

African Art Music Conducting Decolonizing Western Conducting in Twenty-First Century Southern Nigeria

By

Dr Udoka Peace Ossaiga
Department of Church Music
Baptist Theological Seminary,
Eku, Nigeria.
E-mail: ossaigaup@yahoo.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2777-5478

Abstract

Western art music conducting is Western in its origin, features; and performance practice. However, the export of the art to non-Western regions; and its use to direct non-Western music have combined to produce a mode of conducting that is not entirely Western. Thus, in twenty-first century Southern Nigeria, the use of Western conducting to direct Nigeria/African art music has enabled a transformation of the conducting through the incorporation of African and Western music idioms. Although the practice predates twenty-first century Nigeria, how African art music conducting decolonizes Western conducting has not engrossed adequate scholarly discourse. This paper engages non-participant observation of select Nigerian/African art music conductors in Southern Nigeria to discuss African art music conducting in Southern Nigeria. Findings indicate that African art music conductors in the region decolonize conducting by expanding performance objectives from singing and instrumentation to ensemble kinetics through musical cross-culturalism and performative syncretism. In view of the fore-going, it is worth noting that African art music conducting decolonizes Western conducting as an African-European cross-cultural and syncretic mode of conducting.

Keywords: Conducting, decolonization, African art music, cross-culturalism; syncretism.

Introduction

Western ensemble conducting originated as a European art in Western art history. As an aspect of Western music tradition, its export to various parts of the world through trade, colonialism; and Christian missions enabled the export of Western ensemble conducting tradition to non-Western parts of the world, including Nigeria. In twenty-first century Nigeria is an artistic intercourse between African music traditions and European art music idioms that produced a cross-cultural form of music that is called Nigerian/African art music. The Afro-European art music composition combines African and European idioms in its composition and performance. To conduct the Afro-European music, African and Western directing nuances are used. The conducting of this cross-cultural music with a combination of Western and African performance nuances has produced a form of ensemble conducting that unpins conducting from its purely European status. While this practice is not uncommon in Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt, Warri, Enugu; and Nsukka, Nigeria, the emergence of the conducting form that decolonizes conducting has not engrossed sufficient scholarly discourse. Thus, standard conducting literature retain conducting in its colonial mode. This paper discusses how African art music conducting decolonizes conducting in twenty-first century Southern Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the theories of decolonization and conducting dynamism. Decolonization is the undoing of colonialism, which in itself, is a process wherein imperial nations dominate foreign territories. Riding on the wings of decolonization, scholars of decolonization focus on independence movements in colonies and the collapse of foreign colonial systems. It is worth noting that to decolonize implies the assertion and insertion of indigenous systems in areas previous dominated by foreign systems and ideas (Hack 2008).

Thus, Herbst, Nzewi and Agawu (2003), Bradley (2012), Rosabal-Coto (2014); and Hess (2018) call for the decolonization of music education in Africa through their highlights of the violence of colonialism that replete curricula, pedagogy, teacher education; and music philosophies, among others. Beyond music education, conducting is an aspect of colonial music that should be decolonized in view of conducting innovations in African art music. Conducting in African art music calls for the decolonization conducting in its theory and practice.

Explicating the theory of conducting dynamism, Ossaiga (2020) states that conducting mutates as it interacts with different music cultures, contexts, compositions and conductors. Thus:

- (a) conducting in Southern Nigeria results from music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors.
- (b) Dynamics in music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors affects conducting.
- (c) Dynamics in music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors is vertical, and horizontal. Vertical dynamics is historical, and time-based. It speaks of changes that conducting experiences as it evolves with music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors from one era to another. The horizontal dynamics is geographical. It speaks of changes that conducting experiences as it engages different music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors from one part of the world to another.
- (d) Conducting conventions point to the history, and evolution of conducting with due regard to music cultures, contexts, compositions, and conductors, from one part of the world to another, and from one era to another; thus, conducting practices in Southern Nigeria point to conducting conventions in Southern Nigeria; and

- (e) Conducting evaluations are based on fair regards to relevant music culture, context, composition, and aspects of conductor's personality. Figure 1.1 illustrates the theory of conducting dynamism.

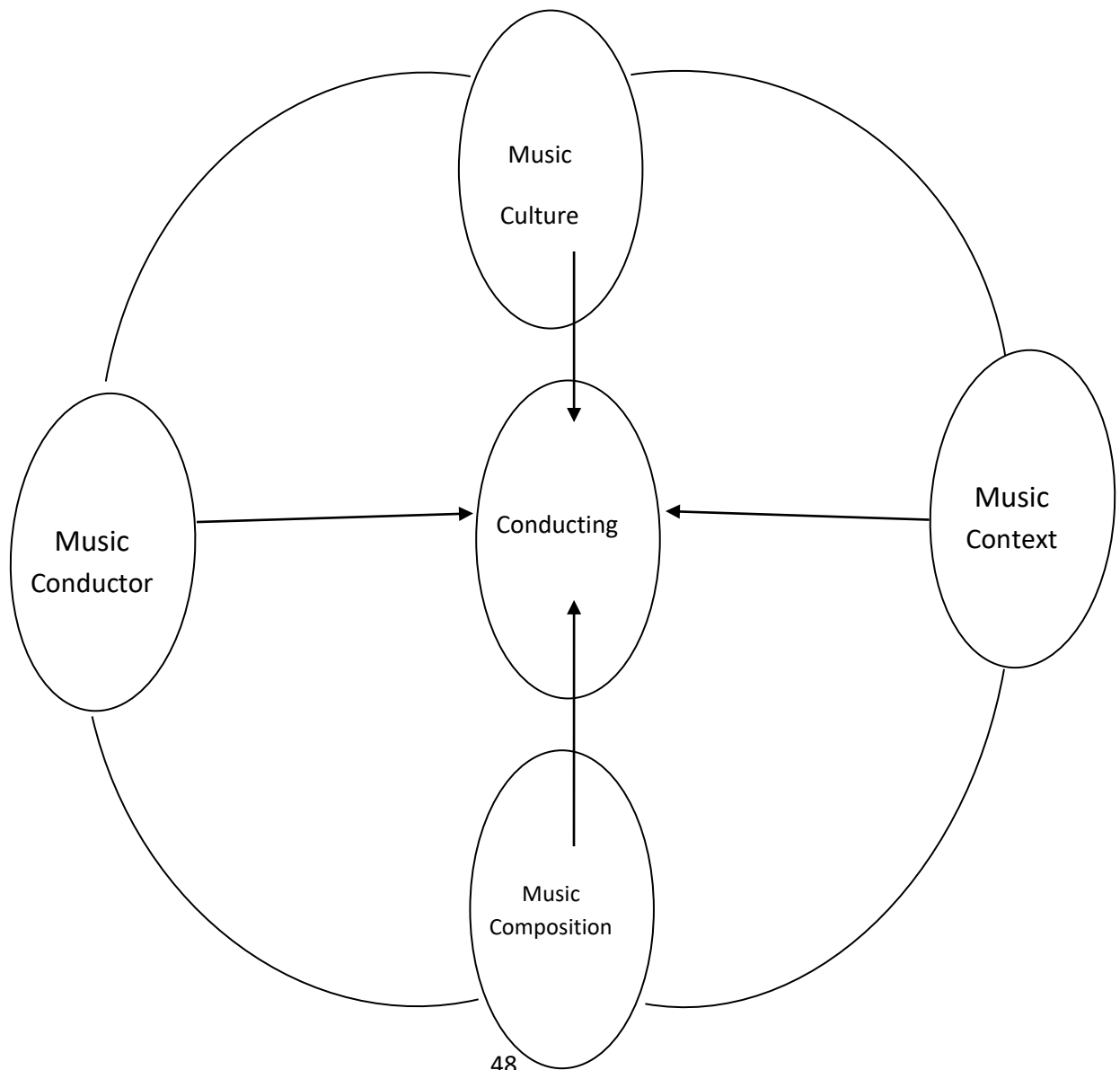


Figure 1.1: A diagrammatic presentation of "*theory of conducting dynamism*"
Source: Researcher-conductor, 2018.

The aspect of the theory that explicates how music culture, context, composition and conductor shape conducting is applicable to this study.

Defining conducting, Macarthur (2013) states that conducting is time beating, and making interpretive decisions, while administering ensemble. Although his view applies much to directing, it is noteworthy that time beating is only used in ensuring that ensembles adhere to metre and tempo. Therefore, time beating as a conducting skill, should be seen in pursuant of conductor's objective of metre, and tempo adherence; not as a conducting end. In a study on choral conducting, Davey (2009) states that conducting is more than just keeping the beat, it is an expression of music that involves the body. His view underscores conducting as an art that involves the human body. According to the League of American Orchestras (2001) conducting is an art of influence through which musicians, audience and communities jointly share a communion with orchestras and their repertoires. The League avers that conducting flows from the respect a conductor commands, his musical vision, skill, and means by which ideas are transmitted via body language and verbal instructions. Their view reflects the role of conducting in connecting conductors, music, musicians, audience and their communities.

Reflecting the evolution of conducting with the music it directs, Demaree and Moses (1995) posit that by the Renaissance era, increasing complexities of rhythm, and polyphonic counterpoint necessitated the practice wherein a (vertical) beat pattern that made no effort to identify strong pulses was used to direct singing. This, they say, was called the '*tactus*' (3). According to them, ensemble conducting in the Baroque commonly emanated from the keyboardist; that convention was kept until at least the time of Joseph Haydn, who directed from

harpsichord at his London concerts in the 1790's. It was only during the nineteenth century that the notion of the conductor as a central authority, working with a baton from the advantage of a podium became the standard. However, two leaders, namely: the keyboardist, and concertmaster, executed conducting tasks. The keyboard player conducted a section of the ensemble by ensuring that all the players were unified, while the concertmaster controlled the string players. Thus, the duality of conducting also manifested in opera performances where more than one players directed the ensemble. Also, Bernstein (1974) reports that sometimes two players hitherto directed ensembles in opera, while the keyboard player was in charge of the singers, the principal violinist was in charge of the orchestra. Although their reports reflect how conducting evolved in Europe during the era, how it evolved in different parts of Western Europe is not clear. In a review of Smith's (2012) book on performance of the sixteenth (16th) century European music, Kreinter observes that theorists of sixteenth (16th) century music occasionally drop hints about the performance practices of the period. Gleaning from the book, he reports that there were profound practical and psychological differences in the way scores were read then, and now; stating that the performance of the sixteenth (16th) century music was characterized by metric hierarchy, unique treatment of cadences and music modes. His view points to a different music culture. While the study is not directly on conducting in the sixteenth (16) century, it is reflective of performance practice of the period, of which conducting is one.

In a study on performance practice in the seventeenth (17th) century Italy, Bassani (2012) reports the central importance of the maestros' beats as the only point of reference for every performer in the ensemble, metrically. Thus, direct interaction with the ensembles was based on basic non-verbal conventions, such as, up-beats, and bipolarity of beats' movements, which had no exception. Tempi were only modified during *ritardando*, and *accelerando* based on certain

stringent conditions. Although the study lacks details on diverse aspects of the conducting, it reflects a strict conducting practice that conditioned conductors and hindered expression. The period could be understood as the conducting era prior to classicism. However, the seventeenth (17th) century conducting practice represents a period, geography, and demography in conducting evolution. Its spread to other periods, places and peoples occasioned further evolution of conducting.

Writing on eighteenth (18th) century conducting practices in Western Europe, Camesi (1970) explicitly reports:

conducting was performed with a baton, a roll of sheet music or other paper, or . . . the hand. A baton was especially popular in France in opera conducting, while concert and choir performances were often conducted with a roll. German musicians knew the baton but preferred the roll; in contemporary reports the roll was often mentioned, and also has been found on paintings of musical scenes and portraits. In some places the roll was considered the symbol of the Kapellmeister, and its popularity continued into the nineteenth Century . . . French musicians used the baton in most concert situations . . . while the Italians and Germans retained the seventeenth-Century practice of conducting operas and instrumental pieces from the klavier. Only in choir performances, in church, or in "sundry other music performances, was a conductor at work . . . in Rome only church music was conducted, never operas, no matter how big the ensemble was (1).

The report reveals how conducting evolved in different parts of Europe with different practices, in different contexts of performance in European art history.

African/Nigerian art music refers to a form of music that results from a fusion of Nigerian/African and European art elements. It is a creation of mostly Nigerian music graduates

who combine European music nuances gleaned from European music theories and practices, and their Nigerian music elements in their art music compositions and performance. Studies in Nigerian art music address challenges, forms, and rehearsal techniques in the genre. According to Omojola (1995) Nigerian art music is the art of a significant number of composers that are trained in universities, and conservatories, both in Nigeria and abroad, whose compositions are conceived along the lines of European music but often employs a considerable measure of African musical elements. He states that the music is a fusion of European, and African elements. Though his view brings to the fore the form of music, its performance practices are not clear. In a study on Nigerian art musicians and social commitment to the family, Onyeji (2006) observes that musicianship in Nigerian art music requires time for personal practice, group rehearsal, travels and stage appearance, with its challenges. These breed misconception of Nigerian art musicians; thus, they are not perceived of being committed to marriage. His study brings to the fore the challenges of art musicianship in Nigeria. According to Udofia (2009) African art music stimulates through voicing, instrumentation, dancing and in varied combinations. He states that the combination of voice, instrumentation, and dance is not uncommon in African music ensembles. It is noteworthy that African (Nigerian) art music combines traditional and foreign musical nuances, reflecting the dual musical background of its practitioners, however, how is African art music conducted to elicit voicing, instrumentation, and dance? In a study on form in Nigerian art music Onwuekwe (2013) reports that the call and response, binary, rondo, ternary, strophic and through compose forms are observable in the works of select Nigerian art music composers. His study details forms in Nigerian art music.

In a performance dissertation on choral directing in African tradition Ogunlade (2014) observes that though African choral conductors demonstrate consciously or unconsciously

African directing behaviours, African music scholars have not designed formal techniques of directing African choral music. To demonstrate African choral conducting practices, he utilised choral repertoire drawn from three (3) dominant Nigerian languages and traditions to demonstrate African choral conducting practices at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso. The performance resonates the import of cultural, and contextual forces to choral directing. Similarly, Olusanya (2015) observes that Western conducting ideals are being adapted for "contextualization in African choral directing" (v); thus, he utilised an SATB choir of thirty-five (35) voices that performed seven (7) choral pieces that were selected from different African languages to demonstrate how Western conducting ideas are interpretatively adapted to express African choral music.

To ascertain the expressiveness of choral directing in, Adetutu (2016), Okunola (2016) and Ajala (2019) conducted choirs that performed select pieces and report that conducting influences choral sound, and congregational singing in Christian worship. Their studies resonate the import of conducting as an effective means of influencing choral acoustics. In an evaluation of choral conducting teaching manual, Abraham (2019) observes the formalistic principles used in training conductors in order to apply same to church based choral conductors in Kaduna Baptist Conference where he observed the use of verbal and nonverbal nuances in conducting, as well as, inadequate choral conducting skills, and knowledge of music. He recommends that churches in Kaduna Baptist Conference should engage the services of music ministers to train church musicians in the area. While music experts are needed to fix musical faults, his suggests that the use of verbal nuances is a conducting anathema is not in not absolute (Miller 1978, Skadsem 1995, and Holden 2017). While studies been executed on challenges of, forms in, and stimulation by Nigerian art music, literature is scant on African art music conducting. Although

Ogunlade (2014), and Olusanya (2015) demonstrated cross-cultural conducting practices in Nigeria at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho, Oyo State, their reports neither emanate from scientific investigations, nor theorise choral conducting practices in Nigeria.

How does African Art Music Conducting Decolonize Conducting in Southern Nigeria?

Through a web of artistic cross-culturalism; and syncretism, African art music conducting decolonizes conducting in Southern Nigeria.

a) Cross-culturalism in African Art Music Decolonizing Conducting

The European origin of Western conducting is not without a measure of Western music culture. This is in tandem with the concept of music and musical arts as cultural expressions. Thus, conducting as a Western musical art embodies, represents and reflects European art music identity. Prior to the advent of African art music, conductors in Southern Nigeria view conducting as the act of gestures, and other forms of body language through which a music group is directed, in tandem with Western classicism. Thus, the basic standards that guide their conducting were westernization, and classicism. The use of Western classicism to direct African art music in Southern Nigeria is in tandem with nuances in standard conducting literature. For literature have, thus far, looked at the standards of conducting through Western lenses. However, African art music conducting in Southern Nigeria has not limited its nuances to Western music conventions.

In addition to the use of nuances of Western conducting, African art music conducting in Southern Nigeria incorporates a measure of African modes of kinetics, clapping and feet stamping. The use of African idioms in African art music conducting points to the African music

tradition that provides some of the idioms in African art music composition and performance. It is worth noting that in Southern Nigeria, there were indigenous ensembles that were directed with traditional techniques before the advent of Western conducting. Thus, different nations in today's Southern Nigeria used indigenous norms of gesture, clapping, instrumentation, and kinetics to direct *ukele*, *midaka* and *omoko* among the Ukwani, Urhobo and Itsekiri of Delta State, Southern Nigeria, respectively. In other parts of Southern Nigeria, indigenous ensembles directing mechanism was used to direct *ogene*, and *gan gan* ensembles of the Igbos and Yorubas, respectively. The indigenous mechanism was used to direct ensemble sonic, choreography, and drama in tandem with the people's concept of music as a union of arts. Thus incorporating the indigenous ensemble directing practice into African art music conducting, conductors use Nigerian, nay African choral directing standards, as deemed necessary. Since the use of indigenous ensemble directing acts predates the advent of colonialism and Christian missions, it could be said that to Africans in twenty-first century Southern Nigeria, indigenous ensemble directing mechanism is senior to Western conducting nuances!

Also, African ensemble directing nuances are used in directing African art music to expand ensembles performance objectives. While singing suffixes in Western choral ensemble performances, in African music tradition, choral ensembles sing, dance, sway, dramatize, and display! Thus, these practices are used in African art music conducting to elicit ensemble's performance in sonic, kinetic, and dramatic dimensions. The use of African and European art idioms to conduct African art music explains artistic cross-culturalism in the region. Furthermore, the combination of African ensemble directing system with Western conducting acts decolonizes conducting through the breach of its conventions. It also promotes Nigerian indigenous ensemble directing practices which have been in use before the advent of European

conducting in the region. Thus, cross-culturalism is a strong force determining African art music conducting in the study area. African art music conducting points to two different music cultures, namely: African and European music cultures. As stated, the African music idioms inherent in African art music conducting in Southern include the following. The use of:

- a) indigenous kinetics to elicit ensemble kinetics,
- b) feet stamping to elicit ensemble feet stamping;
- c) clapping to communicate clapping to ensemble.

b) Conducting Syncretism in African Art Music

Syncretism refers to the amalgamation of different schools of thoughts, cultures and religions. In the context of African art music conducting, it means the use of musical acts that are traceable to Western European, and African music cultures in conducting. In Southern Nigeria, African art music conducting involves cross cultural practices that point to the music cultures where Western conducting hailed from, and African music culture wherein the conducting interacts with its music idioms. Thus, Nigerian art music is conducted using both Western, and Nigerian musical acts to elicit sonic, and kinetic responses from ensembles.

When conducting Nigerian art music, conductors use applicable beat patterns, adhere to dynamics, incorporate applicable dance patterns and performance practices applicable to the music. The dance patterns/performance practices are usually sourced from the tradition/culture where the music hails. The utilization of western conducting beat patterns and dance that is sourced from the Nigerian music culture where the music hails point to *performative* cross-culturalism, however, the Nigerian songs that have been arranged into art form, and its dance constitute the music. The role of the conductor in conducting syncretism is a completion of the

music making process by joining the sonic to its kinetic elements. Although the extra sonic dimensions of African art music may not be written, it is the duty of the conductor to personally practice the dance steps, teach the ensemble to learn to combine dancing with singing and/or instrumentation; and to present all in performance.

Revealing the source of the dances used in African art music conducting, it is observed that Nigerian art music conductors use indigenously sourced dance forms, in addition to posture, beat patterns, gestures and facial expression. However, all the conducting techniques are bent to accommodate performance practices that are applicable to Nigerian art music. The use of indigenously sourced dance forms and modifying western conducting art to accommodate Nigerian performance practices indicate a merger of western and Nigerian music traditions in conducting Nigerian art music. Although Nigerian art music is mainly sourced indigenously, their arrangements into art songs reflect a measure of Western music tradition which their composers, and arrangers are exposed to. The integration of Nigerian musical acts into the conducting of Nigerian art music align with the nature of the music. In merging Western European conducting practices with Nigerian musical kinetics to conduct Nigerian art music, the strict conducting norms used in directing Western European art pieces are modified to enable the combination.

It is noteworthy that ensemble performance in some Nigerian music traditions incorporates dances, instrumentation and singing. Thus, the extension of *performative* objectives in Nigerian art music conducting to kinetics reflects Nigerian indigenous choral traditions, which Nigerian art music conducting is not divorced from. Nuances used in African art music conducting are used to elicit ensemble's sonic, kinetic, and dramatic responses in line with African music traditions. The combination of African ensemble traditions with Western

ensemble tradition in African art music conducting makes the conducting a syncretism of Western and African music cultures, a reflection of Nigerian and European music cultures.

It is noteworthy that while the African art music conducting involves time beating, the conducting is not as strict as that of the Western. The conductor is at liberty to incorporate dance patterns on the stage or in rehearsals to elicit appropriate dance from the ensemble. Thus, the Nigerian/African art music conducting is free in concept and practice.

Although some conductors view African art music conducting as a merger of African, and Western European music traditions, others are of the view that the conducting is a merger of two conducting conventions, namely: African and Western conducting conventions. It was observed that some practices utilized in conducting Nigerian art pieces align with traditional ensemble acts that are indigenous to the study area. Thus, beyond using gestures, beat patterns, and kinetics to elicit sonic, dramatic, and kinetic elements from the ensembles, conductors utilize same acts to occasionally elicit dance from the audience. The audience's participation in Nigerian art music performance points to their role in traditional music performances.

Furthermore, "call and response", rhythm, and spoken words are vital elements of Nigerian traditional music. Beyond being music features, they point to communal values of interactions, interpersonal relationships, and the explosiveness of Nigerian indigenous culture. Thus, it was observed that Nigerian art music conducting connects the conductor, with his/her ensemble, music, audience, and community in a circle that reflects the people's culture. Therefore, it could be deduced that African art music conducting in Southern Nigeria is a "*syncretic*" act that engages Western, and Nigerian music traditions in directing choral singing, and kinetics, with occasional participation of the audience. The "*syncretic*" mode of conducting features:

- (a) use of beat patterns
- (b) disregard to Western conducting posture minutiae
- (c) pursuit of choral acoustics, dance and/or kinetics as performance objectives
- (d) use of gestures, clapping, traditional dance/kinetics and
- (e) verbalization.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the decolonization of ensemble conducting in Southern Nigeria through a discourse of the role of artistic cross-culturalism and syncretism in the emergence of African art music conducting in Southern Nigeria. Although the study focused on African art music conducting in Southern Nigeria, the findings are not exclusive to the region. In parts of Northern Nigeria, Southern and Eastern Africa, African conductors are fusing African and European conducting traditions to direct African art music. These are evident in the conducting performances of many African art music conductors such as Sir Emeka Nwokedi of the award winning Lagos City Chorale; and Mr Bob Amunye of Port Harcourt Men Ensemble. The fusion of African into European designs illustrates the development of African knowledge systems and the quests of her practitioners to contribute their quota to world knowledge systems, especially, conducting innovations in the twenty-first century.

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