



Towards a Theory of Indigenosociomusicology: African Perspectives on Indigenous Knowledge, Social Meaning, and Decolonial Music Studies

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This article proposes Indigenosociomusicology as a theoretical and methodological paradigm designed to reclaim African musical thought from colonial and Eurocentric frameworks. The concept merges indigenous epistemology and sociomusicological inquiry to examine how music operates as a medium of knowledge, spirituality, and social identity within African contexts. Traditional musicology has often emphasised textual analysis, notation, and Western aesthetics, neglecting the oral, communal, and performative dimensions that characterise African musical practice. Indigenosociomusicology seeks to address this imbalance through a framework informed by Ubuntu philosophy, decolonial thought, and indigenous knowledge systems. Drawing on the contributions of scholars such as Nketia, Kofi Agawu, Mapaya, Mhlambi, Mugovhani, Yende, and Chilisa, the article situates African music as a repository of collective memory, ethical norms, and cosmological understanding. It highlights how participatory performance, storytelling, and oral traditions serve as mechanisms for transmitting cultural wisdom and social values. The paper demonstrates that this approach provides a transformative yet focused lens for research, pedagogy, and policy development in African higher education, offering practical strategies for incorporating indigenous music epistemologies into curricula and scholarly discourse. Ultimately, Indigenosociomusicology promotes epistemic sovereignty, ensuring that African musical knowledge is theorised, interpreted, and valued on its own philosophical and cultural terms. Rather than claiming a sweeping revolution, the article presents a grounded framework that enables scholars and practitioners to engage African music holistically, bridging scholarship, pedagogy, and community-based knowledge production.

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Introduction

Perhaps it is prudent to foreground this article with the assertion that the restoration of indigenous musical arts, languages, and cultural heritage should be prioritised. Without such restoration, attempts to redress the dominance of Eurocentric arts, languages, and cultural heritage risk being ineffective. The study of African music has historically been shaped by colonial ideologies, which defined African soundscapes according to Western analytical frameworks (Agawu, 2003; Ballantine, 2012; Mugovhani, 2012; Nketia, 1986; Nzewi, 2007). Early anthropological, ethnomusicological, and



musicological research demonstrates that colonisers deliberately suppressed indigenous musical arts, languages, and cultural heritage, often describing African music as “primitive” or “pre-theoretical,” reflecting epistemic hierarchies embedded within the colonial encounter (Agawu, 2003; Ballantine, 2012; Mugovhani, 2012).

Meki Nzewi’s seminal work, *A Contemporary Study of Musical Arts: Informed by African Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (2007), provides a detailed historical account of these processes. Nzewi (2007, p. 228) observes:

Under the colonial manipulation of Africa, the attitude was that what old Africa could humanly do right was perceived with a jaundiced eye. Extraneous paradigms leading to superficial understanding, interpretation and judgement were applied; Africans were condemned as wrong or backward, not being technologically/scientifically modern, often for the virtues and integrity of their knowledge to be discretely expropriated and reformulated as European-American knowledge inventions. Some African cultural practices, including the musical arts, were rationalised as offering painful or bitter experiences because these were practised for the tremendous lessons for life and value to health that form part of experiencing what is bitter or painful.

Colonial interventions deliberately undermined the intellectual and aesthetic foundations of African musical traditions, privileging Western modernity and rationality. Mugovhani (2012, p. 5) asserts:

...the dominant arts were those of the politically and economically dominant language groups. The music of the other indigenous South African people was seen as primitive, ungodly and devoid of artistic excellence.

These hierarchies positioned European music as a marker of sophistication while reducing African music to rhythmic or percussive elements. The legacy persists in contemporary African music curricula, which often foreground Western classical theory.

Indigenosociomusicology emerges as a theoretical framework addressing these distortions. Traditional musicology and ethnomusicology have inadequately captured the social, ethical, and philosophical complexity of African music, frequently treating African musicians as objects of study rather than co-creators of knowledge (Agawu, 2016; Mwanga, 2025; Nannyonga-Tamusuza & Solomon, 2012). Ekal et al. (2025, p. 16) note:

It is common to undervalue indigenous cultural values in comparison to those imposed by Western influences. This situation is exacerbated by globalisation and the incessant consumption of easily accessible online content. Consequently, this trend may lead to a generation that does not subscribe to any specific set of values.

In their study, Kirui et al. (2025, p. 14) emphasise:

In many African societies, music is not merely an aesthetic artefact but a part and parcel of African life, deeply rooted in social structures, spiritual beliefs, historical consciousness, and philosophical underpinnings. The study of African music performance as an epistemic system – a system of knowledge – necessitates a departure from purely Eurocentric analytical frameworks.

Indigenosociomusicology thus combines indigenous epistemology with social contextualisation, conceptualising music as a living archive of collective knowledge that sustains social structures, transmits ethical values, and preserves historical memory (Mugovhani, 2012). African music becomes



both epistemic and ontological, serving as a mechanism through which communities negotiate meaning, transmit cultural knowledge, and maintain cohesion.

Grounded in Ubuntu philosophy, decolonial thought, indigenous epistemologies, and sociocultural theory, Indigenosociomusicology provides a methodological and theoretical orientation that privileges oral traditions, ethnography, and creative practice. Ubuntu emphasises relationality, empathy, and communal responsibility (Yende, 2024), while decolonial thought restores African scholars' intellectual authority (Chilisa, 2012; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Chilisa (2012, p. 4) observes:

Decolonisation is thus a process of conducting research in such a way that the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalisation are given space to communicate from their frames of reference.

Methodologically, Indigenosociomusicology integrates oral traditions, ethnographic engagement, and creative practice. Oral traditions safeguard narratives, values, and philosophical insights (Agawu, 2003; Mugovhani, 2012; Nzewi, 2014), while ethnography enables participatory co-creation of knowledge. Performance, composition, and improvisation serve both as method and theory, facilitating the interpretation, reconstruction, and innovation of indigenous soundscapes.

The framework's implications extend to higher education, research, and cultural preservation. Curricula that privilege indigenous epistemologies foster cultural literacy, ethical awareness, and creative agency (Agawu, 2003; Mugovhani, 2012; Nzewi, 2014). Participatory research recognises local musicians, elders, and practitioners as co-producers of knowledge, while cultural policy supports archives, documentation, and transmission of musical heritage. Indigenosociomusicology promotes epistemic sovereignty, empowering African scholars to theorise and preserve their music independently of Western paradigms, affirming Africa as a source of theory and intellectual authority. By integrating indigenous epistemologies with sociocultural analysis, Indigenosociomusicology repositions African music as a socially, philosophically, and spiritually embedded practice. It offers a coherent theoretical structure for decolonising African music scholarship, advancing intellectual sovereignty, and reaffirming African musicology as a vibrant, autonomous discipline that contributes meaningfully to global knowledge production.

Literature Review: African and Global Debates, Gaps, and Motivation

This literature review analyses African and global perspectives on music, highlighting gaps and the need for Indigenosociomusicology. It first examines African music as a repository of cultural, social, and spiritual knowledge, emphasising indigenous epistemologies and pedagogy. It then critiques Western-centric musicology and explores decolonial efforts, establishing the theoretical rationale for an African-centred framework in music scholarship.

African Perspectives on Music as Knowledge

The conceptualisation of African music within its indigenous context requires an approach that recognises music as both cultural knowledge and social practice. In African societies, musical expression functions as a medium through which histories, philosophies, and moral systems are encoded and transmitted. Chisa and Ngulube (2017, p. 4) define Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as:

The Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) is a broad concept used mainly in the African context to denote that IK is connected to political, social, spiritual, cultural, legal, environmental and other institutions and, therefore, that this knowledge cannot be viewed as a separate entity, but rather as part of an interconnected system.



This definition emphasises that indigenous musical arts, culture, and heritage form an inseparable triad. African music exists within broader cultural and spiritual frameworks (Agawu, 2003; Lut & Starenkova, 2022; Mapaya, 2014), functioning as both repository and transmitter of moral, historical, and cosmological wisdom. Lut and Starenkova (2022, p. 66) observe:

The connection between culture and language can be traced in such functions of the language as referential, emotive, and metalingual. The former is related to the fact that it describes the situation, behaviour, and mental state when a person uses language.

Like language, African music operates as a communicative system conveying emotional, behavioural, and situational meaning. Music encodes social relationships, moral values, and spiritual beliefs, demonstrating that musical sound is not merely aesthetic but semiotic, communicating lived realities. Nketia (1974) posited that African music serves as a moral language, articulating collective values and shaping social relationships. Mapaya (2014, p. 623) adds:

In other words, apart from perspectives, there is little separating that aspect of the indigenous African music compound, which is somewhat amenable to the Western notion of music... Some of the major peculiarities of indigenous African music... are its logic, discursiveness (or not), contemplativeness (or not) and its functionality.

These peculiarities highlight African music's embeddedness in lived experience, communal participation, and spiritual function, resisting reduction to Western analytical categories. Mugovhani (2012) advocates pedagogies that reflect oral transmission, performance, and communal participation, including call-and-response, apprenticeship, and ensemble work, while preserving heritage and social ethics. Mhlambi (2025) shows African music embodies political and aesthetic agency, while Yende (2024) demonstrates how sacred Zulu polyphony encodes theological, emotional, and communal meanings, reflecting Ubuntu and social interconnectedness.

Together, these perspectives illustrate African music's epistemic and ontological dimensions. Indigenosociomusicology theorises African music within its own epistemological framework, synthesising Nketia's moral theory, Mapaya's critique of Western paradigms, Mugovhani's pedagogical insights, and Mhlambi's and Yende's explorations of sound as consciousness and theology. This framework positions African music as central to knowledge production, a repository of wisdom, and a socially embedded system of knowledge. It advances a holistic understanding of music as art, pedagogy, and philosophy, essential for decolonising musicology and affirming Africa's intellectual and cultural sovereignty.

Global Debates and the Decolonial Turn

Globally, musicology has increasingly been critiqued for its Eurocentric foundations, which historically positioned non-Western musical systems as curiosities rather than legitimate knowledge frameworks. This epistemic imbalance has often reduced African music to isolated rhythmic or aesthetic phenomena, obscuring its cultural, philosophical, and social significance. Agawu (2003) critiques this practice, arguing that Western analytical paradigms fragment African soundscapes, sustaining a colonial hierarchy in which African music is observed rather than interpreted on its own terms. The marginalisation of indigenous African music reflects a long-standing process of epistemic domination. Mugovhani (2018, p. 436) notes:

Until recently in the twenty-first century, there had been no hope that the practitioners of an indigenous African music genre could ever derive a living out of their art. There was also fear that some of the indigenous musical practices were becoming extinct because the few practitioners still available were of advanced age and on the brink of death. Responding to



this eventuality, some contemporary musicians, albeit without formal training, are attempting to preserve indigenous cultural heritage by trying to stimulate the original musical creations of their forebears.

This observation underscores the urgency of safeguarding African musical heritage and situating analyses within indigenous logics rather than Western models, which often fail to capture communal and philosophical nuances. Repositioning African music within its own epistemological and ontological domain is an act of reclamation and intellectual sovereignty. Decolonial thought provides a theoretical foundation for this repositioning. Mignolo (2011) defines “epistemic disobedience” as thinking from the perspective of the oppressed, while Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) emphasises re-centring African thought within global knowledge production. Such approaches restore cultural and intellectual autonomy, asserting that decolonisation must extend beyond political independence to include epistemic liberation. Indigenous music functions as a living archive of memory, emotion, and identity, mediating between the sacred and the social, the historical and the contemporary. Chisa (2012, p. 2) affirms:

Indigenous music is an important component of Indigenous Knowledge. In an indigenous tradition, music expresses cultural belonging. It is also part of ceremony, storytelling, celebration, mourning and telling of events in indigenous people’s lives.

Indigenosociomusicology emerges from this trajectory, synthesising sociological interpretation with indigenous epistemology to frame music as both a social process and a knowledge system. It foregrounds the interconnectedness of performance, spirituality, and community, positioning African music as a site of philosophical inquiry. Globally, it challenges Western universalist assumptions, demonstrating that African theoretical systems generate insights with universal significance, empowering African scholars to reclaim intellectual authority and affirming that all cultures’ music can illuminate societal, ethical, and human truths.

The Role of Technology in Indigenosociomusicology

This literature review underscores the necessity of Indigenosociomusicology by framing African music as both an epistemic and cultural practice, while highlighting the critical role of technology. Technological tools, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), are increasingly vital for preserving, archiving, and disseminating indigenous musical knowledge, supporting creative expression, pedagogy, and global access. Kirui, et al (2025, p. 20) caution:

The intersection of African music and AI is plagued by the dangers of algorithmic bias and epistemic injustice, primarily due to non-representative training sets and the limitations of current AI models. There is a fundamental problem stemming from the over-reliance of AI music models on Western music forms, primarily due to the biased nature of their training data.

Despite these challenges, AI offers transformative potential for safeguarding African musical heritage. Yende and Mugovhani (2022, p. 87) affirm:

AI is essential in preserving the indigenous African cultural heritage, especially at South African universities. Indigenous African cultural heritage plays a vital role, as it is a record of life and history, and an exceptional and irreplaceable source of creativity and inspiration. Indigenous African cultural heritage is an important aspect of life as it gives identity and value that guides Africans in a changing world.

Rutsate (2024) further argues that technology enables global dissemination and creative innovation, allowing indigenous musical forms to reach wider audiences while facilitating pedagogical



engagement. In higher education, digital tools provide experiential learning opportunities, blending traditional practices with contemporary modalities. Integrating technology within Indigenosociomusicology strengthens the framework by addressing contemporary challenges and opportunities. It ensures that African music is preserved, studied, and innovated upon in ways that respect indigenous epistemologies. By foregrounding technology alongside oral, participatory, and performative methodologies, Indigenosociomusicology emerges as a comprehensive framework that reflects contemporary African music scholarship, cultural preservation, and higher education pedagogy, bridging the historical and digital worlds while sustaining epistemic and cultural integrity.

Alternative Perspectives and Global Voices on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Music

While much literature emphasises the decolonial imperative in African musicology, alternative perspectives advocate integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) with Western-centric frameworks, suggesting hybrid models can enrich music education, scholarship, and practice without fully rejecting established methodologies (Kipkoech, 2024; Lal et al., 2024; Sekiwu et al., 2022; Silvestru, 2023). These approaches illustrate that IKS and Western paradigms can complement each other, producing adaptable methods for understanding, teaching, and performing music. Nweke (2024, p. 53) observes:

Integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems into Africa's digital transformation represents a transformative approach that addresses the limitations of Western-centric models. By embracing IKS, Africa can create culturally and environmentally sustainable solutions, challenging global technological norms and offering a new paradigm for digital innovation.

This underscores the potential of hybrid approaches to generate culturally grounded innovations while engaging global standards. Sekiwu et al. (2022) similarly argue that integrating African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK) into university pedagogy is essential for equitable, inclusive, and contextually relevant education. They note that colonial and neocolonial forces historically marginalised AIK, privileging Western epistemologies and dismissing indigenous contributions. Reaffirming AIK enriches scholarship while fostering a balanced, pluralistic knowledge framework.

Comparative studies from Asia, Latin America, and Indigenous communities in North America and Australia demonstrate practical strategies for integrating local knowledge with global frameworks, showing that traditional music can coexist with Western pedagogies or digital technologies without erasing cultural specificity. Weaver (2023, p. 1) notes: "bridging of IKS and WKS represents a process wherein the two systems interface." Furthermore, Abu et al. (2018) highlight epistemological pluralism as a framework that recognises diverse ways of knowing, with bridging adding both intrinsic value through multiple knowledge-holders contributing to research and instrumental value by improving research processes and outcomes. Acknowledging these perspectives allows a nuanced understanding of IKS in music studies. It demonstrates that African music can be theorised within its own epistemology while engaging global traditions. Integrative frameworks, such as Indigenosociomusicology, thus remain locally grounded yet benefit from international insights, ensuring relevance, rigour, and innovation in African music scholarship.

Theoretical Framework: Ubuntu, Decoloniality, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Sociocultural Theories

Indigenosociomusicology is grounded in interconnected theoretical perspectives that provide a comprehensive framework for analysing African music. Central to this approach is recognising the plurality of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) rather than privileging a single philosophy such as Ubuntu (Bhuda & Marumo, 2022; Yende, 2024). Ubuntu, emphasising relationality, empathy, and collective interdependence, frames music as a communal practice in which performance,



participation, and creation sustain social ethics, solidarity, and human interconnectedness. Bhuda and Marumo (2022, p. 19133) note:

Ubuntu is a philosophy, worldview, natural ethics, and way of knowing that originated in Africa. Ubuntu is a viable alternative to the Western world's prevailing individualistic and utilitarian ideologies. It is, therefore, best understood as a social ideology that conveys the basic interconnection of human presence and is subordinate to care and collective values, harmony and friendliness, respect, and responsiveness.

Under Ubuntu, music embodies moral codes, cultural wisdom, and knowledge transmission across generations (Yende, 2024). Yet, relying solely on Ubuntu risks creating a "new universality" that flattens epistemic diversity and marginalises other IKS traditions. Indigenosociomusicology foregrounds multiple indigenous epistemologies, capturing the richness and complexity of African music.

Decolonial thought reinforces this pluralistic stance by challenging entrenched colonial epistemic hierarchies. Mignolo (2011) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) advocate for epistemic delinking, while Chilisa (2012, p. 4) observes:

Decolonisation is thus a process of conducting research in such a way that the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalisation are given space to communicate from their own frames of reference.

Indigenous epistemologies, including oral traditions, rituals, proverbs, and participatory practices, are recognised as authentic knowledge systems. Music functions as a repository of historical memory, ethical norms, and spiritual cosmologies while mediating identity and reinforcing cultural continuity (Mhlambi, 2020; Mugovhani, 2012). By integrating pluralistic IKS, Ubuntu, decolonial thought, and sociocultural perspectives, Indigenosociomusicology situates music at the nexus of social life, ethics, and knowledge production. This framework avoids monolithic interpretations, allowing scholars to theorise African music on its own terms while engaging global discourse, ensuring that its philosophical depth, social significance, and epistemic diversity are fully acknowledged.

Methodological Approaches in Indigenosociomusicology

Indigenosociomusicology employs methodological strategies that prioritise the oral, participatory, and performative nature of African music. Unlike conventional approaches that focus on observation and documentation, this framework foregrounds co-creation, positioning performers as active partners in research and knowledge production (Agawu, 2003; Mapaya, 2014; Mugovhani, 2012). Ethnography is applied collaboratively, ensuring that musicians contribute to theorising, interpretation, and analysis. Oral traditions, storytelling, proverbs, and call-and-response singing function as pedagogical tools and repositories of communal knowledge. Researchers engage through immersive participation, apprenticeship, and shared performance, enabling the co-construction of meaning where philosophical, ethical, and historical dimensions are interpreted alongside knowledge-holders (Agawu, 2003; Mugovhani, 2012).

Creative practice further distinguishes Indigenosociomusicology, integrating performance, composition, and recording to generate theory directly from lived musical experience. This approach synthesises insights from musicology, anthropology, sociology, and indigenous epistemologies, producing knowledge grounded in practice rather than imposed frameworks. Ethical principles of reciprocity, respect, and transparency underpin all processes, ensuring communities retain agency over how their music and knowledge are represented. By combining co-creation, immersive engagement, and ethical collaboration, Indigenosociomusicology provides a participatory, culturally



grounded framework that recognises multiple indigenous perspectives, honours the social and spiritual dimensions of African music, and advances decolonial approaches to scholarship.

Discussion: Implications for African Higher Education, Research, and Cultural Preservation

African higher education continues to contend with the pervasive influence of Eurocentric curricula, which prioritise European epistemologies and present colonial ways of knowing as normative. Such curricula often marginalise African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), framing local knowledge as subordinate or irrelevant (Chilisa, 2012; Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Students are routinely taught to evaluate themselves and their societies through foreign philosophical, aesthetic, and historical lenses, systematically privileging external knowledge while undermining indigenous intellectual traditions (Agawu, 2003; Mugovhani, 2012). This epistemic dependency constrains learners' capacity to independently theorise, analyse, and interpret their cultural realities. Over time, such conditioning can internalise perceptions of intellectual inferiority, devalue African cultural practices, including music, and create generational disconnections from local knowledge systems (Mhlambi, 2020; Yende, 2024). Consequently, African knowledge is often perceived as outdated or marginal within contemporary academic and social contexts.

Indigenosociomusicology provides a transformative framework to address these challenges. Integrating this approach into higher education curricula affirms African musical systems as legitimate sites of intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical knowledge, challenging Eurocentric dominance (Mugovhani, 2012; Yende, 2024). Teaching methods grounded in oral transmission, apprenticeship, and communal ensemble practice cultivate students' cultural literacy, ethical awareness, and creative agency (Agawu, 2003; Mhlambi, 2020). When complemented by digital recording, composition, and cross-genre collaboration, African music can be preserved, documented, and innovatively adapted to resonate with students shaped by globalised popular culture (Nweke, 2024). Ethical participatory research positions communities as co-creators, ensuring reciprocity, protection of indigenous intellectual property, and scholarly rigour (Chilisa, 2012; Yende, 2024). Intergenerational engagement safeguards cultural continuity, reinforces communal identity, and affirms African music as an epistemically robust system (Mhlambi, 2020; Mugovhani, 2012).

Moreover, Indigenosociomusicology advances epistemic sovereignty, empowering scholars and students to theorise from indigenous perspectives while maintaining global relevance (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Yende, 2024). By foregrounding indigenous epistemologies, participatory pedagogy, and creative engagement, this framework cultivates intellectual autonomy, cultural pride, and agency. Its adoption in higher education represents a decolonial alternative to Eurocentric models, enabling students to perform, theorise, and valorise African music on its own terms, revitalising it as a repository of memory, ethical reflection, and communal identity (Agawu, 2003; Mhlambi, 2020; Yende, 2024).

Conclusion: Towards Epistemic Sovereignty in African Music

Indigenosociomusicology presents a transformative framework for rethinking African music scholarship, pedagogy, and cultural practice, prioritising epistemic sovereignty, ethical engagement, and the preservation of indigenous musical knowledge. Central to its development is curriculum reform in higher education, integrating indigenous musical epistemologies to move beyond Eurocentric paradigms that have historically dominated knowledge production (Mugovhani, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Modules emphasising oral traditions, apprenticeship, performance-based learning, and community engagement cultivate students' cultural literacy, ethical awareness, and creative agency (Agawu, 2003; Nketia, 1974; Yende, 2024). Digital technologies can connect traditional practices with contemporary learning contexts, ensuring relevance for students influenced by globalised popular culture (Nweke, 2024; Rutsate, 2024). Participatory and collaborative methods



encourage students to value African music as intellectually rigorous, socially meaningful, and culturally significant (Bhuda & Marumo, 2022; Kipkoech, 2024).

Equally vital is ethical research and co-creation with communities. Indigenous communities should be recognised as co-producers of knowledge, with frameworks for consent, intellectual property rights, and reciprocal benefits (Chilisa, 2012; Wanyama, 2012). Longitudinal studies of indigenous musical practices reveal patterns of continuity, adaptation, and resilience (Izu, 2024; Kirui et al., 2025), while participatory workshops enable communities to influence pedagogy and reinforce cultural authority (Sekiwu et al., 2022; Weaver, 2023). Cultural policies should support archives, repositories, and digital platforms that preserve heritage while safeguarding local ownership (Chilisa & Ngulube, 2017; Rutsate, 2024), alongside funding for community education, practitioner recognition, and research grounded in African epistemologies (Mapaya, 2014; Mugovhani, 2012). Global collaboration amplifies African scholarship and foregrounds indigenous epistemologies as sources of theory and cultural authority (Agawu, 2016; Lal et al., 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Indigenosociomusicology thus restores intellectual agency, fosters cultural continuity, and positions African musicology as both locally grounded and globally respected.

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