *mandala*. *Mandala* is an indispensable art pattern in Hinduism and Buddhism. The word “*mandala*” is written in the Hindu holy Sanskrit and made up of “*manda*,” means “essence,” and “*la*,” means “container.”¹⁶ Accordingly, “*mandala*” literally means “encircling a core.”¹⁷

There are three basic elements that a *mandala* consists of: a centre, symmetry, and several cardinal points (see Figure 1.).¹⁸ The centre of a *mandala* is a core of power with radiances of emanation fading gradually and symmetrically with the distance from the centre to the periphery. Cardinal points are the small, separate, but significant local powers that influence the centre while also being attracted by it. They are located symmetrically within the centre’s sphere of power.

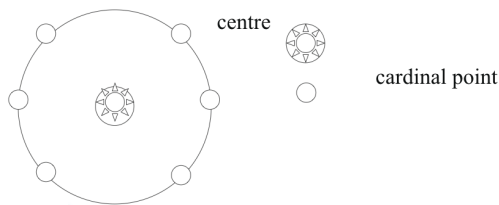


Figure 1. A mandala graphic art.¹⁹

Mandala in the pre-colonial Indonesia was far more than just a simple religious shape. It was also a common political form of all political entities, notwithstanding the fact that this ubiquitous *mandalic* system was officially ended by the arrival of the Dutch colonists in the mid-19th century. The centre of a *mandala* is the core of the power of its community, but since the extension of centre’s power is untouchable and irregular in real practice, the “symmetry” within a *mandala* in politics is merely a conceptual feature (see Figure 2.). The number and position of all cardinal points are also not necessarily fixed and symmetrical.

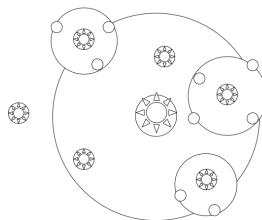


Figure 2. Structure of a mandalic community.²⁰

When the power of the core strengthens, an increasing number of external and diverse political entities would be absorbed as the new cardinal points of this *mandala*. The location of the old cardinal points might need to be moved because of tribal clashes or other social and natural problems. These old and new cardinal points likewise were the centres of their respective *mandalic* communities (see Figure 2.). Therefore, a *mandala* is not defined by its periphery, but by its centre with flexible power extension and contraction. Without clear and stable borders, the size and movement of the population become the key standard to draw the periphery. Domestically, every village or community can be a *mandala*, and the smallest *mandala* in politics is the family of each islander. In international relations, every state is a *mandala*. Hence, in the pre-colonial period, inter-state and inter-village relations are actually inter-*mandala* relations.

Macroscopically, the societal structure of a *mandalic* community was manifested by the reciprocal “patron–client system,” in which islanders were clients and their recognized leader was the legitimated patron.²¹ Groups of small settlements as the cardinal points tended to stay around and submit their recognition and labour to the leadership with the highest socio-political and socioeconomic position in return for adding to their social status and receiving sufficient protection.²² Islanders thus were able to form and show their political and religious preferences and followed any leader they wanted. They were authorized to express themselves within this unified *mandalic* structure. The supreme leader in each *mandala* who represented the “centre” was a “man of prowess.” The greatest leaders are “*raja sewu negara nungkul (sujud)*” – “the kings of a thousand kingdoms offer submission to them.”²³ Therefore, a *mandala* with a patron–client system is actually a strategic alliance where both the centre and cardinal points set up a reciprocal, interdependent relation with each other to fulfil their individual needs. To a certain extent, it also legitimized the relatively parallel statuses of these two parties in politics. No matter if the cardinal points are weighted heavily or not, without their participation, no “man of prowess” is able to establish his *mandala*. Leadership in the early Indonesian archipelago thus had already put a heavy emphasis on the powers and heterogeneities on the local level.

The *mandalic* patron–client system created a sense of belonging in politics and culture for ordinary people and encouraged them to feel responsible to participate in the politics of their community. The political form of the *mandala* hence is also an inclusive platform of directly transferring political messages between the leadership and people on all administrative levels. As this paper has mentioned, by looking through human history, political culture is recognized as an amalgam of different societal elements. The political preferences of people in any *mandala* thus also added up with multiple messages, such as people’s attitudes toward their current life and their understandings of politics, kingship and loyalty. When settlements were directly choosing their leader, all these messages were also automatically being shown to their leader, the ruling “man of prowess.” He had to give official responses to these callings otherwise his cardinal points would leave him. This “send–receive–respond” route of transferring political messages within a *mandala* established a primitively federal system in pre-colonial Indonesia. Its preference for local people to directly appeal to the central leadership is similar to the modern federalist mechanism of a referendum. In a referendum, substantial national affairs must be directly decided by the people.²⁴

However, the *mandala* is still not truly democratic, but tribal and centre-oriented with a strong concern for “subjects.” This top–bottom system has serviced as a means for improving the ruling efficiency of the archipelago aristocracy for centuries. Although cardinal points and ordinary islanders had the right to formulate their political preferences, neither they nor other societal entities were allowed to check the “man of prowess.” Nevertheless, what cannot be denied is that the *mandala* is in form still a long, spontaneous local attempt at a relatively federalist centre–periphery administrative relation.

Charisma in Indonesian Politics

Similar to the situation in modern federalist states, the open-minded attitude toward local authority in the *mandala* also encouraged the generation of excessive societal heterogeneities in the local that could threaten the unified national identity. The risk of regionalism and the worship of the “man of prowess” are two reasons that Indonesian politics has emphasized the importance of “charisma” since the old days. In political practice, charisma is mutual-complementary with the political form of the *mandala*. Ruling with charisma is not a compulsory structural measure, but a soft, effective means to cohere public feelings and put the whole society together. Unfortunately, in modern Indonesia, charismatic leaders have always been military men, like General Sukarno (1901–1970) and General Suharto (1921–2008), who tended to generate “strongman politics.” One permanent and inevitable task in Indonesian politics hence has always been to prevent the military from over involving itself in civil affairs. However, this paper argues that the long tradition of charismatic leadership in Indonesia can be beneficial to the country’s federalization and federation today.

The prominence of charisma suggests that Indonesia’s federalization will be centre-oriented, but it does not mean all federalist attempts in Indonesia are nominal. A centre-oriented federalization is: First and foremost, a gradual plan initiated by the national government rather than a reluctant emergency response to uncompromising local discontents. Secondly, “self-management” is the key word in the initial stage of this process. Promising self-management is different from providing autonomies. The former is giving limited rights to the local governments to manage their own affairs. However, the latter at the greatest extent means to directly give them the legitimacy to rule themselves. Giving autonomies to the local level is the ultimate goal in federalization, but since federalism is still sensitive in Indonesia, federalizing the country should be done step-by-step. The centripetal attraction of the national government to the public therefore is a promise of social harmony and stability.

In understanding charisma, there are some noticeable distinctions between the East and West. Max Weber, one of the most prestigious German political scientists, represents the old western top-down notion of charisma in this paper. In Weberian thinking, charisma is the remarkable character of a person in physical and mental aspects and the political and social charisma of a leader is an initiative power with a temporary influence in terms of attracting followers.²⁵ In this sense, charismatic leadership is “irrational” and “revolutionary”.²⁶ By contrast, Benedict Anderson, as the representative of the new western bottom-up notion, suggests that charisma is the politically and socially permanent, passive power of a leader.²⁷ This leader is charismatic because his (or her) people believe he (or she) has power.²⁸

In the eastern interpretation, the charisma of a leader is an outstanding quality of his or hers which has a permanent political and social influence in terms of attracting followers’ beliefs. In reality, charismatic ruling is a significant commonality in Asian politics, whether in democratic countries like South Korea and the Philippines, democratic countries with a single long-lived dominant leadership like Singapore and Malaysia, or dictatorial countries like Myanmar. The charisma of their leaders is still important in maintaining social stability and in the actual obedience and practise of the central policy by the people.

The immediate conditions that have pushed Indonesia to pursue charismatic leadership have been the country’s excessive heterogeneities in its ethnicity and geography. With *Bahasa Indonesia* as the lingua franca, in 2010, there were still more than 700 languages and dialects being spoken by over 300 ethnic groups in Indonesia, with Javanese people, the major ethnic group, only accounting for 41.71% of the total population.²⁹ Furthermore, Indonesia earned its name “the thousand islands country” by being divided into 17,000 islands (6,000 islands are inhabited).³⁰ Cultural, political, economic and other social communications among people have therefore been affected by the geographic barriers of the Pacific Ocean. Without a charismatic leadership to put disparate groups together moderately, Indonesia would be too disrupted to

promote its democratic and federalist experiment nationally.

During Suharto's New Order, from 1965 to 1998, Indonesia witnessed rapid economic development, but meanwhile, its government was also gradually eroded by nepotism, cronyism, corruption and the abuse of official powers.³¹ Hence, the new election in 1999, the first Indonesian parliamentary election since the collapse of the New Order, was essential to bearing the democratic dream of the whole nation. Ninety percent of the total population participated in this election.³² Nonetheless, even in this watershed moment of the Indonesian democracy, charisma as a political tradition still had its place. Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of the first Indonesian President Sukarno, and her Indonesian Democracy Party–Struggle or the *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia–Perjuangan* won the majority, about 34% of the votes.³³ The former ruling party, the Party of the Functional Groups or the *Golkar*, won 22% and took second place.³⁴

Sukarno's charisma did greatly contribute to support for Sukarnoputri, but she also cultivated her own label as a modest female politician in the Islamic Indonesia.³⁵ On one hand, after 30 years of corrupt reign by Suharto, Indonesian people were desperate for a clean democracy with a new, capable administration; on the other hand, they were still inevitably partial to the politicians that they were familiar with. The public trust toward Sukarnoputri illustrated that Indonesian voters were expecting that she would inherit the national spirit of the Indonesian nation and the sense of national responsibility from her father, a heroic, honourable figure. Unlike Suharto, who regarded Indonesia as a private wealth-producing machine, Sukarnoputri was portrayed as a leader that would truly work for the well-being of her country. Later, she did respond to this expectation by advancing the *reformasi* to re-democratize Indonesia and correct the mistakes left by the New Order.³⁶ Thus, the potential for democratization under a charismatic leadership actually has to rely on the personal will of a leader. If this leader is enlightened, democratization is possible.

Conclusion

In a purely historical study, it is meaningless to make assumptions like “What if Indonesian people establish their federation successfully?” or “What if the Dutch did not arrive at the Indonesian archipelago in the mid-19th century?” because admitting and concentrating on the sole facts of the past is an academic necessity. Though some historical events have long-term impacts, once they end they are all physically finished and become a unique part of history.

Nevertheless, studying political culture by adopting a historical approach is different. Even though it still focuses on the course of human history, political culture cannot be eliminated physically. Instead, it is a perpetual social phenomenon, which is constantly transforming along with the changes of human society. Hence, asking the “what if” question has practical significance for enhancing societal improvements. Based on this theoretical foundation, this paper has assumed that Indonesian people have the possibility to develop their own federation from two aspects of their traditional political culture: ideas of ruling in the *mandala* and the role of charisma in Indonesian politics.

The *mandala*, primarily as an essential art pattern in Hinduism and Buddhism, has generated its unique political significance in favor of building a federal system. It contributed to the formation of a typical feature of Indonesian politics – local powers regardless of their various distinctions have a tendency to gather around one strong central authority, or a “man of prowess.” In return for this obedience, the central authority acknowledges the local heterogeneity and fulfills some needs of the people to ensure unity by recognizing diversity. Generation after generation, this feature has encouraged Indonesian people with dissimilar backgrounds to stay together or at least not break away from the majority of the society. The power of a political leader in his *mandalic* community not only refers to his personal ability and strength, but also

includes his charisma. A charismatic politician is always accomplished at attracting more public support. Hence, in ethnically and geographically diverse Indonesia, a central government with a skillful, charismatic leader is more likely to make local people accept its policy.

Despite the fact that some papers with outstanding arguments have embraced the creation of an Indonesian federation, most of them prefer Indonesia to completely imitate the western federalist models due to the latter's unshakable institutional and experiential superiorities. Scholars have seldom mentioned that a federation could be facilitated by the traditional political culture in Indonesia. Therefore, this paper tries to provide a meaningful analysis of two outstanding aspects of this culture to examine how they can play significant roles in the establishment of an Indonesian federation. Yet, it is still impractical for this paper to cover all the interesting elements of this culture. One of these unmentioned points is the Dutch influence on the development of the traditional Indonesian political culture. Hence, this paper hopes to draw the attention of future scholars to traditional Indonesian political culture and its relation with federalism.

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37. *Ibid*, 109.

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