


Biblical discourses and the construction of genders and sexualities in contemporary South Africa: A decolonial analysis

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The constructions of genders and sexualities in different global spaces continue to be influenced by Christian and imperial ideologies. In Africa, genders and sexualities were (mis)construed by colonial and missionary enterprises, and they continue to be defined according to Eurocentric terms and perceptions. This has produced 'modern sexual repression'. The use of Biblical discourses to construct African genders and sexualities is one way that this repression is mirrored in South Africa. Because of this, African genders and sexualities are marginalised, treated as taboo and depicted as backward and uncivilised, thus, promoting hegemonic heteronormative and monogamous marriages. This article examined how Biblical discourses contributed to this narrative. It further advanced a call for transforming this dominant narrative by engaging theology, gender and sexuality studies and socio-political sciences from the premise of a multidisciplinary epoch. The decolonial motif, with a focus on delinking African genders and sexualities from the Western agenda of sexual repression, serves as the theoretical framework for this research. On the other hand, race, gender and sexuality serve as lenses used to better understand the phenomenon and to explore the use of biblical discourses in this context. Thus, the article makes use of a secondary research approach to carry out this task.

Contribution: This article seeks to add to the body of knowledge that endeavours to change the way that biblical discourses are used in South Africa today to construct a narrative that represses non-normative genders and sexualities.

Keywords: Biblical discourses; Christianity; African; genders; sexualities; decoloniality; delink; transformation.

Introduction

Biblical discourses are often influenced by imperial ideologies and play a critical role in the constructions of genders and sexualities within global spaces (Jakobsen & Pellegrini 2003). Although this phenomenon is common in different religious circles, this paper focusses on Christianity by interrogating the use of biblical discourses in the constructions of African genders and sexualities. Biblical discourses refer to formal and informal talks, discussions and messages in the pulpit that use the Bible and sometimes references to God to define what are acceptable genders and sexualities. This article examined how biblical discourses contributed to this narrative. It further advanced a call for transforming this dominant narrative by engaging theology, gender and sexuality studies and socio-political sciences from the premise of a multidisciplinary epoch. The decolonial motif, with a focus on delinking African genders and sexualities from the Western agenda of sexual repression, serves as the theoretical framework for this research. On the other hand, the Bible, race, gender and sexuality serve as the hermeneutical approach to better understand African genders and sexualities and to explore the use of biblical discourses in this context. Thus, the article makes use of a secondary research approach to carry out this task.

Methodology

The article employs a secondary research methodology to explore this phenomenon and to develop a thorough knowledge of African genders and sexualities. This indicates that it used data from already existing sources to generate and gather data. According to Ellis (2015), secondary research is an analysis of the scholarly examination of the existing body of literature on a chosen

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subject. As a result, reliable academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science were consulted during the search and analysis of literature. A variety of academic books, journal articles, essays, published papers and academic theses were among the materials used in the secondary research processes.

Data from university archives were accessed using secondary research datasets. Generally, secondary data are gathered and recorded for archival reasons and complies with legal and ethical standards so that it can be shared with other researchers (Heaton 2008:35). Furthermore, to acknowledge the contribution made by other interlocutors, their data were used while adhering to strict guidelines like appropriate citation and referencing. Biblical discourses, African genders and sexualities, Christianity in Africa, the missionary-colonial agenda, decoloniality, delinking and other related terms were included in the literature search. According to Fawcett (2013), the goal of the literature review is to pinpoint knowledge gaps and present a thorough picture of the state of science in this field of interest. Although there are numerous techniques for analysing secondary data, this article used the Focused Mapping Review and Synthesis (FMRS) strategy. According to Bradbury-Jones et al. (2019:453), the FMRS involves focussing on a particular field of expertise related to the subject at hand rather than the body of available evidence. As a result, the emphasis was primarily on the use of biblical discourses in the constructions of genders and sexualities in contemporary South Africa.

Theoretical framework

The decolonial theoretical paradigm has been applied in this article from the contention that a decoloniality effort is necessary given the persistence of the colonial narratives in postcolonial and post-apartheid South Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:10). The term 'postcolonial' is used here to refer to the period during the 18th century when most colonised countries began to gain their independence, while post-apartheid era refers to the period after South Africa gained democracy in 1994. Although democracy has been attained in South Africa, biblical discourses still carry colonial nuances that reflect the negative construction of genders and sexualities as Shingange (2023:2) pointed out that some pastors continue to use the pulpit to send discriminatory messages against those who identify with non-normative sexualities. Decoloniality, in this context, questions the knowledge and power structures that support the creation and maintenance of gender and sexuality hierarchies that emerged or found new and more potent ways to manifest themselves in the modern and colonial world (Maldonado Torres 2007:243).

Objectives of the study

This study aims to critique the current narrative that upholds the missionary-colonial goal of suppressing and subjugating African genders and sexualities using biblical discourses.

It illustrates how decoloniality might be a helpful tool for breaking the stereotypes that African genders and sexualities are homogenous, static, primitive and backward. The study questions the use of biblical discourses to support the missionary-colonial gender and sexual repression agenda. It further seeks to transform the prevalent norms regarding genders and sexualities in South Africa.

African genders and sexualities

African genders and sexualities entail the diverse genders and sexualities that were prevalent in Africa even during the pre-colonial era. These genders and sexualities are socially located in Africa and have their epistemic location founded in African cultures, traditions and indigenous knowledge systems as Tamale (2011) opined:

A great deal of rich information about African sexualities lies in ancient histories that live through griots, ighyuwas, imbongies, jelis, igawens, guewels, and other orators around the continent. Historical accounts of African sexualities are alive in folklore, traditional songs, dance, folk art, body markings, clothing, jewellery, names, and naming systems. Yet these systems of knowledge are denigrated in the theoretical and normative domains of mainstream research. In fact, they have been 'reclassified as oral traditions rather than histories'. (p. 21)

Against the backdrop of the citation above, it can be deduced that precolonial African cultures in southern Africa were open about sexuality. In the same vein, Delius and Glaser (2005:29) maintain that sexual education and talks were conducted freely until Christianity deemed them as shameful and private matters. Henceforth, African genders and sexualities were generalised and portrayed as homogenous experiences and realities. Furthermore, starting in the early 2000s, discussions and acts taken by dogmatic religious voices and organisations have had a major impact on establishing the contours of sexual politics in South Africa. Therefore, the critical conceptualisation of genders and sexualities is crucial because concepts and lines of reasoning impact sexual politics and what is perceived, how it is viewed and what is not seen (Arnfred 2004a:82).

Sexual homogeneity

The concept of African sexual homogeneity has always been presented as the truth; as a result, it has influenced what society sees and has not seen from previous generations to the present. The truth is that African genders and sexualities are not uniform; rather, they have a variety of distinct and varied subtleties, manifestations and histories. In fact, Matebeni et al. (2018:2) cautioned that we should not try to homogenise the continent narrowly and existentialistically either. Instead of being a single geopolitical entity with a multi-layered complexity of transnational settings, 'Africa' refers to a varied range of identities that its people hold. In other words, the construction of gender and sexuality varies widely across African nations, with postcolonial and neo-colonial relations, local subjectivities, traditionalist patriarchies and nationalist homophobias entwined with activist interventions and human rights frameworks.

While taking note of the cautionary statement made by Matebeni et al., it is also important to stress that there are some similarities in the use of biblical discourses to construct genders and sexualities in different African contexts. These contexts also have certain things in common in that they were nevertheless affected by and conceptualised through the lenses of colonial, missionary and imperialist ideas and terms; thus, they still share these legacies (Tamale 2011:1). These similarities are the basis for referring to Africa as a single entity in this article. Focussing on these similarities should not be construed as an attempt to present a unified image of Africa (Murray & Roscoe 1998:xxxii). On the contrary, it should be viewed as a discussion about similar patterns and experiences of genders and sexualities happening in the African continent. According to Tamale (2013:35), heterosexuality was indeed a predominant form of sexuality in precolonial Africa as it was everywhere else in the globe. This is because most communities value childbearing and reproduction. However, there is no question that same-sex relations were also practised, and this reality cannot simply be erased by heteronormativity in society (Tamale 2013:40). Therefore, the ideologies of monogenous and exclusive heterosexual Africa are a fallacy. Pre-colonial Africa was marked with pluriverse and diverse forms of genders and sexualities (Van Zyl 2015:149).

Secrecy and tabooing

The secrecy and tabooing prevalent in the subject of sex and sexuality do not represent the historic African realities (Asante 2020:114). This does not imply that sex and sexuality were topics that were addressed carelessly and without boundaries in Africa. Contrarily, Okechi (2018:1) observed that although there was what an outside observer may consider sexual recklessness among males and females in African nations, especially the East African nations, all these are regulated through certain consistent means but not repressed.

The form of secrecy and tabooing that came with the missionary-colonial and apartheid eras in South Africa came with barriers to sex and sexuality that ensured that African genders and sexualities were repressed, censored, demonised, stigmatised and treated with shame (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2020:70; Posel 2003:4). In the same vein, Kungu and Chacha (2022:17) posited that these barriers to sexual communication were put in place for several reasons, including gender power, the rules governing children's sexual and gender development, the control of how pleasure is developed, the social control of adults' morality and the prohibition of sexual behaviour that deviates from norms in such fundamental contexts as premarital and extramarital sex. Contrary to many kinds of sexuality in the West, African sexuality since the colonial-missionary era was frequently incorporated into interpersonal relationships, and how it was expressed was rigorously constrained by taboos, rituals and customs.

The opposite is true when considering pre-colonial African sexualities as Delius and Glaser (2005:30) observed that children in Africa were exposed to the mechanics of sex at an early age. Teenage boys and girls discussed the rules and customs of sexuality appropriate for their age groups. Uncles, aunts and grandparents could provide them with sexual advice (though typically not parents). Teenage sexual experimentation was viewed as normal and healthy if it ended before full-on sexual contact (Delius & Glaser 2005). Against this backdrop, it is apparent that the pre-colonial African genders and sexualities were not repressed or tabooed. However, it was the colonial-missionary era that brought shame to African genders and sexualities (Delius & Glaser 2005:30).

African genders, sexualities, religions and spiritualities

It should be noted that under the African worldview, genders, sexualities and spiritualities are intertwined. According to Togarasei (2020:22), African sexuality and spirituality have always been linked and intertwined from the dawn of humanity. This concurs with Mbiti's (1990) assertion that religion permeates all facets of African life. Therefore, Asamoah-Gyandu posited that it is vital to grasp the relationship between the body and spirit to understand African sexuality (Kaunda 2020:ix). Indeed, this view of genders, sexualities and religions is expressed in African lifestyles that revolve around the spiritual realm and the physical. Against this backdrop, the missionary colonial enterprise found room in African spirituality to enforce biblical discourses in their constructions of gender and sexuality.

Missionary-colonial historic accounts

It is impossible to discuss colonialism in Africa without involving the role played by the missionary enterprise. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the colonial-missionary age created gender and sexual categories that were alien to Africans (Oyewumi 2004:7). They misrepresented and misinterpreted African genders and sexualities. Kaoma (2014) noted that pre-colonial African liberal ideas on sexuality were modified by colonisation and Christianisation efforts. According to Kungu and Chacha (2022:19), because of the colonialists' and missionaries' inability to decipher secret codes and the scarcity of knowledge, there are myths, misunderstandings and misinterpretations regarding African sexuality today. Once more, inaccurate portrayals of African sexuality by Western imperialists were a component of a larger plan to colonise and oppress the Black race (Tamale 2011:15). Indeed, Kisiang'ani (2004:15) made a similar observation when positing that Christianity was used to legitimise colonialism in Africa. It becomes evident that the way African genders and sexualities are viewed has been influenced by colonial, imperial and missionary endeavours. Missionary-colonial and Western perspectives, for example, portrayed African genders and sexualities as promiscuous,

careless, infectious, libidinous and uncivilised characters that need taming, improving, civilising, modernising and saving (Nyanzi 2011:477)

It should, however, be borne in mind that most of what is known as the history of 'traditional' African cultures, genders and sexualities was written by individuals who were part of a colonial system that disrupted those cultures (Murray & Roscoe 1998:8). Therefore, Epprecht (2009:1261) asserts that the scandalised accounts of African sexuality mark the beginning of writing about sexuality in Africa, South of the Sahara, in the 14th century. Following that, an increasing number of non-Africans including slavers, explorers, missionaries and colonial officials gave their accounts. Through the middle of the 20th century, white male authors who tended to represent Africans as essentially heterosexual and promiscuous or as deeply disordered and dangerous were predominant in this work (Epprecht 2009:1261). Against this backdrop, Kungu and Chacha (2022:20) posited that there are widespread misconceptions about a variety of sexual practices, such as the myths surrounding polygamy, virginity, same-sex relationships, sexual parts and others. This is because much of the data that is currently available on African sexuality has frequently been distorted by research intended to support certain beliefs and stereotypes, as well as racial agendas.

This historiography was based on three interrelated threads. The first known fears caused by the invasive tactics of colonialism divided between 'normal' sexuality (heterosexual, monogamous) and 'perverse', 'immoral' and 'dangerous' sexuality, such as same-sex relationships, extramarital affairs and prostitution (Musisi 2014). Again, Delius and Glaser (2005:30) opined that it was Christianity that brought shame to African sexual acts and sexual diversities as they were treated as a sin by Christian missionaries. Again 'Christianity infused sexuality with silence and shame, which probably has contributed to stigma' (Delius & Glaser 2005:32). Therefore, the sexual freedom and liberty that existed in the pre-colonial African era were disrupted and frowned upon by missionaries and colonisers. This freedom entailed the acceptance of genders and sexualities without a desire to categorise and shame them. For instance, this freedom was exemplified by same-sex practice and discourse that occurred within the traditional healing context that was purely indigenous and was not influenced by Western paradigms (Mkasi 2016:6). Undeniably, the modern sexual repression occurred as Christianity employed biblical discourses to define and construct African genders and sexualities (Tamale 2014:159). The next section looks at the use of biblical discourses about sexuality in South Africa.

The use of biblical discourses in South Africa

Corrêa et al. (2008:53) posited that 'Discourses and actions deployed by dogmatic religious voices and groups are a major influence in determining the contours of sexual politics

from the early 2000s. In Africa, genders and sexualities continue to be constructed and reconstructed using Christian and Eurocentric terms and perspectives (Phiri 2016:61). Christian terms entail the use of the Bible as a tool to define acceptable genders and sexualities. On the other hand, Eurocentric terms imply the view that Western gender and sexual constructs are superior to the rest of the world, thus universalising them. Therefore, using these terms, African genders and sexualities continue to be (mis)construed by colonial and missionary ventures (Epprecht 2021). As a result, there is modern sexual repression (Foucault 1978). Although, Foucault speaks of sexual repression from the context of a French philosopher, similar sexual repressions are also prevalent within contemporary African biblical discourses as Murray and Roscoe (1998:173) posited that European colonialists sought to repress genders and sexualities in Southern Africa. Against this backdrop, sexual repression is reflected in South Africa through the construction of African genders and sexualities often defined in biblical terms even in the post-1994 South African political epoch.

The current gender and sexualities narrative in South Africa

Although the post-1994 South African constitution has been deemed progressive because it includes a clause that prohibits discrimination against people based on their race, gender or sexual orientation, the reality of unchanged attitudes towards people engaging in same-sex practices is evidence that transformation is not yet fully attained (Posel 2011:131; Sanger 2010:115; Schäfer & Range 2014:11). Biblical discourses are still covertly and overtly used in South Africa to force and reinforce rigid sexual moral codes. While there is nothing wrong when biblical texts are used correctly, their application to issues of gender and sexuality in the South African context becomes problematic because of (mis)interpretations and sometimes inadequate contextualisation. It is as Kisiang'ani (2004:19) opined that these Western conceptions of African genders and sexualities in their rigid forms have been effectively reinforced by Christian religious texts. Again, Corrêa et al. (2008:55) opined that Catholicism is a 'religion of the book' that uses scriptures to mobilise conservative public positions on a wide range of issues, including gender and sexuality'. Indisputably, it is not only Catholicism but Christianity in its entirety that has always used scriptures to influence society about strict moral gender and sexuality issues (Corrêa et al. 2008:61-62; Jakobsen & Pellegrini 2003).

According to Nadar (2020), research on sexuality in Africa demonstrates the indisputable influence of Christianity's holy book (the Bible) in denouncing forms of sexual expressions and identities when they deviate from the heteronorm. Without a doubt, Black bodies in addition to African genders and sexualities are also disparaged in biblical discourses. Mothoagae and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2021:2) posited that the missionary enterprise employed the Bible as

an imperial 'tool', and this was done to convert, civilise and colonise Black bodies in South Africa. The myth that black people are sexually deviant is the cornerstone of historical and contemporary racial discrimination and inequality (Johnson and Hunte 2012:52). Therefore, biblical discourses have left Black bodies, Black genders and sexualities as contested spaces, struggling and fighting for recognition as valid and human in South Africa, Africa and other global spaces.

Biblical discourses on gender and sexuality comprise conversations and debates centred on human existence to understand gender and sexuality in the context of their complex interconnections with biblical texts, settings and interpretive histories (Punt 2018:69). The hegemonic heteronormative gender and sexuality narratives that are founded on biblical scriptures to marginalise and exclude non-normative genders and sexualities, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer persons (LGBTIQ+), characterise these discourses in South Africa.

Scriptures that are commonly used to condemn same-sex practices include Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13, which declare that it is an abomination for a man to lie with another man as with a woman; Romans 1:26–27 which speak of God giving them to their lust so that men have sexual desires for other men and women for other women, and 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, which list homosexuality as one of the sins that can keep a person from entering the kingdom of God. These passages of scriptures are often used as the basis for demonising other genders and sexualities while strengthening the hegemonic position of heterosexuality and the Western constructions of African genders and sexualities.

Therefore, biblical discourses that hegemonise heterosexuality and marginalise non-normative genders and sexualities in South Africa suggest that the desired non-discriminatory transformation has not yet been accomplished. According to Potgieter and Reygan (2011:60), homophobia in religious and biblical discourse still permeates religious life despite improvements in South Africa's legal view of homosexuality. Thus, decolonising this narrative is important because it advances the move to liberate African genders and sexualities. This task is a never-ending process because the legacies of the missionary-colonial era regarding gender and sexuality are still pervasive in South Africa. As a result, it is crucial to problematise the present constructions of genders and sexualities and to delink them from the missionary-colonial agenda. This should happen not just for South Africa but also for the entire African continent and other contexts with comparable dynamics.

Delinking the narrative

The task of delinking the current narrative from the sources of ongoing inequalities that were firmly established and have their historical origins in Europe is imperative. The delinking

processes here entail posing an epistemic challenge to colonialist thinking that has subjugated African genders and sexualities (Noxolo 2017:342). This subjugation is reflected in the way that African genders and sexualities are currently constructed using biblical discourses as suppressive tools. Therefore, delinking the ideology of suppressing and subjugating African genders and sexualities is necessary for decolonising the current status quo. According to Mignolo (2007a) the following is one of the characteristics of the decolonisation processes:

The definitive rejection of 'being told' from the epistemic privileges of the zero point what 'we' are, what our ranking is about the ideal gender and sexuality, and what we have to do to be recognized as such. (p. 3)

This means that Africans will have to reach a point where they refuse to be defined according to Western terms and constructions. An example of such refusal was set by the Basotho women who had intimacy with other women and still did not identify as lesbians, rather used the term mummies for older women and babies for younger women to define their practice (Kendall 1998:221–238).

In the same vein, Arnfred (2004b:7) posited that 'The time has come for re-thinking sexualities in Africa'. This can happen if the pluriverse nature of African genders and sexualities is duly acknowledged and embraced by emphasising how God created everyone in God's image, thus embracing everyone with love irrespective of gender and sexuality. Therefore, in this context, delinking is a call to rethink and transform the ways that African genders and sexualities have been portrayed, understood and practiced. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2015:485) asserted that decoloniality is not only a long-standing political and epistemological movement intended to free (ex-) colonised peoples from global coloniality but also a way of being, thinking and acting. Indisputably, colonial thinking, understanding and practices are perpetuated by biblical discourses as churches in Africa are sites for the reproduction of coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). The use of biblical discourses in the construction of African genders and sexualities should be challenged and transformed because it is based on what Mignolo (2007b:450) calls 'the crooked rhetoric that naturalizes "modernity" as a universal global process and point of arrival hides its darker side, the constant reproduction of 'coloniality'.

This call to delink the current narrative is comparable to creating a new kind of theology, which Mashau (2018:7) referred to as 'a theology of hope'. This theology seeks to overcome social divisions including racism, tribalism, xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of discrimination based on gender and sexuality. Similar sentiments were also echoed by Togarasei (2020:30), who regarded this transformation as a transition from biblical to Christian sexual theology. He further asserted that the premise that the Bible lacks a coherent sexual theology necessitates the need for Christian theology that considers both the teaching of the

Bible and the existential circumstances of readers and users of the Bible today (Togarasei 2020:30:34).

Investigating the power dynamics that played a role in both the production and performance of biblical discourse requires a focus on gender performativity to understand the Bible as a discourse. The focus shifts to how relations of power have established sexual hierarchies to serve as expressions of naturalness and normality, how power through discursive practices has created and upheld normative ideals of the body and how power, as repeated acting, has constructed sexual normativity. Investigating biblical discourses is more interested in what the bible did and does than what biblical writing says about gender, sexuality or the body (Vorster 2012). Therefore, delinking biblical discourses from the Western colonial-missionary agenda is not concerned with biblical references condemning other non-normative sexualities; it is, however, concerned with the repercussions of such writings and discourses on the lives of those who do not identify with heterosexuality.

In the same vein, African theologies, womanist theologies and other liberation theologies in Africa rarely speak of these power relations regarding African genders and sexual liberation. This is like other liberation theologies that Marcella Althaus-Reid lamented about when she said that decades ago, liberation theologies began to be wary of politically dictated definitions of terms like 'theology' and 'theologian'. Liberationists described theologians at that time as factory or mine workers who were attempting to detect the presence of God in a socially and economically downtrodden community. However,

It did not occur to them at that time that it was necessary to dismantle the sexual ideology of theology, and for theologians to come out from their closets and ground their theology in a praxis of intellectual, living honesty. (Althaus-Reid 2003:2)

These theologians that need to come out of the closets should dismantle the monogenous description of African genders and sexualities. Indeed, Mignolo (2020:616) opined that 'decolonial tasks must be pursued on many fronts, all of them interrelated in their march towards universal modes of existence'. This means that the monogamous view of African genders and sexualities must be dismantled and their pluriverse forms accepted and presented as valid. This action will not only liberate biblical discourses from their subjugated state but will also transform the current dominant narrative by opening the doors of Christianity to everyone irrespective of gender and sexual orientation.

Conclusion

This article made the case that colonial ideologies, religion and Christianity still influence how genders and sexualities are constructed and interpreted in international contexts. Furthermore, it argued that starting in the early 2000s, discussions and acts taken by dogmatic religious voices and organisations have had a major impact on establishing the

contours of sexual politics. Thus, genders and sexualities are still being constructed and redefined in Africa using languages and viewpoints that are Christian and Eurocentric. Therefore, colonial and missionary endeavours continue to (mis)interpret African genders and sexualities. There is consequently 'contemporary sexual repression' visible in South Africa because of the formation of African genders and sexualities using Christian and biblical discourses. This article called for the transformation of this dominant narrative currently in place in South Africa. As a result, the decolonial theory was used to dismantle African genders and sexualities from the Western goal of sexual repression. This aimed at transforming gender and sexual norms in contemporary South Africa as well as other nations. This calls for the destruction of the monogamous conception of African genders and sexualities and the acceptance of their plurality. Not only will this effort free biblical discourses from their oppressive status but will also change the prevalent narrative by making Christianity accessible to everyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

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Author's contributions

T.S. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

No human subjects were used as this research was secondary research. Nevertheless, research ethical factors were considered when choosing the study materials and sources that were analysed and examined for this article. Additionally, no animals, children or other vulnerable individuals participated in the study.

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Disclaimer

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