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## The role of Igbo women in peace building during the Nigerian civil war: 1967 – 1970

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### Abstract

The salient roles of Igbo women during the Nigeria Civil War were a catalyst in the survival of many dying and suffering children, and the broken and frustrated Biafra soldiers. The roles too were important in the internal security of Igboland in the absence of the men who were on the war front to defend the fatherland. The devastation caused by the war affected the culture and traditional institutions of the Igbo, which in effect, posed a double challenge to the women. Igbo women were not only victims of the war, they were challenged too with roles of acting as heads of their various families and bridge builders in communal and inter-communal relations. The women amid uncertainties embarked individually and communally on peace-building processes. A spectrum of interventions embarked by the women to bring the end to the war spread across the area of health, business, international relations and food security through their salient actions, which enhanced and promoted human security and created positive peace in the land. This paper examines these roles played by Igbo women during the war and how their efforts helped bring about peace and hope during, and after the war period. Looking back and the devastation of that time, the Igbo women today would abhor any wars in Nigeria. We employ the conflict transformation theory in this narrative and conclude that Igbo women are creative peace-builders.

**Keywords:** Civil war; Peace-building; Nigeria; Igbo-women; Biafra

### 1. Introduction

War, historically is like a man. It is at the same time a universally unacceptable and condemnable act since it is destructive and tragic. Unfortunately, war is a commonplace feature of human life. The biblical story of creation began with warfare (Gen. 1ff). It is the reason you can say that the story of human life is the story of warfare. There are many understandings of war. Etymologically, war comes from the Frankish-German word, *werra*, meaning confusion, strife, discord. From the Latin root, *Bellum*, war, means belligerent or duel. In its Greek root, war comes from the word *polemos* implying violence, hostility or fighting. War from all these roots means violence and conflict. It is armed violence between groups, which involves killing. War is a struggle against another. It bears and portrays the spirit of antagonism. Jeong defines war as an extreme form of contention conducted by a violent struggle on a mass scale often measured by at least 1,000 deaths[1]The execution of the Nigerian civil war (popularly referred to, as the Biafra War) in all intent was cruel to the Igbo nation. In the war that lasted three years (1967 – 1970), the federal military government of Nigeria with its superior weapons strategically enforced blockage on the Biafra side. It employed a starvation strategy, the bombardment of marketplaces and Churches of Igboland to force an end to the war. It further employed war media propaganda to pursue the war and to multiply the sufferings of the Igbo people to the outside world. To date, there is no accurate number of Biafrans killed before and during the war. The war rather produced negative feelings, on both sides of the border and engendered prejudice, hatred and trauma.

While the war lasted, Igbo women who were not many on the war front were very busy in the management of the home front. In their community meetings under the forest trees or village squares, they had their meetings, settled disputes

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and plan the village programs. They played the gallant roles of fighting the battle of peace at home while the men were in battle. As the war affected the operation of hospitals and maternity homes, private homes were used for health delivery and healing. The women at these homes cared for wounded soldiers while Kwashiorkor (malnutrition) children were cared for at homes and the food centres.

The war ended over 50 years ago, yet the scares are still there. The post-war children have reacted negatively to the war. The growing unemployment rate, bad governance and corruption have exacerbated the level of violence in the country. The healing of memories has become difficult for the victims as many women lost their husbands, sons or relations to the war. Many on the other hand overcame their bad experiences by telling the story of the war repeatedly. Our work here is to narrate the roles played in the peace process by the gallant women of Igboland while the war was still raging on.

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## 2. The Biafran War

There have been many writings about the Biafran war. The Biafrans were made up of the whole of the former Eastern region of Nigeria, which today is made of the Six Southern States and the five states of the East. The State of Biafra was declared on May 25, 1967, following the massacre of Easterners who were mainly Igbo people living in the various cities of North and the West regions of the Nigerian state between 1966 and 1967. The massacre of the Igbo was triggered by the murder of some Nigerian politicians who were accused of corruption by a group of military boys led by Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, of Igbo extraction. When dialogue failed to yield any fruit to stop the massacre, and myriads of broken promises of the federal government, Biafra declared itself Independent. The declaration of independence by Biafra triggered the declaration of war by the Federal government on Biafra. In the book, *The Edge of the Sword*, Charles De Gaulle stated, "war stirs in men's hearts the mud of their worst instincts. It puts a premium on violence, nourishes hatred and gives free rein to cupidity. It crushes the weak, exalts the unworthy, bolsters tyranny"[2]. War generates hatred and creates disharmony. It creates more enemies than friends. This was the experience as long as the Biafran war lasted.

As the war progressed, indiscriminate killings followed it. In Asaba, Issele Uku and surroundings, the federal soldiers killed innocent citizens uncontrollably. Iheka argues that the killings followed the unsubstantiated reason of betrayal and sabotage that led to the gruesome murder of Western Igbo in Benin and Asaba by the Federal troops who recaptured these sectors"[3]. The massacre of Igbos happened too, in Port Harcourt, Calabar and other areas captured by the Federal troops. As the war dragged on, Obiezuofu Ezeigbo, argues that "the Biafran enclave shrunk in size, refugees clustered in available villages[4]. The clustering of the refugees in these villages created problems. There was hunger, disease and frustration everywhere. "Markets, Churches, Schools and hospitals were the targets of the Federal war jets. Corrugated houses were covered with palm leaves to hide them from enemy planes. Hunger and disease were prevalent as the Federal government used hunger as a weapon of warfare. Victor Ukaogo affirms that this warfare strategy depopulated the East as it became an untold misery and death of the people including women and children who were most affected[5]. During this traumatizing period, pregnancy was scarce for Igbo women, except probably with the 'soldiers' comfort women'. The circumstances on the ground, the frustration, the diseases, the poverty, and the lack of hospitals and medical personnel made matters worse because of the raging war. Men have gone to war while women, the very old and the very young, were home to "look" after the homes. In many communities, women automatically assumed the role of community leaders. According to Sybil Nmezi, this period of war made women the life-blood of the family and society. The women were ingredients for nation-building[6]. The implications of the war, however, disadvantaged the Igbo politically, socially and economic development.

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## 3. The Cost of War

The fatality cost of the war is unquantifiable. Unfortunately, there has been no accurate data on deaths from 1966 till the end of the war in 1970. Many of the writers used estimation to capture the number of deaths. According to Wiseberg Laurie, "the statistical data quoted for civilian deaths has ranged from a low of 500,000 to a high of 6 million. The 'true' estimate may never be known because there is no accurate baseline for comparison with ... 1973 suspect data"[7]. He went on to say that the data of death could not be available because of inaccuracy and aggregate nature of figures and manipulation of figures by both conflicting parties and the international community[8]. As a result, it remains unclear how many Eastern Nigerians died in the 1966 attacks and in the subsequent civil war. Bokola Oyeniya suggested that about 30,000 to 300,000 were killed in the Northern region and some other places in the pogrom of 1966. He estimated about 1 million were killed on the war front and another 1 million were displaced from their homes. Those killed by hunger and diseases could be up to a million[9]. There is no doubt about the accurate number of fatalities in the 1966 pogrom or the accurate number of deaths during the period of the civil war; no one however was in doubt of the

devastating effect of the Biafra war. There was much destruction. Homes, hospitals, schools, and churches were destroyed. Disease due to hunger was prevalent while livestock, wildlife and plantations were destroyed. In the estimated number of fatalities, children, women and non-combatant men and women are included in Bokola Olaniyi's estimation shown in table 1.

**Table 1** Statistics of People massacred between January 1966 and before the war

<b>People massacred between January 1966 and before the war</b>	<b>30.000</b>
Displaced Igbo people from North and West	1 million
Those killed by hunger and disease due to economic blockage by the federal Military Government	1 million
Estimated people killed in battle on both sides during the war including non-military officers	500.000 to 1 million

Sources: [bbcnews.co.uk/hi/Africa/596712stm](https://www.bbcnews.co.uk/hi/Africa/596712stm) accessed 28/3/2016

Many children suffered from malnutrition and kwashiorkor. Maduawuchi S. Ogbonna, argues that the picture of children suffering from kwashiorkor attracted the attention of Western Media[10]. and many International Organizations (NGOs). Many of them tried as much as possible to save many Biafra lives. Unfortunately, the Nigerian economic blockade on Biafra killed more than shell mortars.

The harsh conditions on the ground placed a heavy burden on female heads of households within the period under review. They risked their lives to provide food for their families. Some women on the other hand became willing tools in the hands of the soldiers; they compromised their honour and dignity as a result. Nevertheless, the stigma of being sexually molested by the soldiers and the trauma they suffered lingered many years after the war.

The war uprooted many people from their ancestral environment, and community and humiliated them. They lost their home and their community. The community wears a human face. It is a place where the act of covenantal kindness is made and where the person acquires an identity. The civil war destroyed these traditional cultural values. Children were brought up without proper parental care. They experienced violence and suffered death and starvation. There were no schools, industries, jobs or social infrastructures. The war destroyed all these. The war generated poverty and today, poverty is germinating into conflict.

The post-war group fragmentation, communal conflicts, injustice, and the demand for resource control were the result of civil war madness, and the failure on the part of the government to keep to the promises of rebuilding the destroyed infrastructures. Ho-Won Jeong argues that "failure or incapacity of the government to respond to demands from marginalized groups lends support to insurgencies that challenge the legitimacy of the state[11]. The federal government's legitimacy is challenged by the incessant ethnic and religious conflicts since the civil war ended in 1970.

The Umuleri/Aguleri communal conflict was one of the legitimacy tastes for Nigeria in the late 70s and early 80s. The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) complained bitterly (*The Guardian of June 27, 1994*) and questioned the centralization of political and control of economic powers, which has led to the abject marginalization and impoverishment of minority groups and, to some extent, non-ruling groups. In their fight for resource control, their local leaders who were suspected to have compromised with the federal government were killed in May 1994. This led to the killing on November 10, 1995, of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others.

The emergence of such groups as 'Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB)' and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) came as a result of the political marginalization of the Igbo nation. One of the policies of the Eastern Nigerian government immediately after the war was the compulsory confiscation of Faith based schools. The federal government had earlier expelled all foreign missionaries who worked on the side of Biafra during the war period, accusing them of aiding the State of Biafra. Terrorism of the Boko haram, bandits, Fulani herders and armed robbery have tremendously increased in our society; kidnapping and occultism have multiplied and the elevation of anti-social behaviour has multiplied too. The high rate of insecurity in our communities and cities is alarming. It has led to various forms of agitation and criminality in Nigeria today.

#### **4. The Roles of women during the War**

Many elderly women who are still living have not forgotten their experiences of the civil war. They can still narrate their story and the roles they played. They were engaged in economic, political, cultural and social roles. Let us examine some of these roles here.

##### **4.1 Economic Role of Igbo Women**

Igbo women like any other women group in Nigeria or Africa are economically independent. They achieve this economic independence through their hard work, primarily through subsistence farming. Igbo women are versed in petty trading and agricultural surplus. According to Joseph Therese Agbasiere, apart from farming, "women achieve economic independence through petty trade in agricultural surpluses like cocoyam, cassava, melons and maize. Tree crops such as palm oil and kola nuts, as well as local crafts, including pottery, form also, part of a woman's trade[12]. In their bid to achieve economic independence and so contribute to the welfare of their family, women can travel far in inter-community trading. Women vigorously carried out these economic engagements during the war and they helped in the survival of life in Biafra land. They risked their lives, avoiding enemy warplanes and shells to search for food for their families and communities.

Igbo women today are engaged in modern viable trade as contracts. Some have established their industries in various parts of Igbo land and abroad. You see them in manufacturing, management and administration, in health and education. Many of them are today proud owners of hospitals, schools and trading companies. The contributions of these elite Igbo women have helped in the empowerment of the economically weak young girls and widows in society. Some Igbo women groups have built houses for widows and widowers to give them hope and a sense of belonging.

##### **4.2 Igbo Women and Socio-Political Roles**

Igbo women, in their various groups as Umuada (daughters of the village or community or kindred), and Ndinyom (married women of a particular village or community), collectively or in groups played vital roles in the socio-political affairs of their various communities during the civil war time.

Igbo cherish their cultural values and they transmit them to the next generation. Every community (by genealogical lineage) maintains its historical and cultural identity. Denigration of cultural values and unchaste life is unacceptable. It is the reason mothers love their daughters to remain chaste till they get married. Pregnancy of unmarried girls is not acceptable at all, as it brings dishonour to the family. In some communities, the mothers of pregnant unmarried girls are penalized for not 'being more responsible in the upbringing of their girls. The Umuada and Ndinyom collectively wade in matters concerning issues of the market, cleanliness of village roads, squares and shrines. This spirit of communal responsibility has been carried into the Church. The women take turns to clean the church on weekly basis and decorate it where possible. Members hold regular meetings and those living in the urban areas make their contributions through mothers-in-law or a neighbour's wife. They come home once a year to hold a general meeting and to deliberate on matters concerning the community in terms of development, health and education of the community. They keep watch on the dress codes of their daughters and direct their conduct. The cultural laws were very strong before the advent of Christianity. Unmarried pregnant girls were married out to elderly widower-s after they performed purification rites. Today, premarital sex and pregnancy are still frowned at, though rampant. Some parents give out their pregnant girls into marriage, forcefully at times, to avoid the "shame" brought about by their girls. Some girls who would not like to face the 'music' run away into "pregnant homes" to deliver and later give out those children for adoption. One of the duties of women is to educate and advise their girls against unwanted pregnancies. Young are educated on how to keep the home, cook and farm. During the civil war, Umuada were on the ground to settle disputes between conflicting women, caution 'wayward' women and girls and punish anti-social behaviours. They saw to the smooth running of the communities in the absence of the men who went to war.

##### **4.3 Igbo Women and Peacebuilding**

Igbo women in whatever social status they found themselves are guided by the conditions of social-political actions of their community. They are therefore involved in activities of the community in the settlement of conflicts arising from the socio-political relationship. Igbo women generally have limited roles in matters concerning Ezeship/Igweship of communities but they weigh a lot of influence to settle its dispute. According to Cletus Obasi and Rebecca Nnamani, women, especially Umuada Igbo, act as the court of 'arbitration' and mediators in conflicts[13]. Their role is to bring lasting peace, eliminate subjugation and infuse in them, the spirit of *metanio*, forgiveness and justice. Igbo women can weigh the big stick on offenders and people of anti-social behaviours in society. Joseph Therese Agbasiere affirms that "apart from their general role as advisers, women have their council of female elders, parallel to the council of male

elders. In critical situations, both councils could meet together for deliberation and consultation... Igbo women in general are expected to perform the role of “watchdogs” of public morality... Women may demonstrate their political pressure through their meetings, which may be interior intra-lineage in structure and usually operative under the aegis of the most senior married women[14]. Under their membership of boarded groups, Igbo women are vested with some measure of political power. This power was greatly used during the civil war. By far the most significant channel for the exercise of female influence within the Igbo community remains that of Umuada. Apart from this group, there are professional associations and other women groups such as market women and dancing groups, who meet regularly to discuss political, economic and social issues. They are also actively involved in the arduous task of peacebuilding. They approach this by making sure that the structures and mechanisms for dealing with abuse of power are adequate.

Strategies used in managing conflict and building peace include negotiation and mediation, arbitration, adjudication and by sheer use of force. In negotiation, the conflicting parties are encouraged to come together and educate themselves about their interests and issues to address their future relations. Where this does not achieve success, there followed a facilitated negotiation. Here Igbo women help the disputing parties through mediation. They assist the parties in mutually accepting an agreement. The Igbo women have the power to arbitrate and adjudicate between conflicting parties in the families and communities. Their decision is final in such matters.

In domestic violence, the women do not tolerate it in any way. It is expected that wives accord their husbands due respect and receive the same from their husbands too. Where a wife is experiencing domestic violence, the Umuada or Ndiyom will intervene.

And where a wife abandons her responsibility to her husband or mother-in-law or even her children, she is punished for her neglect.

The particular culture and tradition of the community determine the strategy and since the cultural and traditional rules define the community's behaviour and relationship, conflict resolution is carried out by Igbo women of that cultural background wherever they live, work or trade in cases of abuse or relational crises. The wartime involvement of women in peacebuilding enhanced the status of women even after the civil war. It is the reason why we have Igbo women organizations or associations in every city they found themselves in Nigeria and globally. The associations exist to promote the interest of their indigenes or members against exploitation, marginalization and discrimination. The socio-political association of women is involved in the empowerment of Igbo women globally. In the urban centres and in overseas as in America, England, Belgium, Germany, etc, the ability of Igbo women to form associations is to create a formidable platform for conflict management, empowerment and the promotion of their interests. Olakunle Odumosu argues that conflict resolution is inherently a problem of bargaining and problem solving, involving the distribution and achievement of shared values[15].

Unlike the Western Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), the Igbo women employ a non-violent approach to conflict resolution. By analyzing the conflict scenario and listening to the parties involved and informing them duly, the women apply a combination of western and African ADR to resolve the problem. The African method of Alternative Dispute Resolution is captured by I. William Zartman. According to him, “in traditional African mediation, the agent is a neutral and powerless third party, armed with personal characteristics such as wisdom and integrity but without the means for providing inducement and sanction with a moral mediator rather than a mediator with muscle, or in more standard times, a mediator as formulator but not as a manipulator. The mediator functions much as an ombudsman, intervening between authority and citizen, tempering justice with mercy and sentences with reintegration[16] I. William Zartman may be thinking of a one-man third-party mediator. The Igbo women work as a team towards enthroning peace. At times, they weigh the big stick for the uncompromising party. This is done in the sense and spirit of communal unity and security.

Igbo women's activity and leadership in Nigeria are higher in the sphere of civil society and community activism than in 'formal politics,' and the women's opportunities for active participation in decision-making are more in Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil societies and very low in government, political parties and even in the Church. Women seem too to be many more in the educational and health sector than men. In the five states of Igbo land and the Delta Igbo, it is estimated that there are more female teachers in primary schools than men. However, men disproportionately hold key decision-making positions. In many NGOs run mainly by women and Igbo women, in particular, they assume decision-making positions and in addition obtain governance roles.

Reconciling and reintegrating traumatized members of the community was the responsibility of some elderly women in the communities during the war. There was ritual reconciliation and reintegration of women who had abusive experiences, victims of rape and abortions. They hide from public eyes, grieving over the stigma violence has brought

to them. They were helped to go through ritual purifications and were reintegrated into the community. There were many too who, despite the reintegration, never overcame the trauma of the war.

#### **4.4 Intelligence and Security**

The dictionary meaning of intelligence as it concerns our topic is secret information about secret plans or activities especially those of foreign governments, armed forces, business enemies or criminals. It is about secret information gathering or political information. It is about people gathering secret information about secret plans or activities of an adversary [17].

During the Nigerian Civil war, the military on both sides made use of spies, informers, and captured documents among some of their war strategies. Captured Igbo women or 'comfort ladies' were made to spy for the Nigerian military. For Biafra, this was a betrayal and those found were killed. Those who survived came back after the civil war to reintegrate with the rest of the community after some ritual reconciliation. This ritual cleansing was also performed on ex-Biafra soldiers who came back from the battlefield. Elderly women performed this ritual cleansing on their sons and grandsons.

Some of the Igbo women spies played double roles. They gave secret information about military raids on any Igbo community. Based on the information received the elderly women will inform their daughters and young women to hide. It was said that many families dug holes to hide their daughters from the enemy and marauding soldiers. The elderly women made sure to shield and protect their young ladies by informing them of the secret plans of the military and enemies. By so doing, the young ladies were protected from rape, forced marriages and prostitution. This role continued even after the civil war in 1970.

#### **4.5 Personal Witnessing**

Some individual women went the extra mile to preach about peace. This was on the bases of their witness as victims of the war. They organized groups in their communities to talk about peace and pray for the stoppage of the war.

Some of them, whenever they remember their experiences, are full of tears. Many have however moved on with their lives so that they can tell their story again and again. One of the stories is here narrated by a victim of the civil war, Mrs Veronica Chukwudi, from Isele Ukwu in Delta State, Nigeria. She organized local women to pray for peace, especially victims of war like herself. She lost her husband, brother-in-law and other relations. It took her time and effort to overcome her trauma. Her children according to her helped her very much to move on with her life. In the interview I had with her on 12 March 2012 in her home Iselle Ukwu, she told me some of these things:

The period of the civil war was really bad for me and my family. I was still young and beautiful. I lost my husband and everything we had as property. I witnessed the massacre of our chiefs and elders at Market Square. The Nigerian soldiers took away our women after killing the men. If not for a god-sent soldier who helped me to escape into the bush, they would have taken me away with my children to an unknown place. I lived my life running from one place to another and from one bush to another. I was pregnant at that time they killed my husband. I gave birth to my child, Dominic in the bush and I thank God that he survived the war. It was a miracle. He is today a Catholic Priest. My children are all adults today and graduates. They like hearing the war story very often. They are my rock and I tell them about it. Today I thank God that I have overcome the trauma of the war. At the end of the war, I went to see our house at Ishiagu. It was vandalized and wrecked. There was nothing in the house. It took me time and effort to overcome it. I lost my husband, relations and everything we had as property.

I pray that we do not experience another war in this country again. Amen[18].

Her story brings us to raise a question; what reasons for the war in the first instance? Your answer is as good as mine is. Veronica did not see any reason for the war. She wished and prayed for no other war in Nigeria. While she lived, she helped traumatized women and girls to overcome their problems. She helped in preaching peace and settled conflict cases in her community.

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## **5. Suggestions**

Conflict is inevitable in any society. The problem lies however in the control and management of conflicts. For Igbo women, controlling, managing and resolving conflict is a shared value and a step in peacebuilding. It was difficult for women to step out from their traditional roles of keeping the home and taking care of children to assume socio-political and economic responsibilities in Igbo communities during the war period. Before the war, Igbo women's associations

were organized better in the cities than at the grassroots. The women managed well despite the situation they found themselves in and the sufferings they experienced. We suggest and recommend the following:

- Igbo women should continue to play their traditional roles as mothers, peacebuilders and bridge builders in their families and communities.
- Igbo Women's Associations at all levels and places should be straightened to meet up with modern demands without losing their cultural values.
- Igbo Women should get involve strongly in national political matters and should not shy away from economic issues
- All Igbo women associations should pursue and enforce the education of the girl child. It is a source of enhancement and empowerment for women.
- Through marriage and family relationships, Igbo women should obtain the right of governance roles over the family business and adjudicate in family matters. It is the same for Igbo women in community-based councils or organizations.

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## 6. Conclusion

We have explored the roles Igbo women played during the Nigerian – Biafra war and acknowledged that their efforts helped in achieving peace. They did not carry guns to win the peace but with their natural feminine characteristics as mothers and daughters of Igbo land. Igbo women are more united and organized in tackling issues of conflict at the family and communal levels. This homogeneity should be extended in tackling inter-communal conflicts confronting Igbo communities today. The experiences of the war period have schooled them in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. They managed very well in building bridges of peace in the homes, hospitals, communities and schools that existed as the war went on. The lacuna created by the absence of men during the war period allowed getting involved in peace efforts.

This process entails the perspectives of conflict analysis, which encompasses the critical investigation of the conflict situations to identify the actors, structures and dynamics, which are the determinants of conflict resolution. Today the processes of women's participation and involvement in peacebuilding were enhanced by the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 of October 2000

The Resolution noted that women are affected more in conflict situations. It called for more support for them by enhancing their participation, and contributions to peace-building processes. Igbo women-led activities since the end of the civil war have increased, especially in areas affected by conflicts. Their August Meetings are now wearing a national look and assisting in the sustainable development of many communities .The meetings should be sustained.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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The authors declare no conflict of interests in respect of the authorship and publication of this article.

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