

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION \*

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## INTRODUCTION

A proverb from Ghana declares that: A woman is a flower in a garden; her husband is the fence around it." (1). That is a beautiful picture of women in African society. In this paper I wish to examine the place and the role of women according to African Religion. The paper focuses on three areas: mythology, proverbs and prayers. In the area of mythology we are confronted with the picture of women in the early state of human existence. This is not history. The myth is broader than history in explaining some aspects of society. It is a language of expressing truths or realities for which history does not supply a full explanation.

Proverbs are expressions of wisdom acquired through reflection, experience, observation and general knowledge. They are intimately related to the culture of a given society. To appreciate, understand and properly apply the proverbs, it is necessary to be part of the culture concerned, or to study it carefully. We are not able in this paper to go into the depth entailed in proverbs, but examining or quoting some of them here will give us a working picture or what the religious wisdom of African peoples says about women.

Prayers take us into the spirituality of those who pray them. they show us among other things, the inner person, the needs of the heart (both joy and sorrow, gratitude and disappointment, expectation and anxiety), as the praying person stands 'naked' before spiritual realities. We want to see what women say in prayer, and thereby to get a glimpse into their spiritual life as that may be nourished by African Religion and as it may in turn contribute to African Religion itself.

The sources of the material used in the paper are given at the end. Only names of authors and pages of their works appear in the text, at the end of a particular quotation or summary of the information so used.

## 1. WOMEN IN AFRICAN MYTHOLOGY

A large number of myths is to be found in Africa. Every African people (tribe) has its own body of myths, stories, legends and oral history. We want to concentrate here mainly on the myths dealing with the origin of human beings, since women are featured very prominently in these myths.

Some myths speak about an original Mother of mankind, from whom all people originated. For example, the Akposso (of Togo) tell that when Uwolowu (God) made men, He first made a woman on the earth and bore with her the first child, the first human being (2). The Ibibio (of Nigeria) say that human beings came from the divinity Obumo, which was the son of the mother-divinity Eka-Abassi (3). It is told in eastern Africa about a virgin woman Ekao, who fell on earth from the sky and bore a son; the

son got married to another woman and founded human society (4). Other examples are mentioned by Baumann (5). The main idea here, is to link human life directly with God through the woman. She is created by God, and in turn becomes the instrument of human life. She rightly becomes the one who passes on life. This is beautifully illustrated in a myth of the Tutsi (of Rwanda). They tell that the original pair of human beings was in paradise. But both the man and woman were sterile, they could not bear children. So they begged God to help them. God mixed clay with saliva and formed a small human figure. He instructed the woman to put the figure into a pot and keep it there for nine months. Every day the woman had to pour milk into the pot, mornings and evenings. She was to take out the figure only when it had grown limbs. So she followed these instructions and after nine months she pulled out what had now become a human being. God made other human beings according to this method, and these later increased on the earth (S). The pot is here a symbol of the womb of a mother, in which a baby takes shape and after nine months it is born. The woman shares directly with God in a personal way, the secrets and mysteries of life and birth. This role of the woman in sharing in the mysteries of life started already in the mythological time.

In other myths of man's origin, the woman is always or nearly always mentioned. In many cases even the name of the first woman is given in the myths, and some myths mention only the name of the woman and not of the man. A lot of the myths say that the first human pair was lowered by God from the sky to the ground (earth), such as the myths of the Akamba, Turkana, Luo, Luhya and others in Kenya; these of the Baganda and Banyoro in Uganda; these of the Tutsi in Rwanda; of the Bomba and Ila in Zambia; these of the Yoruba and Ibo in Nigeria, and many others.

In a few myths, it is told that the woman was made by God out of the man's body, or after the man had been made. Perhaps behind these myths is the wish and practice on the part of males (men) to dominate women. For example, the Kwotto (of Nigeria) say that God made the first human beings out of the earth (soil). God made (created) first the husband, and when He had become tired, lie then made the wife (woman) who turned out to be weaker than her husband (7).

Fire is an important element in human life. In some myths it is the women who either invented or discovered fire. Women are also credited with inventing or discovering foodstuffs and their preparations. Thus the cooking skills of the woman are attributed to her from mythological times. She is thus not only the bearer of human beings, but also their cook who provides them with nourishment.

The life of the first human beings is generally depicted as having been in a form of paradise. God provided for them, in some cases they lived in the sky (heaven) with Him or lie was on earth with them; God gave them one of three important gifts: immortality, resurrection (if they died) or rejuvenation (if they grew old). However, this paradise got lost, the earth and heaven separated, God went to live up in heaven while men lived on the earth, the three gifts got lost and in their place there came diseases, suffering and death. There are many myths which address themselves to this change of human fortune. Some speak about a message which God sent to people, but which either did not reach them or was changed by the messenger on the way, or the messenger arrived just too late to find that a faster messenger from God had brought another message. Myths of the lost or changed or later arrived message are very widespread in eastern, southern and parts of western Africa. The carrier of this message (generally one of

immortality, resurrection or rejuvenation) is often the chameleon; while the carrier of the contra message is often the lizard, the hare, the weaver bird or the frog.

In some cases the myths speak of a test which God put to the original people. They failed. So the misfortunes of death and suffering, of God's separation from men came about. Other myths explain that this occurred as a result of jealousies and quarrels within human families. Still in other myths, the cause originated from animals, like the hyena which, being (always) hungry sought and ate the leather rope that had united heaven (sky) and earth (8).

There are, however, considerable myths which put the blame on the women. Thus, for example, it was a woman who in Ashanti myths (of Ghana), while pounding fufu (national food) went on knocking against God Who lived in the sky. So God decided to go higher up. The good woman instructed her children to construct a tower by piling up the mortars one on top of another. The tower almost reached God, leaving a gap which could be filled with only one mortar; Since the children had used up all the mortars, their mother advised them to take the bottom-most mortar and fill the gap. As they removed this mortar, the whole tower tumbled down and killed many people. In one of the Pygmy (Bambutu) myths, it is told that God gave the first people one rule: they could eat the fruits of all the trees, except from one tree. The people observed this rule, until a pregnant woman was overcome by desire and persistently urged her husband to get the forbidden fruit for her. Finally he crept secretly into the forest, plucked the fruit and brought it to her. However, the moon was watching all this and went and reported it to God. God became so angry that he sent death to the people as punishment.

While the woman is in these and some other myths blamed for the misfortune that befell the first human beings, she is clearly not the main nor the only culprit. Indeed the myths that put the blame on her are proportionally few. They indicate that she shares in the cause and effect of suffering, misfortune and death in the world. She is a human being like men and children. She is also faced with the mysteries of life at the other end -- just as she shares in the mysteries of life's beginning, so she shares in life's end.

Through the myths of origin, we get a picture of the woman as someone placed by God in a special position. She shares with Him the creative process of life. In some ways her position and her role in these myths eclipses the position of the husband (male). She is in a real sense the mother of human beings, the dispenser of life, howbeit as an agent of God. At the same time the woman shares in the misfortunes, suffering and death which in various ways came into the world.

We shall now consider the woman as seen and depicted in African wisdom, in the proverbs of the ages.

## 2. WOMEN IN AFRICAN PROVERBS

Proverbs are infinitely more numerous than myths. We find them by the hundreds and thousands in every African people (tribe). They address themselves to many themes and areas of life and knowledge. They are very concentrated in the sense that they put a lot of thoughts, ideas, reflections, experiences, observations, knowledge and even world views, into a few words. We shall here quote only a few proverbs and try to capture what they intend to put in a few words.

a) Women are extremely valuable in the sight of society. Not only do they bear life, but they nurse, they cherish, they give warmth, they care for life since all human life passes through their own bodies. The following proverbs bring these points out clearly.

"Wives and oxen have no friends" (9). This indicates that a wife is so valuable that she cannot be given over to even the best friends of her husband. For that reason, another proverb reminds us that: "A woman must not be killed" (10). She is the mother of life, and to kill the woman is to kill children, to kill humanity itself. The woman should be handled with respect and not be treated as if she were a slave. So another proverb asks the husband: "Did you buy me with elephant tusks?" (11), if the husband is ill-treating her. She reminds him that he really cannot buy her, she is not a commodity for sale like elephant tusks or slaves.

Even an aged woman is a blessing to men. So another proverb says: "It is better to be married to an old lady than to remain unmarried" (12). There are areas of human life which only the woman can fulfil. The unmarried man is lacking something, as one proverb explains: "It is at five that man succeeds" (13). The Maasai who use this proverb explain that a successful life needs "a wife, a cow, a sheep, a goat, and a donkey". This would mean, that even if one is rich, one is not successful as long as one lacks a wife.

The value of the woman begins already when she is born and not when she gets married. So it is stated: "A baby girl means beautiful cows" (14). Already at birth the woman is destined to be married. In traditional African society this entails a bride-exchange in form of cattle, services, foodstuffs, family ties, or other expressions of the marriage contract. Furthermore, the woman will bear children and thus enrich her husband and the wider circle of relatives from both sides. So the Tsonga and Shangani people of South Africa (Azania) say: "To beget a woman is to beget a man" (15). This saying carries with it the hope and expectation, that after marriage, the wife will bear both girls and boys.

b) The woman who is not married has practically no role in society, in African traditional world-view. It is expected that all women get married. So a proverb states: "an ugly girl does not become old at home" (16), which means that the looks of a girl should not stop her from getting married. Otherwise this would deny her the role of womanhood.

This thought is bound up with the value of bearing children. The childless woman goes through deep sorrows in African society. So it is said, for example: "The woman who has children does not desert her home" (17). This means that bearing children gives the woman the security and joy of a family, of being taken care of in her old age, of being respected by the husband and the wider society. So "the woman whose sons have died is richer than a barren woman" (18), is intended to say that people will excuse a woman for losing her children through death, but the one who does not bear is hardly 'excused'. Consequently people say: "A barren wife never gives thanks" (19) - nothing else is as valuable as children. If a woman has everything else, except children, she would have no cause or joy to give thanks. The sentiment is expressed in African societies, that the more children one has the better. So the Ghanaians say: "A serviceable wife is often blessed with the birth of a tenth child" (20). Parental blessings often run along the lines of: "May you bear children like bees! May you bear children like calabash seeds!" Today's economic and educational pressure will force a change in these sentiments, where parents reel the need to reduce the number of children they can support and

educate adequately. Nevertheless, African society is carried away by the proverb which says: "The satiety of a pregnant woman is off-spring" (21). This means that motherhood is a woman's fulfillment.

c) The mother or wife is probably the most important member of the family, the centre of familyhood. So it is said by the Akamba of Kenya for example: "he who has not traveled thinks that his mother is the best cook in the world." This proverb, while attacking a narrow horizon in life, shows how central the person of the mother is. This sentiment is aired in another proverb from the Gikuyu of Kenya: "The baby that refuses its mother's breast, will never be full" (22). Other people may feed the baby or the person, but their food would never satisfy as well as that provided by the mother.

The place of the mother is further indicated by *comparing* her with other women or wives, whether she is alive or dead. The Swahili of East Africa say categorically: "The step mother is not a real mother" (23). This sentiment is shared by other peoples and is expressed in various ways. For example: "Somebody else's mother, however good to you she may be, she can never be better than your own mother", or "Your step mother is not your mother", or "A sheep does not lament the death of a goat's kid" (24), all from the Acholi of Uganda. Their neighbours the Lugbara put it this way: "There are no two mothers", or "There is not another mother" (25). From southern Africa we hear: "The mother's breast cannot get leprosy" (26). All these and many other proverbs are indications that the mother's role cannot be one hundred percent duplicated: she provides (or should provide) the best love and tenderness, warmth, care, bodily and emotional nourishment, and much more. All this begins already, when the person is inside the mother's womb and lasts (or should last) until the mother has died or indeed, it continues when she dies and becomes a spirit, a living dead. It also means that the love, the care and tenderness should be reciprocated by everyone towards his or her own mother, since everyone has a mother. So we hear proverbs like: "A child does not laugh at the ugliness of his mother" (27), from the Lugbara of Uganda; or "The mother of the big he-goat has no horns" (28), from the Akamba of Kenya. This last proverb indicates that all the "big" men (like artists, generals, presidents, bishops, doctors, professors, inventors, singers, scientists and so on) are each born of a woman, of a mother who may not herself be regarded as a "big" person in society. She may not "have horns", but she gives birth to a "big" person in society.

d) Women are human beings and as such they also have their weaknesses. African society knows those weaknesses and speaks about them. One of them is jealousy, especially when several wives live in a polygamous family. Three proverbs from the Lugbara of Uganda illustrate this weakness: "The tongue of co-wives is bitter", "The tongue of co-wives is pointed" (which means that the co-wives can sting each other with their talking), and "A co-wife is the owner of jealousy" (29). Such domestic problems can affect the husband who has the task of pleasing each wife. So a Uhanajan proverb says: "Polygamy makes a husband a double-tongued man" (30). The husband's role is not easy if the co-wives do not get on well with each other. He may be seen to favour one more than the others. In this case he could be rebuked with a proverb like: "This polygamist ploughs one field only" (31). This could indicate that in fact the husband provokes the co-wives to show jealousy, when they realise that he favours one more than the others.

The fact that jealousy may arise in polygamous families is not basis enough to condemn polygamy as such. There are many happy polygamous families just as there are even more unhappy monogamous families. Indeed, there are proverbs that show and urge respect for polygamous families. For example: "Uncriticised, are you the senior wife?" (32), used by the Lugbara, to remind people that the senior wife is the focus of highest respect in the family, but she too is not perfect and if need be can also be criticised. In any case she has more respect by being a co-wife than she would have if she were the only wife (in a monogamous family). It is said in Kenya: "Axes carried in the same bag cannot avoid rattling", to mean among other things, that it is not so terrible if co-wives "rattle" with each other. Indeed, a proverb from the Tsonga of southern Africa can be applied to support the "value" or "necessity" of co-wives: "A pole is strengthened by another pole" (33). If women in African society would have found polygamy to be unbearable, the custom would have long ago. One proverb reminds us that in such families there are mutual support and love and care: "The way to overcome cold is to warm each other" (34).

e) There are also prejudices shown to women in African societies. It is amazing, that similar prejudices are found in other societies of the world. I give here some examples of proverbs of prejudice or judgement towards women. Among the Tsonga-Shangana people of southern Africa, some women earn the remark: "This woman is fire", or "This woman is a deceitful and ferocious crocodile" (35). Even the beauty of women may earn them remarks like: "Do not desire a woman with beautiful breast, if you have no money!" (36), to mean that beautiful women are expensive to win and maintain. The Gikuyu in Kenya say: "Women, like the weather, are unpredictable", and "Women have no secure gourds, but only leaking upside down ones" (37). The second of these means that "women are given to letting out secrets. You can't trust women with secrets". In a beautiful expression the same point is made using the proverb: "Woman, remember that the mouth is sometimes covered with a branch" (38), to mean that she cannot keep a secret.

It is thought that women ruin men. So the Maasai remind us: "The prostitute can make you useless" (39), of course without saying what men do to women! The Maasai also accuse the women of being short-sighted by saying that: "A woman cannot see her palm" (40). In Uganda the Acholi complain that: "Women have no chiefs" (41), to mean that "women cannot allow another woman to be superior. In another sense, a chief is not a chief to his own wife or wives, or even to other women". Naturally, when the men occupy so many of the superior positions in society, what more is left for women? The woman is often blamed for disputes in a marriage. So there are proverbs in Tanzania for example, which say: "A lazy wife does not miss going to her parents frequently", or "The good wife at her husband's home, the other one is at her parents' home" (42). But what happens to lazy men, or do they not exist? Women are also accused of domineering their husbands (whatever the realities may actually be): "No man is a hero to his wife" (43).

Men complain that they cannot understand women. So the Ghanaians say: "When women increase in wealth, they are silent. But when they fall into trouble, the whole world gets to know." In another saying we hear that: "In a town where there are no men, even women praise a hunch back for being the fastest runner" (44)

There are men (and women) who fear women, considering them to be dangerous. So we hear proverbs like: "To marry is to put a snake in one's handbag", and even to take up contact with women is an evasive undertaking: "One does not follow the footprints in the water" (45), which means that "following a woman is like footprints in water", because "the way soon vanishes". It is even claimed that words of women have no legal value, they are not reliable: "Women have no court" (46). They even ruin men: "Marriage roasts (hardens)" (47), is said to mean that a man's heart hardens after marriage, because of his wife. Even beautiful women get a share of prejudice: "Beautiful from behind, ugly in front" (48), a proverb which warns that a person may look attractive or say nice words at first, but after marriage turns out to be really ugly.

f) In spite of these and other prejudices, there are many beautiful things said about women. Some of these we have already encountered. Men will fight over women - to show how much they value the women concerned. So in Ghana we hear that: "Two bosom friends that vie one and the same lady have chosen a common road to be each other's enemy" (49). Compared to a man, the woman is more precious: "The woman is a banana tree (which multiplies itself); the man however, is a cornstalk (which stands alone)" (50). It is also from Ghana where we have the beautiful comparison and mutual complement between the wife and the husband: "Woman is a flower in a garden; her husband, the fence around it" (51). So the women need all the protection that men can give them. For this reason the Lugbara say: "The man dies in the wind, the woman in the house" (52). The woman and the man belong together, can and do love each other, they need each other. In Lugbara proverb we are told: "The woman is the rib of man" (53), a statement which is parallel to the Biblical creation story in Genesis 2, 21-22. The Akamba warn against the danger of remaining unmarried: "He who eats alone, dies alone" -- he leaves neither wife nor posterity to remember him in the world of the living.

### 3. WOMEN AND PRAYERS

In traditional African life women play a significant role in the religious activities of society. One of the areas where this role is prominent, is in offering prayers for their families in particular and their communities in general. In many areas there were (and still are) women priests (priestesses); almost everywhere in Africa the mediums (who are so important in traditional medical practice) are nearly always women; those who experience spirit possession are in most cases also women. Traditional healing is a profession of both men and women and it is more often the women practitioners who handle children's and other women's medical needs. In this paper we have space for only a few prayers which illustrate how actively involved are the women in the spirituality of African Religion. The examples are cited out of my own book (54), so that there is no need to indicate the source each time.

A women's morning prayer runs: "Morning has risen; God, take away from us every pain, every ill, every mishap; God, let us come safely home" (55). [In this prayer the woman brings before God her family and hands it over to God, believing that He will keep away all evil. It is a Pygmy prayer.

A litany for a sick child is offered by women, addressing it specially to the departed members of the family who are thought to exercise healing power especially by conveying the request to God. It comes from the Aro of Sierra Leone. Mother prays: "O spirits of the past, this little one I hold is my child; she is your child also, therefore, be

gracious unto her". The other women chant: "She has come into a world of trouble: sickness is in the world, and cold and pain; the pain you knew, the sickness with which you were familiar". The mother prays on: "Let her sleep in peace, for there is healing in sleep. Let none among you be angry with me or with my child". The women take up their chanting: "Let her grow, let her become strong. Let her become full-grown. Then will she offer such a sacrifice to you that will delight your heart" (56). In this prayer we see how close the women feel to the spirit-world. They enter into it, they solicit help from it. The physical and spiritual world mingle here in a harmony of 'going' and 'coming'. The women depict here a deep sensitivity towards the invisible and spiritual realities.

A woman whose husband is away fighting in war, prays for his protection and safe return. She prays not just for him alone, but for others who are with him. Like all similar prayers, it is a one-sided prayer, favouring one side. It comes from the Banyarwanda. "Let him be saved with those who went with him! Let him stand firm with them. Let him return from the battle with them..." (57). In this way the women participate in fighting on the side of their husbands. The husbands would certainly feel encouraged to get this form of spiritual support from their wives.

Recognising that menstruation is intimately linked to the passing on of life, many African peoples perform a ceremony in Ghana, the Ashanti mother of the concerned girl prays that she may grow to full maturity and bear children. This is the wish of every mother for her children. "Nyankonpon Tweaduapon Nyame (God) upon whom men lean and do not fall, receive this wine and drink. Earth Goddess, whose day of worship is a Thursday, receive this wine and drink. Spirit of our ancestors, receive this wine and drink. This girl child whom God has given to me, today the Bara state has come upon her... Do not come and take her away, and do not have permitted her to menstruate only to die" (58).

In many parts of Africa it does not always rain enough. Rainmaking ceremonies are performed, at which sacrifices, offerings and prayers are made to God, beseeching Him to give more rain or to let it rain. Here is one such prayer made by Maasai women (Kenya and Tanzania). The woman leader intones one part, while other people present for the occasion sing or recite the other:

*Leader:* "We need herbs on the earth's back! "

*Others:* Hie! Wae! Almighty God.

*Leader:* "The father of Nasira has conquered, has conquered. "

*Others:* The highlands and also the lowlands of our vast country which belongs to thee, O God.

*Leader:* "May this be our year, ours in plenty (when you grant us rain!)"

*Others:* "O messenger of Mbatian's son" (59).

This prayer is for the welfare of people, animals and nature at large, since all depend on water for their survival.

Women express gratitude to God, after childbirth. Then they know that life comes ultimately from Him and is sustained by Him. The following prayer is said by Pygmy women in a ceremony of dedicating a baby to God. The mother and father lift the baby towards the sky and pray: "To Thee, the Creator, to Thee, the Powerful, I offer this fresh bud, new fruit of the ancient tree. Thou art the Master, we thy children. To Thee, the Creator, to Thee, the Powerful: Khmvoum (God), Khmvoum, I offer this new plant" (60).

The sorrows of being childless go very deep in the wife. There are many prayers for help in such situations. From an affected woman of the Barundi, we feel with her the agony of her spirit, when she prays: "O Imana (God) of Urundi, if only you would help me! O Imana of pity, Imana of my father's home, if only you would help me!... O Imana, if only you would give me a homestead and children! I prostrate myself before you, Imana of Urundi. I cry to you: Give me off-spring, give me as you give to others! Imana, what shall I do, where shall I go? I am in distress: where is there room for me? O Merciful, O Imana of mercy, help this once!" (61).

Death also brings with it its own sorrows and problems, and many prayers are offered in such times. The following prayer pours out desperation with the same forcefulness as the previous prayer: "My husband, you have abandoned me. My master is gone and will never return. I am lost. I have no hope. For you used to fetch water and collect firewood for me. You used, to clothe and feed me with good things... Where shall I go?" (62).

It is clear, that women both participate in the religious activities of society and make their own contributions for the spiritual welfare of their lives, their families and of society at large. The prayers are small window that opens into their spirituality which indeed is the spirituality of all human beings. As they share with God in the great mysteries of passing on life, so they share also in giving human life a spiritual orientation. They are truly flowers in the garden. They give life beauty, scent and seed.

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## NOTES

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(5) *Ibid.* p. 245-248.

(6) *Ibid.*, p.204

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- (10) *Ibid.*, p.62.
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- (20) BANNERMANN, J.Y, *op. cit.* p.19.
- (21) DALFOVO A.T., *op.cit.*. p. 238.
- (22) BARRA. G., *op. cit.* p.31.
- (23) KALUGILA, L., *op. cit.* p. 33.
- (24) OKOT p'Bitek, *op. cit.* p. 10-11,14.
- (25) DALFOVO. A.T., *op. cit.* p. 78.108.
- (26) JUNOD. H. Ph. - JACQUES. A.A., *op. cit.*, p.159,
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- (45) IUNOD. H. Ph., - JACQUES. A.A . *op. cit.* p. 177.
- (46) *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- (47) *Ibid.*, p. 175
- (48) *Ibid.*. p. 175.
- (49) BANNERMANN, J.Y. *op.cit.*, p.17.
- (50) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- (51) *Ibid.*, p. 9
- (52) DALFOVO. A.T.. *op. cit.*, p. 57.

(51) *Ibid.*, p. 237.

(54) *The Prayers of African Religion*. London. S.P.C.K. - Maryknoll. Orbis, 1975.

(55) *Ibid.*, p.32.

(56) *Ibid.*. p.50.

(57) *Ibid.*, p. 83.

(58) *Ibid.*, p.96

(59) *Ibid.*, p. 113.

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(61) *Ibid.*, p. 86.

(62) *Ibid*, p.99

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