African Literature and the Rwandan Expedition

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In 1998, poet Nocky Djedanoum organized a trip for several African writers and one filmmaker to go to Rwanda. They were to produce books and a film on the genocide of Tutsis and moderate Hutus, which took place four years earlier. The aim of Mr. Djedanoum, a Chadian who resides in Lille, France, where he is the director of an annual book fair called Fest'Africa, was to break the silence of African artists and intellectuals on human-rights violations in Africa. Djedanoum and his fellow travelers presented their project as "the duty of the African writer to remember"; they believed that art, by preserving the memory of the 1994 genocide, had the capacity to heal people, to prevent ethnic violence, and to contribute to the reconciliation of different groups. Djedanoum's colleagues on the trip included Tierno Monenembo (Guinea), Boubacar Boris Diop (Senegal), Véronique Tadjo (Côte d'Ivoire), Abdourahman Waberi (Djibouti), Monique Ilboudo (Burkina Faso), Koulsy Lamko (Chad), François Woukoache (Congo), and Jean-Marie Rurangwa (Rwanda).

The Rwandan African Writers' Expedition raises several important issues for African artists and intellectuals living in Africa and abroad today. First there is the question of political commitment as a moral duty for the artist, at a time of gross human-rights violations not only in Rwanda but also in Sierra Leone, Sudan, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Côte d'Ivoire. What is the poet or the public intellectual to do under the threat of repressive regimes in the isolated nations of Africa that the rest of the world has turned its back on? Finally, if the artist is committed, whom does he or she write for? I have raised these questions about the status of the artist and the public intellectual in Africa, and the reception and legitimacy of such artists and intellectuals in the public sphere, that I believe are addressed by the Rwandan Expedition.

The issue of commitment has always existed with regard to African literature and art. The Negritude poets first declared their *engagement* when Aimé Césaire, in *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939) stated his identification with the Congo against Belgian colonialism and celebrated the dignity and heroism of "those who never did invent anything" against the inventors of weapons of mass destruction and those who committed pogroms and other crimes against humanity in the name of progress. The Negritude poets put their reputations on the line for the freedom of Africa; their poetry drew its artistic resources from the movement of decolonization and the struggle against racism. It enhanced the legitimacy of Césaire and the Negritude poets in France — where their main audience lived — that they had the support of Jean-Paul Sartre, André Breton, and other artists and public intellectuals at the time.

After the Negritude movement, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) became the most celebrated writing about commitment in the letters of Africa and the diaspora. With that book Fanon went beyond the text to put his body and life on the line in Africa, blurring, thereby, the lines between the writer and the guerrilla fighter. In fact *The Wretched of the Earth* inaugurated a new form of writing and commitment based on the experience of the author as a revolutionary in the battlefield. It is still today the most enduring document on decolonization and human-rights violations in Africa. Ironically, also, Fanon's call for the violence of the oppressed against the violence of the oppressor has equally been influential beyond Africa. Instead of bringing the warring sides to reason and reconciliation — as Fanon had intended when he theorized the peace of mind that was to be had at the conclusion of the violence of the oppressed — it might have exacerbated it; it might have increased violence from Algeria to Rwanda, Palestine, and Afghanistan. Fanon's committed ideas

may also have fallen into the hands of people who are against decolonization, progress, and human rights. I will come back to the unforeseen excesses in Fanon's theory of violence in the section below where I discuss the Rwandan Expedition and the writers' total identification with the Tutsi-led government.

But there is little doubt that Fanon had redefined the Sartrean notion of *engagement* by taking the writer out of Paris's cafés, where he was safe and free to express himself, and transporting him to the frontlines in Algeria. Many poets and writers have since followed Fanon's example in Africa. Mongo Béti even went as far as to criticize a fellow writer, Camara Laye, for writing *The African Child* (*L'Enfant noir*, 1953), a romantic novel, when the writer's place was in the decolonization and independence movement. There are other famous examples, such as in South Africa, during the struggle against the apartheid regime. Breyten Breytenbach was imprisoned (joining Nelson Mandela on Robben Island) for both his views and his activities with the African National Congress. Poet Dennis Brutus was also shot in the leg for his involvement in the fight against apartheid.

In postcolonial Africa, writers have continued to put their lives on the line in the defense of human rights, democracy, and peace. In the 1960s, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka went to jail for defending the Igbos' right to self-determination during the Biafran War. While in prison, the defiant Soyinka wrote a novel, *The Man Died*, about his experiences. The case of Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who challenged corruption and neocolonialism in his country, also provides a good illustration of the Fanonian commitment. Wa Thiong'o, too, was thrown in jail and later sent into exile.

After Ngugi wa Thiong'o's exile in the 1970s, however, fewer and fewer writers were able to follow Fanon's example. Dictatorial regimes in Africa clamped down on all forms of dissent, including the artistic ones. The burgeoning public sphere that was emerging in countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Uganda was soon destroyed by presidents-for-life. The center of African literature in English moved to London, while the locus of Francophone literature returned to Paris. Even though the writers continued their critique of the African regimes, they were removed from the situation, and wrote mostly for a Western readership. Writing in exile, African authors had to rethink the form and content of their works. They had to become more reflexive and individualist, and less Fanonian and existentialist.

One exception, however, was Ken Saro-Wiwa, who lived in Nigeria and wrote protest literature against the oil companies and the corrupt Nigerian government. When Saro-Wiwa, like Fanon, realized that writing was not enough to expose and stop either the environmental crimes of Shell Oil Company in Ogoniland or the racism directed against ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta region, he formed a resistance movement, MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People), to organize peaceful protests against Shell and the military dictatorship. Saro-Wiwa also created links between his organization and international human-rights and environmental groups such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Human Rights/Africa, The Body Shop, Friends of the Earth, and PEN. In the words of Rob Nixon, Saro-Wiwa was "the first African writer to articulate the literature of commitment in expressly environmental terms."[1]

Saro-Wiwa and his MOSOP gained momentum in Nigeria and abroad, and became an embarrassment for Shell Oil Company, which urged Sani Abacha's military junta to silence them. First, during a peaceful protest of MOSOP, the Nigerian army killed 2,000, destroyed villages, and displaced 80,000 persons.[2] Then Saro-Wiwa was arrested with eight other Ogoni leaders. They were tried on trumped-up charges and hung without anybody being able to stop Abacha.

Thus, with Fanon, Soyinka, wa Thiong'o, and Saro-Wiwa, we have illustrations of courageous commitment on the part of African writers. We see intellectuals turned guerrilla leaders; writers who put

their pens and their lives at the service of a revolution; and literature that identifies with the rights of one group that considers itself oppressed by another. Such a commitment requires the artist to occupy an ethical position and exert a high moral authority that reduces the function of art to propaganda, and makes everything else secondary to the larger aim of defeating what is deemed to be evil. In addition to rendering literature more eloquent to sing the praises of the revolution, commitment also encourages the author to make ideology his or her main source of inspiration. Influenced by the Negritude movement, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and the liberation of Angola and Guinea-Bissau, poets and novelists have demonstrated that being at the front line is the best source of and inspiration for African literature; that the best literature is resistance and propagandistic literature. They have gone from writers to social and political commentators, to even taking up arms to defend what they consider to be right. It is in this sense that one understands Saro-Wiwa's worldwide reputation as a martyr and a champion of ethnic minority rights and environmental justice.

The Rwandan Expedition, therefore, reminds one of the paucity of courageous intellectual commitment as well as the lack of a public sphere in Africa today. That the genocide in Rwanda took place without the world hearing from African intellectuals and their struggle to prevent it is an indication of the death of the public intellectual on the continent and the triumph of Afro-pessimism. That there are human-rights violations everywhere — the mutilation of innocent civilians in Sierra Leone, slavery in Sudan, violence and murder against women in the Sharia-ruled Northern Nigeria, and the atrocities committed by Rwandan and Ugandan-backed rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo — without African intellectuals in other nation-states expressing outrage and concern constitutes a betrayal of the legacy of Fanon and Saro-Wiwa who had died for the revolution. One only reads of and hears the protest against such crimes in Western media.

Could it be that the advent of the nation-state in Africa, by isolating intellectuals from one another and anchoring their symbolic capital in nationalism, contributed to the diminution of the intellectual public sphere in Africa? It i also clear that the decline of the public intellectual in Africa, as in most emerging nations, is due to Western monopoly of media outlets. Africa lacks newspapers, television networks, and book publishers that have an influence beyond an individual nation-state. Moreover, the Western press and intellectuals speaking from the West — New York, Paris, and London — have more legitimacy than their local counterparts in Africa.

In addition to exposing the crisis of commitment on the part of African writers, the Rwandan Expedition raises concerns about the need for an African public sphere and the legitimacy of African intellectuals in that public sphere. I have already mentioned the difficulties posed by nation-states which, more than in colonial times, isolate writers from one another or silence them. African writers from different nations feel closer to each other in Paris, London, and New York than in Bamako, Freetown, Kinshasa, and Kigali. Most Africans learned about the Rwandan genocide from the Western media, which covered it with the usual stereotypes of Afro-pessimism, exoticism, and tribalism. Reading about it in the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, and *the Guardian*, one never gets the sense that the Tutsis and the Hutus are similar to the Israelis and the Palestinians, the Serbs and the Bosnians, and the Hindus and the Muslims in India and Pakistan. Territorial, nationalist, and ideological struggles in Africa are seen as tribal warfare, while similar struggles elsewhere are less dismissively or pejoratively described.

One year after the genocide in Rwanda, when the books started to come out, Wole Soyinka's was the only African voice. Predictably, it received less attention than books that were written from the Western point of view, like Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda.*[3] Ironically, a review by Soyinka in the New York Times lent the legitimacy of an endorsement by an African intellectual to the book. It leaves one to wonder

if, were there a vibrant public sphere in Africa, Soyinka's *Open Sore of a Continent*[4] would have remained in the shadow of European and American writers on Rwanda. One is also left with the feeling that Africans can-- not rely on the press and the writers in Europe and America to address adequately its human-rights issues; and that, without a Pan-African public sphere, human-rights abuses will go unchecked at the national level.

During colonial times, human-rights issues were limited to land occupation by the colonizers and their oppression of the natives. Poets and writers could denounce such violations from liberal circles in Paris and London, where their voices mattered the most. Today, however, with Africans killing each other in autonomous nation-states, their suffering seems remote from European capitals, and from one African capital to another. It is therefore urgent to build an alternative public sphere, which is Pan-African and capable of undermining the autonomy of nation-states and the hegemony of Europeans and Americans in the media, in order to highlight human-rights issues in Africa.

Clearly, my point here is not to deny the significance of the criticism of human-rights violations in Africa coming out of Europe and America. On the contrary, as I have shown here, Saro-Wiwa's protest movement against Shell Oil Company and the Nigerian dictatorship was successful because of its links with human-rights organizations in the West. Saro-Wiwa's ability to mobilize such organizations on behalf of the Ogoni people forced the Western media to pay attention to them, and to put pressure on Shell and Nigeria. Indeed, the Rwandan Expedition, under discussion here, came from Europe, even though the writers and intellectuals are of African origins. The expedition received funding from the Fondation de France and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and that support legitimated the writers' mission to the Rwandan government. (Had the African writers been funded by another African country, the Rwandan government would have been less receptive.) French institutions also made it possible for the writers to publish their works and thus provided an important space for African voices on the genocide in Rwanda.

Finally, when we look at the current tragedy of Safiya Hussaini in Northern Nigeria, we find the only movement in her defense is coming from Europe and America. The Sharia court in Sokoto state in Nigeria has condemned Hussaini to death by stoning because it has found her guilty of committing adultery and having a child out of wedlock. The federal government in Nigeria has refused to intervene and save Hussaini's life against this primitive application of the Sharia. There is no credible space in Africa — on television or in newspapers — from which to organize a protest by African writers, intellectuals, and artists against the violation of Hussaini's human rights, and the cowardly manner in which the federal government in Nigeria has turned its back on her. Clearly, therefore, if the world does not come to her aid, she will be killed by an archaic law put in place by religious fanatics. The Western media — the BBC and Radio France Internationale in particular — have done a good job of keeping Hussaini's story in the news. Some Internet links, such as Afrik.com, have also developed discussion forums to inform and mobilize people to her cause.

My argument in favor of an African public sphere is, however, to prevent cases such as Hussaini's from falling between the cracks when they are not covered by the media in the West. The point of view of African intellectuals in Africa is important in undermining the autonomy of the West's representation of the continent as the heart of darkness, tribalism, and infectious diseases. African writers' commitment to respect for human rights in Africa will also constitute the best form of self-determination, the best prospect for the defeat of Afro-pessimism, and the best protection of the citizens of the continent against ethnic violence and abuse by dictators and religious fundamentalists.

The Rwandan Expedition teaches us this much: that Africans must break their silence on human-rights violations. As Djedanoum puts it, to be silent is to treat all crimes the same way, as normal and natural. African writers must break their silence to take their place in the world. Certainly writing collectively about an issue, as the authors of the Rwandan Expedition did, is one way to bring attention to it. A public sphere can also be constituted through the media, such as a Pan-African television network that competes in Africa with CNN (USA), TV5 (France), and the BBC (UK). The communication of the issues of human rights would also be facilitated by the creation of Pan-African newspapers with regular editorial contributions by African public intellectuals. Finally, as we have seen with the Rwandan Expedition, African writers and artists should organize meetings on human-rights issues in different African cities in order to make their presence felt.

Let us return now to the Rwandan Expedition proper, in order to analyze some of the difficulties inherent in such a project. First, as I have pointed out, the expedition arrived in Rwanda in 1998, four years after the genocide took place. As one young woman said in the documentary that Woukoache made on the writers' trip, *Nous ne sommes plus morts* (We Are No Longer Dead), "When the genocide was being prepared, why did you and other writers not write about it? I would have liked you to have the sign of solidarity before the genocide took place."[5]

Having arrived on the scene late, the writers could only adopt a style of writing that was reflexive, that is, self-conscious of its own removal and distance from the historical event that was the subject of the writing. They had no existent connection to the events except through the trauma of memory. Theirs is a sense of guilt that they had to negotiate through their writings. In *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (Murambi, the Book of Bones), the novel written by Boubacar Boris Diop, Cornelius, the main character, returns home four years after the genocide to find that his own father had plotted the massacre of Tutsis in a school where they were supposed to be protected from the Hutu extremists. To add to Cornelius's pain, he learned that his father has betrayed his own wife and son, Cornelius's mother and brother, with the other unsuspecting Tutsis. Cornelius's guilt is therefore double: his Hutu father is a perpetrator of genocide and his Tutsi mother is a helpless victim, whose death, like that of more than 800,000 other Rwandans, he could not prevent on those fateful days of April 7 through 15, 1994. As another character tells Cornelius, "Some people feel guilty for surviving the genocide. They are asking themselves what sins have they committed in order to be still alive."[6]

The writers in the Rwandan Expedition are, in a way, like Cornelius; they are embarrassed by their delayed action, and they face the task of making amends both to the dead and to the survivors. In the preface to his book, *Moisson de crânes* (Harvest of Skulls), Abdourahman A. Waberi apologizes for writing about the genocide because words are inadequate for describing what he has seen during his short visit to Rwanda. He has only let go of the book in the hope that the words will serve a reminder of those who are dead: "What else can [the writer] do but to invoke, but for a moment, the souls and the presence of the people departed, to touch and caress them with timid words and silences, and to fly by them, like a bird, because one can no longer share their fate."[7] For Véronique Tadjo, too, in *L'Ombre d'Imana: voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda* (Imana's Shadow: Journey to the End of Rwanda), the most difficult thing for a person visiting Rwanda after the genocide is how to live with the presence of death everywhere: "The particles of the massacre are floating in the air. The dead accuse the living of using them still. The dead want to be buried. They are rebelling. They want to disappear in the ground."[8]

The purpose of writing for Rwanda is therefore to ask for forgiveness from the dead, and to help the survivors to heal and to prepare for reconciliation. There is a mourning scene in the documentary film by Woukoache, where people gather at a cemetery for an annual ritual in memory of the dead. The women are dressed in white and they sing the words of a long poem that underscores the feeling of

grief and trauma of the survivors of the Rwandan genocide. As the camera pans slowly from one end of the mass grave to the other, following the rhythm of the song, the spectator becomes a participant in the funeral ritual, and begins to feel the pain of the Rwandans. The poem opens as follows: "I recall you. / It is the second time that we will be burying our own / Who died without us being able to help them, / Who were buried in places unknown."

The identification with the dead and the living in this scene reveals in fact the most effective way of representing the genocide in Rwanda. It contrasts with other scenes in the film, and the novels written for the expedition, that depict piles of human bones massed together at schools and churches where the massacre took place. If there is an artistic lesson to be learned from the Rwandan Expedition, it concerns how to present this horrific crime and help the survivors overcome their trauma. To me, most of the realistic representations of human skulls and other evidence of the genocide dull the imagination or paralyze the viewer under the power of evil.

The mourning scene in *We Are No Longer Dead*, on the contrary, draws its aesthetic resources from traditional rituals of mourning that speak directly to the dead, and from the symbolic use of one mass grave to represent others. The scene is also effective because of the respect that it shows the dead by not exposing their nakedness in public places.

Tadjo, too, makes recourse to traditional myth and magical realism in her novel, *L'Ombre d'Imana*, to render the genocide alive for the reader. In a compelling scene, she describes the anger of a dead man who returns to punish the living. This man, who was beheaded during the genocide, was cross at the survivors for failing to bury him properly. His punishment was a torrential rain that did not stop for days and nights. The living called a diviner to see if he could stop the rain. The diviner spoke with respect to the dead, asked for forgiveness for all the pain that the dead had suffered before dying, and promised to let him rest in peace with a proper burial. The rain stopped as the diviner turned to the living and said, "You must bury the dead according to our rituals; bury the dried-up bodies; the bones that are aging in the open air. You should only keep the highest memory of them."[9]

The diviner here is also the African writer, whom Tadjo describes elsewhere in the novel as one who "pushes people to lend an ear and exorcizes [their] repressed memories. The writer has the power to heal the wound and write about everything that can bring a little hope."[10] Tadjo is critical here of the Rwandan government for exposing so many bodies in the open air in order to prove that the genocide took place. For Tadjo, not burying the dead is a lack of respect for human dignity, and an invitation for further genocide: "The Hutus are afraid of the Tutsis because they are the seat of power. The Tutsis are afraid of the Hutus because they can take over power. Fear remains in the hills."[11]

Many of the writers of the Rwandan Expedition, in fact, posit their artistic and social *engagement* at the service of the reconciliation between the Tutsis and the Hutus. For this reason, the main characters of the novels are often hybrid, with Hutu and Tutsi parents. In *L'Aîné des orphelins* (The Eldest of Orphans), by Tierno Monenembo, Faustin is a fifteen-year-old boy with a Tutsi mother and a Hutu father. In the beginning of the novel, his parents are killed by Hutu extremists and he is taken to a concentration camp at gunpoint by a Tutsi child soldier who accuses him of being a "genocideur."[12] The rest of the novel (though the plot is not linear) depicts Faustin's ordeals as a gang member in Kigali, in juvenile detention camps, and finally awaiting execution in prison on a murder charge. The novel describes present-day Rwanda as still trapped in determining who is a Tutsi and who is a Hutu; in the meantime, it is a hell for children like Faustin. It, too, is an indictment of the present government's unwillingness to move beyond the genocide.

For other writers in the Rwandan Expedition, writing is to identify with the Tutsi point of view because they are overwhelmingly the victims. Every Hutu is also seen from their perspective as a potential agent of genocide. The writer's role becomes, therefore, to help the Tutsis to reconstruct the memory of the genocide; to engrave it as evidence against revisionists and negationists; and to document it as a singular event for future generations to remember. I will return now to what I called the unforeseen excess in Fanon's theory of violence to discuss what I consider here as the writers' total identification with the Tutsis as victims. One of the biggest problems facing the African states, as they move into democratic regimes today, concerns the human rights of ethnic minorities. We have seen that in Nigeria, the Ogoni people and other small ethnic groups are invisible in the struggle for power that opposes the "Muslim North" and the "Christian South," Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. In Zimbabwe and South Africa, white minority rights are inextricably tied to land distribution issues and democracy. How the writer identifies with the victimhood of a minority group is therefore never a straightforward issue — not even in the case of Tutsis in Rwanda.

I was surprised therefore to find that some writers in the Rwandan Expedition relied on the Israeli model to describe the Tutsi experience in Rwanda. For the genocide, they used expressions like "the Holocaust," "the Tutsi Shoah," "the Final Solution," "Never again," "Tutsi Diaspora," "negationist and revisionist." The writers were also influenced by Jewish writers on the Holocaust, such as Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel. Finally, they allowed their writing to justify the view that the Tutsis are permanent victims even though a Tutsi-led government is occupying the seat of power. This logic of permanent Tutsi victimhood mobilizes the whole country against one enemy only — the Hutu extremists in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo — to the detriment of nation building, peace, and reconciliation. The text that succumbs to this total identification with the ideology of the ruling party in Rwanda is *Le génocide des Tutsis expliqué à un étranger* (The Genocide of the Tutsis Explained to a Foreigner) by Jean-Marie Rurangwa.[13] In this book, the author reminds us that it was first in 1959 that the Hutus attempted genocide against the Tutsis. That led to the exile of Tutsis in Uganda, Tanzania, and Congo. The Hutus have since demonized the Tutsis as outsiders, bloodsuckers, and snakes that the country must rid itself of. The massacres of 1994 were therefore the "Final Solution," that is, an attempt to kill all of the Tutsis in Rwanda. For all of these reasons, Rurangwa argues that we must keep in mind the memory of the "Tutsi Shoah."

As I have indicated with regard to Fanon's theory of violence by the oppressed, this type of total identification with the Tutsis, as the only side deserving justice, blinds us from critical judgment when human-rights violations are committed by them. An unproblematized adoption of the Israeli model by the Tutsis is also what prevents writers who take their side from criticizing the Rwandan Popular Front (RPF) for invading the Democratic Republic of Congo and committing the human atrocities that are well-documented today. For the RPF, the Rwandan soldiers are going inside Congo after the Interhamwe, the Hutu extremists who committed the 1994 genocide. But the fact is that they have killed several hundred thousand innocent people, and displaced countless others in the process. Seven years of devastating war in the Congo, since 1994, and there is no end in sight.

The Israeli model posits, in fact, a form of ethnic absolutism that is incapable of the kind of reconciliation seen in South Africa. As the Tutsis claim the genocide in order to be beyond reproach in their conflict with Hutus Interhamwe, they remove the possibility of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence with any Hutu who rejects the ideology of the RPF. What Rwandans are rejecting, in fact, is democracy, because their country will remain locked in conflict as long as the ethnic groups will not let go of their claim to a special status. Meanwhile, the war between the Hutus and the Tutsis in Rwanda and Congo has destroyed the economy of the two countries, and the future of the children.

In *Murambi*, one of the most complex texts of the Rwanda Expedition, Boris Diop has one of his characters saying, "It would not be easy for those who have suffered so much to sort out things, to put behind the worst in order to remember only the best."[14] For this character, only the capture and trial of people who perpetrated the genocide would cure Rwandans of the trauma that they are now suffering. But history must go on and a new Rwanda must be born. That's why another of Diop's characters, Cornelius, says that, as horrible as it is, "there is life after the genocide; it is time to move on to something else."[15]

With the Rwandan Expedition, one dares to dream of a renewed life and space for African literature. After slavery and colonialism, disease and humanrights violations are some of the most important crises facing Africa today. The intellectuals' role in the public sphere is crucial to denouncing such violations and arguing for democracy and tolerance.

Manthia Diawara. African Literature and the Rwandan Expedition. In: Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, Octavio Zaya (ed.): Experiments with the Truth. Documenta11_Platform2. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit. 2002, pp. 319-330.

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