

THE GODS, DISEASES, AND AILMENTS IN AFRICA AND THE DIASPORA

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DOI : [10.5281/zenodo.16580081](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16580081)

Article History

Received: 16-03-2025

Accepted: 22 -03-2025

Published: 30-03-2025

Abstract

This research paper looks into the multi-layered relationship that exists between the traditional African belief system, particularly with regard to understanding and perception of gods and spirits, and how disease and health-related concerns are perceived, interpreted, and dealt with both on the vast African continent and throughout the African diaspora dispersed around the world. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to really look deeply into the complex ways in which indigenous religious beliefs and spiritual frameworks throughout history have influenced and shaped popular perceptions related to health and illness and the methodologies employed in the same. This calls for an extensive study that seeks to understand multiple perceptions of diseases, which are hardly ever literally observed in isolation to be biological but complex conditions invariably entwined with spiritual beliefs and moral and communal experiences. Such multifaceted health conditions require combined interventions of both medical practices and spiritual approaches if effective healing is to be accomplished. For the diaspora, these beliefs have undergone a series of major transitions or adaptations-changes with the demands of new environments while managing to preserve key foundational elements of African spirituality that are considered important to their understanding and practices. This postulates that understanding these various insights and their integration into health systems become one of the bases or springboards from which meaningful, inclusive, and efficacious health systems need to emanate. This perspective marks a profound respect for the rich diversity along the continuum of African and diasporic experiences with reference to health and healing practices.

Keywords: African spirituality, traditional medicine, health beliefs, disease conceptualization, diaspora, indigenous healing practices.

Introduction

Africa's spiritual landscape is deeply intertwined with the understanding and treatment of diseases and ailments. The belief that health is connected to the divine, with gods and spiritual forces influencing human well-being, has shaped the practices of many African societies for centuries. African cosmologies often conceptualize illness not only as a physical condition but as a spiritual imbalance or divine repercussion for moral or social transgressions.

Consequently, the role of gods, ancestors, and spirits in the African worldview is central to interpreting and addressing health-related challenges. In this light, the exploration of African traditional beliefs surrounding gods, diseases, and ailments is critical for understanding the complex ways these beliefs continue to inform health practices in both Africa and the African diaspora today.

Historically, traditional African societies have emphasized the importance of maintaining harmony

between the physical and spiritual realms. Many African communities believe that illnesses are manifestations of discord within this balance. Spiritual practitioners, such as diviners and healers, are seen as intermediaries capable of diagnosing these imbalances and prescribing rituals, offerings, or herbal remedies to restore harmony.

As Ronald Nkere notes,

“The interconnection between religion and medicine in traditional African communities is both deep and functional, serving as a means to address not just the body but the spirit as well” (Nkere 45).

This understanding positions health as a holistic concept that encompasses physical, spiritual, and social well-being, an idea that remains relevant in modern African societies and diasporic communities.

The arrival of colonial powers in Africa in the 19th century brought significant disruptions to indigenous health practices. European missionaries and colonial administrators introduced Western medicine and dismissed traditional African beliefs as superstition. The imposition of Western healthcare systems often clashed with indigenous practices, creating a lasting tension between traditional and modern medical approaches.

As Andrew Tsara observes,

“The colonial project attempted to erase indigenous medical knowledge, categorizing it as irrational while promoting Western medical practices as the sole

solution to health issues” (Tsara 33).

Despite this, many African communities have retained their traditional beliefs, and these have evolved to coexist with modern medicine in various ways. This persistence highlights the resilience of African spirituality in the face of cultural imposition and medical hegemony.

In African diasporic communities, traditional beliefs about health and disease have undergone significant transformations. The transatlantic slave trade dispersed millions of Africans across the Americas, Europe, and the Caribbean, where they encountered new cultural and religious environments. Despite the trauma of displacement, many African slaves and their descendants preserved elements of their spiritual and medical traditions. In some cases, these beliefs merged with indigenous and colonial religions to form syncretic practices, such as Vodun in Haiti, Santería in Cuba, and Candomblé in Brazil. These hybrid spiritual systems often retained core African elements, particularly in their approaches to health and healing. For instance, the Yoruba concept of *Orisha*, or deities responsible for various aspects of human life, continues to influence health-related practices in the diaspora. As stated by Maya Armstrong, “The endurance of African spiritual practices in the diaspora, especially concerning health, speaks to the adaptability and resilience of these belief systems” (Armstrong 102).

In the African diaspora, beliefs surrounding gods and disease often reflect the dual influences of African spirituality and the new religious environments encountered in the New World. African spiritual practices were adapted to local contexts, but many of the core tenets concerning health remained intact. For example, the belief that illness could result from a spiritual imbalance or offense to a deity is a recurring theme in both African and diasporic religious practices. Even within the African-American church tradition, which has largely adopted Christianity, echoes of African spiritual approaches to health can still be found. Spiritual healings and the belief in divine intervention in matters of health are common in many African-American religious communities.

According to Leah Morgan,

“The African religious concept of divine retribution as a cause of illness finds resonance in the spiritual practices of the African diaspora, where health and religion are often interwoven” (Morgan 78).

African Beliefs on Health, Disease, and Spirituality

In many African societies, health is perceived as a state of balance between individuals, their communities, and the spiritual world. Illness, in contrast, is often understood as the result of disharmony—whether caused by moral failure, a broken social obligation, or an offense to spiritual entities such as gods or ancestors. This belief is particularly pronounced in African cosmologies, where

the supernatural is seen as both a source of health and the origin of diseases. As documented by Mensah in his seminal work on African traditional medicine, *“Health is not simply the absence of disease, but rather the presence of equilibrium between the individual, the society, and the cosmos”* (Mensah 56). This conception of health underscores the notion that disease cannot be viewed in isolation from the larger spiritual and social contexts.

Across the continent, certain deities are believed to hold dominion over specific aspects of health and disease. For example, in the Yoruba religion of West Africa, *Babalú-Ayé* is revered as the god of healing and affliction. He is associated with smallpox, leprosy, and other contagious diseases. Yoruba traditional healers invoke *Babalú-Ayé* to protect against or cure these ailments, believing that such diseases are divinely controlled and that human intervention must be spiritually sanctioned (Ajayi 73). In other African traditions, similar gods or spirits serve as custodians of health, illness, and healing. Among the Akan people of Ghana, the deity *Asaase Yaa* is connected with the earth, fertility, and health, linking human well-being with the natural world. According to the Akan belief system, illnesses caused by disrupting the natural environment, such as deforestation or pollution, could only be remedied by appeasing *Asaase Yaa* through ritual offerings (Agyekum 89).

The influence of gods and ancestors in maintaining

health extends beyond curing physical ailments to ensuring the social order is upheld. Spiritual healers, or traditional priests, serve as intermediaries who diagnose the spiritual cause of illnesses and prescribe rituals to restore balance. The Nguni people of Southern Africa, for instance, believe that an illness may be a form of punishment from the ancestors for neglecting one's familial duties. Thus, the treatment often involves ritual sacrifices or libations to appease the ancestors and restore favor (Mthethwa 110). This concept of disease as spiritual imbalance reflects the broader African worldview in which the human body, the spiritual realm, and the natural environment are inextricably linked.

CONCEPTUALIZING DISEASES AND AILMENTS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL BELIEF SYSTEMS

In African traditional belief systems, the understanding of diseases and ailments transcends mere physical symptoms and often encompasses spiritual, moral, and social dimensions. Unlike the Western biomedical model, which typically focuses on pathogens, genetics, and environmental factors, African cosmologies interpret illness as intricately linked to an individual's relationship with the divine, the community, and the ancestral spirits. This holistic approach reflects the broader worldview that health is a balance between the physical, spiritual, and moral aspects of life. Within these systems, healers, diviners, and spiritual leaders

play critical roles in maintaining societal well-being, offering treatments that are grounded in centuries of indigenous knowledge.

➤ Spiritual Etiologies of Illness

The root cause of illness in many African traditional belief systems is often attributed to spiritual disturbances. Diseases are frequently seen as punishments or signs of moral failings, not merely as random or natural occurrences. In this context, illnesses can result from breaking taboos, neglecting one's obligations to the ancestors, or failing to appease specific deities. For example, among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, it is believed that angering the god *Sopona* could lead to smallpox, a form of divine retribution (Adejumo 44). In many communities, illnesses serve as physical manifestations of deeper spiritual or moral transgressions.

Moreover, illness may also arise from spiritual imbalances within the self or the community. When an individual or a community strays from the prescribed moral or spiritual path, divine forces or ancestors may respond with sickness as a warning or form of discipline. This notion of illness as a form of spiritual imbalance is further linked to African communalism, where individual well-being is seen as reflective of the collective harmony. When an illness strikes, it is often interpreted as not only affecting the afflicted individual but also as a signal of discontent within the wider community, requiring collective spiritual intervention.

Divination plays a central role in diagnosing such illnesses. In many African societies, diviners act as intermediaries between the spiritual world and the physical realm, using a range of methods, such as casting cowrie shells or consulting oracles, to uncover the spiritual cause of the illness. These spiritual consultants interpret divine messages, identifying which ancestor, deity, or spirit is responsible for the affliction and what remedies must be employed to restore balance. The prescribed treatments may involve sacrifices, rituals, or offerings, aimed at placating the offended spirits and restoring the patient to health (Njoku 93).

For example, among the Akan of Ghana, spiritual healers known as *Okomfo* consult deities through spirit possession to determine the cause of an illness and the required remedies. The act of sacrifice — whether it involves animals, foodstuffs, or symbolic objects — is central to the healing process, with the belief that it will appease the spirits responsible for the ailment. The ritual acts as a bridge between the human world and the supernatural, restoring the disrupted balance that caused the illness (Opoku 128).

➤ **Common Ailments and Their Spiritual Causes**

In many African communities, ailments are categorized based on their perceived spiritual origins. Mental illness, for example, is often attributed to spiritual attacks or possession by malevolent forces. While in the West, mental illness may be treated

primarily with medication or psychotherapy, in African traditional contexts, it is believed that an individual suffering from such conditions may be under the influence of spirits, ancestors, or sorcerers. Among the Zulu of South Africa, mental illness is sometimes seen as a sign that an individual has been chosen by the ancestors to become a healer, signaling a spiritual calling rather than a pathological condition (Ngubane 202).

Infertility, another common ailment, is frequently seen as a spiritual problem, often attributed to curses or the disfavor of the ancestors. In such cases, the afflicted person may be required to undergo cleansing rituals, offer sacrifices, or consult spiritual healers to restore fertility. A well-documented example is the role of *Babalawo*, the Ifa priests in Yoruba culture, who are consulted by couples experiencing infertility. The priests perform divination rituals to diagnose the cause of the infertility, which is often viewed as stemming from spiritual causes such as a curse or a broken spiritual bond (Adejumo 47).

Even pandemics, such as the recent COVID-19 crisis, have been viewed through the lens of spiritual causation in some African communities. In this context, the spread of a pandemic is interpreted as a sign of widespread moral failing or disfavor from higher powers. Traditional leaders in these communities may call for collective rituals, sacrifices, or community-wide prayers to appease the gods and

stop the spread of the disease (Opoku 130).

➤ **Traditional Healing Practices**

Traditional healing practices in Africa are deeply rooted in a synthesis of spiritual, herbal, and communal approaches. Healers, herbalists, and religious leaders form the backbone of traditional medical systems, each contributing unique knowledge and methods for diagnosing and treating illness. In many communities, healers are believed to possess a divine calling, often selected through spiritual visions or initiations, and are regarded with high respect and authority.

Herbalists, in particular, play a crucial role in African traditional medicine. Africa's rich biodiversity has provided healers with an extensive pharmacopeia of medicinal plants, each with specific properties for treating a wide range of ailments. For example, the *neem* tree (*Azadirachta indica*) is widely used in West Africa for its antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties, treating conditions ranging from malaria to skin infections (Olufemi 35). Similarly, the bark of the *prunus africana* tree has been used traditionally in East Africa to treat prostate conditions, and its effectiveness has been recognized even in Western medicine (Odugbemi 62). This shows how indigenous knowledge systems regarding medicinal plants continue to play a vital role in health practices across the continent.

Healers and herbalists do not operate in isolation but

are often supported by religious leaders and diviners who provide spiritual insight into the underlying causes of illness. In many African communities, religious leaders are seen as mediators between the human and spiritual realms. Their role in the healing process includes performing rituals, offering sacrifices, and leading prayers to restore the spiritual balance necessary for recovery. For example, the Maasai people of East Africa have a rich tradition of spiritual healing, wherein the *Laibon*, or spiritual leader, performs rituals that address both the spiritual and physical dimensions of illness (Hodgson 77).

THE DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE

The African Diaspora, formed through centuries of forced migration, particularly due to the transatlantic slave trade, created a dynamic shift in the social, cultural, and spiritual landscapes of African-descended communities around the world. This dispersal, which resulted in African populations settling in regions as diverse as the Americas, the Caribbean, and parts of Europe, brought with it a complex interplay of continuity and change in health beliefs and practices. In these new environments, African spiritual traditions, including those concerning health and disease, were both preserved and transformed, blending with local cultures, religious systems, and healthcare practices. The result was a rich syncretism that kept core African values alive, even as these traditions adapted to new contexts.

➤ Continuities and Changes in Health Beliefs

One of the most fascinating aspects of the African diasporic experience is how spiritual beliefs related to health have evolved over time, particularly in communities such as Afro-Caribbean, African-American, and Brazilian populations. For these groups, traditional African concepts of disease and healing—rooted in an understanding of the interplay between the physical and spiritual realms—remained central to their lives. However, these ideas did not remain static; instead, they adapted to the challenges and opportunities presented by new environments.

In Brazil, for instance, the religion of *Candomblé*—largely practiced by descendants of enslaved Africans—retains many elements of traditional West African spiritual practices, particularly from the Yoruba religion. In *Candomblé*, illness is often seen as a disruption in the relationship between humans and the *Orishas*, divine entities that are believed to control various aspects of the natural and spiritual world. Much like in African traditional systems, disease is viewed as a sign of imbalance, and healing rituals often involve offerings to the *Orishas* to restore harmony (Harding 152).

Similarly, in the Afro-Caribbean religion of *Vodun*—widely practiced in Haiti and the Dominican Republic—traditional African ideas about health have been maintained and adapted to local contexts. Like their African counterparts, Afro-Caribbean

practitioners of *Vodun* view disease as a disruption caused by malevolent spiritual forces or displeased ancestors. Healing involves spiritual consultation with priests, sacrifices, and the use of herbal remedies, mirroring the practices of African traditional healers (McAlister 217).

African-American spiritual traditions have also preserved elements of African health beliefs, though often in more syncretized forms. For example, the concept of “rootwork,” a form of traditional healing within African-American communities, is deeply influenced by West African beliefs in the use of herbs and spiritual rituals to address illness. *Hoodoo*, another African-American spiritual practice, integrates African healing traditions with elements of Christianity, emphasizing the use of prayer, herbal remedies, and protective charms to ward off illness and restore health (Chireau 94). These continuities, however, have not remained untouched by the Diaspora's diverse cultural and religious environments. Over time, African health beliefs have syncretized with elements of Christianity, indigenous American traditions, and even European folk practices. For example, in *Santería*, a Cuban religion rooted in Yoruba beliefs, African deities have been synchronized with Catholic saints. As a result, rituals intended to heal disease might involve invoking both African spirits and Christian saints, reflecting the blending of African, European, and indigenous influences in the healing process (Olmos and

Paravisini-Gebert 132).

➤ **Challenges of Transplanting Traditional Beliefs**

While the persistence of African health beliefs within the Diaspora speaks to their resilience, diasporic communities have also faced significant challenges in maintaining their traditional spiritual practices. One of the primary obstacles has been the tension between traditional African healing systems and the biomedical healthcare systems of the host countries. Many diasporic Africans and their descendants have struggled to reconcile their holistic, spiritual understandings of disease with the often rigid, scientific framework of Western medicine. In traditional African cosmologies, illness is often seen as a manifestation of spiritual or social imbalance, requiring rituals, sacrifices, and the intervention of healers to restore harmony. However, in Western biomedical systems, health is typically understood as a purely physical phenomenon, with disease caused by biological factors such as bacteria, viruses, or genetics. This fundamental difference in worldview has led to misunderstandings, marginalization, and, at times, outright rejection of African traditional health practices by modern healthcare institutions (Williams 87).

In some cases, diasporic communities have been forced to practice their traditional healing methods in secrecy due to fear of stigmatization or persecution. For example, during the colonial period in the

Caribbean, African spiritual practices like *Vodun* and *Obeah* were criminalized by colonial authorities, who viewed them as forms of witchcraft. This legacy of demonization has persisted in some regions, where African healing practices are still regarded with suspicion or derision by mainstream society. As a result, many Afro-Caribbean practitioners of traditional medicine continue to practice in secret, fearing that their beliefs will not be taken seriously or, worse, that they will be punished for their adherence to these traditions (Murrell 58).

Another significant challenge faced by African diasporic communities is the pressure to assimilate into dominant cultural and religious systems. In regions where Christianity or Islam dominate, African spiritual health practices have often been marginalized, leading to a gradual erosion of these traditions. Many African-descended people have converted to Christianity or Islam, and in the process, have adopted religious frameworks that are more compatible with Western healthcare systems. This religious shift has, in some cases, led to a devaluation of traditional African health practices and a reliance on biomedical treatments for illness, even when such treatments do not address the spiritual causes of disease as understood in African cosmologies (Pinn and Finley 203).

Despite these challenges, African health beliefs have shown remarkable resilience within the Diaspora. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in

traditional African spiritual practices, particularly among younger generations of African-descended people. This revival has been fueled in part by a desire to reconnect with ancestral traditions and to reclaim cultural identities that were suppressed during the colonial period. As a result, many diasporic Africans are now actively seeking out traditional healers, learning about herbal remedies, and participating in rituals that honor the ancestors and restore spiritual balance.

THE ROLE OF MODERN MEDICINE AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

As global healthcare systems evolve, the interplay between traditional healing practices and modern medicine continues to shape the health outcomes of African and diasporic communities. For centuries, African traditional medical systems have provided holistic approaches to health, often viewing illness not merely as a physical affliction but as a manifestation of social, spiritual, and environmental imbalances. These practices, rooted deeply in indigenous knowledge, continue to hold relevance today, especially in regions where Western biomedical models are dominant. In many African and diasporic contexts, healthcare providers are recognizing the value of incorporating spiritual beliefs and traditional practices to create a more holistic and culturally competent system of care.

➤ Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge in Contemporary Healthcare

Indigenous knowledge systems have long played a pivotal role in the healthcare of African communities, offering treatment strategies that encompass herbal remedies, spiritual rituals, and a profound understanding of the environment. In many parts of Africa, traditional healers remain the first point of contact for individuals seeking health interventions, particularly in rural areas. These healers, who often act as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual realms, offer treatments that address both the bodily and spiritual components of illness. While this system has coexisted alongside modern medicine for decades, recent efforts are being made to bridge the gap between these two paradigms, integrating the best of both worlds to create more comprehensive healthcare models.

One significant example of this integration can be found in South Africa, where the government has officially recognized traditional healers as part of the country's healthcare system. The Traditional Health Practitioners Act of 2007 provides legal recognition to these practitioners and seeks to regulate their activities in a manner that complements the existing biomedical framework (Masango 112). This move acknowledges the significance of spiritual beliefs in the overall health and well-being of the population, allowing for a more inclusive approach to healthcare. In this context, traditional healers are permitted to work alongside Western-trained doctors, providing patients with both

spiritual and physical treatment options.

Similarly, in Nigeria, a concerted effort has been made to integrate traditional medicine into the formal healthcare system. The Nigerian Institute of Medical Research has initiated studies into the efficacy of various herbal remedies used in traditional healing, seeking to validate these treatments within a scientific framework. This approach not only brings indigenous knowledge into the fold of modern healthcare but also helps to preserve and document traditional practices that might otherwise be lost (Oguntola 157). In many parts of West Africa, hospitals now offer both biomedical treatments and traditional remedies, giving patients the option to choose between or combine the two.

In the African Diaspora, particularly in communities such as the Afro-Caribbean and African-American populations, similar efforts are underway to incorporate traditional health beliefs into contemporary healthcare. For example, in Brazil's public health system, *Candomblé* healers are often consulted for treatments that complement Western medical interventions. This blending of practices allows patients to address the spiritual causes of illness, which might be overlooked in purely biomedical approaches. By recognizing the importance of spiritual health, modern healthcare systems in the African Diaspora are beginning to create more inclusive and culturally relevant models of care (Martinez 92).

➤ **Cultural Competence in Healthcare**

The need for culturally competent healthcare systems is more pressing than ever, especially in regions with diverse populations such as the African Diaspora. Cultural competence refers to the ability of healthcare providers to understand, respect, and effectively address the cultural and spiritual beliefs of their patients. In African and diasporic communities, where spiritual beliefs often play a critical role in the understanding and treatment of illness, culturally competent care is essential for improving health outcomes and building trust between healthcare providers and patients. One key aspect of cultural competence in healthcare is the acknowledgment of the patient's worldview. For many African-descended individuals, illness is seen as a disruption of spiritual balance or a result of displeased ancestors. In such cases, a purely biomedical approach may not address the root causes of the illness as perceived by the patient. Healthcare providers must be equipped to engage with these beliefs, offering a more holistic approach that respects both the physical and spiritual dimensions of health (Morgan 73). This may involve consulting with traditional healers, offering spiritual counseling, or allowing patients to incorporate their own spiritual practices into their treatment plans.

Healthcare systems that lack cultural sensitivity often alienate patients, leading to poor adherence to treatments and a lack of trust in medical professionals.

Studies have shown that African and African-American patients are less likely to seek care from healthcare providers who dismiss their spiritual beliefs or cultural practices (Ogutu and Carter 56). This disconnect can result in delayed treatment, exacerbated health conditions, and a widening of health disparities between African and non-African populations.

To address this gap, there is a growing call for healthcare providers to receive training in cultural competence, particularly in areas with large African or diasporic populations. Such training would equip doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers with the skills needed to engage with patients' spiritual beliefs, facilitating more effective communication and fostering greater trust. This training might also involve learning about the history and cultural significance of traditional African health practices, helping providers to appreciate the value these practices bring to the healthcare system (Lindsey 134).

The integration of traditional and modern medical practices holds significant potential for improving global health outcomes, particularly in multicultural societies. Indigenous knowledge systems, such as those found in African traditional healing, offer valuable insights into the treatment of diseases that go beyond the biomedical model. For instance, the use of medicinal plants by African herbalists is well-documented, and many of these plants have been proven to have medicinal properties that are still being

explored by modern science. The *neem* tree, used widely across West Africa, is one such example, as it has antiviral, anti-inflammatory, and antiseptic properties, making it a valuable addition to modern pharmacology (Olufemi 36).

Conclusion

African traditional belief systems offer a holistic understanding of health, where diseases and ailments are often seen as manifestations of spiritual imbalances or moral failings. These beliefs, deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual practices, continue to shape how health is perceived and managed in both Africa and the diaspora. In diasporic communities, such as in the Caribbean and Brazil, these traditional views have evolved, blending with local customs and religions to form syncretic health practices. While these systems offer valuable insights into the connection between spirituality and health, they also present challenges for modern healthcare systems. The lack of standardization and the spiritual nature of traditional practices create barriers to integrating them with Western medical practices. Nonetheless, there is growing recognition of the potential benefits of such integration, particularly in multicultural societies where indigenous knowledge systems can enhance holistic treatment approaches.

Recommendations

To improve healthcare delivery to African and diasporic communities, it is essential that healthcare

systems adopt policies that recognize the importance of cultural sensitivity and the value of indigenous knowledge systems. These policies should aim to:

- i. **Promote the Integration of Traditional and Modern Medicine:** Governments and healthcare institutions should establish frameworks that allow for the formal integration of traditional healers into the healthcare system.
- ii. **Implement Cultural Competency Training for Healthcare Providers:** Healthcare providers, particularly those working in areas with significant African or diasporic populations, should be required to undergo training in cultural competence.
- iii. **Encourage Research into Traditional Healing Practices:** More research should be conducted into the efficacy of traditional African healing practices.
- iv. **Foster Collaboration Between Traditional Healers and Biomedical Practitioners:** Healthcare systems should create spaces where traditional healers and biomedical practitioners can collaborate to offer holistic care to patients. This can be facilitated through regular consultations, joint treatment plans, and mutual respect for each practitioner's expertise.

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