Leadership in the Context of Plantation Sector of Sri Lanka: Exploring the Style, Behavior and Perspectives of Estate Managers

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The paper explores the nature of managerial leadership within the estate working environment in the plantation sector of Sri Lanka by with a focus on estate managers. A survey of literature and a qualitative review carried out with the top most administrators of and expert stakeholders to this sector has led to development of a validated structured questionnaire, which was used to gather data from the Senior Estate Managers (n=65) with more than 10 years of experience and are attached to 8 key Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs) in Sri Lanka by means of an in-depth personal interview. The premise of the article is the examination of the behavioral dimensions of leadership as rendered by estate managers. The outcome of analysis proves that most managers believed the leadership style that prevails in their organizations showed "empowering" characteristics; not a completely empowered culture but one where managers are empowered within the work environment. Further respondents preferred a more "consensual" nature of leadership and a "proactive" organizational climate, as opposed to a "reactive" leadership style. Furthermore, estate managers claimed to be satisfied with the existing management practices of their respective organizations.

INTRODUCTION

No other social or managerial concept has been studied or debated like leadership. Its area of influence extends from mere gatherings of society to the towering administrative institutions of national and international governments. Leadership has been proven to be an important factor for organizations (Larson and Vinberg, 2010; Yukl, 2006; and



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Arvonen, 2002). From the perspective of the business sectors, effective leadership is a primary determinant of organizational viability (Mastrangelo *et al.*, 2004) and has considerable influence on organizational effectiveness (Andersen, 2000). Another important role that leaders do is provide strategic direction to the enterprising unit they lead (Boddy, 2008).

However, there is no one accepted definition of leadership. This situation is complicated by a number of misconceptions about leadership in terms of common language and everyday usage (Barker, 2001). Rost (1991) finds fault with most leadership scholars who have not clearly defined taxonomy or functions of leadership, and make no attempt to distinguish what they are studying from popular misconceptions. Another reason for the disagreements about the definition could be the fact that leadership involves a complex interaction among the leader, the followers, and the situation (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2004). For the purpose of developing an operational definition for this study (Zechmeister *et al.*, 2009), the concept of managerial leadership is considered; viewed through an organizational context and pursued from a managerial perspective, leadership is defined as 'a social influence process in which the leader seeks the voluntary participation of subordinates in an effort to reach organizational goals' and leaders as those 'who are able to influence others and who possess managerial authority' (Schriesheim *et al.*, 1978; and Robbins *et al.*, 2009).

The plantation sector of Sri Lanka plays a key role in the economy in terms of its extent of land of cultivation, production, foreign exchange earnings, employment, etc., and further, it is closely embedded in the social fabric that surrounds many important industries and productive societies. The sector comprises the cultivation, processing and marketing aspects of mainly tea, rubber, coconut and oil palm crops (Table 1).

Table 1: Performance of Tea, Rubber, and Coconut Sectors in Sri Lanka (2009)								
Description	Tea	Rubber	Coconut					
Extent (Hectares '000)	222	124	363					
Production (Million)	289.8 kg	136.9 kg	2,762 nuts					
Contribution to GDP	1.0%	0.3%	1.4%					
Export Income (Million Rs.)	136215.4	11333.1	19103.1					
Source: Annual Report 2009 of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka								

The existence of the estate, the primary point of operation, makes this sector unique from other businesses, in general, and the agribusiness sector, in particular. The estate carries its own associated socioeconomic and political dimensions, which have been shaped by years of historical, geographical and cultural influences. Today, the plantation sector faces a number of issues ranging from low productivity, rising costs of production and unstable prices of products in the marketplace. Attention needs to be shifted to resolving these core issues systematically and guiding managers on appropriate ways of doing so.

BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

NATURE OF MANAGEMENT IN THE PLANTATION SECTOR

An historical perspective on this matter will shed light on the present nature of management in this sector. The plantation sector truly emerges during the colonial rule of the British and the most significant turn occurs as a result of land reforms introduced in 1970s, which passed large numbers of these plantations into the hands of the state, which created a number of agencies to manage the bulk of this land. Later in 1977, entire plantations owned by the government were brought under two state corporations, namely the "Janatha Estate Development Board" (JEDB) and "Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation" (SPC) and parts of the land acquired were distributed among the peasants in the villages, i.e., about 8,094 ha of cultivated estate lands. Public ownership was, however, reversed when Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs) were formed in 1992 which were sold to the private sector after 1995. Today much of the formal sector is in the hands of these RPCs, each of which manage a number of different estates.

The primary managerial role in the estate is played by the estate manager, who acts as the focal point of the whole human and social capital of it, and wields significant authority within this business-social setting. The traditional perspective of the estate manager comes as an individual with significant power in both decision-making and problem solving. The old, but still used, titles such as 'Superintendent', "Periya Durai (PD)" (Big Sir), 'Assistant Superintendent', and "Sinna Durai (SD)" (Small Sir), stand testimony to these views. Very little has been academically studied about the organizational-managerial firm structure in estates and management styles of estate managers. Although, numerous, popular views of autocratic managers are common.

ESTATE MANAGER AS A LEADER

The estate manager is by definition a managerial position. The proposition in this paper is that, estate managers require leadership ability, in addition to other managerial skills. Reflecting on the thoughts of Kotter (2001), it can be said that estate managers cope with complexity, they plan and organize their estates, manage the different employees, from office staff to the estate workers, monitor results and they are provided with formal rights to manage. In parallel, estate managers, preferably, have to cope with change, creating and communicating a vision for their estate. The importance of the ability to lead has been continuously highlighted in recent events. Industrial actions by estate workers demanding increased wages, and the crippling challenges from the external environment have demanded effective leadership ability from estate managers, as they are responsible for the prime unit, the estate, in a plantation firm. Given that organizations need strong leadership and strong management for optimal effectiveness (Robbins *et al.*, 2009), the rationale for this study arises from the argument that the leadership ability of the manager has considerable influence on the performance of

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both the administrative gears and human resources of the estate and in turn has a direct impact upon the performance of the company.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

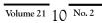
Leadership has been continuously recognized as a key element for business success and has been extensively studied and written about from a variety of perspectives. Researchers have for many years attempted to understand the determinants of effective leadership, from traits of leaders (Stodgill, 1948; and Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991), behaviors of specific leaders (Fleishman, 1953; and Lewin *et al.*, 1939), towards more recent views of contingency theory (Fiedler, 1967; Vroom and Yetton, 1973; and Vroom and Jago, 1988), and other alternate views such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1990) and charismatic leadership (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Each of these different approaches has their inherent merits and demerits and, through different times in the evolution of the scholarship of leadership, has been adopted, abandoned and then revisited again.

STATUS OF CURRENT STUDIES IN SRI LANKA

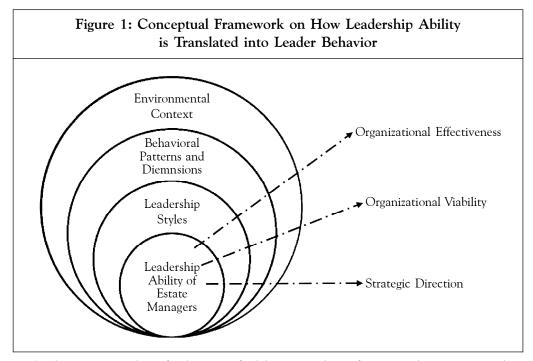
A number of key attempts to study leadership within the local context have been undertaken by scholars (Alawattage, 1998; Somasundaram, 2000; Evens *et al.*, 2000; and See Jayakody, 2008). Another issue that compounds research into leadership is the question about the cultural context; as to whether the theories with a Western origin are appropriate for application in different and vastly varying cultural situations (Shahin and Wright, 2004). The nature of managerial leadership within the plantation sector, despite its importance, has been poorly studied. Both these highlight important gaps in management literature that urgently needs the attention of leadership scholars.

VIEWING LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE BEHAVIORAL LENSES

The underlying conceptual framework of this study is that, the leadership ability of estate managers is illustrated in the different leadership styles adopted by them. In the work environment, the behavior of estate managers, when it comes to different situations of social influence, is symptomatic of their styles of leadership (Figure 1). Meta-analytic evidence also suggests that leader behaviors are important predictors of leadership effectiveness (Judge and Piccolo, 2004; and Judge et al., 2004). However, the style and patterns of leadership of estate managers comes under the influence of three levels of culture, namely, the national or Sri Lankan culture, organizational culture unique to that RPC, and the professional culture which engulfs orientations and ethics of the members of the plantation sector (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997). Therefore, examination of the behavioral dimensions of leadership portrayed by estate managers is warranted, given that these dimensions are moderated by a number of socio-cultural variables that define a single particular situation, the plantation sector.







Such an approach is further justified by a number of empirical issues in such a research. Management research on the plantation sector is difficult due to the unwillingness of most companies to share information and participate in in-depth studies. Estate managers are typically very busy and time-poor individuals and often, when contacted for research purposes, they often cite their busy schedule as an excuse. This creates numerous empirical difficulties for those undertaking systematic research on leadership and management in this sector. Thus, there is a need for the development of research tools and instruments that are science-based, yet friendly for use in such a constricted situation.

The works of Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) was chosen to serve as the base of the theoretical formulation. This groundbreaking work is considered as an advancement to the propositions by Lewin *et al.* (1939) and although categorized as a behavioral theory of leadership by some scholars (Robbins *et al.*, 2009), is a precursor to the contingency views on leadership (Boddy, 2008). This theory illustrates a continuum of leader behaviors, which perceives leaders as operating in a variety of ways, anchored as seven points, from completely autocratic to laissez-faire. Other literature sources (Chartered Management Institute, 2002; and Worrall *et al.*, 2008) have adapted this framework and categorized leader behavior into many dimensions.

This study was aimed to examine empirically the nature of managerial leadership within the estate working environment in Sri Lanka. It identifies and assesses the behavioral dimensions of leadership that are expressed by estate managers focusing on high performing plantation companies.

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METHODOLOGY

DEVELOPING THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

A multi-phased research approach was adopted for the study, beginning with an extensive review of literature on leadership, leader behavior and cultural reflections of leadership. From the works of Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973), Derue *et al.* (2011) and Worrall *et al.* (2008), 13 different leader behavioral styles and patterns were selected, namely: (1) authoritarian; (2) accessible; (3) bureaucratic; (4) consensual; (5) entrepreneurial; (6) empowering; (7) innovative; (8) paternalistic; (9) reactive; (10) risk-averse; (11) secretive; (12) suspicious; and (13) trusting. Considering such a large number was, however, deemed unrealistic.

The second phase was a series of focus group discussion and interviews, conducted with Chief Executives and Directors of RPCs, academics in the field of plantation management, and experts and resource persons from different social institutions dealing with the plantation sector. The idea was to explore the nature of leadership prevail in this sector, to scrutinize the behavioral dimensions, and in turn, to select the styles that have more concurrence with the social-business situation of estates (Zikmund, 2003).

Two distinct behavioral styles were isolated, namely: (1) Authoritarian; and (2) Empowering. Further, another two types of styles were developed as amalgamates of existing patterns based on the responses of the key stakeholders, namely: (3) Risk-averse/reactive, and (4) Nebulous, with the fourth dimension carrying a series of unclassified styles, such as paternalistic, suspicious and consensual (Table 2).

Table 2: Finalized Behavioral Dimensions of Managerial Leadership						
Behavioral Style	Description/Definition					
Authoritarian	The manager makes the decision and announces it; subordinates are not provided an opportunity to participate directly in the decision-making process; manager as a "dictatorial leader"					
Empowering	The manager involves employees in decision making, delegates authority, encourages participation in deciding work methods and goals; there is an open, friendly, and flexible atmosphere; manager as a "democratic leader"					
Risk-averse/Reactive	The manager has the general tendency to not to take risks; manager is "not entrepreneurial"; the manager takes a long time to respond to issues and problems; manager is "not proactive"					
Nebulous	Includes three unclassified leadership styles; the manager consults everybody before decisions are made; manager is "consent obtaining"; manager acts as a father-like figure; manger does not trust anybody within the work environment					

For each of the four dimensions, a series of attitudinal statements were developed that reflects the behavioral patterns of leaders within the work environment. These



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statements were adapted from literature and the discussions with the prime personnel of the sector in the second phase. The recommendations of Zikmund (2003) and Zechmeister *et al.* (2009) were followed during the development of the attitudinal statements (Table 3). A questionnaire was designed and the attitudinal statements were included. In the questionnaire, respondents were told to 'think about their organization, about their work environment, the senior management, their own management styles, the way themselves and other managers carry out their duties', and were asked, first, to select the statements that reflect scenarios that are "existing" in his/her organization, and then, those that they "preferred" to have in it and were allowed to make up to eight such preferences. This survey methodology stems from the assumption that when estate managers select a particular attribute as representative

Table 3: Attributes indicating Behavioral Dimensions of Leadership						
Leadership Style	Attitudinal Statements					
Authoritarian (5 statements)	 i. The managers decide and announce the decision. ii. All employees are given limited freedom for decision-making. iii. You can never question the decision of the manager senior to you! iv. At all levels of the firm, ideas/suggestions by subordinates are not considered by their supervisors. v. There are long procedures to be followed in making even small decisions. 					
Empowering (5 statements)	 vi. The organization supports an open, friendly and flexible atmosphere. vii. You can always voice your opinions; feedback and criticism are promoted. viii. Even junior staff members are empowered to take their own decisions. ix. Regular meetings to discuss and review activities are a common feature. x. The managers allow their staff to identify the problem, develop the options and decide on the action, within the manager's authority. 					
Risk-averse/Reactive (4 statements)	 xi. The managers do not like to take risks. xii. Nobody wants to take big decisions alone; they always "pass the buck". xiii. The organization takes important steps only after the need becomes urgent. xiv. The organization as whole takes a long time to respond to issues/problems. 					
Nebulous (4 statements)	 xv. All relevant staff member are consulted before a critical decision in made. xvi. Senior managers act like father-figures to other employees. xvii. Nobody trusts anybody within the work environment. xviii. Everyone has to watch their back, because no one can be trusted. 					

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of leadership within their work environment, it actually reflects their perception of the protocols of behavior allowed and followed by them; thus, indirectly focusing on the behavioral dimensions of themselves. The questionnaire was validated by means of a pilot survey with eight estate managers from the sample (5%).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Based on the information gathered through the survey of literature, a number of factors were taken into account in developing the sampling framework for this study, including: (1) current structure of the plantation sector (i.e., type of management – private vs. public RPCs; geography – low, mid and up country; type of crop – tea, rubber and both tea and rubber, etc.); (2) proposed number of estates for the study (n = 80) given the "time" and "financial" constraints as well as difficulties faced in terms of getting a higher number of estate managers for collection of data at a one point of time; (3) desire of the senior administrators of the RPCs to participate in this study (Table 4).

Table 4: Outline of Sampling Strategy								
RPC	No. of Estates	No. of Estates Selected	No. of Estates Participated to the Study				% of Total	
			(a) UC	(b) MC	(c) LC	(d) Total	Surveyed / Total No. of Estates of RPC	
A	11	5	3	_	1	4	36.4	
В	14	8	6	2	_	8	57.1	
С	16	10	2	2	5	9	56.3	
D	17	10	_	10	_	10	58.8	
Е	26	11	5	5	_	10	38.5	
F	9	5	3	-	1	4	44.4	
G	20	12	8	_	4	12	60.0	
Н	15	8	_	6	2	8	53.3	
Total Sample	151	70	27	25	13	65	43.0	
% out of (d)			41.5	38.5	20.0	100.0		

Note: Names of RPCs cannot be revealed due to confidentiality agreement. UC = Up Country; MC = Mid Country; LC = Low Country.

The validated structured questionnaire was administered to 65 senior estate managers from June to August 2010 with the cluster of managers belong a single RPC at a time followed by a personal interview with each manager to verify certain issues.

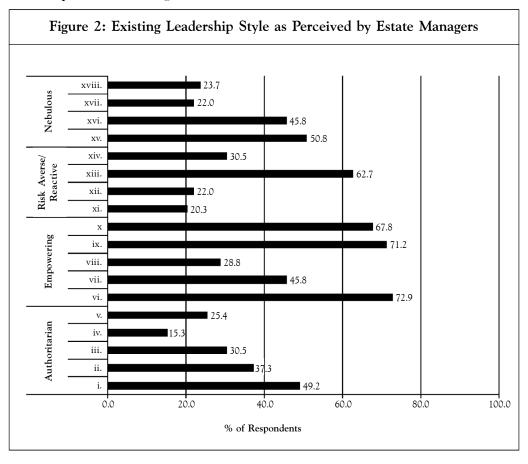
The responses to the attitudinal statements, by means of selections and scores, were segregated by quantitative data analysis techniques including the derivation of



mean scores, to evaluate the dispersion and variance in perception of respondents. The difference between the existing style of leadership and preferred style of leadership was calculated to reveal the gap as perceived by respondents about their work environment. The more negative the difference or the more positive the difference, then that attribute is the lacking dimension in leader behavior.

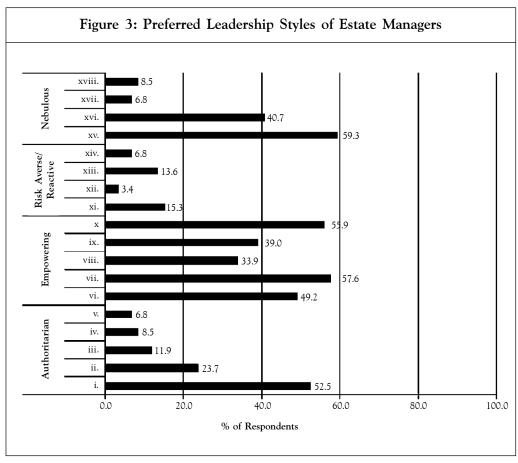
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

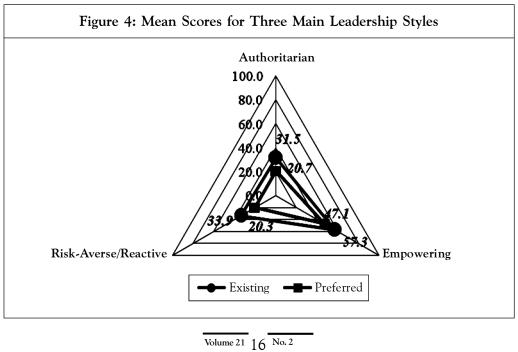
The existing and preferred behavioral style of leadership, as scored by respondents, is illustrated in Figure 2 and 3, respectively. The following attributes were mostly selected as existing features of the work environment: "The organization supports an open, friendly and flexible atmosphere" (72.9%), "Regular meetings to discuss and review activities are a common feature" (71.2%) and "The managers allow their staff to identify the problem, develop the options and decide on the action, within the manager's authority" (67.8%); all three indicative of the style of empowering. Another attribute that was mostly scored was "The organization takes important steps only after the need becomes urgent" (62.7%). This, perhaps, is illustrative of the reactive nature of leadership of estate managers.



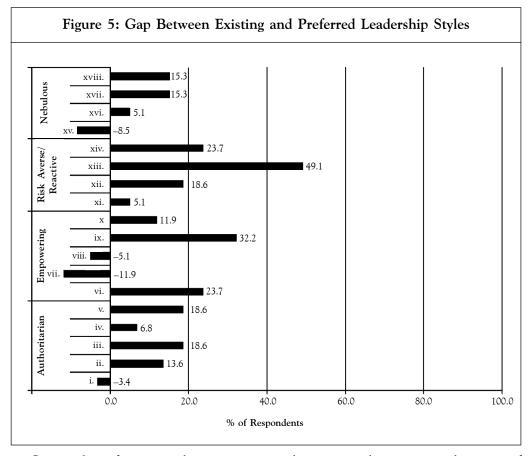
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From the mean of scores obtained for each statement, the overall indication is that estate managers in general, perceive the leadership styles in their organization to be an empowering one (Figure 4). When respondents were asked to select the attributes they preferred, the responses are much less pronounced. An examination of the gap between the existing and preferred leadership behaviors revealed some intriguing insights (Figure 5).



One striking feature is that many respondents wanted a consensual nature of leadership/management; "All relevant staff member are consulted before a critical decision is made" (59.3%) and this carried a gap of 8.7% points. Another element which is preferred by managers is one of empowering: "You can always voice your opinions; feedback and criticism are promoted" (57.6%) with a gap of 11.9% points. Managers also preferred a proactive organizational climate, as opposed to a reactive leadership style; the attribute "The organization takes important steps only after the need becomes urgent" (13.6%), carried a gap of 49.1 percentile points, highlighting that estate managers least prefer such behavior within the work environment.

A key finding of this study is that estate managers' report that there is an 'empowering style' in their organizations. This means not a completely empowered organizational



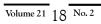
culture, but, must be inferred as one that as empowered the managers within the work environment. A preferred feature is the allowance to voice opinions, an environment where feedback and criticism are promoted. Once again, this is an indication of a need for a more empowered work environment, perhaps for them. They respond that there is a lack of a consensual nature in the management/leadership practices. This could be inferred in two ways; one is that perhaps estate managers need the top management of their firms to involve them in decisions, in a consensual manner; the other possibility is that, perhaps, managers feel the narrow line of decision-making, as practiced by the management of plantation companies, need to reach a consensus with the other actors such as staff and estate workers. Estate managers further preferred a more proactive stance towards business challenges; a breakaway from the reactive nature of managing/leading inherent in the firms. However, estate managers did proclaim their satisfaction with the existing management practices and style of the organization.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

An estate manager is arguably the most important individual at the estate level. This job carries immense responsibilities and clusters of duties for the continuous operation of the estate. The title also carries a high level of respect from other residents of the estate and the surrounding community. The role of estate manager as a leader has come under discussion during the recent events in the plantation sector. This paper set out to examine the leadership styles of estate managers from a behavioral perspective and the managers' own perceptions.

The discussion on the experienced and wanted management/leadership styles by estate managers is a complicated task. What has been simplified here entails a lot of behavioral and perceptual dynamics. The question asked the respondents to consider their senior management, their management style, and the way managers carryout their duties in their firms when answering it. Therefore, respondents have generally highlighted features that they experience or do not experience. Although they perceive an empowering organizational environment, they seek a more consensual flavor to it and increased empowerment for themselves. Perhaps they also dislike the reactive nature of decision-making exhibited by estates and prefer a more proactive stance towards business challenges.

These findings raise important managerial implications for the present success and future survival of the plantation industry; what style of leader behavior will be most effective and resource efficient in the long run, and whether to what extent the styles will need to change in-line with changes within the organizational environment so as to create and sustain a competitive advantage. The primary elucidation is that the nature of leadership is beyond those firms within, what is colloquially known as, the "Colombo business circles"; views of an endowing leader were not reported here, nor





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is the view of a completely single-minded autocratic manager; but a manager who wields power and authority since it has been granted by position and influence since the work environment has evolved to allow so.

A series of recommendations can be made in this regard. Empowerment is generally the preferred style of management/leadership, but this must not be limited to free decision-making at the managerial level, but extended to the entire organization; the creation of such an organizational culture is dependent upon the senior management of plantation companies. Interestingly, it is possible that there will be resistance from estate managers in this regard, since they were not direct in their responses as to whether the staff of an estate manager should not be allowed to make decisions on their own. From the corporate level down to the smallest operations units, a consensual approach towards managing should be practiced wherever possible and/or suitable. Plantation companies need to adopt better environmental information systems, with environmental scanning and environmental analysis undertaken and the findings acted upon, thus enabling a proactive stance for the business.

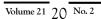
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