

# Contradiction and its Manifestations in *Arrow of God*

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**Abstract:** For many years, scholars have inexhaustibly studied *Arrow of God* in relation to pride, over-ambition, extreme conservatism and fear. In addition to these dimensions already studied, this paper examines *Arrow of God* as a text that thrives in ambiguity, which accrues from the contradictory and dynamic portrayal of characters and events in the text. Characters and events turn out to be the opposite of what they are initially depicted as, and this ultimately makes the text thought-provoking. This paper studies how contradictions are creatively interwoven to sustain the suspense of the text and how they, as well, contribute to the tragic development of the text. **Keywords:** Arrow of God, contradiction, Ezeulu, Ulu, conflict, interpretation, Chinua Achebe.

## Introduction

*Arrow of God*, an obviously timeless text has proliferated in different dimensions because of its contradictory and ambiguous quality. Ezeulu, the highly debated protagonist, for example, has been deconstructed by critics either as a pitiable character who deserves sympathy or as an over-ambitious, proud, fearful and power obsessed character who deserves the eventual punishment he gets from the gods for his extremities.

The former, represented here by Emenyonu (1991), claims that Ezeulu's

tragedy is as a result of his strict dedication to the services of Ulu, which he cannot compromise with any other being or interest as the case may be. Ezeulu exhibits this unalloyed relationship in accordance with his beliefs that, "no situation could make him defy the postulations of his god" (15) and that "no one is above the law (107)" Therefore, no true judge should allow personal feelings to over-shadow his strict interpretation of the law. This position of his is actually made manifest in the text when Ezeulu refuses to yield to Umuaro elders' passionate pleas to eat up the remaining

three sacred yams that traditionally mark the end of the year's calendar and name the date for the New Yam Festival. He maintains that, "those yams are not food" (207) and equates the action with "eating death." He believes that the people of Umuaro underestimate the situation of things and are trying to influence him to do what is contrary to the will of Ulu. Another problem which Ezeulu had to battle with in the text, according to Emenyonu, is that of contempt with which his god, Ulu, is treated by his enemies - Ezeidemmili and Ogbuefi Nwaka, and Ezeulu's humanly struggle to prove the strength of Ulu to them. In order to buttress this point of his, Emenyonu opines that,

The circumstances of the creation of both Ulu and its priest are thus controversial and Ezeidemmili, the priest of Idemmili (the most likely supreme deity of Umuaro in the absence of Ulu) has a bias against the new hierarchy. He holds Ezeulu in contempt and secretly assets his own god as supreme deity to Ulu. It is to stem the tide of this personal animosity with Ezeidemmili that Ezeulu indulges in some of his most dramatic and extraordinary actions (55).

For this group of critics, Ezeulu's tragedy actually emanates from Ulu's betrayal of Ezeulu as contrary to his expectations and that Ulu did not join him in the fight or, better still, shield him against all his opposing forces. After all, "a child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam, which its mother puts into its palms." (15).

Still under the first category, but differing a bit from Emenyonu's opinion, is Chukwumah (2016), who thinks that the tragedy of Ezeulu rather emanates from the outcome of the circumstance and historical period in which Ezeulu existed. For him, therefore, Ezeulu is a victim of "a clash between the old (Umuaro) order and the new (Hegel's) order." He further interprets Hegel's History as that which "accounts for the evolution of mankind from one stage to the other owing to the contribution of individuals, subjective beings, to the entity, the 'objective mind or a 'universal spirit'..." Chukwuma therefore, concludes that "the modern History with all the inconsistencies in its inherent drive to make progress meets history of Umuaro and Okperi, crises ensue and the villages are subjugated" (8).

The latter group feels that Ezeulu, who has collected the proverbial 'ant-ridden faggots,' should face the consequences of his action. Critics under this group believe that he actually gets appropriate punishment for over-stepping his boundaries. (Nwahunanya, 2003), in his dogged argument, describes Ezeulu's actions as desperation to cling to power and his down fall comes as a result of his extraordinary fear of losing the priestly throne. Accordingly, Nwahunanya upholds that;

Ezeulu's predicament as a tragic hero is also linked with the ambiguity in his relationship with his god. His impulse to resolve this ambiguity is fired by selfish ambitions fired by his fear that certain people are working to

destabilize and supplant him. 'Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the crops and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real (175).

Buttressing his stand further, Nwahunanya argues that Ezeulu is insatiable with his position of a "watchman" in the text as exemplified in his constant musings on and the analogy to the child's ownership of a goat. Again, Ezeulu is presented as one who in recognition of the vulnerability of his enviable position and stops at nothing to protect it as any loophole left by him could be used against him by his enemies. That is why for Nwahunanya, fear is the tragic flaw that leads Ezeulu to self-destruction. Nwahunanya believes that Ezeulu's fear is made manifest in his disappointment in the fact that his family could lose out in the lineage of the priesthood since none of his grown-up children exhibits "unique qualities that would qualify them for candidature." He, therefore, wishes he "could have a say in the choice. Since he fears that the office would be debased if a riff-raff is nominated into it (177).

The artificial nature of Ulu is also seen by Nwahunanya as a source of worry to Ezeulu as his greatest premonition in the text is to make Ulu's power be felt in Umuaro so as to compel their obedience. Furthermore, Nwahunanya does not fail to acknowledge earlier oppositions to his opinion, because, according to him:

It is not uncommon to come across critics who absolve

Ezeulu of a crime he purposely committed (or is it not criminal and callous to starve a whole clan under false pretenses?) The usual argument of such critics is that Ezeulu was acting sincerely in consonance with the dictates of his god. Such critics are quick to point out at the official Calendar of the Chief Priest for eating the ritual yams, the termination of which ushers in the New Yam feast. Again, they point at his unconvincing consultation with Ulu at the point at which Umuaro is locked in crisis, consultation that, in any case, yields no results. Such critics even use Akubue's reflections (212) to buttress their points (178).

Ezeulu's tenacious obedience to Ulu is undisputable quite all right and in as much as we tend to sympathize with Ezeulu's fall, we cannot deny the fact that Ezeulu in the guise of his office as Ulu's Chief Priest wanted vengeance on his enemies and Umuaro for allowing him to be taken to Okperi without a fight. He never on his own mediated to Ulu on the people's behalf and the sarcastic undertones that underline his remarks whenever the issue is discussed suggest Ezeulu's insincere intention to the people's plight. Emmanuel Obiechina, on the other hand, argues that Ezeulu's tragic end is as a result of isolating himself from the communal wish by standing against his townsmen in the major conflicts of the text. For him, it could be disastrous for any single individual to fight the community because:

Social and political institutions of the traditional society have perfected the art of exerting conformity from the individual and discouraging deviations and subversion of the common will. In all their workings, these institutions emphasize the primacy of the group over the individuals who compose it. The careers of important characters like Okonkwo (*Things Fall Apart*), Ezeulu (*Arrow of God*), and Araba (*Panda*) illustrate the primacy of the society over the individual. All of them are shown to be powerful, in their communities, the primacy of the latter is soon established. In the cases of Ezeulu and Araba, it is shown that the individual cannot find fulfillment outside the protective wing of his country (85).

Furthermore, (Egudu, 2014) also investigates the significance of the use of irony in *Arrow of God*, and the study focuses on the “negation of expectation, deflation of inflation, recantation of laudation, and contradictory transformation in the text” (28). His conclusion is that the ironic implication of the text is a demonstration of life, which is full of contradictions. He also contends that irony as used in the text sustains the suspense.

In such diverse ways, Ezeulu, the protagonist of *Arrow of God*, has generated so many controversies among critics. With the view of the fact that nothing is employed into a text without a specific purpose, this study

explores the contradictions in line with the Reader-Response theory of Wolfgang Iser, and it aims at revealing the ambivalent thoughts generated from the readers, which result in the timelessness of the text.

### **Contradiction, Ambiguity and Reader-Response Theory.**

#### **Contradiction**

According to Dale (1992), the term contradiction manifests itself in several forms. In the literal sense, contradiction simply means “to speak against” or “the opposite of something” such as Aristotle directly contradicting Plato, and so on. In another sense, contradiction manifests itself as “inconsistency of sincere or insincere assertion and behavior otherwise known as hypocrisy” (366). For instance, Corbett (2015:1) defines contradiction as “something about a person that piques our interest, because it betrays what we expect, given what else we know or see about him.” The latter definition is exemplified in an individual as self-contradiction when he/she suddenly changes from an opinion he or she previously had just to fit into the present seemingly better or favourable situation. There is also a third form of contradiction, which is logical and classified as syntactical inconsistency which manifests itself in constructions that cannot be necessarily true or false. Mayes (2014) explains that, “logical contradiction arises when one arises when one assumes that the premises are true but the conclusion is false.” The last one could be deduced as ambiguity whereby words or actions could proffer several meanings at a time.

## Ambiguity

Sennet (2016) explains ambiguity as “an idea or situation that can be understood in two or more than one way.” This situation, according to him, “extends from ambiguous sentences” (1). In other words, ambiguity applies when a phrase enjoys multiple interpretations. Sennet asserts that for some disciplines like philosophy, this multiplicity of meanings is unacceptable because of its constraints on clarity and truth. Accordingly, he opines that “arguments that may look good in virtue of their linguistic forms in fact can go wrong if the words or phrases involved are equivocal” (1). However, on the contrary, Sennet also observes that the same concept could be very skillful to writers as he further states:

Authors, poets, lyricists and the like on the other hand, have often found ambiguity to be an extremely powerful tool. Thomas Pynchon’s sentence “we have forests full of game and hundreds of beaters who drive the animals towards the hunters such as who are waiting to shoot them” (2).

Interestingly, *Against the Day* (p.14) utilizes the referential ambiguity of “them” to create an effect when said Shakespeare’s fictionalized Archduke, Ferdinand, says: “ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man,” (Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 1 line 97-98). This statement plays cleverly on the double meaning of “grave.” Also, comedians have often found ambiguity useful in some forms of comedy. Groucho Marx’s “I shot an

elephant in my pajamas” is a classic of this genre.

Ambiguity is not only made manifest in literary works; an illustration in applied arts is also ambiguous when it is subject to many interpretations from viewers, for example the artistic illustration of the Caterpillar for Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland* by Sir John Fennel. The illustration can be viewed as being a man’s face with a pointed nose and chin, or as the head end of an actual caterpillar with the first two legs visible.

Ambiguity, when employed in the above manner will definitely increase the interest in a work of art, because it refuses to allow easy classification and interpretation. In other words, the effort to resolve ambiguity in any literary work gives more insight to both thought and interpretation.

## Reader-Response Theory

This is a school of thought or critics whose focus is on the reader rather than the author, context or form. Originated by I. A Richards in 1929, the group also known as *Structuralists*, later had scholars such as Norman Holland, Stanley fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, and Roland Barthes among others. An opinion strictly held by this group of theorists is that the meaning of a text is incomplete without its various interpretations from the readers. These multiple interpretations are essential because the readers generate new meanings through different interpretations, approaches and textual analysis. For this group of theorists therefore, the ideal text,

according to Bressler (2003), is one “with many possible interpretations” (66). The reader’s purpose is then to examine, explain and defend his/her personal reaction to the text. Although, Reader-Response theory is criticised of anarchic subjectivism because it allows readers to interpret the text anyhow, they like, its use is necessitated by this study because of its in-depth ideal of engaging the reader with the text. By exploring *Arrow of God* using the Reader-Response Theory, the study intends to reveal the text’s significant structural interweave of contradictions and their ambiguous implications, and how the different interpretations of the text by readers reveal the contradictions and ambiguity in the text. This study also aims to ascertain the literary relevance of the outlined concepts to the success of the text.

### Textual Analysis

With the land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi, *Arrow of God* sets itself off on a contradictory note by selecting two orators - Ogbuefi Nwaka and Ezeulu - to present the land issue to their people. Ezeulu has it that: “...my father said this to me that when our village first came here to live, the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in. They also gave us their deities - their Udo and Ogwugwu...” (15) On the other hand, we have Ogbuefi Nwaka arrogantly stating his own version with reference to Ezeulu’s thus: “...my father told me a different story. He told me that Okperi people were wanderers. He told me three or four different places where they sojourned for a while and moved on again...” (16). Akukalia,

on his emissary mission to Okperi, tells how he used to go with his father to the land (in dispute) to cut grass when he was young.

The contradictory and ambivalent portrayal of the land ownership by the text give the readers room for various interpretations as Donatus Nwoga’s which has it that “it is in this context that the confused leadership of Umuaro is first exposed” (25), since the incident ends in splitting the villagers between the two orators. It could equally be an exposure of the rate of escalation of mere personal indifferences to a serious communal conflict and tragedy. This stance of a text to elicit various interpretations is in line with the reader-response theorists. Iser (1978) has argued “that texts contain gaps or (blanks) that powerfully affect the reader, who must explain them, connect what they separate, and create in his or her mind aspects of a work that are not in the text but are incited by the text” (169). The indecisive nature of the stories reveals the fact that Nwaka could have fabricated a counter story merely to garner support against his rival - Ezeulu, as suggested in his later comments:

But I have been watching this Ezeulu for many years. He is a man of ambition, he wants to be king, a priest, a diviner, all. His father they said was like that too...We have no quarrel with Ulu...But I will not see with these eyes of mine this priest making himself Lord over us (27).

Nwaka’s jealousy and envy are maliciously portrayed in this speech, because he never at any point cited

how Ezeulu had wronged him in any way, and in essence, he could go to any length to strategize his victory over his deemed enemy. Nwaka intelligently manipulates his disciples to the extent that the death of Akukalia and his brother in the same war against the Okperis, which ought to have turned the majority to Ezeulu's side since they had already agreed that *Ekwensu's* (Satan's) hand is in it, waxes them stronger unto Nwaka's faction. The land dispute episode, therefore, goes a long way to prove Nwaka a shrewd fighter of his course.

In another episode in the text, Captain Winterbottom, in a contradictory twist, relays the cause of the war to Clark. He tells him that:

This war started because a man from Umuaro went to visit a friend in Okperi one fine morning after he'd had one or two gallons of palm wine - it's quite incredible how much of that dreadful stuff they can tuck away-anyhow, this man from Umuaro having drunk his friend's palm wine reached for his *Ikenga* and split it in two...The outraged host reached for his gun and blew the other fellow's head off... (37).

This story contradicts the real cause of the war, which was that Akukalia (one of the emissaries) sent to Okperi was shot by Ebo, because of his arrogance. Akukalia splits on Ebo's *Ikenga* because he unconsciously referred to him as a "castrated bull" and coincidentally, Akukalia is impotent. The reader is again left to fill the missing link of how Winterbottom got

the distorted information and its role in the text.

Another contradiction, which serves as a comic effect and as well as sustains the suspense is when characters and events contradict their initial portrayal in the text. This is vividly depicted in the people of Umuogwugwu (Ibe's people), whom Obika has described as aggressive and invites his friend, Ofoedu, to lend him a hand in the fight against them. Ofoedu expresses his disappointment when he learns that he would not follow in the fight, but Obika reassures him that; "there may be work for you. If Umuogwugwu are what I take them to be they will come out in force to defend their brother. Then there will be work for you" (11). This statement actually prepares the reader to eagerly anticipate a riotous fight in Umuogwugwu but all expectations are mellowed down when eventually no villager was around and Ibe was beaten to the extent of tying him up and bringing him to Umuaro, where he is dumped under the *Ukwa* tree. Ibe's kinsmen, on the contrary, accuse him of stretching his hand too far while they "patiently waited for three market days' before they could ask after him. Again, the utmost display of humility in their peace-seeking statement, "we have not come with wisdom but with foolishness..." (12) negates the image the reader must have had about them from Obika's point of view.

Furthermore, Ezeulu is portrayed by the text as a contradictory character. He is dynamic and conservative, prophetic and shortsighted, sincere and insincere and all of these interweave to make the

text complicated and, all the more, confusing. He tells Oduche that;

The world is changing... I do not like it. I am like the bird Eneke-nti-Oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wing he replied, men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching. The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place...My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had I known tomorrow (45).

Again, he tells Oduche that if anybody asks him why he is being sent to learn the white man's ways that "a man should dance the dance prevalent in his own time" (189). By sending Oduche to represent him at the white man's religion and education, Ezeulu is portrayed as a dynamic individual who moves with the tide of time with regard to change. This is seen in his appropriate and intelligent prediction of the white man's religion taking over the indigenous practices, which later occurs in the text. The same Ezeulu is presented as highly conservative when the issue of eating the sacred yam comes up. He says to the ten titled men of Umuaro; "...You all know what our custom is. I only call a new festival when there is only one yam left from the last. Today I have three yams and so I know that the time has not come" (207). Despite the fact that the elderly men had explained that the harvest should rot in the farm if not harvested – also suggesting that the rules be adjusted since they had never had such an experience before, Ezeulu remains

adamant in his position. He believes that the elders rightly know the custom and ought to know the consequence of what they are pushing him to do. He, therefore, in total shock replies to them that "those yams are not food and a man does not eat them because he is hungry" (207). This statement of his has been very controversial because some critics like Obiechina (1975) have argued that it displays the height of Ezeulu's sense of duty as he had foreseen the eventual consequence of the action and exonerates himself early enough from it by saying that he is "only an arrow in the hands of the gods"(60). In addition, Obiechina opines that inasmuch as Ezeulu nurses war against his people that "his unyielding non-compromise can be found more in his natural strong will and high moral principles than in any pre-mediated vendetta against his people" (61). This line of thought takes us back to Chapter Eighteen, where we ponder on the narrator's account of the events.

In literature the narrator of this nature is referred to as "omniscient," because he knows everything and sees the inner hearts of the people, which the other characters may not be obliged to see since it is impossible to read other characters' minds. At the beginning of the chapter, just immediately after Ulu had warned Ezeulu to leave the fight with his detractors for him, the narrator states the eagerness of Ezeulu to continue with the vengeance thus: "after a long period of silent preparation Ezeulu finally revealed that he intended to hit Umuro at its most vulnerable point - the Feast of New



Yam (201).” Again, after the assistants who came to ascertain Ezeulu’s accuracy of the months had left, the narrator relays that: “If anyone had come into Ezeulu’s hut after the men had left, he would have been surprised. The old priest’s face glowed with happiness and his youth and handsomeness returned temporarily from across the years” (204).

If the narrator’s account is anything to be considered, would it not be to prove that the following utterances by Ezeulu are mere pretenses, since the closest clue into his mind is what the narrator reveals? When the ten elderly titled men came to him to find out Ulu’s grievances, Ezeulu, off-handedly replies that, “Ulu did say that two new moons came and went and there was no one to break kolanut to him and Umuaro kept silent” (208). He further reminds them that he and his households are not exonerated from the suffering since he equally has his own yam fields. The sincerity of these statements becomes illusive at this moment, because Ezeulu at Okperi had thought out this as a rightful excuse upon which to stand to fight back at Umuaro. There is no evidence from the text where Ezeulu had gone into consultation with Ulu to get such a response. Rather Ulu had rebuked him in a vision saying;

Ta! Nwanu! ...Who told you that this is your own fight? ...I say who told you that this was your own fight to arrange the way it suits you? You want to save your friends who brought you palm wine he-he-he-he... Beware you do not come between me and my victim or

you may receive blows not meant for you (191).

*Arrow of God* also highlights a contradiction of intentions where characters’ intentions and actions are misunderstood and misinterpreted by the other characters. Ezeulu bears almost all the brunt of these misinterpretations. When he sends his son Oduche to be his “eye” at the white man’s religion, he merely wants his family to be represented in case something good accrues from it. He tells Oduche that; “...If there’s nothing in it you will come back but if something is there you will bring home my share” (45). This action of his (which is apparently selfish considering his speculations on page 42 that if “the white man takes over the land, it would be wise to have one’s family in his band” is grossly misinterpreted by both his kinsmen and the white man. Nwaka and his group chide Ezeulu for seeking the white man’s face and betraying their common course of fighting the foreigner together, just like he did when he told the truth about the land and solely stood against his kinsmen.

Moreover, Captain Winterbottom’s extension of favour to Ezeulu is misinterpreted by both Ezeulu and his kinsmen. The administrators at the headquarters insist on sustaining the Warrant Chief system despite Winterbottom’s negative report of its abuse by James Ikedi (the former Warrant Chief). James Ikedi’s behavior contradicts the white man’s expectations of him as a mission-trained man. He exploits his own people to unbearable limits and this earns him a suspension. Surprisingly,

Ikedi is reinstated by the senior Residence just three months after he had come back from his leave. Since the administrators did not agree with Winterbottom in doing away with the title, he therefore decides to change his method of selection- this time by going for an illiterate person who may not have the effrontery to exploit his people and that is what prompts his choice of Ezeulu. Jacobu, the court messenger, with his errant character, distorts the motif for fetching Ezeulu. He frightens Ezeulu in his house and tells him: "I have not come all the way from Okperi to stretch my legs...When the White man sent me here, he did not tell me he had a friend in Umuaro...But if what you say is true we shall know when I take you to him tomorrow morning" (138).

Jacobu's countenance, coupled with Umuaro and Nwaka's reaction of disdain for Ezeulu's summon to discuss the White man's invitation, elicits in Ezeulu a resentment for both his people and the white man. That actually explains the arrogance in his response: "Tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody's king except Ulu" (139), when the offer is made to him by Clark at Okperi. The white man, on the other hand, misinterprets Ezeulu's rejection of the offer. Ezeulu is subsequently locked up in order to teach him a lesson. Interestingly, Winterbottom's coincidental sickness is tied to the enormous power of the "witch doctor from Umuaro."

In addition, even Ezeulu's limited relationship with his half-brother (Okeke Onenyi) is given several interpretations by the Okekes and the

villagers, which contradicts Ezeulu's intentions. Okeke thinks that Ezeulu is jealous of him because their father split the powers of herbs and priesthood between them while the kinsmen say that Ezeulu refuses to acknowledge his brother's powers out of pride. In the text, however, Ezeulu explains the reason behind his aversion for all the new generation medicine men and not just Okeke. According to him, all medicine men had died with his father's generation. "Practitioners of today are mere dwarfs" (146).

The Christian converts and teachers in *Arrow of God* - Moses Unachukwu and Mr. Jaja Goodcountry, disagree on teachings of faith. While Mr. Goodcountry regards the sacred pythons as fetish that should be done away with, Moses Unachukwu warns Goodcountry against his extremity and upholds the deity by terrifying the congregation with frightful experiences of those who had dared the act. According to Unachukwu:

...I have been to the fountain head of the new religion and seen with my own eyes...So I want to tell you that I will not be led astray by outsiders who choose to weep louder than the owners of the corpse. You are not the first teacher I have seen; you are not the second; you are not the third. If you are wise you will face the work, they sent you to do and take your hands off python (49-50).

Ogbuefi Oforika, on a visit to Ezeulu's house to welcome him back from Okperi, summarizes the confused state of mind of the villagers as well as the readers on the plot of the text, which

are exemplified in Ezeulu's contradictory actions thus;

...I want you to know if you have not already known it that the elders of Umuaro did not take sides with Nwaka against you...Why then did we agree with him? The elders of Umuaro are confused...We are like the puppy in the proverb which attempted to answer two calls at once and broke its jaw. First, you, Ezeulu, told us five years ago that it was foolish to defy the white man. We did not listen to you. We went out against him and he took our gun from us and broke it across his knee. So, we knew you were right; but just as we were beginning to learn our lesson you turn around and tell us to go and challenge the same white man. What did you expect us to do? (188)

### Conclusion

The contradictions in *Arrow of God* as we have seen, accrue more from the incongruence in the narrator's and the

characters' points of view. The characters' actions sometimes negate the text's foreshadow of them, and in some characters, are depictions of some kind of inconsistency. These skillful interweave of surprises and disappointments contribute in the successful creation of a character with a huge depth in Ezeulu. He ends as a complex, round and dynamic character whose personality could generate a multiplicity of ideas. *Arrow of God*, therefore, manipulates the reader's suspense until the end of the text. Again, the text does not portray any sentimental support for any of its characters or events. To that effect it does not assert itself as a moralist text with lessons to be learnt from; it rather depicts man in conflict with the diverse challenges of survival in his environment. The readers by drawing their own diverse conclusions about the text, make the text inexhaustible.

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