

Identifying translation strategies employed by Yusuf Ali in translating culturally specific items in Surah Al-Baqarah

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Abstract: Translating the Quran from Arabic to English presents significant challenges due to the cultural and linguistic differences between the two languages. The Quran's status as a sacred text, believed by Muslims to be the direct words of Allah Almighty, further complicates the translation process. Each word in the Quran carries profound theological and cultural significance, which can be difficult to convey accurately in another language. Translators, therefore, must consider not only the literal meaning but also the deeper cultural and religious contexts of the text. To tackle these challenges, translators can employ various strategies. Newmark (1988) identified a range of translation strategies for dealing with culture-specific items (CSIs) which include transference, naturalisation, cultural equivalence, functional equivalence, descriptive equivalent, and componential analysis. This study examines the strategies used by Yusuf Ali in translating the culture-specific items in Surah Al-Baqarah. By analysing how these strategies are applied, the study seeks to understand how Yusuf Ali bridges the gap between the source and target languages while maintaining the intended meanings. The analysis shows that Yusuf Ali employs strategies such as modulation, cultural equivalence, naturalisation, and transference to achieve meaningful and functional equivalents in English, ensuring the message remains true to the original Arabic text.

Keywords: culture-specific items, source language, translation strategy, translation, target language

INTRODUCTION

The number of Muslims has been increasing year by year around the world. By 2030, it is estimated that the world's total population of Muslims will increase up to 2.2 billion people, which makes up about 26% of the world's population (Fustos, 2011). Due to the widespread of Islam around the world, translating the Holy Quran from Arabic to English is believed to be very important, as English is regarded as one of the most spoken languages in the world. Translating and interpreting the Quran are not a recent practice as they have started thousands of years ago. According to Balla and Siddiek (2017), this dated back to the time when Prophet

Muhammad had been asked by his companion about the meaning of some words and verses of the Holy Quran.

Translating the Quran from Arabic to English is not an easy task as both languages have distinct linguistic features which might be challenging for translators to fully convey the meaning from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL). In addition, The Holy Quran is a sacred text, and because it is written in a language that is exclusively the words of Allah Almighty, translating it appears to be more difficult (Mohamed Abdelaal & Md Rashid, 2016). Al-Abbas and Haider (2020) as cited in Al-Smadi (2022) state that translation is not just simply switching the words from SL by their equivalent in the TL, as Arabic and English possess different cultural heritage. Moreover, there has been a conflict between the Islamic scholars regarding the translation of the Quran. The first group believes that the Quran is untranslatable, while the second group believes that the translation should not be exact, but it must focus on the meaning of the texts, or the concept intended by specific verse (Balla & Siddiek, 2017). Hence, in this case, the translation will be seen as an interpretation or explanation, which is also called 'Tafseer' (تفسير) of the Quran (Balla & Siddiek, 2017).

Moreover, translating the Holy Quran could be challenging due to some reasons. For instance, Ayyad et al. (2021) highlight that one of the challenges that might be faced by translators when translating the Quran is the culture-specific items that are deeply ingrained in the Arabic culture. Some words or phrases used in the Quran might not be available in other languages or cultures and this can be a huge challenge to the translators in finding the most suitable words with the closest meaning to the SL when translating. This is because languages emerge within their cultural contexts, and people use language as a means to convey their culture (Almahasees & Al-Taher, 2021). Quran is also difficult to translate mainly due to its sensitivity as a religious text. For instance, Moradi and Sadeghi (2014) as cited in Ayyad et al. (2021) mention that the proper translation of culturally specific elements can be extremely important when translating religious writings because a mistranslation of such an item could completely change the content. In order to avoid this, translators can employ some translation strategies to aid them in translating the culture-specific items in the Quran. Although many studies have examined the general translation strategies employed by Quran translators such as Yusuf Ali, however there is a notable lack of focused on how he handled culturally specific items in a key chapter like Surah Al-Baqarah. Additionally, the rising number of non-Arabic Muslims around the world signals that there is a need for accurate and culturally sensitive English translation of the Quran. Therefore, the current study is conducted with the following purposes:

1. To identify the translation strategies used by Yusuf Ali in translating the culture-specific items in Surah Al-Baqarah.
2. To identify how the translation strategies are applied by Yusuf Ali to obtain equivalent meaning between SL and TL.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Translation

Newmark (1988, p.5) describes translation as "rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text". Besides, translation is also a type of linguistic mediation whereby the content of a foreign language text (the source language) is transmitted into another language (the target language) by producing an information and

communicative comparable text in that language (Corina, 2021). Additionally, Palupi (2021) defines translation as a process of understanding the meaning of a text and creating an equivalent text that expresses similar information in a different language. In other words, translation acts as a tool that conveys the message of a text from one language to another language. Moreover, it has been stressed by Corina (2021) that the goal of translation is to facilitate cross-language communication in a way that the translated text in the target language serves as a full substitute for the original, matching it in terms of function, structure, and content. However, due to the differences in terms of the grammar, vocabulary and also culture, these could be a challenge to translators when translating texts from one language to another. Therefore, Newmark (1988) has laid out several translation strategies such as transference, naturalisation, cultural equivalent, and more to assist translators.

Culture-specific Items

Living in a multicultural world has caused a high demand for translation in order for us to understand texts from other countries and cultures. In fact, there is also an increase in awareness regarding the role of culture in translation and the role of translators as “active mediators” between the source culture (SC) and target culture (TC) (Sentov, 2020). Many translation scholars have expressed that the concept of culture is very crucial in understanding the significance of culture-specific items in translation (Larson, 1984; Newmark, 1988; Gambier, 2004 as cited in Sentov, 2020). Culture-specific items (CSI) refer to certain aspects of the text that are linked to specific concepts in the source culture (such as history, art, or literature) that may be unfamiliar to readers of the target text (Aixela, 1996 as cited in Daghighi & Hashemian, 2016). Besides, Almahasees and Al-Taher (2021) define CSI as words and phrases that depict certain groups’ cultural identities and they link to domains such as habits, traditions, costumes, politics, and beliefs.

Translating CSI can be quite challenging especially when translators have little knowledge of TL’s culture. As stressed by Sentov (2020), the translator must possess both extensive knowledge of the SC and strong proficiency in the SL in order to translate such items into the TL/TC. Additionally, translating CSI is deemed as “one of the most challenging tasks” to be performed by a translator (Ordudar, 2007 as cited in Ayyad et al., 2021) as they are deeply ingrained in a certain culture and are nearly impossible to be translated (Ayyad & Mahadi, 2020 as cited in Ayyad et al., 2021). According to Almahasees and Al-Taher (2021), CSI exists due to the contrast between SL and TL cultures, and the translation difficulty arises due to the lack of equivalency. In order to overcome this issue, many translation strategies and procedures have been introduced to assist translators in rendering the meaning of these items sufficiently (Ayyad et al., 2021).

Translation Strategies

Newmark (1988) has introduced a set of strategies for translating culture-specific items (CSI). These procedures include transference, naturalisation, cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, descriptive equivalent, componential analysis, synonymy, through-translation, shifts or transpositions, modulation, recognised translation, compensation, paraphrase, couplets, and notes, additions, glosses.

Transference is a method of transferring a SL word into TL text. It includes transliteration, which relates to the conversion of different alphabets. For example, Russian (Cyrillic), Greek, Arabic, Chinese, etc into English. Then, the word becomes a ‘loan word’. Things that are normally transferred are the names of all living (excluding Pope and one or two royals), most dead people, geographical and topographical names including newly independent countries

(unless they have any recognised translations), names of periodicals and newspapers, titles of literary works, plays, films that have not yet been translated, names of private companies and institutions, names of public or nationalised institutions (unless they have recognised translation, street names, addresses, etc (Newmark, 1988).

In naturalisation strategy, at first, the SL word will be adapted into the normal pronunciation, later to the normal morphology (word-form) of the TL (Newmark, 1988). Next, Cultural equivalent is used when a SL cultural word is translated by a TL cultural word. Even though they are not accurate, they can be used in general texts, publicity and propaganda, also for a brief explanation to readers who are ignorant of the relevant SL culture (Newmark, 1988). On the other hand, Functional equivalent refers to a procedure that is applied to cultural words, which requires the use of culture-free words, sometimes with a new specific term. So, it neutralises or generalises the SL words (Newmark, 1988). For Descriptive equivalent strategy, the meaning of CSI is explained in several words. For example, the word Samurai is described as 'the Japanese aristocracy from the 11th to the 19th century'; its function was 'to provide officers and administrators' (Newmark, 1988). Apart from that, Componential analysis compares an SL word with a TL word which has a similar meaning but is not an obvious one-to-one equivalent, by demonstrating first their common and then their differing sense components (Newmark, 1988).

Synonymy strategy is used for an SL word when there is no clear one-to-one equivalent. A synonym is only appropriate when literal translation is not possible and because the word is not important enough for componential analysis. Here, economy precedes accuracy (Newman, 1988). Next, Through-translation which refers to the literal translation of collocations, names of organisations and components of compounds which also can be called as calque or loan translation (Newmark, 1988). In Shifts or transpositions, they involve a change in the grammar from SL to TL. There are several types of changes: (i) change from singular to plural, (ii) when a specific SL structure does not exist in the TL, (iii) change of an SL verb to a TL word, change of an SL noun group to a TL noun, and so forth (Newmark, 1988). Modulation occurs when the translator produces the message of the original text in the TL text in conformity with the current norms of the TL, since the SL and the TL may appear dissimilar in terms of perspective (Newmark, 1988). Recognised translation is the use of official or the generally accepted translation of any institutional term (Newmark, 1988). Meanwhile, Compensation occurs when loss of meaning, sound-effect, metaphor or pragmatic effect in one part of a sentence is compensated in another part, or in a contiguous sentence (Newmark, 1988). Moving on, Paraphrase refers to a procedure where the meaning of the CBT is explained. Here the explanation is much more detailed than that of the descriptive equivalent (Newman, 1988). On the other hand, Couplets is a strategy where the translator combines two different procedures together (Newmark, 1988). Last but not least are Notes, additions, glosses. These are the additional information that translators can add to their versions (Newmark, 1988).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the qualitative descriptive research method to examine and analyse selected ayahs from Surah Al-Baqarah (البقرة, or "The Cow"). Nassaji (2015) mentions that the qualitative descriptive research method is primarily concerned with outlining and providing detailed descriptions of a phenomenon and its distinct features. In this context, the research focuses on understanding the linguistic and cultural nuances embedded in the selected verses of Surah Al-Baqarah. Surah Al-Baqarah is the second surah in the Quran and contains a total of 286 ayahs, making it the longest surah in the holy text. However, for the purposes of this study, only a specific set of ayahs from Al-Baqarah were chosen for in-depth analysis.

The data for this study is derived from the English translation of the Quran by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, titled *The Holy Quran: Translation & Commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali*. It is first published in 1934, and this translation has since become one of the most widely circulated and influential translations of the Quran. Various editions of Yusuf Ali's work have been published by both Islamic institutions and academic presses, attesting to its enduring popularity and scholarly credibility. According to Abu-Mahfouz (2011), Yusuf Ali's translation is highly regarded for its accuracy and eloquence, and it has earned a place of prominence among both Muslims and non-Muslims seeking to understand the message of the Quran. Moreover, Robinson (1996) also suggests that Yusuf Ali's translation of the Quran is very well-known especially among Muslims and is "generally reliable". Given the widespread acceptance and scholarly recognition of Yusuf Ali's translation, this version is selected as the reference for comparison and analysis in this study.

There are several translation frameworks available including Nida's Translation Theory, Chesterman's Pragmatic Strategies, and Skopos Theory. However, this study specifically utilises Newmark's Translation Strategies as it is deemed to provide a clear, practical, and culturally sensitive framework that suits the linguistic and cultural complexities in translating the Quran.

The methodology of this research involves a comparative analysis of the original Arabic text of the selected ayahs with their English translation by Yusuf Ali. This comparison aims to identify the translation strategies employed to convey the meanings of culture-specific items present in the original Arabic. By examining these strategies, the study seeks to determine how the translator navigates the challenges of rendering culturally and linguistically specific content into a target language while maintaining the intended meanings and cultural context. The focus is on how these translation strategies contribute to achieving equivalence between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL), particularly in terms of both semantic accuracy and cultural resonance. Through this approach, the study aims to shed light on the methods and techniques used in translating the Quranic text and how these impact the understanding of its message across different languages and cultural contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis, some translation strategies have been identified such as modulation, cultural equivalent, naturalisation, and transference.

Modulation

Table 1: Modulation Translation Strategy

Verse	114
Ayah	وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ مَّنَعَ مَسَاجِدَ اللَّهِ
Translation	And who is more unjust than he who forbids that in places for the worship of God

Modulation occurs when the translator produces the message of the original text in the TL text in conformity with the current norms of the TL, since the SL and the TL may appear dissimilar in terms of perspective (Newmark, 1988). In addition, it is also employed to convey semantic

meaning given that despite the translator's differing point of view, the context conveys the identical meaning as the source language (Murniati, 2011).

As can be seen, the word مَسَاجِدَ (*masjid*) from the verse above refers to a place of prayer for Muslims. In English, the word *masjid* has a literal equivalent to the word ‘mosque’. According to the Collins Dictionary (2024), mosque refers to a structure where Muslims go to perform prayers. However, we can see that instead of using the word ‘mosque’, Yusuf Ali has decided to use ‘places for the worship of God’ to translate مَسَاجِدَ in order “to give more information about that word itself” (Yaman, 2007, p.34) to the readers. Non-Muslim readers might not know or understand what ‘mosque’ is and what the purpose of it is, so by translating it as ‘places for the worship of God’, this can help them to understand the context easily.

Cultural Equivalent

Table 2: Cultural Equivalent Translation Strategy

Verse	43
Ayah	وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَارْكَعُوا مَعَ الرَّاكِعِينَ
Translation	And be steadfast in prayer; practice regular charity ; and bow down your heads with those who bow down (in worship).

Cultural equivalent is used when a SL cultural word is translated by a TL cultural word. Even though they are not accurate, they can be used in general texts, publicity and propaganda, also for a brief explanation to readers who are ignorant of the relevant SL culture (Newmark, 1988). Moreover, Verkhovtsova (2023) also stresses that this strategy tackles the difficulty of properly communicating the cultural subtleties, context, and semantics of a source text into a target language without eliminating or altering the original cultural elements.

Referring to Table 2, the word الزَّكَاةَ (*zakat*) refers to “an annual tax on Muslims to aid poor people in the Muslim community” and “a tax, comprising percentages of personal income of every kind, levied as almsgiving for the relief of the poor” (Collins Dictionary, 2019). Apart from Muslims, other people might not know or understand what *zakat* is. Therefore, Yusuf Ali has decided to translate it into a word that has the closest meaning to *zakat* and is familiar to all people, which is ‘charity’. As stated in Cambridge Dictionary (2024), the word ‘charity’ refers to “an organisation whose purpose is to give money, food, or help to those who need it”. Even though *zakat* and ‘charity’ bring almost the same concept which is giving aid to people who are in need but, the real definition of *zakat* is not served by the translation. According to the Center for Arab American Philanthropy (2015), translating *zakat* as ‘charity’ is somewhat misleading as it is not the usual type of charity giving that can be associated with صدقة (*sadaqah*), which is a voluntary charity. However, since SL and TL do not hold the same cultural values, then it would be easier for readers to understand if the word is translated into a familiarly used word in TL as what Yusuf Ali did.

Naturalisation

Table 3: Naturalisation Translation Strategy 1

Verse	98
Ayah	مَنْ كَانَ عَدُوًّا لِلَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَجِبْرِيلَ وَمِيكَالَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ عَدُوٌّ لِلْكَافِرِينَ
Translation	Whoever is an enemy to God and His angels and apostles to Gabriel and Michael Lo! God is an enemy to those who reject faith.

Table 4: Naturalisation Translation Strategy 2

Verse	136
Ayah	قُولُوا آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَى وَعِيسَى وَمَا أُوتِيَ النَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ
Translation	Say ye: “We believe in God and the revelation given to us and to Abraham Isma`il Isaac Jacob and the Tribes and that given to Moses and Jesus and that given to (all) Prophets from their Lord we make no difference between one and another of them and we bow to God (in Islam).”

Naturalisation strategy adheres the SL and takes the TL or readers of the translated text as the goal, using language that the target speakers are familiar with in order to communicate the original text's meaning (Qiu, 2023). In naturalisation strategy, at first, the SL word will be adapted into the normal pronunciation, later to the normal morphology (word-form) of the TL (Newmark, 1988).

From the verses above, we can see that Yusuf Ali had adopted the naturalisation strategy when translating the names of angels and prophets from Arabic into English. According to Alturki (2021), some Muslim translators intentionally opt to transliterate some accepted English forms in a way that most closely fits their pronunciation in Arabic, rather than utilising their recognised English forms. For instance, نوح (*Nuh*) as ‘Nooh’ rather than ‘Noah’. However, Yusuf Ali translated the names of angels and prophets according to their English pronunciation. The translated angels and prophets’ names such as Moses, Jacob, Jesus, etc are abundantly used in the Bible and hence, people are very familiar with these names. That might have been one of the factors that led Yusuf Ali to choose the English pronunciation when translating these names rather than retaining their Arabic pronunciations.

Transference

Table 5: Transference Translation Strategy 1

Verse	158
Ayah	إِنَّ الصَّفَا وَالْمَرْوَةَ مِنَ شَعَائِرِ اللَّهِ فَمَنْ حَجَّ النَّبْتَ أَوْ اعْتَمَرَ فَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْهِ أَنْ يَطَّوَّفَ بِهِمَا وَمَنْ تَطَوَّعَ خَيْرًا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ شَاكِرٌ عَلِيمٌ
Translation	Behold! <u>Safa</u> and <u>Marwa</u> are among the Symbols of God. So if those who visit the house in the season or at other times should compass them round it is no sin in them. And if anyone obeyed his own impulse to good be sure that God is He who recognised and know.

Table 6: Transference Translation Strategy 2

Verse	185
Ayah	شَهْرُ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنْزِلَ فِيهِ الْقُرْآنُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ وَبَيِّنَاتٍ مِّنَ الْهُدَى وَالْفُرْقَانِ
Translation	<u>Ramadan</u> is the (month) in which was sent down the <u>Qur'an</u> as a guide to mankind also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong).

Transference is a method of transferring a SL word into TL text which relates to the conversion of different alphabets, then, the word becomes a 'Laon word'. (Newmark, 1988). According to AlZu'bi (2021), sometimes, the transference strategy is seen as a way to make up for the TL's inability to keep up with the SL's dominance in creating new vocabulary for its creations.

الصَّفَا (*Safa*) and الْمَرْوَةَ (*Marwa*) refer to two small hills close to the Ka'ba in Mecca where the pilgrim conducts in a quick walk or trot known as 'the running' while on the pilgrimage (hajj and 'umra) (Firestone, 2004). Since *Safa* and *Marwa* are the name of places, therefore it would be impossible to translate them into TL. As mentioned by Newmark (1988), one of the things that is normally transferred involves geographical and topographical names including newly independent countries (unless they have any recognised translations).

The same concept is applied to the word رَمَضَانَ (*ramadan*) and الْقُرْآنُ (*Qur'an*) where they only exist in the context of SL. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and also the month of fasting while Qur'an is the sacred scripture of Islam. Since there is no word in the TL that is literally equivalent to the meaning of *ramadan* and *Qur'an*, therefore it is best to retain their original names when translating as can be seen from the verses above.

CONCLUSION

The present study has identified several translation strategies used by Yusuf Ali in his translation of culture-specific items in Surah Al-Baqarah, including modulation, cultural

equivalence, naturalisation, and transference. These strategies were employed to facilitate a better understanding of the text for readers of the target language (TL), aiming to translate the terms into concepts that are more familiar and accessible to them. For instance, the term *zakat* was translated as "charity," and the Arabic names of angels and prophets were translated into their commonly recognized English counterparts. These strategies help bridge the gap between the source language (SL) and the target language by ensuring the message remains clear and comprehensible.

However, certain words, especially names of places or practices unique to the Arabic culture and Islamic tradition, present significant challenges in translation. Terms like *Safa*, *Marwa*, *Ramadan*, and *Qur'an* do not have direct equivalents in English, as they refer to specific cultural and religious concepts that are integral to the Arab-Islamic world. In these cases, it is often best to retain the original names in their Arabic form to preserve their cultural authenticity and ensure that their original meaning is not lost. The challenge, therefore, lies in finding a balance between making the text accessible to the TL readers while respecting the original cultural and religious context.

The cultural differences between the Arabic and English languages pose a significant challenge for translators, as they must carefully select the most appropriate terms in the TL to accurately convey the meaning of the SL. Translating culture-specific items requires a deep understanding of both the linguistic structures and cultural contexts of both languages. This is particularly true when translating the Quran, a text deeply rooted in Arabic culture and history. The challenge is further compounded by the fact that the Quran is a holy scripture, and its translation must be done with extra care to maintain its sacredness and convey the intended divine message accurately. As such, it becomes clear that translation is not just a linguistic task, but a cultural and religious one as well.

Moreover, several linguistic features of the Quran make it difficult to translate into English. One of these features is the difference in sentence structure between Arabic and English. In English, the standard word order is subject-verb-object (SVO), and the meaning of a sentence is primarily determined by how the components are arranged. By contrast, Arabic has a more flexible word order, with verb-subject-object (VSO) being the standard, and subject-predicate (SP) used when no verb is present. The extensive verb inflection and case marking in Arabic allow for a wide variety of word order structures with minimal restrictions. This flexibility enables speakers to convey emphasis, tone, and other nuances, giving them more freedom in how they express their thoughts (Elimam, 2020). As a result, the task of translating Arabic sentences into English requires not just converting words, but also understanding how the structure of the original language reflects meaning and intention. This highlights the intricacies involved in the translation process and the difficulty in maintaining the same level of nuance in the TL.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that there is no such thing as a perfect or flawless translation. As Newmark (1988, p. 6) emphasizes, "there is no such thing as a perfect, ideal or correct translation; a translator is always trying to extend his knowledge and improve his means of expression; he is always pursuing facts and words." This perspective underscores the dynamic nature of translation, where the translator is constantly striving to improve their understanding and methods of expression. Language itself is fluid and constantly evolving, and no translation can ever fully capture all the intricacies and nuances of the original text. Thus, translation should be seen as a continuous process of adaptation and refinement. Moreover, the translator's role goes beyond merely substituting words from the SL to the TL; rather, translation is about transferring the intended message such as its meaning, tone, and context across languages. A skilled translator must navigate both the linguistic and cultural differences between the SL and TL, ensuring that the message is conveyed accurately and meaningfully to the TL audience.

In light of these considerations, it is also important to note that the findings of this study represent only a small portion of the overall translation strategies employed by Yusuf Ali in his rendering of Surah Al-Baqarah. The study only focused on a selection of ayahs from the surah. Therefore, future research could benefit from analysing a larger number of ayahs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the translation strategies used throughout the entire surah. Additionally, there are numerous English translations of the Quran by other renowned translators, and it would be valuable to compare these translations to see how different translators handle culture-specific items. Such comparisons could offer further insights into the various approaches to translating the Quran and how translators deal with the complex task of conveying culturally and contextually specific concepts to a global audience. By expanding the scope of research, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies involved in translating this sacred text and contribute to ongoing discussions about the role of translation in cross-cultural communication.

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