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Introduction: Theology, Gender and Pandemics

Guest Editors: Molly Manyonganise, Tshenolo Madigele and Musa Dube

Introduction

Pandemics are not merely biological or sociological phenomena; they are fundamentally theological events that challenge existing understandings of God, suffering, justice and human dignity. As Ernst M. Conradie explores in “A Test Case for the Theodicy Problem” within the *World Christianity and Covid-19* volume, such crises force a profound engagement with questions of divine action and human hardship.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic, alongside previous global health crises, has exacerbated significant gender-related disparities that permeate social, economic, cultural, and theological dimensions.² As Sande observes, the pandemic pierced all aspects of life encompassing global health, economics, politics, religion and gender as well as socio-cultural structures.³ This disruption specifically exposed and deepened social inequalities across various sectors. For instance, the phenomenon of “Lockdown and Sexual Exploitation,” as examined by Fulata Lusungu Moyo, illustrates how pandemic measures intensified vulnerabilities and gender-based harms, burdens and economic consequences for women.⁴ It led to distinct gendered experiences of psychological distress. Moreover, it critically redefined gendered spaces within the home. It renegotiated traditional roles for women, including in areas like healing and, consequently, led

- 1 Ernst M. Conradie, “A Test Case for the Theodicy Problem,” in *World Christianity and Covid-19*, ed. C. J. Kaunda (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), 19-36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12570-6_2>.
- 2 Metzi Makgoba, “Gender Mainstreaming in Health: Looking Back and Thinking Forward,” *South African Medical Journal* 105, no. 4 (2015): 268-270, <<https://doi.org/10.7196/SAMJ.9404>>.
- 3 Nomatter Sande, “Theologies of women’s submission and the COVID-19 pandemic,” *HTS Theologies/Theological Studies*, 80(2), a10083. <<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.10083>>.
- 4 Fulata Lusungu Mbano Moyo, “Lockdown and Sexual Exploitation,” in *World Christianity and Covid-19*, ed. C. J. Kaunda (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), 133-149, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12570-6_10>.

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Section 1: Theology, Gender, and Women's Experiences in Pandemic Contexts

“Blessing in Disguise?”: COVID-19, Women and the Reconfiguration of African Masculinities in Zimbabwe

Molly Manyonganise

ABSTRACT

While the dominant narrative emphasizes the overwhelmingly negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study explores its unexpected impact on gender relations in Zimbabwe. Focusing on the experiences of men during lockdown, it argues that the pandemic offered a “silver lining” by challenging and reconfiguring traditional African masculinities. For example, men took on increased domestic responsibilities and shifts in economic roles. Employing African Womanist theory, the study analyses data gathered through a focus group discussion with ten participants in Harare to understand the shifts in gender roles and relations within a COVID-19 context. The findings suggest that pandemic lockdowns challenged hegemonic masculinities which to some extent led to their transformation. This implies that masculinities are never permanent but change depending on context

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound and multifaceted global impact.¹ While scholarship predominantly focuses on the pandemic's negative consequences, including increased mortality rates², economic hardship³, and exacerbated gender

- 1 United Nations, 2020. Impact of COVID-19 in Africa. Policy Brief; United Nations Habitat. 2020. COVID-19: Socioeconomic Impacts on Africa. Discussion Paper.
- 2 Baud, David et.al. “Real estimates of mortality following COVID-19 infection,” *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 20 no.7 (2020), 773.
- 3 Syed. A. Tabish. “Life and livelihood during the COVID-19 pandemic,” *Journal of Clinical Immunology and Immunotherapy*, 6 (2020), 035. DOI: [10.24966/CIIT-8844/10000035](https://doi.org/10.24966/CIIT-8844/10000035).

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Trans-generational HIV and AIDS Care and Inter-sectionality with COVID-19: Women LWH Experiences in Western Kenya for the Period 2020-2022

Edith K. Chemorion

ABSTRACT

The experiences of women living with HIV and AIDS (WLWH) during the 2019-2022 COVID-19 pandemic may have comprised of challenges and opportunities. Providing trans-generational HIV/AIDS care to women in western Kenya during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the 2020-2022 periods underscore the importance of an intersectional approach to care. This paper seeks to determine the inter-sectionality of HIV/AIDS and COVID-19, and their influence on WLWH in rural communities in western Kenya. Trans-generational HIV and AIDS care will be unpacked and explained in this paper, and women's experiences reflected upon, and unpacked. Furthermore, the difficulties of accessing spousal support, and essential services, such as HIV treatment and care, and treatment buddy support, due to family stigma, disruptions caused by the restrictions of the pandemic and religious isolation will be interrogated.

Introduction

This is the main introduction to the paper 'Trans-generational HIV and AIDS care and inter-sectionality with COVID-19: Women LWH's experiences in western Kenya for the period 2020-2022'. This introduction covers the aim of the study, the guiding research question, theoretical framework, research methodology, results, and contribution to knowledge. The aim of this study was to evaluate the intersecting challenges and experiences WLHV in western Kenya encountered across generations during Covid-19 for the period 2020-2022. The leading question this study sought to answer was "What intersecting challenges and experiences did WLHV in western Kenya encounter across generations during Covid-19 for the period 2020-2022." The study used the framework of intersectionality and transgenerational care to acknowledge interconnectedness of gender, socio-economic status, HIV and COVID -19, and how they influenced

Resilience and Agency of Elderly Women in Botswana: A Feminist Theological Gerontological Perspective on Dual Pandemics

Tshenolo Jennifer Madigele

ABSTRACT

This article explores the lived experiences, resilience and agency of elderly women in Botswana during the HIV and AIDS pandemic. It employs a feminist theological gerontological framework to examine how gender, aging and religion intersect within these dual crises. The study highlights vulnerabilities such as health risks, caregiving burdens and economic insecurity. It reveals the women's remarkable capacity for adaptation, resourcefulness and spiritual endurance. Religious beliefs emerge as both empowering and constraining forces. They provide comfort, community and moral strength, yet sometimes reinforce patriarchal limitations on women's agency. This article contributes to both theological and gerontological scholarship. It also calls for contextually grounded, gender-sensitive and faith-informed interventions that respond to the complex realities of aging women in pandemic contexts.

Introduction

The lived experiences of elderly women in Botswana, typically defined as those aged sixty years and above present a compelling case for examining the intersection of aging, gender, faith and health in contexts of crisis. Although this article engages both the HIV and COVID-19 pandemics, its primary analytical focus remains the HIV and AIDS context, with COVID-19 serving as a comparative lens that exposes continuing structural and theological vulnerabilities. This article uses a feminist theological gerontological lens. Through this integrated framework, the study investigates how elderly women navigate their multiple vulnerabilities and exercise agency in the face of prolonged social, economic, and spiritual adversity. While scholarly attention has focused on the individual impacts of this pandemic on elderly women, there remains a need for integrated studies exploring their combined effects and the intersectional vulnerabilities and resiliencies within

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'Preserving Virginity as an Escape for Men from HIV and AIDS': Revisiting the Role and Status of Women in the African Apostolic Indigenous Churches in Zimbabwe

Lindah Tsara

ABSTRACT

This study examines the interplay of gender, health, and religion within the African Apostolic Church (AAC) of Paul Mwazha, focusing on the belief among male members that marrying virgins protects against HIV/AIDS. This belief underscores teachings on marriage and virginity while highlighting the subordinate status of women in the church. Through qualitative research, including interviews and secondary analysis, the study reveals that these teachings create a gendered hierarchy that limits women's roles and opportunities in education and leadership. It calls for a reinterpretation of the church's religious texts to promote women's empowerment and gender equality. The research contributes to discussions of how religious beliefs affect health outcomes and gender dynamics.

Introduction

Despite women comprising most African Apostolic Indigenous churches (AICs) members in general and AAC in particular, they cannot hold significant leadership roles in the church. Generally, in AICs, women's roles are peripheral and limited to specific leadership roles. There are some AICs where women are still regarded as subjects. A dominant male ideology has ensured that women remain abstract as leaders and more visible as clients in these churches. This ideology (patriarchy) that approves only male headship has been highly influential in placing women on the fringes of AICs.¹ The men are always the ones making decisions that affect women, even though men are a minority in the church. The AICs in Zimbabwe, particularly the AAC of Paul Mwazha, have an intriguing doctrine that intertwines spirituality, health, and gender, casting a unique light on the church's social fabric.

1 Tapiwa Praise Mapuranga, "AICs as a Gendered Space in Harare, Zimbabwe: Revisiting the Role and Place of Women," *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae* 39, no. 2 (2013): 303-317.

Redefining Gendered Space in the Home during COVID-19: Evolving Religio-Cultural Identities in Zimbabwe

Enna Sukutai Gudhlanga

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic meaningfully reconfigured global social orders and domestic power dynamics. This paper examines the transformation of gender roles and religio-cultural identities within rural Nyanyadzi households, Zimbabwe, during government-imposed national lockdowns. Whilst traditional structures position men as heads of households, pandemic-induced restrictions empowered women in domestic governance, spiritual leadership, and healthcare management. Through informal interviews with selected local couples and a multi-theoretical framework of Africana Womanism, womanist and pandemic theologies, the paper explores these intersections. It concludes that role reversal promotes progressive masculinities, encouraging adaptive collaboration and interdependence rather than threatening male identity.

Introduction

The onset of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020 brought an extraordinary disruption which interrupted people's daily lives globally. It also disrupted social and economic structures as well as unsettling the moral and spiritual fabrics that hold communities together. The Government of Zimbabwe imposed some lockdowns which restricted mobility with the intention of containing the spread of the pandemic. These government-imposed lockdowns distorted domestic life. The home was, by tradition, regarded as a gendered and religiously structured space which was a place for negotiating identity, faith and survival. With the advent of COVID-19 it meant that men and women spent more time together in the home and this transformed the home into crucibles of ethical, cultural and spiritual negotiation. The pandemic foregrounded critical questions of power, care, vocation, and spiritual responsibility, revealing how gendered prospects entrenched in religio-cultural practices were instantaneously highlighted, redefined, and challenged. The paper is informed by Africana Womanism,

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Section 2:
African Women, Theology and Pandemics

A Critical Assessment of Theology, Female Agency and Gender Roles During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kenya

Loreen Maseno

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, which in Kenya was first traced in March 2020, deeply impacted every facet of life. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic period in Kenya brought along uncertainties for individuals and families. Women in Kenya were not exempt from the challenges of the pandemic. Within this context, the pandemic significantly impacted female agency and reinforced, or in some cases challenged traditional gender roles. This essay explores the multifaceted experiences of Kenyan women during the pandemic, focusing on their agency with reference to nutrition and ritual practice of the Eucharist, how gender roles were reshaped in the face of crisis, and a theological assessment of the same. Theoretically, this essay posits the view of agency that uncouples agency and autonomy, to demonstrate that agency as resilience.

Introduction

The COVID-19 virus was identified as causing a cluster of pneumonia and deaths in Wuhan city, China, on 31 December 2019. It continued to cause morbidity and mortality due to its rapid spread to other parts of the world, Kenya not being exempted. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic.¹ In Kenya, it was first reported in March 2020. Soon after a shut-down was announced to check the spread of the virus. The pandemic greatly impacted

1 World Health Organization (WHO) details on Covid-19 from <<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>> retrieved on 22.11.2024 & World Health Organization, WHO (2020). Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report-11. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200131-sitrep-11-ncov.pdf?sfvrsn=de7c0f7_4> retrieved on 22.11.2024.

Gender, Church Leaders, and COVID-19: A Womanist Ethic of Care

Thandi Soko-de Jong and Nomatter Sande

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the gendered impact of COVID-19 in Malawi, on the Malawian clergy. More Malawian adult men than women contracted COVID-19. Within the Malawian church community, the pandemic significantly impacted male church leaders. Findings show that women and men are socialized differently in relation to risk-taking behavior and this negatively impacted male church leaders. The paper concludes by drawing from studies on risk avoidance and womanist theology ethics of care to offer suggestions for better risk management behaviours that can help manage pandemic risks without compromising health.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and deepened existing social inequalities across myriad sectors globally, including healthcare, education, and religious institutions. These inequalities are also evident in the gendered experience of psychological distress. Church leaders played a crucial role in mitigating the psychological distress brought on by the pandemic. They supported community members through illness, grief, and related pandemic-specific crises, helping them cope by “encouraging their audiences to seek spiritual support, regain control over the situation, and find positive meaning in the pandemic.”¹ However, in the Malawian context, a study by Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, Atipatsa Chiwanda Kaminga, Joshua Isaac Kumwenda et al. found that “women were less distressed than men because of certain factors, such as less involvement in religious and traditional leadership roles than men, and women’s traditional role of caring for the sick being taken away due to government policy of placing COVID-19

1 Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps, “God Is in Control: Religious Coping in Sermons About the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Reformed Church in Zambia,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 63 (2024): 704.

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Hindrances to Pastoral Accompaniment in the Face of HIV and AIDS

Pauline Wanjiru Njiru

ABSTRACT

Pastoral accompaniment is central to the church's nurturing mission, calling pastors to walk with people amid suffering, sickness, and death. This study examines the failure of pastoral accompaniment for grandmothers raising grandchildren orphaned by AIDS in Maai Mahiu, Kenya, who experienced intense stigma after losing children to AIDS. Although they sought counsel, guidance, and material support, pastors denied accompaniment and intensified stigma. Using qualitative grounded theory methods and data from sixteen participants, the study identifies key hindrances: inadequate HIV knowledge, life-threatening theologies, fear, HIV stigma, and insufficient theological training. The paper concludes that these failures reflect gaps in pastoral understanding and calls for targeted training to equip pastors to respond effectively during public health pandemics.

Background

In 2011, I visited Maai Mahiu Comfort the Children International (CTC)¹, now Ubuntu Life Foundation. During that visit, I encountered a few Christian grandmothers parenting grandchildren whose parents had died of AIDS.² They sat around me and shared their experiences. A seventy-five-year-old woman who had lost five daughters to AIDS, with a sense of humour, said that due to shock, her husband died after their third daughter's death. She was bent over after a tree branch fell on her, breaking her spine as she was fetching firewood to cook for her grandchildren. I was amazed by the way she told her story with calm, dignity and passion which appeared to have been firmly grounded in her faith in God. Like so many members of her community, she knew very little about this body wasting disease, but she suffered so much stigma, shame, denial and discrimination as her daughters wasted away and finally succumbed to the strange disease. Her daughters had left behind orphans in her custody.

1 A non-governmental organisation.

2 Mombo, Esther, and Pauline Wanjiru. "Grandmothers and Pastors Learn Theology Together in Maai Mahiu, Kenya." *Anvil: Journal of Theology and Mission* 36, no. 2 (2020): 54-58.

Religious Ritual in the United Methodist Church, Rukwadzano RweWadzimai and Behaviour Change in an HIV and AIDS Context

Tabitha Bishau and David Bishau

ABSTRACT

Zimbabwe is one of the few countries in the developing world to meet the UNAIDS 95-95-95 fast-track targets owing to several HIV biomedical interventions which have received sustained international funding. However, recently the funding was suspended. This has prescribed the urgency to find other complementary interventions that are not wholly dependent on international donor funding. Through historical-typological phenomenology this study investigated how religious rituals in the United Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (UMCZ) instigated behaviour change to prevent HIV transmissions. The study concluded that, the RRW rituals possess spiritual resources to prevent HIV transmissions through influencing members to positively change and maintain their behaviour. The study recommended an alternative ritual-based model of behaviour change.

Introduction

Several scholars have rightly observed that HIV and AIDS are among some of the most formidable challenges to social development, progress and stability the world over.¹ As such, the global response to the pandemic has been exceptional and comprehensive. While there has been progress on the scientific and biomedical front to diagnose and treat AIDS as well as manage it as a chronic condition, new HIV infections are still recurring among those receiving treatment and the new infections seem to be out pacing the response to AIDS treatment.² For example,

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- 1 Sue Parry, *Practicing Hope: A Handbook for Building HIV and AIDS Competences in the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013.), ix.
 - 2 Manoj Kurian, *Passion and Compassion: The Ecumenical Journey With HIV* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2016), x.

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The Impact of Gospel Songs in Dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic Losses Among Selected Zimbabwean Women

Matanga Sarah Yeukai & Elijah Elijah Ngoweni Dube

ABSTRACT

This paper explores lived experiences of selected Zimbabwean women as they dealt with loss of loved ones during the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore selected narratives and how gospel music was used for comfort and hope. Participants were purposively selected to identify women's coping mechanisms during times of loss and to explore the therapeutic and spiritual role of music. There were various ways of dealing with loss such as, receiving grief counselling, friendship benches, but at a personal level, women chose ways of drawing hope and strength from a spiritual perspective. This study examines the interplay between gender, religion, and pandemics.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic came with pain and loss of lives. In most societies, the grieving and mourning processes mainly affect women. In African societies, women handle funerals primarily due to their traditional roles as caregivers. Women provide entertainment through song and dance. This entertainment, however, is part of the mourning ritual, where music and dance are used to provide comfort and ease grief. Howlin and Hansen assert that “the scale of disruption caused by the considerable number of cases and the implementation of lockdowns led to widespread social and emotional disruption”,¹ which forms the basis of this study, as they clearly articulate the nature of the environment within which the grieving women are placed. This environment was associated with anxiety, fear, and depression, among other issues.

The study does not focus on songs performed during the funeral period, but on the music played by the bereaved after the burial of their loved ones. Mostly

¹ Claire Howlin and Niels Chr Hansen. “Music in Times of COVID-19.” *PsyArXiv* (2022), 1

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Section 3:

Women, Leadership and Care During Pandemics

A Biblical Analysis of the Prophetic Role of the Church on Gender-Based Violence, Pandemics and Mother Earth

Phoebe Faith Chifungo

ABSTRACT

It is possible to see in Genesis 1:1-31 that whatever God created was “very” good. Unfortunately, global warming, pandemics, Gender based Violence and other gender skewed disasters have claimed and continue to claim countless lives. Thus, the guiding question is: “What is the prophetic role of the Malawian church in addressing the problem of GBV and Mother Earth in the context of pandemics? The purpose of this paper is to discuss ways in which the church with its prophetic role can address the above problems. This paper utilizes feminist theory and uses personal interviews and focus groups to collect data.

Introduction

According to the Bible, God is the creator and everything God created was not just “good” but it was “very good”. The phrase “very good” means that it is more than just good; it means that God assessed that which God had created and determined it was very good. It suggests that creation was the way God wanted it to be. Thus, it was exactly the sort of quality God desired. The questions that arise are, “where do all these pandemics like HIV and Aids, Ebola, and natural disasters like floods, global warming, cyclones, and deforestation, come from?” Where have we gone wrong? Who is accountable for all these atrocities?

There is a need to redeem creation and bring it back to its original status of being “very good”. Through Adam and Eve sin came on earth and as such the

On Finding Home: A Socio-Political Sacrament for Black Liberation and Land Reclamation

Karen Crozier

ABSTRACT

This essay identifies and advances the significance on finding home in response to COVID-19. First, the ancestral wisdom of Fannie Lou Hamer is provided. Second, through quantitative and qualitative health data and autobiography, a description of Black women's international experiences of COVID-19 ground us in aspects of Black women's lived realities during the pandemic. Third, the significance of finding home is constructed that engages African and African American women's ways of doing theology for liberation. Fourth, and finally, a synthesising testimony is provided. The act of (re) turning and (re)claiming home as a socio-political sacrament foregrounds Black freedom struggle activist and organic intellectual Fannie Lou Hamer

Introduction

Dianne D. Glave, an environmental historian, argues Black people in the Global North are intimately connected to the land.¹ She declares Black people's grounding in the soil regardless of the various forms of terror and trauma experienced in and on the land. While the land has been, and continues to be, the site of the crime for many Black people, Black farmers remind us that it should not be confused as the criminal.² In many ways, the land was/is a victim, and also a container for and co-participant in healing itself and we humans. As will be discussed, this both victim, and healer, observation regarding the land is applicable to Black women especially during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although U.S. civil and human rights civil leader Fannie Lou Hamer³ died in

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- 1 Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2010), 3.
 - 2 Leah Penniman, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire's Farm Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*, (Chelsea, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018).
 - 3 Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977) is part of the African American Ancestors and Cloud of Witnesses who is primarily known for her voting rights activism in Mississippi, USA, and resistance to White terror and jailhouse torture. For a more extensive portrayal of Hamer's civil and human rights' thought,

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Enhancing the Power of Pastors' Wives to Promote Care and Prevention for Evangelical Women during Covid-19 in Malawi Cities

Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler and Grace Banda Saguga

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to enhance the power of pastors' wives to promote care and prevention for Evangelical women during Covid-19. Utilizing an ethnographic gender analysis design, we found that limited theological training of pastor's wives contrary to the rich tradition of highly trained Evangelical Black American missionary wives and lay American women leaders of the 19th Century contributed to their vulnerability to the pandemic. The paper proposes a review of the theological curriculum for pastors' wives and reclaiming positive her-stories of women to advance women's agency during Covid-19.

Introduction

Evangelical Women in this paper are those that belong to churches that form "believers only" churches, where entry usually is through believers' (adult) baptism. The first Evangelical church established in Malawi was the Zambezi Evangelical Church in 1892, founded by the Australian, Joseph Booth. He was also instrumental in establishing the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1902 and the first Baptist Church in 1900.¹ The majority of Evangelical churches have a congregational system of government where power rests with the congregation. In practice, however, the power of the church rests with the clergy and the majority of clergy are men. The power of pastors' wives is restricted to women members of their churches. In the church, the power of pastors' wives is less than that of pastors because of the interpretation of verses that undermine women's roles in Evangelical churches.² These interpretations limit levels of theological training

* *Acknowledgments*: Nagel Institute, "Engaging African Realities" Project

- 1 Kenneth R. Ross and Klaus Fiedler, *A Malawi Church History 1860-2020* (Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2020), 103-111.
- 2 Klaus Fiedler, "Gender Equality in the New Testament: The Case of St Paul," in Klaus Fiedler, *Conflicted Power in Malawian Christianity. Essays Missionary and Evangelical from Malawi* (Mzuzu: Mzuni Press, 2015), 160-177.

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Editorial

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