

Osundare's Proverbial Illocution of Stolen African Artifacts: The Shame of Europe and the Agony of Africa

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Abstract

A telling European vandalism wreaked on African continent is the looting of Africa's visual artifacts and the desecration of African royal palaces and places of worship. This paper analyzes how Osundare, using African proverbs, makes meaning, projecting the shame of Europe, the agony of Africa and the demand for universal justice in one of his poems in which African artifacts are the subject of imagination. The historicity of stolen African artifacts is well documented and known. This is in spite of the European art historians and dealers' shameless polemic of ownership in an attempt to erase or rewrite the history. What continues to generate controversy, because it centrally borders on the right of the victim to seek reparation on and repatriation of these Africa's treasures, is the refusal of those who perpetrated the robbery to return thousands of these looted visual artifacts. The economic and psychological implications for Africa are unquantifiable. While Europeans and their American collaborators are reaping from where they did not sow, exhibiting and auctioning these timeless ancient African treasures, satisfying their orgy of perverse art pleasure, the original creators and owners are made to continue to fight to retrieve what rightly belong to them and what should have been honorably returned by those who violently carted them away. The loss of these treasures regularly occupies the creative imagination and muse of African writers in manner that brings back tragic memories and the need to seek redress of these centuries of injustice in the global arena of human right court. Such is the poetic rhetoric of Osundare. Osundare proverbially illustrates the essence of these cultural icons, musing the shamelessness of the perpetrators and the agony of the victim, using African proverbial text as a trope of meaning. Bursar

Introduction

An event in the art world took place between July 10 and September 21, 2008; a global arts exhibition event entitled "Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria", which debuted at the Ehhnologisches Museum, Berlin, Germany (Feb. 7- May 25, 2008) and was later mounted in the United States by the Art Institute of Chicago. Many journalists wrote about the event but two accounts stood out because of their contrasting instructive views: Kelly Crow of *The Wall Street Journal* (New York, USA)¹ and Tajudeen Sowole of *The Guardian* newspapers (Lagos, Nigeria)². While Sowole, understandably, focuses on the agony of the loss of these ancient historic Nigerian artifacts and decries the lackluster efforts of Nigerian government agencies to retrieve them, Crow rehashes the old well-known rhetoric of lies and falsehood that are regularly peddled about Africa in the West. Crow's words: "A global commodities boom is fueling today's art market; five centuries ago, the West African empire of Benin capitalized on a similar surge in trade with Portugal to pay for pricey art". Crow's report begs some critical questions. Who bought what from whom? Was this a surge in trade or looting by the West? To suggest that thousand of ancient African artifacts in museums and private homes in Europe and America are a result of a global trade boom with Africa is to rewrite history to fit the thesis of the so-called "global trade", which deceptively projects mutual merchandizing. What is now going on in Europe and America as "global trade" is indeed a global trade- a global trade in stolen African artifacts in the vaults of continental Europe and America.

¹ Kelly Crow: "Treasures from a Lost Realm: An Exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago Revisits the Glory Days of the African Kingdom of Benin", *The Wall Street Journal*, Sat/Sun July, 5-6, 2008.

² Tajudeen Sowole: "In Chicago, Stolen Benin Artifacts on Parade", *Guardian Newspapers* reproduced online in *ARTS*, July 1, 2008.

See also Kwame Opoku: "Nigeria and the Quest of Reclaiming its Stolen Cultural Objects from the Western Countries" in *Vanguard*, Sept. 21, 2008.

The image of these artifacts as a proverbial commentary and meaning making in two of Osundare's poems- "Africa's Memory" (*Memory*: 43) and "On Seeing a Benin Mask in a British Museum" (*Songs*: 39-40) is the focus of my analysis in this section. One of the well-documented atrocities of colonialism is the looting and thievery of African cultural artifacts. We recall here the plundering of such artifacts during the European invasions of Magdala, Ethiopia (1868), Kumasi, Ghana (1874), Ancient Benin empire, Nigeria (1897) in which Oba Ovonrwen was exiled and later died 1914. These are the artifacts which have now become, according to Crow's claim, articles of a "booming trade" and tourist attraction in Europe and America. Places of worship, ancestral alter and palaces in Africa were plundered. Can we bereft of memory of the internecine wars among Europeans over pieces of ivory and fertile land of Africa that led to Otto von Bismarck's Berlin Conference of all-European bandits of 1884-5? The images of this vandalism remain a major factor in the history of African's many civil wars till today.

These reality and consequences of European carnage on Africa are particularly a central discourse of early post-independence African literature. Some of the images remain indelible in the life and verbal art of Africa and they are regularly used as metaphorical references to recall African past or accentuate her myriad problems. Osundare makes the issue of African stolen artifacts a central theme in two of his poems. In doing so, being a versatile Yoruba-English bilingual writer, he uses the mode of Yoruba proverbs and structural manipulation of the materiality of language to articulate a lamentation. Osundare, in his communicating this message in the selected poems relies on the Yoruba proverbs as tropological agents of thought and the proverbial pragmatic protocols (Adeeko 1998) that suggest *Òwe lesin òrò, bí òrò bá sonù, òwe la fì í wá a*: 'The proverb is the horse of the word; if the word is lost, we use proverb to search for it'. I argue that Osundare provides a most passionate exemplification of the relevance of these African artifacts, including the implication of the loss. I further argue, by my analysis, that both the proverbs and the Yoruba-English interlingual interaction, along with the intersection of transcreation premised the nativization of both the language of expression- English- and the subject matter of the poems. This artistically maps into the African identity claim that I discuss in the poems. Following is the full text of the poems for my analysis:

Text 1 (T1)**Africa's Memory**

I ask for Oluyenyetuye bronze of Ife
The moon says it is in Bonn

I ask for Ogidigbonyingboyin mask of Benin
The moon says it is in London

I ask for Dinkowawa stool of Ashante
The moon says it is in Paris

I ask for Togongorewa bust of Zimbabwe
The moon says it is in New York

I ask

I ask

I ask for the memory of Africa
The seasons say it is blowing in the wind

*

The hunchback cannot hide his burden

Text 2 (T2)**On Seeing a Benin Mask in a British Museum**

(For FESTAC 77)

Here stilted on plastic
A god deshrined
Uprooted from your past
Distanced from your present
Profaned sojourner in a strange land
Rescued from a smouldering shrine
By a victorianizing expedition
Traded in for an O.B.E.
Across the shores

Here you stand, chilly,
Away from your clothes
Gazed at by curious tourists savouring
Parallel lines on your forehead
Parabola on your cheek
Semicircles of your eye brows
And the solid geometry of your lips
Here you stand
Dissected by alien eyes.

Only what becomes is becoming
A noose does not become a chicken's neck
Who ever saw a deity dancing *langbalangba*
To the carious laugh of philistine revelers?

Ìyà jàjèjì l'Egbè
Ilé eni l'èsó ye'ni

Retain the tight dignity of those lips
Unspoken grief becomes a god
When all around are alien ears
Unable to crack the kernel of the riddle.

Every society has its artifacts of history, which could be painting, literature, masks, sculpture, songs and music. These artifacts are that society's memory of the past and identity, and archeologists and historians often use some of these artifacts to construct origin, history and identity of the people that own them. Africa is replete with such memory signifiers, many of which were either vandalized or stolen and carted away by Europeans during the denigrating and destructive colonial occupation of Africa. *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006), Soyinka's arresting narration of some aspects of his life encounters gives an account of his precarious trips to Europe, searching private homes and museums, in company of some of his colleagues, to recover, surreptitiously, Ife *Ori Olokun* bronze head. For instance, Soyinka recalls the history of the theft of Benin ivory mask this way:

A famous ivory mask from Benin, exquisitely carved and detailed, remained safely ensconced in the vast labyrinths of the British Museum in London. It had been looted in the equally famous sacking of Benin Kingdom by a British expeditionary force in the late nineteenth century, launched in reprisal for an earlier humiliating encounter between a Captain Phillips and King Overawhen, the paramount ruler of the Benin Kingdom, whose ancestry, one line of legend insists, was none other than Yoruba! The Phillips expedition had insisted on being received by the king during one of his most sacred retreats, when the Oba was not permitted to see any strangers. His Majesty's Britannic servants were not to be denied, however, and they forced their way into the city, with gruesome consequences. Such insolence was not to be countenanced! Orders were issued to mount a punitive expedition and they were carried out with equally gruesome efficiency. Numerous treasures, the spoils of war were shipped back to England- to offset the cost of war, the British dispatches stated with admirable candor. Among them was the ivory mask, allegedly the head of a Benin princess (188-9)³.

Taking the position of a 'rememberer' to remind Africa of its history, T1- "Africa's Memory" engages our consciousness while T2 makes that awareness a lamentation of the loss and violent displacement ("uprooted" and "deshrined") of these artifacts, which the two poems seem to provoke as despicable and regrettable. The poetic discourse implicate the clamor for the retrieval of the artifacts as signs of identity and history, whereby the locution of consciousness and lamentation become, to whom may be responsible, *àbò òrò làá so fómolúwàbí, tó bá dènú rẹ̀ yóò di odindi* - pragmatically; a well-bred/learned person understands a half discourse as it will become a meaningful whole in his inner reasoning, meaning a call for release and retrieval and repatriation of these ancient priceless artifacts back to Africa, by all concerned. Beyond bemusing the loss and indicting the West, the poems incite some awe and passion engendered by these artifacts by evoking some semantic essences of religious and cultural implications through the linguistic choices in the composition of the poems as my analysis demonstrates below.

Analysis

The referents of Osundare's concern are the "bronze of Ife"- *Ori Olokun* (Ife bronze head), "mask of Benin"- famous also for being used as FESTAC '77⁴ symbol, "stool of Ashante"- originally royal stool of Ashante in Ghana, and "bust of Zimbabwe"- cast in stone. These objects date back to centuries of creation. They represent African authentic creativity and significations in addition to deep spiritual and mythical past from which the present still draws to assert and understand the present. The disappearance of these "memory of Africa" into private homes and museums of Western countries, "blowing in the wind", far from the grasp of Africa, making her to lose a major repertory of her history is the central theme of these poems. Put in another words; forced displacement by "victorianizing expedition" brings about subversion or loss of history and identity. However, by the same token, the poems make a belligerent counter, that in spite of the artifacts being "profaned" as a "sojourner in a strange land" and living a precarious "*langbalangba*", undignifying existence "[...]in Bonn". "[...] in London", "[...]in Paris" and "[...]in New York", Osundare maintains, with a creative illocution of a proverb, that "The hunchback cannot hide his burden". The underlying force of the proverbial statement is in its being *assertive* and being a *warning* about the indestructibility of the true origin, identity and meaning of these stolen treasures of Africa: "The awesome ruins of Zimbabwe, were they fiction?"/The bronze marvels of Benin, of Ife, were they a lie?" (*Midlife*: 94).

³ See pp. 181-221 of *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (Olori Kunkun and Ori Olokun) for the interesting account of Ori Olokun "misadventure", as Soyinka describes it.

⁴ FESTAC '77- The 1977 Festival of Black and African Arts held in Nigeria.

The wider situation of the poems is implicated to be an experience rooted in Africa- part of which embodies colonial experience. The original geopolitical origin (Ife, Benin, Ashanti and Zimbabwe) and cultural semiotic signification (religious, royalty, creation and identity) associated with the artifacts tend to suggest this. This makes for some bearings in the interpretation of how the poems *mean* by the ascribed value of its cultural context of Yoruba speech genre of proverbs. The titles of the poems suggest the thesis, which, in T1, implicates something that must be remembered and not forgotten, while the necessity to remember incites the lamentation of loss in T2 on the encounter of “Seeing a Benin Mask in a British Museum”. “Memory” is a quality of recall and an abstraction of history. Thus “Africa’s Memory” suggests Africa’s history and what makes that history and, by implication, Africa’s semiotics is inferred in these artifacts. We can draw the conclusion that the title of T1 is a ‘fabrication’ of creative fictionalization because memory is a feature of human brain but so distorted to *mean*, with the import of ‘remembrance’ and Africa’s history signified by the artifacts. These stylo-linguistic pragmatic manipulations also magnify the aesthetic importation of T1 which would have been lost had the poem been otherwise titled, say ‘Africa’s artifacts’ or ‘Africa’s history’, which is the reality of the thesis.

A further inference could be drawn in the association established by the analogous structural constructions of S/V/O (subject-verb-object) linkage between stanzas 1-4 and 5 of T1, making the objects of stanzas 1-4 (bronze of Ife, mask of Benin, stool of Ashante and bust of Zimbabwe) and object of stanza 5 of T1 (memory of Africa) to be interpreted as having semantic coreferentiality. The structural arrangement of syntactic equivalence and repetition may also be used to explain how T1 means. Though the linguistic concept of structure and reference create syntagmatic relations among its elements, which are pragmatically established in the system of grammatical categories to form the core of the (semantic) meaning of a text (Halliday and Hasan 1996:6-7), the arrangement can also signal a (pragmatic) meaning which is outside it but, connected with it within the defining context of the text. The notion of this meaning in T1 is a reference to the repetitive partitive noun phrases to suggest the truth, urgency and the importance of the idea and emotion expressed about the subject; the truth of the theft and forced displacement, abuse or loss of identity, emotion of loss and urgent call for remedy; retrieving the stolen treasures of Africa from Europe and America.

However, this is immediately juxtaposed with a sense of optimism of recovery incited in the proverb- “The hunchback cannot hide his burden”- and embodied in the assertive declarative semantic content of the declarative clause. The meaning of the proverb, truth, heightens the assertiveness and the sense of optimism projected in the poem (T1). From this identifiable syntactic calibration in the poem, I disagree with Dunmade’s (2003:407) thinking that “value and evaluation” of art is the central concern of Osundare in T2. In Dunmade’s estimation, Osundare’s deployment of the proverb below “metaphorically reflects issues central to art, *value* and *evaluation*”.

Ìyà ja jè jì lé’egbè
Ilé eni l’èsó ye’ni

In the poem, “On seeing a Benin Mask in a British Museum”. Osundare translates the proverb in the poem thus: “suffering afflicts the stranger in an alien land [prime order translation]/One is most valued in one’s own home” [pragmatic interpretation]. According to Dunmade, “the proverb questions the reader about “value and evaluation” in the second clause, and talks about philistinism in the first clause. Art, however, is not an important focus in Osundare’s translation of the proverb, although it is implied in *teso*, a Yoruba word for “adornment” or “object d’art”⁵. I think “value and evaluation” is peripheral to this poem, if at all it can be regarded as such. The poem, in my estimation, is not a poetic critical “evaluation” as Dunmade’s position seems to suggest. This position is further underscored by Dunmade’s misinterpretation of the illocutionary performative force of the proverb in the context of the poem. In no immediate way does the proverb suggest “value and evaluation” but rather a pensive lamentation of violent dislocation and displacement and loss of origin. There is an emotive dimension to the proverb in the context which Dunmade missed.

Moreover, if, according to Dunmade, “art [...] is not an important focus of Osundare’s translation of the proverb”, how then do we conjecture “value and evaluation” as central to the theme of the poem? This seems contradictory and confusing.

⁵ Dunmade, O.I. “Art, Value and Evaluation in Niyi Osundare’s “Benin Mask” and Jack Mapanje’s “Kabula Curio’s Shop” in Na’Allah (ed.) *ibid* op.cit.

However, “value and evaluation”, in my opinion, contrary to what Dunmadu suggests, should be weighted on the paradigm of religion, royalty and identity in contrast to pleasure and entertainment as conceived by geopolitical difference of ‘home’ and ‘foreign land’ of the artifacts, respectively. Moreover, the *value* of the object as an art form is not in question and therefore not the basis of the poetic thesis. The lamentation of the loss of the ancient objects to European thievery, which paradoxically authenticates the value and incites this remembrance of history, is central to the theme of the poem.

In the case of T2, Osundare’s personal experience of a moment of mixed rapture “On Seeing a Benin Mask in a British Museum” seems to be what is narrated. The title is as the reality is, bereft of fictionalization. The encounter is linked to FESTAC ’77, in a symbolic sense of nostalgia and the denied presence, by the British government, of the original “Benin Mask” to ‘grace’ FESTAC ’77⁶, and this experience too, it seems, is being relived in the poem. What follows therefore is a lamentation and indictment of “victorianizing expedition” and the deceptive bait of “O.B.E”, which invites complicity of the vanquished owners of the ancient mask. The performative force that manifests the violence of the plundering and indignity unleashed by the rogues from the West is eloquently achieved by a lexical indexing and the cumulative semantic spectrum of “deshrined”- a desecration and displacement, “uprooted”- displacement and invasion of space, “distanced”- spatial and psychological alienation and displacement, and “profaned”- disgraced and made powerless (stanza one of T2).

However, in a show of avid resistance, Osundare transforms the Mask into a god and reify the god into a living being and urges: “Retain the tight dignity of those lips”- by which the mask transmutes itself into a god and dumfounds and confuses its captors as they are unable “to crack the kernel of the riddle” of the tight lips. In a sense, too, the inability “to crack the riddle of the tight lips” by strange eyes that feed on the artifact-god is a metaphorical reference to the jaundiced Eurocentric interpretation of African art, instances well documented in Chinweizu, Jamie and Madubiike (1983). Europe and America, in their collective pathological bravado have always pursued a hegemonic agenda that serves their interests, with a complacency of “Mr. know all”, even of arts whose creative and cultural impulses they have no understanding of or care to learn about. Their analytical theories are presumptuous and disconnected Osundare (2002).

With the elimination of the interrogative marker ‘Wh-’ in T1, the structural permutation in stanzas (1-5) is set up as an interrogative proposition disguised as declarative one, matched up by negative declarative response. This is made possible by the dialogic-exposition paradigm constructed between the protagonist-questioner (metaphorical speaker-interlocutor) and “the moon”- (metaphorical hearer-interlocutor) - implied as a neutral impartial witness to the thievery. This intra-textual pattern of question-statement proposition engenders an illocutionary force which is both *expressive* and *directive* throughout T1, assuming a combative questioning in its cumulative “face”-subverting, face-threatening implicatures (Levinson 1983). This macro-dialogic exchange as interplayed with the grammatical alternation identified also invokes the inference of indictment of the culprits in the plunder and stealing of the artifacts. In this instance, stanza (6) of T1 becomes an extended implicature of the ‘truth’ to be understood on the basis of the subject matter of the question-statement proposition as patterned in the context of the poem.

The interlingual incorporation of Yoruba codes both as code mixing and transcreation has both linguistic and aesthetic functions and meaning making implications in T1 and T2. This is a bilingual interference that has wide spread practice in African verbal art. It is both an imperative of artistic rhetoric and communication much as it is a process of Nativization (Adeeko 1998) and “writing back” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989) and undermining the hegemony of the disreputable “Center”. In an impulse of creative profundity, Osundare uses this stylistic genre to express an African sensibility which would have been lost were it codified in ‘pure’ English idioms. For instance, the Yoruba and Ewe codes- “Oluyenyenyetuye”, “Ogidigboyingboyin”, “Dinkowawa” and “Togongorewa”- in T1 take onomatopoeic form, signifying awe, beauty and significance of these artifacts by the phonic association of meaning and idiophonic duplication. The nature and combination of the consonants and vowels sounds as well as the tonal turnings and undulations suggest the awe and the mythic-spiritual reverence in which the artifacts are held. This stylistic arrangement is naturally paradigmatic of artistic and bilingual characteristics of a versatile home-rooted bilingual writer like Osundare, and it is a signification of literary Africaness. The transferred words from African languages (Yoruba and Ewe) are ideophonic representation of meaning within the semiotic milieu of the speech community of reference.

⁶ See Ibid Soyinka, (2006) pp. 189-190.

In fact, the lexical items are used as adjectives for this purpose. They have experiential function because, as ‘epithets’, they describe the quality of a thing (Halliday 1976: 1986b). The lexical embodiment of this meaning is in the choices of high density cacophonous and homophonous reduplicated sounds combination of the syllables in the words. In the morphology of the lexical items, for instance, “Togongorewa” is a combination of two morphemes and other meanings; ‘ogongo’ is the name of the bird ostrich; its name ‘ogongo’ bears its height and ‘rewa’, its beauty (beautiful), bears its grace. The two elements project the grace and beauty of the bird. Consequently, “Togongorewa” in its co-referentiality, along with its semantic signals, is a metaphoric signifier of the awe and beauty of “bust of Zimbabwe”. Similar signification applies to “Oluyenyetuye bronze of Ife”, “Ogidigbonyingboyin mask of Benin” and “Dinkowawa stool of Ashante”.

Proverb is a tutelary to Yoruba *ewí* genre of literature and metalanguage of Yoruba cultural historicism and signpost of African sophisticated verbal artistry (Owomoyela 2005). In T1 and T2, the graphic manipulation of making “The hunchback cannot hide his burden” and “*Ìyà jàjèjì l’Égbè Ilé eni l’èsó ye’ni*” (Suffering afflicts the stranger in an alien land/One is most valued in one’s own home- Osundare’s translation) to stand as separate stanzas in T1 and T2 respectively is a deliberate stylistic stroke of foregrounding. For instance, in T1, the foregrounding by separation of the proverb to stand as a stanza (for special focus) is interplayed with the meaning the proverb constructs, that is the *truth* that cannot be hidden away. The intrinsic value of the proverb is walked into the meaning generated in stanzas 1-5 of T1 through a juxtaposition signaled by the fact of foregrounding and semiotic signification of the truth of the last stanza- the proverb’s performative force. This is an accentuation of universal truth in Yoruba culture akin to *Olè tò gbé kàkàkí oba, níbo ni ó ti fú, n?*- a thief who steals a king’s trumpet, where will he blow it? (Without being seen or caught?); the trumpet is a mark of identity of royalty in the semiotics and it cannot be duplicated. The proverb suggests the truth of the identity and the source/origin of the artifacts, which cannot be denied or hidden. Thus the proverb in T1 imbues meaning that forms the backdrop against which the poem is understood as a charge of roguery and indictment of impropriety. It is also to say that the fact remains that the artifacts are property of Africa even though they may have been stolen and domiciled in strange lands- Bonn, London, Paris or New York. Their African identity cannot be denied and as long as they remain in these places, the artifacts are historical evidence of the West’s thievery of African treasures; it is also an indictment, as noted earlier, and a questioning of western civilization.

Further on T2, illocution of lamentation and pensive reflection are the theses of the proverbs employed. The proverbs are injected as transcreation and interlingual code mixing. “Here you stand, chilly, /Away from your clothes” is a Yoruba reference to communalism reflected in the proverbial refrain: *Eèyàn laso mi, bí mo bá bojú wè’ yìn bí mo r’èni mí , inú mi á dùn ara mi á yá gágá* : alienation and separation from one’s own kith and kin, making one becoming lonely and with a sense of insecurity because of the loss of communal security and protection. The reflective mood is created by “Only what becomes is becoming/A noose does not become a chicken’s neck”; *ohun tó yeni ní n’yeni, okùn orùn kò ye àdié* . This a figurative connotation of what the artifacts have been made to become by being disrobed of origin and ownership , exposed gracelessly- “dancing *langbalangba*”, with the proverbial comment of the disgrace that “*Ìyà jàjèjì l’Égbè Ilé eni l’èsó ye’ni*” . Consequently, the protagonist urges, combatively: “To the carious laugh of philistine revelers?”- Europe and America, “Retain the tight dignity of those lips” for “Unspoken grief becomes a god”.

Conclusion

Finally, the proverb, being a philosophical ‘truth’ comment on stanzas 1-5 in T1, is systematized into the intra-textual relations of other linguistic units (this applies also in T2) of the poems, whereby, in T1, the linguistic equivalence identified and the embedded Yoruba and Ewe codes, strengthened by phonological relations, generate and attribute meaning. It thus seems that the attribution of meaning is as generated by the intra-structural and semiotic relations within the context implicated in the two poems. In T1, both the phonological causation of onomatopoeic manipulation of meaning generation and the syntactic linkages of meaning appear to have taken the prerogative of semantics to make meaning within the pragmatic interpretation of the poem. It is the only instance, as far as I know, in Osundare’s poetic corpus where the agency of African proverbs is used specifically for the illocution of artistic objects. The semiotic evidence of Yoruba proverbs and linguistic interplay of structural relations and interlingual incorporation in the Textuality of the two poems premised the different levels of meaning revealed in my analysis. The linguistic evidence and proverbs as socio-cultural signifiers relate the texts to the experience relived and expressed.

In the same vein, the agony of the looting and loss of these African historic identity-signifiers-artifacts is combined with an exhortation, to recover them, because, just as, “The hunchback cannot hide his burden”, neither does an alien land befit the dignity of African gods and goddesses.

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