

# The Intangibility of the Intangible in Cross-cultural Contexts: Assessing the Value Gaps in Heritage Protection

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## Abstract

*This paper highlights shortcomings in the cultural heritage evaluation process that focuses on the tangible rather than the intangible, thus leading to the exclusion of certain communities. The paper summarizes the results of published research on the exclusion of the so-called Kakure Kirishitan (Hidden Christians) communities in Hirado on the north-western tip of Nagasaki Prefecture. The study investigated the heritage-making process using triangulation methodology combining document analysis and fieldwork in Hirado. The results showed that in the face of cultural differences in evaluating the intangible and religious, the authorities — the Japan Agency for Cultural Affairs and UNESCO — followed the global authenticity and integrity criteria. I argue that privileging tangible secular elements of the religious heritage led to the disregarding of cultural values that make the nominated site of Hirado unique.*

**Keywords:** cultural heritage evaluation, tangible and intangible, cultural landscape, Japanese Hidden Christians, document analysis, multidisciplinary approach

## 要旨

本論文では、無形文化財よりも有形文化財を重視する文化財評価プロセスの欠点を明らかにし、これにより、世界遺産の構成資産から特定のコミュニティを対象外とする傾向につながっていることを指摘する。本論文は、長崎県の北西端に位置する平戸市のカクレキリシタン集落を研究対象とする。本研究では、世界遺産登録に関わる公式資料の分析と平戸でのフィールドワークを組み合わせた多角的な分析手法を用いて、世界遺産形成のプロセスを調査した。その結果、無形文化財や宗教的文化財を評価する際に、文化庁とユネスコは、「世界的な真正性と完全性の基準」に従っていることが明らかになった。宗教的な遺産が世俗的な有形要素に偏ることによつ

て、平戸市のコミュニティが保持してきた文化的価値が軽視され、平戸の文化財の独自性が損なわれていると考えられる。

キーワード：文化遺産評価、有形・無形、文化的景観、カクレキリシタン、文書分析、学際的アプローチ

## **1. Introduction**

During the prohibition of Christianity in the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), the Japanese Christians handed down their faith underground for more than two centuries. They preserved their faith with persistence even after freedom of religion was proclaimed in the Meiji period. Until this day, in the Nagasaki area, communities of the so-called *Kakure Kirishitan* (Hidden Christians) have continued to hand down the rituals and prayers of their ancestors. Since the 1950s, researchers from Japan and elsewhere have urged to record this exceptional heritage. This was finally considered when Japan decided to nominate the ‘Churches and Christian Sites in Nagasaki’ for a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation World Heritage Site (UNESCO WHS).

‘Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region’ in the north-western part of Kyushu was designated a UNESCO WHS in 2018. The serial property that includes ten *Kirishitan* (Christian) villages, one castle remains, and one cathedral, uniquely attests to the region’s cultural tradition nurtured by the Hidden Christians. While there are other places that are known for Christian persecution in the world, Japanese Christians stand out in that they, despite the cruelty of persecution, transmitted their faith underground for several centuries without the help of missionaries. Moreover, after gaining religious freedom, about half of the Christians in hiding, (60,000), refused to ‘reunite’ with the Catholic Church, choosing instead to continue the rituals and prayers their ancestors taught them. They were named *Kakure Kirishitan* (Hidden Christians) by researchers and the media to distinguish them from the *Senpuku Kirishitan* (illegal or underground Christians) of the Tokugawa period prohibition. Some Japanese researchers argue the *Kakure Kirishitan* were estranged from Christianity, becoming one of the amalgamates of Japanese folk religions (Miyazaki 1996; 2001).

In the Nomination File for UNESCO World Heritage, prepared by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA), the English term ‘Hidden Christians’ was manipulated to refer only to historical *Senpuku Kirishitan*. However, to be able to nominate what the *Senpuku Kirishitan* have left behind – the *Kirishitan* villages and sacred sites – for the UNESCO World Heritage Listing (WHL), the State Party (country which has adhered to the World Heritage Convention) had to first designate the villages as Important Cultural Landscapes. In line with the Japanese cultural heritage protection policy on cultural landscapes that presupposed the villages have a living community that has continued the tradition. This meant that ACA included the living *Kakure Kirishitan* communities to justify the inscription of Hirado’s cultural landscape on the national level. I use the term Hidden Christians to refer to both the historical *Senpuku Kirishitan* and their descendants of *Kakure Kirishitan*.

The present paper discusses the evaluation process based on a detailed analysis of ACA and UNESCO ICOMOS (International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites) documents to highlight the shortcomings of the evaluation measures, e.g., authenticity and integrity criteria, which resulted in the exclusion of the living communities from the WHS list of candidates. Some Japanese researchers pointed out reasons for excluding the living *Kakure Kirishitan* from the component sites of the serial property intended for WHS nomination, such as hegemony of the Catholic Church and tourism interests of Nagasaki Prefecture (Yamanaka 2020; Hirono 2018). To add another angle to these arguments, this study brings in perspectives from different disciplines, such as geography and religious studies. I analyzed primary national and international documents and secondary scholarly sources to clarify how concepts for evaluating WHS candidates (e.g., cultural landscape, authenticity, and integrity) were defined by cultural heritage protection authorities. In addition, the study investigated a decade-long designation process focusing on authenticity measures taken by national authorities ‘on the ground’ to select *Kirishitan* villages and sacred sites as Important Cultural Landscapes. To better grasp how this religious heritage was reframed in the heritage-making process, I examined bureaucrats’ geographical approaches to cultural landscape, instead of solely approaching the Christian sites through the lens of religious studies.

### **1.1. Background of the nomination**

The heritage-making process concerning Christianity in Japan formally began with the insertion of the ‘Churches and Christian Sites in Nagasaki’ to the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List in 2007 (see Fig. 1, section 4). Multiple actors participated in the process: Nagasaki Prefecture, municipalities, tourism industry, intellectuals, non-profit organizations, mass media, Catholics, residents, pilgrims, and travelers (Matsui 2006). At first, however, the initiative for World Heritage listing came from a grassroots movement for the preservation of churches in villages far from Nagasaki that wanted to preserve the vanishing churches (Yamanaka 2007: 2). In September 2001, a citizen group called Nagasaki’s Churches as World Heritage Site was formed. The group consisted of about eighty members from churches, local businesses, and related municipalities. Interestingly, because of the assumingly religious nature of the initiative, Nagasaki Prefecture distanced itself from it until the site was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List in 2007. Then the Nagasaki Prefectural Government became actively involved in the campaign to promote its designation (Matsui 2006; Yamanaka 2012).

## **2. Different definitions of evaluation concepts and categories**

This section looks at how the cultural heritage authorities define the main evaluation concepts, particularly cultural landscape, authenticity, and integrity. Potential differences in defining these concepts may influence how the authorities negotiate common meanings.

### **2.1 The Cultural Landscape**

The implementation of the UNESCO Convention through the cultural landscape approach shifted the focus from natural sites and national parks to natural sites in a landscape with people and communities (Rössler 2006). Following this shift, State Parties began to recognise rural landscapes as potential WHS. Moreover, the inclusion of cultural landscapes influenced the implementation of the World Heritage Convention and selection processes by State Parties. A significant change in the selection process concerns property management which requires the engagement of local people (Hodges and Watson 2000;

McCandlish and McPherson 2001). Local communities are seen as contributing to preserving the sites and biological diversity with unique land-use systems that adapt to the natural environment. The sites came to be viewed as part of the ecological system (Rössler 2006). In the Operational Guidelines of UNESCO (Operational Guidelines 2008, Annex 3), cultural landscapes fall into three main categories: i) clearly defined landscapes designed and created intentionally by man (e.g., gardens, parks); ii) organically evolved landscapes (e.g., relict or fossil landscapes) and continuing landscapes (e.g., where the present form developed from initial social, economic, religious imperatives in response to the surrounding natural environment); and, iii) associative cultural landscape with powerful religious, artistic, or cultural associations of the natural element, rather than material cultural evidence, which may be absent. Among the three categories, the associative cultural landscape is designed to best accommodate local communities. This evolving concept of cultural landscape influenced Japan's cultural heritage evaluations of rural landscapes and historic buildings.

ACA based their decisions for the handling of cultural heritage related to land and lifestyles on the revised Law for the Protection of Cultural Property of 1996. Thus, policies were in place to provide protection of the environment and intangible cultural elements such as lifestyles, even before Japan introduced the cultural landscape category into its Law for the Protection of Cultural Property in 2005 (Delakorda Kawashima 2021; Edani 2012). The new Law was established to protect the so-called *satoyama* (areas surrounding villages for common use, see Fukamachi et al. 2001; Arioka 2014; Doshita 2010). The Law defines the cultural landscape as “landscape that has been created by people's lives or occupations in their community as well as by the climate prevailing in such community, and which are indispensable to the understanding of the mode of life or occupation of Japan” (Article 2, Paragraph 1, Item 5 of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Property; Edani 2012). The protection and promotion of cultural properties in Japan is operated by the ACA.

Japan's cultural landscape protection system was influenced by the ‘organically evolved landscape’ as defined by UNESCO. In collaboration with environmental sectors (e.g., agriculture, forestry, and fisheries), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) designates the most exceptional cultural landscapes in the country as Important Cultural Landscapes

(Inoue 2005). Landscapes that are already protected in Japan emphasize the ongoing engagement of people with their environment. ACA thus emphasizes the continuity and evolution of the cultural landscape, which significantly differs from UNESCO's definition according to which the cultural landscape can be either fossil or continuing.

## **2.2 Authenticity, integrity, and intangible concepts**

The concepts of authenticity and integrity in evaluating cultural landscapes formed the basis for evaluating and selecting *Kirishitan* villages throughout Nagasaki Prefecture. These two concepts play an important role in election/registration and the conservation and management of cultural landscapes. In the following, I describe how UNESCO, ICOMOS, and ACA define these concepts.

The concept of authenticity, as a transmitter of the values and significance of heritage, was used as a primary criterion for assessment of property in the WHL, and the concept of integrity was added as an essential criterion by the ICOMOS Committee (ICOMOS 1976; UNESCO Guidelines 1978; Nezhad et al. 2015). Satisfying the integrity criteria means an in-built potential for the property to be maintained and managed over time.

Discussions on the meaning of authenticity in the conservation of heritage sites have been raised in various parts of the world and a global consensus on its importance was reached. However, because of differences among cultures, it was argued that the value of authenticity cannot be measured based on fixed criteria. According to UNESCO Operational Guidelines, the cultural values of authenticity must be expressed through a variety of attributes to maintain authenticity, e.g., form and design, materials and substance, location and setting. Since the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), the intangible notions of use and function, spirit, traditions, techniques, and management systems have been included as important attributes of authenticity (Inaba 2009). Notably, the Nara Document included notions of 'socio-cultural values' and 'cultural diversity' as the main criterion for explaining authenticity and the process of conservation (Stovel 2021). It was argued that cultural heritage must be assessed in its own cultural context in a flexible manner (Nezhad et al. 2015). A flexible manner is particularly relevant for intangible cultural heritage or living heritage, which

aims at preserving a tradition, but which is ever-changing and takes new shape over time. Therefore, the intangible or living heritage forms a basis for cultural diversity and continuing creativity (2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage 2011; Mitchell et al. 2009).

The evolution of the concept of the cultural landscape, which has tangible and intangible aspects, has complicated defining authenticity measures (Heike and Hazen 2010). Research showed that authenticity is best marked not as ‘material change’ but rather as ‘social-cultural authenticity’, and by “considering the creativity aspect while maintaining its continuity over several generations” (Jokilehto 2006). With regards to cultural heritage conservation then, the durability of tangible and intangible aspects has been recognised as crucial.

### **3. Methods**

In this study, I examine the cultural heritage evaluation process using a multidisciplinary approach. Focusing on authenticity measures to select *Kirishitan* villages and sacred sites as Important Cultural Landscapes, I conducted fieldwork including in-depth interviews with local cultural heritage officials, community leaders, and (former) *Kakure Kirishitan* practitioners. Among all evaluated *Kirishitan* villages throughout the Nagasaki Prefecture, I focus here on Hirado City’s villages, which were designated because they preserve the earliest *Kirishitan* traditional practices at sacred sites predating the strict prohibition of Christianity in Japan. I examine the bureaucrats’ geographical approaches to *Kirishitan* villages for designation to clarify how the *Kirishitan* religious sites were reframed as cultural landscapes.

To clarify how cultural heritage protection authorities defined concepts for evaluating WHS candidate sites, I analyzed the primary national and international documents as well as secondary scholarly sources. Among these key documents, published after official decisions were made, are the Nomination File, UNESCO Advisory Body (i.e., ICOMOS) Evaluation, Executive Summary, Supplementary Material, and State Party (i.e., ACA) Report. The basic concepts I discuss here in detail include cultural landscape, authenticity, and integrity.

#### **4. Document analysis results**

This section analyses how the above definitions were applied in the selection process of the *Kirishitan* villages and sites in Hirado for WHL.

The analysis of documents showed that in selecting the component sites intended for a WHS nomination, the actors initially focused on tangible cultural heritage, e.g., the architectural value of nineteenth-century Catholic churches in Nagasaki Prefecture. Later, following the advice of a committee of outside experts and scientists (ICOMOS UNESCO Nomination File 2018), in August 2016, Japan withdrew the application and submitted a new one entitled ‘The Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region’. With this move, the nomination focus seemingly shifted from tangible Catholic churches (Fig. 1) to the intangible cultural traditions of the Hidden Christians (Fig. 2) however, a closer analysis showed that the cultural tradition was primarily measured based on tangible elements (Delakorda Kawashima 2017, 2021).

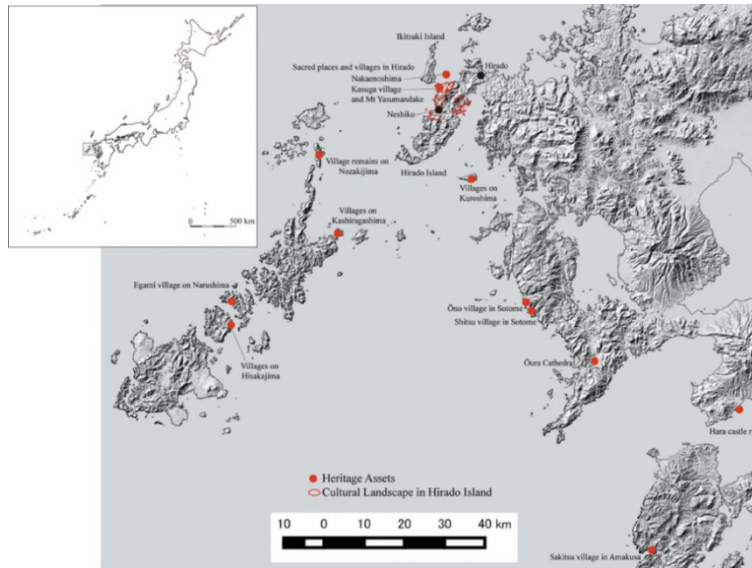
The major change in the new application can be seen in the choice of the historical period of ‘hiding’ as one of the most outstanding values of the sites. This change was based on frequent conversations between ICOMOS and Japanese experts. The selection committee now had to show that sites, buildings, areas, settlements, or landscapes can tangibly demonstrate the cultural tradition in/of hiding (UNESCO, Supplementary Material 2017: 14). Accordingly, as Fig. 2 shows, the new proposal resulted in twelve components, mostly villages, demonstrating the story of the Hidden Christians’ cultural tradition beginning and ending in a distant past.





(Nagasaki Prefectural Government, Pamphlet 2014)

**Fig. 1:** Sites on Japan’s Initial Tentative List  
‘Churches and Christian Sites in Nagasaki’



(Based on Nagasaki Prefectural Government website materials, modified by the author using Fundamental Geospatial Data, GIAJ)

**Fig. 2:** Sites in Japan’s Final Application Proposal  
‘The Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki Region’

#### **4.1 Assessment in the Cultural Landscape category**

On the national level, first, all component sites in Nagasaki, except for one cathedral and castle remains, were assessed in the category of cultural landscape. Why and how were the above-mentioned concepts applied to the sites? The choice of the cultural landscape category for evaluation is shown based on document analysis.

The supplementary material that explains the revised nomination's background and the improved points from the original nomination dossier, shows the interests of the Prefecture to revitalise depopulated areas through a World Heritage designation (UNESCO, Supplementary Material 2017: 14). Because of the critical issue of depopulation in Nagasaki, the Prefectural Government had proposed to link the potential impacts of a WHL to revitalizing local economies (ACA Status Report). Being aware of the acute population decline in remote islands such as Hirado and Gotō (Kimura 2007), it was in the interest of the Prefectural Government to preserve the rural villages surrounding the churches through ecotourism. This led to the decision to designate the surrounding villages as cultural landscapes under the new Protection Law of 2005. The analysis showed that it was in the interest of the Prefectural Government, which wanted to utilize the potential of the Christian heritage historic remains throughout a broader area, to benefit the whole prefecture. This approach affected the living successors of the *Kirishitan* tradition – the *Kakure Kirishitan* in Ikitsuki (Hirado), who represent the link to the first missionaries and the beginning stages of Christianity in Japan. Because the Prefecture was afraid that nominating Ikitsuki would lead to only Hirado receiving the protection, the Prefecture excluded Ikitsuki from the original nomination file.

Those familiar with the heritage-making process in Nagasaki had reservations about evaluating the Hidden Christians' heritage in the cultural landscape category. Not only because such evaluation could result in interpreting and representing the religious heritage as 'reduced to culture' (Yamanaka 2020), but also because cultural landscape is a hard-to-understand concept (based on author's communication with community members and leaders, researchers, and even local officials). To motivate locals to manage, promote and maintain their heritage, the national cultural heritage authorities tried to explain the worth of the heritage as a cultural landscape, but with only limited success.

## **4.2 Important Cultural Landscapes**

The *Kirishitan* villages of Hirado were included as Important Cultural Landscape of Hirado in 2012 (National Designated Cultural Properties database). Some of the main attributes of authenticity that justified Hirado in this category are shown in the text accompanying the registration: Hirado is “a unique cultural landscape composed of terraced rice fields, pastures, and human settlements formed by continuous cultivation and production activities while continuing the tradition of the *Kakure Kirishitan* under the restricted conditions of the islands” (National Designated Cultural Properties database). The attributes of authenticity that supported Hirado’s designation as Important Cultural Landscape thus focused around the “continuous cultivation of the environment”, including “the continuing tradition of the *Kakure Kirishitan*”.

Among the *Kirishitan* villages in Hirado, the officials selected only one – the Kasuga village – for WHL. Comparing the evaluations of all villages in the Nomination File, only Kasuga was judged to satisfy the authenticity, integrity, management, and buffer zone criteria. Authenticity was measured based on the written records about Kasuga by the Jesuit missionary Luis de Almeida (1525–1583), the topography and land-use that showed that the continuing landscape centred around the sacred mountain which has remained almost unchanged from the Tokugawa period. Although in Kasuga village, the *Kirishitan* organisation dissolved a long time ago, the authenticity of the landscape with ritual space was highly evaluated by the cultural heritage protection authorities. The evaluation of Kasuga village for the WHL proposal (Nomination File 2018) focused on tangible aspects of the landscape.

## **5. Data discussion**

### **5.1 Differences in defining cultural landscape**

The document analysis results showed that concepts applied in the nomination process of the Christian-related sites in Nagasaki were defined differently by UNESCO and ACA authorities.

Landscapes that were already protected in Japan, either as ‘tangible cultural properties’ or ‘monuments’, emphasized the continuity of the local people’s livelihoods and daily lives. Thus, the definition of cultural landscape under the Japanese Cultural Landscape Protection Law and the definition under the World Heritage Convention differ significantly. The World Heritage Convention includes fossil (or relict) landscapes in which an evolutionary process came to an end at some time in the past (see UNESCO Operational Guidelines 2016: 73). On the other hand, Japanese law defines cultural landscapes only as those currently engaged in, maintained and nurtured by people. The protection system is designed to protect the (living) cultural landscape (Law for the Protection of Cultural Property, Article 2, paragraph 1-5).

## **5.2 Authenticity and integrity criteria**

While the evaluation on the national level accounted for living communities based on Japan’s definition of cultural landscape (Law for the Protection of Cultural Property, Article 2, paragraph 1-5), for the WHL nomination, the local authorities selected the villages almost solely based on the World Heritage Convention criteria. Concretely, ACA documents acknowledge the authenticity and integrity of Hirado’s cultural landscape encompassing several islands and villages, including the living *Kakure Kirishitan* organisations on Ikitsuki Island (see the national designation of Hirado sites in Japan’s Cultural Properties database). Hirado’s landscape, including Ikitsuki Island, was designated an Important Cultural Landscape by the national criteria. However, for the WHS designation, only one village on Hirado Island without *Kakure* organisations – Kasuga, was stated to have retained an environment undamaged from the time of the *Senpuku Kirishitan* of the Tokugawa period (UNESCO, Supplementary Material 2017). Throughout Nagasaki Prefecture, the focus was on those areas with *Kirishitan* villages where Catholic churches were built, replacing the cultural tradition of the *Senpuku Kirishitan*. The *Kirishitan* villages where the living successors of the tradition have remained, on the other hand, were excluded based on the criteria for authenticity.

### **5.3 The dominance of tangible aspects**

The selection committee compared all Kirishitan villages based on authenticity criteria as a common denominator privileging the same value. According to ICOMOS, the value of sites and landscapes was that they tangibly demonstrated the intactness of the historical land layout since the period of ‘in hiding’. ICOMOS most highly evaluated the environment of those Kirishitan villages with continued historical land-use, topography, and land layout, demonstrating that the overall landscape of the village was maintained from the past (UNESCO Nomination File 2018). Ironically, the still evolving landscape, the living communities, were seen as spoiling its historicity. These villages were claimed as not authentic enough to be selected for nomination. The analysis of documents and interviews with local officials (author’s communication with the city official Mr. Ueno, July 2013) illustrates that despite Japan’s proclaimed high value of the intangible and living heritage (Qian and Siân 2021; Kalland 2002), in practice, the State Party selected ‘unchanged’, historical, tangible, and easy-to-manage sites to maximise their potential for inscription on the WHL (Delakorda Kawashima 2021). The focus on the maintenance of tangible property led to underestimating intangible resources based on practices of currently engaged landscapes. Consequently, for Hirado, the UNESCO protection system failed to utilise internal resources to sustain and revitalize the region.

The applied concepts of cultural landscape, authenticity, integrity, and the intangible not only differed in definition, but also changed over time. The analysis of secondary scholarly material showed that researchers continuously develop notions of the intangible. However, although officials on the ground include intangible elements, the intangible elements cannot be assessed based on fixed criteria because of the different economic, social, and cultural context of each area.

## **6. Conclusions**

The analysis in this paper showed the shortcomings of the World Heritage evaluation process, such as privileging tangible over intangible characteristics and failure to recognize cultural heritage protection criteria based on local cultural values. Details in evaluations of particular *Kirishitan* villages, Kasuga village in particular, illustrate that the cultural heritage protection authorities focused more on

tangible aspects. The applied criteria show that although intangible criteria were in place, officials found it difficult to implement them. The main outcome of the investigation is that intangible criteria should be made more accessible to implement by, for example, applying more nuanced criteria to individual sites.

Comparing the document analysis and fieldwork results also showed how these shortcomings affected living communities as potential guardians to maintain their environment as a World Heritage Site. Overall, the research revealed that in the nomination process of Christian heritage in Japan, the local voices of the communities and independent researchers remained unheard, despite various expert evaluations of the heritage. Looking at different angles of the heritage-making process allowed me to find the concerns and interests of various involved actors behind and beyond the published documents. To ensure that in the future, the people who will be most affected by the heritage-making process are not ignored, the correspondence process between heritage protection authorities should be made more transparent and accessible, especially in the cases where World Heritage criteria does not apply to a local situation.

\* The research approach to Christian heritage and *Kakure Kirishitan* in particular, through the lenses of multiple disciplines and methodologies, was inspired by the meetings and seminars of the Inter Faculty Education and Research Initiative (IFERI) at the universities of Tsukuba, Ljubljana, and Bonn. Thank you for many learning opportunities.

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**Maps**

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