
Ichoka Mythic-Folkism Theory as Revival Strategy for Live Theatre: A Study of Kanidram

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Abstract: *The non-application of apposite theoretical frameworks by practitioners impacts on the outcome of stage productions, and also hinders professionalism in the creative enterprise for the revival and sustenance of live theatre practice in Nigeria. With the ascendancy of postmodernism in contemporary theatre practice, there is a need to support stage productions with suitable theoretical bases. The study evaluated the application of Canice Nwosu's Ichoka Mythic Folkism Afro-postmodern theory in the stage production of Kanidram done at the Commassie Art Theatre, Imo State University Owerri. The objective of the study was to ascertain how the director reflected the production techniques of the theory in the theatrical process. The finding revealed that Kanidram reflected essentially the major production techniques provided in the theory which impacted positively on the quality of the outcome. Finally, the study recommended that practitioners both at the academic and professional levels should adopt Afro-postmodern theories in the production process to ensure quality performances that can lead to the revival of the Nigerian theatre practice.*

Keywords: *Ichoka Mythic Folkism, Theory, Live Theatre, Kanidram.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Theory outlines the basic principles that define the outlook of different fields of human knowledge. It is usually influenced by practice and observable realities in society. It can also pre-empt or inspire practice. The validity of every theory is hinged on empirical testing that either proves or disproves an assumption, hypothesis, or concept. In theatre practice, theory provides the guidelines that govern artistic creation, production, and evaluation of stage performances. Though practice predates theory in the history of theatre, Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz argue strongly that theory complements practice (181) and undoubtedly has remained an integral part of the artistic process.



Beginning with the classical to the modern theatre, theories, either dramatic or performance-oriented, have always shaped the practice of theatre, and according to Canice Nwosu, also significantly affected “the quality of theatre practice as evident during the classical, the celebrated 17th and 18th Century France theatres and even the beginning of modern African theatre” (36). Incidentally, some of the classical and modern theories (both in the West and Africa) transcend epochs and boundaries because of their relevance in offering service to theatre practitioners across the globe. One example is Aristotle’s Poetics, a classical theory that provides the basic tenets for the evaluation of good drama in general, and tragedy in particular, even though most of his positions have been contested and re-theorised by critics and theorists to suit the realities of theatre practitioners in different regions and epochs. Arthur Miller’s Tragedy of the Common Man and Wole Soyinka’s The Fourth Stage are quintessential inquiries and re-evaluations of Aristotle’s grand position on tragedy. Fundamentally, the essence of evaluating a dramatic theory is to test its adequacy so that theatre practitioners will not, “...run the risk of losing intellectual rigueur, fall into the trap of complacent stagnation and perpetuated outdated modes of thinking...that no longer corresponds to contemporary social realities...” (Taylor 89). In other words, the rejection and or modification of certain theoretical positions enable theorists to search for suitable theoretical frameworks that can aid practitioners to respond to contemporary social realities in the practice of theatre, and also guarantee quality productions for the sustenance of theatre practice across regions.

Postmodernism offers theatre practitioners the opportunity to search for alternative theoretical frameworks that support creativity, reflect the postmodern reality, and meet the creative demands of the twenty-first century theatre practice. Incidentally, postmodern theatre unlike modernist theatre is more performance-oriented than textual- a trademark of modernist theatre tradition. Ontologically, Clement Ajidahun states that “postmodernism is generally conceived as a protest and reaction to classicism and modernism” (188), especially against Western modernist ideologies, grand theories, and techniques that are no longer suitable for the practice of theatre in the postmodern era. In Africa, the emergence of postmodernism began when “the African developed the attitude of questioning and rejecting monoculturalism” (Nwosu 89). Malesela Lamola adds that this inquisitiveness and rejection of Western episteme led to the development of a “theoretical attitude that is aimed at subverting and reworking the epistemological system that feeds colonial mentality in Africa” (114). Incidentally, the modern African theatre is a brainchild of colonial mentality that disrupted the primordial African theatre tradition that was communal, total and original in form and content. Modern African theatre introduced a personalised theatre that favoured the Western literary tradition. This inadvertently pinned down creativity and left stage directors and producers at the dictate of play scripts written by both Western and African playwrights. African postmodernists reject the absolutism of play scripts as a major determinant of stage production, though not outright, and also call for the return to tradition as the conditioner of the new. Hence, African postmodern theorists like Nwosu and Lamola believe that the creative techniques of postmodernism generally provide the necessary alternative and valid framework that can lead to the revival of African episteme and theatre practice to enhance development, creativity, and also “protect practitioners economically and otherwise” (Nwosu 170) in a globally competitive entertainment market. Unfortunately, the African theatre today is still heavily influenced by modernist theories that fail to advance the course of stage practice in the continent.



Consequently, the non-application of relevant postmodern theory necessary in the theatrical process in the postmodern period has remained part of the problems impeding the revival of theatre practice in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular. The implication of neglecting the application of postmodern theories by theatre practitioners in the creative process unfortunately results in poor quality performances and substandard theatre productions that fail to attract the sophisticated postmodern audience to the theatre. This without doubt, endangers the revival attempts by theatre practitioners (academic and professional) to redeem the live theatre practice from total collapse, especially in a period where modern technologies and the new media have taken over the creative space, offering more convenient entertainment that appeal to both the creative and aesthetic needs of the contemporary audience. The implication of the steady decline of live theatre is that the theatre has become less economically viable for practitioners and potential investors. The search for adequate theories to guide stage performances has enabled most African theorists to conceive the creative tenets of postmodernism as a suitable alternative in theorising for contemporary Nigerian theatre. Canice Nwosu's *Ichoka Mythic Folkism* falls under the category of African postmodern theory formulated to drive the postmodern theatre in Africa, boost the performance aesthetics of theatre to meet contemporary reality and engender a strategy for the revival of live theatre practice in Nigeria.

Ichoka Mythic-Folkism Theory in the Service of Nigerian Theatre

Ichoka Mythic-Folkism was propounded by Canice Nwosu in 2010 as part of his doctoral thesis for the theorisation of the nation and national theatre development. Nwosu in his seminal book, *Postmodernism and Paradigm Shift in Theory and Practice of Theatre* experimented and formalised the potency of *Ichoka Mythic Folkism* for the revival of the declined African theatre, through the analyses of some modern African plays and the emergent Beggars' and Pulpitic Theatres. He asserts his motivation and purpose for developing this theory on the basis that:

The Mythic-Folkism theatre sprang from my quest to theorise for the nation and national development at a time when war, terrorism, destitution, and religious fanaticism are ravaging the African continent, especially Nigeria. I offer to today's theatre practitioners, the African postmodern fragmentation, pastiche, unity in diversity, and meta-narrative performative techniques as metaphors and imagery of peace; a peace derived from *Ichoka* receptivity, creativity, justice, and recognition of otherness in the other. (103)

Like every postmodern theory, *Ichoka Mythic-Folkism* is a performance-oriented theory that evolved as a guide for theatre practitioners to write and produce African postmodern plays for the contemporary theatre audience. The theory is intended to "enable the African postmodern playwright to experiment with theory; see the staging of his plays in his mind's eye, so that he foresees the staging, acting difficulties and makeup of audience as critical variables that impact on his creative impulse" (Nwosu 95). The inelasticity and non-durability of modern theories to advance the growth of African theatre practice in a fast-changing world led to the gradual and embarrassing downward steep of African theatre. As such, Nwosu's theoretical enquiry is fuelled by the failure of these monocultural African modern theories to provide elastic canons and principles that are unswerving in providing continuous service to the nation's theatre practice, especially in the contemporary era.



Nwosu's ideal theatre is that which is relevant in providing service to the people in the face of challenging realities of the present age and further engenders development of the nation through the articulation of viable conventions and techniques that will inject vibrancy in theatre practice, as well as ensure the sustenance of the nation's theatre. Therefore, the core of Ichoka Mythic Folkism is hinged on three aesthetic principles: creative whimsicality, regeneration, and justice. According to Nwosu, the aim of developing Ichoka Mythic Folkism is to produce: Aesthetic principles capable of inducing globalised justice crusades among playwrights accommodate the quality and kind of drama that modernism failed to accommodate, and cash in on their provisions to foster a pan-African but multicultural consciousness for the fast-developing African globalism. (123)

Colonialism which is an aspect of Western modernism robbed Africa of her prestige in virtually all aspects of her identity through the imposition of Eurocentric conventions. This consequently marginalised African theatre and creativity and radically severed it from the global centre through theories that could not address the needs of the people. However, Ichoka-Mythic Folkism provides the theoretical base for African theatre to thrive and contribute to the global centre through the adoption of multicultural approaches that will inspire her creativity, and in turn, engender global reception. The theory, therefore, provides the guideline for the creation of pan-African plays/productions that promote African identity in the global competitive market. But unlike Western postmodern theories, Ichoka Mythic Folkism is an all-inclusive theory geared towards the exploration of the various production techniques of postmodernism and fundamentally calls for the "recuperation and valuable continuance of traditional African theatre culture in a manner that will push the theatre to a globally acceptable standard" (Nwosu 156). By so doing, it aspires toward the standardisation of theatre practice by embodying the necessary vestiges that drive contemporary theatre. To achieve quality and standard in its operational tenets, the theory emphasises cognisance and acceptance of "the little" aesthetic appreciation of the "other" and "contrast". It debunks foundationalism but glorifies originality and creativity" (Nwosu 159). Generally, the theoretical stance of African postmodernism is an eventual return to African traditional theatre. Traditional African theatre relies on people's religious and communal activities to form a viable and sustainable theatre practice. The traditional theatre is dominated by oral tradition and further flourished through the use of the people's myth and folklore as creative tools for dramatic and other theatrical actions. Ichoka Mythic-Folkism is influenced by these aspects of African tradition and thus Nwosu states that: Mythic Folkism theatre is begotten by the union of mythos and folk. It is a theatre of economic resuscitations, religious and socio-political restructuring presented in folkloric but co-performed story-teller-like theatrical technique where the actor uses rendition to engage the audience in rhetorical questioning and protest, for empathised judgement. (136)

However, Nwosu is not in denial of the fact that Ichoka Mythic Folkism is also prefigured "from an overview of modern African critical theories and plays and how indigenous developments articulate with Western theories..." (182). In fact, two critical modern African theories influenced Nwosu's Ichoka Mythic Folkism theory. First is Michael Echeruo's Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual which emphasises the secularisation of religious rituals and myth of the Igbo people. Second is Sam Ukala's Folkism theory which explores the aesthetic canon of African folkloric theatre in the writing and production of African plays. What these



early theories lack, Nwosu's Ichoka Mythic-Folkism provides through the synthesis of both. Therefore, Nwosu underscores that the proposition of Ichoka Mythic Folkism is "intended to harness the lack in the "old" and articulate the requirements of the "new" to provide the requisite theoretical base that will ensure the revival of the declining live theatre in Africa" (136).

Nwosu provides a clue on the outlook of an African postmodern play/ production if the practitioner decides to appropriate this theory in his/her productions. He notes that "the African postmodern theatre practitioner must combine the mythic creative collectivity of the Igbo gods with the receptivity and reflectivity of Ichoka folklore to create the mythic play" (155). Ichoka Mythic-Folkism is based on the mythological story of the multicoloured bird Ichoka and her alliance with the Igbo deities of Amadioha (god of justice), Ikenga (god of creativity), and Ala (earth god) in reviving the deplorable cosmic conditions of draught, injustice and, degeneration that threatened the existential unity of the human race. The survival instincts of the birds in contributing their feathers to enable Ichoka to access Amadioha, Amadioha's willingness to descend from the sky and salvage the situation of draught that troubled the cosmos, and Ikenga's ability to partner with Ala (earth goddess) to help Amadioha regenerate his dismembered body parts in the course of meting out justice, define the methodological approaches of Ichoka Mythic-Folkism theory, which Nwosu identifies to have a socio-historical placement, ideational in superstructure with a communalised aesthetic inheritance and a diversified functional attribute (164). Chinyere Okeke in her critique of Ichoka Mythic Folkism affirms that the receptivity of the Ichoka Bird is "motivated by the need to evolve a multicultural theatre which will get a bit from the West, East, and Africa" (7).

Every theory has techniques and conventions that govern its service and application. To this end, Ichoka Mythic-Folkism offers an array of performative techniques that can guide a theatre practitioner, including playwrights, directors, actors, and critics to structure, produce and analyse play productions. Nwosu outlines the following Ichoka Mythic Folkism performative techniques for the creation and critique of African postmodern plays:

- Non-compartmentalisation of Occidental, Oriental, and Afro-drama and theatre conventions
- Unification of classical, popular, and folkloric theatre aesthetics
- Use of metaphoric, ironical, mythopoetic, and vernacular languages
- Combination of conservatism and experimental styles
- Acceptance of "formism" and "free formism"
- Application of causal and fragmented plots
- Adoption of total theatre's processional, multiple presentations, and spontaneity
- Revival of myth, carnivalesque, folkloric, and minstrel procession and mobility
- Use of sporadic action and pastiche techniques
- Utilisation of diffused concept of African Heroism
- Use of chaotic formations and contrast variables
- Aspiration towards creativity and subordination of conventional authenticity
- Emphasis on dualities and vicissitudes of life.

While Ichoka Mythic-Folkism is intense in its originality, it fails to address the role of technology which is part and parcel of the postmodern theatre and the main reference point in Lyotard's theorisation of human conditions in the age of postmodernity. However, these



performative techniques of Ichoka Mythic-Folkism as prescribed by Nwosu, obviously address the major shortfalls of modern theories that failed to provide the needed creative force to drive the African theatre practice. It further offers the African theatre practitioner the freedom to overcome the rigidity and stifling modern conventions that adversely affect the quality of theatre productions witnessed in recent times.

Ultimately, Ichoka Mythic-Folksim becomes a barometer for assessing the quality of productions that are being offered to the theatre audience by the artist. The goal of the theatre practitioner who adopts this theory in his/her production is to ensure the quality of the performance that is based on creativity, professionalism, and in-depth reflection of the worldview and social realities of the artist and the audience. In doing so, quality and standardisation are achieved.

Central to Ichoka Mythic Folkism theory is the issue of mobility which is on two frontiers. Firstly, an operational and functional postmodern theatre is mobile and can transit boundaries to close the gulf created by the rigidity of modernism. Hence, the mobility of Ichoka Mythic Folkism aims at taking the performance to the people. Alvin Kheng in his study on postmodern academic theatre in Asia notes that “to avoid a total collapse of composing works that exhibit postmodernist characteristics from other cultures, it then becomes necessary to get down from the ivory tower of academia and interact more with the community” (151). By implication, any theatre that seeks to remain sedentary and in a confined space loses its relevance if it fails to interact and engage with the outside community. Secondly, Nwosu sees mobility to be a revival strategy that is hinged on carnivalesque and minstrel mobility blended with performative techniques of Pulpitic and ‘Beggars’ theatre (166). The blend of these performance techniques creates an aesthetic difference that is capable of ensuring economic growth and profit optimisation for the practitioner.

Ichoka Mythic-Folkism in the Stage Performance of Kanidram

Kanidram is an experimental stage production that was performed by the 200 Level students of the Department of Theatre Arts, Imo State University, on the 21st of May, 2021, at the Commassie Arts Theatre. It was directed by Anthony Ebiriukwu as an experimentation of the Ichoka Mythic-Folkism Afro-Postmodern theoretical paradigm proposed by Canice Nwosu. The production aspired toward a total theatre approach that assembles drama, dance, pageantry, poetry drama, and entrepreneurship into an ensemble. The performance showcases a high sense of creativity and also depicts the subordination of conventional authenticity that characterise modern African theatre. The directorial concept is hinged on showing the effect of mobility through a multiple presentational performance style that allows various actions to happen on stage at the same time. The Afro-postmodern theatre thrives on mobility for the resuscitation and sustenance of live theatre performances in Nigeria. The director thus attempted to show how the contemporary African postmodern stage can break the boundary of restrictions imposed on it by Western modernism to create new ways of experiencing the theatre. Hence the experimentation of different independent performances in a carnivalesque and minstrel blend on stage is tied together using stage lighting as a connecting device to harmonise them into an ensemble.



Overall, Kanidram dramatises various postmodern themes using different vignettes fragmented to emphasise the dualities and vicissitudes of life. Issues represented are germane contemporary global problems like sexual abuse, murder, suicide, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQIA), trans-border trade, religious hypocrisy, issues of technology and advanced fee fraud, epidemic/diseases, and cultural integration in diversity. These representations reflect discourses and practices that typify the global postmodern condition. The major dramatic persona in each narrative exemplifies the idea of a diffused African heroism where each hero is a product of late capitalist institution(s) that fail to protect the interest of the marginal forces. Hence, their struggles, suffering, pain, resistance to adversities at some point, and acceptance of the dualities and vicissitudes of life on the other hand, enable them to interrogate the issue of justice, exclusion, and oppression of economically disadvantaged majority in society.

Structurally, Kanidram is a synthesis of independent narratives and actions happening at intervals. The action begins with two men playing the game of draught beside Madam Hoha's bar. The sequence changes to the entrance of Alija cultural dance performers performing to the rhythm of the percussive instruments. While this goes on, two groups of actors also come on stage to man their respective spaces. The first group is Pastor Frank and his mistresses; the second is a group of Yahoo boys (internet fraudsters) and their girlfriends. As the Alija performance ends, hip-hop dancers enter to perform their dance sequence. This is quickly followed by a pageantry display on stage by four female models. While these models exit the stage, three women in skimpy dresses go to attack the two men playing the game of draught at Madam Hoha's bar for neglecting their responsibility at home. The chaos and physical violence at the bar dissolve into a dramatisation of Endurance's rape experience. Endurance's stepfather takes advantage of his wife's busy work schedule to sexually abuse his stepdaughter. His wife, Beatrice finds out and mistakenly kills him in the process of rescuing Endurance from another rape attack. As a result, she is arrested by the police and jailed. Unfortunately, Endurance blames herself for the tragedy that befalls her family and commits suicide. The tragic death of Endurance is followed by the intervallic display of Alija dance performance, Hip Hop dance, and a performative display of dance costumes showing the dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria. These dances culminate in the comic narrative that chronicles the life of Madam Kash. Madam Kash is a trader, but her poor customer service approach causes her to fall out with a customer whom she does not know is a spirit. Consequent to her encounter with the spirit, she becomes dumb and deaf and seeks help from a witch doctor and prophets without any success. However, her deliverance comes through the intervention of Pentecostal ministers who reveal to her the need to change her ways. The comic drama ends with another set of dance performances of both African and Western dances. This is followed by the poetic dramatisation of the challenges of Covid-19, its origin, global and national impacts, and, prevention as well as the containment of the spread of the disease. The poetry drama is followed by a pageantry display of Western dresses and ends with the exposition of Pastor Frank's sexual escapades with female members of his church.

Kanidram is without doubt an infusion of various techniques laid down by Nwosu in Ichoka Mythic Folkism. The production is a reflection of the importance of pastiche as a technique



that encourages the borrowing and blending of various materials in the production process. The African postmodern theatre aspires towards the coeternity of various cultural nuances presented in a sporadic sequence. The director achieved this through the blend of Western and African cultures evident in the use of language, costume, and props to show Africa's globalised experience. The production is also a fusion of traditional and Western concepts as revealed through the interchange from Alija cultural dance to Hip-hop dances. Beyond the interchange between the West and Africa, intercultural relationships and exchange among the various ethnic tribes are represented through the costume/dance display of some ethnic regions in Nigeria, to depict the multicultural makeup and ethnic dimensions of the nation which Nwosu sees as a metaphor for peace and inclusion. There is also an attempt at de-genrifying the performance to disrupt the purity of genre and allow fluidity and crisscrossing of different genres like tragedy, comedy, and tragic-comedy in the ensemble. Furthermore, there is a blend of mime, improvisation, metaphors, and vernacular as vehicles of communication that cut across the various performances. The implication is that it reduced unnecessary verbalisation of actions and heightened the actors' stage business. Finally, the weaving of different performances: dance, pageantry, poetry, drama, and entrepreneurship, ensured that the audience experienced a novel stage experience that delegitimises the authority of a single narrative technique.

The beauty of the performance heavily depended on the fragmentation of various aspects of the old and new performance aesthetics forms happening at intervals. However, within each narrative divide, dramatic actions follow a causally-related sequence, thus validating Nwosu's belief in the application of both the casual and fragmented plot techniques in an African-postmodern theatre. The combination of both narrative techniques enabled the director to allow forms and free forms to interact in the creative process. Consequently, the performance made avid use of lighting aesthetics, dance, pageantry, drama, entrepreneurship, poedram (dramatic poetry), comedy skits, and audience participation in showing the coeternity of various performative forms. Naturally, each of these forms embodies its uniqueness and relevance in meaning-making. However, the intermingling of these forms radicalises the idea of unity and gives allowance for the permeability of each form in the narrative sequence. However, the concurrent fragmentations between forms created the illusion of discontinuity, disorder, and chaos which are the snippets of postmodern art. For instance, the performance begins with the presence of stage lighting crisscrossing the stage, the spotlight is cast on Madam Hoha's bar and two men playing draught, action fragments to the Alija cultural dance, followed by a hip-hop dance performance, fashion show, and the attack of the men at the bar by three women. Action moves to a group of internet scammers arguing, before the dramatisation of Endurance's rape experience. The fragmentation from one sequence to the other causes a temporal disorder in the time, space, and structure of the performance. This undoubtedly breaks the idea of a linear narrative thereby making the entire performance episodic, even when each narrative mode retains its linear construct. With the introduction of a new performance form like the entrepreneurial drama, where the stage is set as a bar for both the actors and audience members to access and buy drinks while the production is on stage, the director further breaks the barrier between the stage and the audience to allow a personalised interaction between the actor and the audience. The audience is an important variable in the African-postmodern theatre. With the effective use of fragmentation, the audiences experienced variety of stage actions that



induced various discourses about the human condition, thereby making the stage a warehouse of critical thinking.

More so, the combination of the various vignettes of the production (drama, dance, tragic-comedy, and pageantry, among others) allowed each performance, genre, and form to imitate one another. Hence, Hip-hop is a parody of the Alija dance, so also is the peodram a parody of the poetry genre of literature. Postmodernism is generally a parody of modernism and its grand narrative and belief in science as the highest form of truth. In peodram, we see this idea in the adoption of metaphysics in place of science as the ultimate means of ending the Covid-19 pandemic, a stance that also played out in the tragic death of Endurance, and Madam Kash's search for healing. The effect of parody is that it creates irony, play, and ridicule aimed at awakening the critical consciousness of the theatre audience to either challenge or accept beliefs and conventions.

Though Nwosu in his theory abstracted from discussing the role of technology in driving African postmodern theatre, it is important to note that the success of Kanidram was hinged on the effective presence of the technology of stage lighting as the main narrative device used to teleport actions on stage. Technoculture ideally goes beyond the traditional technology used in the theatre to accommodate other digital and hi-tech technologies in the creative process. However, stage lighting as used in the production transcended beyond its primary utility to become a creative and interpretative tool for the creation of the metatext. Thus, the omnipresent nature of lighting helped the director to harmonise the various performances, and experiment with time and space. More so, the use of mobile phones by the group of internet fraudsters as props created also a virtual space for the actors to exist. Postmodern theatre aspires toward the simulation of reality and reconstruction of subjective experiences using technology.

2. CONCLUSION

The application of the requisite theoretical framework in the practice of theatre is necessary to ensure a creative difference that can engender the needed professionalism for the revival and sustenance of live theatre practice in Nigeria. Regrettably, Nigerian theatre practitioners are still grappling with this reality, despite the obvious implication of applying relevant theories to practice. The consequence of relegating theory to the background in the creative process is that the live theatre practice in the postmodern era continues to suffer from low audience turnout, thereby giving room for the theatre audience to embrace emergent entertainment forms that are more convenient and accessible but are bereft of the moral and sociological substances that can drive national cohesion through the promotion of unity, peace and inclusion which are the recipes of national growth and development. The global theatre audiences seeking artistic and aesthetic experiences are no longer limited by borders due to technology and social media. It is imperative for live theatre practice in Nigeria to leverage the realities on the ground to meet the surging and changing tastes of theatre audiences seeking theatre productions that can enrich their stage visual experience. African postmodern theories, especially Ichoka Mythic Folkism, when applied in the creative process by theatre practitioners both at the academic and professional levels have the potential of not only re-aestheticising the content and style of theatre practice in Nigeria that can bring about quality productions that meet the creative needs



of the audience who are very cardinal in the revival process of the theatre but also enable practitioners and investors to see the live theatre as a viable business model.

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