The symbolic significance of motifs on selected Asante religious temples

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Abstract
Asante temples are small edifices built over 100 or 200 years ago to house the shrines of some of the deities of the Asante. They are adorned with beautiful motifs which are a body of knowledge about the culture of the Asante, yet not much scholarly work has been done on these motifs on the temples. As a result, a lot of Ghanaians do not know much about the motifs on the traditional temples. This research therefore presents a brief history of selected Asante temples and the symbolic significance of their motifs. The research revealed that the motifs are a storehouse of information regarding the religious beliefs and social norms of the Asante. They enlighten us about symbolism in Asante art and serve as decorations on the temples. The symbols represent concepts and beliefs personified in human and animal forms and geometric shapes. They as well echo some philosophies and wise sayings of the Asante.

Keywords: Asante; motifs; indigenous; symbolic; temples

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The Asante are a Twi-speaking people of Akan descendants who occupy the central part of the Republic of Ghana. Oral tradition suggests that the Asante came from an area north of the West African forest belt to occupy their present home in the central forest region of Ghana. According to Osei, "the ancestors of the Asante emerged from a hole in the ground at Asantemanso, near Essumengya and Bekwai in the present day Amansie West District of Ghana." Another school of thought is that the Asante migrated from the old Ghana Empire to present-day Ghana. However, according to oral traditions, some of the people migrated from Mesopotamia in Asia. The writer further stated that the people shared boundaries with the Israelites and were of the same roots. Wherever the Asante might have migrated from, they settled in the forest belt of Ghana to form states. Nana Osei Tutu I, the first King of the Asante, united the then-separate Asante states into one strong kingdom in the later part of the 17th century. Under Nana Osei Tutu I and other successive Asante Kings, the Asante grew into a powerful empire in the next two centuries until its dominance was squashed by the British in 1901.

Early Asante religious culture centered on the belief in a supreme being called Nyame or Onyankopn (God), who created and controls everything in the universe. Natural phenomena such as water bodies, mountains, and forests, which are believed to be the progeny of Nyame, possess special powers. Abosom, the spiritual entities, serve as the intermediaries between Nyame and the people. Debrah et al. and argue that the abosom are believed to reside in shrines which have been properly sanctified with the appropriate ritual. The shrine may be kept under a tree or in a temple. Historically, the Asante are known for their bravery and their formidable chieftaincy institution. They are known particularly in the arts of metal casting, wood carving, fabric decoration, weaving, and pottery. The Asante also achieved great feats in the areas of architecture and wall decoration. Their buildings became larger and beautifully adorned just as their towns became bigger.

The Asante built palaces, temples, and homes in their traditional courtyard architectural styles with steep-sloped thatch roofs. The walls of the palaces, homes of very prominent citizens, and temples of the deities were profusely adorned with motifs. Sadly, however, most of the Asante traditional buildings got ruined, especially during the Asante and British wars. Only a few temples of the abosom have survived. These temples are found in some of the villages dotted around Kumasi, such as Kentinkrno, Adako Gyaakye, Besese, Edwenease, Abirem, Saaman, Bosore, Asenemaso, Kenyase, and Bdwese. The walls of the temples are adorned with reliefs of human, animal, plant, and abstract motifs. Besides their aesthetic significance, the motifs also reflect the philosophical beliefs and norms of the Asante.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study is primarily focused on the description of the symbolic and aesthetic significance of motifs on temples that are located at Adako Gyaakye, Asenemaso, Besese, Kentinkrno, Edwenease, and Abirem in the Asanti Region of Ghana. According to Best, McNeil, and Cohen and Manion, the aim of this research is to paint a holistic picture and depth of understanding, but not to render a numeric analysis of data. The researchers’ fieldwork, observation, and structured interviews served as the primary data, and literary sources from other writers served as the secondary data as proposed by Ary et al. Principally, the spotlight was placed on 6 out of the 10 existing Asante temples that are located in this region. Data concerning the interpretation of the symbols on the temples and the functions of the temples were collected from the custodians of the temples and from the heads of families at the palaces and houses which also had the motifs on the walls.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**The Adako Gyaakye temple**

The Adako Gyaakye temple was built by the people of Adako Gyaakye, Fumesua, Abirem, and Tikurom through communal labor upon the invitation of the chief of Adako Gyaakye. Two of the original decorated houses built at the time have collapsed. Over the decades, the Adako Gyaakye temple has gone through several renovations. The
late-17th-century temple was enlarged in the early 19th century and used as the chief’s residence.

Those who consult the deity known as *Obosom Akwasi Sima* include childless mothers, business-people, and the sick. The *Adako Gyaakye* temple is built in the Asante traditional courtyard style. The roof has been changed from the original thatch to corrugated iron sheets (Figure 1). It comprises the *bosomdan* (shrine), *akyeromadefon* (drummers’ room), *soorofon* (cooks’ room), and *adwomtofon* (singers’ room).

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*Figure 1. Adako Gyaakye temple (exterior view).*

*Figure 2. Adako Gyaakye temple (interior view).*

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**Symbolic significance of selected motifs on the Adako Gyaakye temple**

The *Adako Gyaakye* temple has been adorned with several motifs. It is interesting to note that the symbolic significance of these motifs is encoded in the names of the motifs, as well as in their religious and social interpretations. Some of the names of the motifs on the temple include *seb ne bfo*, *takyiri fa*, and *kra*.

**Seb ne bfo motif**

**Symbolism:** Strength and bravery

This motif consists of two separate symbols. It is made up of a leopard (*seb*) image on the left column which supports the arch in front of the temple and another figure of a hunter (*bfo*), placed on the right column in front of the “deity’s room” (*bosom dan*) (Figure 2). The motifs are rendered in profile without much detail. The motifs face each other. The hunter is pointing a gun at the leopard while the leopard appears to be moving toward the hunter (Figure 3).

*Figure 3. Seb ne bfo motif (arrowed) – Adako Gyaakye temple.*

The motif symbolizes the idea that the deity representing the *bfo* (hunter) was capable of protecting the people from the terror of evil spirits representing the *seb* (leopard), thereby instilling a sense of security and an assurance of protection for the society. The symbolic implication is that the strength and courage of the righteous can overpower the terror of the evil.

**Takyiri fa motif**

**Symbolism:** The optical powers of the obosom (deity)

This motif shows two birds placed facing each other. They are placed very close together without much detail; they are only separated by a tree placed between them. The head of the bird on the right is turned backwards (Figure 4).

*Figure 4. Takyiri fa motif (arrowed).* The bird representations are believed to demonstrate the ability to turn its head round in a full 360° circle as demonstrated by the other bird. Therefore, the motif symbolizes the deity’s capability of seeing all evil deeds in all directions. It is also believed to be able to see and alert the community or someone of impending calamities. Even though this representation seems to depict the traditional Ghanaian Sankofa symbol, which advises people not to shy away from going back to the past to take the good things or learn from past achievements as well as failures, the import of the *Takyiri fa* motif indicates the omniscient
and all-seeing nature of the deity. This motif also expresses a complete trust in the providential care of the deity who stands for all the benign forces that sustain life on this earth.

**kra motif (cat motif)**

Symbolism: **Quietness and precision**

The cat motif, found on the upper wall of the adjoining house, is meant to symbolize the slow but swift ways of the cat. Also known as *anwaanwaadaabo* (the animal that walks or does things slowly and quietly), it has the tendency to move slowly yet precisely to achieve its goal. This quiet quality of the cat and its sense of precision are attributed to the deity, which is also believed to act very quietly with precision (Figure 5). 21

The motifs are found on both the outer walls and the lower portions of the inner walls (Figure 6). The lower portion of the front wall is painted red, while the upper portion, the sides, and the back of the temple are painted white. Red is a color used by traditional Akans to show a sense of seriousness, readiness for a serious spiritual or political encounter.22 The temple is a place for sacrificial rites and the shedding of blood, which is symbolic of red. On the other hand, white is used to symbolize spiritual purification, healing, and sanctification rites. In the Asenemaso temple, a lot of ritual sacrifices are performed. Therefore, the color white symbolizes contact with ancestral spirits, deities, and other unknown spiritual entities such as ghosts.

**The Asenemaso temple**

The Asenemaso temple was built between 1894 and 1896 for Obosom *Tano Kwasi*, of river Tano. This deity was brought from Manfo-Tano by Kwadwo Frimpong, also known as Kokoroko, to Nana Amankwaatia, the Bantamahene at the time, to lead him to wars. The original temple was called *Tano Kwasi Fie*. The motifs were said to have been done by Kofi Yinka, Kwame Akosem, and Aboagye Sei on the temple in their hometown. The deity had a priest called Bosie who came from Suma. *Tano Kwasi* was very well known before and after the Yaa Asantewaa war as a powerful soothsayer with healing powers. *Kwasi Tano* accompanied Asante troops to the battlefield as a consultant during the Yaa Asantewaa war. After the war, the village of Asenemaso was left desolate for many years (S. Larbi, personal communication, 2011). Consequently, the temple which was roofed with leaves or *benmu* caved in. On their return to the village, the temple was rebuilt and then roofed in the current state. It “stands” just on the left side of the Kumasi–Sunyani motor highway. It is on the same premises with the *banmu* (royal cemetery).

**Symbolic significance of selected motifs on the Asenemaso temple**

The exterior walls of *Asenemaso* Temple are adorned in the *Owuo atwedee* motif and the *Dwanninmmon* motif, executed mostly on the outside wall.

**Owuo atwedee motif**

Symbolic implication: **Death is inevitable; every being shall experience it**
This motif is composed of a network of diagonal lines boldly modeled on the lower wall of two of the columns in front of the temple (Figure 7). It captures the *owuo atwede o baako nfiro* (the ladder of death is not climbed by only one person), an Asante proverb that is a reminder of the inevitable journey of death to which everyone shall succumb.

The lesson is that people should always sympathize with the bereaved because everyone is vulnerable.

### Dwannini mmọn motif

**Symbolism:** Aptness and staying away from trouble

This is a decorative motif on the base of one of the pillars in front of the temple.

The lower portion is placed above the surface, while the upper portion consists of incised lines. The entire motif comprises spiral lines placed on a pedestal (Figure 8).

This motif symbolizes the aptness and significance of the ram for temple rituals.

The *dwannini* (ram), usually a white ram without blemish, is the preferred sacrificial animal for invocation, pacification, and/or thanksgiving. Therefore, the motif is a reminder to clients who visit the temple for various reasons to prepare their pre-consultation sacrificial lamb. In the traditional Ghanaian culture, the ram is considered to have the attributes of power, force, energy, virility, protection, and fearlessness. Significantly, a white ram is chosen to show the purity of the sacrifice, which is being offered to the gods.

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**The Kentinkrōno temple**

Kentinkrōno is a suburb about 6 miles from Kumasi on the Kumasi–Accra highway. The current chief is called Nana Owusu Afriyie. The *Taak Kwadwo* (Tan; Kwadwo) temple was built after the Yaa Asantewaa war. In 1918, the Kentinkrōnokene, Nana Ankbea, brought the deity from Praso near Nkawkaw in the eastern region of Ghana and built the temple for it at Kentinkrōno (Figure 9). The deity was often consulted by barren women and the sick. It also predicted the outcome of impending wars. These decorative temple motifs (Figures 10–12) by anonymous artists convey thought-provoking philosophies that are largely coded in the messages which the motifs convey.

The shrine of the deities is intact, but unfortunately they have neither priest nor priestess to service the temple. The temple was eventually abandoned and occupied by squatters until recently, when the Ghana Museums and Monument Board (GMMB) restored it in 2006.

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Figure 7. *Owuo atwede* motif – Asenemaso.

Figure 8. *Dwannini mmọn* motif – Asenemaso.

Figure 9. Kentinkrōno temple.
Symbolic significance of selected motifs on the Kentinkr\textregistered no temple

There are three main motifs presented on the temple. Each of these motifs also presents some thought-provoking philosophies, and the philosophies are largely coded in the messages which the motifs convey.

\textbf{Sank\textregistered fa motif}

\textbf{Symbolism: Retrieving the positive aspects, the culture is not abominable}

The Sank\textregistered fa motif is boldly modeled on the lower part of the pillar in front of the shrine room. It comprises a spiral line in the shape of a bird that has turned its head backwards. Traditionally, the symbol is represented by a picture of a bird which is shown moving forward and at the same time turning its neck back to look over its shoulder into the past, which is used to signify the fact that progress is based on the right use of the positive contributions from the past. The bird’s tail and feet are defined in abstract forms of vertical lines. The entire motif is placed on a pedestal (Figure 11). Sank\textregistered fa expresses the popular proverb sank\textregistered fa yennkyi\textregistered or se wo were fi na wo san lefa a yennkyi, which literally can be translated as “It is not wrong to go back and fetch” or “If you forget and go back to fetch it, it is not wrong,” respectively. The motif represents the idea of reclaiming the positive aspects of our cultural past.

\textbf{\text\textregistered denkyem motif}

\textbf{Symbolism: Anyone who destroys a neighbor destroys society}

This motif shows a crocodile (\text\textregistered denkyem) holding a mud fish in its mouth. Its figure is highlighted in dots with an impressive tail-wagging look. It is found on the outside wall of the shrine room (Figure 9). The \text\textregistered denkyem motif is a visual representation of an Asante proverb which states \text\textregistered denkyem b\textregistered ne na odi ne b\textregistered ne mu a\textregistered dee. In the illustrated proverb, depicting a mud fish in the mouth of its neighbor, the crocodile is an obvious reference to good neighborliness. It warns the powerful in society not to harass or destroy the weak ones. Culturally, the Asantes believe in fairness and respect for each other no matter how inferior one appears. A symbol of this nature is therefore used to advise the privileged in society to behave peacefully with the less privileged members.

\textbf{The Besease temple}

Besease is a village near \text\textregistered dweso about 21 km from Kumasi on the Kumasi–Accra highway. The Besease temple was built by \text\textregistered kmfo\textregistered Yaw Awua in the 19th century during the reign of Nana Kwaku D\textregistered oo\textregistered kyi the Edweso\textregistered hemene.\textsuperscript{24,25} It houses the shrine of the Besease \text\textregistered tam deity known as \text\textregistered tam\textregistered Yaw. According to Besease popular knowledge, Yaa Kyaa, an indigene of Besease and a relative of Yaa Asantewaa the \text\textregistered dwesohemaa, gave birth, surprisingly to a mysterious object instead of a human being (Figures 13 and 14). It was revealed, upon consultations with mediums, that the object was the
representation of a powerful deity called Tan. It was given the traditional day name on its birth as Tan Yaw or Taa Yaw, thus born on a Thursday. Yaa Kyaa then became the priestess of the deity. Tan Yaw is regarded as a protective deity, reputed to be a great protector of its people in times of war.

Both the GMMB and the French Embassy in Ghana carried out some restoration work on the Besease temple in 1963 and 1998. It is also a relatively popular tourist attraction site. At the moment, no priest or priestess has replaced the late priest, who died about 6 years ago. However, the place is kept under the stewardship of Opanin Kofi Bonsu.

Symbolic significance of selected motifs on the Besease temple

The Besease temple has several motifs which are similar to the motifs on the other temples. They consist of animal figures, plant forms, and abstract forms. These motifs carry symbolic ideas which are inherent in their meanings. One unique motif on the temple, however, is the nnomaa mmienu motif.

Nnomaa mmienu motif

**Symbolism: Mutual understanding**

This motif (Figure 15) shows two birds (nnomaa mmienu) facing each other. They appear to be feeding from a single source. They are also linked by a series of circular lines. The motif is found at the top of the doorway of the shrine room.

This motif represents the idea of peaceful coexistence, and mutual understanding between such opposites (opposite forces) in society as day and night; male and female; life and death; young and old; and, by extension, the deity and the priest, as well as the deity and the community.

It is embedded in Asante culture and tradition that peace between opposing forces obviously brings unity, calmness, and progress in society, and avoidance of imbalance and calamities.

The Dwenease temple

Dwenease (popularly called Edwenease) is about 8 km from Dweso (Ejisu) through Nwe (Onwe). It was founded by Opanin Kwaku Yawo in the 19th century (K. Dua, personal communication, 2008). The village was founded under a big tree called dwono. Hence, the name of the village became Dwenease (Edwenease), meaning “under the dwono tree.” After the people had settled there, they built a temple for their Obosom Atuo-Kosua Kwame.

Dua claims that Atuo-Kosua Kwame helped the Dwesohene to defeat the army of the Mampnhene (Mampongahene), who together with the Kokofuhene had rebelled against the Asantehene. In order to honor the deity for this victory, the Dwesohene (Ejisuhene) Kwabena Dua ordered for the temple to be rebuilt and enlarged. The daha leaf roof was changed to corrugated tin sheets. The motif creator-artist was called Kosae Fuo, and his apprentice was Kwaku Nitnaka and hailed from Antoa.
The present Adwenease temple comprises the conventional Asante courtyard structure. These are the respective shrine rooms for the drummers, the singers, and the cooks. The house of the priest is attached to the temple. The abosom dan (shrine room) has an open yard that makes it possible to see the shrine from the courtyard. The Nyame dua is found in front of the abosom dan (shrine room). The lower parts of both the exterior and interior walls are painted red, while the upper parts of both the exterior and interior walls are painted white.

There are varieties of motifs decorating the upper and lower parts of the interior walls. The exterior wall of the akyeremafo dan is embellished with these motifs. These motifs are expressed with a range of stylized and abstract human figures (Figure 16). The temple and the motifs have generally been kept in good shape, but the priest, named Opanyin Kwaku Assuming, is currently old and weak (at the time of this research).

Symbolic significance of selected motifs on the Adwenease temple

The Adwenease temple is decorated in a variety of motifs. They comprise human figures, animal figures, plant forms, and abstract shapes. These motifs carry symbolic meanings that reflect religious and social issues (Figure 17).

Bofo motif
Symbolism: Always ready to hunt evil spirits
Bofo means a hunter. This motif shows a relief figure of a male (Figure 18) on the base of the exterior of the cook’s room. The motif represents a warrior holding a sword (afena) in his right hand and a gun (etuo) in his left hand. He also has a bag (apiretwua) and gunpowder (atuduro) “tied” around his waist, creating an illusionary impression of a hunter who is ready to shoot an animal. The symbolic implication is that the deity is always ready to hunt evil spirits, just like the hunter, who is ready to hunt animals.

Denkyem motif
Symbolism: Trust in knowledgeable people
Denkyem is a crocodile. Figure 19 is a motif on the upper wall of the exterior of the cooks’ room. It shows an denkyem (crocodile) with a bomokyikyie (mud fish) in its mouth.

The motif is a usual representation of the Asante proverb se bomokyikyie firi nsuo ase boka se denkyem atwu a yan nyene no akyinyie, which literally translates as “If the mud fish comes from under the river to say that the crocodile is dead, we do not dispute it” because it lives with it and knows what is happening in their world. In other words, if an aide-de camp reports the death of the master, it must not be disputed. In this context, the symbol means that the interpretation gained out of spiritual consultations by the priest must be final and undisputed.
The Abirem temple

The village of Abirem is about 13 km from Kumasi on the Antoa road. It was founded in the 18th century. Most of the previous traditional buildings in the village have collapsed due to disrepair and a plan to relocate it to another site. The temple of their deity, called Ta\textsuperscript{n} \textit{Abirem Subunu}, still exists. The deity was reportedly brought from Akomadan Nkwantu by a woman called Afia during Osei Tutu's reign as Asantehene. The people of Abirem and the neighbors were very dedicated to the deity. Ta\textsuperscript{n} \textit{Abirem Subunu} accompanied Osei Tutu I to the war against King Adinkra of Gyaaman.\textsuperscript{24}

The Abirem temple is built in the traditional Asante courtyard style (Figures 20 and 21). It is sectioned into four rooms, namely, the \textit{adwomtofo; dan}, \textit{soroofo; dan}, \textit{akyeromadefo; dan}, and \textit{bosom dan}. The entrance of the \textit{bosom dan} has an open front, making it possible for one to see the shrine of the god from the courtyard. The shrine room is a one-storey building. The base of the interior wall is painted red, and the upper level painted white. The exterior walls of the temple are painted white. There is \textit{Nyame dua} in front of the shrine room (see Figure 17).

The GMMB restored the Abirem temple in 1964. There are four types of motifs on the temple at present. Only the walls of the shrine room are decorated.

Symbolic significance of selected motifs on the Abirem temple

All the motifs on the temple are on the front wall of the shrine room. There are only three types of motifs in the Abirem temple. They are placed on both the lower and upper walls. All the motifs are in the abstract, expressed in curves, vertical lines, perpendicular lines, or oval shapes. The motifs bring to the fore the attributes of the deity as well as its relationship with other spirits, as demonstrated below.

\textbf{Nkinkyim motif}

\textbf{Symbolism: Dynamism and versatility surmount challenges}

The \textit{Nkinkyim} (translated as “twisting”) motif in Figure 22 shows relief of several twisting lines in a design that represents the weaving track or path created by a dancing priest or priestess. During ritual performances, the traditional priest dances by moving the legs in systematic rhythmic patterns that cross each other at equal intervals, which create the twisting designs depicted in Figure 22. These dances are believed to invoke the spirits in order to protect the people from the machinations of malevolent spirits, whereas the interlocking patterns created by these lines suggest wholesome protection for the people. The design also represents the qualities of...
dynamism and versatility of the deity. The deity, Taa Yaw, is believed to have the ability to change variously into human and animal forms to outwit evil spirits.  

**Mmoatia adwa motif**

**Symbolism:** Friendship and partnership between the deity and other spirits

This motif is composed of thick vertical lines joined to form the shape of a stool. And the second design comprises two curves that are interlocked to form a unit. The design as created by the motif doubles as a screen window to the shrine room. This motif is found on both sides of the front wall of the *bosom dan* (Figure 23).

The motif represents the friendship/partnership between the deity and the *mmoatia* (gnomes). The Asante traditionally believe that *mmoatia* are nature spirits who also have some human forms and attributes, such as sitting down, whistling, communicating, and eating. They also come to the rescue of people when they are called upon to do so. The depiction of the *adwa* (stools) shows that the gnomes are welcome to the temple. For it is only when one is welcome at a place that he is offered a seat. The gnomes help the priest (or priestess) in the performance of their duties. For instance, according to Yeboah K. (personal interview, March 19, 2012), they might show him a particular plant for preparing medicine to cure diseases.

**Bese saka motif**

**Symbolism:** The possibility of linking the physical with the spiritual through physical things

This motif, a low relief, is incised on the upper front wall of the shrine room, represented by four triangular shapes on the top, bottom, left, and right sides of the motif (Figure 24). *Bese saka* is a bunch of kola nuts; the motif shows a bunch of kola nuts (*Bese saka*) presented in oval shapes.

Kola is a very important fruit that is often included in the offerings to the deity as rituals to the river gods by the roadside. They might also offer kola so that a misfortune will evade them. *Bese* (kola) is also chewed by the Asante when they are bereaved. Deeply embedded in Akan tradition is the belief that kola nuts are one of the favorite foods of the gods as well as ancestors. These nuts are, however, presented to these deities to seek their favors. During divination, four kola nuts are used to represent the four cardinal points (east, west, north, and south) of the universe, and the deities are expected to reveal hidden secrets, from all four directions of the universe, to humans.

The motifs are enjoyed as aesthetically appealing artworks and also as sources of religious and social lessons to the people. The GMMB, since the 1960s, has been restoring the temples in order to preserve them for the present and future generations. Some of them are in very good states, while others are struggling to survive. Most of the temples can now be conveniently labeled as monuments as they are no more manned by priests or priestesses.

**CONCLUSION**

The motifs on the selected Asante temples were found to be imbued with symbolic concepts with religious, medical, social, and political implications. The motifs portray the cosmological beliefs of the peoples which inevitably permeate every aspect of their lives. The study of the motifs on Asante temples can reveal the key to understanding certain aspects of ideologies in the lives of the Asante people.

It could be divulged from the various symbols studied so far that the deities played crucial roles in the religious, political, and medical lives of the people. These crucial roles are encoded in the
visual representation of the deity, and therefore the need for the current study.

A lot of the motifs on some of the temples have disappeared. This is due to years of neglect and lack of restoration of the temples and their motifs. The forms represented in the motifs and their meanings were derived from local objects, tales, myths, proverbs, and experiences.

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