

Lessons for Life: Roma Children, Communal Practices, and the Global Marketplace

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The Roma, also known as gypsies or *tsinganoi*, are amongst the oldest ethnic minorities in Europe. Nonetheless, they have been one of the most universally marginalized groups across all of the European nations. Their marginalization is evident in how Roma children have been treated in schools. Until recently, most nations have only offered them a segregated education. Those allowed into integrated settings have attended schools whose goal has been cultural assimilation (Lesar, Čuk, & Peček, 2006). Since curricula do not reflect their lives, customs, or personal experiences and school officials make little effort to communicate with families (Kale dor Kayiko, n.d.), many Roma opt not to send their children to school. There are over 3.5 million school age Roma children, but over 1.5 million have never attended public school because of the cultural assimilation practices (Cozma, Cucos, & Momanu, 2000). Through rejection of assimilative institutions, Roma people distance themselves from the non-Roma, referred to as *balamos* by Greek Roma. Some would argue that such distancing from mainstream society and its institutions limits Roma children's access to the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) which may lift them out of poverty.

In this article, I report on preliminary data from an ethnographic study of how and what Roma children in Greece learn outside of schooling via the practice of familial economic participation to show how the Roma leverage their own cultural capital as a marginalized people to participate in the informal economy. I provide brief notes, stories, and snapshots from the two months I spent traveling with a migrant Roma troupe to illustrate how the Roma in Greece, 80-90% of whom cannot read or write in Greek as result of their mar-

ginalization, prepare their children to work on the fringes of Greece's local economies. Before discussing the research findings, I provide a brief history of the challenges the Roma have faced in Europe and then detail the research methods, providing a description of the migrant troupe I joined for two months.

The Roma: A Landless, Discriminated People

Considering themselves a landless nation, the Roma live all over the world, with the largest populations living in Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. The Roma are thought to have travelled to Europe from the Punjab area of India during the 11th century. Documentation indicates that Europeans have persecuted Roma people since as far back as the 14th century (Villanueva, 1999). They have been forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and for centuries, they have been discouraged and punished for speaking the Romani language by extreme measures such as having their tongues cut off (Kyuchkov, 2000). While exact numbers are difficult to obtain, scholarship suggests that during Nazi Germany between the years of 1939-1945, over 170,000 Roma people were deported to concentration camps and massacred in ethnic cleansing efforts (Gilbert, 1984).

Over seventy years later, Europeans policies and practices continue to discriminate against Roma people. Dominant European narratives construct the Roma as poor, dirty, uncivilized, untrustworthy, immoral, drunkards, fighters, and thieves (Kligman, 2001). *The European Roma Rights Center* (2010) documents that Romani people have also endured police brutality, hate speech, inadequate access to healthcare, discrimination in

housing, as well as poor education. Given that they are discriminated against in the job markets, Roma are disproportionately poor and rely on migrant underground labor practices to feed their families (Kligman, 2001).

European governments have attempted to prohibit Roma from urban centers. As recently as 2010, the French government expelled Roma people from the country, sending them to Romania. In 2009, the Berlusconi government in Italy targeted the Roma people through legal measures that transported them away from urban cities to special camps in order to "sanitize" the sites of the Roma encampments. On the island of Crete, the city of Chania passed an ordinance in 2007, which barred Roma people from staying in the city more than three days without documented housing, thereby eliminating the possibility for migrant Romani children to attend the city schools of Chania, and learn Greek.

Historically, throughout Europe, Roma children have been segregated and separated in public schools. Trimikliniotis and Demetriou (2009) document how separatist school practices in urban cities within Cyprus make high educational attainment impossible for Romani children. Integrated education is seen as the solution to poverty by researchers and children's rights groups (Jaroka, 2007). In response to lobbying from children's rights and Roma rights groups, the Grand Chamber of European Court of Human Rights made a landmark decision on November 13, 2007, ruling that segregation of Romani students in remedial schools is unlawful and discriminatory. Three years after that ruling, however, many migrant Roma still do not choose to attend public schools.

Public schooling has been problem-

atic in the Roma community for many reasons (Cozmas, Cucos, & Momanu, 2000). First, schooling is not necessarily linked to social or economic status within Roma communities, and is therefore deemed painful, ineffective, and a distraction from familial economic activities. Second, Roma parents see formal schooling as an invasive, impractical, unnecessary means by which society seeks to control their parenting and their children's lives (Lee & Warren, 1991). Third, Roma children, for their part, experience school as boring and have more interest in knowledge about everyday life than book knowledge (Kyuchokov, 2000). As a result, more often than not, Roma families do not enroll their children in school. Instead, Roma children learn through apprenticeship into the practices of their culture and community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In this way, knowledge construction is communal (Wasko & Faraj, 2000) and stands in opposition to individualist paradigms, which call for children to be socialized into learning away from the family.

Unlike children in America and Western Europe, Roma children are seen as full emerging, contributing members of family life and not simply as young individuals training for life (Levinson, 2005). They engage fully in helping the family gain income and take care of the household, while children in the U.S. and Western European dominant culture engage in very little actual work and much more play. Consequently, Roma children learn very specialized knowledge through observation of their parents' trades, which they then ply on the local economies (Adams et al, 1975; Oakley, 1983). They are socialized within an extended family network that provides emotional and physical spaces in which children learn by "watching, listening, and observing, the economic, social, linguistic, political and moral codes of their society" (Smith, 1997, p. 6).

The main features of traditional Roma values include oral language traditions, strong family life, practicality, experiential learning, and practices of collective good that involve elders and youngsters (Exteberria, 2002). Building on the oral and communal culture,

children engage in elaborate storytelling from an early age (Reger & Gleason, 1991). Storytelling is used to educate, entertain, and reinforce moral and religious values. Some stories deal with the adventures of the old Roma archetype who travelled to many far-off and challenging places (Wood, 1973) others are "songs of youth and manhood, epic and sorrow songs" (Yoors, 1967, p. 113) that tell of loss and survival.

Little is known, however, about how poor Roma families migrating through urban centers educate their children outside of public school institutions, and within the changing local economies of contemporary, post Cold-War Europe and how that education might help cultivate a resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) rooted in cultural pride and freedom from oppression. Because the Roma are a migrant culture, the traditional distinctions between urban and rural communities hold little explanatory power. Migrant Roma move between urban and rural settings, depending on the economic conditions, seasonal demands, and their own family needs.

This article documents how one Roma migrant troupe in Greece, where there are an estimated 300,000 Roma people (*Hellenic Republic: National Commission for Human Rights* 2008), educated their children outside of public institutions (schools). In particular, I discuss how the Romani troupe taught the children verbal, non-verbal, and musical literacies with which to participate in, work in, and adapt to the globally impacted local economies.

METHODS

Site and Participants

The Roma troupe that allowed me to observe them travelled in mainland Greece, mostly in areas populated by seasonal tourists. I came to know the members of the troupe through family and friends; my mother's family is from a small village, close to a large Roma population. The troupe consisted of five families who travelled together. When they could, the families would stay in the homes of extended family members. Those without family networks would stay with the troupe and set up tent-housing en-

campments, or what the Greeks called a *tsenderi*, on other people's olive groves, vineyards, or abandoned lots.

The families with whom I travelled were multigenerational and interrelated. They included:

Violetta & Marko (3 boys—Theodoros, Hristakos; Kostas; 1 girl—Chrisa)

Fifi & Hristo (3 girls—Eleni, Dena, Roula)

Chrisa & Michali (5 boys—Spiros, Hristos, Yannis, Yorgos, Demetris)

Marina & Yeorgos (3 girls—Danae, Eva, Maria; 2 boys—Thanos, Manos)

Yanna & Yosif (1 boy—Angelos)

Ana (mother of Marko & Hristo; sister of Popi)

Popi (mother of Michali, Yeorgo, & Yosif; sister of Ana)

While each family had their own children, all adults in the family shared in the childrearing. The families travelled together during the summer months to take advantage of the influx of tourists coming to Greece. Most tourists came from Northern European countries, particularly Germany, Sweden, Norway, France, and England. There were also many American tourists. Tourists tended to have more disposable money than Greeks did and were therefore favored as customers by the Roma troupe.

Ethnographic Methods

Consistent with qualitative ethnographic methods (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), I constructed ethnographic field notes to document how this particular Roma troupe engaged the children in teaching and learning. Over a two-month period, I was a participant-observer as the troupe travelled from one tourist place to the next, selling lace, jewelry, wooden chairs and tables, and watermelons. From dawn to dusk, I participated in the troupe routines, especially those linked to childrearing.

The fact that I had my own family connections to this particular Greek Roma troupe helped me to overcome

my outsider status. My accented and imperfect Greek made me more approachable, as Romani-Greek is often considered ungrammatical, broken, and improper. Additionally, my expatriate status made it easier for them to attack Greek nationalist practices in my presence. Nevertheless, it took quite some time for the women in the troupe to trust in me, especially since I was unaccompanied by a male partner of my own—an expectation in the Romani culture, where women marry around the age of 15. I took extreme measures to make sure that I was never alone in the company of just men, and that I never made any direct eye contact with men that could be misinterpreted as flirtatious.

In my role as participant-observer, I attended to all instructive events throughout the day. I focused on all interactions between parents and children, as well as on interactions between children themselves, especially siblings. I also observed the children as they worked during the day to help supplement the family income. Because English is my dominant language, I wrote all of my field notes in English and maintained only those words that were not translatable, like *balamos*, a heavily connoted word for non-Romas.

Data Analysis and Developing Coding Categories

Data analysis began from the beginning of data collection and entailed constant comparison and grounded theory approaches (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At the end of each day, I identified each instructive practice engaged in by the parents and children, such as how to ask tourists for money, how to play music for small groups of tourists and still get money, how to position oneself outside of a store without being chastised by the police. As the days progressed, I documented patterns and themes through periodic open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through open coding, I began indexing to link themes across time, and thus the language that I used to define events became more consistent with each subsequent observation.

I also coded data by each child. Cod-

ing by individual children gave me a fuller picture of how gender, age, and birth order shaped instruction in child rearing. Additionally, coding by student afforded me the opportunity to use axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to compare and contrast gender and age. To assess whether themes were representative (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), at the beginning of each week's data collection I sought out disconfirming evidence, which either refined my themes or altered them. From the themes that emerged in the field notes, I formulated assertions that helped me conceptualize how the Romani troupe educated their children for participation in Greek's summer tourist economy.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Over the summer, urban centers in Athens, Greece are teeming with tourists who want to shop, visit museums, and walk the sites of ancient ruins. Greece's economy is based primarily on this summer tourism. Migrant Roma Greeks who are street vendors or peddlers also rely on tourism to make the bulk of their yearly income.

Depending on their ages and gender, all of the children learned how to participate in the making of family income. From both explicit and implicit lessons taught by parents and siblings, children learned how to use the languages of the market place, how to leverage musical knowledge, and the art of begging to make money consistently. Learning and reflection happened at mealtime during the end of the evening when the troupe gathered at the *tsenderi* for storytelling and music playing near the campfire.

Learning the Languages of the Market Place

Working with tourists requires very specific communication skills that this Romani troupe had identified clearly to their children. English was a common language spoken throughout the tourist season, and many of the children already knew phrases like, "Do you like..." or "Pretty Lady..." "How much..." "Can you help me?" "I am hungry." As summer came underway

and it became clear that the majority of tourists were going to be Northern Europeans, the parents alerted the children that they would need to learn key phrases of some of the dominant languages, and the children made a point of doing as told. On one occasion, I observed 14-year-old Theodoros learn German and put it to use immediately. He asked a German tourist how to "say hello" to which the tourist responded, "hallo." Theodoros followed up with "how do you say 'do you like?'" The German tourist responded with the translation. Theodoros, then repeated the German phrase to the tourist while pointing to some lace. The tourist smiled and bought a lace doily. During the evening, Theodore recounted the story to the troupe, sharing both his strategy for engaging the German tourists, as well as the actual German words he had learned. The younger children repeated "hallo" throughout the evening to one another in what they perceived as a German accent.

Another strategy the children used to learn foreign languages was to pantomime and encourage tourists to teach them useful words and phrases. One day, in the marketplace in front of the Acropolis, ten-year-old Chrisa engaged in the following interaction while selling silk scarves to British female tourists, as her grandmother looked on:

Chrisa: Please (gestures to British tourists to come to her table where she has scarves displayed)

British Woman: You want us to come? (gestures to the other woman) She wants us to go with her. Come, sometimes the Gypsies have nice things.

Chrisa: Please (points to scarves—gestures questioningly and looks over at her grandmother.)

British Woman: Oh, you want to know---SCARVES---These are SCARVES. SCARVES. Now you say it. SCARVES. Look Linda, these scarves are quite lovely, aren't they? Should we buy a few? (The other woman is sorting through the scarves)

Chrisa: Scarves.

British Woman: How much are these scarves? Do you know what I'm saying? HOW MUCH ARE THESE SCARVES? (pulls out her wallet and gestures) HOW MANY POUNDS?

Chrisa: Ah..em. Euros, ten em Euros.

British Woman: Very good. I would like these two.

Through pantomime, Chrisa engaged the British tourist in an exchange. The tourist, a woman in her fifties took it upon herself to turn the transaction into an opportunity to teach Chrisa English. Like Theodoros, Chrisa shared her new vocabulary with other troupe members that evening.

Multiple languages became a way to garner tourist attention in large crowded areas. On several occasions, Spiros walked with Theodoros through large marketplaces and along a tourist beach destinations selling jewelry, shouting: "bracelets, necklaces, halksetten, schmuck, smycken, gioielli, joyeria, only 10 Euros!" Spiros had learned to say jewelry in English, German, Swedish, Italian, and Spanish. During a transaction, the boys listened closely to the interactions to encourage a sale. For example, on one occasion, a Spanish speaking woman asked her daughter what she thought of a necklace, and Spiros said "linda, linda, linda" (beautiful). The boys had a keen eye for tourists and often knew the tourists' country of origin and which language to speak. When I asked them how they knew what languages to use, they looked at me as though I should know better and asserted that they could always tell the Germans and Swedes because they were very white, very tall, and their language was very distinct. The Italians and Spaniards, according to the boys, were smaller and/or darker.

Spiros, Theodore, and Chrisa show how Roma children engaged in learning language through direct participation in market transactions. The marketplace offered the children opportunities to appropriate languages from other cultures. The children

hybridized languages for use during their market transactions, thus resulting in not only an economic exchange, but a linguistic dialogic one as well (Bakhtin, 1981). Such language learning stands in sharp contrast to school learning, which takes place through interactions with the book and a teacher, and is decontextualized, with vocabulary that is not immediately useful.

Music and Money

In most Roma cultures, music is very important. Ramati (1986) documents how music became a unifying and uplifting form of expression and communication during Nazi German occupations. In Greece, Roma music typically involves instruments like the clarinet, violin, and a string instrument called a *bouzouki*. Roma Greek music is in the style of *tsifteteli* and is often associated with what Americans would characterize as belly dancing. Dancing *tsifteteli* involves gyrating hips and shoulders and appears seductive. While Roma people are heavily discriminated throughout the country, their music is highly regarded and is the one area in which they have been able to succeed, with some garnering international acclaim and fame.

Music was integrated into the daily routines of the Roma troupe I observed. During the evenings, the adults and children played music around the campfire. The men dominated the making of music and took on much of the teaching and mentoring of children. As the men played, the children usually tried to chime in with their instruments. The fathers taught them small repetitive parts until they were able to play a full accompaniment.

Music was not just a pastime activity; it was also a means by which to make money. Children between the ages of 7 and 14 could often be seen playing accordions, clarinets, violins in the urban streets of Athens. During the summer, their childhood musical notes filled the streets and the outdoor cafes, which catered to many tourists. However, playing music alongside outdoor café's was risky business that involved luck and good timing because the restaurateurs did not want the Roma

children competing with them for the patrons' money. On one occasion, for example, Eleni, Roula, and Dena took the opportunity to play for a large table of Swedish tourists, while the waiter was busy trying to get the food to the table. Dena looked-out for the waiter as she held the jar and waited for the tourists to reach into their pockets to put money in the jar. When it appeared as though the tourists were taking their time, Eleni stopped playing and exclaimed "Money!" The statement startled the tourists, who then laughed and put money into the jar, just before the waiter ran out shooing the girls away with an old dishrag. After a full-day's work, the children often brought back a hefty sum of money, while also having practiced their music making.

Children also played music in bus depot areas, while other children sold flowers to onlookers, specifically couples, but sometimes families too. In the depot one day, Eleni and Angelos played a violin and clarinet duet. They targeted couples by playing romantic songs and asking for money, and Roula followed them with long-stem red roses. As the duet surrounded the couples with music, Roula offered the male partners a rose and pointed to the woman, as if to say, "Don't you want to buy a flower for your wife or girlfriend?" Typically, the tourists bought the flower and gave money to the musicians.

The Art of Begging

There were three different venues where Roma children positioned themselves for their begging work—the bus depot, *Plaka* (the marketplace near the Acropolis), and busy highway exits. The bus depot was a major venue because there were always large numbers of people waiting to make use of Greece's busy public transportation system. At the depot, the older girls often carried around the younger children, toddlers, and babies as they asked for money. The girls would stand right in front of a large group of tourists waiting for a bus and appeal to their humanity. Toddlers followed the older girls' instructions and locked eyes with the tourists.

On occasion, some curious tourists would ask where the parents of

the children were, and sometimes the girls would lie and tell the tourists that their parents had died and that they were homeless in hopes of soliciting more compassion, and therefore, more money. Children who were mentally or physically challenged or who had some sort of physical deformity were often coached into begging by their parents. One of the boys, Hristos, had a spinal deformity that prevented him from standing upright. With the help of his parents, he learned how to contort his body in such an unnatural position that tourists would stop to look. As they stopped to look, his grandmother walked around with a can to beg for money for her grandson to help him fix his spine. Nearly all onlookers reached into their pockets to help. In this way, Hristos was able to contribute to the family economy in spite of his handicap.

Begging was a skilled practice that involved a deliberate construction of image and performance. The children typically wore tattered clothing and walked barefoot. What is more, from a very early age, parents taught their children to understand the subtlest of glances, stares, and small gestures, which they used, in part, to communicate with one another and, thus, avoid the primary occupational hazard—police confrontation for loitering, begging, or stealing. On one occasion, a Roma woman from another troupe was begging from tourists as they spilled out of a bus. A local police officer confronted her and asked to check her purse. She glanced over to her son, who was standing near a magazine stand. He pushed the magazine stand, which came tumbling down, causing commotion. The police officer immediately dashed over to the stand to see what had happened. As he did so, the Roma mother left the bus depot and her son disappeared into the crowd.

Given their training, the Roma children were also very aware of how their presentation, postures, expressions, and eyes, could be used to gain compassion and pity from passers-by. The children made sure to hold eye contact, while thrusting out a can for money. Their expressions were searching, beckoning tourists to feel empathy. The tourists would often give money to the

children, using the occasion to teach a lesson to their own children about how, as one American mother described, “lucky [they] were that [they] weren’t poor and that [they] had parents who could take them on nice vacations.”

Childhood Responsibilities—Apprenticeship

While both boys and girls contributed to family income, the work tended to be gendered along traditional lines, a finding echoed in the work of Levinson & Sparkes (2003). Boys participated in labor such as loading and unloading watermelons, chairs, tables, vases, and other heavy items that their fathers were selling. Boys also drove trucks, cars, and mopeds from a very early age, often delivering items, or conveying messages from one person to the next. What is more, boys were also socialized to protect their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters and cousins. On one occasion, for example, Kosta created a distraction when police officers were about to remove his mother, Violetta, from the farmer’s market place because she was selling lace without a permit. As the police approached, he knocked over a whole display of wind chimes, causing a loud commotion that drew the police officers attention and allowed Violetta to get away.

Grandmothers and mothers apprenticed girls into more domestic work related to food preparation and childcare. Older girls in the troupe often worked with the grandmothers to help with the younger children and to prepare for meals. Girls also learned how to read coffee grounds from their grandmothers. The grandmothers taught the girls the art of fortune telling by reading the coffee grounds that come with a serving of coffee at cafes. The girls applied their knowledge by positioning themselves outside of coffee houses and offering their fortune telling services. Greeks and tourists, alike, were often curious enough to pay one Euro to find out their fortunes.

Learning through Storytelling and Reflection

At the end of the night, the troupe

would meet at the *tsenderi* over a bonfire and a meal. The meetings involved a reporting out of how much money was raised, which products sold the best, as well as any conflicts that the family encountered. It was also a time of sharing daily lessons. Parents would give advice about how to beg at the highway exit without the danger of being hit by cars, or how to know which tourists have money to spare and which ones do not. For example, young tourists carrying backpacks rarely gave much money, and so were not typically approached. Children were encouraged to ask money from women with children because they usually gave money to begging children so as not to explain to their own children why they were unwilling to help. The lessons served to provide instruction for immediate application in the following day’s work.

In the context of the daily reflections, children, parents and grandparents would weave daily stories in with older stories. The stories told had common themes related to their daily work, such as near escapes from the police, jokes played on mean storeowners, tricks played on naïve tourists, and funny missteps of the younger children. On one occasion, after a long day’s Marko recounted a relatively recent event when the troupe “borrowed” serving platters from a restaurant, by having the women hide the platters between their legs under their long skirts. The restaurant owners, who had made the families pay ahead of time, were shocked to find that the platters went missing while everyone was still seated. Marko told the story to remind the troupe that they are resilient, and even if there were tough economic times in Europe, they would find a way to make ends meet. All of the stories ended with a lesson about the importance of persistence, perseverance, familial solidarity, and the absolute necessity of protecting the family from the *balamos*, who disparaged and discriminated against them.

Discussion

Preliminary data analysis from this ethnographic study demonstrates how one Roma troupe taught their children to participate in the changing local and

global economies within Greece during tourist season and, thus, contribute as much and as soon as possible to the families' income and resources. In the context of trade and interactions with both consumers and wholesalers, Roma children from this troupe had opportunities to practice their use of Greek, the dominant language, learn to read body language, and employ key phrases in languages reflecting the summer tourist demographics. Their market transactions relied on linguistic transaction, thus embedding language learning within commerce. Music also became a knowledge domain that the Roma children cultivated through parental/elder mentorship and through practice during street performances. Begging performances and non-verbal development taught the Roma how to interpret their surroundings in order to protect their family members and their incomes. With their work, which is rooted in family ties and interdependency, Roma children have access to practices typically associated with adult worlds. Through the recounting and analysis of daily events during storytelling time, children developed reflective and critical thinking, which they put to use in their market transactions. Overall, their participation in the family economy allowed them to contribute to the family income, regardless of their age or physical condition, and construct possible future selves for the changing marketplace.

While European governments have legislated greater access to urban education for the Romani, many will likely continue to opt out of public schooling. They are suspicious of public schooling because their children experience discrimination, the curriculum does not reflect their cultural values, and the children miss cultural life lessons learned in the communal practices utilized by the Roma in the local economies. Consequently, many Roman parents are unwilling to have their children trade their communal practices for the possibility of having greater access to the labor market through public education. By choosing to teach life lessons outside of formal schooling, Roma parents, in effect, cultivate a resistance capital—strategies with which to maintain

solidarity and cultural uniqueness in the face of dominance and oppression.

There are both benefits and challenges for Roma children who gain their education outside of formal schooling. Instead of school curricula, the children learn how to make sense of the marketplace and how to respond to changing economic demands. While some might argue that this informal education restricts children's opportunities and access, such an argument necessarily views the Roma in terms of deficits, and not in terms of the economic flexibility, interdependence, and community solidarity that they cultivate. That said, because many migrant Roma resist formal schooling, there are very few Roma working in professional fields requiring higher education. As a result, when the Roma seek out public services, (like medical care, for instance) they do not have one of their own to turn to in times of need. Nor are there Roma politicians to champion their causes and concerns at the national level. Additional research might examine the education of the few Roma who hold such positions, and how their parents, troupe, and community supported their learning both in and out of school. Further research is also needed to understand the manner in which Roma people root their childrearing lessons in familial solidarity, cross-generational cultural practices, and the labor skills needed to navigate the world and its markets. Educational research in the United States could benefit from studies that compare the educational experiences of migrant Roma children with that of children of migrant workers in the United States (e.g. farm workers), whose jobs necessitate interrupting their children's schooling.

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