



Humanism and Nationalism in the Sports Arena: Uniting Differences, Building Peace

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ABSTRACT

Sport is not just a physical activity or a means of winning medals, but has now evolved into a socio-political instrument capable of addressing the roots of inequality, conflict, and even humanitarian crises. This article critically examines how Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) is used as a social intervention strategy in marginalized communities globally, although it is not immune to criticism for the reproduction of power relations and neo-colonialism in practice. Phenomena such as the participation of refugee athletes in the 2016 Rio Olympics or the unification of the two Koreas under one flag reflect the potential of sport as a medium for soft diplomacy and a rare but meaningful symbol of reconciliation. Domestically, Indonesia with its diversity of ethnicities, religions, and identities has strong assets to utilize sport as a national unifier and a symbol of social cohesion. Furthermore, the public health crisis, both physical and mental, emphasizes the urgency of sport as a preventative solution. Data from the WHO and the Ministry of Health show a surge in non-communicable diseases and mental disorders that can be reduced through active participation in sport. However, the challenge is not simply participation, but rather a restructuring of the development paradigm: from sport for development to development through sport. This article emphasizes that the state must be present, not merely as a facilitator, but as a strategic policy director that makes sport an integrative pillar between development, nationalism, diplomacy, and humanism. Without it, sport will be merely a temporary stage, not an agent of change.

Keywords: *humanism, nationalism, sport, universal.*



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INTRODUCTION

Sports are part of the benchmark for the success of national development. Sports are not limited to the achievements of athletes, but are much broader than that. Existing literature highlights a wide range of benefits associated with participation in sport. These include significant contributions to public health and disease prevention, the promotion of stronger and more sustainable communities,

and the mitigation of anti-social behavior along with reducing the public's fear of crime. Sport also plays a crucial role in providing young people with a strong foundation for future success, supporting economic vitality and workforce development, and serving as a key component in achieving sustainable development goals. Furthermore, sport enhances educational outcomes by complementing quality education, empowers individuals—particularly women and girls—and promotes gender equality while reducing various forms of discrimination. It also addresses social exclusion, fosters social integration, and contributes to the development of social capital. In addition, sport facilitates conflict prevention and resolution, supports peacebuilding, and plays a role in rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. It contributes to long-term peace, strengthens communication and social mobilization, and serves as an essential tool in the promotion and protection of human rights (Beutler, 2008). Sport also serves as a highly effective medium for advocacy and public mobilization. This is evident in the way visits by well-known athletes to various countries tend to attract greater media attention and public engagement compared to those by political leaders.

Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) should be positioned as a central component of governmental policy-making across all levels and sectors, aligned with the broader vision of national unity and identity often referred to as the 'Spirit of the Nation'. SDP refers to a domain in which sport functions as a strategic tool for achieving wider social objectives that extend beyond the realm of athletic performance or competition (Giulianotti et al., 2016). These objectives may include, for example, youth empowerment, peacebuilding and improving intercultural relations, health education, gender equality, and social inclusion of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, studies (Giulianotti et al., 2018) providing definitions related to SDP, "*The intentional use of sport and physical activity as a tool to contribute to development and peace goals, including the Commonwealth goals of democracy and development*". Previous study even proposed an interesting term as one of the solutions, namely 'New engine of development'. Furthermore, another study (Chawansky et al., 2017) believes that "It has become a recognized strategy of social intervention in disadvantaged communities throughout the world," meaning that it has become a recognized strategy of social intervention in disadvantaged communities throughout the world.

Initially, the SDP 'movement' was considered an effective way to contribute to peacebuilding and social development (Rahadian, A., Pd et al., 2021). Nevertheless, critical perspectives have questioned the "messianic narrative" that portrays sport as a universally effective tool for delivering aid and development to the Global South. The expanding body of research on Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) has shifted from merely assessing project outcomes to interrogating the deeper power dynamics and structural inequalities that shape the intersection of sport and international development. A growing number of scholarly works now explore the socio-political consequences of aligning sport with development agendas, revealing how such initiatives can, in many cases, reinforce and sustain neo-colonial patterns within global aid systems. Moreover, empirical studies and case-based research increasingly point to both the potential and the shortcomings of SDP programs, emphasizing the difficulties in disentangling sport-based initiatives from broader systemic trends in international development. In light of these critiques, this volume seeks to illustrate how research on development and SDP can be enriched through more intentional, critical, and innovative approaches (Chawansky et al., 2017).

The challenges facing our world are greater than ever before, and we often create and perpetuate conflicts among ourselves. The war we are currently facing is

a prominent fact that we cannot deny. Social status, educational background, living environment, and even diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria still affect human development throughout the world, especially in our country, Indonesia (Murty, 2022). To meet this challenge and find solutions to existing problems, sports have been identified as an innovative instrument (Beutler, 2008). Sport possesses the capacity to bridge divides among individuals, promote mutual understanding across socio-cultural boundaries, and cultivate a climate of tolerance. As Albert Einstein once remarked, “We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” This insight underscores the need for fresh, innovative approaches—ones that position sport as a vital component within comprehensive strategies for development and peace. Consequently, sport is gaining increasing relevance on local, national, and global policy agendas. While the realm of sport is not without its imperfections and ongoing challenges, its potential to build community and nurture a collective sense of purpose remains a powerful asset that should not be overlooked. (Markum, 2024). Sport is about humanity, and together, with sport and through sport, a better world can be created (Beutler, 2008).

Literature studies have proven that sports are not only a means of improving healthy lifestyles and achievements, but also a medium for struggle and a means of uniting this great nation (Indrawan & Aji, 2019). The achievements and level of community participation in sports can be used as an indicator of national development, so that the promotion and development of sports must be positioned as a tool for national unity (Indrawan & Aji, 2019). In addition, exercise will certainly improve our mental and physical health, making life feel more fulfilling (Darisman et al., 2021). Therefore, exercise can be a healthy and fit lifestyle for anyone.

The origins of nationalism in a large nation with diverse ethnic groups spread from Sabang to Merauke must be used as a tool for national unity. Amidst the diversity of the Indonesian nation in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and religion, sports are one of the tools for national unity (Indrawan & Aji, 2019). We can observe how our highly diverse society competes in one arena, whether against fellow Indonesians or other nations from around the world. Everything blends together, and that is the beauty of sport. Competition is conducted in a healthy manner, even when the participants come from very different races, ethnicities, cultures, religions, and backgrounds (Indrawan & Aji, 2019). That is Indonesian pluralism; that is Indonesia. Imagine how sports can be a perfect unifying force for such diversity. Sports not only promote physical health, but they can also foster good character traits such as honesty, fairness, healthy competition, cooperation, a strong sense of brotherhood, and peace (Zhannisa, 2015).

The relationship between nationalism and sports is clearly visible when a sport is competed in an international championship (Bertoli, 2017; Seippel, 2017). The national flag and national anthem are raised and played. Nationalism emerges when the red and white flag is raised to the highest pole and the national anthem Indonesia Raya is played at international sporting events (Setyowati, 2017). Not only the athletes competing, but everyone watching is sure to feel moved and proud, to the point of tears. At the international level, there are only two moments when a nation's flag is raised and its national anthem is played: during a presidential state visit and when the country's sports team competes. This highlights how sports can play a significant role in nurturing a strong sense of nationalism among the Indonesian people. Beyond that, sports also strengthen unity and brotherhood across the nation. We can clearly see this whenever Indonesia competes against another country—people from all regions come together to passionately support their national athletes. Regardless of their race, ethnicity, or religion, as long as they wear

the red and white colors and the Garuda emblem on their chests, the entire nation will support them (Indrawan & Aji, 2019).

In addition, sports also play an important role in international diplomacy and strengthening relations between nations. History records how various international sporting events, such as the Olympics, World Cup, and SEA Games, have become a platform for countries to demonstrate a spirit of unity and friendship amid political and cultural differences (Fernando, 2023). In this context, sports serve as a means of soft diplomacy, where interactions between athletes, coaches, and supporters from various countries can strengthen cross-cultural dialogue and create better understanding. A real-life example of sports diplomacy is the “Ping Pong Diplomacy” between the United States and China in 1971, which paved the way for diplomatic relations between the two countries after years of tension. Thus, sports are not only a tool for achieving individual and national achievements but also a strategic medium in building global peace.

The feelings of emotion, pride, and tears will multiply many times over if our sports contingent achieves victory. For example, in badminton since 1992 in Barcelona, Indonesia has consistently won Olympic gold medals (except in 2012 in London) (Denatara, 2023). That moment became a “moment of magic” for Indonesia, when the entire nation united in support of our badminton athletes. At that moment, the red and white flag flew and the national anthem was sung as the country that won the gold medal. The pride was extraordinary, because not all countries participating in the Olympics can experience winning a gold medal.

This is the peaceful culture we need. Unity because it bridges the diverse identities of Indonesians (ethnicity, religion, language, residence, and others). Catharsis because with that spirit of unity, we can momentarily forget all the problems we face. Society is able to convert all the suffering and difficulties of daily life into positive energy, which is channeled positively as well. The problem is that, until now, the energy generated by society has been negative energy, which has led to violence and conflict. This type of release is positive for the spirit of peace in Indonesia, because it is not wild, not compartmentalized, and certainly does not bring death.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature review method, analyzing previous research articles, policy documents, and international as well as national case studies related to Sport for Development and Peace (SDP), humanism, and nationalism. The analysis focuses on identifying key themes, critical perspectives, and their implications for social development and peacebuilding.

RESULTS

Universal Humanism in Sports

Sports as an integral part of human life cannot be separated from the athletes who participate in them, as well as humanitarian actions that go beyond the spirit of sportsmanship and competition (Usman, 2023). There is something more meaningful than just the final result of a match. That is humanity (humanism). On several occasions, athletes from various sports and events often play different roles. As athletes, they must compete and win, but as human beings, they cannot deny their role as agents of inspiration for world peace (peacemakers). Muhammad Ali is one such example, the legendary world boxing champion who passed away last June, dedicated his life to humanitarian causes. He was deeply committed to supporting the demands of the African-American community facing racial discrimination. He also worked tirelessly to refute any accusations linking Islam to terrorism. Equally

humanitarian, during the Vietnam War, Muhammad Ali refused to serve as an American military soldier. For him, the Vietnamese people had never oppressed or fought against the American people, so he saw no need to get involved in the Vietnam War.

Furthermore, the world will surely remember the historic moment of the two Koreas uniting during the Sydney 2000 Olympics. A moment of peace that was so inspiring. The two Koreas, which had been at odds for so long, joined together during the contingent parade. Not carrying their own flags, but one under a new flag bearing the title “United Korean Peninsula.” The world marveled at this act of humanism, even if only for a moment. Another example is Indonesian silat athlete Hanifan at the 2018 Asian Games, who carried the red and white flag on his back and ran toward the VIP stands, where the final match was being watched live by President Joko Widodo (at the time—2018) and the Chairman of the Indonesian Pencak Silat Association (IPSI), Mr. Prabowo Subianto (who is now the President of the Republic of Indonesia-2025). Hanifan embraced them both with emotion and pride at bringing Indonesia a gold medal. It is known that the two VIP guests were rivals at the time in the presidential election, but once again, thanks to sports, the rivalry was not felt.

In addition, sports can also serve as a tool for reconciliation in societies that have experienced conflict (Harjo, 2023). In various countries, sports programs have been used to unite groups that were previously divided due to ethnic, religious, or political differences (Halim, 2020). For example, in Rwanda, after the 1994 genocide, soccer was used as a medium to reconcile warring communities and rebuild damaged social relationships. A similar thing happened in Northern Ireland, where sports programs were implemented to reduce tensions between Catholic and Protestant communities. This proves that sports are not only about winning and losing, but also about creating bridges for peace and unity.

Many humanitarian actions by athletes around the world go unreported by the media. The two inspiring stories above are just a glimpse of sports' contributions to humanity. Regardless of race, background, religion, and ideology, what is shown is the important message of sports for world peace, and it must begin with removing the barriers that have been hindering progress, followed by spreading the spirit of universal humanism. However, there will always be antagonistic roles behind the message of peace and universal humanism throughout the Olympics. The tragic Black September incident at the 1972 Munich Olympics stands as a dark chapter in the history of world sports. Eleven Israeli Olympic athletes were killed by a radical terrorist group, which later led to a retaliatory operation by the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, known as the “Wrath of God Operation,” to track down and kill the masterminds behind the Black September tragedy.

The Olympics and The Narrative Of Unity

The grand Olympic Games event ended almost three months ago. Despite being accompanied by various criticisms and technical and non-technical issues, both domestically and internationally, Brazil was able to present an attractive spectacle at the opening ceremony of the Olympics. The 2016 Rio Olympics in Brazil seemed to convey a message to the global community to come and experience the beauty of Brazil, with Rio de Janeiro as its showcase. Over the past two to three years, Brazil has hosted two of the world's largest sporting events. The 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Rio Olympics can be seen as representations of the dominance of global sports, two events brimming with prestige and achievement.

Brazil seeks to present itself—in the concept of realism known as the “Unitary rational actor,” where the state is the sole rational actor in the dynamics of

international relations—as a nation brimming with economic progress and political stability conducive to development, despite this appearing contradictory to on-the-ground realities. There is a narrative being disseminated to participating nations that Brazil is a strong and influential country on the international stage. While this does not amount to hegemonic influence, the message serves as a diplomatic tool for Brazil in its relations with other nations. However, the author will not delve into Brazil's ability to consecutively host major global sporting events. The author wishes to highlight something different about the Rio 2016 Olympics, namely the opportunity given to athletes from refugee camps to participate. They competed under the flag of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). In fact, during the live broadcast of the Rio Olympics opening ceremony, the audience's reception for these refugee athletes (refugee team) was overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

The first touching event in the history of the Olympics, which has been held since 1896 in Athens, Greece (Suminar, 2019). A contingent of 10 refugee athletes was said to embody the spirit of Olympic solidarity while also bringing hope to millions of refugees worldwide. This was stated by Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in his opening ceremony speech at the 2016 Olympics in Maracana Stadium. “You had to flee your country because of violence, hunger, or simply because you were different. In the Olympic realm, we not only tolerate diversity, but we also welcome you as an enrichment to our unity and diversity” said Bach. The ten athletes come from various refugee camps and will compete in three of the 12 sports being contested. They include several athletes from the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, two Syrian swimmers, two judokas from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and an Ethiopian marathon runner. Rose Lokonyen Nathike, an 800-meter runner, led her team carrying the Olympic flag. The 2016 Rio Olympics could set a positive precedent for the future. The grand parade bringing together people from various nations and countries should also be utilized as a platform to promote Humanitarian Solidarity. Over 200 countries participated in the world's largest sporting event, uniting people from diverse cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds through the common bond of sports.

In addition to being a competition, the Olympics also serve as a platform to raise global awareness of humanitarian issues (Alisya, 2018). The presence of refugee teams not only inspires those in refugee camps, but also reminds the world of the importance of international solidarity in facing humanitarian crises (Miliband, 2017; Miserez, 2023). In a broader context, such initiatives can serve as a starting point for international organizations and participating nations to strengthen the role of sports in humanitarian diplomacy and build networks of cooperation to assist marginalized communities. We certainly never imagined that a “selfie” photo of two gymnasts from North and South Korea would go viral online. At first glance, the photo may seem ordinary, but upon closer examination, it conveys a message of peace for the two nations currently embroiled in conflict. These two athletes embody the people's longing for the two nations to live together as one Korean nation (Korean unification).

Ultimately, the Olympics and global sporting events are no longer about the final results and victories, nor are they about competition and the spirit of competition. There is something more than that—the human values that unite all nations. The characteristics of a cosmopolitan society will become evident, as all athletes, who are ambassadors of their countries, come together to form a global community for the realization of humanity and world peace.

Health Crisis and Sports Solutions

An imbalance between caloric intake and energy expenditure can lead to obesity, with a simple indicator being an increasing waist circumference (Maksum, 2018). Individuals with obesity are at risk of developing cardiovascular diseases, which are conditions related to the heart and blood vessels (Amriani et al., 2023). This kind of situation will undoubtedly harm the nation in the long run. As such, it's worth re-evaluating whether our focus should remain on curative measures—delivering as many health services as possible—or shift toward prevention by investing in infrastructure that encourages regular physical activity among the population, ultimately reducing the incidence of illness (Maksum, 2018).

Non-communicable diseases are, in fact, a global phenomenon, not only for developing countries but also for many developed nations (Faisol & Umar, 2022). Unhealthy lifestyles are the primary triggers of this issue, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, low-fiber processed foods, and lack of physical activity (Aspiani, 2014). According to the WHO's 2018 report, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are expected to remain a major global issue within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), largely due to insufficient commitment worldwide—whether in terms of legislation, funding, or practical execution. Back in 2014, the WHO carried out a global survey and published country-specific data on NCDs. In Indonesia's case, the organization highlighted that illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, acute respiratory infections, and diabetes were responsible for 71% of total deaths. This marks a clear upward trend over time: in 1995, NCDs accounted for 41.7% of deaths, rising to 49.9% in 2001 and 59.5% in 2007 (Maksum, 2018).

Based on gender, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more prevalent in men than in women (Gerungan et al., 2020). Diabetes tends to be more prevalent among women compared to men. The report further highlights that several health risk factors among adults are associated with specific conditions. These include smoking, which is reported in 67% of males and only 3% of females; hypertension, which affects 29.1% of men and 26.6% of women; and obesity, with prevalence rates of 2.6% in men and 6.9% in women. Type 2 diabetes mellitus is the third leading cause of death after stroke and coronary heart disease (Letelay et al., 2019). The prevalence of diabetes has increased over time. In 2007, the prevalence was 5.7% and rose to 6.9% in 2013 (Lathifah, 2017). According to the International Diabetes Federation's 2017 data, Indonesia ranks sixth globally, with 10.3 million people living with diabetes. The WHO warns that if this serious and life-threatening condition is not addressed effectively, the number could skyrocket to 21.3 million by 2030. One contributing factor to this alarming trend in Indonesia is the excessive consumption of rice. Among various carbohydrate sources, rice is considered the most detrimental compared to alternatives like corn, cassava, or potatoes. Indonesians consume an average of 124 kg of rice per person annually—the highest rate in the world. In comparison, annual rice consumption is 80 kg in Thailand and Malaysia, 60 kg in China, 50 kg in Japan, and 40 kg in South Korea (Maksum, 2018).

Mental health is just as vital as physical well-being and deserves equal attention. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 35 million individuals globally suffer from depression, 60 million are affected by bipolar disorder, 21 million live with schizophrenia, and 47.5 million experience dementia. In the Indonesian context, data from the 2013 Basic Health Research (Riskesdas) conducted by the Ministry of Health reveals that approximately 14 million Indonesians aged 15 and above—equivalent to 6% of that population segment—exhibit symptoms of depression and other mental health conditions. Furthermore, severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia affect around 400,000 individuals, or

1.7 per 1,000 of the total population. As modern life becomes increasingly complex—exacerbated by factors commonly associated with the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) environment, alongside various biological, psychological, and social stressors—the prevalence of mental health disorders is likely to rise. This trend poses significant challenges, as it may place substantial pressure on the national healthcare budget and contribute to a long-term decline in societal productivity (Maksum, 2018).

The fundamental question is: how can sports contribute to addressing these issues? Research findings demonstrate that increasing sports participation by 25% could reduce healthcare costs by approximately \$778 million or around 10.8 trillion rupiah. Additionally, it stimulates productivity by 1–3% for every \$2–5 invested (Maksum, 2018). There is a positive correlation between involvement in sports and an individual's health condition (Hasmarita & Meirizal, 2024; Saufi et al., 2024). Those actively engaged in sports activities exhibit higher self-confidence levels compared to those who are not involved. When adolescents engage in competitive sports, they exhibit a more positive self-concept than those who do not participate in competitive sports (Permana & Praetyo, 2021). A positive self-concept manifests not only in one's physical attributes but also in social interactions, and notably, it plays a significant role in fostering intellectual growth. Participation in sports has been shown to bolster individuals' capacity to manage stress effectively. Research findings indicate that adolescents who regularly engage in physical activities demonstrate greater resilience and are better equipped to handle environmental stressors. This is particularly important given that adolescence is a developmental stage marked by heightened vulnerability to various psychosocial issues, including substance abuse, underage drinking, risky sexual behavior, and other forms of social deviance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight that sport functions not only as a field of competition but also as a medium for promoting universal humanism, strengthening nationalism, and providing solutions to social and health crises. These results are consistent with the perspective of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP), which frames sport as a strategic tool for broader social objectives (Giulianotti et al., 2016).

First, the role of sport in promoting universal humanism is evident in cases such as Muhammad Ali's humanitarian stance, the unification of the Koreas during the 2000 Sydney Olympics, and the reconciliation efforts in Rwanda and Northern Ireland. These examples support Beutler, (2008) argument that sport can be a powerful medium for advocacy, social mobilization, and peacebuilding. However, critical perspectives Chawansky et al., (2017) warn against idealizing sport as a "messianic" solution, as sporting events may also reproduce power asymmetries or be exploited for political interests, as illustrated by the 1972 Munich tragedy.

Second, sport also contributes to nationalism and social cohesion. Evidence from Indonesian contexts, such as collective pride during international victories in badminton or silat, confirms Seippel, (2017) notion that international sporting events are arenas for the construction of national identity. The emotional resonance of the national anthem and flag ceremonies demonstrates how sport reinforces collective belonging. Yet, nationalism through sport may contain ambivalence: while it unites internally, it can also intensify rivalry between nations (Bertoli, 2017).

Third, the findings demonstrate the role of sport in addressing the health crisis. Participation in physical activity contributes to reducing the prevalence of non-communicable diseases, improving mental health, and enhancing resilience among youth. These findings align with WHO reports and national health data (Maksum,

2018; Saufi et al., 2024), underscoring the need to shift paradigms from curative health measures to preventive strategies through sport. Nevertheless, the challenge lies in ensuring equitable access to sporting opportunities across socio-economic groups, which requires structural support and policy intervention from the state.

Overall, the discussion suggests that sport has multidimensional potential in promoting peace, unity, and well-being. At the same time, sport cannot be viewed as a neutral arena; rather, it is embedded in broader socio-political structures that may either support or undermine its developmental role. Therefore, government involvement is crucial to ensure that sport is directed not merely as entertainment or achievement, but as an integrated pillar of national development and diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

In this article, the author aims to highlight the importance of sports development for peace. Numerous theories and empirical evidence support this notion. History has also demonstrated that sports have the power to unite nations. A nation can become great if it can develop all aspects of life and improve the quality of life for its people. The universal and particularistic spirit inherent in sports can strengthen nationalism, pride, a sense of community, and the will to live. Sports serve as a natural bridge connecting cultures, religions, ethnic groups, and nations. By utilizing sports as a tool, the United Nations can implement various initiatives worldwide, such as humanitarian aid, peacebuilding, education, gender equality, environmental protection, and efforts to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Sport serves as a powerful tool for bridging social, economic, and cultural divides within a community. It fosters a collective sense of identity and belonging, promoting connections and friendships among groups that might otherwise be separated by mistrust, animosity, or even potential conflict. In this way, sport contributes to the reduction of societal tensions and supports the maintenance of peace and harmony within national and civic life. Sports played by the nation's elite can also be used to open the door to peace dialogue and to ease political tensions between countries. However, it should be emphasized that the politics used in sports must be positive and far from the impression of "politicization" so that the objectives and benefits of sports can be clearly felt by the community. The state must be involved in determining all types of policies in Indonesia, including sports. It is time for us to shift our paradigm to "development through sport," as this can enhance the quality of the nation. The state must also provide space for young people, especially young academics, to participate in policy planning, as this will bring fresh perspectives to the nation through the knowledge they have acquired.

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