

Roman Catholics

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Roman Catholicism is the largest single Christian church in Africa. Africa is also the fastest- and most consistently growing part of the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century.

According to October 2015 statistics released by the Vatican, there are 206,224,000 Catholics in Africa, constituting 18.92% of the continent's population and served by 705 bishops, 41,826 priests, 427 permanent deacons, 8,427 religious brothers, 69,883 women religious, and 79 male and 917 women members of secular institutes. Seminarians in training for the priesthood, at both high-school and college level, number 80,744. In addition, 7,226 lay missionaries work on the continent, together with 409,994 lay catechists. Apart from parishes and mission stations, the Church runs 1,167 hospitals, 5,252 dispensaries, 201 leprosy centres, 630 homes for the elderly, chronically ill or disabled, 1,292 orphanages, 2,641 nursery schools, 1,774 marriage counselling centres, 264 schools and 2,339 other institutes, including a number of universities, the latter serving 132,990 students. About 25 million alumni of Catholic schools currently live in Africa.

These statistics, impressive by any standard, highlight the size and scope of Catholicism's African footprint. Recent popes have marvelled at this achievement, made largely in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Pope Benedict XVI has called the African Church Catholicism's 'lung'. But this achievement must be carefully read against a set of defining features that made this growth happen and against a number of challenges and tensions within the Church.

The two key defining features for contemporary African Catholicism were the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) and the decolonisation of Africa from the late 1950s, peaking in the 1960s and culminating in the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994. Both serve as contextualisation for the present and thus need a brief historical examination.

The Second Vatican Council, called by Pope John XXIII and completed under his successor Paul VI, radically renewed the inner and outer face of global Catholicism. In successive constitutions and decrees an inward-looking and essentially European institution was globalised, to a limited degree democratised, and set on an outward-looking and more open engagement with the world. The Council decentralised somewhat its hierarchical structure, paving the way for more collegial governance and generating national, regional and continental-wide conferences of bishops. It emphasised the role of laity in the Church, stressing collaborative ministry between them, the clergy and religious congregations in catechising, evangelising and social outreach. Similarly, clergy and laity alike were encouraged to promote justice in all its forms, renew its efforts in media, education and health care, and encourage family life. By downplaying Catholic religious exclusivism, it opened up ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and cooperation. The Council also promoted liturgy in the vernacular, embraced a renewal of liturgical music and endorsed inculturation, the (albeit careful) expression of Christian faith through local cultural practices.

Although the presence of local and foreign-born African bishops at Vatican II was relatively small, and had fairly little direct impact on the Council, the impact of Vatican II on the African Church was considerable. The empowerment of the laity revitalised Catholic organisations on the continent in every area of life, above all regenerating and deepening the

role of lay catechists in transmitting the faith. The most apparent reform, however, was the introduction of vernacular liturgy. It is perhaps a result of liturgical reform that African Catholicism, then and now, is characterised by vibrant and joyous liturgical celebration. Whether celebrated according to Roman or African rites (the latter with Vatican approval), the exuberance of worship can frequently be mistaken by an outsider for a charismatic or Pentecostal service. In this, African Catholic liturgy was and is often ahead of the rest of the Church: when asked in the late 1960s by a few Irish bishops how they might help him implement the Council in Africa, a missionary told them that they in fact already had the Mass in English and local languages. Would they like to borrow the East African texts to use in Ireland?

Similarly, the African Church swept through other inculturated changes. This ranged from use of drums during worship, through hymns, to, in the case of Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), a whole new Mass, the Missa Luba, which combined the established rite with imagery drawn from African tradition. A new generation of local theologians, encouraged by missionary professors in seminaries, developed new African theologies and philosophies, often in dialogue with their Protestant counterparts. By the early 1970s a number of African bishops' conferences had already called for the abolition of compulsory clerical celibacy for diocesan priests. This was seen as an impediment to vocations, culturally and pastorally a problem in a society where a man was not considered adult until he was himself a parent. Rome rejected these requests, and also set about limiting the autonomy of local bishops' conferences.

As elsewhere in the Catholic Church, the experimentation and enthusiasm for change was curtailed first by Paul VI and later by John Paul II through a series of encyclicals that reaffirmed clerical celibacy (1967) and the prohibition on artificial birth control (1968) and by reining in the authority of local ordinaries and bishops' conferences. During the 1970s a new generation of more traditionally-minded African bishops (most of them local clergy, many of them with postgraduate training in Rome) were appointed. As theologian Adrian Hastings observed, 'by the mid 1970s a logic of reform had given way to a logic of conservatism'. Although this did not (as elsewhere) create a crisis for the Church and a decline in membership, many of the challenges and ambiguities in African Catholicism did not abate; if anything they would evolve in new directions.

Decolonisation, the end of European rule in Africa, is the second historical force important for understanding contemporary African Catholicism. The Church played an ambivalent role in colonial times: as a European institution it often relied heavily on its ties to colonial authorities, sometimes (as in Portuguese-ruled Africa) enjoying special privileges in return for its services to the state, in short becoming an agent of colonialism. At one extreme it has been claimed (by Catholic and secular scholars alike) that the Church in Rwanda and Burundi actively supported 'divide and rule' colonial policies emphasising differences between Hutus and Tutsis that would lead to cycles of massacre and genocide in the postcolonial era.

Contrarily, the Church through schools and hospitals often met the needs of Africans not (or inadequately) provided for by the colonial state, earning grassroots sympathy for its work. Many African nationalists were products of Church schools: some, like Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (currently under scrutiny for sainthood), were devout Catholics as well as

nationalists; others, like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, would develop more ambivalent views, while some would show hostility after independence.

In areas where wars of national liberation were fought (such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique and South Africa), the degree to which the Catholic Church identified with the struggle became a key factor in its post-liberation acceptance by the new states. The Church in Angola and Mozambique suffered for its support for colonial authority. Property was expropriated, foreign clergy sometimes expelled and much of its educational and health infrastructure nationalised. It has taken decades for the Church to regain lost ground in both countries. In contrast the Catholic Church in South Africa's principled opposition to apartheid since the 1950s, and its considerable (and under-researched) role in non-violent resistance, earned it respect and even some political leverage after 1994.

Another marked effect of decolonisation was the role of the new ruling elites. Though many were products of church schools, some embraced secularist ideas like *laïcité* in French Africa, by liberalism and Marxism, like Sékou Touré of Guinea (who was also a Muslim by background). Where the Catholic Church found ways to dialogue with these ideologies after independence, a more equitable relationship was struck. Whether the relationship was good or bad, however, a common pattern emerged that furthered tension with the Catholic Church: the emergence of corrupt, autocratic postcolonial governments in Africa. If the Church was too close to such leaders, it was tainted by their corruption and discredited after their fall; if it opposed such tyrants it was likely to be persecuted.

In many places too, African clergy – themselves de facto part of this new mission-educated African elite – became anti-colonial political leaders. In Congo Brazzaville, for example, Fulbert Youlou – a priest laicized by the Church for his nationalist politics – became the country's first president. (Decades later a Jesuit priest and bishop, Ernest Kombo, would be elected president of the High Council of the Republic, to guide the Congo back to democracy).

The two defining features noted above – Vatican II and decolonisation – are significant in that they have set two broad agendas for the Catholic Church in Africa. The first, the changes brought to Catholicism by the Council and the subsequent recentralisation of ecclesial authority under Rome, gives context to the internal difficulties (often overlooked in the light of the Church's rapid growth and apparent vibrancy on the continent) that the Church faces regarding its mission in Africa. These include tensions over theological inculturation, relations with other religious traditions (Protestantism, Islam, African Traditional Religion), attitudes to celibacy, gender, sexuality and the crisis of AIDS. Decolonisation and its legacy pose ongoing challenges for the public role of Catholicism in Africa: the extent to which the Church (as one of the few highly functioning institutions on the continent with a vast network of services) must provide an alternative to often dysfunctional and corrupt governments and become a voice for democracy and human rights. This is read against a background in which the Church itself might not always live up to the values it espouses for the state. The two features merge when one asks, to what degree is the Catholic Church in Africa itself a 'decolonised' institution?

As noted at the beginning of this essay, the Catholic Church in Africa is an enormous, growing and influential institution. There have been interesting developments: the migration of African priests and religious to the Churches of Europe and North America, and the development of local missionary religious congregations (notably in countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda where vocations are numerous) who serve both overseas and within other African countries. Many African bishops and clergy have served and serve in papal commissions and departments in the Vatican under the pontificates of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. A small but growing number of African cardinals belong to the College of Cardinals that elects the pope. Numerous posts at Roman universities, like the Gregorian, are filled by African scholars. Many African professors are tenured in North American and European university faculties of Catholic theology and philosophy. This is a reflection of the proliferation of seminaries (including the world's largest Catholic seminary, located in Nigeria), the concern for higher education, and the sheer numbers of Africa's Catholics.

The Church has built upon its foundations, developing the infrastructure created by generations of European missionaries who raised funds mainly in Europe to create schools, clinics, hospitals and even universities. The result is reflected in the impressive statistics and examples noted above. However, with all this infrastructure – some of it battered, misused or simply expropriated by anti-clerical postcolonial states – there has emerged a challenge: maintenance in a post-missionary era. As the Church contracts in Europe, the number of missionaries has declined rapidly, and with them the overseas funding of institutions they built. These resources, sometimes the only functional services in districts where civil government delivery is either poor or non-existent, are highly stretched. Local church donors, especially in poor regions, are few. Some rely on aid from secular international non-

governmental organisations (INGOs), though this sometimes generates tensions, such as when the INGOs' policies on issues like birth control or condom provision for HIV-AIDS prevention clash with Catholic sensibilities and African cultural practices. Many struggle to meet their service goals.

One of the desires of bishops' conferences around the continent has become the creation of a self-sustaining Church. This has been most notably achieved through greater lay participation at various levels. At base levels, Small Christian Communities have become expressions of the local church. Lay led, they are the 'out-stations' of urban and rural parishes that attend to day-to-day functioning of the community, catechesis and prayer services in the absence of the priest who might visit weekly, monthly and in some cases every few months to provide the sacraments of Initiation, Penance and Eucharist. Justice and peace groups at the parish and diocesan levels link into national conference structures, often serving as important voices for democracy and human rights. The higher one moves in church structures, however, the more clericalised the institutions become. Few, if any, examples of paid lay parish ministers or chaplains exist, as has become common in the Church in North America and Western Europe. Nor do many lay theologians teach in Catholic universities or seminaries, apart from a handful of women religious (who are technically laity under Canon Law).

The latter highlights the complex role of the priest in African Catholicism. It might be suggested that, contrary to the vision of theologians and bishops of the Vatican II era (missionary and local alike), the Catholic Church in Africa today is more clericalised than ever before. There are reasons for this. First, the post-Conciliar restoration of a more traditionalist understanding of priesthood and the appointment of Vatican-minded bishops in

the African hierarchy has re-emphasised a model of the priesthood that is uneasy with lay leadership in the Church as a whole and in Africa in particular. This segues into a hierarchical cultural understanding in many areas, including a patriarchal view of women. Second, as in many poorer countries in Europe's past, ordination has become a means of social mobility. Seminarians receive higher education (including for the most talented graduate studies overseas), stable employment (in a continent still marked by poverty and inequality) and an enhanced social status upon ordination often perceived as culturally akin to minor chieftainship. In parts of West Africa, upon ordination priests received substantial gifts from relatives and parishioners: money, vestments and increasingly a better-than-average motor car. Such incentives offset the disadvantages of ordination, such as not being allowed to marry and raise a family. Even here the power of clerical culture allows many who might reject the Roman discipline of celibacy to quietly ignore the restriction. So long as they are discreet and avoid anything that might be deemed criminal, there is little sign within many African dioceses (as indeed in some dioceses outside Africa too, it should be noted) that Rome's restrictions will be enforced. When such issues are occasionally raised, based upon comprehensive but almost entirely anecdotal evidence, they are dismissed as at best hearsay and at worst as an attempt to bring the Church into disrepute – or to advance the forbidden agenda of changing the rules of celibacy. Critics of the Church's refusal to face the problem – most of them from within, including theologians and priests – call this denial.

Catholic relations with other religious traditions have historically generated tensions. Relations with non-Catholic Christians are varied. On the ground, among lay Catholic intellectuals and some theologians, there has been a growing uneasiness about the limitedness of ecumenism, particularly in the postcolonial era. For many believers across denominations the Reformation was a European dispute that had nothing to do with Africa. Theologians who

desired to create a truly African Theology, though well-informed about the terms of the dispute, sometimes felt that the Reformation was a distraction from inculturation. In some places where different churches had evangelised different tribes and communities, tensions between Christian communities often could take on dimensions of ethnic conflict that needed to be eased in the postcolonial era. A general view of the current situation would suggest that African Catholics are caught between two poles: on the one side a more exclusive 'Roman' theology that has returned to dominate seminaries (and thus become the discourse of most clergy), downplaying ecumenism and inculturation while preaching religious tolerance and dialogue, and on the other a distinctive blurring of Christian identities, including drawing on African traditional religious practices and the new Pentecostal traditions that are also growing dramatically on the continent. While moving away from past condemnation, African bishops' conferences struggle with achieving a balance between embracing African culture, including aspects of African religion, and (with one eye fixed on Rome) preserving the doctrines and practices of the universal church. It isn't easy: at what point, for example, does the continent-wide veneration of one's ancestors (which the Church often equates with honouring the saints) or recourse to traditional spiritual healers become worship of other 'gods' – or witchcraft? Many Catholics (including priests, some formed in highly 'Roman' seminaries) believe in both Christ and the ancestors, Western science and traditional healing.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal enjoys some influence on the continent, notably in countries like South Africa, Cameroon, Nigeria and Kenya. This movement draws on 'Catholicised' elements of Pentecostalism (and in some cases aspects of African Traditional Religion) – speaking in tongues, spiritual healing, being 'slain in the spirit' and so on – without leading to a schism from the religious mainstream. What gives the Charismatic Renewal in many parts of Africa its distinctiveness is its preoccupation with healing. Healing

might be the single greatest element in both African Pentecostalism and African Traditional Religion (perhaps not surprising on a continent with high levels of contagious diseases and limited public health infrastructure), and the Renewal's embrace of it makes sense: it is the Church's way to meet an existing spiritual need that is often not explicitly expressed in its spiritual mainstream. This occurs not without tensions, however: Charismatic healing frequently embraces a worldview of witchcraft and demons that the Westernised hierarchies would prefer to downplay. Some Charismatic groups and individual leaders have become so obsessed by this that conflicts have arisen between them and local bishops. Tensions, too, arise between Catholics who see diseases like HIV-AIDS as a spiritual malaise and the majority, particularly those in health care, who see it biomedically, albeit with multifaceted social dimensions.

The Catholic Church's relationship with Islam, which in parts of West Africa, the Sahel and the east coast of the continent has been established longer than Christianity, is even more complex. Adequately categorising African Islam theologically is difficult. It varies between theologically progressive and open to pluralism, including liberal democracy, and militant, as epitomised by rigid Sharia law, anti-Christian persecution and practices like female genital mutilation that many Muslims see as owing more to local cultural accretions than to the Quran. In many parts of Africa competition between Muslims and Christians (including Catholics) for converts is fierce. In parts of northern Nigeria and East Africa, this has led to low-intensity civil war between government forces (many of them Muslim) and groups like Boko Haram (Nigeria) and Al Shabab (East Africa). The extent of such conflict is arguably less about theology than about the state of postcolonial politics, particularly the failures of many decolonised African states to deliver to citizens. In failed, failing or weak states, strong religions like Islam or Catholicism create social infrastructures as well as communal spiritual

identities. A key factor here is numerical balances between religious groups: the more religiously diverse the communities, the more Christians and Muslims alike support and promote religious tolerance and liberal democratic values.

It is primarily from the twin features of the positive signs of a growing, vibrant Church in Africa and the less salubrious signs of clericalism and denial that one might analyse the most important ecclesiastical development in the contemporary African Church: the African Synods of 1994 and 2009. As with most regional, continental and international synods held since the early 1970s (an exception perhaps being the Extraordinary Synod on the Family in 2015), they reflect the uneasy tension between collegiality and centralism in Catholic governance. While both were African synods, they were held in Rome. Though the synods employed African theologians as consultants, some of whom helped in drafting the preparatory documents and the final statements, everything was carefully vetted by authorities in Rome, including the prepared statements made by bishops at the meetings. The findings of these synods reflect not only these tensions but also the ambivalence with which theology in Africa has become an inculturated African theology.

The 1994 Synod, and John Paul II's 1995 post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, described the Church as the Family of God in Africa and embraced the work of inculturation, directly linking it to the doctrine of Incarnation: inculturation 'incarnating' Christ on the continent. On inculturation the Pope indicated two essential criteria to be followed in practice: compatibility with the Christian message and communion with the universal Church. Many observers noted that while sounding good, the positive imagery underplayed or glossed over significant issues. The image of family insufficiently

interrogated the complexity of forms of family life on the continent – the ‘Christian’ nuclear family, the extended family, and polygamy, and in some areas the reality of single-parent families. Similarly it failed to grapple with the complexities of African culture and the persistence of African Traditional Religious practices among many Catholics.

In contrast to the *ad intra* focus of 1994, the second Synod (2009) and Benedict’s post-synodal exhortation highlighted the ways in which the Church could be at the service of justice and peace in Africa. While reaffirming the image of the African Church as the Family of God and acknowledging its importance to the wellbeing of global Catholicism (the ‘lung’ image), the Synod raised the important issue of the social role of the Church, not only in terms of its service to the continent in areas like health and education but also in the promotion of justice and peace. Here the tone was both realistic and challenging: realistic in the sense that it recognised the Church’s limitations and challenging in the sense that the Church had to do more. Particularly important to the Synod was the Church’s role in promoting human life, economic justice, greater social equality, opposition to corruption and building democratic states. In short, it was both an acknowledgment that decolonisation had not delivered all the social goods its leaders had promised and a pledge to Africa that the Catholic Church was on the side of positive social change.

Why did the 2009 Synod take this stance? First, despite the ‘re-Romanisation’ of the Church, it must be acknowledged that African Catholicism has to a significant degree the features of a postcolonial Church, no longer tied up with foreign-born missionaries and their home churches but, for better and worse, with local societies and cultures. Second, the African Church now saw its social and spiritual challenges rooted in the decolonised states in which it

operated: fears of a hostile new state ready to punish the Church for its colonial sins had abated; its decolonised African identity (however influenced by Rome) was no longer in question; its ongoing social importance to new African states had been affirmed, even if part of that was now to challenge the failures of these new states. The question was no longer one of adjustment, but how to make Catholicism's considerable and growing presence felt in the 'post-colony'.

Decolonisation, as has been noted, has had a mixed impact in Africa. Though no longer ruled by Europe, Africa's journey has been pockmarked by corrupt new ruling elites, often in alliance with multinationals who have extracted the continent's resources to their mutual benefit at the expense of Africa's citizens. Elsewhere poorly-thought-out socialist strategies have created economic failure and increased poverty. Though progress has been made through the African Union in promoting democracy and good governance, cronyism between heads of state and an often kneejerk anti-West response to outside criticism remains a major problem. The Catholic Church's response to this ongoing struggle for good governance and social justice has taken a number of often interlinked forms: prophetic denunciation, diplomacy and education. Informed by Catholic Social Thought and tempered by more than a century of grassroots experience, the Catholic Church in Africa combines these modalities in socio-political situations as varied as election monitoring, service to refugees displaced by wars, civic education of laity in public life, and public statements denouncing corruption, atrocities and election-rigging, as well as quiet negotiation and mediation between parties.

That the Church had a role, for example, in ending the civil war in Sudan that led to the creation of Africa's newest nation-state, South Sudan, is indisputable; the story that is yet to

be told is how extensive this was. What is known is that Catholic leaders denounced human rights abuses and promoted a negotiated cease-fire between the Muslim north and non-Muslim south. As the new country emerges the Church continues to pour resources – particularly education – into South Sudan, while trying to mediate the end to factional violence that has marred its independence.

Education for justice and the training of new leaders committed to democracy and clean governance continue to feature across the continent. Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya, offers workshops, short courses and a master's degree in peace studies and conflict resolution. Other Catholic social justice centres train many people (including non-Catholics) in similar areas and do valuable social research that informs the wider public. A notable example of the latter is the 'food basket' – a survey of basic foodstuff costs – that was initiated in Zambia by the Lusaka-based Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection and is currently being introduced into other African countries.

An innovation in Catholic political advocacy has been the creation in some countries of Parliamentary Liaison Offices. First introduced in 1999, the South African Office has built up good cross-party relations in Parliament and has made interventions promoting and sometimes challenging proposed legislation. Such work, combined with the quiet presence of papal nunciatures (Vatican State embassies), adds a diplomatic dimension to the Church's social mission.

Beyond the overtly political, the Church's presence in postcolonial Africa extends widely and deeply into areas like education and healthcare. As noted above, many of the rulers of newly

independent Africa failed to provide these services, whether because the state itself was too poor or because new elites neglected citizens, distracted by their pursuit of personal gain. The result is that today some of the best hospitals and clinics, schools and universities, are Church-run. (Parallels exist within other Christian churches and Islam.) Such a situation is not without its challenges. The perennial question for schools, for example, is the extent to which they should admit non-Catholics (which most do). Though since Vatican II the mentality of Catholic exclusivity has largely faded away (apart from the obvious exception, minor seminaries), there remains the problem of maintaining a school's Catholic identity or ethos. Beyond this dilemma is the debate over whether the focus of schools should be on educating an elite – with the hope that a social justice ethos might have an impact on the next generation – or educating the poor. It is not easy to resolve, particularly when considering the great disparity of resources these schools have that mirrors the gaps between rich and poor on the continent. Though it cannot deal directly with income gaps between private fee-paying elite schools and state-funded township and rural schools, the Catholic Institute of Education in South Africa, for example, has tried to bridge this gap through providing ongoing teacher formation across the rich-poor divide.

Catholic healthcare is another challenging area. Though the presence of Catholic-founded and -run hospitals and clinics across Africa is considerable, providing wide-ranging care in areas underserved or simply overlooked by the state, the decline of religious orders of men and women dedicated to healthcare presents a problem. The decline in priest, brother or sister doctors and nurses means (as in schools founded by teaching orders) having to foot the bill for lay staff in an era when foreign funding is drying up. The question of Catholic ethos resurges again, compounded by the moral dilemmas many Catholic hospitals face today in regard to HIV-AIDS. The Catholic Church is the single largest private HIV-AIDS care

provider in Africa (in fact, as the World Health Organisation has noted, in the world). Like other churches, the Catholic Church has been deeply involved in almost all aspects of dealing with the pandemic, particularly in southern and eastern Africa, which have still the highest HIV infection rate in the world. This has included human rights advocacy for persons living with HIV, lobbying governments and pharmaceutical companies to provide free or cheap antiretroviral drugs, AIDS awareness education and direct medical care. The challenge here has been the official Catholic rejection of condom use as a strategy to prevent the spread of HIV, the reasoning being that the condom is an artificial form of contraception (officially rejected by the Church) and that ready access to and use of condoms might promote promiscuity. Though this teaching and argument are by no means accepted by all Catholics, Catholic hospitals are at least officially expected to abide by the rule. The result has been an uneasy engagement of Catholic healthcare institutions in Africa in dealing with HIV-AIDS. Many hospitals and carers have condoms available 'under the counter' and remind their patients of the classic Catholic moral theology maxim: follow your formed and informed conscience. Theologians, priests and bishops too are by no means all of one mind with the Church's teaching. Low-key debate continues throughout the African (and global) Church.

Inevitably, perhaps, as one looks at the contemporary Catholic Church in Sub-Saharan Africa the question must be asked: what about the future? Can the Church continue to grow? Apart from South Africa, which has seen a marked increase in secularism (from 1% to 10% over the last twenty years), there seems little sign of secularisation in Africa. The Catholic Church continues to enjoy considerable influence and prestige, largely through its social work. In many parts of the continent it might even be seen as performing the functions normally associated with the state. Though it might not have inculturated as extensively or quickly as the Vatican II generation desired, it has developed roots in African consciousness. Whether

this will change, and the Church decline in numbers and influence, as African states consolidate democracy, human rights and service delivery to citizens – reducing in the process the Catholic Church’s social influence – is unclear.

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