"Discover Your Destiny": Sensation, Time, and Bible Reading among Nigerian Pentecostals

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Abstract: Pentecostal Christians in southwest Nigeria claim to experience divine revelations of personal destiny by reading scripture. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with the Redeemed Christian Church of God, this article argues that members' sensual reading practices are entangled with perceptions of time. Church members use bodily experience to construct a near future that they understand as continuous with the lived present. To examine the production of embodied religious temporality, I use a stage-based analysis of Pentecostal hermeneutic development. Church members gradually progress from "beginning" to "advanced" stages of Bible reading, generating new relationships to the self and to a Christian cosmology.

Keywords: Christianity, Pentecostalism, Nigeria, sensation, time, reading

Résumé : Les chrétiens pentecôtistes du sud-ouest du Nigéria affirment qu'ils éprouvent des révélations divines sur la destinée personnelle par la lecture de l'Écriture. Me basant sur un terrain ethnographique au sein de l'Église Chrétienne des Rachetés de Dieu, je soutiens que les pratiques de lectures sensuelles des membres de cette Église sont enchevêtrées à leur perception du temps. Ces chrétiens pentecôtistes recourent à des expériences corporelles pour construire un avenir rapproché qu'ils comprennent en continuité avec leur vécu présent. Pour examiner la production de cette temporalité religieuse incarnée, j'utilise une analyse qui se base sur les étapes de développement de l'herméneutique pentecôtiste. Les membres de cette Église progressent graduellement des « débuts » aux stades « avancés » de lecture de la Bible, qui génèrent de nouvelles relations au soi et à la cosmologie chrétienne.

Mots-clés : Chrétienté, Pentecôtisme, Nigéria, Sensations, Temporalité, Lecture

"Be the Word of God!" The pastor's injunction to the congregation caught me short. Since beginning my fieldwork with Pentecostal Christians in the southwest Nigerian town of Ilé-Ifè in 2010, I had heard about reading the Word, preaching the Word, and doing the Word. Now, I was told to *be* the Word. I gathered that the Word – *oro* in Yoruba – was related to the Bible. However, my non-Christian upbringing in the United States did not prepare me to know the significance of this term to members of my institutional base, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG).[1]

Redeemers, as the RCCG members called themselves, approached the Word as the sensual event of interpreting scripture. This method of interpretation was tied to Pentecostalism's central feature: felt experiences of the Holy Spirit, which believers worldwide define as God's earthly manifestation.[2] Redeemers' Biblical interpretation, or hermeneutics, involved the fingering of feathery pages, the visual encounter with lines of black text, and, finally, the bodily reception of the Holy Spirit in visions, voices, and ineffable feelings. Participant observation, interviews, and media analysis revealed that Redeemers used scriptural interpretations to relate their lived experiences to a God-given personal destiny.

The RCCG – and by implication, the Redeemers' hermeneutic approach – was widespread in Ilé-Ifè. By the time I left Nigeria following 12 months of research, Ilé-Ifè held more than 30 RCCG branches. The RCCG's popularity in Ilé-Ifè reflected its popularity in the rest of Nigeria. The RCCG is the largest Pentecostal church in a country that holds the world's second-largest Pentecostal population (Pew Research Center 2011:27). RCCG church buildings speckled Ilé-Ifè's streets, competing for members with mosques, mainline churches and a variety of Pentecostal churches in the town's thriving "religious marketplace" (Hackett 1998:1).[3] Roughly 50 percent of Ilé-Ifè's population identified as Christian, 50 percent identified as Muslim, and a small number

identifed as African "traditionalists" who worshipped Yoruba spirits and gods. Christians included Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, and Catholics, but these groups were far outnumbered by various Pentecostal congregations affiliated with a church rather than a denomination. I counted over 20 Pentecostal ministries in the town, including the pervasive RCCG.

Just as striking as the number of RCCG churches in Ilé-Ifè was the ubiquity of English and Yoruba scriptural passages. The sight and sound of Biblical language seemed to surround me on the street: church speakers blasted sermons citing scripture; Bible passages decorated buses and roadside posters; strangers sang verses fashioned into hymns. Central to the Redeemers' oral, visual, and bodily engagement with Biblical language was the practice of reading. "One week without the Bible makes one weak!" went a familiar adage. In church and at home, Redeemers bent over English-language and Yoruba-language Bibles in efforts to "be the Word of God." As they read, Redeemers said, they merged the felt presence of the Holy Spirit with scriptural text, forming through the Word a bodily relationship to the divine. Readers sensed God's presence in scripture and also made sense of that Spirit-filled text with respect to their day-to-day lives. Put differently, Redeemers used ongoing experience as both the means and the context for interpreting scriptural messages.

Redeemers interpreted these messages as signs of individualised destiny. "If you want to discover your destiny, then search the Bible," a Sunday school teacher exhorted students. Pentecostal Redeemers' approach to scripture aligns with that of non-Pentecostal evangelicals who frame the Bible literally, "as a constitutive text, establishing the cosmos, the social world, its customs, and its laws" (Crapanzano 2000:38; Harding 2000). From Redeemers' evangelical standpoint, scripture both reflected and encompassed a God-given history for all humankind.[4] However, while Redeemers approached scripture as a singular history, they also accepted that many Biblical histories existed – one for every born-again reader.

My research on the Redeemers' embodied interpretations of destiny framed Christian sensation in temporal terms (see also Engelke 2009). In the context of Pentecostalism's global expansion in recent decades, anthropologists have taken into consideration the tactile and affective dimensions of Pentecostal and also non-Pentecostal Christians' lives (Engelke 2007; Keane 2007; Meyer 2009; Pype 2012:130–167). Research focused on Christian sensation logically uses a spatial frame to understand subjects' physical interactions with the social and material world. However, when Redeemers sensed material scripture, they also operated within a temporal frame, constructing a distinct relationship to the future. Simon Coleman's (2011) notion of "historiopraxy" is particularly relevant here. Redeemers "attempt[ed] to 'perform' the relationship between the past and the present (and the future) in a productive sense, not only through narrative accounts but also through embodied forms of worship and mission" (434). With other evangelicals, Redeemers hoped to rupture the Christian present with a non-Christian past, but their sensual hermeneutics emphasised the continuity between an always-unfolding embodied present and a God-given near future (Coleman 2011; Meyer 1998; Robbins 2007).

Redeemers' scriptural interpretations of time exemplified what Birgit Meyer (2009, 2010) calls a "sensational form," a culturally and historically specific style of contacting the divine learned through religious practice. Meyer's concept contributes to efforts by anthropologists of Christianity, and of religion more broadly, to develop "more adequate conceptual tools for grasping religious bodily sensations . . . [and] to avoid the pitfall of taking the feeling body for granted as a prime phenomenological reality" (see also Asad 1993; Vilaca 2009). I complement these efforts methodologically, tracking the steps through which Redeemers' hermeneutic learning process culminates in the sensational form of Bible reading. The temporality of reading, as well as the temporality produced by reading, constitute the Redeemers' hermeneutics. My approach draws on the work of Tanya Luhrmann (2004, 2012), who explores how converts train over time to think, feel, and act as Christians. When Redeemers were new church members, they learned to conceptualise scripture as doctrine applicable to all readers. Slowly, with the sedimentation of the reading experience, Redeemers developed a Bible-reading aesthetic in which they embodied God, the revealer of destiny. With each stage, Redeemers generated cosmological conceptions and a sense of Christian subjectivity. Redeemers' sociocultural worlds, then, followed from, and also helped to advance, Redeemers' hermeneutic learning process.

After situating the Redeemers' Word in intersecting regional and global Christian histories, I explore how new church members' verbal and bodily techniques shaped their approach to the Bible and a broader process of Christian world making and self making. Ultimately, the Redeemers' Bible reading, world, and self came together in the Word, a triadic combination of text, God, and reader. While reading the Word, Redeemers uncovered, narrated, and felt what they saw as personal, Bible-based destinies.

The RCCG and the Word

I carried out the bulk of my fieldwork in a heterogeneous RCCG branch in Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria, that I call Grace Sanctuary.[5] The 500-member branch attracted university faculty and staff and also tradespeople who were "just managing," struggling to make ends meet. Grace Sanctuary's congregation also varied in age, gender, and religious background. Congregation members were at least moderately proficient in English and Yoruba, and most people spoke Yoruba at home. Apart from a small group of "elders" over the age of 60, though, people owned and read English Bibles. Members had easiest access to the King James Version of the Bible because the national RCCG headquarters close to Lagos, Nigeria, distributed large numbers of pocket-sized editions to branches throughout the country. Members also used the New King James Version, the New International Version, and the Good News Translation.

Redeemers used Bibles translated into a Western language, but their hermeneutic method was grounded in a unique regional history. I traced this history from the encounter between Yoruba people and the Church Missionary Society (CMS), a powerful social, political, and economic force in southwest Nigeria in the mid- and late 1800s (Ajayi 1965).[6] Bible reading among Yoruba Christians has followed a distinctive trend over the past 150 years. Believers have sometimes treated the Bible as a guide to salvation in the next world and sometimes as a direct, "this worldly" portal to the supernatural. Intriguingly, contemporary Redeemers spoke about the English-language Bible as both a means of immediate contact with God and as a means of self-improvement for salvation.

Local converts to Christianity in the colonial era saw the "Book people," as they called British and indigenous CMS missionaries, as conveyers of *awo* (spiritual secrets) (Peel 2000:223). Some new converts viewed Bible reading as a replacement for Yoruba divination tools, such as the kola nut, which diviners used to invoke Yoruba spirits (225). Meanwhile, European missionaries urged against such a perspective. In one exchange, a local political leader affiliated with the CMS told a diviner: "Our book never changes. Open the same place a hundred times and you will find the same thing" (225). This view found traction among independent Christian churches in the early 20th century. These "Aladura" churches – literally, "one who prays" – taught local members to read the Bible as "ethically oriented, fixed, [and] universal in application" (225). Meanwhile, the churches sought direct connection with God by means other than Bible reading, including spoken prayer and the recording of dreams and visions (Probst 1989; Ray 1993).[7]

The Aladura churches' view of scripture as a fixed body of knowledge extended into post-colonial Nigeria's dynamic born-again Christian movement. A universalised approach to scripture is evident in the history of the RCCG, which was founded in 1952 when Josiah Akindayomi broke away from a prominent Aladura church. Seeking to distance himself from certain "traditional" Yoruba practices in his church like incense burning and dealings with ancestral spirits, Akindayomi aligned himself with a Pentecostal movement influenced by American and British missionaries (Ukah 2008). In the 1970s, the RCCG incorporated a "holiness" doctrine centred on moral purity, anti-materialism, and the promises of salvation (Ojo 1988). Like Aladura practitioners, people in holiness churches treated scripture as a set of static truths that were equally applicable to all readers. Through Bible reading, they sought to learn about and avoid sinful and "disobedient" actions such as drinking, smoking, fornication, or stealing (Marshall 2009:71; Ojo 1988).

In the 1980s and 1990s, popular Pentecostal churches like the RCCG tended to develop a "this-worldly" focus on prosperity in which they continued to read the Bible but renewed a commitment to prayer. This period of Nigerian Pentecostalism was shaped by a "new wave" of Pentecostalism that began in the United States and spread to Latin America and Africa (Gifford, Rose, and Brouwer 1996; Marshall-Fratani and Corten 2002). Nigerian prosperity churches used prayer as a means to immediate spiritual and material blessings, contextualising earlier Aladura churches' use of prayer in a period of financial crisis and political upheaval. A popular moniker for the prosperity doctrine in Nigeria – "name it and take it" – highlights the prosperity gospel's emphasis on the spoken word as a tool of self-care and even of self-preservation.

The RCCG certainly stressed professional success and upward mobility while I was in Nigeria from 2010 to 2011. Pastors pushed members to pray and read the Bible in English because, as Pastor Ajayi told the congregation, "English is the language of the future." English is Nigeria's national language, and many middle-class and upper-class jobs in southwest Nigeria require an intermediary knowledge of the language. So did active participation in Grace Sanctuary, which conducted most of its evening and weekend meetings in English.[8]

Given Grace Sanctuary's English language meetings and Bibles, the ability to read and speak English was part and parcel of mastering Biblical hermeneutics. A

parallel might be drawn between English in the context of Grace Sanctuary and the spread of Islam across northern Nigeria between the late 14th and 18th centuries, when "Arabic remained absolutely privileged as [Islam's] medium of religious communication" (Peel 2000:189). Before the 19th century, Arabic was the desirable language of the elite and the government, and people viewed the Arabic of the Koran as potent and even magical (Hunwick 1964; Peel 2000). English was likewise entangled for contemporary Pentecostal Redeemers with promises of spiritual and economic power. Following the RCCG's founder, Redeemers tended to associate Yoruba language and cultural practices with a sinful past and English with a blessing-filled future.

Contemporary Redeemers' desire to "break with the past" (Meyer 1998) echoes the narratives of evangelicals in several other contexts, but their geographical location may have quickened a desire to leave cultural history behind (Engelke 2004; Robbins 2007). The town of Ilé-Ifè is fraught with symbols of tradition. Yoruba mythology frames this "sacred city" as the birthplace of the Yoruba people and the centre of their spiritual-political lineage (Olupona 2011). The present-day king – or *Ooni* – of Ilé-Ifè is said to be a Yoruba god, and museums scattered around the town hold remains of the bronze, terracotta, and stone sculpture from 1300 AD. Two miles from Grace Sanctuary, hawkers of fruit and pirated DVDs recline against remnants of the original city gates, which stand just steps beyond the palace entrance. In a setting steeped in historical significance, Redeemers look wilfully forward to the material and spiritual promises of Christian life.

However, even as Redeemers have attempted to achieve well-being by breaking with local "tradition," they are worried about creating a public image that is too closely associated with the materialistic greed of "this world." One pastor confided in me that he did not want people to see the RCCG's version of Christianity as a "get-rich-quick plan." Like other Nigerian Pentecostal churches, the RCCG has struggled to situate itself in a "middle ground" on a "spectrum of 'holiness-prosperity'" (Marshall 2009:85). Perhaps for this reason, during my fieldwork I noticed that pastors actively promoted Bible reading as a way to become more obedient to God. Pastors at Grace Sanctuary lectured the congregation to come to weekly Bible studies, where they would learn about "righteous," or holy, habits.

However, the form of Bible study in Grace Sanctuary only partially resembled a holiness approach to scripture. Redeemers did read the Bible to inhabit righteousness, but their Biblical hermeneutics combined an accent on holy living with an accent on contact with God. The latter dimension of Bible reading signalled continuity with the "this-worldly" dimension of the RCCG's history. Redeemers' two uses of scripture – one as a guide for moral purity and the other as a conduit for the divine – manifested in readers' learning experiences.

Learning the Word: A Temporal Map

When Grace Sanctuary members saw me around Ilé-Ifè, they sometimes encouraged my fieldwork: "*Eku ise*, Sister Jesse": "greetings on your work." At least, I thought my acquaintances were recognising my research. One month after I began my fieldwork, I realised that people referred to Bible reading as *ise* – work.[9] I had recently arrived at Grace Sanctuary, and people categorised me as a convert who was assimilating to the RCCG's method of Bible reading. I did not blame them since, as a non-Christian agnostic, I was indeed experiencing the Bible as a beginner. Redeemers saw the Word as "a complex process, and above all else, a learning process" and one that took time and work for a new reader to understand (Luhrmann 2004:519).

Unlike me, most newcomers to Grace Sanctuary had previously converted to Christianity in other Pentecostal churches along the "holiness-prosperity" spectrum. Others had previously attended mainline churches and Islamic mosques.[10] Regardless of religious background or expertise, the RCCG treated all newcomers, many of whom were in their twenties and thirties, as if they were "making a fresh start in Christ." People who joined the church were required to undergo a "second baptism" by a pastor from the RCCG even if they had already been baptised.

New church members were exposed to the RCCG's doctrine and practices in required classes for new members. The weekly, one-hour classes typically attracted about 15 teenagers and adults; Redeemers held that a person could only make an informed decision to "give their lives" to Christ after the age of 13. In the 12-week session I observed, students' relationships to the teacher, a long-time RCCG member, were subservient but friendly. The teacher took on a paternal, pastor-like position as he began classes with Bible reading, prayer, and sung praise and then offered stern lectures on the RCCG's teachings. During lectures, new church members listened quietly, responding only when addressed and dutifully taking notes in paper notebooks. If students attended class regularly, they received a diploma marking their graduation. The RCCG authorities seemed to assume that the repeated practice of carrying out and hearing about the church's doctrinal expectations would, over time, sediment in the souls of new members.

Lectures in classes for new church members related either to spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting or

social mores like courtship etiquette and marriage. In contrast to these other topics, the Word was rarely explicitly addressed. Instead, new members encountered the Word in a piecemeal fashion, in Bible study sessions, church services, all-night vigils, evangelising missions, and conversations with long-time Redeemers. During roughly the first year of membership, Redeemers moved from a "beginning" stage of Bible reading to an "advanced" stage of Bible reading.[11]

At first, I did not view scriptural interpretation in terms of learning stages. Instead I saw a puzzling disjuncture between the two ways of reading. In one interpretive stance, the Bible was a story of God's "plan" for humanity, and central to this plan was a set of rules for righteous living. In the second interpretive stance, the Bible was a medium for felt contact with God and His revelations of personal destiny. The generic and sensual interpretive stances initially seemed antithetical to one another, but I found they facilitated, respectively, Redeemers' beginning and advanced interpretive stages.[12] While I do not know whether other Pentecostal churches in Ilé-Ifè introduced new church members to scripture through the same sequence of interpretive stances, my research shows that many of these institutions clearly drew on both modes of reading: one in which scripture was a general story of humankind and one that framed it as a personalised guide for the everyday.[13] Within the RCCG context, the mastery of these frames in sequential order helped members create a cosmology, a set of categories that encompassed the universe as a whole (Tambiah 1985). Learning the Word was at once a form of subject making and a form of world making, the construction of collective and also personal narratives of the past, present, and future.

Beginners, or new converts, learned to speak about the Bible and God as cosmological entities distinct from lived experience. In so doing, beginning readers expressed into existence the difference between the Christian person, on the one hand, and God and the Bible, on the other hand. Church leaders in Grace Sanctuary told newcomers that scripture was unchanging and fundamentally true. The Bible taught a fixed set of actions and attitudes that together constituted a "Christian lifestyle," habits that accorded with holiness doctrine and ruptured with the unholy practices of a non-Christian past. Leaders found guidance on Christian lifestyle primarily in the New Testament. New Redeemers learned, among other lessons, to give freely (Luke 6:38), tell the truth (Prov. 12:19), avoid fornication (1 Cor. 7:2), cleanse the mind of sinful thoughts (Rom. 12:2), and, above all, love and follow God (2 Cor. 10:5; Gal. 1:10).

New RCCG members were taught that a Bible-based Christian lifestyle would eventually purify them of sin and make them worthy of feeling the Holy Spirit while they read the Bible. Mr. Udoh, a Sunday school teacher, shared a personal experience of purification during a Sunday school class themed "Sanctified Vessels": "Before, I wouldn't tell my wife if I had money. But now, I find it difficult to lie.… We are talking about spiritual heart surgery here! Through God, all bad things in our body are flushed out." Later in the class, Mr. Udoh spoke about the effect of a pure heart on the Holy Spirit's presence in a believer: "Are you obedient to God's will? That is the litmus test." Once Redeemers were cleansed of "bad things" through a Christian lifestyle, new church members learned, they would have the potential to experience the Holy Spirit through scripture.

Advanced readers claimed to do just that. They continued to read the Bible as a guide to life as a Christian, naming the difference between two dyads: Christians and God and Christians and scripture. At the same time, after at least one year of RCCG membership, Redeemers fused the human "spirit" with the Holy Spirit during the act of reading. Redeemers explained that the spirit, a point of connection with God, was held within the heart or soul, a moral space of decision making in the born-again Christian. The spirit shaped the heart's direction of the body, the third and outermost part of the person. Speaking about the layers of the Christian person, Pastor Ajayi told Grace Sanctuary's congregation: "The man has a body, a soul, and a spirit. The real you is within – the spirit. He is the inward man." Advanced readers aimed to embody God in a (masculinised) human spirit so that their daily desires and actions would adhere ever more fully to the holy lifestyle outlined in the Bible.

Advanced readers' inward, spiritual encounters with the Word were not constrained to the act of reading. Redeemers used the term *oro* to denote speech as well as text, and my acquaintances reported hearing and also seeing Biblical verses and spoken revelations from God. In this respect, they mirrored the experiences of Pentecostal groups elsewhere. For instance, Coleman (2000:117) writes of a Pentecostal congregation in Sweden: "Powerfully charged language is read, spoken, written, memorised, prophesied, translated … and, so it is believed, embodied not only in the flesh of Christ, but also in that of his followers." I followed the RCCG members' emphasis on the read Word, tracing the Redeemers' shifting encounters with the "powerfully charged" text of scripture.[14]

If Redeemers' knowledge of the written Word eventually involved feelings of the Holy Spirit, mine merely

involved explanations and performances of these feelings. Toward the end of my fieldwork, I did experience occasional and quickly fading sensations of vibrancy, while I read my travel-sized King James travel Bible. My heart would quicken after reading a passage, and I would read the passage again, mentally sorting through its implications for my life. My Bible held a sense of possibility for me; part of me dearly wanted to know "the Word." However, my training as a social scientist kept me from embracing a view of scripture as God's message or a conduit for the Holy Spirit. Without a commitment to Pentecostal doctrine, I was still "finding my way," as Redeemers put it; I was not yet born as a Christian person.

Beginning Bible Reading

"New believers are like infants in Christ," Pastor Ajayi liked to say at the end of Sunday services at Grace Sanctuary. Going on, he sometimes exclaimed: "The Bible is like milk. You need to read it every day to grow strong as a Christian." Church leaders blended the metaphor of bodily growth with a globally popular Pentecostal metaphor of spiritual warfare (Robbins 2004:122). New members were told that as "infants in Christ" their hearts were susceptible to the sinful force of the Devil. Prayer was one method through which members could win the fight over their spirits and hearts: "Spiritual battle calls for what? Prayer to God," an assistant pastor of Grace Sanctuary urged. Reading the Bible was a second way Redeemers strengthened the born-again heart. Church leaders encouraged new RCCG members to imbibe the spiritual nourishment of scripture by themselves and in collective Bible studies.

In Bible studies, new church members learned to utter into existence a three-part relationship between readers, God, and the Bible. That is, Redeemers who took part in Bible studies talked about the difference between their experiences as earthly humans and the transcendent God described in the pages of their Bibles. Much of this cosmological category-making took form in didactic discussions about Christian lifestyle, and new members presumably applied this reading style to their solitary study. The beginner's Bible – like the Aladura Bible – was universal; its prescriptive narrative applied to all human life.

One of the first Bible studies I attended at Grace Sanctuary showcased beginners' pronouncements of the person–Bible–God relationship. The day's topic was "Seek the Lord." An older woman standing at the front of the church read a quote out loud:

> Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. [Isa. 55:6–7]

The woman paraphrased the quote from Isaiah: "We must seek Him continuously, with all our hearts. This is what the Bible tells us." Next, the Bible study leader asked a question. "Who is God?" A few church members raised their hands. "He is the creator," 40-year-old Mr. Rotimi said. "God is love," another man offered. Next, young Mrs. Alejo took to her feet: "God is the I am that I am." The leader agreed, adding: "He is not past, present, or future, but ongoing. He is omnipresent."

Redeemers clearly viewed the appreciation of God's greatness as a requisite attitude for a proper Christian lifestyle. Perhaps the Bible study was a space for practising the felt aptitude of spiritual awe. Long-time members may also have experienced an intimate, felt connection with God as we discussed Isaiah 55, and advanced readers did not limit their embodied interpretations of the Word to solitary reading.[15] Still, in addition to embodying awe and even God in this and other collective Bible studies, Redeemers were focused on the work of creating cosmological categories. In repeated statements about God's greatness, Redeemers uttered into being God's existence and, by implication, God's difference from humans. Redeemers' emphasis on the cultural and religious project of cosmology-building, together with the wide range of Biblical translations they used, may have contributed to a marked lack of disagreement in Grace Sanctuary about the significance of specific Bible verses.

The purpose of collective Bible study in the RCCG differs from the group Bible readings in Thomas Kirsch's (2008) ethnographic study of Pentecostal literacy in Zambia, in which he argues that people who were not intimate with the Holy Spirit required "spiritualized social intermediation" from church leaders. Kirsch notes that Bibles were sparse in the Zambian context, and he suggests that the scarcity of personal Bibles lent significance to the "spirit-led" performances of leaders (137; see also Kirsch 2002). In contrast, new RCCG members – all of whom owned their own Bibles – used guided reading to shape their basic conceptualisation of a God-centred world.

However, Redeemers were doing something even more complex in Bible studies than learning a Christian lifestyle and differentiating Christian persons and God.

In group Bible readings, beginning readers also established a second cosmological difference, this one between the person and scripture itself. During Bible studies, members developed generic explanations of Biblical text that implicitly distinguished the person's subjective feelings from the universal language of scripture. In the lesson above, for instance, we discussed God's omnipresence and the mandate to "become like" God. These interpretations applied to everyone in the room and, in the context of our conversation, had little to do with personal experiences and circumstances.

If beginning readers clearly distinguished between themselves, on the one hand, and God and the Bible, on the other hand, the third relationship constituting this cosmological formation – the relationship between God and text – was more ambiguous. Given Redeemers' insistence on God's greatness during collective Bible reading, did they think He loomed above scripture or, alternatively, that God infused the text?

Advanced Bible Reading

In Bible study classes and prayer sessions, evangelism trips and all-night vigils, I found that the answer to this question depended on a church member's adherence to the Christian lifestyle outlined in scripture. The RCCG's Bible was an entity that was filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit if – and only if – the reader's spirit was cleansed of sin. New RCCG members learned that when an unconverted person read the Bible, it would appear no different than any other sort of writing. However, when a purified Christian "close" to God read the Bible, the Holy Spirit jumped like a spark from the reader to the book, infusing the text with divine presence. As far as I could tell, the Word, *oro*, was like a finely crafted instrument that responded to the touch of a maestro.

Redeemers entered an advanced Bible reading stage when they began to feel, see, and hear God while reading scripture. Deji, a friend and a pastor-in-training, described the Word from the perspective of an advanced reader while we sat on the stoop of his tailoring shop. Deji spent his spare time studying a stack of Nigerian- and American-published Christian books piled next to his bed. Between his pastoral training and independent reading, he was more familiar with Christian terminology than most advanced readers: "When you are talking of the Word, there is something we call *logos* that is the written Word of God, and then there is something we call *rhema*." He paused and flipped through a Bible in his lap. "*Rhema* is the voice of God giving an understanding of His Word. If you have Christ, the Holy Spirit will be telling you a lot of things about that one verse."

Deji distinguished between two much-debated theological forms of Christian knowledge: *logos*, which Redeemers often referred to as "dead text," and *rhema*, which Redeemers sometimes called the Holy Spirit, the voice of God. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit, Redeemers insisted, scripture was lifeless. As Pastor Ajayi sometimes repeated in reference to what he called the misuse of Biblical text by non-Christians, "for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:6). Without inspiration from God channelled by the Holy Spirit into the born-again reader, claimed Redeemers, the Bible was meaningless.

Deji went on to explain the theological formation of *rhema*, which all started with the departure of Christ from Earth:

> When Christ was leaving, he said, "I'm going, o', but I'm going to send unto you a Comforter. He will reveal everything you are reading here. Now you are going to have the revelation of this Word through the Holy Spirit." When you have Christ, you will discover that even when God created the earth, everything was spoken into existence by the Holy Spirit. When you read it, for instance, you will see, "God said let there be light," and there was light. And when Jesus had performed what He wants to do here, He now said He was going to give us that Spirit again.... You know that Muslims are now reading this Bible. Even some herbalists. But the real revelation that God has in mind for initiating this Word will never be given to them. If you don't have the Spirit of Christ in you, you will just be reading the Bible as if you are reading a novel. In the moment you are reading the Bible, you can read only one verse and the Holy Spirit will be telling you a lot of things about that one verse.

Deji suggested that whereas the Holy Spirit was originally immanent in God's creative act of speech – "when God created the earth, everything was spoken into existence by the Holy Spirit" – the Spirit of God was now absent from the written form of the Bible when read by unbelievers.

For advanced readers like Deji, the contemporary Bible was like straw, drained of the divine life that had once given it freshness and vitality. But Deji did not see the Holy Spirit as altogether absent from Biblical text. Upon Jesus's departure, he explained, the Son of God relocated the Holy Spirit from Biblical text to the born-again person. Like other Christians, Redeemers balanced their distance from Jesus with a corresponding proximity, and they found this proximity in their direct experiences of the Holy Spirit (Engelke 2007:16). In turn, Deji implied, the born-again person brought the Holy Spirit

with her to an encounter with Biblical text: "In the moment you are reading the Bible … the Holy Spirit will be telling a lot of things about that one verse." In other words, in the act of reading the Bible, the born-again person restored the Holy Spirit to Biblical text, resurrecting what Deji called the "living Word."

Over time, advanced readers complicated a view of scripture as a static set of signifiers that held the same significance for everyone. Advanced readers continued reading practices that distinguish God and the Bible from the self, creating the categories constituting their Christian cosmology. However, these distinction-making practices unfolded alongside the work of a feeling God and the Bible. In the convergence of three elements – text (*logos*), the voice of the Holy Spirit (*rhema*), and the embodied reader – Redeemers found the Word: a sensual, interpretive event.

The work – *ise* – of becoming a Bible reader in the Nigerian RCCG exemplifies Tanya Luhrmann's (2004: 2012) learning-centred approach to Christian subjectivity. Similar to the American evangelical Christians studied by Luhrmann, Redeemers who experienced the Word mastered "techniques of identifying the presence of God through the body's responses" and used spoken categories to organise these sensations "into a new understanding of their bodies and the world" (Luhrmann 2004: 522). Luhrmann brings a psychological slant to her research through an emphasis on cognitive and syntactical learning, and I refocus her lens on the production of embodied social discourse. Luhrmann's approach illuminates Redeemers' gradual accumulation of assumptions, spoken categories and habits surrounding scripture – a slowly built cultural assemblage that constituted the sensational form of the Word.

Redeemers recognised that Biblical uses and significance shifted as "infants in Christ" matured, but they also acknowledged the variation of scriptural interpretations across long-time church members. When advanced readers vivified the Word's significance in lived experience, they highlighted how many interpretations – and how many destinies – one congregation could hold.

Finding the Future

Advanced readers in the RCCG sometimes experienced the Word during collective church events like Sunday services or Bible studies. Just as often, they "got in touch" with God through solitary Bible reading or "meditation." While beginning readers tried to make a habit of reading the Bible once a day, advanced readers bragged about filling their spare moments with prayer and Bible reading. I cannot ascertain the accuracy of Redeemers' claims of frequent Bible reading, but I often noticed long-time church members looking at Bibles when I happened upon them during the day. During a three-month homestay with a devout Redeemer, moreover, I became used to reading the Bible with my host while we waited for rice to boil or for the electricity to return.

I also took part in meditation when my friend Kemi invited me to study the Bible with her over the course of several weeks. Kemi had converted to Christianity from Islam four years prior and had passed through several RCCG training programs on discipleship and religious leadership. She now managed the bookshop at the RCCG provincial headquarters in Ilé-Ifè, so she spent her days surrounded by Christian readers, films, DVDs, and Bibles of various translations. An analysis of Kemi's meditation complements my interpretation of Redeemers' gradual mastery of the Word with an interpretation of the Word itself: a performance of scriptural significance that varied according to the reader's experiences and shaped his or her relationship to time. Scholars have examined both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal evangelical groups that deploy the "common practice of radical recontexualization of scripture" (Bialecki 2006: 145; Malley 2004), but Spirit-centred Pentecostal Redeemers like Kemi brought a distinctively embodied lens to the personalisation of the Biblical story.

Before my series of meditations with Kemi, I saw Redeemers' Word as similar to the Zambian Pentecostal concept of reading scripture, which Thomas Kirsch (2008:127) describes as a "triad of texts, readers, and Spirit." Both Pentecostal groups viewed the work of the Holy Spirit as instrumental to the reader's selection and interpretation of Biblical passages. After my meditation sessions with Kemi, I modified my notion of the Word by adding a temporal dimension. Advanced Bible readers carried out a process of historiopraxy; they performed the text–reader–Spirit triad as a cosmological entity that extended into a lived present and constantly moved toward the future.

My understanding of the Word shifted most radically over the course of a single afternoon with Kemi. She placed her Bible on its spine and let it fall open, asked the Holy Spirit to guide our reading, and began to read aloud: "These things command and teach. Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in Word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:11–12). She stopped. "See? We are youth! 'Let no man despise thy youth.' We are young, but we cannot stop spreading the Word of God. Praise the Lord," she added, and I supplied the expected response: "Hallelujah." Kemi used the term "youth" to refer to the relatively few years we

had lived – both Kemi and I were in our mid-twenties – and to our shared status as unmarried adults. At 25, Kemi was, by Yoruba standards, running out of time to find a husband.

Kemi claimed to draw on the silent, interior voice of the Holy Spirit while she meditated on scripture. It is possible that Kemi invoked the voice of the Holy Spirit because she had a stake in exhibiting her Christian zeal. Since the RCCG headquarters only employed born-again Christians, Kemi's income depended on her reputation as a devout practitioner. Kemi may have reasoned that I held some administrative sway; I had recently interviewed several high-level RCCG pastors. However, Kemi's Bible-reading performance did not strike me as guided by financial self-interest. Her account of the Holy Spirit's voice was similar to other Redeemers' reports of encounters with the divine. Sometimes, Redeemers claimed they heard an audible voice from the Holy Spirit. More often, they described the voice as interiorised. Likewise, my research assistant, and a long-time RCCG member, told me that the Holy Spirit's voice was like "intuition." "It is something deep inside you," she explained: "It touches you and talks to you."

Back in the bookstore, Kemi continued to read the first book of Timothy aloud: "Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things" (1 Tim. 4:13–15). She interrupted herself: "The Holy Spirit is telling me another message. That one was for both of us, but this is just for you. The Holy Spirit is telling me that you were destined to preach the Word of God to others. That is what I am being directed to say. God intends for you to go out and preach the Word." Noticing my shocked expression, Kemi added, "When you get home, read this passage, and see what God tells you."

I did read the passage again that evening. Whatever aliveness Kemi found in the text eluded me. Far more palpable was my surprise at being included in Kemi's Bible-centred cosmology. Kemi's immediate social and environmental surroundings – and her lived past and hopes for the future – affected the Word's significance in the moment of meditation. Even as Kemi employed felt experience to perform the Spirit-filled Word, she drew on experience to contextualise this performative act. Kemi, like other Redeemers, used experience as a way to sense and to make sense of scripture.

Inasmuch as Redeemers performed relationships to scripture and God, they invoked the phenomenological bent of some anthropologists of religious experience who explore "modalities of human existence within ever-shifting horizons of temporality" (Desjarlais 1992; Desjarlais and Throop 2011:88; Jackson 2009; see also Csordas 1997). Redeemers articulated a hermeneutic phenomenology that, from their perspective, momentarily broke down the boundaries between self and other, heaven and earth, Christian experience and Christian language. Still, Redeemers stressed that God was impossible to fully fathom. Again and again, I heard about how God was "omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent." Redeemers constantly referenced the ungraspable greatness of "the alpha and the omega" – God encompassed human experience, but humans came nowhere close to encompassing God.

And yet advanced readers like Kemi did incorporate the "living Word" into a horizon of lived experience, weaving Biblical text into a personalised, God-given story. This story unfolded toward the future. Redeemers claimed to uncover hidden messages about personal destiny in the Spirit-filled Word. Brother Abraham told a Sunday school class one morning: "Our God is a revealer of deep secrets. He shows our destiny to us by the Holy Spirit so that we will not be a failure." He held a Bible high above his head: "Our destiny is embedded in this Bible. If you want to discover your destiny, then search the Bible." The people around me nodded. In the act of reading, Redeemers established a Spirit-led present that would continue after that act was complete.

As discussed earlier, Redeemers shared with other evangelicals an emphasis on personal and historical rupture from a non-Christian past (Casanova 2001; Meyer 1998; Robbins 2007). Yet, their scripture-based historiopraxy was less focused on breaking with a sinful past than with creating lived continuity with a holy future. In his study of Swedish charismatics, Coleman notes that historiopraxy ruptures with the past "even as it needs to work with the material of other aspects of past action" (435). Meanwhile, Redeemers show the extent to which the "material" of present action shapes evangelical constructions of time. Redeemers invoked unadulterated feelings of God to purify the present and perceive a realistic – though not yet real – near future.

The uncertainty of this future is evident in a passage from *Open Heavens*, a Christian reader by RCCG General Overseer Enoch Adeboye (2011): "You can either earn or lose a destiny through your deeds." Redeemers' precarious notion of destiny held similarities to the indigenous Yoruba concept of *ori* – destiny, though they employed the terms *ipin* and *kadara* to denote the concept (cf. Ray 1993). The term *ori* not only signifies "head" literally and refers to a Yoruba god, but it also refers to personal destiny. Within "traditional" Yoruba spirituality, God assigns everyone a

future that materialises through negotiation and work (Barber 1981).[16] In both indigenous Yoruba and Redeemers' Pentecostal concepts of destiny, the person has some degree of control over an individualised future and can therefore fail to find it.

Redeemers themselves denied a direct connection between born-again Christianity and local history. They asserted that conversion to a global Christian community allowed them to shed the sinful shackles of a "pagan" past (cf. Meyer 1998). In fact, globally circulating Pentecostal media did shape Redeemers' discourse. Redeemers bought and borrowed Christian guides from Ghana, Britain, and the United States. But Redeemers' view of destiny also developed in local and regional contexts. Their notion of joint divine–human responsibility for destiny demonstrates some parallels with indigenous Yoruba spiritual practice and other sub-Saharan and diasporic groups (see Gifford 2004; Nieswand 2010; van Dijk 2010).

Redeemers' biblical interpretations were informed by, and also framed within, overlapping geographical scales. The RCCG members sometimes spoke about destiny on the global scale. They cited earthquakes in Latin America and tsunamis in Asia as signs of the apocalypse, the return of Christ. At other points, they situated destiny in national terms. As the 2011 presidential election approached, members of Grace Sanctuary gathered nightly to read the Bible and thank God for "taking Nigeria's future into [His] hands." Redeemers' interpretations of large-scale events were akin to those of Baptists in the Southern United States, who understand lived events in terms of an overarching Biblical narrative that begins with Genesis and ends with the apocalypse (Harding 2000).

More often, though, Redeemers divined destinies that involved smaller-scale and more intimate concerns like relationships, grades in school, and the spiritual well-being of non-Christian friends. This is not to say that Redeemers did not experience Nigerian politics or even global events in deep and sometimes intimate ways. Rather, the point is that Redeemers placed as much emphasis on readers' mundane near futures as humankind's ultimate future and even saw personal histories as being constitutive of the Bible's collective history. For this reason, narratives of individualised and collective Bible-based destinies did not come into tension in the eyes of Redeemers. *Open Heavens* (Adeboye 2011) likened the expansiveness of pre-ordained destiny to a play. It read: "Unlike human playwrights, His scripts are so all-embracing that one way or another, every human being finds himself or herself fitting into one of the roles or characters." When each Christian plays his or her assigned "role," the passage suggested, they together form a collective future: "The greatest destiny anyone can have is to fit like a jigsaw puzzle into the Maker's plan for his or her life." Through the Word, Redeemers lent significance to the Bible and to the "script" of everyday life.

Concluding Remarks

Against a background of national precarity – Christian–Muslim riots in northern Nigeria; oil-related violence in southern Nigeria, and uncertain flows of electricity, goods, and money throughout the country (Guyer 2004) – Redeemers' Bible reading took on particular resolve. As the electricity flickered off one morning, Kemi sighed in frustration and patted the Bible she held in her lap: "You just read every day! I ask God to give me the grace to let the Holy Spirit plan my days." Members of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in southwest Nigeria learned to "be the Word": to enliven scripture through the bodily act of reading and, in turn, to frame "the Maker's plan" in terms of everyday experience. Nigerian Pentecostal Redeemers performed this God-given plan day after day, week after week, through repeated readings of the Bible.

Time figures into my examination of Redeemers' sensual hermeneutics as a perceptual experience and an objective measure of practice. As a perceptual experience, time was entangled with the physical; Redeemers' embodied readings of destiny strained toward the future. Redeemers' future-oriented historiopraxy mirrors that of other evangelicals and Pentecostals who strive to rupture connections to a local past. Redeemers share striking resonances with Coleman's (2011:443; cf. Guyer 2007; Scherz 2013) Swedish charismatic interlocutors, who make history by "taking time by the scruff of its temporal neck" and leading it forward. However, while the Swedish Christians in Coleman's research guide time toward the apocalypse, Redeemers were equally concerned with the foreseeable future.

Moreover, if Coleman's notion of historiopraxy emphasises Christians' attempts to divide the past and the present, Redeemers' experience-centred hermeneutics aimed to connect the present with the future (see also Meyer 1998; Robbins 2007). The embodiment of a desirable, Christian present was just as relevant for Redeemers' historiopraxy as an undesirable, non-Christian past. Further research might explore how bodily sensation figures into Christian constructions of time across varied historical and cultural contexts, particularly with respect to debates about continuity and rupture (Engelke 2004; Robbins 2007). More specifically, studies might examine the relationship between sensation, time, and the use of

Bibles, building on a growing comparative literature on the socially situated ideas and practices surrounding scripture (Bielo 2006; Engelke 2009; Harding 2000).

My stage-based approach could be of use in these studies of Christian sensation and in studies of ineffable religious experience more broadly. Anthropologists who research religious experience have largely given up "attempt[s] to name-call into existence a phenomenon that refuses to be verbalized" (van de Port 2005). They turn their attention instead to the way "historically distinctive disciplines and forces" shape religious life (Asad 1993). In this vein, I borrow Tanya Luhrmann's (2004) process-oriented method to unpack the sequential relationships between, and the sociocultural effects of, the shifting practices and concepts that helped Redeemers learn the sensual Word. Redeemers created cosmological categories and a sense of religious subjectivity by reading scripture first as a set of guidelines for holiness and, later, as a felt manifestation of God-given destiny. A stage-based analysis illuminates the complexity and cultural reach of Redeemers' hermeneutic learning – the process of learning to read scripture helped produce Redeemers' relationships to the Christian cosmos and Christian self, which in turn authorised experiences of the "living Word."

My stage-based approach also opens the way for showing the ethnographer's shifting understandings of cultural practice. I have noted the dynamism of the Pentecostal Bible for me, the ethnographer, as well as for my interlocutors, to help my readers evaluate my conclusions for themselves. Together with Redeemers' reading practices, my embodied interpretations co-construct what I represent as the Word. My fieldwork – and, therefore, my temporal frame – was limited to one year; a longer period might have revealed an even more complex and socioculturally generative process of learning to read the Bible. With more time in the field, I might even have joined my interlocutors in experiencing, or at least seeking, God through scripture. Even if I do not "spread the Word," as Kemi predicted, I trace the edges of the Word's pulsing aliveness for Redeemers: its dynamic significance across and within the lives of church members, its hard-earned materialisation in the act of reading, and its charged opening onto the not quite known.

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to Paulla Ebron, James Ferguson, Miyako Inoue, and Shahzad Bashir for their support throughout the research process. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their commentary on this article. Finally, I am indebted to members and pastors of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria, for their kindness and generosity during my fieldwork.

Notes

1 I capitalise "Word" to help readers distinguish the Nigerian Pentecostal concept from other denotations of "word." In their own writing, Redeemers sometimes capitalised "Word" and sometimes did not.

2 Social scientists often use the term "charismatic" interchangeably with "Pentecostal" to denote born-again Christian churches claiming that "God, acting through the Holy Spirit … play[s] a direct, active role in everyday life" (Pew Research Centre 2006). For the sake of simplicity, I use the term "Pentecostal" to refer to non-mainline churches in which Nigerian congregants claimed to experience the Holy Spirit, even if these congregants identified more closely with the labels "holiness," "Spirit-filled," "charismatic," or, simply, like many Redeemers, "Christian."

3 I use the term "mainline" to describe traditional Protestant denominations. In Ilé-Ifè, Baptist and Methodist churches predominated among the mainline churches.

4 The similarity between Pentecostal and evangelical hermeneutics is unsurprising given the historical continuity of these religious forms. Pentecostalism emerged as a distinctive evangelical strand in the early 20th century. I follow Joel Robbins (2004) in approaching evangelical Christianity as a religious form distinguished by an emphasis on conversion – the conscious choice to become "born again" and to convince others to become "born again" – and by a view of the Bible "as a text possessed of the highest religious authority" (120).

5 I use pseudonyms for Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) churches and members throughout this article to protect the anonymity of my informants.

6 The Church Missionary Society (CMS) intervened in local political structures, established Anglican churches and mission schools, and taught converts to read, sometimes in English and sometimes in a newly developed Yoruba language (Ajayi 1965).

7 In their use of prayer to access the divine, Aladura churches were similar to certain indigenous Christian churches in west central, eastern, and southern Africa (Hoehler-Fatton 1996; MacKay 1987; Sundkler 2004).

8 Exceptions included Yoruba services on Wednesday mornings and late Sunday mornings.

9 I should note that my most direct neighbours did in fact see my primary work as research. I lived during much of my fieldwork in a residential section of Ilé-Ifè's Obafemi Awolowo University campus, and I became acquainted with university professors and students who attached a great deal of value to academic pursuits. The perceived nature of my "work" seemed to change when I stepped outside the campus gates. There, and especially among church members, I was usually situated as a Christian "seeker" with an academic side-project. My intensive participation in Grace Sanctuary's activities reinforced

this perception, as did a one-month homestay with a Grace Sanctuary church member, during which time I took part in midnight prayer and early morning worship sessions.

10 Everyone I met in Grace Sanctuary was affiliated with some sort of religious institution before they joined the RCCG.

11 For the sake of clarity, I draw on anthropologist Michael Lambek's (1993) adoption of Alfred Schutz's (1964) notion of the "ideal type" to distinguish groups of people with different levels of religious knowledge. While the religious practitioners Lambek studies on the French island of Mayotte are fixed in categories of expertise like "expert" and "man on the path" (1993:3), I show that any Redeemers could – with ample practice – move from a "beginning" level of hermeneutics to an "advanced" stage.

12 One might frame Redeemers' stances as part of a two-stage "textual ideology," a term coined by James Bielo (2006:160–161) to denote the socially negotiated and always embodied assumptions guiding the reading of particular texts.

13 Like the RCCG, other Ilé-Ifè-based Pentecostal churches such as Winner's Chapel and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries framed scripture as a guide to "righteous" Christians living in Bible studies, sermons, and other events. At the same time, members of those churches sometimes spoke about scripture as a revelatory window onto God's "plan" for their lives and claimed to experience divine messages about their futures while reading the Bible alone and in groups. Perhaps because the RCCG's future-oriented hermeneutics was somewhat similar to reading approaches in other local churches, I did not find that the institution used its scriptural approach to compete with other churches for members. In this regard, the RCCG's use of its Bible-centred attitude toward time differs from the Swedish charismatic church Coleman studies, which draws on a future-oriented stance to distinguish itself from other churches (Coleman 2011).

14 Though beyond the scope of this article, further research might explore how Redeemers' readings of personal destiny shaped their spoken exchanges with others in testimonies, sermons, Bible studies, and informal conversations. Susan Harding (2000:34) shows how American Fundamentalist Christians "acquire a specific religious language or dialect" that compels listeners to situate themselves as born-again Christians, and Redeemers may have carried out a comparable discursive process when narrating past encounters with the Word. In the same way, Kemi implicated me in her interpretation of the Bible passage – that is, Redeemers sometimes framed individuals and groups in terms of God's "plan," thereby inviting them to take part in that plan.

15 For instance, my research assistant, a female, college-aged RCCG member, described how God used Psalm chapter 11, verse 3, one Sunday service to tell her to change majors from biology to sociology.

16 As Boris Nieswand (2010:40) notes, scholars of Yoruba culture debate the extent to which *ori* is predetermined, but they agree people "are capable of influencing human destiny either for good or for bad" (Balogun 2007:125).

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