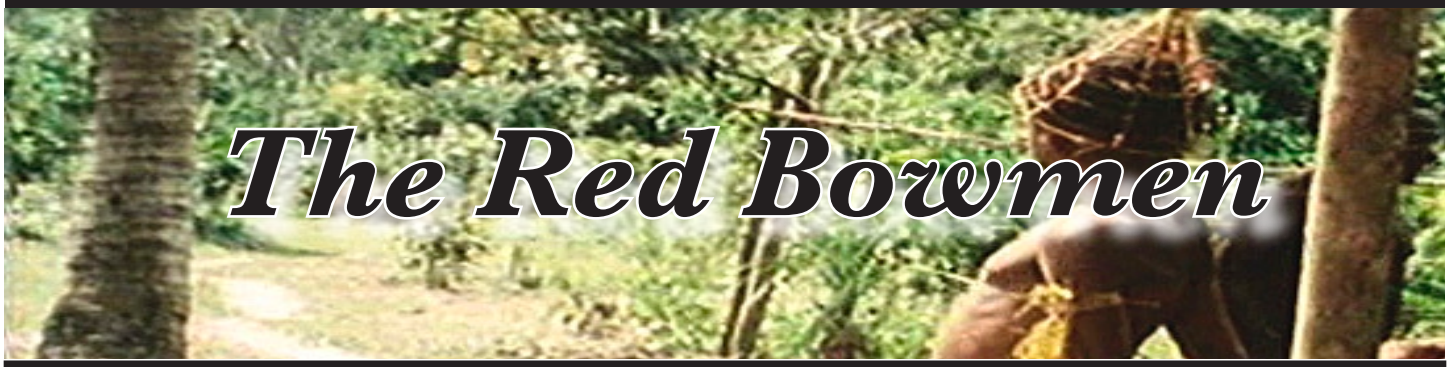

The Red Bowmen

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1.Introduction

In the northwestern corner of Papua New Guinea, West Sepik District, is an area known as Waina-Sowanda. A thousand people lived in four Waina-Sowanda villages when anthropologist Alfred Gell conducted research in 1969-70. Gell's ethnography, *The Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries* (1975), focuses on ida, a ritual concerned with fertility: of sago palms, of nature, and of human beings. Ida is also the subject of the film *The Red Bowmen*. In this guide Gell's complex argument is condensed to illuminate the meaning of the ritual as it appears on film; for a fuller treatment of the complexities of ida, viewers are advised to read Gell's book.

2.The Setting

Like most of New Guinea, the Waina-Sowanda area was relatively isolated from outside contacts until recently. Malay bird-of-paradise hunters were the first outsiders in the region. The Dutch established control in the western half of the great island of New Guinea before World War II, visiting the eastern region only sporadically; after 1950 they set up a control post near the border. At this time missionaries began to enter the Waina-Sowanda area, bringing cloth and metal, and encouraging local people to use steel rather than stone for tools. In 1962, when the Dutch were expelled and the western region became Indonesian Irian Jaya, Australian patrols established administrative control in the east. Their impact on indigenous peoples in Waina-Sowanda, however, was minimal.

Waina-Sowanda lies in a depression between the Bewani Mountains to the north and the Border Mountains to the south. It is hilly, broken country with poor fertility and poor drainage. At an altitude of no higher than 900 feet above sea level, it is malarial country as well. The land is dominated by dense primary forest, which is utilized for hunting and collecting. Secondary bush areas are

used for gardens, and swampy lands and creeks host abundant stands of sago palms, source of the staple food.

Umeda and Punda are two of four closely related villages in the Waina-Sowanda area. *The Red Bowmen* was filmed in Punda; Gell's book focuses on Umeda. Villages consist of a number of smaller settlements built on ridges. Umeda and Punda each have six hamlets made up of about ten houses constructed of wood and sago stems and standing on piles. Houses are used more for storage than for daily life, while outdoor plazas are the locus of hamlet activities and rituals. In contrast to many New Guinea societies, there are no separate men's houses. A nuclear family occupies a Waina-Sowanda house.

For most of the year, however, hamlet houses are not occupied at all. Instead people live in semi-permanent bush encampments and garden houses, usually long, open-sided shelters. During these times sago is collected and processed, gardens are worked, and men hunt wild pigs and smaller forest game. Sago, at the center of the ida ritual, is also central in daily life and subsistence.

Sago is worked by both men and women. Men fell the palms with axes, strip the outer bark, pound the pith, and load it into buckets. Women bring the pith to a source of running water and leach it, using an apparatus made of sticks and sago spathes with a coconut-fiber filter. Granules of starch that are leached from the pith settle in the bottom of the apparatus; sedimented starch is scooped up and packed in leaves.

In addition to sago, gardens produce taro, yams, pitpit, sugar cane, and tobacco, as well as a variety of greens and other crops. Certain trees are also cultivated, including coconut,

breadfruit, areca, and a kind of "tulip." Bamboo shoots are seasonally collected by women, along with other minor foods like mangoes and mushrooms. Men hunt wild pigs and smaller game, while children contribute lizards, frogs, mice, and grasshoppers.

3.Society

The villages of Umeda and Punda have a common origin myth. At a spot called "the place of rotten houses," equidistant from the two villages, an ancestral coconut palm grew. From this palm the first man emerged, along with dogs, pigs, cassowaries, and other creatures. Later the Umeda people moved downstream and the Pundas moved upstream; today villagers intermarry and form a single entity linked by marriage, economy, and ritual association (Gell 1975:27). THE RED BOWMEN was filmed at Punda village, with the leading roles performed by Punda men, while Umeda villagers came as guests.

Each village is divided into two moieties: edtodna, "of the men," and agwatodna, "of the women." Affiliation is determined patrilineally. Moiety organization is expressed in the duplication of each ritual role: for every part a dancer must be drawn from each moiety.

Gell comments: "All Umeda ritual is based on this symmetrical dualism between members of opposite moieties: it is through the moiety opposition that the unity of the village, which is only realized fully in performances of ritual, is given expression" (ibid. 33). Moieties are not groups with instrumental roles; they are not corporate, they do not determine control over resources. They are "expressive" groups that become visible in ritual, functioning, in Gell's (ibid. 42) phrase, "to render intelligible the principles on which the society is based."

4. Life Cycles: Male Perspectives

How do Pundas or Umedas conceptualize the person and the stages of their lives? Gell focuses on experiences and expectations of men and boys, acknowledging that he had virtually no access to the worlds of women and girls.

A new child, it is thought, is "fed" by both parents. The father contributes semen while the child is still in the womb; the mother provides milk after birth. Birth is a taboo subject for men, who do not speak of it. Men may not even touch a child until it is a year or older. From the time a child is three years old the father begins to play an increasingly important

role in its socialization, particularly following the birth of younger siblings who occupy the mother's attention. Around the age of eight a boy is abruptly excluded from his father's attention, often when a younger child replaces him. This pattern leads to lasting antagonism and strain in father-son relationships. Similar strains seem common between older and younger brothers. The relationship between senior and junior generations is a recurring theme in ida, expressed through age and color symbolism.

The peer group of boys ejected from the center of adult social life eventually becomes a group of bachelors. Unlike married men who engage in sago production, bachelors hunt. They wear penis-sheaths and have the leisure to adorn their bodies. "Bachelors" may in fact be childless men married to young girls; as husbands they do not become "adult" until the maturity of their wives and the birth of children. Upon entering adulthood, the boy returns to the social center he had left, now as a socially responsible man. In the process, he sacrifices his bachelor prestige as potent hunter, and his cherished freedom. In many societies transitions such as these are marked by rites of initiation or by age-grades. Here the movement is ritually unmarked, except, as Gell suggests, in subtle ways by ida which enacts a hierarchy of progressively more senior roles.

Although married men give up their bachelor freedom they gain new and highly valued control. Specifically, they control women: the means of production, for women process essential sago. Since bachelors (men without women) are dependent on married men for basic subsistence, married men in this way also control other men. Increasing autonomy and control of married men is reflected in their life style, as they become indifferent to external appearances, walk about naked, bearded, and unkempt, and no longer seem to need "to bolster their prestige with finery" (ibid. 108). In this the behavior of married men contrasts strikingly with that of the competitive, finely groomed and decorated younger bachelors.

5.Ida

Ideally ida is performed each year, although in troubled times, such as years of epidemics, it is not held. Ida is "the most dramatic and picturesque" ceremony in this area, and "the one with the most far-reaching sociological implications, in that it involves the total society," every man, woman, child. "Indeed," Gell comments, "it sometimes seems as if, in ida a dramatic re-creation is set in motion of the entire cosmos as it is constituted in Umeda experience, and interpreted in Umeda cultural categories" (ibid. 156). Following Gell, outlines of the ceremony are sketched below and interpretations suggested.

In October or November, as the rainy season begins, the onset of ida is marked by a day and night of wooden trumpet playing. The trumpets are each capable of producing a single, fog horn-like note. The musical band marches around the hamlet, the ground vibrates, and the sound is heard in neighboring villages. Villagers consult to determine who will play which ritual roles. Coconuts are col

-lected, for following the night of trumpeting there is a taboo on consuming coconuts until ida is performed. Noise-making is also taboo during these preparations, which may last up to ten months. During much of this time villagers live in dispersed bush houses or at sago sites; the village is virtually deserted. Everyone is busy in this "rain and bamboo time." Even bachelors work sago, and married couples are enjoined to have sex to help the sago grow. Gardening is at its peak, as taro is weeded, fenced, and consumed. With the onset of the dry season, around April, coconuts and breadfruit become available, and interest shifts from sago to hunted foods: small game, wild pigs, and the enormous, flightless, black cassowary. Meat is smoked in preparation for ida, and people congregate enjoying food and company.

During this period, everyone is subject to the taboos on coconuts and noise. Persons chosen for ida roles must observe further strict prohibitions. The cassowary dancer, for example, may not leave the village, eat tinned or imported foods, engage in sex or eat food cooked by a sexually active woman, nor may he hunt the cassowary, a prime game bird. He must wear a penis gourd and abstain from eating soft, squishy breadfruit which would prevent his penis sheath from resounding loudly against the hard seeds in his dancing belt.

In the months preceding the performance, food production slackens as attention turns to making rattan armbands, sago fiber skirts, arrows, penis sheaths, and other ornaments. At the full moon everyone converges on the village, bringing many months' accumulation of meat, fish, sago, and supplies. During the next few days, men enter the bush to collect ochre, white clay, and magical plants for paints and masks. Women, who are not supposed to know that masks are actually made by men, are chased from the village while men climb palms to gather fibers. In a secluded ritual enclosure in the bush, men paint their bodies and make masks.

On the first night of dancing, the "cassowaries" enter the dance arena after dark: two men, painted black with charcoal, wearing elongated, weighted penis gourds and elaborate masks of rattan, pandanus fringes, strings of orange fruits, and waving sago fronds. The two dancers (one from each moiety) leap from foot to foot so that the penis gourds fly up and strike the hard sago seeds threaded on the dancers' belt, a movement "overtly intended to imitate copulation" (ibid. 180). In this rhythmic manner, gourds clacking, the "cassowaries" dance till dawn.

As the "cassowaries" dance, they are accompanied by a pair of neophyte youths or "fish," painted red all over, armed with bows and arrows and the ordinary, smaller penis gourd that they have just received. In contrast to the "cassowaries" who leap and cavort and sometimes charge unwary spectators, these "fish" dance slowly, sedately, in single file around the arena's edge. On the sidelines, the entire population watches. Men play trumpets, their bodies adorned with headdresses and plumes, marsupial skins, leaves, tusks, shells, buttons, and turmeric. Women wear dancing skirts, colored cloths, and red ochre powder. Men and boys dance in the center, while women, often in pairs, move on the periphery. The moonlight and flickering bamboo torches, dancers moving in and out of shadows, and the eroticized "cassowaries" (whose penes are said to grow in the darkness to great length) all contribute to what Gell (ibid. 184) calls the "orgiastic tone" of this first night of ida dancing.

Dawn approaches. The "cassowaries" depart to be replaced by two new dancers in "sago" roles. The sago characters wear the same masks as the "cassowaries" and the exaggerated penis gourds, but their body paint is very different: broad horizontal bands of yellow, red, white, and black, with black markings on their joints. As the sun rises the women leave, for they are not allowed to see the "cooked sago" ceremony that next takes place. The sago dancers leap over heated stones, which are then used to boil water for making sago jelly. As the boiling water is poured over dry sago flour (contributed by all the men), the mixture bubbles, hisses, and solidifies. Crowding round the dancers at the center, the men seize the dancers' hands and plunge them into the hot sago jelly. Each dancer grasps a burning handful and throws it overhead, filling the air with "flying fragments of hot jelly" (ibid. 185).

After a lull, dancing resumes in the late morning. New fish dancers enter, painted black with splashes of red and yellow. The women reappear, and visitors from other villages join the crowd. Throughout, it is said that the women believe these dancers are real fish, an explanation Gell claims provides "supposed anonymity for indulging to the fullest extent in individual sexual self display" (ibid. 193). The young men who dance as fish are ritual actors in a drama whose theme is "a kind of cosmic sexuality" (ibid 193).

"Fish" and other minor actors (fiends, ogres, demons) dance throughout the day. On the following morning the cassowaries briefly reappear, followed by the first day's cast of characters, with the addition of "termite" dancers, elegantly polychromed with elaborate yellow masks. Finally the bowmen enter. Danced by youths who have just received the penis sheath, they are called "new men." Their red-painted torsos are striped with black; their penes are bound with palm strips; and they bear red-painted bows and arrows. As they dance they are accompanied by old men or "preceptors" who must instruct them. The bowmen and their preceptors dance twice during the afternoon; their crucial role, however, is at sundown of the second day, when they conclude the performance.

The bowmen dance is quite different from the leaping of most other ida figures: intensely controlled, slow, measured steps, "reminiscent of a slow bowler," suggesting "power held on a tight leash" (ibid. 206). The bowmen also change the tenor of the scene: when they appear, all other dancers suddenly freeze, and even the trumpet playing changes. A few long trumpet chords signal their approach and women must leave or hide. All other actors retire to the periphery, and the atmosphere becomes hushed and solemn. After the bowmen dance, they turn to the west and shoot their arrows into the bush, above the coconut palms that fringe the ritual arena. The dancers rush back to the enclosure; ida is finished.

Five days later, the entire ceremony is repeated. At its conclusion, women remain in the village while men go to the bush for several nights. There they shoot game and ritually wash in streams, a purification that enables them to resume their normal lives.

6.Interpretation

This is a very abbreviated summary of a complex ritual. How does the anthropologist make sense of it? Gell notes that villagers do not say much about such things; they do not expound upon the meaning either of the ritual or of particular symbols. In the absence of indigenous interpretation, Gell proposes to explore the position of symbols within the ritual, and within the context of Umeda language, social structure, and cosmology.

The Umeda do have an explanation of what ida is about: sago fertility. Sago in fact is abundant, and Cell suggests that on another level ida may be about human fertility, which is apparently a more serious problem. Human fertility and reproduction are strongly

tabooed themes, however, particularly among Gell's male informants. To argue that ida's overt concern with sago masks a fundamental if unspoken concern with human fertility, Gell analyzes the ritual as a "metamorphosis of the cassowaries."

The cassowary is a wild game animal: large, black, hairy, aggressive, flightless and antisocial. A creature of the deep forest, the cassowary is notoriously difficult to hunt. The cassowary dancer, Cell proposes, is associated with older married men who are personally autonomous, "off center" from the social axis. Such men are socially and economically independent, less pressured than younger men to conform to social norms. The cassowary role is danced only by such men, who may with impunity express personal wishes. Dancers adopted a wild creature persona, dancing with exaggerated, clacking penis gourds, in the privileged ritual arena. These cavorting "cassowaries" are accompanied by junior "fish," who dance a measured sedate dance. With their red-painted bodies and smaller penis gourds and bows and arrows, Cell sees these "fish" as representing a transition from a "natural" to a more "cultural" pole. The contrast also prefigures the inevitable decline and displacement of the older "cassowaries" by the junior generation. This transition is mediated by the sago jelly rite.

To interpret this brief rite, Cell suggests that all climactic, boundary-crossing experiences, including birth, death, orgasm, sleep, and cooking by fire, are associated with heat. So too is the process of making sago jelly or yis, as uncooked flour is transformed by the addition of boiling water. Hard raw flour suddenly becomes soft jelly, a transformation known as the "death" of flour. The "sago" dancers themselves leap over the fire and plunge their hands into the hot jelly.

This, argues Gell, is a quintessential experience of heat, a ritual death that parallels the "death" of sago flour. But why is the yis dismembered and thrown into the air?

The answer proposed by Gell lies in conceptions of sexuality. The later years of active sexuality are associated with physical decline: a man's reproductive role depletes him of his limited stock of strength and semen. The casting out of vis is a symbolic ejaculation, a kind of death, and at the same time a kind of nourishment. As the yis falls it is trampled into the earth, with the cry that the heads of sago palms should rise. Like the human embryo, which is thought to be nourished by its father's warm semen, sago jelly must also be consumed so that maturing palms might thrive. In both cases, the transformation of growth is mediated by fire and entails a kind of death.

The yis ceremony, then, explicitly concerns the maturation of sago. Implicitly, it is about the relationship between successive generations, between paternal (consumed) and filial (consuming). At the same time the transformation from nature to culture is represented in the shift from cassowary dancers (autonomous

"naturalized" men) to sago dancers, who wear the same masks as the cassowaries but are "culturalized" through the cookery of yis. This is the first metamorphosis of the cassowary, a process that "involves consummation and liquidation of the cassowary role in the interests of the regeneration of the total society" (ibid. 254). The fish, who enter the dance arena next, are "nothing other than the heralds of the looked-for regeneration" (ibid. 254).

Fish are linked in a variety of ways with male generative power: water is associated with male sexuality, and fish inhabit water. Fish are also nutritive (like semen) and extraordinarily reproductive '(appearing in shoals). In dreams, fish portend the birth of children. Fish "stand for multiplicity, proliferation, the repopulation of the social world," after the "death" of sago (ibid. 265).

If fish are symbolic of renewal of the human and natural world following the death of sago, the initial effort at renewal fails. The first fish dancers are black and danced by older men. During the course of the day, however, they are replaced by red fish dancers, a transition equated with the shift from senior to junior generation.

Regenerative "fish" are also associated with the domain of culture. Their masks are decorated with mythical figures representing particular clans, and constructed with materials found in the hamlet, such as coconut fibers, rather than in the bush (unlike cassowary masks). In fact a crucial symbol of culture is the coconut palm, which is also used in making sago-leaching devices, and in the preparation of panadanus sauce. Unlike the empty-handed cassowaries, fish carry the cultural paraphrenailia of bow and arrow. Unlike the bushy, unkempt hair of cassowaries, fish sport carefully shaped wigs of coconut fibers above their masks. These wigs suggest both the sexuality of bachelors and its cultural constraint. This constraint is also evident in dancing style: in contrast to the cassowaries' gyrations, fish dance in disciplined, single file, although still with a strong sexual element. Their dance is not yet the tight "loping" of the red bowmen.

Fish dancers, Gell (ibid. 273) proposes, enact a dream-augury, a "public dream of good omen." Cosmologically, the fish portend biological and social regeneration; more mundanely, dances may actually lead to sexual relationships. Nonetheless, Gell claims that

the reproductivity striven for in this ritual is reproductivity without women. Ida depicts a purely masculine creative enterprise, as "natural cassowaries" are transformed into "cultural bowmen." In myth, women originally had the secrets of ida and danced its roles. Only after they were tricked by men, who feasted them with sago jelly and copulated with them until they "died" (fainted or slept?), did men steal the masks and expropriate ida and its creative powers. This myth is a reversal of a widespread New Guinea theme: the depletion of male strength through sexual intercourse.

The theme of reproduction, once highlighted, may be uncovered throughout ida. The termites, for example, may represent inexhaustible reproductivity (real termites are fantastically prolific), as well as reproductive knowledge (it is said that if men hear women's reproductive secrets they will have huge, ridiculous, yellow, termite-like heads). On the dance floor termites wear over-sized yellow masks and are followed by a retinue of children: reproductivity in action.

If termites like fish are reproductive metaphors, so too is the movement of the ritual as a whole. Ida begins with just two dancers, the cassowaries, and builds as fish are added, eventually becoming dense with termites, children, and crowds of musicians, women, and other spectators. The effect is a progressive multiplication, enhanced by feathers, leaves, dancing poles, and fluctuating colors, underlining the symbolism of this "ritual of multiplication" (ibid. 280).

The culmination of the ritual is represented by the "red bowmen," the ultimate transformation of the original pair of cassowary dancers. The transformation is discernible on various levels and through several specific attributes. The treatment of the penis, for example, has

changed from the cassowaries' exaggerated, bouncing gourd to the tightly bound penis of the bowmen. The dance of the bowmen is structured and controlled, and lasts for about ten minutes, in contrast to the cassowaries' untrammeled seven hour dance. The "new man," notes Gell (ibid. 292), "conserves himself, conformably to the bachelor stereotype, by refraining from dancing overmuch." The bowmen dance awkwardly, as though they had not yet learned how; likewise, they have not yet learned to shoot their bows and arrows. They are instructed by old men, their preceptors, until the last few seconds of the ritual. Their novice behavior and their penis bindings express the social subservience of the junior generation. Yet it is the young bowmen to whom great prestige attaches, not their older preceptors. The old unpainted men shoot dummy, clay-weighted arrows into the bush, while the new bowmen shoot potent barbed and feathered ceremonial arrows. The latter are said to renew the fertility of the bush into which they fall. With the old men, the "nemesis of reproductivity" has run its course (ibid. 294). Whereas in the beginning of the ritual the older generation (cassowaries) dominated

the junior (fish), by the end of ida the junior (bowmen) dominates the senior (preceptors).

7.Conclusion

Ida begins with the impersonation by men of a natural species, the cassowary. It ends with men taking on specifically human roles: hunters with bow and arrow, "shooting birds," as the final rite is called. In "shooting birds," the bowmen send the cassowaries, fish, termites, and others back to the bush, and "thus restore the accepted boundaries of the spheres proper to humankind and natural species, which the entry of the cassowaries (heralding an invasion of the cultural domain by natural species) threatened to overturn" (ibid. 295).

An opposition in ida unfolds between the autonomy of the individual (cassowaries) and the interests of society (bowmen). On the one side there is spontaneity; on the other, social order. "As the ritual progresses, the balance of forces shifts: on the first night the perimeter defences

of the society collapse under attack from the 'outside' represented by the cassowaries; by the conclusion of the rites the situation has been

reversed and the 'new men' fire their arrows outwards, over the bush, bringing about its renewal ... Thus the yintavalm (shooting birds) ceremony asserts, not only the pre-eminence of man the hunter over the natural species, such as cassowaries, who form his prey, but also asserts human control, over the processes of regeneration in nature" (ibid. 295).

The shooting of arrows is a cultural victory, but its cost is repression: the cassowaries' autonomy is restricted by the bowmen and the oppressive orderliness they represent. The process does not end here; the bowmen are "on their way to becoming cassowaries themselves .... Order and disorder (autonomy and repression, cassowary and hunter, senior and junior generations) are locked in a dialectical struggle from which neither emerges as the final victor" (ibid. 296-97). One clue to this dialectic is found in body paint.

Body painting plays a significant role throughout ida. The black/red contrast is a contrast between senior and junior, which may be "weakened," for example by a red body with black design elements. The "cassowaries" are utterly black; neophyte fish are red. Over the

course of dancing, this opposition is progressively eroded as polychrome designs appear: first simple stripes, then variegated lines, and eventually recognizably cultural patterns. The latter are the emblems of specific clans, most painstakingly inscribed upon the bowmen mask. With bowmen, the color red also emerges triumphant, a color that first appeared on the neophyte fish. Red, the color of Melanesian babies' skin, is associated with maturation and regeneration.

The bowmen's bodies are not entirely red, however. Each is painted with a black design representing the dancer's moiety. Two vertical stripes signify the male, two circles the female moiety. The stripe pattern is called kwituduh, or "cassowary chick." Here, writes Gell (ibid. 329), the ritual has come full circle: the bowman is presented "as a nascent cassowary, bearing on his sides the longitudinal stripes which are, indeed, a distinguishing feature of young cassowaries."

In conclusion, the figures of cassowary and bowman represent two ideal stereotypes: the "autonomous" and the "ultra-social." They define not norms but limits, as the "social personality of the individual hovers between the two, and conforms to neither" (ibid. 334). The figures and masks suggest the trajectory of an Umeda/Punda male at different points in his history; the two faces of an individual; elder and younger members of the same generation; or members of opposed generations. What is crucial is continuity between the two poles, as each is transformed into the other, expressed publicly in the progress of ida. As the film's narrator comments, man the hunter triumphs in the end, and the forest will regenerate. The cassowary, however, will also return.

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