

IMPACT OF URBAN GROWTH IN NEW OWERRI IMO STATE ON HOST COMMUNITIES, 1976-2020

Augustine Uche Igwe

Department of History and International Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
au.igwe@unizik.edu.ng

&

Edward Dabere Opara

Department of History and International Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
ed.opara@unizik.edu.ng
eddyoparah1@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the impact of urban growth in New Owerri, Imo State, on host communities between 1976 and 2020, with a view to highlighting its effects and implications on the host communities. It analyzes government implementation of rural land-use policies, as well as the problems and prospects these policies present for the communities. The study emphasizes the commonalities, peculiarities, and contributions of the host communities to the development of New Owerri. The study recognizes that three (3) communities host the “twin city” of Owerri, officially referred to as New Owerri, with emphasis on the area and size of land mass each community contributed to the development of the twin city. The research method adopts a historical narrative approach, thematically and analytically structured, using qualitative methods for collecting and interpreting available data. Both primary and secondary sources were utilized, including oral interviews, journals, and books relevant to the study. The findings reveal that the urban built environment in the area has more than doubled over the 44-year period (1976–2020). Urban expansion occurred largely at the expense of vegetation, fallow lands, open spaces, and, to some extent, wetlands. The study further shows that the host communities have been impacted positively, negatively, or both. It concludes by recommending that principles of planning standards, land control, and land suitability should be strictly adhered to in the development process of New Owerri for the benefit of the host communities.

Keywords: New Owerri; Urban Growth; Host Communities; Land Use; Imo State Government

Introduction

Owerri is the capital of Imo State, South East Geo-Political zone of Nigeria, which was created on February 3, 1976 as part of the state creation exercise in Nigeria. The state was carved out of the former East-Central State. Owerri serves as the hub of commercial and industrial activity in Imo state and is set in the heart of Igboland, it is also the state's largest city. Owerri town is located at the intersection of roads from Aba, Onitsha, Port Harcourt, and Umuahia. Incidentally, the first three governors between 1976 and September 1979 were military men who did little to improve Owerri, nevertheless, the idea of a New Owerri, World Bank, Ikenegbu and Aladinma neighborhoods were conceived during the early period of military administration.¹ Urban growth in New Owerri saw a remarkable increase in the population and physical size of the area. It was mainly driven by two factors of rural-urban migration, which entails people moving from the rural areas into New Owerri urban center in search of better opportunities that naturally increased the population of the area. Urban growth in the area began to manifest through intensive and systematic Greenfield development by urban extension into previously undeveloped areas, and increased density and development within the existing urban area. Thus, this attracted economic development, although with challenges like strain on infrastructure, environmental degradation, and social issues.

The people of the host communities of New Owerri were hitherto subsistence farmers but have since abandoned farming after Owerri became a state capital in 1976 and their arable lands were acquired by government for other development projects as part of the Owerri Capital Territory, and particularly as their land formed the bulk of the New Owerri area. As the area's population grew, agricultural land surrounding the city of New Owerri was converted to living spaces. The master plan for the comprehensive development of Owerri Capital Territory did not sufficiently carry the residents along in the planning and design of the emerged New Owerri. The stage therefore was set for the struggle against certain variables that encompassed environmental, physical, socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects and more importantly that of heritage and identity. This is so because the cultural identity expresses the philosophy of life, the passion, history and heritage of the people.

Therefore, the paper examines these dimensions in the struggle by host communities to preserve their local identity in New Owerri, and to highlight the extent of benefits and, or losses the host communities experienced.

Brief Overview of Owerri Area

The Geographical Location of Owerri: Owerri is located in the south-western part of Imo State, it is bounded on the north and north east by Mbaise and Ikeduru local Government Areas respectively, on the south and south east by Agbala and Ngor Okpala respectively, on its west end by Ohaji Local Government Area. It included the five communities of the indigenous Owerri Municipal Council of Umuonyeche, Umuororonjo, Oyima, Amawom and Umuodu. It also included the Owerri West and Owerri North Local Government Areas. Owerri lies within latitude (width) $5^{\circ}29'01.1''\text{N}$ (5.4836300°) and longitude (length) $7^{\circ}01'59.7''\text{E}$ (7.0332500°) with an area of approximately 100 square kilometers (40 sq mi),² with a 2019 projected population of 838,554 million.³ Owerri serves as the hub of commercial and industrial activity in the state and is set at the heart of Igboland, it is also the state's largest city. It has an area of 104 square km, with a current projected population of 872,604 in 2020.⁴ The population estimate and projection comes from the latest revision of the UN World Urbanization Prospects, this represent the urban agglomeration of Owerri, which typically includes its population in addition to adjacent suburban areas. It is bordered by the Otamiri River to the east and the Nworie River to the south. The weather is average of 29°C , Wind at 8 km/h, and 81% humidity. The area code is 083.⁵ The area's texture type varied from the plain lands to the hills and Wetland around Nworie and Otamiri Rivers, which flowed across Owerri Municipality through Nekede and Ihiagwa. These two rivers are important landmarks in Owerri, they also provides few mineral resources like sand, gravel, fresh water, and serves for fisheries, especially the Otamiri River.⁶

Owerri is largely endowed with modern social infrastructures such as roads, electricity, schools, hospitals and tourism industries such as hotels, restaurants and recreational centers. Owerri City is one of the hospitality industry centers in Nigeria. However, the New Owerri area serves as the honeycomb of the hospitality industry in the state. Owerri, like a few other state capitals in Nigeria, is known as a civil or public service city. The city is believed to be a place where money is rather spent. It is, however, not like Port Harcourt, Aba, Onitsha, Nnewi, Enugu and others where various production industries are scattered all over. Rather, Owerri city is known for bustling with entertainment activities all week-long, especially during the weekends. However, the general insecurity situation in Nigeria and particularly in the Eastern part has altered or reduced some of the above hospitality indices. In Owerri, hotels of every kind, entertainment centers and eatery spots dot the nook and cranny of the city. Every evening, almost every hotel hosts a number of lodgers who, from every indication, come around to recreate.⁷

The Geographical Location of New Owerri Host Communities

The host communities of New Owerri are made up of two Local Government Areas, Owerri Municipal, but particularly the Umuoyima Autonomous community, and Owerri West people of Nekede (Umualum) Autonomous community, and Umuguma (Ogbuosisi) Autonomous community.⁸ Owerri Municipal is the capital city of Imo State and at the center of the Capital Territory, located within longitude $7^{\circ}02'\text{E}$ and latitude $5^{\circ}49'\text{N}$. It has an area of 58 km². Owerri Municipal is bounded at the Southeast by Naze, at the Northwest by Irete, Nekede is located 0.5 km south of the municipality, Uratta located at the north, Egbu located 6 km east, and Umuguma Town, 6 km west.⁹ The area of New Owerri under Umuoyima of Owerri Municipal Council includes, the Owerri Girls Secondary School, Port-Harcourt Road, Imo Television (ITV) and NTA area. However, Umuoyima of Owerri Municipal, one of the host communities shares boundary with the other two major host communities of Umualum Nekede and Umuguma, who are the main contributors of land in New Owerri Area. The Area that covers Owerri Municipal is grouped into Area A-D among the towns of Owerri and the surroundings. Area "A" includes the main town of Owerri Nchi Ise, an area which stretched from Emmanuel College through whetheral Road to Okigwe Road and Royce Road to Hausa Quarters (Ama Awusa) and back to Emmanuel College. Area "B" comprised the Government Station area of Government House and offices. Area "C" is the Ikenegbu layout area.

Nekede is the nearest satellite town of Owerri urban, with only half a mile (0.804 km) separating them. Nekede lies within 5°N of the map of Igbo territory and South of Owerri Municipal and occupies an area of approximately 25 square kilometers. To her East lies the Naze community. On the West is the Avu Village, which share a common boundary with Nekede. On the North lies the Owerre Nchi Ise Villages. And to the South-West, one meets the Obinze community. Nekede is the largest contributor of land to the New Owerri Capital Territory¹⁰, a considerable part of New Owerri falls within the Nekede homeland. A large percent of her landmass is ceded to

Imo State Government as part of the Owerri Capital Territory, under the Owerri Capital Development Authority (OCDA), which includes the Imo State House of Assembly, Central Bank, Imo State Secretariat, National Primary Education Commission, New Nigeria Post Office Complex, Imo Concorde Hotel, Protea Hotel, and over 50 other mega hotels, others includes, INEC secretariat, NLC Secretariat, Consumer Protection Commission Office (CPC), New JAMB Center, ISOPADEC Office, Imo State Specialist Hospital, Udenwa Estate, Imo State Primary Health Care Office, Imo State Universal Basic Education Board (IMSUBEB), OCDA office, Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) Owerri office, New Owerri Police Station, Areas H; U; G; V; C; E; P; Pocket Layout, Federal Forestry Reserve, Imo State Agricultural Development Agency, Imo Rubber Estate, among others. Nekede is in Owerri-West Local Government.

Umuguma stretches from the North-Western part at the roundabout on Sam Mbakwe Avenue by Dream-Land Hotel, through the Coca cola Factory off Irete Road on the East, to the Federal Secretariat Complex on Port Harcourt Road to the West and through Port Harcourt expressway including all the Housing Estates - World Bank Housing Estate, Area L; M; N; Federal Low Cost Housing and Imo State Housing Estates. The community also play host to Federal Secretariat, Customs and Exercise office, General Hospital, Owerri. It borders Owerri at the north, Nekede at the west, Irete and Okuku on the east and Avu at the south. Umuguma contributed as the second largest landmass to the New Owerri Capital Project and is the Headquarter of Owerri-West Local Government.¹¹

The Effects of Urban Growth on Host Communities in New Owerri

Urbanization has both positive and negative impacts on rural livelihoods. On the one hand, well-planned and managed urban growth and development can serve as a positive factor for rural livelihoods ¹² such as a high demand on agricultural products, access to developed extension services, educational and medicinal facilities and opportunities for non-farm employment.¹³ On the other, unplanned urbanization negatively affects rural livelihoods ¹⁴ as a result of changing land use and cropping patterns, decreasing arable land, increasing unemployment in farming sector, causing high price of food commodities, poor quality and scarcity of water, rural-urban migration and increasing competition between agricultural and residential uses of natural resources.¹⁵ Therefore, as it brings development, it also brings degradation, hence urbanization causes the spread of built-up areas,¹⁶ and as well results in increasing poverty and environmental degradation in rural areas.¹⁷

The two towns of New Owerri, Nekede and Umuguma, both of Owerri West Local Government Area are seen as peripheral rural areas that comprise both urban and rural features and which had undergone some physiological changes to be seen as semi-urban. Thus, as a result of their proximity to the city urban center, they went through a process where rural areas transform into urban system physically and functionally.¹⁸ The major drivers of changes in rural livelihoods are rapid population, increase in urban centers and changing socio-economic pattern.¹⁹ As cities are growing rapidly towards peripheral rural areas, farmlands are transforming into concrete structure and thus rural villages are reclassified as urban settlements.²⁰ Urban pull is a major cause of human migration from rural areas and this leads to population growth in cities.²¹ Urban expansion supports the spread of urban land into the rural-urban fringe and thus leads to rural-urban interaction. Urbanization has spatial and functional characteristics and it has intensive and reciprocal interaction with nearby rural areas in terms of service and commodity flow. The study shows urbanization's impact in New Owerri on land use pattern, cropping pattern, livestock and market, livelihood options, occupation and income and rural-urban migration. It also observes the various factors influencing population growth, spatial pattern of urban expansion, development of infrastructural facilities, land use/cover change and a detailed case study of the impacts on rural livelihood transformation. Rural growth is exogenous, meaning that external demand and influence drives growth in the area.

With adequate planning and implementation of urban development, rural communities could be integrated into urban milieu and upgraded to modern gardens, recreational parks, mixed use residential buildings and civic centres as in developed cities.²² However, in the emerging New Owerri this was not the case for the host communities. While the urban development led to the elevation of some areas to urban and sub urban status, it also caused the decimation of the community squares in other areas and deprived the people of their traditional possession and long standing association, participation in the design, planning of the built environment within the area in the bid to improve their quality of life, their rural or semi-urban environment, their value of buildings, and their settlements.²³ The positive contributions of the host communities to the physical planning, heritage, economic empowerment, social integration, recreation, environmental resources, settlement and the beauty of the environment were beclouded and compromised. The non-integration and abuse of community squares in these

communities within the Owerri Capital Territory not only affected settlement patterns but defaced the cityscape, hence real or perceived resistance to urban planning activities.

In addition, the study observed that the location of formal public open spaces outside the community squares not only led to abandonment of the formal public open spaces, but manifested in environmental problems such as urban sprawl, defacing of the cityscape, slum development, squatter settlement, street trading, blocking of streets during family or community functions evident in Umuoyima Owerri urban, Nekede, and Umuguma. Efforts to integrate the host communities improved democratic urban governance, and also reduced public agitation and rural-urban migration in the emerging New Owerri megacity. This not only provided avenues for improved quality of the urban environment and socio-economic activities but lead to sustainable, participatory, workable and people-centred urban planning and design, and saved community squares from being endangered. For this study, the extent of government effort towards integrating the host communities through the urban development plan in New Owerri would go a long way to determine the positive and negative impacts such will make on the communities, which could serve as guide for government to know the areas to put more efforts in order to maintain even development and create a harmonious relationship in the area.

The study identified some factors through which urbanization process in New Owerri made impact on rural livelihood. However, the extent to which these channels were in play varies depending on the size and geographic location of each community. The enabling factors covers the social, physical, geographical, economic and institutional conditions that help determine whether rural populations will be able to reap the opportunities presented by urban development. These include the extent of agro food production, people's purchasing power and food preferences, population growth, development of infrastructural facilities, including communication and transportation, rural – urban market linkage, direct and indirect land use change, rural - urban migration, remittance flow, urbanization pattern, trade policies and financial incentives, and stable government services.

Negative Effects of Urban Growth on Host Communities in New Owerri

Land Alienation: The introduction of the Land Use Decree (and later Act) of 1978, ultimately altered the traditional matters concerning land ownership in the host communities. It is also obvious that compensation for land compulsorily acquired is not always paid for on time on the part of government. When cash payments are made such payments prove inadequate to compensate for the property compulsorily acquired. The right to acquire, hold and enjoy landed property is one of the fundamental pillars on which members of these communities rest on. Landed property is not only an economic asset, it has emotional and sentimental value too. Compulsory acquisition is the power of government to acquire private rights on land without the willing consent of its owner or occupant in order to benefit the general public or society in exchange for compensation. This is one of the major effects of urban growth and urbanization, thus, the host communities have been deprived of their land, which was forcefully acquired by government. Land alienation has made it impossible for the communities to access their vast agricultural land, which had in the past solved the problem of shortage in food production, employment, and the hope of having a reserved landed area made for future expansion as the population of the communities outgrown their traditional native enclaves.

Subsistence Labor Dislocation: There was alteration in the traditional labor, income and livelihood of the host communities. Before the Government take-over of land in the area, it was a vast area of land used by these communities for intensive farming. The bulk of labor supply in the host communities of New Owerri area revolved around the family units. Generally, in Igbo society, the unit of agricultural labor is the family, made up of a man, his wife, male and unmarried female children, this also applied to the New Owerri host communities. Polygamy and large families were in vogue up to the late 1970's, partly as a means of ensuring a large labor force.²⁴ Besides the family unit as chief source of farm labor, was the clientage and associational labor force, who were referred to as "*Ndi isu-aka-nma*", "*Ndi isusu oru*" (hired non indigene laborers, who were good at neatly clearing farmstead with knife), phonetically shortened to "*Ndi isoma*", which constituted as the other sources of labor apart from the family unit.²⁵ These hired extra hands in the form of laborers were necessary in order to meet up with the farming calendar.

Therefore, the agro-based economy of the host communities of New Owerri City was dependent on the human labor force, which was later dislodged as a result of urban growth and development immediately after the designation of the area as the New Owerri City. This created unemployment among the hitherto traditional agro laborers who were displaced from the government confiscated lands, which the white collar job of government

establishments tried to solve partially, for many joined government work and some other migrated for greener pastures.

Reduction in Traditional Disposable Earnings: As soon as the government started developing New Owerri City, there were immediate changes in the pattern of capital flow in the area. The occasion of land alienation forced some indigenes out of their farmlands, which invariably affected their source of income that was equally needed to finance more goods and services in the economy of the host communities. As a result of being forcefully removed from their land and subsisting agro-economy, many joined the government white collar job to save themselves from starving. Therefore, with urban growth and development experienced in the area, the peoples' pattern and source of income changed as well. This also heightened the rural-urban migration, some left the core village hamlets and moved to the New Owerri area that was fast developing in search of greener pasture and better income. Most men turned to other sources of income away from farming, like engagement in manual alluvial sand excavation from the Otamiri and Nwaorie Rivers to make ends meet (quarrying). Later quarrying machines were set up in these rivers, further dislodging the manual quarrying laborers and made the river to become unsafe for locally made boats used in fishing along the Otamiri River. Alternatively, the women provided cheaper sources of labor in the area in the bid to help their families survive, which led to the lowering of wage rates in the area and it also enhanced the competition among the rural dwellers.²⁶

Rural-Urban Migration: Urbanization process involves the increasing concentration of populations into urban areas. Thus, migration from rural to urban areas is one of the principal mechanisms of urbanization. The increase in the population and human activities in New Owerri area was, and is still as a result of the designation of the area as a twin city of the capital of Imo State. Migration was fuelled by the pull-based factors, like the need for improved living standards, job opportunities, income opportunities, and access to services, and also the push-based factors informed by the perception of better things to come in urban areas, though the perceptions are not borne out in the lived experience of the migrants. In both situations, migration is related to people's perceptions of the differentials between urban and rural areas and regions.²⁷ The infrastructural development and population growth naturally attracted other businesses to the city like banks, mercantile houses, shops, supermarkets, etc and offer other jobs to migrant rural dwellers.²⁸ However, alongside the possibility for higher incomes, many other motives affect these migration flows, such as access to improved amenities, educational opportunities, and involvement in "knowledge Economies."²⁹

The out-migration of mostly able bodied men from these communities in search of work in the New Owerri City resulted in the neglect and degradation of pastures in the communities. The women, children, and older people left behind were less able to contain with the few landmass left, in addition, households continue to lack the necessary labor to keep livestock due to outward migration of mostly able bodied men and women. Therefore, the task of managing the land falls by those left behind, mainly women, children and the elderly. As such, labor shortages in these communities led to unsustainable agricultural practices and land use patterns.³⁰

The study notes that another effect on the host communities is that the migration of their youths took away the glamorous social life in the host communities, leaving the area in a gloomy state. The youths migrated from the villages, moving along with their energy and vigour, and leaving behind the feeble old men, women and children to labour on the few available farm lands. Despite the case of land alienation, various regimes and governments of the state have denied these communities the essential amenities of life, they lack socio-economic facilities which include, pipe borne water, electricity in some parts, motor able roads, industries, and high paid employment. They undergo lots of deprivations that have confined these host communities comparably to a vicious circle of poverty. A number of infrastructural developments in these communities were through self-effort.

Erosion and Flooding: The host communities are also denied the opportunity to extend their living abode to other parts of their land area formerly used for extensive farming as they are now experiencing population explosion and have been forced to remain clustered together in their old hamlets, causing serious flooding and erosion when it rains in the host communities as currently being experienced unlike before because the rain flood has no planned drainage it could be channel to. As the communities' population continues to grow, and the number of buildings and structures increased, but clustered within their old traditional hamlets without enough space for spacious building arrangement due to lack of land for extension, the flood and erosion menace will not abate. Yet Government has refused to construct the major roads with drainages leading to Umualum Nekede and Umuguma, in spite of the massive land the two communities in particular gave up for New Owerri.

Positive Effects of Urban Growth on Host Communities in New Owerri

Changes in Land Value: Urbanization meant that as more people left the villages, suburbs and rural areas to live in the cities, it induced rapid urban growth with its attendant complex problems as a result. This meant that rural–urban migration to New Owerri was reduced among the people and communities of the sub-urban and semi-urban areas of Owerri capital city, especially the ones with the closest proximity like Nekede and Umuguma. On the other hand, urbanization has been associated with pro-poor social reforms ³¹ over the years. The rural–urban migration flow, which causes urbanization, is mostly a response to economic changes. Urban expansion towards rural areas covers agricultural land and changes land values and land markets, this resulted to rise in the value of lands within New Owerri which benefited indigenes of the host communities and brought many, who went into the business of land speculation and real property agency out of poverty. A handful became land or property agents, thereby providing employment to them.

Urban Integration: The whole of the New Owerri, without exception have become and served as a Promise Zone (PZ) for integrated housing, educational and economic development, crime reduction efforts, good transport linkages, economic specialization and land available for development, in addition to dynamic entrepreneurial activities, and forest management collaborative, etc, within the area. Traditional squares that belong to the communities of Nekede, Umuguma and Umuoyima (Owerri) have fully been integrated into New Owerri urban planning. The area started to burgeon with modern development in infrastructures, facilities and services with linkages to the host communities. In like manner, integrated policy packages that focused on local asset development, improving policies, job creation, investment, human capital and infrastructural development, paying more attention to building rural-urban clusters and serving urban niche markets for local and distinctive rural products was what the three communities also came to experience.

Urban Encroachment and Rural Transformation: This had direct effect on building infrastructure in the communities very close to New Owerri, the areas referred to as semi-urban. Areas in this category had witnessed transformation in their landscape and views, some part have built drainages, good roads and scenic views, which changed over the years and resulted in reconfiguration of the entire landscape. The study notes a remarkable shift to endogenous growth in the urban city as rapid growth moved toward the peripheral rural areas, transforming farmlands into concrete structure and thus this brought rural villages to be reclassified as semi-urban settlements. Therefore, urban expansion supported the spread of urban land into the rural–urban fringes which led to rural–urban intensive and reciprocal interaction in terms of service and commodity flow. Remarkable physical and structural rearrangement had occurred in the semi-urban areas, with tarring and expansion of footpaths as roads, from pedestrianization to motorization, natural drainage routes to modern drainages, though this might cause reduction in the sizes of the community squares that might have reduced the natural physical value of the community squares.

Increased Output from a Shrinking Land Base: Utilizing modern farming techniques like irrigation, fertilizers, and mechanization to increase yield and efficiency were employed effectively to improve the market flow. It is significant to note that some factors driving this shift to market driven agriculture include the population growth that increased demand for food. There was economic development that gave rise in disposable income leading to higher consumer demand for diverse food options especially among the urban residents. Again, government policies of encouraging market flow through incentives and support programs to promote commercial agriculture by providing fertilizers and better crop species at cheaper rate were real boost.

Off-Farm Income: This became the main source of household income for the majority of farms who were able to diversify their income and depended less on agriculture or farm income. This signifies a shift towards a more diversified income strategy, where farmers are not solely dependent on the often unpredictable yields from their land. A number of off-farm income sources became available to many households in the form of wage employment, for those that worked in factories, construction site, or other local businesses. Some others engaged in self-employment in the form of running a small shop, or those that provided services like carpentry or tailoring. There were also those that benefited from remittances, like those that received money from family members who were working in urban areas because of better opportunities the urban areas presented, some relied on these remittances from relatives to build-up their own businesses.

Conclusion

The study recognizes the importance of land and the complexity of land use in Imo State. Owing to its economic and political significance, land-use and tenure policies should reflect prevailing realities in the state and address the welfare and development needs of the people. Given that Imo State is predominantly agrarian, land policies should, as a matter of urgency, prioritize the needs of farmers while also making adequate provision for housing schemes accessible to the population.

With sufficient allocation of agricultural land and housing for the teeming rural and suburban populations, government would have addressed two of the three basic needs of humanity—food and shelter. Consequently, the study recommends that portions of land appropriated from the New Owerri host communities should be designated for mechanized agricultural farming and low-cost housing development. This would help accommodate indigenous residents who were deprived of their ancestral lands meant for residential expansion, while also providing employment opportunities and sustainable livelihoods for displaced subsistence farmers and natives forced off their farmlands due to government actions and inactions.

Furthermore, with the concentration of government infrastructure, modern residential estates, hotels, and other commercial ventures, it is expected that the development of such a high-tech business city will further enhance the economic and tourism potential of New Owerri and its host communities. Regarding the flood and erosion challenges affecting the host communities, it is essential that urban construction projects adequately assess soil erosion risks and incorporate appropriate mitigation measures. The provision of effective flood control systems capable of minimizing disruptions experienced by residents should be prioritized by the government to alleviate the suffering caused by even minimal rainfall. Government neglect or inaction in this regard amounts to a double jeopardy: the forceful acquisition of community land without adequate compensation, and the failure to provide remedial measures to improve the livability of the limited land left to these communities.

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