

# Zones of Entanglement: Nigeria's Real and Imagined Compounds

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**This article examines the architectural and discursive configurations of traditional walled compounds in Nigeria. It begins by discussing the spatial and social organization of compounds in different regions of the country, focusing on the impermanent structures of the Èfik in and around the southeastern port city of Old Calabar. It then examines archival evidence to highlight the ways that compounds have been rhetorically constructed by European observers and post-independence scholars. It concludes that a more productive reading results from understanding the compound as a zone of entanglement ensnaring real, imagined, and often contradictory constructions.**

Despite Nigeria's tremendous ethnolinguistic and geographic diversity, the country's domestic environments are often organized in similar compound configurations. Surrounded by a high wall or fence and enclosing a small open-air courtyard, compounds can be found in cultural traditions as diverse as those of the Hausa, Yorùbá, and Ìgbo.

In particular, the Èfik of southeastern Nigeria have a long history of constructing walled compounds. Dominating the landscape of the earliest fishing villages in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these served as interiorized zones protected and set apart from the existing coastline and forests (FIG. 1). Composed of local mud, thatch, and mangrove posts, and housing a lineage-based social structure in compartmentalized rooms, the single-story mud and stick structures provided a less permanent built environment than those of the more centralized trading kingdoms to the west. But the very impermanence of these structures afforded the constantly fissioning and fusing social groups of the region a degree of flexibility in their built environment — a condition that was particularly apparent in and around the port city of Old Calabar.<sup>1</sup> In a critical context, the continual process of fragmentation and movement displayed by the Èfik contests the distorted image of Africa as a static entity. However, the ephemeral quality of this building tradition has also presented scholars with the challenge of preserving and legitimizing these structures.

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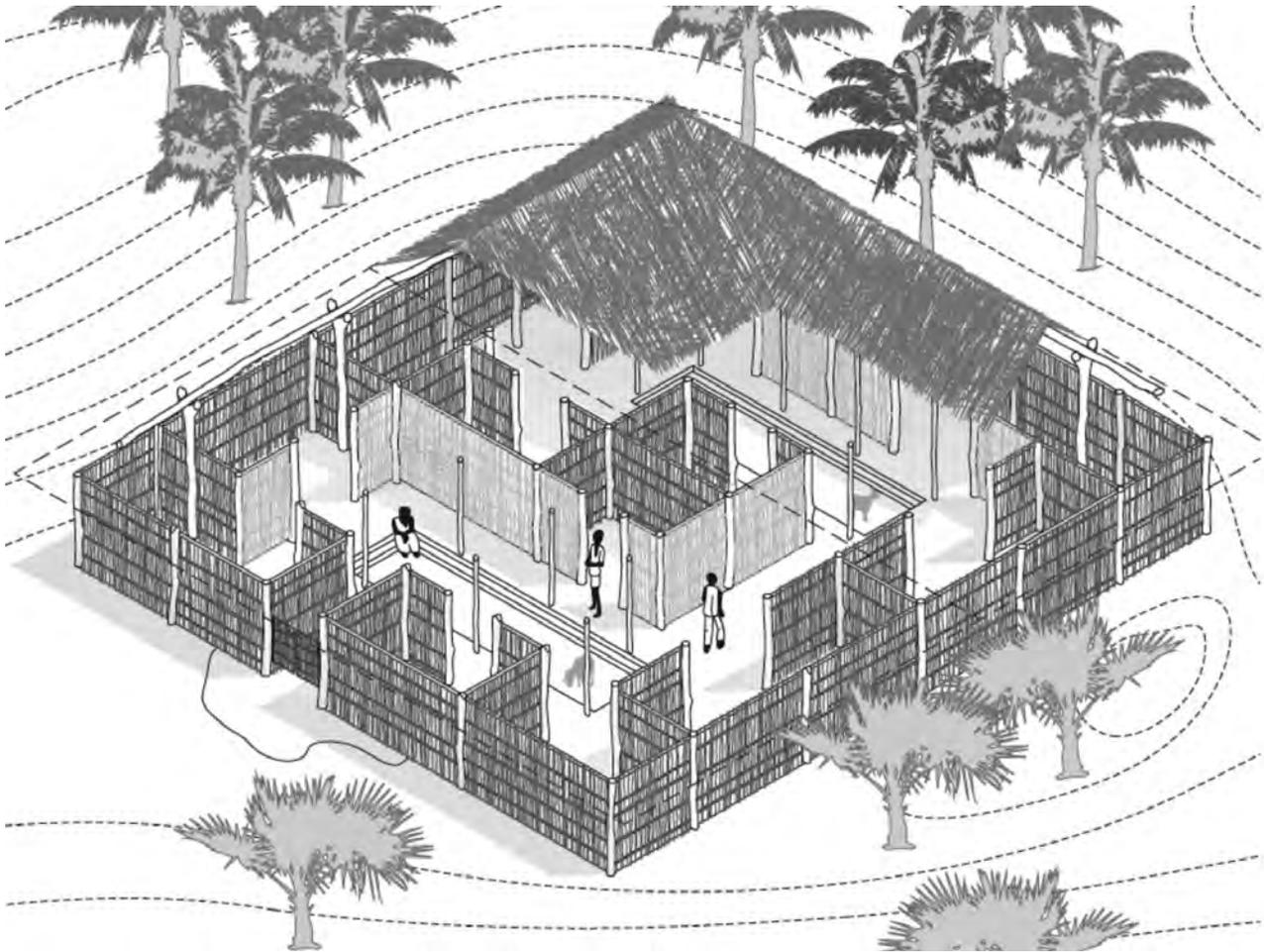


FIGURE 1. Traditional Èfik compound, axonometric diagram. Drawing by Joseph Godlewski and Scott Krabath.

Throughout history, the nature of these urban configurations has been interpreted in vastly different ways. European observers first conceived of compounds such as those of the Èfik as timeless spaces that were home to a litany of uncivilized practices. To these commentators, compounds were viewed as theaters of barbarity that justified both the institution of slavery and the missionary enterprise. However, as if to reverse hundreds of years of epistemic violence, a new generation of scholars, writing after Nigerian independence, came to conceive of compounds as symbols of national identity and primordial tradition. Close readings of local cultures and their spatial practices were central to the construction of the emerging national imaginary in anti-colonial and post-independence Nigeria. For instance, the opening chapters of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* take place in a precolonial Ìgbo compound much like the one the eighteenth-century author Olaudah Equiano lived in before he was captured and sold into slavery.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the outspoken Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti led his resistance to the Obasanjo military regime in the 1970s from his controversial bohemian compound,

Kalakuta Republic, in Lagos (FIG. 2).<sup>3</sup> Summarizing his thoughts on this complex, Kuti commented,

*The idea of creating a place open to every African escaping persecution began taking shape in this my mind. Was that my first pan-Africanist idea? Maybe. At any rate, that's how the idea of setting up a communal compound — one like Africans had been living in for thousands of years — came about.*<sup>4</sup>

In general terms, the form of the compound provided the newly minted Nigerian state a marker of national identity and a link to the distant and distinctly noncolonial past. Yet the absence of physical historical evidence of such places has posed a problem for advocates of this position, especially with regard to the noncentralized societies of country's southeast. One result has been to foreground analysis of the compound's discursive existence in historical texts and images. However, as a rhetorical construction, its interpretation has been pulled between ethnocentric descriptions of a primitive building culture creat-



**FIGURE 2.** *Kalakuta Museum. Residence of late Afrobeat king, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, situated at 18 Gbemisola Street, Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria. Source: starconnectmedia.com, “Fela’s Residence Evolves into International Museum.”*

ing sites of barbarous, inhuman acts and nationalist discourses extolling a symbol of authentic Nigerian culture, free trade, cultural unification, and environmental coexistence.

Such conflict indicates how the discursive site of the compound is itself a contested space that is as integral to its meaning and to processes of identity formation as the actual physical artifact. Indeed, commenting on the intangible quality of the compound as a spatial symbol, the Nigerian architect David Aradeon highlighted the complex roles culture and lifestyle play, noting that the “line between the modern and the traditional is not so clean.”<sup>5</sup> Rather than accepting the either/or proposition presented by Eurocentric and nationalist narratives, it is thus perhaps more productive to understand the compound as a zone of entanglement ensnaring real, imagined, and often contradictory constructions.

“Entanglement” is a word that has recently gained traction in critical theory to describe the generally contentious, unstable politics of space and the binding together of people, ideas and things. To “entangle” — *kòmó* in Èfik — means to foul or involve someone in a complicated circumstance. The term is often used to describe the competing and overlapping interests that constitute territory and their intertwined histories. At its core, it is thus merely a spatial metaphor; but it is one that is particularly useful. For example, the anthropologist Donald Moore has written that entanglement “suggests knots, gnarls, adhesions, rather than smooth surfaces. It is an inextricable interweave that ensnares.”<sup>6</sup> The concept of entanglement, then, can be used to analyze the multiple and differential relationships that constitute a space, without pre-

suming to study them in isolation or reverting to a singular narrative about technological progress.

Likewise, this article builds on the historian Duanfang Lu’s conception of “entangled modernities” in architecture.<sup>7</sup> Gathering the work of many scholars who have challenged universal, Eurocentric conceptions of modernity, the concept emphasizes how modernist architecture was variously adopted, modified and contested in different parts of the world. Thus, postcolonial studies of the built environment have set out to reimagine the bounded spaces of Western knowledge and its monolithic conception of history. In this work, architectural modernity is conceived not as a unidirectional transmission of knowledge from a rational core to an irrational undeveloped periphery, but as a mutually constituted process that resulted in multiple hybridizations and adaptations of regional building traditions. The history of Old Calabar’s compound constructions is replete with examples demonstrating this fraught relationship.

To date, architectural historians of Nigeria have understandably focused on the varied material expressions of the region’s traditional built environments. However, because of the contradictory ways these spaces have been conceived throughout history, this article will argue that is also necessary to examine them as discursive formations constructed as much through images and texts as through actual artifacts. Underscoring such an approach, Nezar AlSayyad has qualified the historian Paul Oliver’s oft-cited conception of tradition in the built environment as being inextricably linked to the transmission of practices over time. He has instead

argued that “tradition more often relies on the continuous ‘representation’ and re-articulation of ideas than it does [the transmission of] practices.”<sup>8</sup> A closer examination of the historical discourse surrounding traditional Nigerian compounds thus reveals a much more complicated picture than does the examination of remnant physical structures.

### ÈFIK COMPOUNDS

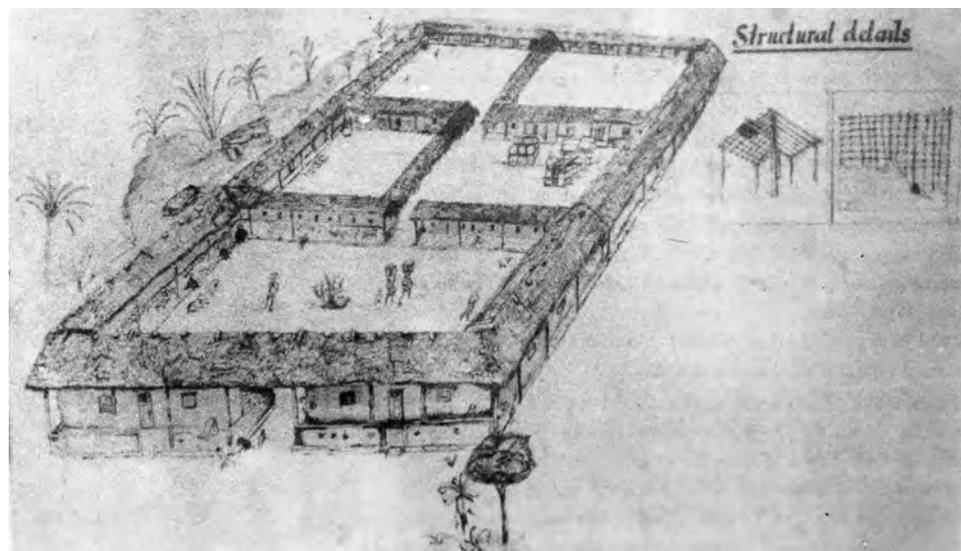
Although the city of Old Calabar has garnered substantial scholarly interest as an important slave-trading and palm-oil port, its architecture and urbanism has rarely been a concern of local studies. Likewise, although Nigeria’s diverse architectural traditions have been extensively documented by a number of scholars, the built environments of Old Calabar and its various ethnic groups have not been included in their work.<sup>9</sup> For example, the architectural historian Kevin Carroll classified Nigeria’s ancient architecture into two main types — that of the forest and that of the savannah.<sup>10</sup> He then attributed rectangular architectural forms with leaf-thatched roofs to “forest buildings” and round forms and grass thatching to buildings of the savannah. The areas of southeastern Nigeria are left blank on Carroll’s map, however, despite the fact that the architecture of Old Calabar clearly fits the “forest building” mold.<sup>11</sup> The historians Zbigniew R. Dmochowski and S.O. Izomoh made similar nationwide studies of Nigeria’s building heritage, but also failed to include the building traditions of Old Calabar or the Èfik.<sup>12</sup>

Comparatively, the traditional architecture of the Èfik in Old Calabar is most similar to that of the Ìgbo.<sup>13</sup> A number of factors may explain this resemblance. The Ìgbo are a nearby ethnic group with a history of trade, cultural exchange, and migration with the Èfik. They also shared a similar rainfor-

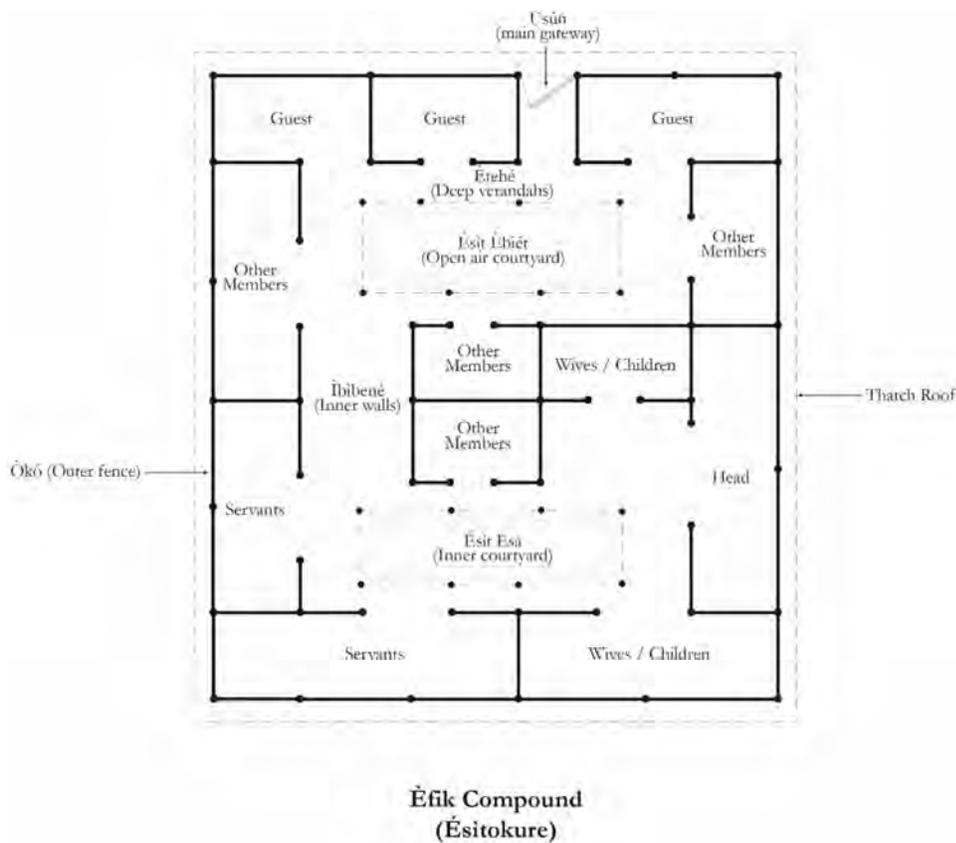
est climate and riverine environment and developed a similar noncentralized political organization. The building traditions of both groups centered on internalized courtyard environments surrounded by a walled complex of compartmentalized spaces. Ìgbo compounds, like those of the Èfik, were thus secure, privatized environments for daily life, trade, and ceremonial activities. The greatest difference between the two “forest building” cultures lay in the construction of walls. The walls of Ìgbo compounds were primarily thick and made entirely of mud, while the compounds of Old Calabar were comprised of a lighter, frame construction with mud applied.

In written and oral histories, Èfik compounds were variously referred to as “houses,” “natives’ huts,” and “yards.”<sup>14</sup> In Èfik, they were called *èsitokure*, *èsituruà* [trade compound], or *ufòk* [house]. Composed of materials culled from the local forests, their mud, bamboo, and thatch construction represented a response to the ecology and humid climate from which they emerged.<sup>15</sup> As such, they were impermanent structures in need of cyclical maintenance. On the other hand, because they were smaller in scale and did not require imported or permanent materials, a large amount of time, or a hefty workforce to build, they required very little in terms of up-front capital investment or risk.

Formally, such compounds were low, single-story constructions. A visual display of this spatial pattern can be seen in an undated drawing of an Èfik compound housed at the Old Residency Museum (FIG. 3). On the interior, they presented rectilinear arrangements of rooms situated around open-air courtyards known as *èsit èbiét* or *èsit esa* (FIG. 4).<sup>16</sup> These are the general outlines that frame contemporary understanding of the traditional compounds of Old Calabar in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Physically comparable to the compounds of neighboring groups, they were impermanent enclosures, flexibly arranged spaces utilizing



**FIGURE 3.** Traditional Èfik compound, undated sketch. Source: National Museum at the Old Residency, Calabar, Nigeria.



**FIGURE 4.** Plan of a traditional Èfik compound. Drawing by Joseph Godlewski and Scott Krabath.

local mud and thatch. In this regard, they fundamentally differed from the monumentality and permanence of other coastal building traditions serving centralized states.

As Jean-Paul Bourdier has argued in his study of African dwellings, the built landscapes of these cultures “never physically stand out as the result of a form of humanist centralization.”<sup>17</sup> Instead of presenting themselves as “the materializations of human control over nature, they speak of their cosmic representational nature in their interactions with nature’s vital forces.”<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, socially and historically, Èfik compounds served as highly charged symbolic landscapes, autonomous zones of commerce, and places of worship.

#### THEATERS OF BARBARITY

The growth of the slave and palm-oil trades during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in more documentation of these indigenous environments. Indeed, the compound, or “native hut,” became an object of focus for European observers remarking on local customs. An influx of European slave traders, explorers and missionaries contributed to a mounting reservoir of historical evidence detailing the people, customs and geography of the region. Many of these accounts were not impartial and did not attempt to hide their

political agendas or personal prejudices. While flawed, these accounts were pivotal in shaping Western perceptions about a distant culture deemed backwards and inferior.

Many scholars have since rightly interrogated these commentaries as Eurocentric and disparaging of indigenous culture.<sup>19</sup> Yet, another weakness of these reports as sources is that the spatial dynamics of the places described were often incidental or anecdotal to economic, political or religious concerns. An epiphenomenon to their primary focus, architectural and urbanistic characteristics were either described in formalistic terms or subordinated to lurid descriptions of events they ostensibly facilitated. As serious as these shortcomings are, they are not sufficient to completely dismiss these accounts, however. Instead, if read critically, they offer a valuable record of both the people producing them and the environments they describe. They should thus be read as spaces of encounter in their own right, traces of the entangled history shared by the observer and observed.

Typically, such early accounts were concerned with establishing a sharp divide between civilization and the social conditions Western travelers encountered along the western coast of Africa. It should be said that this was often more an exercise of providing moral justification for their authors’ trading or missionary activities than it was about scholarly curiosity. Traditional compounds, or “natives’ huts,” became discursive

battlegrounds and theaters for all sorts of barbarous activities carried out by an inferior race. The Nigerian historian Geoffrey Nwaka has thus correctly observed the “heavy imprint of colonial history” on Calabar’s built environment, noting that early European observers “criticized the structure and pattern of settlements in the town, as low, mud-plastered, palm thatched and poorly ventilated houses grouped in small yards, separated by narrow, crooked, and dirty alley-ways.”<sup>20</sup>

Evidence for this claim comes from a broad list of sources. In 1786, for example, the sailor Henry Schroeder, a contemporary of the local slave trader Antera Duke, described at length the “putrescent” conditions within the low “wickerwork” houses surrounded by walls.<sup>21</sup> He described the people of Old Calabar as “degraded beings . . . kept in the most abject mental darkness,” who were inclined to publicly decapitate criminals and sacrificial pawns.<sup>22</sup> His vivid account also included descriptions of the fractious ways in which towns broke apart and new ones were created. Schroeder wrote of the leader of Enshee Town (Henshaw Town), Tom Henshaw, as a man of “martial enterprise, and independent spirit” who opposed the government of Duke Town and established his own.<sup>23</sup> While Old Calabar maintained indigenous territorial sovereignty during the period of the slave trade, intra-Éfik battles produced a sense of rivalry, instability and impermanence in the urban landscape. And to outside observers, this was evidence of a primitive, scattered city of “unenlightened minds.”<sup>24</sup>

In 1807 the trader James Grant visited Old Calabar on one of the final slaving voyages to leave Britain. During his visit he wrote, “Calabar consists of a great number of low thatched houses, or huts, like those common on the coast, and is irregularly scattered amongst trees that a stranger may easily lose his way.”<sup>25</sup> Consistent with the tortured logic of slavers that their work was a means of saving Africans from “human sacrifices” and “barbarous exhibitions,” Grant described the graphic details of a public decapitation of a woman in Old Calabar. With regard to the bloody head, he wrote, “when it is instantaneously pulled away by the rope, and, while yet warm, is tossed in the air, and played with like a ball.”<sup>26</sup> Slavery, for these observers, was conveniently positioned as a lesser evil to the cruelty of this primitive culture.

The mixture of debased ritualistic spectacles, primitive building technologies, and lack of rationalized order were signs of an inferior cultural milieu in need of civilizing. Visiting Creek town in 1828, the blind traveler James Holman remarked, “there is little interest to be found in a black town, the huts are all the same plan; and the streets rugged and narrow.”<sup>27</sup> And, describing a meeting of Duke Ephraim’s wives in his compound, he wrote that “about sixty Queens, besides little Princes and Princesses, with a number of slave girls who wait upon them” live in a “square formed of mud huts, with a communication from the back part of the house.”<sup>28</sup> He continued, “These people practice many other superstitious customs, equally dreadful, and I am persuaded that it needs but a recital of them, to prove how much they

stand in want of the benevolent instructions of Christian missionaries.”<sup>29</sup>

In a less stereotypical account, the explorer Henry Nicholls detailed the materials and process involved in building a compound. He described nearby Aqua Town as “composed of a number of low houses, supported by mangrove sticks, and covered over with bamboo laid across afterward with bamboo leaves.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Thomas Hutchinson remarked that “The houses are built by forming walls of interlaced palisading, which are plastered inside and outside with mud, technically styled “wattle-and-dab.”<sup>31</sup> He continued, “The native architects have not yet arrived at the civilisation of a chimney.”<sup>32</sup> As he concluded, “The higgledy-piggledy order of architecture prevails throughout.”<sup>33</sup> While these accounts provide invaluable historical records of building practices in Old Calabar, details are often buried in exhibitionist layers of rhetorical bombast.

In the early nineteenth century at least two accounts discussed the courtyard structure of compounds. In 1830 the explorer Richard Lander compared the courtyards of Old Calabar with those of the Yorùbá. Consistent with earlier accounts, he described how “The houses are built in an irregular manner, leaving very little room for the road between them, which at that time was exceedingly wet and dirty.” He continued,

*The duke’s house is situate (sic) in the middle of the town, and like the rest is built of clay. It consists of several squares, round each of which is a verandah, similar to the houses in Yarriba (Yorùbá). The centre square is occupied by the duke and his wives, the others being the abode of his servants and attendants, which altogether amount to a considerable number. Immediately opposite to the first square, which forms the entrance to his residence, stands a small tree, profusely decorated with human skulls and bones.*<sup>34</sup>

In the 1840s, and taking a more negative stance, the surgeon W.F. Daniell commented that “The houses in Old Calabar, belonging to the middle and upper classes, are inferior in every point of view to those of any other nation in this part of Africa, not only in the firm and compact arrangement of the building materials, but in the appropriate style of architecture, which conjoins strength and solidity with neatness in execution.”<sup>35</sup> Daniell was drawing an immediate distinction between the permanent architectures of other parts of Africa and the inferior dwellings of Calabar, which he judged to be flimsy, loose, sloppy and inappropriate.

Missionaries had a similar outlook on the architecture of Old Calabar, though their perspective was shaped not by the creation of markets, but by the spread of the gospel. On his arrival in 1846, Reverend Hope Masterton Waddell thus observed that “Duke Town presented but a poor appearance. . . . The houses were low, mud-plastered, and palm-thatched,

without windows, but each with a capacious door, leading into a small court-yard."<sup>36</sup> He then contrasted these houses to the clean and upright quality of the mission houses being built (FIG. 5).

Mary Slessor, now considered a kind of patron saint of Calabar for her role in eradicating the practice of twin baby (*âmanambâ*) sacrifice, was taken to Duketown by the missionary Euphemia Miller Sutherland (known as Mrs. Suerland) in 1876. Slessor's biographer, James Buchan, described her first impression of a stagnant, primitive society beholden to crude superstitions:

*Mary found that it had not changed much since Hope Waddell's day. The family huts were still built around interconnecting yards and were decorated in the way in which he described. The backs of the huts were presented to the lanes and there was usually only one entrance to both huts and yards. This was guarded by watchmen to keep out human intruders and by charms to keep out evil spirits. In a corner of the main yard there was always a shrine dedicated to family ancestors with offerings of fruits and vegetables in front of it and the remains of the latest sacrifice — usually a chicken — hanging beside them. Naked children, goats, dogs, and chickens wandered through the yards so that they were usually dirty, stinking, and buzzing with flies. But the huts were relatively clean inside.<sup>37</sup>*

Another Slessor biographer, William Pringle Livingstone, described the architecture as "a collection of mud-dwellings thatched with palm leaf, slovenly and sordid, and broiling in the hot rays of the brilliant sun." Describing Slessor's response, he continued, "What a land she had to make her dwelling-place — a land formless, mysterious, terrible, ruled by witchcraft and the terrorism of secret societies; where the skull was worshiped and blood sacrifices were offered to jujus."<sup>38</sup> And as the traveler Mary Kingsley, writing years later, commented,

*[T]hese houses being erected haphazard among the surrounding native built houses did not lend that air of improvement to the town that they might otherwise have done if the chiefs had studied more uniformity in the building of the town, and arranged for wider streets in places of alley-ways many of which are not wide enough to let two Calabar ladies, (usually of noble proportions), to pass one another without the risk of their finery being drabbed with streaks of yellow mud from the adjoining walls.<sup>39</sup>*

Of course, not all European accounts of compounds pouped such stereotypical views. In fact, some provide surprising insights into the tectonics of construction, materiality, and spatial organization. In their position as outsiders, they were able to see what an insider might have taken for

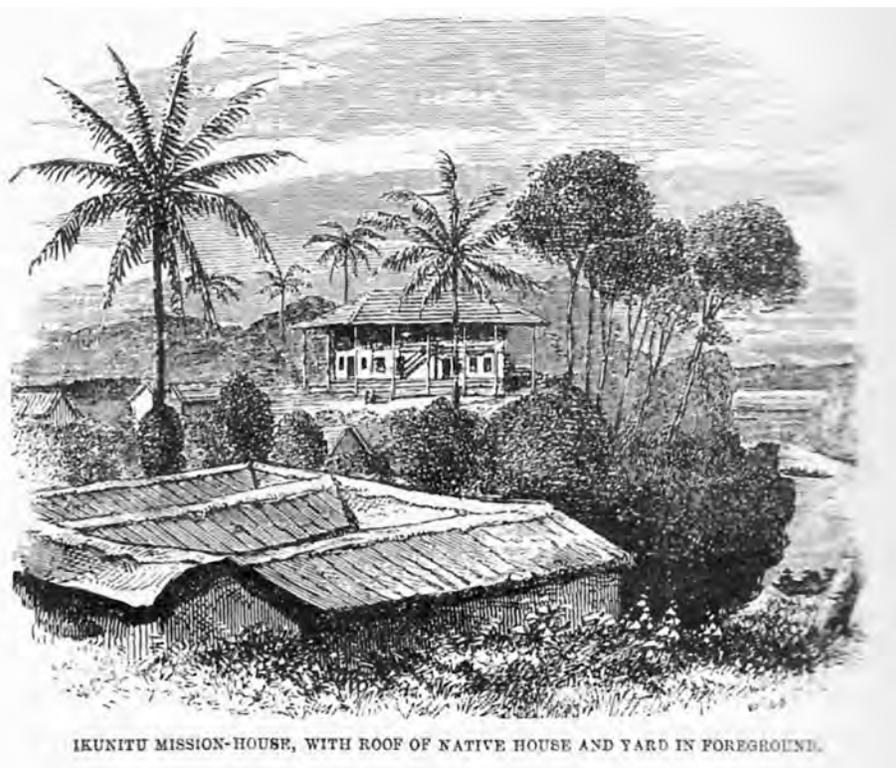


FIGURE 5. "Ikunitu Mission-House, with roof of a native house and yard in the foreground." Source: Waddell, *Twenty-Nine Years in the West Indies and Central Africa 1829–1858*, p.596.

granted. Thus, despite his disparaging description of Duke-town's "poor appearance" and "crooked" and "dirty" passageways, the missionary Waddell in 1846 essentially described the "paradox" of houses of Old Calabar in a way that might be regarded today as a precursor to the modernist "free plan" condition, as theorized by Le Corbusier, in which the building envelope is liberated from structural constraints:

*"Gentlemen" have usually houses in town as well as on their plantations, dividing their time between their trading and farming operations. The Calabar houses are well constructed, considering the insufficient materials employed, and well adapted to the climate and state of the country. They consist each of a quadrangular court-yard, surrounded by ranges of apartments, which all open into it, while one main gate, kept by a porter, opens into the street. No windows exist, except one little peep-hole in the gable at each end. An "aumbong" has usually several of these yards opening into each other, for his servants, wives, and trade goods. . . . The construction of a Calabar house exhibits a paradox. In other countries the walls support the roof, there the roof supports the walls. The explanation is simple. The roof rests not on the walls, but on the rows of strong posts which surround the house inside and out, and are fixed deep in the ground. The walls stand six feet within these, and very frail, such as might be called lath and plaster. Their hold of the ground is very slight, while the upright sticks are bound securely to the roof, so they cannot fall, though soon decayed at the foot.<sup>40</sup>*

Writing at the turn of the century, the missionary Hugh Goldie offered a comparative, albeit Orientalist, description of the central courtyards of the compounds of Old Calabar.

*The apartments are built in Eastern style, round a court or yard, without windows, each apartment opening into the court, and all having a common entrance from the street. In this manner court can be added to court, to provide the accommodation required, and a hundred or more may have their homes in the same premises. In almost every house there is a womens' (sic) yard, corresponding to the harem or zenana of the East. When the walls are finished, a clay bench is commonly formed along the bottom, inside, which, while it gives stability to the wall, forms a convenient seat or bed, as may be required.<sup>41</sup>*

A working definition of the "compound" concept in the West African context was likewise provided by the British colonial official and anthropologist Charles Partridge, whose detailed documentation of artistic traditions in the Cross River region during the early twentieth century is still referenced today. According to Partridge:

*Compound is a word imported from Anglo-Indian parlance, in which it signifies "the enclosed ground, whether garden or waste, which surrounds an Anglo-Indian house." In West Africa, however, it is applied to the yard or ground, whether rectangular, circular, or irregular, which the huts themselves surround. The fronts of the huts all opening into the central yard, their backs form the surrounding wall of the enclosure. When the huts are too few for this purpose, the gaps between are filled up with a high palisade of stakes or lengths of timber. There is generally one principal entrance to every compound, and many of the huts have between them and the next hut a small exit which gives ready access to the latrine or rubbish-heap in the adjoining bush; it is also used to escape an attacking enemy. There are no windows of any kind in the back walls of the huts that form the enclosure. In the central yard stand shrines and miniature huts erected to their deities; also a few palms and other trees; and here at night are kept the livestock. Sometimes the chief or head of the family lives in a hut built in the middle of this yard. Usually, however, he occupies one of the side huts, while the others are severally occupied by his wives, children, and other relations. Narrow lanes run between compounds, a collection of which forms a village or town.<sup>42</sup>*

This formal description, though short of analytical detail, provides insight into the privatized space created by the compound and offered a sketch of its social organization. Partridge spent three months as an assistant district commissioner in Calabar in 1902. Countless documents repeated the elements evident in Partridge's description: a surrounding wall of enclosure, an internalized space surrounded by huts providing protection from a seemingly hostile exterior environment and a kinship-based social hierarchy. While there was a tendency in sources to view this family unit as a stable entity, Partridge was quick to acknowledge the tremendous changes circulating through these spaces. On Calabar, he remarked, "the place is developing very rapidly, and old institutions and old customs are giving way to a new and better order of things."<sup>43</sup>

Most, though not all, representations of traditional compounds by precolonial and colonial observers tended to denigrate their materiality and the social organizations they contained. The "higgledy-piggledy order" therefore represented the European perception of the architecture of Old Calabar. Littered with language about primitives and barbarians, sensational and lurid accounts almost exclusively branded the indigenous built environment as a backward other to English built propriety. Often intended to shock, these sometimes garish representations created a knowledge space of their own.

In the absence of preserved monuments or visual documentation of actual historic spaces of Old Calabar, after centuries these representations of the compound persist as

a contentious rhetorical construction. And while originally intended to shape perceptions in abolitionist and Victorian Europe, they have now taken on a second life as a focus of refutation for post-independence scholars intent on recontextualizing their claims.

#### POSTCOLONIAL SYMBOLS OF AUTONOMY

On October 1, 1960, Nigeria gained independence from Britain. Until that point, European accounts of the traditional built environments of the region had tended to distort, disparage and misrepresent the “natives’ huts” as a backward, unclean, primitive technology in need of civilization and rationalization. In contrast, post-independence scholars made a concerted effort to relegitimize their history and local customs. Thus began an all-out pursuit for ideas that could bring together the collective imagination of the country after years of colonial repression.

Writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a collective of historians known as the Ibadan School deliberately rejected Eurocentric analytical perspectives, emphasizing instead the primacy of “internal forces” in the social and political history of the country. The group promoted the use of oral histories, indigenous scholars, and a critical examination of European sources and documents to undo the epistemic violence wrought by centuries of foreign literature.<sup>44</sup> There was a decidedly nationalist air to many of these writings, some of which sought to resuscitate what was deemed to be an authentic Nigerian culture. In aggregate, however, this scholarship tended to fashion what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have called an “invented tradition” to establish a sense of continuity with the past.<sup>45</sup>

The traditional compound, upheld as an authentic spatial artifact native to Nigeria, thus became an important component in what Benedict Anderson has termed the “imagined community” of post-independence Nigeria.<sup>46</sup> In this role, it was cast as a unifying symbol for one of the most populous countries in Africa, one comprised of tremendous ethnolinguistic diversity and differential experience with British colonialism. Thus, in Achebe and Kuti’s use, the imagined space of the compound reflected on the country’s past and projected toward its future, connecting groups across ethnic lines.

The anthropologist David Scott has described such anti-colonial stories as “largely depend[ent] upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving.”<sup>47</sup> This utopian horizon is evident in the literature marshaling the compound as a unifying spatial concept in late twentieth century Nigeria. A closer examination of Kuti’s conceptualization of the “communal compound” as an escape from persecution thus reveals that the frame of reference goes beyond that of the modern Nigerian nation-state. What at first seems to be a strategic conceptualization of the compound as an anti-colonial symbol of

autonomy is actually one which is thoroughly anti-statist as well. The notion of the Nigerian compound as a space which actively seeks to disembed itself from federal governmental control is one which then resurfaced in the context of a liberalizing economy in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>48</sup>

In the absence of existing structures from Nigeria’s pre-colonial and early colonial period, the space of the traditional compound can be conceptualized as a discursive terrain pulled between the dismissive Orientalist proclamations of primarily European observers and the heroicized accounts of post-independence scholars. The precolonial Èfik compound, therefore, can be viewed as a literary construction. The traces of this discursive formation are shaped both by scholars struggling to come to terms with Nigerian identity and local culture and foreign observers casting it as a strange, frozen, underdeveloped and uncivilized space of the “other.”

In the 1960s the architectural historian Z.R. Dmochowski conducted fieldwork in the newly independent nation of Nigeria to document its rich architectural traditions. Dmochowski was subsequently permitted to create the Museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture (MOTNA) in the northern city of Jos, which catalogued Nigeria’s building traditions. He further composed a wealth of meticulously measured drawings and photographs seeking to survey the region’s diverse building customs. Part of this documentation was the Nigerian walled compound.

Though numerous groups, including the Èfik, were excluded from it, Dmochowski’s work made tremendous strides in conveying the heterogeneity of Nigerian architectural achievements as well as establishing the grounds for future research on the country’s built environment.<sup>49</sup> Hausa, Yorùbá, Bini, Ìgbo, and Jaba traditions were all precisely represented in his introductory publication on traditional Nigerian architecture.<sup>50</sup> However, despite differences in geography, social organization, and religious affiliation, a formal reflection on Dmochowski’s work concluded that “compounds . . . surrounded by a high wall or fence” were a common element in Nigerian house plans.<sup>51</sup>

In general character, then, the architecture of Old Calabar, like that of the Ìgbo, consisted of buildings made of mud and stick construction. The houses were erected by communal effort, and each owner was, usually, his own architect. This composite system of wooden strips and mud was flexible and expedient method for building walls and enclosing space. Because of the humid climate, the buildings had a rather short maintenance cycle. However, walls made using this process allowed continuous ventilation.

In the decades following independence there was proliferation of scholarship on Old Calabar. The establishment of the University of Calabar in 1973 further abetted efforts to devote attention to the region. Some of this work directly addressed the city’s building traditions, though it often replicated Eurocentric conceptions of heritage preservation. Thus, in the relative absence of historic traditional archi-

ecture, imported models of wooden houses and colonial compounds assumed a privileged position. The tendency of this literature has likewise been either utopian or nationalistic in orientation, silencing historical conflict and focusing on discrete formal elements.

In many ways, these postcolonial imaginings were a corrective, offering a necessary representational recalibration of European rhetorical caricatures. However, where these earlier ethnocentric accounts had dismissed local traditions as heathen and unworthy of serious study, postcolonial literature tended to extol the traditional walled compound as self-sufficient and organized around traditional family structures. As anyone who has lived in a family can attest, though, such extended households are not without inner conflict, and are frequently riven by all sorts of disagreements, inefficiencies, and fissionings. Yet, despite such inherent fractiousness, the postcolonial literature exhibited a marked tendency to venerate lineage descent and the family as a harmonic social unit.

In the case of Calabar, the importance of Efiang Upkong Aye's 1967 book *Old Calabar through the Centuries* cannot be understated.<sup>52</sup> Aye's seminal text presented a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature on the city as well as one of the first attempts to integrate oral traditions and theories about Calabar's early ethnic settlements. Certainly, the book is an invaluable source about regional traditions and the Èfik language; but it was not without flaws. For example, Aye's take on the Palestinian origins of the Èfik has been refuted by many scholars, and his readings of early missionary and trading accounts were often oversimplified. In another instance, Aye's mistranscription of the quote, cited earlier, from W.F. Daniell's 1846 text was revealing of an underlying stance toward history. Instead of referring to Daniell's view that "The houses in Old Calabar, belonging to the middle and upper classes, are *inferior* . . . to those of any other nation in this part of Africa," he cited Daniell as describing them as "*superior* in every point of view . . ." (emphasis added).<sup>53</sup> Whether the word inversion was intentional or not is not the issue; what is significant is an undercurrent of semantic transposition that was characteristic of most late colonial and postcolonial scholars of Old Calabar.

In 1986 the National Museum at the Old Residency opened to the public with a seminar on the "History of Old Calabar." Included in the proceedings were articles devoted to the city's architectural heritage from precolonial times to independence. While valuable as compendiums for future research, the work by several admitted nonexperts put forth oversimplified versions of the city's architectural forms. Nnimo Bassey's "The Architecture of Old Calabar," for example, classified the buildings of the city into "unification," "fragmentation," and "colonial" periods. An original condition of indigenous unification was thus seen to have deteriorated into colonial fragmentation.

Years later, Philip Ajekigbe proposed a similar periodization of architectural form to that of Bassey, arguing that

each compound during the precolonial "unification" period "constituted a micro-unit capable of independent existence and expansion."<sup>54</sup> What exactly the compound was unifying, however, was unclear, and the question of independent existence has since been undermined by scholars who have demonstrated that these spaces were the subject of much contention and constantly in flux. Moreover, despite these disputes, individual compounds remained thoroughly networked and interdependent in the interest of trade. What is most problematic about this sort of classification, however, is that, by nostalgically privileging and elevating an era prior to European contact, these scholars ironically removed indigenous agency from later periods of fragmentation, labeling Europeans as the sole catalysts of change. The spaces and inhabitants of later periods were thus branded as victims of foreign intervention, which they certainly were not.

Bassey portrayed compounds as precolonial "unified" constructs that were "congenial to the people and sympathetic to the environment." In doing so, he characterized social life during this time as "communal," and euphemistically labeled domestic slaves "house helps."<sup>55</sup> Bassey cited the Èfik folklore classic *Edikot Nwed Mbuk [A Book of Stories]* as a source for details regarding the construction of compounds.<sup>56</sup> According to his narrative, the compounds were thus the natural result of a strong connection between local cultural traditions and the environment. Further fusing this bond, the historian David Lishilinimle Imbua later called the families occupying these compounds "bio-social groups." As naturalized, unified entities, they were thus free of conflict and any of the "uncivilized" activities recorded by European observers. Compounds, it was argued, were stable entities that became casualties to the spatial violence wrought by colonial intervention.<sup>57</sup>

Bassey further drew out this distinction by citing Ruth Benedict's classic text *Patterns of Culture*. In it, Benedict argued that architects during this era had a "real and positive relationship in which they lived."<sup>58</sup> But, as an anthropologist, Benedict was, in fact, opposed to precisely the kind of romantic utopianism displayed by Bassey, and which was a feature of many other postcolonial renditions of the traditional Èfik compound. Indeed, Benedict famously argued against a return to such simple, archaic notions, in favor of understanding the rich diversity of cultural processes at work.<sup>59</sup>

Interpreting precolonial compounds as simple homeostatic entities also undermines any understanding of them as spaces of domestic dispute and internecine warfare. In fact, it is essential to regard the space of the compound as contested and processual in nature. Yet, while by definition compounds were formed from admixtures of different, and perhaps conflicting elements, this description didn't fit with the sanitized version put forth by many post-independence scholars.

Similar to Bassey's stable rendition of the compound, Monday Efiang Noah thus claimed that the "homogeneity" of these spaces wasn't challenged until they were "undermined by expansion" and "segmentation" associated with the rise of

the slave trade.<sup>60</sup> However, tagging prior compounds as “homogenous” environments free of segmentation is misleading and obscures the socio-spatial dynamism, political conflict, and demographic diversity of this era. Associating the advent of segmentation and conflict with the arrival of slave traders is thus an oversimplification of a process already at work in the early phases Old Calabar’s history. Imbua, for example, more recently argued, “There is no doubt that intertribal wars in the Cross River region predated the coming of Europeans.”<sup>61</sup>

Further, well-documented practices of human sacrifice and slavery were systematically unrepresented in the optimistic post-independence imaginings of the compound. The historian Robin Law commented on this tendency:

*Human sacrifice is seen as self-evidently wicked, and therefore not congruent with the essentially sympathetic picture of pre-colonial West African societies which these authors seek to project. The problem of human sacrifice is therefore both minimized and externalized, reducing the moral guilt and transferring it as far as possible onto non-African societies.*<sup>62</sup>

Thus, while early European accounts often fixated on these violent practices, later scholars necessarily elided important socio-spatial dynamics in sanitized histories which conveniently fit the need for a new nationalist imaginary.

In the same 1986 National Museum proceedings, Tonye Braide and V.I. Ekpo’s “Notes on the Preservation of Vanishing Monuments of Old Calabar” argued that traditional compounds represented the “unadulterated social life in the sub-region.”<sup>63</sup> As they observed, these vanishing monuments “hold the memories of the early beginning of this great nation.” And they cited the need to preserve the traditional built environment, which they argued provided a series of “autonomous and self-sufficient units.”<sup>64</sup> Such a claim, however, directly contradicts the conclusions of the economic historian A.G. Hopkins, who argued persuasively that during the sixteenth century the economy was “by no means self-sufficient.”<sup>65</sup> Oral histories and economic historians of Old Calabar have thus described a web of exchanges that took place in a basic distribution system.<sup>66</sup> Rather than autonomous internalized spaces, compounds at this time are better understood as calibrated nodes in a network of small-scale trading states.

Reflecting on what he termed the “nativist” response to Eurocentric literature on Africa, Kwame Anthony Appiah has noted that such critiques still ultimately “inhabit a Western architecture.”<sup>67</sup> Rather than taking an Afrocentric position preoccupied with legitimating ancient histories, he has thus advocated recognizing the multicultural and hybrid nature of African culture.

Following this critique, it is possible to observe that while post-independence scholarship on the history of Old Calabar has been a necessary corrective to its precolonial and colonial predecessors, it has often advocated essential-

ist readings of identity. Through the lens of these scholars, the traditional Èfik compound was elevated from a primitive and debased indigenous form to a naturalized, self-sufficient symbol of “national individuality” worthy of preservation.<sup>68</sup> Yet, these accounts, which stressed the unity, communalism and self-sufficiency of compounds, presented a utopic vision of an indigenous built form. And among its other deficiencies, such a view of the imagined compound overlooked the arrangement’s fluctuating and diverse identities as well as the tensions and violence which constituted it.

#### ZONES OF ENTANGLEMENT

Considering this record, it becomes evident that it is necessary to pay particular attention to what Greig Crysler has termed “the historically and socially situated nature of discourse” when analyzing representations of the traditional walled compound in Old Calabar.<sup>69</sup> Much has been written about the traditional Èfik compounds of precolonial Old Calabar — though, tellingly, most of this documentation has emerged since the precolonial time period. In particular, travelers, colonial officials, and anthropologists in the nineteenth century sought to document the space of the compound, and they often cast it as a static and disorganized entity, contrasting it to the “planned” forms of Western development. But because the literature describing the spatial dynamics of these configurations has been scattered, contested, and written for different purposes, it is difficult to get a precise understanding of how they worked. A number of mischaracterizations, evident in colonial and postcolonial writings about Old Calabar architecture and urbanism, have thus unwittingly been repeated.

The imprecision in all these descriptions seems to cluster around three interrelated adjectives: traditional, unplanned, and decentralized. Early European accounts cast the space of Old Calabar as an unplanned zone of violence and death; likewise, the traditional built environment of Old Calabar was described as primitive and backwards. In contradistinction, post-independence scholars viewed compounds as innovative, decentralized, and self-sufficient units. The compound was thus elevated to a naturalized national symbol. A less sanguine account, however, is necessary in order to understand the socio-spatial dynamics of the compound. And though the compound has historically been pulled between discursive poles, it is important to understand it not merely as a rhetorical construction, but as a socially constructed space unto itself. It is thus more productive to read traditional Nigerian compounds as transformative zones of entanglement situated between competing aspirations involving both real and imagined sources.

The notion of entanglement can be used to analyze the multiple and differential relationships that constitute a space without presuming to study them in isolation or reverting to

a singular narrative about technological or national progress or its opposites. This understanding echoes the historian Duanfang Lu's conception of "entangled modernities" in architecture. The history of Old Calabar's built environment provides numerous examples demonstrating the entangled relationship of agents and interests. As Lu has argued, the purpose of conceiving of these entangled modernities is not to simply multiply narratives, but to "enfranchise other

spatial rationalities," recognizing them as legitimate spaces of knowledge production.<sup>79</sup> This cross-cultural perspective is necessary to understand the complex encounters between African and European agents, especially in exchange-heavy sites like the port of Old Calabar. As zones of entanglement, the compound constructions of the Èfik act as anxious, productive sites of identity formation involving competing and overlapping interests.

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11. Ibid., frontispiece.
12. Dmochowski and Moughtin, *The Work of Z.R. Dmochowski*; Dmochowski, *An Introduction to Traditional Nigerian Architecture*; and Izomoh, *Nigerian Traditional Architecture*.
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