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March 2007 Newsletter

Archeological Perspectives of Palmares: A Maroon Settlement in 17th century Brazil.

By Aline Vieira de Carvalho[1]

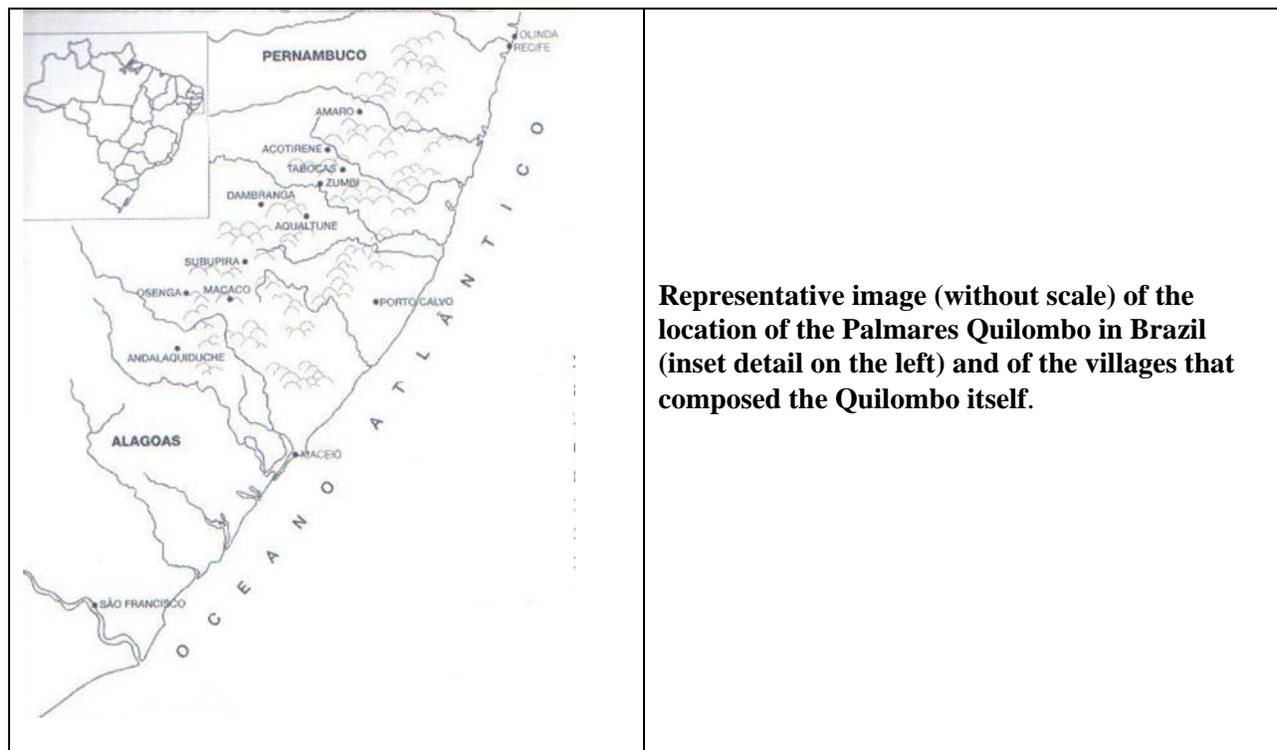
Abstract: The goal of the current paper is to analyze several interpretations made by analysts with the human sciences, especially by historical archeologist, about the Palmares Quilombo, a maroon settlement in 17th century Brazil. Presented with a multiplicity of views of this *quilombo*, one can conclude that there is no consensus in historical studies of this past community and culture, and, most importantly, that choosing and celebrating one of the historical accounts over others entails certain political positions.

Keywords: Palmares Quilombo, Historiography, Historical Archeology, Identities, and Politics.

Introducing the Object of the Research: The Constitution of the Palmares Quilombo

In order to understand the constitution of the Palmares Quilombo, a maroon settlement in 17th century Brazil, it is necessary to consider the period of the maritime expansion undertaken by Portugal in order to search for new routes to the Indies in the 15th century. In 1415, the Portuguese overtook the island of Ceuta and initiated a process of colonial expansion into Africa. In the following decades, they expanded their control across South Atlantic and arrived at the land that is known today as the country of Brazil. During the second half of the 16th century and beginning of the 17th century, when the commerce with the Indies proved to be unprofitable to the Europeans, the Portuguese implemented a new type of commodity production in the newly discovered lands: sugar cane.

Many sugar mills that used the labor of enslaved Africans and local Indians were set up in the Brazilian coast of Bahia and Pernambuco. The sugar production resulted in profits not only for Portugal but also Dutch commercial interests based in Holland, the latter of which were responsible for refining the sugar. While the Portuguese dedicated themselves to the implementation of the sugar mills, they also started to see increasing incidents of enslaved African and Indian laborers escaping from their control. Together these escaped slaves started the Palmares Quilombo.



During the period of the Iberian Union (1508-1640) – when Portugal was incorporated within the Spanish Crown under the power of Philip II – Palmares, located about 60 km inland from the Brazilian coast, received new settlers. According to the historiography about the *quilombo* (which will be discussed further below) there were not only Indians and Africans in the

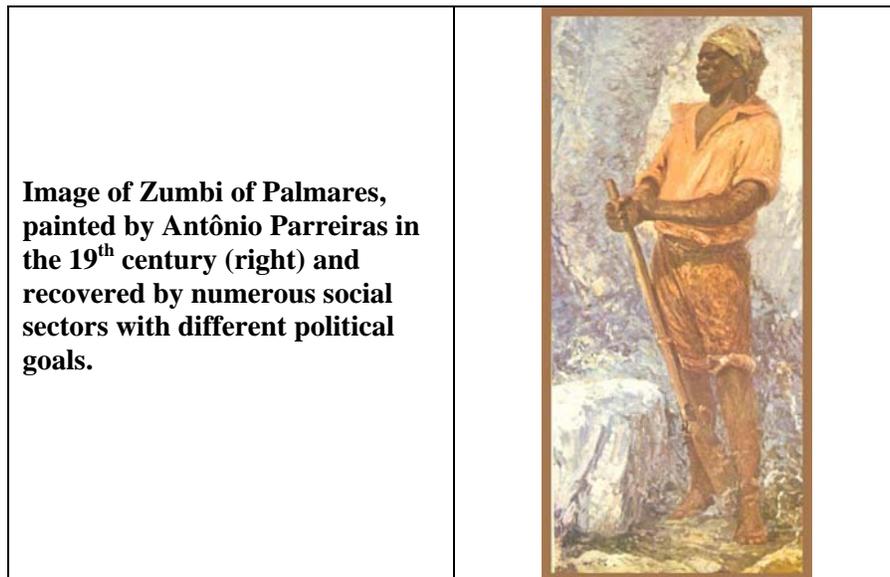
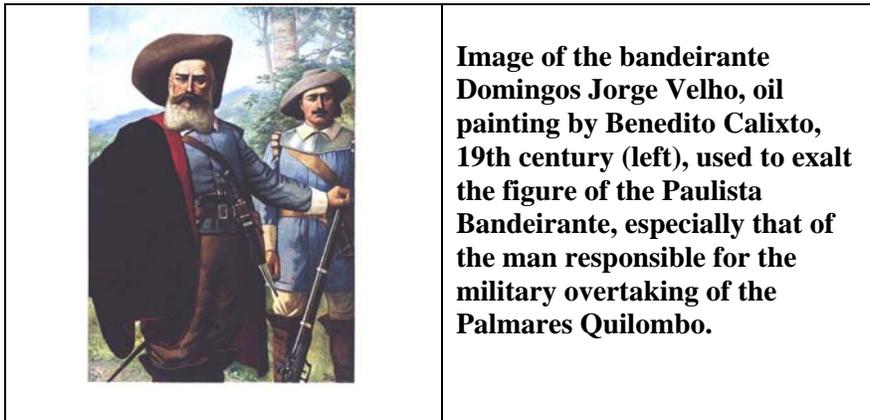
Quilombo but individuals described in historical texts as Jews, witches, and Muslims. In 1612 the settlement had already been acknowledged by the Portuguese as a powerful and dangerous refuge for the escaped laborers.

The religious disputes that existed in Europe in the 17th century had repercussions in the daily life of the Brazilian Colony and because of this also in the Palmares Quilombo. Philip II, king of catholic Spain, forbade Holland from engaging in commerce with Brazil (the latter of which belonged to Spain due to the Iberian Union). This prohibition was motivated by the loss of Spanish territories in the Netherlands. The Dutch, mostly Protestants, invaded Brazil in 1630 to search for sugar and as a response to the actions by Philip II. The Dutch authorities that then dominated the region of Pernambuco also acknowledged the danger of the settlement of Palmares but despite all military efforts were unable to destroy it.

After the expulsion of the Dutch from Brazil in 1654 and also with the end of the Iberian Union in 1640, the colonial authorities and mill owners concentrated their military forces with the purpose of destroying the Palmares Quilombo. As a response, the Palmarians started to attack farms along the coast in order to obtain weapons, free more enslaved persons, and take revenge against the mill owners and overseers. In one of the many conflicts, the captain of the infantry, Fernão Carrilho, imprisoned about 200 members of the *quilombo*. Due to the new events, Ganga-Zumba, military chief of the Palmares Quilombo, tried to solve the situation through a deal: he proposed to the governor of Pernambuco, Aires de Souza e Castro, that the inhabitants of Palmares would be disarmed if, in exchange, they could have the right over the lands of Palmares and their freedom (limited to those born in the *quilombo*).

Discord arose inside the *quilombo*. Another military leader, Zumbi, allegedly led the opposition against Ganga-Zumba and organized Palmares's resistance to the colonial forces. The

governor of Pernambuco decided to summon Domingos Jorge Velho, a *bandeirante*, in 1687, to command the expeditions against Palmares. After seven years of attempts, Domingos Jorge Velho, leading an army of colonists, Indians and *mamelucos* (mestizos of Indian and European descent), finally destroyed the settlement. Zumbi was not captured until November 21, 1695.



The First Readings about the Palmares Quilombo: The Historiography.

Since the end of the 17th century, the historical accounts of the Palmares Quilombo have been based on narratives presented in official written records, including political, military, and religious documents. The reading of the documentation, partly done by chroniclers, archivists,

historians, sociologists, anthropologists, lawyers, and play writers, despite the varied contexts in which these scholars operated, resulted in the elaboration of two images of Palmares: the first one gives us the touching example, “worthy of pity,” of the slave movement against the colonial authorities; while the second one exalts the *quilombo* as an example of the heroic resistance of the black people.

This way, the historiography was marked by the creation of broad, dual categories: good versus evil, the black man versus the captain of the woods, black people against colonial authority, among others. Six authors can be mentioned, in more or less chronological order, as important figures of this historiography until the 1980s and, because of this, are essential to the understanding of the interpretative changes about the Palmares Quilombo: Ernesto Ennes, Arthur Ramos, Edison Carneiro, Clóvis Moura, Décio Freitas and Abdias do Nascimento.

Ernesto Ennes was a librarian and archivist, and a contemporary of Arthur Ramos and Edison Carneiro, writing in the 1930s and 1940s. Ennes used official sources about Palmares to prove the heroic aspect of the *bandeirantes* from São Paulo in opposition to the barbaric side of the inhabitants of the *quilombo*, the *quilombolas*. Connected to the Paulista Museum (currently Ipiranga Museum) – his book *As Guerras nos Palmares*, published in 1938 was dedicated to Afonso E. Taunay, director of the institution – and to the elites of southeast Brazil, Ennes organized countless documents in an epic narrative with the clear intention of reconstructing “the true history of Palmares” and giving value to the image of Domingos Jorge Velho, the *bandeirante* who commanded the last attack expedition against Palmares. The hero, in this history, was a “brave *paulista* (man from São Paulo)”.

The answer to Ennes’s position came in the voice of Arthur Ramos (Ramos, 1946) and of historian Edison Carneiro (Carneiro, 1958). Both researchers contended that Palmares was a

lasting example and “more expressive” of the persistence of African cultures. In their studies Ramos and Carneiro stated that the black slaves escaped to the *quilombo* in order to preserve the culture they had brought from Africa, keeping it free from the threats of white culture (such as the catholic religion, and the clothes and foodways of Europeans, among others). This way, the *quilombo* could be an alternative to keeping the black identity away from a supposed deformation, a type of contamination by the white culture. It is interesting to observe here a preliminary idea of pure cultures opposed to one another – one white and one black.

Historians of the 1960s fought extensively against the studies about Palmares that circulated in the 1930s and 1940s. Clóvis Moura (Moura, 1959) and Décio Freitas (Freitas, 1978) provide good examples of this fight. These authors discussed the rebelliousness of the enslaved laborers and the existence of the Palmares Quilombo based on Marxist theories. Within an analytical context of class struggle, Moura and Freitas contended that Palmares was inherent to slavery, in other words, that it only existed because there was class exploitation. On the other hand, the appearance of *quilombos* was perceived as introducing disruptions into the slave system and undercutting this peculiar institution. The slave revolts, and among them the *quilombos*, start to be considered as ways through which black people began to recover their human dignity that had been lost in the process of slavery. The authors engage a broad audience with descriptions of the punishments suffered by enslaved laborers, the difficulties faced by the *quilombolas* in their escapes from captivity, and the free life that existed inside the *quilombos*. These authors constructed heroes worthy of admiration, exemplified by Zumbi, the warrior.

In this same period, Abdias do Nascimento (Nascimento, 1980) glorified Palmares as a heroic example of the power of black people in the New World. An African-Brazilian intellectual – as he called himself – he preached immediate pan-africanism (the union of all the

“Sons of Africa” as descendants of Africans born in other continents), whose inspiring model should be the Palmares Quilombo. With an engaging narrative text inspired by his experiences as a black individual in Brazil, Nascimento described the existence of a social exclusion caused by color, attacking in a direct way the myth of a racial democracy, where blacks and whites lived in harmony without racism. He focused on the past writings of Décio Freitas and Clóvis Moura in his analysis and scrutiny of the narratives that had been created about Palmares. Abdias do Nascimento’s vision of Palmares becomes an icon to be pursued, a society which we must dream of and fight for.

The six authors considered here longed to recover “through exhaustive and empirical research” the Palmares Quilombo as it “really” was, according to historian Célia Marinho Azevedo (Azevedo, 2000). However, they present a *quilombo* full of expectations, doubts, and answers that are dated by the period in which each researcher lived. The colonial *quilombo* no longer represents just a historical event, but now symbolizes the struggles of our present; once described as a symbol of “black weakness and inferiority,” the *quilombos* have moved to the level of a concrete example “of African richness and power.”

After the 1980s, Brazil stopped being controlled by the military dictatorship and this made the birth of a thematic explosion about Palmares inside the scholarly world possible. The investigations stopped focusing only on economic issues and expanded to address the dynamics of families, women, eating habits, and Zumbi’s sexuality, among other possibilities. In the next section of this paper I will discuss the identities attributed to the Palmares Quilombo by the archeologists who investigated it.

Archeology and the Palmares Quilombo

In 1992 the many different approaches to the Palmares Quilombo were complemented by archeological investigations focused on the settlement. The interpretation of the artifacts – the objects produced or modified by human actions – belonging to the daily life of the *quilombolas* together with the analysis of the written sources supported other visions of the *quilombo*. In these new approaches, the existence of other outcast groups inside the settlement (such as persons characterized as witches, Muslims, and Jews in the written documentation), the commercial role played by Palmares, and the connections of the *quilombo* with the colonial authorities became important objects of study.

The archeological work done in the Serra da Barriga (currently the state of Alagoas) and financed by national and international institutions was carried out by the researchers Charles Orser Jr. (Orser, 1996), Michel Rowlands (Rowlands, 1999), and Pedro Paulo Abreu Funari (Funari, 1993). Each one of them, despite investigating the same material vestiges of the settlement, produced different accounts of the characteristics and significance of the Palmares Quilombo.

The American archeologist Charles Orser Jr, employing a perspective of global historical archeology, states that the Palmares Quilombo did not form an isolated unit fighting for a pure cultures, because it was inserted in a complex web of direct and indirect relations with the inhabitants of the colony as well as with the Europeans. The colonists would have maintained a direct relationship with Palmares, not only for trade and exchange purposes, but also in the private spheres of daily life, because they shared an identity that was much closer to that of the dwellers of Palmares than to the farm owners and other local elites.

In this interpretation, the Palmarian settlement would be a part of a web of relations that would allow the connection of several parts of the world. The Palmares Quilombo, just like the plantations in the southern United States and rural areas in Ireland, is understood as the result of capitalist forces, of modernity, of Eurocentrism, and of colonialism. We see the creation of a broad model that attempts to explain and interconnect all humanity after the year 1415.

The relationships between different social groups are also valued by Brazilian archeologist Pedro Paulo Abreu Funari, who, through a perspective of ethnicity archeology, states that the *quilombo* was a place where people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds would have lived together. This multi-ethnic setting originated from the historical and strategic situation of the *quilombo*. The Palmarians established themselves in a region where there were natives, dwellers of the colonial villages, farmers, the Dutch, and other groups who were frequently outcast. Therefore, the *quilombolas* weren't isolated; they survived not only in conflict with these groups but also, and necessarily, in interaction with them. These contacts transformed Palmares not into a modified summary of a faithful copy of previous experiences (exclusively African); on the contrary, the residents of Palmares consolidated the *quilombo* as a unique cultural experience.

This perspective of ethnicity archeology presents the settlement as a space of debate where the identities, fluid as they are, can only be determined with an analytical end, or better, with a didactic goal. The settlement can be seen as an example of interactions between different social elements and thus could be understood as proof of the possibility of peaceful living and tolerance among people with fluid and diverse identities in our current society. Such an ethnicity archeology approach does not attempt to build an explanatory model that can be applied to *quilombola* settlements all over America, but rather, it values the historical context in which the

Palmares Quilombo appeared and in this point it resembles a perspective of domination and resistance archeology.

British archeologist Michael Rowlands reads the Palmares Quilombo with the eyes of such a domination and resistance perspective, and focuses on the idea of Palmares as a plural structure where there was, for example, an important context of enslavement activities in the region. In this perspective, the *quilombo* is seen as a society very close to the one existing in the colonial world at the time. There were distinctions between the Palmarian elite and the other inhabitants of the *quilombo*; in other words, there were distinctions of class and differences established by gender and ethnicity, which were used by Europeans to justify the existence of slavery.

Within this perspective of domination and resistance archeology therefore, Palmares is perceived as a result of a combination of contexts: the existence of slavery, of sugar cane plantations, of Indians, of European dealers, of the Dutch, and other factors. The Portuguese colony, and later Dutch Brazil, had a very specific social structure that was in parts reproduced in the Palmares Quilombo. The settlement could be evidence that the concept of resistance can mean more than the escape of enslaved laborers or the defense of a pure cultural identity. Palmares, as an extension of colonial society, gives the concept of resistance the meaning of negotiation and interaction.

Another group of researchers, led by North-American archeologist Scott Joseph Allen, conducted new archeological investigations in the Serra da Barriga in 1996. Using a perspective of ethnogenesis, Allen saw Palmares as having a very specific dynamics: for him, the *quilombolas* created a new culture and identity in an unknown natural and social environment. Their clothes, names, artifacts, and other cultural expressions (material or non material) were

composed from the joining of traditional elements of multiple cultures (mostly African) and colonial conventions. These articulations were supposed to differentiate the Palmarians from the various groups belonging to the slave society (the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the Brazilian colonists). The Palmarian identity was consolidated through the contact between many cultures and it originated from then on as an identity of its own, specific of the *quilombo*.

Within this ethnogenesis perspective, the Palmares Quilombo is structured as proof that the *quilombos* in the Americas were born with the objective of defending a cohesive identity, formed by the mixing of other identities, such as those of Indian and African heritage, against the cultural threats of colonial society. This ethnogenesis perspective diverges apart from the perspectives of ethnicity archeology and domination and resistance because it prioritizes the existence of cultural cohesion. A global historic archeology perspective follows a similar path, but with an overarching theme that this cohesion or unity can be found within many cultural groups over time and not only in the Palmares Quilombo.

These archeologies practiced in the Palmares Quilombo, named from the methodological choices of their representatives, emphasize different aspects of the settlement and, for this reason, when they are analyzed together, allow the perception of the existence of different representations of the *quilombo*. According to scholar Kaathryn Woodward, the representation can be understood as a cultural process that: “establishes individual and collective identities and the symbolic systems in which they are based supply us with possible answers to the questions: who am I? What could I be? Who do I want to be? The discourses and the systems of representations construct the places from where the individuals can position themselves and from which they can speak” (Woodward, 2000).

The archeological narratives about Palmares, the representations of the *quilombo* built by different archeological theories, structure, thus, unique places where the readers can look for support to imagine and feel identities about themselves and about others. These places drawn within the archeologies can be conceived as political choices, according to archeologists Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley. For Shanks and Tilley, the archeological actions, understood not only as field work but also as the theoretical base of the researcher, are a political action. Through this perspective, the texts produced by material culture scholars should create dissonance and elicit discussion and contestation among readers, public audiences, and interested parties (Shanks and Tilley, 1987).

Each archeology in the Serra da Barriga created a unique Palmares Quilombo whose images provoke certain reactions not only in the academic world where they were conceived but also in the world outside of the universities. They have stimulated discussions. Before I turn our attention to the debates created by the archeologies of Palmares, I wish to emphasize that I make some use of a distinction between academic and non-academic settings solely for the purposes of the analysis presented here, and not as description of the realities in society today (Bourdieu, 1989).

Archeologies of Palmares and the Need for Public Archeologies

How can the theoretical options in archeology promote changes in our society? According to North-American anthropologist Richard Handler, collective identities, just like any other cultural processes, do not appear to the researcher in an objective way. They exist only in the processes of semiotic interaction; in other words, they are constructed in specific acts of social interpretation. Each individual interacts with the world that surrounds him in a very specific way that is directly related to his upbringing.

Throughout this process of constructing identities, museums constitute themselves as essential elements. The institution's practice is to chose social groups that would be worthy of a public memory and at the same time, they contribute to the exclusion of other possible memories. And, according to Handler, "[t]he decisions we make to canonize certain objects as 'culture', or worth of preservation, always depend on contemporary ideological concerns" (Handler, 2003).

Applying Handler's analytic framework, it is possible to trace a parallel between the archeological discourse and the position of museums. Both of them deal directly with the memories of certain social groups, be those memories written or symbolized by tactile objects. Each has their own working rules: the choice of the language, the objective of making public a certain knowledge, here seen as non-neutral discursive practices that emphasize power relations and disciplinary practices (Foucault, 1996), among other possible aspects.

Thus, the archeological discourse can be interpreted, similarly to the museum, as an instrument of choice of certain memories guided by power relations. Julian Thomas, an archaeologist working in English, emphasizes that archeologists should be careful with the power of exclusion and inclusion: these professionals have the responsibility of making choices that can aggravate certain inclusions and social discriminations (Thomas, 1985). It is important to remember that these memories chosen by the museum or by archeology do not necessarily determine the formation of collective or individual identities (Jones, 1999), but contribute to their constructions.

The archeologies practiced in the Serra da Barriga present divergent representations of the Palmares Quilombo because they come from different theoretical positions. If these representations are made public, it is possible to defend the inexistence of a single truth or even

of a single identity to be celebrated: besides the African, we would have, in the Palmarian settlement, Indians, witches, traders, Europeans, rich men, poor men, among other infinite categories that, even if analytical or didactic, open many other spaces of representations.

An interesting possibility for making these multiple palmarian identities public would be the linking of archeological research with the field of public archeology. This focus on public archaeology has undergone recent developments initiated with the foundation of the World Congress of Archeology in 1986 (Funari, 2001), and its objectives are centered around the discussions about the public and social importance of the discipline, legislation for patrimonial preservation, participation of social sectors in the social administration of patrimony, archeology as politics, and the political use of Archeology.

In Brazil, even if the empirical research of field archeology, almost as a technique, is predominant (Zarankin, 2000) the investigations connected to public archeology are growing at a dramatic rate. This innovation, which is often opposed to a status quo and standstill within the archeological establishment, according to Jorge Eremites de Oliveira, is a result of the energy and motivation young archeologists that he characterizes as a “thirst” for change. And young, in this text, does not mean in terms of biological age: “this *thirst* is part of the effective construction of scientific knowledge and behavior of some scientists, without which there would be no change of nuances or epistemological transformations” (Oliveira, 2000).

The growth of public archeology is necessary to broaden the archeological action in society. When the possibility of multiple identities in the Palmares Quilombo, or even in other research objects, is made public we open space for freedom: the readers of archeological works can build their own identities without feeling limited or excluded. The Palmares Quilombo becomes a land of dreams, because in it all individuals can see themselves.

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Note

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