

Introduction: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches to Kongo History

KOEN BOSTOEN AND INGE BRINKMAN

The Kongo kingdom is a famous emblem of Africa's past. It is an exceptionally important cultural landmark for Africans, the African diaspora and anyone interested in Africa's pre-colonial history. When Portuguese navigators reached the Lower Congo region of West Central Africa by the end of the fifteenth century, they encountered a centralised polity. In 1492, some years after the first contacts in 1483, the Portuguese chronicler Rui de Pina wrote about an encounter with the Mwene Soyo, the lord of Kongo's Soyo province, who resided south of the Congo mouth at the western edge of the kingdom:

The lord of the land, whose port we entered on 29 March 1491, is a great lord, the uncle of the king and his subject, called Manisonyo, a man of fifty years of age, good natured and wise. He was two leagues distant from the port when he was notified of the arrival of the fleet and was requested to send word of the arrival to the king. The Manisonyo gave signs and demonstrations of great joy at having to attend to the affairs of the king of Portugal, and as a token of respect placed both hands on the ground and then placed them on his face, which is the greatest sign of veneration that they make to their kings. [translation by Newitt (2010: 100–1)]

It is clear that Portuguese notions about political power were being projected in this account, but at the same time the evidence indicates that political centralisation had started well before the arrival of the Portuguese.

The Kongo kingdom was not the only centralised polity in the region, rendering West Central Africa particularly interesting for comparative research on the growth of social and political processes of hierarchisation (McIntosh 1999). The Portuguese navigators made reference to several other states apart from the Kongo kingdom: Kakongo, Vungu, Ngoyo and later Loango, north of the Congo River, in parts of present-day Cabinda, Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon. These smaller coastal

kingdoms were culturally and linguistically closely related to the Kongo kingdom. The commercial influence of the Loango kingdom, which over time became the most influential of the coastal polities, stretched as far inland as Malebo Pool, where another important state flourished at that time, i.e. the Tio kingdom (Vansina 1973). It was situated on the Bateke plateau, close to the current-day cities of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, and shared several social and political institutions with the kingdoms of the Lower Congo area with which it maintained close trade relationships. It federated speakers of Kiteke language varieties belonging to a subgroup of West-Coastal Bantu that is distinct from the Kikongo Language Cluster present in the kingdoms of Kongo, Loango, Kakongo and Ngoyo (de Schryver *et al.* 2015). To the south of the Kongo kingdom in northern Angola, there were a number of Ambundu states, which also played a key role in the international and regional trade (Miller 1976). Although Kimbundu is part of a separate branch of the Bantu family, i.e. South-West Bantu (Vansina 1995; Grollemund *et al.* 2015), the Ambundu kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba shared deep-rooted cultural and political traditions with the kingdoms to the north (Vansina 1990, 2004). All these centralised societies bore numerous similarities regarding their origin, evolution and organisation (Vansina 1966a, 1989). Trade, for instance, played a key role in the reinforcement of political centralisation within these states and in their mutual economic integration. Obviously, each of them also had its historical particularities. They constituted a mosaic of similarity and diversity.

Of all pre-colonial West-Central African states, the Kongo kingdom was the largest and most powerful. When the first Portuguese sailors set foot on Kongo ground in 1483, they came into contact with a state that stretched from the Congo River in the north to Luanda Island in the south, roughly 300 km as the crow flies, and had its capital Mbanza Kongo 200 km inland, covering territory of what is today Angola and Congo-Kinshasa. Soon after relations were established with Portugal, the Kongo elite adopted Christianity and over time – as elsewhere in the world – a specific local form of Christianity developed, designated ‘Afro-Christian syncretism’ by Thornton (2013). This Kongo form of Christianity also reached the Americas, where it again started taking its own course. Many members of the Kongo elite became literate and integrated elements from southern European culture in their daily life.

While the initial aim of the Portuguese was mainly to find minerals, soon trade relations focused on the sale of slaves. The large-scale transatlantic trade of goods and people had dramatic consequences for the people sold, while it led at the same time to a further expansion and centralisation of the kingdom until the start of civil wars in the late seventeenth century. During the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries, at the height of their hegemony, Kongo kings ruled over an area of approximately 150,000 km², and its Christian kings maintained diplomatic relations with Western Europe and the Americas.

Right up to the present day, African leaders and intellectuals have been inspired by the history of the Kongo kingdom, taking it as an example of pre-colonial grandeur and globalised relations (de Maret 2002, 2005). It is also a key marker of identity construction for several colonial and post-colonial religious and political movements as diverse as UPNA (*União das Populações de Angola*), PDA (*Partido Democrático de Angola*), FNLA (*Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola*), ABAKO (formerly *Alliance des Bakongo*, nowadays *Alliance des Bâtisseurs du Kongo*), the Kimbanguist Church and the Bundu Dia Kongo movement (MacGaffey 1994; Verhaegen and Tshimanga 2003; Vellut 2005, 2010, 2016; Brinkman 2011, 2015; Mélice 2011; Muzalia Kihangu 2011; M'Bokolo and Sabakinu Kivilu 2014), to name only some of the best-known organisations. The kingdom's influence also spreads far beyond Africa. Kongo culture is among the most prominent Afro-American traditions across the Atlantic (Thornton 1998a; MacGaffey 2000b; Heywood and Thornton 2007; Cooksey *et al.* 2013c).

With the Lower Congo region's involvement in the transatlantic trade, its early introduction to literacy, and its interaction with Europe and the Americas, the history of the Kongo kingdom and of the wider area from 1500 onwards is better known than the pre-colonial history of most other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. A wide array of historical scholarship is available for different periods of Kongo history (e.g. Cuvelier 1946; Balandier 1965; Randles 1968; Ekholm 1972; Broadhead 1979; Thornton 1983; Hilton 1985; Heywood 2009; Batsikama 2010; Vos 2015), together with an even larger body of ethnographical, anthropological and art-historical literature for the more recent periods (e.g. Van Wing 1921; Laman 1953, 1957, 1962, 1968; Janzen and MacGaffey 1974; Janzen and Arkinstall

1978; Farris Thompson and Cornet 1981; MacGaffey 1970b, 1983, 1986b, 1991, 2000; de Heusch 2000b; Hersak 2011). Especially in recent years renewed interest has risen for the Kongo kingdom and its involvement in world history (e.g. Heywood 2002; Heywood and Thornton 2007; Thornton 2016c), with a number of widely attractive exhibitions (Cooksey *et al.* 2013c; LaGamma 2015c) and new award-winning books (Fromont 2014).

Nonetheless, considerable uncertainty still remains about the origins and early history of the kingdom. What is more, until recently, both archaeology and historical linguistics, considered to be two crucial disciplines in the reconstruction of early African history, had only marginally been used in the reconstruction of Kongo's past. Apart from minor excavations in Mbanza Kongo, Mbanza Soyo and Ngongo Mbata (Bequaert 1940; Esteves 1989; Abranches 1991), no systematic archaeological research before 2012 had aimed at reconstructing the origins of the kingdom. Similarly, even if the oldest Bantu language sources originate from the Lower Congo region (Cardoso 1624; Van Gheel 1652; Brusciotto 1659), the Kikongo Language Cluster had until then never been the subject of any comprehensive historical-linguistic study, notwithstanding some preliminary work within the field (e.g. Daeleman 1983; Nsondé 1995; Nguimbi-Mabiala 1999). That is why the KongoKing research project (2012–16) focused on the origins and early history of the Kongo kingdom through a joint archaeological and linguistic approach. The present volume is one of the project's main outcomes.

Independently from the KongoKing project, Geoffroy Heimlich has conducted, since 2010, doctoral and post-doctoral research on Kongo rock art in the Lovo Massif situated in the Kongo-Central province of Congo-Kinshasa (Heimlich 2010, 2013, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Heimlich *et al.* 2013). Furthermore, between 2011 and 2015, an international team of Angolan, Cameroonian and Portuguese archaeologists carried out archaeological fieldwork in Mbanza Kongo as part of a broader project to have the kingdom's ancient capital registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List, an enterprise which was eventually successful in 2017. The KongoKing project team did not directly participate in those excavations. However, upon an invitation from Angola's Ministry of Culture, it sent a delegation in 2015 to examine, in close collaboration with the international

team of archaeologists, the archaeological data obtained since 2011 (cf. Clist *et al.* 2015e).

The KongoKing project

The KongoKing project has been an interdisciplinary and interuniversity research project funded by Starting Grant No. 284126 (1,400,760 EUR in total), which the European Research Council granted in 2011 to Koen Bostoen (Ghent University) under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). The KongoKing project united researchers from Ghent University (UGent), Brussels University (ULB) and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (RMCA), as well as from several partner institutions in Africa, Europe and the USA. The project's full title was 'Political centralisation, economic integration and language evolution in Central Africa: An interdisciplinary approach to the early history of the Kongo kingdom'. The project's archive is currently to be found on the www.kongoking.net website.

The stated objectives of the KongoKing project were to: (1) reconstruct the origins and early history of the kingdom of the Kongo in particular; (2) examine the growth of social and political complexity and the rise of urbanism in the Lower Congo region more generally; (3) protect and conserve the fragile material and immaterial heritage of the Kongo kingdom and raise public awareness thereof; (4) determine a refined model of the social ecology of language change in the Kongo area with special attention to the linguistic impact of political centralisation and economic integration; (5) improve interdisciplinary research strategies and methods for the reconstruction of early African history with special focus on the integration of linguistics and archaeology; and (6) reinforce scientific collaboration between Europe and Africa and strengthen mutual research capacities.

Conducted between 2012 and 2016, research from the KongoKing project team contributed to Kongo history in various important ways. First, it mainly relied on archaeology and historical linguistics, which were until recently only marginally used in the reconstruction of Kongo's past. This has led to a wide range of new sources, which are complementary to the written documents that have been used mostly so far. Secondly, the archaeological research of the KongoKing project focused on the kingdom's northernmost provinces

mainly situated in present-day Congo-Kinshasa, especially in the Inkisi valley which once hosted the capitals of the kingdom's Nsundi, Mpangu and Mbata provinces (Thornton 1977: 523, 1983: 4; Hilton 1985: 7). Admittedly, this regional focus was born out of need rather than a deliberate strategy; in spite of several attempts, the authorisation to excavate in Angola was simply never obtained. KongoKing research was nonetheless not completely off the mark, given that several historians had situated the kingdom's origins in the present-day Kongo-Central province of Congo-Kinshasa (e.g. Vansina 1963; Thornton 2001). In the end, this geographical reorientation proved fruitful and allowed a move away from earlier Kongo research, which had predominantly approached Kongo history from the kingdom's heartland, i.e. from its capital Mbanza Kongo, and from its main Atlantic port, Mbanza Soyo, both situated in present-day Angola. The view from the kingdom's northern provinces has led us to re-open and reframe debates on the processes of centralisation and decentralisation; the spread of language practices and material culture; and elite formation in relation to the politics of extraversion and appropriation. In sum, the approach of Kongo history by the KongoKing project could be considered 'decentring' in a twofold way, i.e. both methodologically and geographically.

From Missionary to Cross-disciplinary Approaches to Kongo History

Some of the written sources contemporary to the kingdom's existence can at the same time be regarded as secondary literature in that they consciously try to offer an interpretation of the past rather than forming a source 'in spite of itself' (Bloch 1953: 61). The book of Cavazzi (1687) would be a case in point, but we could also include Dapper (1668) and de Cadornega (1680) (cf. Delgado 1972b). Other contemporary records that at the same time reflect on the past would be local oral traditions, often informing written sources (cf. Thornton 2011c).

Apart from these works which straddle the boundaries between source and secondary literature, the study of the kingdom's history started with the missionary literature of the twentieth century. With their engagement in religion, many clergy focused on the early Christianity in the region as the work of Jean Cuvelier, François Bontinck and Louis

Jadin shows (e.g. Cuvelier 1941, 1946; de Bouveignes and Cuvelier 1951; Cuvelier 1953b; Cuvelier and Jadin 1954; Bontinck 1964, 1970, 1992; Jadin 1961, 1963, 1964, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1975; Jadin and Dicorato 1974). Some of the missionaries, such as Jean Cuvelier and Joseph De Munck, also showed keen interest in local historical traditions and/or Kongo rock art (e.g. Cuvelier 1930, 1934; De Munck *et al.* 1959; De Munck 1960, 1971). While the history of Christianity in the region remained an important ally of research, slowly other historical themes emerged, with trade relations as a major example (Vansina 1962; Broadhead 1971; Martin 1972; Vellut 1975; Vansina 1998).

Kongo history also broadened from a predominantly Belgian concern to a truly international field of study (e.g. Balandier 1965; Randles 1968; Broadhead 1979; Thornton 1983; Hilton 1985). Moreover, historical scholarship on the Kongo kingdom became increasingly influenced by other research within humanities, not least in anthropology (e.g. MacGaffey 1970b; de Heusch 1972; Janzen and MacGaffey 1974; Janzen and Arkinstall 1978; de Heusch 2000). This volume includes contributions from two of the leading experts on Kongo culture, religion and history who have been in the field for over forty years, Wyatt MacGaffey and John Thornton (e.g. MacGaffey 1970b, 1977, 1983, 1986b, 1991, 2000b, 2002, 2016; Thornton 1977, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1992, 1998b, 2006, 2016a).

Another expert of Kongo history whom we invited to contribute to the present volume is the late Jan Vansina. He graciously declined, because he was already struggling with his health. However, even without a direct contribution from him, this book and the KongoKing project more generally has been strongly influenced by Jan Vansina's academic legacy. Apart from the publications in which he specifically deals with the Kongo kingdom (e.g. Vansina 1963, 1966a, 1966b, 1994, 1999), his books *Paths in the Rainforest* (1990) and *How Societies Are Born* (2004) had a decisive intellectual impact on the scholars who conceived the KongoKing project and/or contributed to this book, both methodologically and content-wise. The multi-disciplinary approach of Vansina's work was a rich source of inspiration for the KongoKing project. Like him, we drew on evidence from written sources, oral tradition, historical linguistics and evidence from archaeology. As de Luna *et al.* (2012: 78) have rightly observed, 'Vansina was one of the first to propose a historical methodology, what he called

“upstreaming”, to link linguistic, ethnographic, and where available, archaeological evidence, working back from the present, from the known to the unknown’. Moreover, being concerned with the genesis of political tradition among closely related Western Bantu speech communities (cf. Vansina 1989), he also developed a hypothesis on how parallel processes of political centralisation from the mid-first millennium AD onwards led to the more or less concurrent emergence of the neighbouring kingdoms of Kongo, Loango and Tio around the fourteenth century (Vansina 1990: 146–52). His theory of state formation in South-West Central Africa has deeply influenced the thinking on Kongo history of several contributors to this volume and was also one of the main guiding principles for the KongoKing project. An important difference is that Jan Vansina’s work focused on political institutions, principles and ideologies together forming what he called ‘political tradition’, whereas the KongoKing project team sought to reconstruct how these more abstract notions were enacted in political practice and during historical events in the Kikongo-speaking region in its interaction with the wider world.

In terms of method, the cross-disciplinary approach of the KongoKing project also distinguished itself substantially from Vansina’s pioneering work in connecting streams of historical evidence from various disciplines. De Luna *et al.* (2012: 86) refer to the observation that MacGaffey (1978: 103) already made four decades ago: ‘historians should learn about carbon dating, botany, dendrochronology, serology, comparative linguistics, and oral tradition. African historiography became the decathlon of social science’, and wonder how it is possible to ‘ensure methodological stringency and accuracy’ and to respect ‘the scholastic responsibility to keep up with literatures’ from different disciplines when engaging today in the reconstruction of pre-colonial African history. The KongoKing project tried to cope with this methodological challenge by creating the necessary conditions for direct collaboration between scholars of different disciplines who are able not only to collect and analyse new discipline-specific data, but also to make a well-judged assessment of its historical significance. While Vansina mainly relied on existing sources from different fields and drew from them the pieces of evidence that allowed him to develop a historical narrative, the KongoKing project team tried to further his scholarship by assembling fresh data from the field, both in archaeology and linguistics.

Although the project was conceived as an interdisciplinary research programme, most of the archaeological and linguistic research was initially carried out in a mono-disciplinary way. Given the state of the art of archaeology and historical linguistics in the Lower Congo region, such an initial stage of discipline-specific accumulation of evidence and hypothesis building was absolutely necessary. Nonetheless, from the very beginning of the project, the KongoKing project team met on a regular basis. During these cross-disciplinary meetings, the results of ongoing archaeological and linguistic research were presented and explained in detail to all team members with ample attention to the particularities of discipline-specific methods, and the implications of archaeological research output for the linguists and vice-versa. These cross-disciplinary exchanges necessarily resulted in mutual influence on research agendas. The kingdom's eastern origin hypothesis, which Bostoen *et al.* (2013) brought back to the forefront on the basis of historical-comparative linguistic research, led to more extensive archaeological fieldwork east of the Inkisi River in the summer of 2014. Likewise, the historical sociolinguistic interpretation of the contact-induced dialectal diffusion of prefix reduction within the Kikongo Language Cluster by Bostoen and de Schryver (2015) shed new light on the social factors possibly underlying the spread of ceramics decorated with woven motifs, which Els Cranshof, Nicolas Nikis and Pierre de Maret interpret in this volume as being 'closely connected with the prestige of local elites'. Furthermore, the delimitation of distinct historical subgroups within the Kikongo Language Cluster by de Schryver *et al.* (2015) raised the question of whether twentieth and twentieth-first pottery within the Kongo area could also be subdivided into historical 'ceramic provinces' and if so, to what extent they coincide with language subgroups, a question which is dealt with in the upcoming PhD dissertation of Mandela Kaumba (see also Kaumba 2018). Finally, the observation of mismatches between the tentative dating of the rise and spread of the Kikongo Language Cluster and the dates available for the first villages in the wider area led to the formulation of a new hypothesis of possible multiple layers of Bantu Expansion in the Lower Congo region (see for instance Bostoen *et al.* 2015a). This hypothesis has become one of the main research questions of the new ERC-funded BantuFirst project (2018–22) dealing with 'The First Bantu Speakers South of the Rainforest: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach to Human

Migration, Language Spread, Climate Change and Early Farming in Late Holocene Central Africa' (cf. www.bantufirst.ugent.be).

The Present Volume

In line with the general approach of the KongoKing project, the present book wants to bring together different new strands of historical evidence and create the opportunity for experts from different disciplines to engage in a scholarly dialogue on Kongo history. It aims neither at proposing a new comprehensive narrative of the Kongo kingdom's history nor at dealing with all major themes in Kongo historiography. Several important topics, such as the economic underpinnings of political power, the nature of syncretic Kongo Christianity and the Atlantic slave trade, are hardly discussed.

While this book consists of multiple chapters written by different authors, it differs from a classical edited volume in several ways. First, the book has a strong regional and thematic focus as it deals exclusively with the history of the Kongo kingdom. Secondly, authors have been asked to familiarise themselves with ongoing research within the KongoKing project and to reflect upon their own research through the lens of newly obtained linguistic and archaeological data. To arrive at an integrated approach, all authors had access to the publications already realised as part of the KongoKing project: Clist (2012), (2013), (2016); De Kind *et al.* (2012); Bostoen *et al.* (2013), (2014), (2015b); Clist *et al.* (2013a), (2013b), (2014), (2015a), (2015b), (2015c), (2015d); Nikis *et al.* (2013); De Kind (2014); Kaumba (2014); Matonda *et al.* (2014); Nikis and Champion (2014); Verhaeghe *et al.* (2014); Bostoen and de Schryver (2015); Brinkman (2015), (2016); De Kind *et al.* (2015); de Schryver (2015), de Schryver *et al.* (2015); Dom and Bostoen (2015); Grollemund *et al.* (2015); Kaumba (2015); Matonda *et al.* (2015); Nikis and De Putter (2015); Brinkman and Clist (2016); Matonda (2016); Ricquier (2016); Rousaki *et al.* (2016); Coccato *et al.* (2017) and Polet *et al.* (2018). They could also consult the different BA, MA and PhD dissertations yielded by the KongoKing project: Bleyenbergh (2012); De Kind (2012); De Neef (2013); Dom (2013); Drieghe (2013), (2014), (2015); Merchiers (2014); Sengeløv (2014); Vergaert (2014); Verhaeghe (2014); Wohnrath A. Campos (2014); Otto (2016); Saelens (2016); Van Acker (2016), (2018); Vandenabeele (2016); Willaert (2016); Matonda (2017) and Tsoupra (2017). Moreover, from early 2016 onwards,

preliminary versions of the book's chapters were sent out for external review and shared between the different contributors in order to enable cross-fertilisation. This intellectual dialogue was further stimulated during a two-day workshop at Ghent University in May 2016, where most of the authors met with the KongoKing project team and where each of the chapters was individually discussed by all participants. This meeting helped to create a better understanding of each other's work and sharply raised the awareness about convergences and divergences in the theories and methods underpinning them.

The result is a volume consisting of eleven chapters subdivided into two main parts: (I) the origins and dynamics of the Kongo kingdom and (II) Kongo's cosmopolitan culture and the wider world. It represents a balanced mix between KongoKing project team members (Koen Bostoen, Inge Brinkman, Bernard Clist, Els Cranshof, Pierre de Maret, Gilles-Maurice de Schryver, Igor Matonda, Nicolas Nikis) and external experts of Kongo history (Cécile Fromont, Linda Heywood, Wyatt MacGaffey, John Thornton, Jelmer Vos) as well as a rich cross-over between an anthropologist (Wyatt MacGaffey), archaeologists (Bernard Clist, Els Cranshof, Pierre de Maret, Nicolas Nikis), an art historian (Cécile Fromont), historians (Inge Brinkman, Linda Heywood, Igor Matonda, John Thornton, Jelmer Vos) and linguists (Koen Bostoen, Gilles-Maurice de Schryver). Although there is only one chapter co-authored by scholars from two different disciplines (Brinkman and Bostoen), evidence from different disciplines, including new data from the KongoKing project, is considered in many other chapters. In the chapter where he revises his view of the origins of the Kongo kingdom, John Thornton explicitly refers to the historical-comparative linguistic research by Bostoen *et al.* (2013) which gave a new impetus to the kingdom's eastern origin hypothesis. Cécile Fromont confronts historical and art-historical evidence with Kongo material culture obtained through KongoKing archaeological excavations at the sites of Kindoki and Ngongo Mbata (cf. Clist *et al.* 2015c,d) to come to a new understanding of Kongo Christian visual culture. Conversely, different contributions from KongoKing team members engage with the earlier (art) historical research of some of the external contributors. Through an advanced historical-linguistic study, Bostoen and de Schryver confirm, among other things, the linguistic division into coastal, central and eastern (South Kikongo) dialects, which Thornton (1983: 15) had proposed for the seventeenth-century Kongo

kingdom. Cranshof, de Maret and Nikis extensively refer to earlier research by Fromont (2014) on Kongo visual culture for the stylistic interpretation of the archaeological ceramics decorated with woven motifs which they analyse. Clist links the typological divide which he observes between Kongo pipes from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries with the end of a long period of civil wars (1641–1718) that ruined the Kongo kingdom, as described in Thornton (1983). The period between the late seventeenth century and the second half of the nineteenth century was one of increasing decentralisation, as discussed for instance in Heywood (2009) and Vos (2015). Clist also directly refers to the chapters of Fromont and Vos to account for the fact that Kongo pipes discovered thanks to KongoKing excavations testify to the kingdom's process of extraversion and the strongly cosmopolitan nature of Kongo material culture, just like ceramics with woven patterns discussed by Cranshof *et al.* and the important status of books as treated by Brinkman and Bostoen do. However, the contributions which speak most directly and forcefully to each other are no doubt those by Wyatt MacGaffey and John Thornton. Their respective chapters strongly reflect their fundamentally different conceptions of Kongo history and how to study it. Read one after the other, they can be considered as an intellectual dialogue synthesising over four decades of parallel research on Kongo history.

The focus of this study is on political space. Through the eleven chapters, this book discusses processes of centralisation and decentralisation, the historical politics of extraversion and the internal dynamics and geographical distribution of aspects of material and immaterial Kongo culture. In this endeavour, we have sought to collaborate across the boundaries of different disciplines. As a Kikongo proverb says, *Kumi dia nlembo, umosi ka sika ngoma ko* 'Ten fingers! One does not beat the drum' (Stenström 1999: 133).

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