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Commons Attribution-  
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International License.**The Transformation Of Ethnic Identity Among Turkey's Circassians Under The Light Of Nationalism Theories****Milliyetçilik Kuramları Işığında Türkiye Çerkezlerinde Etnik Kimliğin Dönüşümü**Özgür SARI<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup>Prof.Dr., Sinop University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Sociology, Sinop, Turkey**ABSTRACT**

Mainly in the Exile in 1864, most of the Circassians, who came to Turkey geography in 19th century, are today forming one of the many ethnic groups considered to be the wealth of the society in Turkey. With the intergenerational change, Circassians, who have been integrated into society, have also changed their point of view towards their ethnic identity. As generations change, the processes of constructing ethnic identity have transformed and they construct their ethnic identities with different parameters. This study, which analyzes these parameters in the light of the most basic theories of nationalism, primordialism, circumstantialism and constructivism, was carried out in the provinces of Kayseri, Konya, Ankara, Düzce and Sakarya. In 2 villages selected from these five provinces; total of 10 villages, were asked to 100 Circassians who were selected with the snowball method. The age ranges of the people in our sample, of which 54 are men and 46 are women, vary between 18 and 64. The information obtained as a result of the study conducted with 20 open-ended qualitative questions was analyzed in the light of nationalism theories. As a result, it is understood that while the older generation constructs their ethnic identities on the theory of primordialism, the young people mostly define their ethnic identities according to the constructivism and circumstantialism theories. Another variable was gender. It has been revealed that women are more primordialist in terms of practicing traditions and keeping the language alive than men. On the other hand, men's ability to use the language, their desire to develop the language and transfer it to their children is less. Men are more flexible than women when it comes to applying traditions. In this case, it is understood that women are positioned closer to primordialism theory than men, while men are more positioned according to circumstantialism theory

**Key Words:** Circassians, Ethnicity, Primordialism, Circumstantialism, Constructivism**ÖZET**

1864 Sürgünü başta olmak üzere, ağırlıklı olarak 19. Yüzyılda Türkiye coğrafyasına gelen Çerkezler, bugün Türkiye toplumunun zenginliği sayılan pek çok etnik gruptan bir tanesi olmuştur. Kuşaklar arası değişim ile birlikte topluma entegre olmuş olan Çerkezlerde etnik kimliklerine bakış açıları da değişmiştir. Kuşaklar değiştikçe, etnik kimliği inşa etme süreçleri dönüşüme uğramış ve farklı parametrelerle etnik kimliklerini kurgulamaktadırlar. Bu parametreleri, en temel milliyetçilik kuramlarından ilkselcilik, durumsalcılık ve inşaıcılık kuramları ışığında analiz eden bu çalışma, Kayseri, Konya, Ankara, Düzce ve Sakarya illerinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu beş ilden seçilen 2 şer köyde; toplam 10 köy, kartopu yöntemi ile seçilmiş olan 100 Çerkeze sorular sorulmuştur. 54'ü erkek, 46'sı kadın olan örneklemimizdeki kişilerin yaş aralıkları ise 18 ile 82 arasında değişmektedir. Açık uçlu 20 nitel soru ile yapılan çalışmanın neticesinde elde edilen bilgiler milliyetçilik kuramları ışığında analiz edilmiştir. Çıkan sonuçta yaşlı kuşağın etnik kimliklerini ilkselcilik kuramına kurgularken, gençlerin daha çok inşaıcılık ve durumsalcılık kuramlarına göre etnik kimliklerini tanımladıkları anlaşılmıştır. Bir diğer değişken de cinsiyet olmuştur. Kadınların erkeklere göre gelenekleri uygulama ve dili yaşatma konusunda daha ilkselci olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Buna karşın erkeklerin dili kullanma yetileri, dili geliştirme ve çocuklarına aktarma istekleri daha az çıkmıştır. Gelenekleri uygulama konusunda da kadınlara göre erkekler daha esneklerdir. Bu durumda da kadınların ilkselcilik kuramına erkeklere göre daha yakın konumlandıkları, erkeklerin ise daha çok durumsalcılık kuramına göre konumlandıkları anlaşılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çerkezler, Etnisite, İlkselcilik, Durumsalcılık, İnşaıcılık.**1. INTRODUCTION**

It is known that the origin of the Circassians, who spread across the Caucasus between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, are from the Caucasian people. Circassians, who are between Turkish and Russian nations and affected by these two great nations, are a Muslim people. Circassians, who migrated to the Ottoman Empire in the face of the attacks and pressure of the Russians, are now dispersed to many parts of Anatolia. Circassians, who lived in fusion with other ethnic groups in the Caucasus before the great exile in 1864, gave great wars and struggles after the exile. After the occupation of the United Caucasus Republic by the Soviet armies in 1920, it was divided into small autonomous republics. Within the scope of the policy of divide and manage, they live under the Russian Federation in the form of several large and small autonomous republics. But the Circassian people more than the population of this autonomous republic, the USA, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Georgia, Azerbaijan, live in different countries such as Dagestan. Today, there is an important Circassian diaspora in the world (Ayan, 2010: 35).

Circassians, who lived their second great exile during the Second World War, were accused of treason. He was exiled with other peoples, especially Tatars, on the grounds that they collaborated with the occupying Germans.

During this exile during the Stalin period, a significant part of the population died of hunger, cold and disease on the way (Ayan, 2010: 21).

The Caucasus, where different ethnic communities live, is a region located at the crossroads of important trade routes and has a strategic geographical location. For this reason, it has been the most important competition area of the Ottoman, Russian and Iranian empires. This region, located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, connecting Europe and Asia, has important energy resources and energy transition lines today. For this reason, the importance of the Caucasus continues today (Aslan, 2006: 2).

Russian attacks on the region started from the sixteenth century and intensified in the nineteenth century. Although the first migrations started in the eighteenth century, Circassian immigration to the lands of the Ottoman Empire increased in the nineteenth century (Şahin, 2016: 2787-2788).

Among the Caucasian peoples, the Circassians were exposed to relatively more exile and oppression, and Circassians played an active role in the conversion of other Caucasian peoples to Islam. It had an important influence on Chechens, Lezgins and Georgians (Akyüz, 2008: 1-2).

The years 1863-1864 had a devastating effect for Circassians. Russian armies, which had an advantage in the war in 1863, settled in the Caucasus. The Russian Empire, which wanted to dominate the Circassians, stated that they would allow the Circassians to live in the region in return for taxes and military service. Circassians, who did not accept this agreement, started to migrate to Ottoman lands (Yılmaz, 2014: 2). The war ended on May 21, 1864 with the settlement of the Russian armies in the Ubykh Region. While this date shows that the Russian domination in the Caucasus is permanent, it is known as the exile date for Circassians (Aslan, 2006: 25). There three main important theories in nationalism: Primordialism, circumstantialism, constructionism (Özkırıklı, 1999: 76-77).

## 2. CIRCASSIAN IDENTITY IN TURKEY

According to Russian sources, the Circassian population in the homeland declined to 200 thousand after the great exile and one fourth of the Circassians in exile lost their lives due to bad conditions (Kaya, 2007: 6).

Circassians, who used the Eastern Black Sea line as the way of exile, entered the Ottoman lands through Trabzon and spread to Anatolia. They are predominantly distributed in Central and Western Anatolia, as well as in Syria and Jordan over Hatay. As a settlement policy, it is understood that Circassians were settled in these lands in order to Islamize the places where there is a Christian population and to meet the labor demand in the areas where there are large agricultural lands (Şahin, 2016: 2795-2798).

As a result of years of Turks and Circassians integration, Circassians in Turkey are being assumed as Turks. However, there is no ethnic similarity other than being Muslim (Yılmaz, 2015: 170). Until recently, Circassians were commemorated around the beautiful concubines in the Ottoman palace or the pro-caliphate revolts during the War of Independence. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and after, the acceleration of the independence movements in the Caucasus caused the Circassian identity to rise again along with other Caucasian identities. The rediscovery and construction of the Circassian identity as ethnic identity has been shaped around the support of the independence movements in the Caucasus (Kaya, 2007: 3).

As a result of Soviet trade and the opening of the passageway with the disintegration of the USSR, people and products transition between the Caucasus and Turkey have also increased. This situation accelerated cultural interaction. Circassians in Turkey and the Caucasus organized tours more often made tourist trips and visits to the Caucasus and the homeland. As a result of the reawakening of ethnic identity, the longing for the homeland gradually increased. With the revival of ethnic identity, interest in culture and language increased. Foreign language courses in Caucasian languages have also started to become widespread (Kaya, 2007: 8).

With the awakening of ethnic identity, there was an increase in civil organization. Founded in Ankara in 1993, the Caucasian Association today has more than 40 branches across the country. Nart Journal, which publishes on Circassian culture, is published by this association (Kaya, 2007: 13).

The Circassian language is divided into different dialects among the peoples living in scattered settlements in the Caucasus, a mountainous geography. It is quite natural for peoples to form their own dialects in settlements where communication with each other is difficult. However, Circassians, who were scattered to different countries with the exile, used Arabic, Latin and Cyrillic alphabets in different periods and geographies throughout history. The use of different alphabets made it difficult to standardize the Circassian language. For this reason, oral tradition and Nart Mythology are very influential in Circassian language. The immaturity of the written language in the transmission of the language between generations is the most important danger to the life of the Circassian

language. Among the younger generations, the Circassian language has become much less common (Papşu, 2006: 6).

### 3. THEORIES OF NATIONALISM IN SEARCH OF ETHNICITY

Studies that examine nationalism systematically and place it in a certain theoretical framework are not common before the twentieth century. However, after the Second World War, the collapse of the colonial empires and the acceleration of nationalist movements in the non-Western world gained momentum in academic studies aimed at understanding nationalism (Özkırımlı, 1999: 26).

- ✓ Primordialism is a theory of nationalism theorized by Clifford Geertz and Edward Shils. This theory looks at the concept of nationalism around primitive ties. Inborn characteristics such as racial characteristics and blood ties determine nationality. The nation is like a large family. Family ties and ancestry are very important. With families coming together and forming kinship ties, large tribes and nations come together with tribes carrying the same blood and gene. It is possible to belong to a nation with inborn features. Pirmordialists add a natüralist and biological meaning to the concept of nation, taht means nations occurs and develops naturally with biological ties like gene and blood. (Keser, 2006: 53-54, and Smith, 2002: 34-35).
- ✓ Circumstantialists aim to approach the concept of nation in a rational way. As a result of the rational choices of individuals, as a result of the current conditions, nations have been formed. The most important are social structures, cultural forms and economic unity. The most important actors in the formation of nations are also elites. Especially as a result of social and cultural structures built by royal families and nobles, a nation is a phenomenon that is created (Keser, 2006: 56-59).
- ✓ Constructivism claims that nationalism and ethnic identity is a phenomenon built by the active participation of individuals and social structures. It does not come about spontaneously as a result of coincidence. Ethnicity is rebuilt over and over again by adding new meanings to socio-cultural elements from the past. Therefore, ethnic and national identities are dynamic phenomena (Keser, 2006: 63-64). According to constructionism, nation and ethnic identities are a social constructions developed by human agents through political and bureaucratic institutionalization, and social-cultural formations. Individuals own their ethnic and national identities through normative and legitimate construction (Ting, 2008: 453 ve Yeros, 1999: 101).

### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study, which analyzes these parameters in the light of the most basic theories of nationalism, pirmordialism, circumstantialism and constructivism, was carried out in the provinces of Kayseri, Konya, Ankara, Düzce and Sakarya. In 2 villages selected from these five provinces; total of 10 villages, were asked to 100 Circassians who were selected with the snowball method. The age ranges of the people in our sample, of which 54 are men and 46 are women, vary between 18 and 82. The information obtained as a result of the study conducted with 20 open-ended qualitative questions was analyzed in the light of nationalism theories. The interviews start with demographic questions to know the identity of the sample and continue with the questions about the practicing the traditions and language coming from their own Circausian ethnic identity.

Table 1. Thematic distribution of the interview questions.

Thema	1) Circassian Language	2) Xabze	3) Homeland Longing
Questions	Using the language in Daily life; teaching the mother language to the children, attempt to learn the the mother language and wishing to develop the mother language skills	practicing wedding-marriage ceremonies; finding partner for marriage inner ethnic or inter ethnic identity; family relations (between partners; and between parents and children)	planning to visit homeland; spending holidays in homeland, planning to migrate back homeland

### 5. FINDINGS

#### 5.1. Findings About The Native Language

When the questions were grouped according to the thematic groups of the study; there are three groups defining Circasian identity: Xabze (a set of unwritten social rules that ensure that the violator is subject to an effective sanction in case of violation), the language, and the homeland longing. The answers differed according to gender and age. The elders and women are tend to more nationalist or connected to their ethnic identity compared to youngsters and men.

The questions about language are about using the mother language in Daily life; teaching the mother language to the children, attempt to learn the the mother language and wishing to develop the mother language skills. The questions related to Xabze are about practicing wedding-marriage ceremonies; finding partner for marriage inner

ethnic or inter ethnic identity; family relations (between partners; and between parents and children). The last thema is the homeland longing and the questions are about the planning to visit homeland; spending holidays in homeland, planning to migrate back homeland. 41 of 46 women declared that they use the Circasian language and partly (some words) in their life compared to only 17 of 54 men. In addition; 37 women stated that they try to teach the mother language to their children; or if they marry and have children; they plan to teach the language. On the other hand; only 3 of men tried to teach the language to their children; and 7 men plan to teach if they have children. 21 women want to learn or develop their Circasian language skills; and they want to go to language course if available. Among the men only 9 men want to learn or develop.

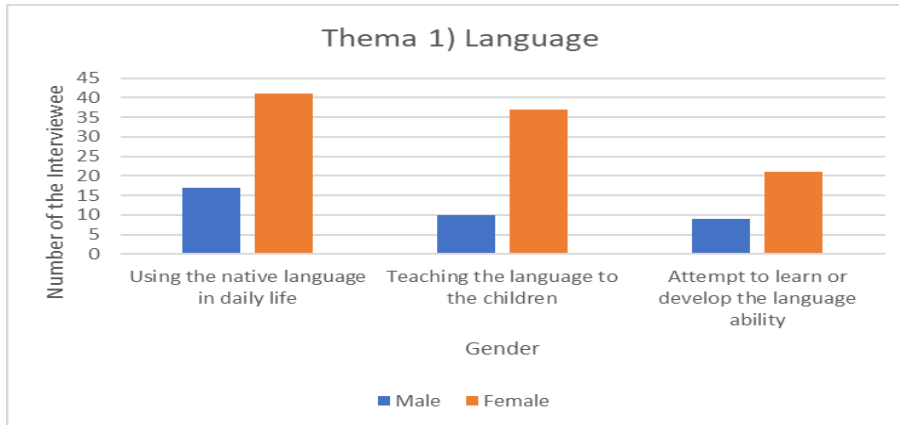


Figure 1. Gender based frequencies in Thema 1 - Language

Other than gender; age is another indicator differing the attitudes towards language using and developing. The age range of the people in the sample ranges from 18 to 82. In this context, the arithmetic mean age of the interviewees was 50. People under 50 are younger generation; People over the age of 50 are in the older generation category. The number of the interviewees under the age 50 is 34; while there are 66 interviewees above the age 50. Totally 58 interviewees declared using the native language in their daily life. 54 of them are above the age 50. Only 4 of them are under the age 50. 47 interviewees stated their own tendency to teach the native language to their children. 33 of them were above the age 50; 14 of them are under 50. Briefly, older generation are more tended to use in daily life and teach children the native language compared the younger. However, the interviewees who want to go to language course to develop their on native language ability are 30 persons and 37 of them are under the age 50; 3 of them are above 50. It means that the interest their ethnic roots among the younger generation is still strong.

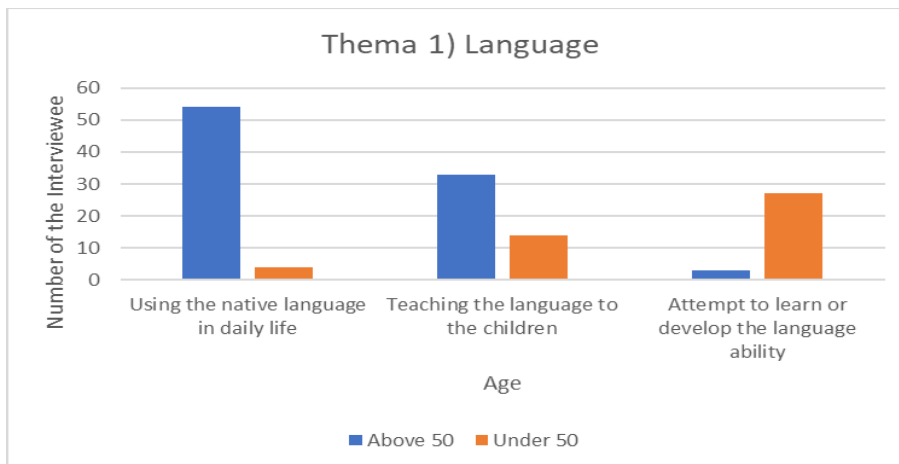


Figure 2. Age based frequencies in Thema 1- Language

## 5.2. Findings About Xabze

As mentioned above; Xabze is a specific term used for the cultural ruling system for Circassians. Under the title of Xabze; the questions about wedding, and marriage ceremonies, finding the spouse among the Circassians or out of Circassians; and family relations including between spouses and between parents and children.

Among the 100 interviewees; 85 are married and all the married interviewees stated that their weddings happened according to the Circassian traditions. From finding and demanding the wife from the family to the marriage ceremony, in each step of the marriage process Circassian traditions applied. The most unique one is the Circassian dances and music in weddings. In addition; 15 single interviewee declared that they are planning to their weddings

within the context of Circassian traditions. The highest attempt is shown in weddings; since all participants are agree on Circassian style weddings. It can be claimed that Circassian weddings are the most important cultural value of the Circassian identity.

When we look at the findings according to gender criteria; 40 of 54 male interviewees accept the marriage non-Circassian person; on the other hand; only 6 of 46 female interviewees are not against the marriage person out of ethnicity. Mostly women are against and they mention about the cultural differences and communication problems including the child caring issue. For the family relations; 22 male participants; 37 female participants state that they care about the Circassian traditions.

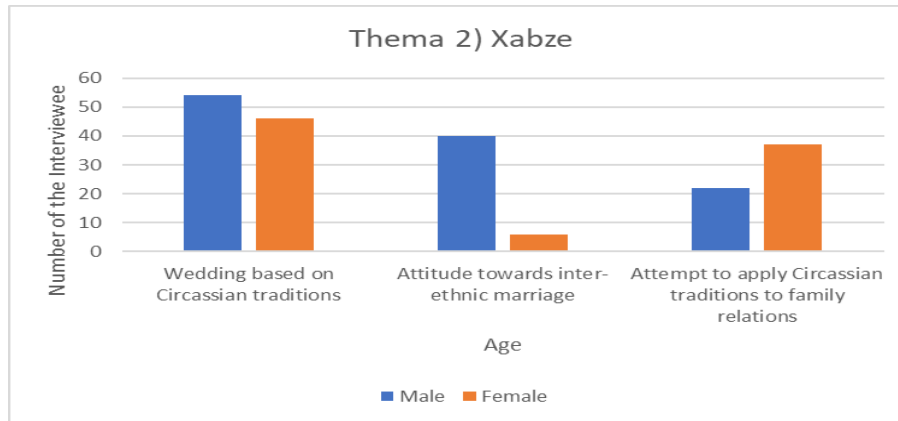


Figure 2. Gender based frequencies in Thema 2- Xabze

According to the age factor; 12 of the 66 participants aged over 50 declared that they would accept marriage with a couple from a different ethnic group. On the other hand, all of the young participants (totally 34) accept marriage with someone from a different ethnic group. Totally 59 participants try to apply their own ethnic values and tradition within the family relations including inter spouse and parent-children relations. Among them 50 participants are above 50 age; while only 9 participants are under the age 50.

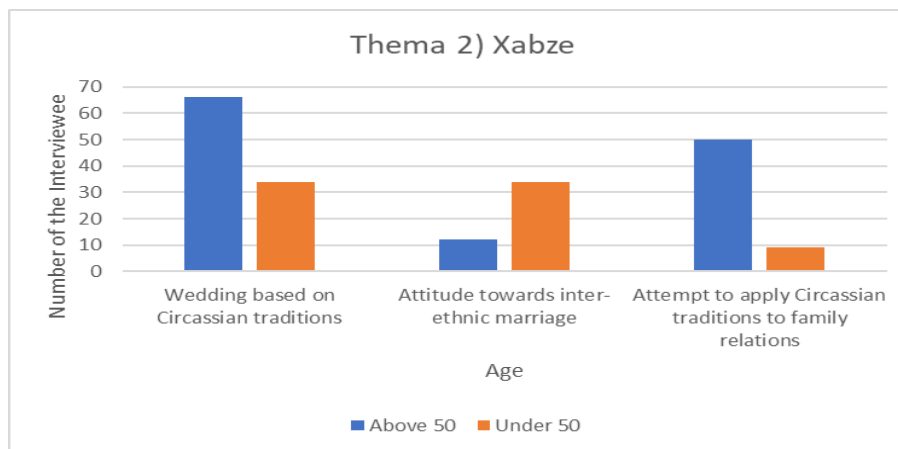


Figure 3. Age based frequencies in Thema 2- Xabze

### 5.3. Findings About Homeland Longing

The lowest tendency in the research was seen in the sense of belonging to the homeland. Since the migration of Circassians to today's Turkey took place more than a hundred years ago; sense of belonging to the homeland is diminished. After the emigration, the homeland of the Circassians was under the domination of the Soviet Union; under the iron curtain conditions of that period; made it impossible for immigrant Circassians to visit their homeland. This situation reduced the Circassians' belonging to their homeland. Only their commitment to cultural practices remained. In the study, only 11 of the participants stated that they made an effort to visit the homeland. Only 9 of these 11 people are over the age of 50. 2 people are young. Looking at the gender factor, 6 female and 5 male willing to go to the homeland are.



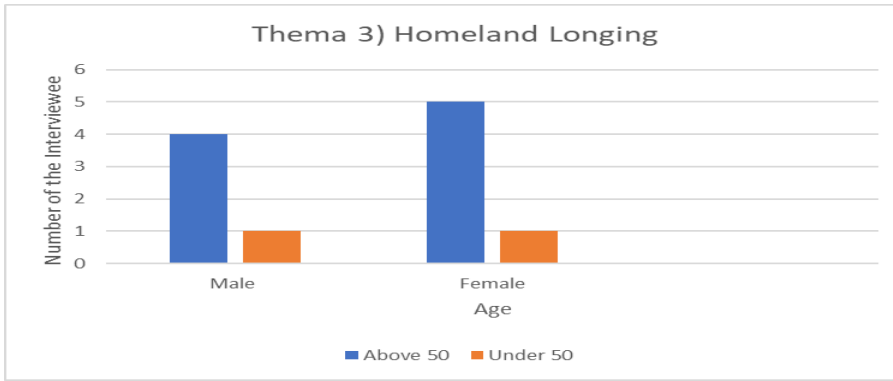


Figure 4. Age and Gender Based Frequences in Thema 3 – Homeland Longing

## 6. DISCUSSION

It is not possible to explain the process of constructing the identities of the Circassians with a single theory of nationalism. It is difficult to generalize for all Circassians as there are differences according to their demographic characteristics. It is seen that the elderly and women are more active in applying cultural elements, keeping them alive and transferring them to younger generations. The use and transmission of language and Xabze play a central role in the construction of Circassian identity. In this context, language constitutes the primordial characteristics of the longing for the homeland and the Xabze Circassian identity. On the other hand, it makes it difficult for young people and men to become primordialists as they attend formal education institutions, migrate to cities to study and find work, and are more associated with national culture and modernity. Therefore; While the elderly and women have a primordialist approach in the construction of the Circassian identity, we can say that young people and men have a more circumstantialist approach. Young people and men stretch and even do not practice the cultural elements of their ethnic identity under certain conditions. On the other hand, in today's globalization process, where national identities are weakening and local identities are on the rise, it is observed that the interest in their ethnic identities has increased among young people. There is increasing interest in activities such as going to courses to learn their language or taking touristic tours to see their homeland. In this context, it is seen that young people are trying to rebuild their Circassian identity with a constructivist perspective.

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