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Looking for Pumpkin Pie's Analogs in the Indian Ocean Trading System: Applying the Creolization Model to the Swahili Coast

Cover Page Note

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INTRODUCTION

Both pride and pity have served to cripple the scholarship with which the transatlantic slave trade has been discussed. White supremacist pride in the ability to establish dominance and superiority over the African people—by now a largely politically incorrect emotion—has eclipsed the importance of the active cultural role played by Africa and Africans. Meanwhile, pity for the way Africans were treated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has served to victimize African people and deprive them of agency in academic discourse. Pride and pity, opposite in their motivations, have advanced a reigning school of thought regarding forced African immigration and culture formation. Known as the “acculturation” model, scholars believed until recently that Africans brought to the New World abandoned their traditions in favor of the dominant—and implicitly, better—Anglo-American customs and beliefs (Deetz 1996, 213).

The prejudice inherent in this approach has been recognized and criticized in recent years. The theory of acculturation has been widely abandoned in favor of “creolization,” a process whereby multiple cultures meet, mix and reformulate. The outcome in these circumstances is something entirely new. Deetz (1996, 213) defines creolization as “the interaction between two or more cultures to produce an integrated mix which is different from its antecedents.” Mouer (1999, 123) exemplifies the paradigm with the example of pumpkin pie, which contains the Native American component of pumpkin, the African ingredient of allspice, and an English pastry crust. Pumpkin pie thus illustrates how, in the Chesapeake, Africans, Native Americans, and the English settlers all contributed to an amalgamation of concepts that underscored and interwove with each other. They each in turn drew upon this amalgamation so that the result was not so much one coherent and dominant culture, but an intricate exchange system where boundaries were blurred.

The academic discourse surrounding culture formation on the Swahili coast has been undergoing a similar transformation. The Swahili coast is a narrow stretch of land extending from the coastline in the south of Somalia to the north of Mozambique. But while the geographic definition of “Swahili” is simple, a cultural definition is much more complex. Farmsteads dating to the fourth century have been found on the coast, indicating an established occupation from this early date (C. Kusimba, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* 1999, 69). Arab and Persian immigrants arrived in the ninth century, but long-distance trade routes with the interior of Africa, the Middle East, and India, had been established even before then (C. Kusimba, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* 1999, 69). More than tangible objects were being exchanged at this time; as in nineteenth century America, distinct cultures were contributing and borrowing ideas and concepts. The setup was ideal for creolization to occur.

Despite this, most of the writing on the Swahili Coast until now has been informed by an overt prejudice toward indigenous contributions to Swahili society (Oka 2008, 14, Horton and Middleton 2000, 2). All positive attributes of the unique Swahili culture were credited to the influence of Arabs and Persians, while it was believed that African peoples could not have been responsible for the complexity and structure of Swahili society (Fleisher 2003, 36). Writers like Madan in 1903, New in 1873, Steere in 1908, and Stigand in 1913 commended the Swahili for their energy and acumen, which they attributed to Semitic heritage or interaction (C. Kusimba, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* 1999, 27). Naturally, their less desirable traits were always blamed on their African blood (C. Kusimba, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* 1999, 27). The racism of those studying and describing the Swahili caused an extremely biased interpretation of the data, which then served to “scientifically” reinforce the stereotypes underpinning the racism permeating the field (Chami 1999, 238). This cycle existed for most of the twentieth century, creating the predominant theory that Arab colonists founded cities along the east African coast to capitalize on the region’s vast resources. In doing so, they were thought to have married with the local African women and to have spread Arab culture throughout the coast (New 1971, 56). All achievements of Swahili society were thus ascribed to the Semitic newcomers, as evidenced by Chittick’s statement: “We conclude that the impetus to the creation of this town [Manda] was due to the settling of immigrants who came from the Arabian/Persian Gulf.” (1984, 217). This model, termed the External Origins Theory by Kusimba (1999, 30), has clear parallels to the acculturation model for the New World.

Similarly, the now-widely-supported Internal Origins Theory (or rather, category of theories) is analogical to the creolization model. Rather than simply crediting Arab men with the entirety of Swahili culture, more recent research has revealed much more ancient origins for the Swahili cities, prompting theories regarding internal culture processes predating Arab immigration that could better explain how Swahili society developed its identity (Fleisher 2003, 36). In addition, the Indian Ocean trade system linked more than just Arabs and Africans. It involved polities as far-reaching as Jenne Jenno, the Roman Empire, Aksum, Parthia, Nabatene, the Kushan empire, the Satavahana Empire, the Gupta empire, the Chola empire, Funan, and the Han empire (Oka 2008, 8). Furthermore, transfers of cultural knowledge were not unidirectional; as early as the fourth millennium B.C.E., millets domesticated in East Africa became mainstays in the South Asian diet while cultivation of Southeast Asian bananas became widespread in East Africa (Oka 2008, 8). Like the people living in the Chesapeake area during the seventeenth century, the people involved in the Indian Ocean trading system had a huge amount of cultural interaction, fusion, and generation. Applying the creolization model to this system as it has been utilized

by historical archaeologists studying the Chesapeake will uncover evidence for where the relations between these groups of people have created something new. By identifying and evaluating possible Indian Ocean analogs for Mouer's concept of the pumpkin pie, the hope is that a more complete view of the nature of Swahili culture will be revealed in the process.

CERAMICS

Nowhere is the cultural exchange element of the Indian Ocean trade relationships more visible than in the area of ceramics. Within the Indian Ocean trading system, the Chinese dominated this craft. Chinese blue-and-white porcelain was highly desired, and at least on the East African coast, was frequently given as a lavish gift and rarely used for serving. In fact, the Chinese blue-and-white ware was in such demand that Muslim potters tried to imitate their motifs in order to break into the East African ceramic importation market (C. Kusimba 1999, 131, Oka 2008, 173-174, Chittick 1984, 77). Chinese Yueh wares and celadons had, after all, been copied successfully from the 11th century C.E. by Egyptian and Thai potters (Oka 2008, 214).

Yet as trade expanded, and imitative attempts multiplied, there was a diversification of once-imitative styles (C. Kusimba 1999, 127, Oka 2008, 215). Given more options to choose from, the East African taste became increasingly selective, and both Ottoman and Safavid potters capitalized on this opportunity, eventually producing unique styles of blue-and-white ware which became popular throughout the Indian Ocean (Oka 2008, 215).

But the people residing on the Swahili coast were not merely passive agents in the creation of these ceramic styles distinguishable from any identifiable precedent. They modified what they imported, applying asphalt, for example, to unglazed Islamic pottery in the same way that they treated their own local pottery to render it waterproof (Chittick 1984, 83). Yet the creolization model calls for the creation of something new, more like what the Ottoman and Safavid potters did with cobalt underglaze and white stoneware. Potters on the Swahili coast generated new ceramic forms as well. Chittick (1984, 129, 132) describes two vessel types found at Manda made from the local ceramic fabric, as well as a kind of square-shaped incense burner with legs resembling a form from a much earlier date in the Middle East. Additionally, the African ceramics were successful beyond the local level. Earthenware vessels from the coast, probably for containing water, have been found at sites near the Persian Gulf dating from the 9th to the 10th century C.E. (Horton and Middleton 2000, 78).

At the level of the entire Indian Ocean, people of various cultures were exchanging not only tangible objects, but techniques and ideas as well. Then, beyond simply incorporating these new concepts into those of their own culture, they integrated the two, creating new objects, techniques, and ideas and sent them

back through the trade routes. These cultural inventions and reverberations are precisely the processes involved in producing outcomes like Mouer's representation of pumpkin pie as involving indispensable ingredients from African, Native American, and settler societies. In fact, any one of these amalgamated, generative ceramic forms could perhaps be viewed as an analog to his example of pumpkin pie. Additional comparable examples exist in other realms, such as that of metallurgy in the Indian Ocean.

METALLURGY

Iron-processing sites in Eastern and Southern Africa have typically been associated with the arrival of the Bantu-speaking people during the Bantu migration from 1000 B.C.E. to 500 C.E. (C. Kusimba, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* 1999, 13). Indeed, both al-Masud writing in the 10th century and a-Mas'udi in the 12th attested to the esteem in which East Africans held iron, saying that women viewed it as equal in value for ornamentation as gold or silver (C. Kusimba 1999, 102, C. Kusimba 1993, 279, Freeman-Grenville 1962, 16). It is integral to many agricultural tools necessary for farming African cultivars (C. Kusimba 1999, 101). Even today, the production of iron continues to be a ritual and sacred process (C. Kusimba 1999, 102, C. Kusimba 1993).

During the 11th and 12th centuries, Indian merchants dealing on the Swahili coast praised the East African iron, claiming it was better than the Indian product (Kusimba and Killick 2003, 114, C. Kusimba 1993, 279, C. Kusimba 1999, 102). Both Arabs and Indians imported the high-quality East African bloom (Kusimba and Killick 2003, 114, C. Kusimba 1999, 102, C. Kusimba 1993, 279). They treated it to create crucible steel, a process developed in the Near East in the 7th century whereby heat-resistant clay cups are filled with iron and heated so the iron melts and carbon becomes evenly distributed throughout it (Kusimba and Killick 2003, 114). The Swahili coast thus played an important role in the metallurgy of the Indian Ocean, providing the raw product for the technology known by both Indian and Arab people.

Yet the interaction extends beyond the simple economics of supply and demand. According to the creolization model, the involved peoples both contribute to and gain from the new culture created by their dealings. Perhaps this is typified by the fact that Swahili people imported the crucible steel (in the form of daggers and swords) for which they had supplied the bloom (C. Kusimba 1999, 106). Yet Kusimba (1999, 106) goes a step further, wondering if coastal people were not making crucible steel themselves. He points out that they used the expensive commodity for objects as mundane as nails (C. Kusimba 1999, 106). The abundant fuel, water, and rich iron ore from ilmenite sands would have encouraged the production of crucible steel in this region (C. Kusimba 1999,

279). In fact, some of the oldest crucible steel in the world was found at Galu, a site on the Kenyan coast (C. Kusimba 1999, 114). Manda, another site on the Swahili coast, has yielded actual crucibles, although they were most likely for the smelting of copper rather than iron (Chittick 1984, 137, 212, Robertshaw 2003).

Other metallurgical techniques were widespread in their use. Pressure welding technology, for example, a procedure documented on the coast, was used also by the Luba people in Zaire and a similar technique was reported at the site Al Mina in Turkey (C. Kusimba 1993, 276). The way that not only products, but processes, were transferred overseas represents the type of cultural production to which the creolization paradigm applies. People from disparate backgrounds found something useful or familiar in each other's foreign culture and integrated the new knowledge into their own quotidian lives. Crucible steel and pressure welding technology are both potential examples of this type of integration, like pumpkin pie. However, a more visible example can be seen in the sphere of religion, and the particular form of Islam found on the Swahili coast.

RELIGION

Scholars discussing Islam in Africa stress its strong African nature (Insoll 2003, Horton and Middleton 2000, C. Kusimba 1999). Horton and Middleton (2000, 48) even call African Islam one of the "indigenous achievements of coastal civilization." The fact that they term it an "indigenous" achievement is telling; it reflects just how much of the religion practiced even today on the coast has its foundations in traditional African religion.

This is visible in the way that traditionally sacred space was reappropriated for Islamic purposes as the religion became more widespread along the coast. For example, in Somalia, the tomb of the Muslim saint Sharif Yusuf al-Kawneyn was constructed next to a hill which, according to oral tradition, contained the remains of a non-Muslim magician-chief (Insoll 2003, 27). Similar examples of integrating Islam into existing concepts of sanctification occur elsewhere in Africa, as in Sierra Leone, where Temne village mosques are built in sacred groves (Insoll 2003, 27).

Other extant structures in Swahili society also invited the incorporation of Islamic elements. Existing social hierarchies, for example, benefited from the introduction of the Qur'an, which may have initially seemed a source of mystical power (Insoll 2003, 33). The unreadable script would have eventually been taught to a few—the local rulers and educated elite, or the *waungwana*—but kept from the masses, reinforcing the status and power of the leaders of the community (New 1971, 57, Insoll 2003, 33). This aspect of Islam underpinned preexisting structures, resulting in the easy acceptance of at least this piece of the religion.

In fact, even the concept of “Allah” meshed easily with traditional beliefs. Many African religions at the time of the widespread adoption of Islam had some kind of high god, so giving it the name “Allah” didn’t represent a complete compromise of their religious integrity—it was simply a renaming of something already familiar (Insoll 2003, 24-25). In fact, Horton capitalizes on this fact in creating a model for conversion to Islam. In his explanation, many African traditional religions make use of a two-tiered system of deities, where lesser spirits affect events and processes in the microcosmic local environment while the supreme being rules over the macrocosmic global environment. As long-distance trade increased in importance, Horton maintains, the macrocosm became more critical than the microcosm, and people began to turn to the supreme being more and more—allowing for its elaboration into the Islamic supreme being Allah (Insoll 2003, 31). While this model is far too general to apply to a system as complex and diverse as the entire Swahili coast, the idea that people were making the choice to turn to something familiar rather than abandon some “obsolete” traditional religion is important, and a significant implication of the creolization model.

In addition, Horton’s emphasis on the importance of trade was anything but misplaced. Not only did trade encourage the spread of Islam, but the spread of Islam in turn stabilized trade relationships (Insoll 2003, 32, Oka 2008, 35). Pious Muslim scholars from the Arab world often accompanied traders, and by 1100 C.E., Islam was the majority religion among the Swahili (Insoll 2003, 32, 172).

Yet the Swahili certainly didn’t (and still don’t) practice Islam in perfect imitation of what was taught to them by travelling Muslim holy men. They continued their sacrifice, especially of goats, a holdover of many religions practiced before 1100 C.E. (Insoll 2003, 27, Caplan 1975, 118). The Swahili persisted in visiting the dead and leaving offerings at graves—a practice proscribed by orthodox Islam (Insoll 2003, 179, C. Kusimba 1999, 153). Burials were, in fact, often found near mosques but with the interred in an ostensibly non-Muslim position, likely representing the burials of those who were Muslims in life, but who wished to be laid to rest in a manner which would please their ancestors (Horton and Middleton 2000, 71). Even the residents of Kilwa, praised by the Arab visitor Ibn Battuta for their devoutness and piety, refused to abandon traditional practices such as scarification (Insoll 2003, 183-184, Freeman-Grenville 1962, 31).

Still, perhaps the most pointed example of integration of disparate spiritual concepts is the belief in spirits, both good and evil, and especially the spirit cults available to Muslim women on the Swahili coast. Among the evil spirits, some have their roots in the Arab world, as Horton and Middleton point out in distinguishing between the *mizimu* and the *majini* spirits—the former being more

African and tied to ancestor worship, with the latter being more Arab (2000, 191). Some *majini* even know Arabic and pray to Allah (Horton and Middleton 2000, 191). Meanwhile, Caplan (1975, 101) describes the rituals surrounding sea spirits, highlighting features in common with orthodox Islamic rituals, such as the use of incense, rose-water, and the Arabic language—as well as the Qur'an.

Nevertheless, although even orthodox Islam does allow for the existence of various types of spirits, claims to possession by spirits are frowned upon by many pious Muslims (Caplan 1975, 100-101). For a great number of Muslim women on the Swahili coast, on the other hand, spirit cults—to which women possessed by the same spirit are initiated—represent an enrichment to former Islam (rather than a replacement) which is permitted or even encouraged by Allah (Horton and Middleton 2000, 189). Initially, this seems difficult to imagine; initiation ceremonies involve not only traditional practices of ritualistic seclusion, but even sometimes the drinking of blood, which is contrary to Islamic dietary laws (Insoll 2003, 180, Caplan 1975, 101, 118). However, this is where the model of creolization becomes especially elucidatory. Rather than abandoning or accepting either religious practice to the exclusion of the other, the Swahili recombined the most practical and meaningful elements of both the traditional religion and the introduced Islam in order to establish a system of meanings most useful to their diverse world. The result is something distinguishable from either original source, which follows the rules of both and neither simultaneously.

COSTUME AND COSMETICS

In addition to their religious practices, Islam also influenced the way coastal Africans conceived of appearance. Women, on the coast especially, had always valued their appearance, as evidenced by the iron, gold, and silver jewelry they had worn even before al-Masud's visit in the 10th century (C. Kusimba 1999, 102, C. Kusimba 1993, 9). Yet women's focus on body care intensified as Islamic law made clear the responsibility their husbands had to maintain them (Caplan 1975, 17). In the archaeological record, the appearance of bronze mirrors and rock crystal beads coincides with a proliferation and the widespread adoption of Islam (C. Kusimba 1999, 130). Also at this time, women began using kohl sticks, which initially were an imported product, but which several sites began producing locally (Chittick 1984, 203, C. Kusimba 1993, 199).

More important, however, than the tangible props of beautification, is the way in which the ideal manifested itself, and was incorporated into the integrative practices on the coast. Specifically, Charles New, writing in the 1870's, documents women who, when dissatisfied with the clothing and cosmetics available to them, made use of their place in spirit cults to obtain desired objects (1971, 69). Meanwhile, Caplan (1975, 31) describes situations at Mafia where

women divorced their husbands for failure to maintain them adequately. The preexisting circumstance on the coast, where ornamentation had always had a place for women, was underscored and elaborated by the introduction of Islamic law and development of spirit cults.

Changes in appearance weren't relegated only to women. Elite men wore specific attire to the Friday mosque—specifically a long white robe, a turban, a sword and dagger, and sandals constructed from animal hide (C. Kusimba 1999, 147, New 1971, 69). The sword and dagger are particularly interesting, as men residing in most rural areas outside of the Swahili urban centers routinely carry these things, albeit for defense and hunting (C. Kusimba 1999, 196). In Islamic culture, the weapons take on the characteristic of being a status marker (C. Kusimba 1993, 195-196). Still, the wealthiest *waungwana* chose to haft their swords and daggers in ivory handles, and craft scabbards from leopard or cheetah skin (C. Kusimba 1993, 195-196). While these objects took on a foreign, Islamic character in the way they became status markers, this transition was reflected in a very indigenous way, using locally found materials. Rather than importing daggers from abroad to match the foreign character of the elite Friday mosque costume, the Swahili created their own variety to suit the dagger's changing function. In a less explicit, but still valid way, these daggers are somewhat like the pumpkin pie in the way they exemplify creolization. In the creolization process, something integral to all interacting cultures, but important for different reasons, is reinvented to match these various, newly combined, purposes.

In fact, the use of ivory in these daggers is an especially good example of creolization. Although ivory was imported from the East African coast, and was therefore a local material, it has an extremely unique character when its role in the entire Indian Ocean trading system is considered. Ivory was valued in India for the handles of weapons and the scabbards of swords, as well as for bracelets and bangles in Hindu weddings (Freeman-Grenville 1962, 16, Freeman-Grenville 1959, 7). Meanwhile, as far away as China, kings and military officials rode in ivory palanquins (Freeman-Grenville 1962, 16). They even burnt ivory at altars in offering (Freeman-Grenville 1962, 16). This global use of ivory in such noteworthy settings emphasizes the Swahili dagger's status as a creolization symbol. By no accident, elite Swahili men chose to use for their handles a material culturally important to the majority of peoples with whom they were interacting. In the model of creolization, it is these shared points of importance which give rise to new innovations, exemplified in the creation of the dagger used by *waungwana*.

ARCHITECTURE

In the same way that religion on the Swahili coast was created from elements chosen from disparate areas and traditions, so too were the buildings in which Islam was centered. Mosques on the Swahili coast almost without exception lack minarets and instead follow the structure of timber buildings present on the coast about 1000 years ago (Horton and Middleton 2000, 71). As Islam became the majority religion on the coast, a local Swahili mosque style developed instead, involving a rectangular prayer hall and either an even number of columns with a central aisle allowing for a view of the *mihrab*, or an odd number of rows and no central aisle (Insoll 2003, 172). Some mosques from this time period even seem to be oriented in a different way, which some have interpreted as confusion over the proper orientation in which a mosque should be built, but which certainly could be seen as experimentation with which elements of Islamic architecture to adopt and adapt (Insoll 2003, 164).

Domestic architecture was also involved in this process. The well-known Swahili stone house represents the integration of African floor plans and Islamic architectural elements (Oka 2008, 51, C. Kusimba 1999, 146). The Palace at Dunga, for example, a structure built in a plainly Arab style, features an African plan, evident especially in its central audience chamber with a platform at one end for the royal chair (Horton and Middleton 2000, 170). This makes sense when it is considered that Swahili kings and the structure of monarchical rule were fundamentally African, despite their employment of Islamic court rituals and procedures (Horton and Middleton 2000, 158).

The results of excavations at Shanga provide perhaps even more convincing evidence for the way stone houses represent a conjunction of both traditional African and foreign-style construction. Houses were rebuilt in the same plan, from the timber dwellings built around 1050 C.E., to the stone and lime versions erected in 1325 C.E. (Horton and Middleton 2000, 119, C. Kusimba 1993, 68, Horton 1988, 300). This transition to permanence conveyed to other citizens that the inhabitants were one of the original owners of the land (C. Kusimba 1999, 146). It showed that those who built it had lived there so long that they had a natural claim to the land and to elite status.

Yet as the buildings were rendered into more long-lasting materials, they incorporated architectural elements from South India and the Persian Gulf, showing the other residents of the town that not only had they, the *waungwana* resided in the place long enough to build a stone house, but that they had access to enigmatic foreign cultural knowledge (C. Kusimba 1993, 16, 146). And not only did they have access to this knowledge, but they knew how to apply it to the Coastal setting—making them masters of both the ancient local culture, and the new foreign culture. This ability to combine the familiar with the introduced was

the ideal, reflecting the way in which creolization in this case was not a passive progression, but was instead actively driven by human beings reacting to and producing their social environment.

Additionally, if the innovative nature of Swahili society has not been stressed enough, and instead the cultural creation occurring seems more like a process of adaption, a brief discussion of findings from Manda may remedy this. Walls of buildings at this site were built from both bricks and small basalt boulders which were both used as ballast in ships sailing to the East African coast (Chittick 1984, 15, 34). Certainly, ballast is something “brought” by traders from afar to the Swahili coast—but not for the purpose of building. This represents something very different, an instance of the Swahili making use of the trade situation itself to invent ways of structuring their lives. They were not simply accepting the new knowledge brought by foreign merchants to their coast; the same problem-solving and creation-oriented attitude reflected in their use of ballast as building material must have influenced their decisions about what other cultural markers would be useful, and in what ways, to the coast.

CONCLUSIONS

The people on the Swahili coast during the height of Indian Ocean trade, from about the 10th to the 12th centuries C.E. encountered a wide variety of other cultures and peoples. With these people, they engaged in trade relationships where a great deal of exchange occurred. The trading system of the Indian Ocean is certainly easily distinguishable in terms of its structure from the colonization situation in the seventeenth century Chesapeake, but the extreme degree of cultural interaction is common to both settings. For this reason, it is appropriate to apply the model of creolization, typically used by historical archaeologists to analyze the New World, to the Indian Ocean trading system in order to understand Swahili culture better.

In doing so, it is possible to pinpoint Swahili analogs to examples used to illustrate creolization in America, such as Mauer’s pumpkin pie, which combines ingredients familiar to Native American, African, and European culture in order to produce something new. The ceramics being traded during this era exhibit evidence of integration of disparate cultural elements, as does the practice of metallurgy, dependent on the interaction of these people for its success. The unique brand of Islam followed—and formed—by the Swahili people reflects a definite process of reformulation as well. The clothing men and women on the coast wear, as well as the houses they build, are no exceptions, as even these cultural markers represent significant recombination of elements both foreign and indigenous based on their practicality and meaning to the people entangled in the Indian Ocean trading system.

Applying the creolization model to the Swahili coast has further implications than simply saying that an ivory-hafted dagger is a lot like pumpkin pie. The concept of creolization has important implications for understanding power relationships. Rather than letting pride in either a purely Muslim heritage or an entirely African one allow discussions to veer toward questions like, "Who contributed more?" this paradigm situates Swahili culture in the broader context in which it was fully ingrained for a long period of time. It gives the Swahili people agency in creating the culture visible on the coast today, and demonstrates the logic and meaning of their choices. Moreover, it helps to explain why Swahili culture is still distinguishable from any identifiably African or Arab culture, by crediting them with having created something innovative and sensical given the cultural tools surrounding them. Beyond composing an academically interesting exercise of finding analogs to Muer's representation of pumpkin pie, this kind of application of creolization could thus help in remedying the politically charged alienation which Swahili people have suffered in the academic discourse.

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