D.N. Andrew

Dr. D.N. Andrew, Faculty of Theology, Unit for Religion, North-West University.
E-mail: danieln.andrew@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7388-1924

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To kneel or not to kneel: Appropriating a religious and sport symbol for racial justice in South Africa

ABSTRACT

The act of kneeling of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) has its origin in both the religious and the sport environment. In some religious circles it is believed that kneeling is a form of submission to God and in other circles it is a symbol of resistance to oppressive and dehumanising practices and structures. This article intends to investigate critically the use of the symbolism of kneeling, its socio-political and religious implications, how it is appropriated to address racism and other inequalities in sport, and how it can become a symbol in the process of achieving racial justice. The purpose of the study is to investigate whether the BLM concept of taking the knee (as well as the related expression "I can't breathe") and its ambiguous interpretation can be appropriated in the South African context and whether it can assist the struggle to achieve racial justice in South Africa. The study will follow a multidisciplinary approach and will utilise comparative literature analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION: TO KNEEL OR NOT TO KNEEL – A SYMBOL OF CONTEST

This article was inspired by a post from a prominent religious leader[1], who stated on social media that it is not appropriate for Christian believers to kneel at sports events. Tepoel and Nauright (2021:693) report that international and national sporting bodies have taken a stand[2] against racism by kneeling at their national sporting events like soccer[3], cricket[4] and rugby[5]. The question that this opinion has raised is whether it is acceptable for a religious person and specifically for Christian believers to kneel at these events, and whether kneeling before God is the only way of appropriating this symbol. Some argue that members of certain religious groups believe that one should kneel only before God, as this is part of their religious observance, while others feel that refusal to kneel at sporting events may result in the labelling of such a person as supportive of racial prejudice and discrimination[6].

This article endeavours to investigate the socio-political and religious implications of the symbolism of taking the knee in relation to religion and to sport, and how it may be appropriated to address racism to achieve racial justice. Through a comparative literature analysis and the use of the multidisciplinary approach, the origins, meaning and use of taking the knee (and/or using a related expression such as "I can't breath") for socio-political and religious reasons are examined in order to find out whether such symbols can be appropriated as useful for addressing racial injustice in South Africa.

2. TAKING THE KNEE – A MULTIDISCIPLINARY CONVERSATION

Conradie (2015:375) argues that Christian theology, together with other disciplines, participates in a common task of sense making in order to help societies understand the world better, analysing what has gone wrong and helping societies to respond to contemporary challenges. Other disciplines view Christian theology as a particular school of thought that is guided by core assumptions to help illuminate some dimensions of reality, but which are also

1 Dr Isak Burger, former president of the AFMSA, questions the biblical and theological basis for taking the knee by believers. https://gatewaynews.co.za/to-kneel-or-not-to-kneel-isak-burger

2 National sporting bodies include Cricket South Africa. https://bit.ly/3MNaZLH

3 The English Premier League took a decision that their teams will kneel at all of their games in support of the "no racism in sport" campaign. https://bit.ly/3lyYLnE

4 See footnote 2.

5 The South African Rugby Union took a decision to support BLM. https://bit.ly/43ewE50

6 Crouse (2020) provides eight reasons why rugby players were not racist when they refused to kneel in support of BLM. https://bit.ly/3OBHA8V

in danger of distorting it (Conradie 2015:375). At the table of multidisciplinary conversations there should be room for such perspectives, given the influence of Christianity in shaping the world for better or worse. Christian theology can make a substantive but limited contribution to this task of sense making.

A more nuanced and multidimensional approach that is interdisciplinary and contextual may be helpful in discussing certain critical issues in Christian theology. Such approaches are also utilised in Pentecostal studies. Lindhart (2015:2) asserts that a variety of disciplines offer an elaborate treatment of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa and that they illuminate for individuals and society ways to make sense of the world. Afolayan, Yabob-Haliso and Falola (2018:4) use multidisciplinary frameworks to address intersectionality in African Pentecostalism. Kalu, Wariboko and Falola (2010) state that the metaphor of intersectionality implies a matter of reaching out, crossing disciplinary and geographic boundaries to embrace knowledge in all its complexity and tensions with great insight and clarity.

3. BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT – A VEHICLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an international, socialist online movement that uses a hashtag to fight racism and anti-black violence, indicating that it is more likely for a black man to be killed by police than it is for their white counterparts (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2021). In the next section, taking the knee is explored within the field of sport as a prominent symbol of solidarity and support for the struggle for racial justice, as led by the BLM movement.

3.1 Taking the knee: a symbol of respect, concern and solidarity in sport

Taking the knee originated in 1965 and was iconized when National Football League (NFL) stars knelt down on one knee before a game. In American football, the quarterback goes down on one knee after receiving the ball, stopping the game temporarily. This is normally also done when a player is hurt to show respect and concern for the player. Over the years, athletes have used the platform of sport to protest against racial prejudice. Tommy Smith used the Black Power salute during the Olympics in 1968: for this he and his teammate were expelled, never allowed to compete for the USA again, and found that they could not find employment outside of sport. Today, in other parts of the world, black players are accustomed to racial chanting from

stadiums, and for them to take the knee expresses their hope for change to happen, believing that it will not end as a symbolic gesture (Campbell 2021).

Smith and Keltner (2017) find commonality between the raised Black Power fist and the bended knee. Studying mammalian nonverbal behaviour, they conclude that raising the fist makes the body appear bigger, while kneeling makes it appear smaller, reducing height and showing submission. It may also be seen as a posture that is requesting protection. The amygdalae of the brain are activated as soon as a deviation from routine and norms takes place, questioning whether the deviation is a threat, which explains the reactions of Americans against the athletes kneeling (Smith & Keltner 2017).

3.2 Sport – vehicle to achieve racial justice in society

There is widespread support in international and local circles for the transformative power of sport to address injustice and inequality in communities. Among the attributes of sport is its "cross-cutting nature", which implies the ability of sport to address a broad range of socio-political and economic challenges (SDP IWG 2008:6). Some of the social benefits of sport include the improvement of the quality of life, the physical, mental and moral well-being of society, and nation building. Maralack, Keim and De Koning (2013:260) state that the movement aims to correct imbalances in sport and promote equity and democracy, and efforts to use sport as a vehicle to achieve national priorities have resulted in the formulation of a National Sport and Recreation Plan (DSRSA 2012).

Labuschagne (2004:125) questions the ability of sport to ensure nation building, and whether it is not just a matter of nationalisation. Symbolic messages were helpful in creating a united South African nation, but whether they really led to national unity, nationhood and nation building is questionable. Labuschagne (2004:129) argues that the value of sport in creating a national identity is a temporary phenomenon, nothing more than a "ninety-minute patriotism". In her critique of sport as nation builder, Keim (2006:1) argues against the proposition that there is a tendency for sport to reduce most people to being mere spectators, which works contrary to the agenda of social transformation that would ensure a safer, more peaceful and caring nation. She further argues that sport is integral to people's lives, whether they are active participants or spectators. Sport is regarded by some as the most cost-effective approach to deal with social problems, rather than through police, corrective or social services. An attractive feature of sport highlighted by Keim (2006:5) is that it is a non-verbal means of communication; it can be a "conveyor of culture of the most accessible symbolism". It eliminates linguistic barriers and other obstacles to interaction and is suited to overcoming feelings of sociocultural unfamiliarity and otherness. Keim (2006:8) warns against false

claims and expectations that cannot be met by sport. In the light of persistent ethnic prejudices, racism and xenophobia that remain after so many years of social transformation, there is much that sport on its own cannot undo.

Evans (2021) recalls the moment when Nelson Mandela put on the captain's jersey during the 1995 Rugby World Cup: this was a masterful act of statecraft in one of the world's most bitterly divided nations, and part of a conciliatory strategy. Unfortunately, after these efforts of Mandela to use rugby (sport) to bring South Africans together, reality is different today. Leshoro (2022) reports that South Africa is one of most unequal societies in the world and one of the factors is the legacy of years of racial oppression. The intersectionality of inequality in South Africa still needs more unpacking.

Sport can be seen as a microcosm of society and after the exposure of racism in society through the BLM movement, sports organisations engaged in conversations about racism in sport (Swart & Maralack 2021:715). Swart and Maralack (2021:716) suggest that South Africa has been reminded by the BLM movement that transformation remains a dream, even after 30 years of efforts in this regard. Swart and Maralack (2021:726) argue that transformation will never happen without engaging players to end the deep-seated othering and the deeply entrenched systemic racism and entitlement in which sport is still steeped. Quotas in sport are an inadequate attempt to address inequality, as this becomes just a box-ticking exercise for narrow political scores. Swart and Maralack (2021:727) view the BLM movement as an opportunity to address institutionalised racism in sport.

Motswatswa (2020) regrets the fact that black people have to fight to be seen, heard and protected and in the South African context, black people still face circumstances misrepresenting their worth and blackness. Another by-product is the Afrophobia that leads to the victimisation of Africans from other countries. Motswatswa (2020) pleads that standing in solidarity with the African diaspora should be coupled with a stand against Afrophobia that undermines the worth of African lives (Motswatswa 2020).

In the next section the religious or spiritual value of symbols like kneeling and expressions like "I can't breathe" will be considered, and how they may be appropriated to produce the most-needed social capital to address inequality and injustice.

4. SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS CAPITAL – BONDS THAT BIND SOCIETY

The classical secularisation theory that emerged from the 1960s describes how religious institutions lost their significance while de-secularisation theory shows evidence of some unexpected expressions of an emergent and confident religion in the public sphere (Baker & Smith 2014:5). Lombaard (2015:1) asserts that spiritual capital is a helpful concept in understanding the role of religion in the public sphere in a post-secular time. Lombaard (2015:3) utilises the concept of social capital in the way in which Gelderblom (2014) distinguishes its usage, as an overarching inter-human social resource that bonds certain similar agents together, or bridges certain dissimilar agents together towards a communal end. Social capital refers to the influence religion has on people or the effect that religious people have on society (Lombaard 2015:3).

Spiritual and religious capital are part of the broader concept of social capital and form part of the individual and social networks from which the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness arise (Baker & Smith 2014:7). Putnam (2000:66) views religion, thus faith communities, as the most important repositories of social capital for the networks of trust they establish in society. Spiritual capital energises religious capital and provides a value system that motivates people to make a practical contribution to society (Baker & Smith 2014:10).

5. KNEELING – A CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOL

Ratzinger (2002) explains the theology of kneeling as a contested space, originating from ancient Greek and Roman culture. Aristotle saw kneeling as a barbaric form of behaviour. Augustine agreed partially, but reappropriated the act of kneeling for Christians. Ratzinger (2002) argues that kneeling does not come from a specific culture, but finds its central importance in the Bible in the word *proskynein,* which occurs 59 times in the New Testament. Two closely related forms of posture can be distinguished: *prostration* – like Joshua, the commander of Israel, who threw himself down before God (Josh 5:15 ESV), and the blind man, who also fell down to worship Jesus (John 9: 35-38); and *kneeling*, from the Hebrew word *barak/berek,* which literally means knee, acknowledging what we are or receive is from God, for example, the leper who fell to his knees before Jesus (Mark 1:40).

Kneeling is associated with religious practices in many religions, including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc. (Denny 1987; Swanson 2021). In Islam, full prostration is developed in various positions: in early Israel it has to do with the generation of new life and adoption (as in Genesis 30:3, where Rachel bore a child on Jacob's knees); and Solomon, Ezra and Daniel all knelt in prayer.

Swanson (2021) sums up some main Christian meanings: *kneeling in prayer for the purpose of worshipping God* (Revelation 19:10; Psalm 95:6-7; Hebrews 12:28-29); *kneeling in prayer to acknowledge God's holiness* (Romans 11:33; 1 Samuel 2:2; John 4:23; Isaiah 6:1-5); *kneeling in prayer for the purpose of privacy* (Luke 5:16; 22:41; Matthew 6:6; Isaiah 57:15); *kneeling in prayer for the purpose of posture's effect* (Matthew 5:5; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Hebrews 12:28; James 1:22; Romans 12:1); *kneeling in prayer, for Christ is King* (Hebrews 4:16). Swanson (2021) concludes that, for those who are physically unable to kneel, it is the posture of the heart that matters most.

Swanson (2021) agrees that, historically, kneeling was part of ancient practice and was a universal sign of submission, honour and respect, but as pointed out from the above contributions, beyond this portrayal of humble reverence is the connection between kneeling and worship. Northern Europeans, Egyptians and Asian peoples were required to bow before early Roman rulers. The hand of the superior person had to be kissed, while the left knee was touched with the left hand. Today, the British curtsy or bending the knee is a sign of courtesy in the presence of their sovereign (Denny 1987).

From the above contributions it becomes evident that kneeling as a phenomenon can be reappropriated in different contexts to represent the values of respect, honour and humility associated with the different cultural and religious meanings. As a form of religious and spiritual capital it can be a positive contributor to the social wellbeing of society. The meaning of kneeling for the BLM movement and its re-appropriation in support of the struggle against racism in sport indicates how powerful its symbolism can be for other struggles against inequality and injustice in society. Faith communities are repositories of social capital and have the potential to bring about relationships where racial justice within groups (bonding social capital) and outside of groups (bridging social capital) can be realised.

6. BLM AND BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION – EMBRACING THE BLACK BODY

Mitchell and Williams (2017:30) illustrate how,

> …racism falls upon the black body across multiple domains and levels throughout history, and how black theology can inform church anti-racist response to this violence today.

Mitchell and Williams (2017:31) state that scholars who take black liberation seriously should embrace the lived experience of the black body.

Racism is demonstrated on four levels: structural, institutional, interpersonal and internalised (Mitchell & Williams 2017:34). Firstly, structural racism involves broad policies at the expense of the coloured group, as seen in education, healthcare, the criminal justice system, etc.; secondly, institutional racism is found in the working of certain institutions; thirdly, interpersonal racism is implicit or explicit; and lastly, internalised racism is the acceptance of society's stereotypes of one's cultural group.

Mitchell and Williams (2017:34) state that this can be seen more in the health outcomes of black bodies than in the dominant group that happens to be white. Structural racism, as seen in residential segregation, limits socio-economic mobility through lack of educational opportunities, unfair treatment of black and brown bodies by the criminal justice system, internalised racism displayed through the imposter syndrome, where blacks question their abilities, merit and success, and stereotype threats where they behave in a certain way for fear of not conforming to a specific group. The above contribution explains how the experience of racism happens at various levels and across many domains (Mitchell & Williams 2017:38).

Greater ecclesial involvement implies that predominantly white churches need to put in greater effort to create interracial congregations. White churches that support the BLM movement should consider letting go of the status quo which maintains white superiority (Mitchell & Williams 2017:42).

Vellem (2018:268) argues for the "cracking of the Eurocentric" code, a Eurocentric view that marks human bodies, commodifies black lives and renders them dispensable. Tshaka (2007: 536) speaks of the dehumanisation of Africans that has become the acid test of Western European cultures and beliefs. Seroto (2018:3) calls for the decolonising of the mind and the mental universe as produced by sites of knowledge production. Seroto (2018:3-6) uses Grosfoguel's analysis of coloniality to describe the ways in which colonialism impacts indigenous peoples. The call for a decolonised/

postcolonial theology confronts all forms of discrimination that dehumanise people (Seroto 2018:11).

Black theology as a contextual theology is concerned with socio-political and economic liberation and empowerment in the South African context (Kgatle 2021:169). God's preferential option for the poor is found in the gospel message of liberation by Jesus Christ. Kgatle (2021:169) finds that worship creates an open liturgy that affords worshippers an opportunity for a holistic form of worship through the Holy Spirit. In the following section, I will make a connection between the statement, "I can't breathe" and the vitalism offered by the Spirit.

"I can't breathe" – spiritual intelligence can help us breathe again

I would like to focus now on the last words by Eric Garner[7], an African American man who was killed by the police in 2014 and shouted 11 times before he died, "I can't breathe!" Walsh (2021) states that these words speak of the inability he had, in the last moments of his life, of being able to breathe. Zohar (2006:87) connects spiritual intelligence with spiritual capital, not meaning that being spiritual has nothing to do with being religious, but only that some people are religious, but do not display spiritual intelligence in their words and actions.

Zohar (2006:87) defines spiritual intelligence as that which makes us live and breathe; it makes human life vital, living and breathing, giving us as humans some sense of meaning, vision, purpose and value to live healthily and happily. Yong (2013:1-2) agrees that *spiritus* (Latin), *pneuma* (Greek) and *ruach* (Hebrew) refer to soul or breath and to the animating dimension of self-consciousness with human interpersonal relations as the primary locus of consideration. Spirit connotes the life force behind agencies that is believed to be personal. Yong (2013:7) opts for a pneumatological pluralism, because it involves a spectrum of pneumatologies, which are conducive to the contemporary world that emphasises differences and derives its power from the capacity to engage the world.

7 The death of Eric Garner during a police arrest and his plea for breath sparked the BLM movement. https://nyti.ms/3IsDlsj

7. BLM AND PENTECOSTALISM: TOUCHED BY THE BREATH OF THE SPIRIT TO FIGHT RACIAL INJUSTICE

Pentecostals are people of the Spirit: a distinctive contribution of Pentecostal pneumatology includes anti-racist and more inclusive relationships between people. The origins of Pentecostalism are evidence enough of the work of the Spirit at the beginning of the twentieth century. Frahm-Arp (2018:2) states that Pentecostalism originated in different parts of the world (United States of America, Europe, Africa and Asia). It is defined, discussed and classified in a number of ways, including historiographically, phenomenologically and theologically. One of the common denominators among these is their openness and engagement with experiences of the Holy Spirit.

Anderson (2020:121) concurs that there are many movements within Pentecostalism, with no uniformity, no single form, no clear-cut theological criteria, although four broad, overlapping groups exist historically. These four groups are the Classical Pentecostals (early 1900s); the Independent Pentecostal churches (from the same era in Africa and Asia); the Charismatics (existing in older churches from the 1960s, like the Roman Catholic Charismatics); as well as Independent Charismatic mega-churches and Neo-Charismatics (that have been in existence since the 1970s, with the prosperity gospel). Anderson (2020:123) also observes that Pentecostal engagement with society is based on members' conversion experience; their experience of the Holy Spirit; as well as their marginal and working-class background.

Ukah (2018:204) asserts that the Azuza Street Revival that launched the Pentecostal movement was characterised by its multi-racial and socio-economic inclusivity. Kgatle and Mofokeng (2019:4) affirm that early Pentecostalism was born from society's margins, which helped them to overcome racism, sexism, ageism and classism through their experience with the Holy Spirit.

The struggle for social transformation among Pentecostals, although accepted with ambivalence among some groups, has the potential to transform oppressive structures as seen in various contexts (Anderson 2020:125-6). Cartledge (2019:84-85) states that Pentecostalism provides an answer to the pathogens of poverty through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. A certain kind of spiritual egalitarianism is created, with liberation from constraints like economic reality, social status and educational opportunity.

In Pentecostalism, the spiritual world is seen as being everywhere; it is a holistic approach to life that includes the individual and the community, as well as both physical and social life (Anderson 2020:128). Every believer

forms part of the priesthood of believers, as agents of social transformation impacting upon the social welfare of people; focusing on their human rights, equal dignity and worth (Anderson 2020:130).

Kgatle and Mofokeng (2019:7) state that the Spirit is experienced within a context of brokenness, whether through gender, ageism, racism or the commodification of God's gifts, experienced at a personal and structural level, which is condemned under a hermeneutic of the Spirit. Such a hermeneutic, Kgatle and Mofokeng (2019:8) contend, condemns any form of abuse and opts for an experience of the power of God that ends all dehumanising restrictions. This is an experience where dignity is found in the work of the Spirit.

8. A RELEVANT PENTECOSTAL WITNESS REQUIRES SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

As far back as 1988, during the suffering of South Africans under the racist rule of the apartheid government, Pentecostals confessed deliverance from all forms of slavery in a document called *A relevant Pentecostal witness* (Leonard 2010:125). This group traced their origins to the Azuza Street Revival and believed that "the colour line was washed away in the blood (of Jesus)". Pentecostals who supported the document, *A relevant Pentecostal witness,* saw themselves as standing in the tradition of the believers in Acts and the Azuza Street Revival:

> …it was here that powerless people were baptised in the Holy Spirit and imbued with power to preach the good news of Jesus Christ, with signs followed (Leonard 2010:126).

The signatories of *A relevant Pentecostal witness* saw Pentecostalism as standing in the tradition of the early Christians, which requires of Pentecostal believers to defy any unchristian demands, even if it costs them their freedom or their lives (Leonard 2010:133).

Lapoorta (1996:139) concurs with the view of the relevant Pentecostal theologians, that the experience of the Spirit has socio-political implications. Today, after the dismantling of apartheid, the Spirit sends believers into society to address the socio-economic imbalances and inequalities that are still perpetuated. Lapoorta (1996:150) finds a link between unity in the church and liberation, in the work of the German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, and in the Belhar Confession of the Uniting Reformed Church. Deriving from this are the tenets that both black and white Pentecostals need liberation, that black people must be liberated from the psychological damage of apartheid wounds, inferiority, complacency, uncritical acceptance, inauthentic values and norms, and that men must be liberated from the oppression they perpetuate over

women. White people, the perpetrators of oppression, need to be liberated from their pseudo-sense of racial superiority.

The question that concerns us here is how the Spirit can breathe new life, vitality, equality, inclusion and mutual respect, taking us beyond tolerance and towards appreciating the gift of cultural diversity and rejection of all unjust and discriminating practices in church and society. How can we as people of the Spirit apply the principles of spiritual intelligence to embrace movements like the BLM and see them as actions of God to liberate us from this intergenerational sin of racism and create a space where everyone can breathe freely?

Zohar (2006:90-100; 2005:3) offers principles that can function as building blocks of how we can create spiritual capital through spiritual intelligence. Applying these principles in our personal lives, institutions and our environment will make us servant leaders who are willing to create spaces where others can breathe and live healthily and happily.

To borrow a metaphor from Nel (2020:1), Pentecostals should take their heads out of the sand and attend to world issues. Their inability to be relevant in regard to issues of socio-political concern may easily lead to an "other-worldly" attitude towards the world that justifies why they are sometimes called "too heavenly minded and of no earthly good" (Leonard 2010:134). When they comment on issues of socio-political importance, such as whether a believer is allowed to kneel or not to kneel, or as a public commitment of intergenerational solidarity to address the sin of racism, they need to be sensitive and to refrain from making public statements that support the status quo of racism in its brutal and subtle forms.

9. CONCLUSION

The article has endeavoured to respond to the question of whether Christian believers should kneel in support of the BLM movement and whether or not it is a form of idolatry, on the basis that they are only allowed to kneel before God. In the article it becomes clear that socio-political and cultural circumstances should be taken into consideration before any particular positions are taken. The theological and biblical basis for kneeling was investigated alongside its re-appropriation in certain cultural and sport environments, making it a useful construct to be used in diverse contexts of transformation.

The article also investigated whether the BLM movement might have implications for our intergenerational struggle against racism within the South African context. It concludes that the struggle is real in all contexts and requires taking the knee in all of the diverse situations, bowing in support of anti-racist

struggles, bowing in prayer to God for help, bowing to be in solidarity with those who suffer the long-term effects of centuries of colonialism, and locally also of apartheid on the being, minds and lived experiences of people of colour daily. A connection is made between the expression, "I can't breathe" and the breath of life, and vitalism that the Spirit can give. Pentecostals can find in their origins and in the historical struggles against racism in their settings and broader society, opportunities to be relevant witnesses for God, fulfilling their prophetic mandate to fight unjust structures and dehumanising practices. It requires of them to take their proverbial heads out of the sand.

In conclusion, the answer to the main question guiding the study, as to whether Christian believers should kneel in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and initiatives for racial justice, is a definite "yes" to solidarity against all forms of violence that dehumanise fellow humans; an uncompromising acknowledgement that we recognise the dignity and right to life of the other; a firm stance against the abuse of political and military power that undermines these basic rights of others; and embracing the bonding and bridging social capital from faith communities and in particular Christian churches.

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Kneel	Kniel
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