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The Irula Tribe

The Irula tribe forms a part of aboriginal tribes sporadically settled in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The Irular people inhabit the scrub jungles of the Nilgiri mountains that stretch over a vast expanse of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. However, their essential kindred is uncertain. The Irulars trace their ancestors to the pre-Dravidian Indians. The Irulars of the Southern slopes of the Nilgiris are called *Malana:du* or *Malade:sa Irulas*¹. More recently due to the caste system, their ancestors were prohibited from owning land or engaging in agricultural activities. The lush jungles they once inhabited have now been destroyed in the name of development. They have evolved with these changes and have emerged as brilliant snake catchers.

All over the world, the Irula people are one of the very few tribes who possess the expertise to identify and capture snakes through mud, water and impenetrable jungles. Considered illiterate and on the lowest end of the caste system, the knowledge is passed from parent to child and nothing is written down in the form of text. Irulas are taught these skills of snake catching, soon after they learn how to walk. Through my interaction with Mr. Mohan, an Irula tribal, I was informed that a non-venomous snake is given to a baby as a toy to accustom the individual. Cobras and Vipers were hunted and killed for their skin until the practice was forbidden by law to prevent local extinction of these species. Before the Indian Wildlife Protection Act of 1972², the Irulas were one of the leading suppliers of snake skins to the global exotic skin industry. This has deprived the tribe of their primary source of livelihood and the demand for skilled hunters has drastically reduced.

¹ Dr. Das, Pauline. "The Irula Language and Literature". The Criterion, An International Journal in English. Volume 4, Issue 2. Page 4. (2013). Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015. <<http://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n2/Das.pdf>>

² Whitaker, Zahideh. " The Irulas". The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust and Centre for Herpetology. N.P. (2002). Web < <http://www.madrascrocodilebank.org/cms/conservation-and-research-2/the-irulas/>>

Population

Of the entire tribal population of India, Tamil Nadu is home to 1% of the Scheduled tribe. The largest tribe of Tamil Nadu is the Irulas. According to the Demographic Status of Scheduled Tribe population and distribution Government census of 2011, there are 7,94,697 Schedule Tribes³. In comparison to 2001, there has been a significant decrease in the number of Irula families. Presently, Tamil Nadu has 23,116 Irula households. With regard to the demographics, the Irulas are mainly concentrated in the north-eastern region of the state⁴.

The population is centred in 4 taluks or administrative divisions namely: Avinashi, Madathukalam, Coimbatore North and Coimbatore South. The districts of Tamil Nadu comprise of 139 villages, 40 settlements and 4254 district houses of the Irulas. In addition to this, there are almost 100 settlements along the coast, forest areas and in the deep mountainous terrains⁵. In an area called Siruvani, situated west of Coimbatore, 14 Irula villages are found. The Southern and Eastern slopes of the Nilgiris has a Malana:du Irula population of 4,500⁶.

TABLE 1: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF IRULAR TRIBES

Sl. No	Profile of Irula Tribes	Domain	N	
			F	%
1	Gender	Male	32	73
		Female	12	27
2	Age	< 25	3	7
		26-35	11	25
		36-45	12	27
		46-55	8	18
		56-65	07	15
		> 65 years	03	8

³ "Demographic Status of Scheduled Tribe population and its distribution". *Ministry of Tribal Affairs*. N.P. Web. Accessed 20 Aug, 2015.

<<http://tribal.nic.in/content/statewisetribalpopulationpercentageinindiascheduletribes.aspx>>

⁴ Dr. Mahadevan , Udaya . Dr, E. Sinu. " Living Conditions of Irula Tribes in Gingee Taluk, Villupuram District of Tamil Nadu". Volume: 03, Number: 02. *The International Journal's Research Journal of Social Sciences and Management*. N.P. (2013). Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015.

<http://www.academia.edu/3642223/Living_Conditions_of_Irula_Tribes >

⁵ Dr. Das, Pauline. "The Irula Language and Literature". *The Criterion, An International Journal in English*. Volume 4, Issue 2. Page 4. (2013). Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015. <<http://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n2/Das.pdf>>

⁶ Dr. Das, Pauline. "The Irula Language and Literature". *The Criterion, An International Journal in English*. Volume 4, Issue 2. Page 4. (2013). Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015. <<http://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n2/Das.pdf>>

⁷ Dr. Mahadevan , Udaya . Dr, E. Sinu. " Living Conditions of Irula Tribes in Gingee Taluk, Villupuram District of Tamil Nadu". Volume: 03, Number: 02. *The International Journal's Research Journal of Social*

Linguistic Affinity

Kamil Zvelebil, an expert on the Irula tribe hypothesised regarding the Irula language; that the anthropologic pre-Dravidian bulk of the Irula population adopted or was made to imbibe an ancient pre- or proto-Tamil dialect which eventually fully superimposed on their native tongue. Zvelebil believes that this formed the foundation of the Irula language. Additionally, this language must have been influenced by other tribal languages of the Nilgiri are such as Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada⁸.

In general they use a non-literary language of their own known as the *ërla na.ya* which is used in four intelligible dialects⁹. Most Irulas including those who inhabit the Siruvani Hills are bilingual who also speak pure Tamil. The Irulas speak two distinct dialects called *Asanur* dialect and *Kalidimba* dialect, as well as the Irula dialect of *Dinbhum*. The language of the Kaadupuujaaris or the Karnataka Irulas is phonologically, structurally resembles Kannada than Tamil. The *Vellian* or *Villiyans* are the Tamil speaking Irulas from Tamilnadu who are socially and culturally different from the Irula speaking Irulas.

Generally, Irulas do not speak their tribal language in the presence of non-Irulas. The tribe members believe that their speech is not a legitimate language and that it is the cause for their social insecurity and inferiority complex. The Irulas tend to switch over to the prestigious Tamil as they see it as elegant and advantageous. In 1955, Zvelebil tried to prove the independent nature of the Irula speech with regard to old Tamil and Kannada features. A sad distinction had been made to describe the dialects as a corrupt medley of Kannada and Tamil. Zvelebil made several attempts to legitimize the language in 1968 and 1971¹⁰.

The etymology of their names root from the practice of calling themselves *viliyaru* which means 'bowmen'. Phonologically, in Irula speech the consonantal length is not too distinctive unlike Tamil. The Dravidian vowels are extended to add "i, u, ' , 6, long or short, 'central, unrounded and rounded, vowels, respectively high and mid". The simple imperative

Sciences and Management. N.P. (2013). Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015.

<http://www.academia.edu/3642223/Living_Conditions_of_Irula_Tribes >

⁸ Dr. Das, Pauline. "The Irula Language and Literature". *The Criterion*, An International Journal in English. Volume 4, Issue 2. Page 4. (2013). Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015<<http://www.the-criterion.com/V4/n2/Das.pdf>>

⁹ Zvelebil, Kamil. "The Cat in Irula Culture. An Irula Creation Myth". *Anthropos Institute*. Pg. 165. (1990). JSTOR. Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable> >

¹⁰ Zvelebil, Kamil. "The Cat in Irula Culture. An Irula Creation Myth". *Anthropos Institute*. Pg. 165. (1990). JSTOR. Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable> >

equals the verb stem and the plural marker is important such as: " in -i, recalling OTa. -i as in vCli 'live' (a salutation, as 'Hail')"¹¹. Below is a folk song in the Irula language followed by the English translation.

itti dore carakkole lattige

ma:ttu maruludo lattige

na:dumu nammadulo lattige

gira:mamu nammadulo lattige

ittidore carakku ma:ttu marulutulo lattige?

[Oh isn't from Itti's distillery oh dear lattige?

Do you also get the kick out of it oh dear?

Isn't this country ours?

Isn't this village ours?

Are we not intoxicated thanks to the liquor of Ittidore?

Racial Affinity

There are various theories that explain the racial affinity of the Irula tribals. Some anthropologists have theorized that the original settlers of India were Negrito. It is believed though that Austroasiatic-speaking Australoid people who had largely pigmented skin. The Austroloids were said to resemble the Negritos but had stright hair rather than unruly hair¹².

Other anthropologists believe that the Irula people had their roots in the Negritos that were living on the Andaman islands. This theory is supported by anthropologic literature from the early 20th century whihc classified the Irulas under the ethnic group of the Negros. Negrito or the Negroid race is one of the sex primary race categories. Literature suggests that Negroids were the first ones to arrive in India from Africa. Their descendants that is, the

¹¹ Zvelebil, Kamil. "The Cat in Irula Culture. An Irula Creation Myth". Anthropos Institute. Pg. 165. (1990). JSTOR. Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable> >

¹² . Fuchs, Stephen. "The Aboriginal Tribes of India". Macmillan India . Pg. 94. (1974). Google Books. Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015. <https://books.google.co.in/books/about/The_aboriginal_tribes_of_India.html?id=2hEkAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y>

Kurumbas, Paniyans, Irulas and Kodars are found in groups forming tribes along the hills of South India¹³.

The term 'Irular' is derived from the tamil word "Irul" which signifies darkness, the term meaning those who are in darkness. This refers to their dark complexion and curly hair. The men are able-bodied, tall with round faces and noses. They have Big eyes, small lips, thick black hair, prominent moustaches. The women are well built with round faces, big eyed, long nosed with thick eyebrows. An Irula myth says that a woman having large palms and feet got married, her husband would have an early death¹⁴.

Economy

By tradition, the Irulas are Hunter-gatherers with their primary expertise in snake catching. So successful were they that the killing of snakes for skin was eventually banned, depriving them of their skill to earn a living. Even today, they are employed as rat-catchers in villages. However, they struggle to find a sustainable occupation owing to their lack of skills in the mainstream professions. The Irula women have immense knowledge of organic extracts from various shrubs, trees and herbs. This is used in preparation of herbal teas, shampoos, medicinal products to cure various illnesses such as respiratory problems, fever, malaria, abortion, brittle bones and so on¹⁵. The tribe also excelled as honey gatherers. It was an important occupation as the level of skill required for both honey gathering and snake catching was high.

Old Tamil literature mentions honey in various instances. Honey was seen as an object of Barter. Through Tamil literature such as the ancient poem "*Porunarāruppafai 214*" one can observe the practices of the tribal economy. The lines translate "those who exchange honey and edible tubers for fish-fat and intoxicants"¹⁶. The fermentation industry was also a source of income for the Irula tribesmen. Exchange of honey for other goods to the fermentation process was an instance of an evident Barter system.

However, nowadays the tribesmen earn a living by obtaining some 'coolie' work. This includes working as labourers under the landlord in rice fields. Some of them collect

¹³ Dutt, Dinesh. "Irula Project Proposal and site report". Asha Projects Organisation. (2000). N.P. Web. Accessed 19 Aug, 2015 < <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/tamilnadu/irulas/irulas.html> >

¹⁴ "Culture and Living. Tribesfolk of Attappady". Attappady Culture and Nature. < <http://attappadycalling.20m.com/custom.html> >

¹⁵ Whitaker, Zahideh. "The Irulas". The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust and Centre for Herpetology. N.P. (2002). Web < <http://www.madrascrocodilebank.org/cms/conservation-and-research-2/the-irulas/> >

¹⁶ Zvelebil, Kamil V. "The Honey-Gathering Skills of a Nilagiri Tribe". Anthropos Institute. Bd. 74, H. 3./4.. Pg. 579. (1979) . JSTOR. Web. Accessed 19 Aug, 2015. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40460020> >

firewood from the forests to sell. Sadly, the Irulas are often held as Bonded labourers along with their entire families for many years. The disadvantage of illiteracy creeps in. The Irular people are used to remove worms from the soil on agricultural lands for many years together; in return, they get a measly sum of money of a bit of the harvested grain. This bonded labour shows the exploitation of the tribal community¹⁷.

TABLE2: OCCUPATIONAL PROFILE OF IRULAR

Sl. No	Occupational Profile	Categories	f	%
1	Working hours	6 - 8 hours	12	27
		8 – 10 hours	22	50
		> 10 hours	8	18
		Unemployed	2	05
2	Issues in occupational life	Low income	25	57
		Long hours of work	8	18
		Job insecurity	6	14
		Exploitation	3	07
		Poor working conditions	2	05
3	Indebtedness	< 500	3	07
		500 – 1000	7	16
		1000 – 1500	11	25
		1500 – 2000	18	41
		Above 2000	5	11
		No indebtedness	-	-
4	Main Source of borrowing	Neighbors	17	39
		Pawn broker	4	05
		Relatives	8	18
		Women SH Group	15	24
5	Main reasons for borrowing	Education	3	07
		Festival	6	14
		for daily needs	19	43
		Health	14	31

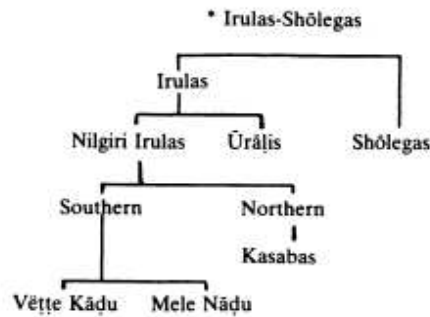
Social Organisation

The Social organisation can be explained in terms of endo or exogamous units. Further organisation can be explained with the help of kinship laws, marriage and types of family.

The Irula tribe is a Tamil-Malayalam subgroup of the South Dravidians. In the diagram below, we observe that two members of different tribes intermarry. This makes the Irula a complex form of tribal group. It consists of three endogamous units along with another group the Shōlegas, who are closely related.

¹⁷ Dutt, Dinesh. " Irula Project Proposal and site report". Asha Projects Organisation. (2000). N.P. Web. Accessed 19 Aug, 2015

¹⁸ Dr. Mahadevan , Udaya . Dr, E. Sinu. " Living Conditions of Irula Tribes in Gingee Taluk, Villupuram District of Tamil Nadu". Volume: 03, Number: 02. The International Journal's Research Journal of Social Sciences and Management. N.P. (2013). Web. Accessed 18 Aug, 2015. <http://www.academia.edu/3642223/Living_Conditions_of_Irula_Tribes >



Kinship

The Kinship system of the Irulas show that their clan is patriarchal, patrifocal, patrilineal and patronymic¹⁹. The Irula clan forms an endogamous caste along with twelve other exogamous patricians or gotras , kulams in Tamil. They are as follows, Devanan (or Thevanan or Devala), Kalkatti, Koduvan (or Kodugar), Kuppan (or Koppilingam), Kurunagan, Ollaga, Peratha, Porigan, Pungan (or Poongkaru), Samban (or Chamban), Uppigan (or Uppali), and Vellagai (or Vellai) along with a clan represented by the Thudai tree whose scientific name is *Ilex denticulata*. However, intra-gotra marriages are not allowed, a patrician is not allowed to marry a member from a neighbouring or brother gotra. Hence, there are exogamous units among Irulas. The size of the units vary for each of these units. One also observes that the kinship system of this clan is very similar to the practices of those of Southern India. In addition to this, each patrician or Gotra maintains friendly and cordial relations with another patrician. The other Patricians are meant to help members when an event occurs, such as the rite of passage , an event that requires collective and cooperative effort²⁰.

Marriage & Family in the Irula Tribe

Among Irulas, the most prevalent form of marriage happens through negotiation between the families of the Bride and Groom. Divorce is also allowed in this tribe. Not all cases are accepted, however divorce has its basis on adultery, barrenness and incompatibility²¹.

Through various interviews and interaction that took place with the tribe members between 15th to 30 May, I also obtained information regarding the marital norms among the

¹⁹ Sinha, Kishore Anil. " Bio-social Issues in Health". Northern Book Centre. Pg. 293. (2008). Print. Accessed 19 Aug, 2015.

²⁰ "Kinship in Irula". Countries and Cultures. N.P. (2002). Web. Accessed 19 Aug, 2015.

²¹ Sinha, Kishore Anil. " Bio-social Issues in Health". Northern Book Centre. Pg. 293. (2008). Print. Accessed 19 Aug, 2015.

Irulas. Mr. Mohan who works at The Madras Crocodile Bank explains to me in Tamil, "I am not yet married, I plan to work for a while before I think of a family. We Irulas are quite liberal regarding marriage. My mother and father were married simultaneously with several other people from their village and neighbouring communities. They had 3 children in the span of 6 years. At the end of six years, an inter-tribe gathering takes place wherein the pair is exchanged with other members of the tribe. It is an exchange of sorts, in which my father will now go live with another woman and they will have a few children. These children become my step siblings and my father becomes an authoritative figure in my life, nothing more". Mr. Mohan seemed to accept this cultural norm. In the formative year and early period, nuclear families were a predominant feature of these families. However, more recently there has been a shift from nuclear families to joint residences, common living and joint families.

I also had the privilege of observing Mr. Mohan's relationship with his biological father, who he now refers to as Step-Father. There is immense respect between the Father and son. As mentioned above that snake catching skills are passed on from one generation to another and this is how Mr. Mohan earns his livelihood today, thanks to his father. In married life, the women are expected to work as well as take care of the household. Women often accompany men to catch mice as it is a group effort. The women also contribute financially by putting to use their extensive medicinal botanical knowledge.

Religion

Irula religion is organized in a complex hierarchical structure . This structure comprises of a nucleus and nodes of which deities are often lost while others are added. At the nucleus, is the protective village deities or clan home-gods who are believed to be the most powerful as they are the best defined divinities. Higher than this however, the Irulas have a notion of a higher power that is always referred to in a pair which is said to be derived from the supreme pair of Hindu Saivism, called *Pa:rvadi-Parame:cura*. The level that follows is more concrete, this level has myths and cultic practices and places such as Rangaswamy Peak, Karaimadai Temple, Nanjangode Temple which is said to be occupied by two gods namely *Vaisnava Raiigaca:mi* and the *Saiva Maha:de:curaca:mi*. At the last level of the hierarchy, are the local village dieties which are believed to be the protective gods of families. Every 8 clans, have thirty sub-clans who possess one deity

Several totems also form a part of Irula religion , several mountains, ant-hills most likely with " resident" cobras as well as trees. Animals are also considered divine and worthy

of worship such as tigers, snakes and jungle cats (*Felis chaus*). Mythical heroes such as Kovan and Billayya along with ancestors are worshipped by the tribesmen. A large part of their worship has its roots from myths. Myths even though crude and considered primitive, transmit a basic message from one generation to the next. The Irulas sing a religious song called *pe:pa:ttu*. The priests follow stringent austerities. Below are two hymns that form part of religious activities, from the Irula tribe along with the English translation.

*artara:vena:m' po:yi porafiga:lu, id'ella eduttupoyi jo:du ca:pa:tt' ell' eduttu po:yi,
adi bu:je ma:dano, bu:je ma:didu a:ttapa:tta kadakadu*

At midnight we go [walking upon] back[s] of the feet, [and] taking all this, having taken all this for a common meal, it is necessary to perform worship there, "Let [them] perform the *pijad*," there's song-and-dance.

*ella: a:ttapa:ttam ittu, adili poigci,25 anda togaku vandu, bu:jeyili paracikka,26
paracina kon'vittu tegina kay'de27 dekkadu, id'ella dettu-m28-ittu vande,29 podayikkano,
mudallu*

All having taken part in song and-dance, being elated there, [they] go to that deity to praise in worship, [and] having finished the praises, [it is] indeed (= now) the offering (lit., 'placing, bestowing') of fresh coconuts, [and] while offering and placing all this, first it is necessary to break [them = the coconuts].²²

Culture of the Irulas

For the Irula tribe, folklore is a vital factor of their culture, it often exposes the complex traditions and social beliefs of the tribe. The tales comprise of fantasies and make-beliefs that help the primitive man understand and quench his curiosity of the surrounding environment. Zvelebil has studied that through the folklore, one can gain knowledge regarding social realities, myths, group dynamics and social set up. Their hobbies include music both instrumental and vocal, folk tales and dance. The Irula tradition is rich in riddles, and proverbs. Folklore of this tribe show external influences from Tamil as well as Badaga.

²² Zvelebil, Kamil. "Toga: Ndra Name Ka: Ppa: Ttaṇō: May the Gods Protect Us: A Contribution to Nilgiri Religious Infrastructure". *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Vol. 120, No. 2. Pg. 178. (2002). JSTOR. Web. Accessed 19 Aug, 2015. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/605021>>

Folk Songs: comprise of 5 types of ballads. They are ". *tene pa:ttu or ca:meyokapa:ttu (millet songs) pe:pa:ttu (deity songs), love ballads, dirges and a medley of other tunes*"²³. They are filled with metaphors, vivid imagery and similies.

madure kere ni:ro: malla ba:va

payppu vettu tirukkuko: malla ba:va

kariyandi cakke ka:yi pulle ma:di vala:duko: malla ba:va

45a:iu pulle puttina lacuma e.du iduko malla ba:va

pe:ru pulle puttina lacumi endu iluko malla ba:va

[The water, the water from the Madurai river on dear ba:va, 8

And shall we install a tap and turn it oh dear ba:va?

Shall we play on the banks with a toy child made of black jack fruit

oh dear ba:va?

If it is a male child shall we give him the name of Lakshman,

Or Lakshmi to a female child, oh dear ba:va?]²⁴

The above Folk song is by the younger sister-in-law to the elder brother-in-law. This shows that this kind of sexual relationship is not looked down upon by the Irulas.

Dirges:

These are laments sung at funerals or death. The theme of the song usually revolves around black magic and sorcery. The tribals strongly believe that death is caused by these supernatural elements.

appu ku:da cangatta kilinu a:vade po:cuto nana tange

Pilli ma:4ina vara: vadu nana tange

nalla canne pelekkaro nana tange

me:lu meddeta: ketti pelakkaro nana tange

I swear, I swear! those villains who practised black magic on my sister

²³ Perialwar,R. " Portrait of Tribal Life in Irula Folklore". Social Scientist. Vol. 3, No. 3. Pg. 44-47. (1974). Web. JSTOR . Accessed 18 Aug, 2015.<<http://www.jstor.org/stable> >

²⁴ Perialwar,R. " Portrait of Tribal Life in Irula Folklore". Social Scientist. Vol. 3, No. 3. Pg. 44-47. (1974). Web. JSTOR . Accessed 18 Aug, 2015.<<http://www.jstor.org/stable> >

Will not have peace of mind and happiness

Who will come to my house hereafter ?

Oh! now my sister has gone.²⁵

Folk Dances:

On festival days, during a marriage ceremony, funeral or puberty rites, folk dances are performed. The women raise their hand with open arms by moving side to side while the children mimic the women. They move around in circles while making gestures. A popular form of Irula folk dance is *arakkole a:tta*.

Proverbs and Riddles :

The Irula culture is a store house of proverbs which embody the wisdom of their ancestors. Literary devices are incorporated such as alliteration, rhythm , thyme, personification and metaphors. These riddles also have a part to play of social communication between the elders and the youth of the families. Many of these riddles and myths talks about the sexual and economic exploitation of the Irula women and children by other groups who are

*"The tiger came to the cat to learn, and the cat, considered the tiger's elder brother (anna), taught the tiger how to crawl, to catch a prey, to climb a tree. While the cat was teaching the tiger how to climb a tree it did not show him, however, how to climb down. The tiger, sitting up in the tree and unable to get down, warned the cat that he would take his revenge: he would watch it carefully and trace it with the help of its excreta (pi:), get somehow down, and ultimately eat it (tindiruge). Therefore the cat covers its excrements with earth. The tiger in the story fell down from the tree and broke its neck."*²⁶

²⁵ Perialwar,R. " Portrait of Tribal Life in Irula Folklore". Social Scientist. Vol. 3, No. 3. Pg. 44-47. (1974). Web. JSTOR . Accessed 18 Aug, 2015.<<http://www.jstor.org/stable> >

²⁶ Zvelebil, Kamil V. " The Cat in Irula Culture. An Irula Creation Myth". Anthropos Institute. Bd. 74, H. 3./4.. Pg. 165. (1990) . JSTOR. Web. Accessed 19 Aug, 2015. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40462123>>

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