

Nomenclature and The Power of Language in the Kom Economy: A Circumspection of Ritual and Proverbial Expressions in a Grass field Tradition in Cameroon

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“Quand dire c’est faire”

Abstract

This paper sets out to appreciate the use of African names in general and the power in symbolism of Kom names in particular. These names do not only carry meaning and context but also transmit messages. They indeed show how language has power and symbolism. The names are not only an identity, a means of communication, but a carrier of culture. This paper will in a way, partially answer a question such as what is in a name and how does it influence the economy. The theory used here for analysis is J. L. Austins’s Speech Act theory.

Key Words: Speech Acts, Conventionality, Fondom, Ritual, Grassfield.

Introduction

The history of the origin and evolution of Kom people is largely legendary and modern historians and anthropologists have largely disbelieved it. The origin and history of this people instilled in them the belief that names communicate; as such, they carry meaning and power. Many Africans seem not to be comfortable with European names. These European names are viewed as remnants of colonialism and imperialism. That is why writers like Ngugi WaThiong’o, Mongo Beti and Chinua Achebe had dropped their European names. James Ngugi is now Ngugi WaThiong’ O. Alexandra is now Mongo Beti, Albert Chinualumogu is now Chinua Achebe. These prolific African writers by dropping their western names may be saying that Africans must know who they are in order to know where they are coming from: an attempt to re-assert and resuscitate African cultural values. The Kom system and belief is shaken and destabilized with such evolutions.

Motto

The motto of the Komfondom stands thus: “Afo-ajini-a nii wain niinyamngveiin” meaning “Food, fertility and prosperity.” It encompasses so many things including security, wellbeing and harmonious living.

Theory

The action which is performed when a “performative utterance” is issued belongs to what John Langshaw Austin later calls a SPEECH ACT.

The notion of the speech act was developed following Austin’s observation that not all utterances are simply statements of fact, some are ‘performatives’ (1962, p5). Austin defined a performative to be where ‘the uttering of a sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action’.

Austin pointed out that we use language to do things as well as to assert things, and that the utterance of a statement like “I promise to do so-and-so is best understood as doing something. For example: “I take this man as my lawfully wedded husband,” used in the course of a marriage ceremony, or “I bequeath this watch to my brother,” as occurring in a will. In all these cases, the sentence is not being used to describe or state what one is “doing”, but being used to actually do it. By the concept of speech acts and the felicity conditions for performing them, Austin showed that to utter a performative sentence is to be evaluated in terms of what we might call: Conventionality, actuality, and intentionality of uttering the sentence. Hence the name of one of his best-known works, *How to do things with words*.

Austin went on to claim that all utterances were concomitantly:

- Locutionary: an ‘act of saying something’ (p. 94, 99).
- Illocutionary: an ‘act in saying something’ (p. 99).
- Perlocutionary: producing ‘certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons’ (p.101).
- The ‘illocutionary’ act is of particular significance because it provides a basis for categorizing conversation into acts and thus accounts of interaction. Searle (1969), a student of Austin’s, (1969), argued that the illocutionary aspect of an utterance, what he called a ‘Speech act’ was the basic linguistic unit of communication and meaning. He produced (1985, p. vii) a taxonomy of speech acts:
 - Assertives – telling people how things are.
 - Directives – trying to get people to do things.
 - Commissives – committing ourselves to doing things.
 - Expressives – expressing our feelings and attitudes.
 - Declarations – bringing about changes in the world through our utterances.

Following Austin’s distinction between stating and doing, Searle argued that a speech act could function as an assertive and an indirect directive or commissive concomitantly on ‘Sir you are standing on my foot’. This led to him pointing a distinction between ‘literal sentence meaning’ of what someone says and the ‘utterance meaning’. The notion of speech act can be usefully built into the interactionist perspective developed earlier. However, this requires a departure from Searle’s position. Searle’s distinction between ‘literal meaning’ and ‘utterance meaning’ suggests that when one listens, one interprets the meaning of some set of words constituting an utterance through some other set of ‘words’. Or from the speaker’s perspectives, as Searle (1985, p. 30) puts

it, 'the speaker utters a sentence, means what he says, but also means something more' or 'means something else' (p. 31). Doubtless, for one to communicate to another how he, she or someone else understands a given utterance, one uses words and often words different to those uttered.

Austin in providing his theory of speech acts, makes a significant challenge to the philosophy of language, far beyond merely elucidating a class of morphological sentence forms that function to do what they name. Austin's work ultimately suggests that all speech and all utterance is the doing of something with words and signs, challenging a metaphysics of language that would posit denotative, propositional assertion as the essence of language and meaning.

So, speech acts are ways of communicating how people perceive others' actions. The conversation analyst constructs a speech act by considering whether the meaning invoked by the conversationally and historically situated locution indicates that the speaker has performed a relevant act.

Conceptual framework

Speech is central to religious practice and every ritual. Ritual is defined as a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order. An example one could give is the ancient fertility rituals. From liturgical forms and sacred scriptures to preaching and conversations in religious context, language is an essential medium of religious practice and meaning making. Rituals usually have a goal or objective, and there is practical symbolism involved.

When a Judge comes out in a black robe, sits behind a high desk and calls the court to order with a gavel he is no longer an ordinary man. He is the law incarnate. He is justice. He is the authority. When a priest dons his vestments, he is clothing himself in the vestiges of ancient religion. He is robing himself in romanzas, vesting himself in the persona of the priest and clothing himself as Christ the great high priest. We take this symbolism for granted; so much so that in our egalitarian age we misunderstand it and even dismiss it as anachronism, a cultural curiosity akin to wearing lederhosen for the October fest. The Fon of Komis a symbol of authority. He is the all in all in the Fondom. His vestments are specially designed and the combination well - formed. He is invincible by the powers vested on him. Every move or sign he makes is well understood by his surrounding and equally revered.

The common man understood at a primitive and profound level that there was another plane of being and the rituals of religion were intended to propel you out of the quotidian quagmire into a transcendent transposition to another realm. The signs symbols, language, and liturgy were an ancient dance that lifted you beyond this bitter world to a better world. We have forgotten that religion is not about making the world a better place, but about going to a better place. Joseph Campbell left his boyhood catholic faith because of his disgust and dismay at the iconoclastic reforms of his church after the second Vatican Council. He understood the language of the liturgy was not only Latin, but a complex communication of symbols interplaying within the architecture, music, language, costumes, rites, gestures and rituals of worship.

Methodology

In this study we used a descriptive design. It is a qualitative research and some in-depth interviewing and observation. For the participants, there was some kind of purposeful sampling carried out. Three men aged between 50-70 years, one woman in her 60s, and those whom we

consider the younger generation were 12 in number. Their age range is 22-43 years. The two genders were all represented.

Nomenclature

Naming children in the KomFondom just like in most African societies was a whole ritual. Unlike the Catholic Church that encouraged its Christians to use names found in the Bible or names of saints already being honored by the church, the people of Kom named children after ancestors or significant events at the time in the village. The church believed in the idea that once named after a great saint, the character and traits of the saint could be assumed by the child. The ancestors replace the saints in the Komfondom. You name a child after any ancestor whose life touched you so much. You remember your relations through the young child. Just like Campbell concluded the church was making the world a better place instead of taking the people of God to a better place, so too there has been a big shift in the naming of children in Kom. Names that portended evil with the new way of being church, are being criticized.

There are reasons behind most names and certain circumstances surrounding particular names. When you give a name, you are communicating a message. Names such as: “Njungbainwii”, which means “Good deeds are never noticed or appreciated”. Before giving this name, the family must have lived and experience a situation of ingratitude or neglect after a good job or sacrifice. In that way, the name is given to a child to fight back the injustice or to keep reminding themselves and the community of a sour experience. The giver of such a name goes back satisfied but it may later become a curse for the one declares good is not evident. He or she may experience such negatives or the child in question may carry about such a declaration and it hurts him or her.

“Anjiingha” means “suffering”; “Ngeh” means “ill luck or trouble”. A parent who gives birth to a Sickler may turn to such names. The suffering type may spend his or her life in suffering and pain. It sounds like mere superstition here, but indeed such people who bear names like that hardly prosper.

“Kfutwaah” meaning “toil your whole life” “die in the bush”, “die and your body will not even be available for burial or spend your whole life in the bush”. Here interpretation is determined by context. The particular circumstance, the period, the season determines the meaning. A parent after a poor harvest that might have repeated itself could vent frustration through such names. He might have given birth to so many children and doubts his or her capacity to feed the children. He has to toil extra hard to feed the family. He or she may be naming a child, but indirectly cursing someone who might have made away with valuables and as such put the rest of the family in pain. Whatever meaning that was intended by the name will hunt mostly the bearer

“Moenang” is a name given to people and to jujus (traditional secret cult). It means politics, dishonest, cunning. When you are given such a name, may beget in you such qualities your parents and the community never intended to find in you. You may become too whimsical for all. Naming and pronouncing go with authority. There is a message in every name and that is communication. Again, a name that is given to human beings and to a cult group may show lack of goodwill or seriousness.

“Mbvi-ibiih” means a bad world. What must have prompted the giving of such a name? There might have been inter-tribal wars and conflicts. Your surrounding represents the world to

you. Your neighbors might have been perpetrating evil and you find yourself helpless. Naming a child thus is a way of venting your disgust. It is a way of expressing one's opinions. The name becomes a voice for the voiceless.

“Angohma” means “It is I alone”. You have found yourself doing so much alone and express your loneliness on a child. These few and many others became a cause for concern. With the new way of being church, many have soul – searched and realized that most often the pains and troubles they experienced in life is just a reflection of their names. You suffered what your name portended.

In his book. *The power of Myth*. (1988), Joseph Campbell lamented thus: “There’s been a reduction of ritual. Even in the Roman Catholic Church, they’ve translated the mass out of the ritual language and into a language with domestic associations. The Latin of the mass was a language that threw you out of the field of domesticity. The altar was turned around so that the priest’s back was to you, and with him you addressed yourself outward. Now they have turned the altar around and it looks like Julia Child giving a cooking demonstration, all honey and cozy. They have forgotten that the function of ritual is to pitch you out but not to wrap you back in where you have been all the time”. The past event, through the ritual is brought into the present moment so that the participants share in the timeless event out of time. If you like, the “there and then” is brought into the “here and now”.

This is the heart of the practice of the catholic religion and the heart of true conservatism, that the past is active in the present and the future. For believers this truth is not just believed but lived. Through the symbolic language of liturgy, we experience the reality of T.S Elliot’s poignant and profound words. “Time present and time past, are both perhaps present in time, future, and time future contained in time past. Every adjustment is done with the hope of having a better tomorrow. So too has the naming of children been affected. Certain names that may portend evil are no longer being given to children. The naming has gone western or followed the new gospel. A culture or system is collapsing.

Like earlier said, names communicate. They carry meaning as single words and in context. So, names can be examined semantically and pragmatically. With the coming of the new belief, a whole system and belief has to experience confusion. Some members of the old generation are yet to come to terms with the sudden upheaval in the naming which a whole rite and rituals were performed. A new generation no longer heeds to the instructions of the old by giving names they dictated.

They were comfortable with the power- meaning names and bathed in illusions, seeing their message go across. Some even saw their ancestors and lost ones in the young ones who bore those names. They were happy moving on foot and sleeping on Bamboo beds. They never thought of prosperity. Their motto was sufficient for them. A generation that saw prosperity in terms of cars, houses bank accounts and travelling abroad can stand it no more. They prefer to bathe in the illusion, “poverty is not my portion, Prosperity is my name” and so on. All the good things come from the Almighty God and not from the ancestors or animists. A subtle way of relating fully with the living God is to praise him through names. There is power in the name, and we see language and the power of symbolism.

“Mbom and Bôbo” representing the creator or lord are now commonly attached to children’s names at initial or final positions (not really like prefixes and suffixes). So, you have names like:

” Abeimbom” ----- “It is God who has said so”. You have not had the child on your own, or what I have done is supported by God. It has a legal backing in Heaven. No one can flout the instructions of God. Through such a name you can be warning the world that; “whatever you find in this child or whatever you see me doing, know God is on my side. That is power in the tongue.

“Mbomli” -----“God Take”. Lord I freely offer my whole being to you. You are my all in all. There is total surrender off course in great expectation of breakthrough. When we pray, we totally surrender our lives unto God for him to do unto us as he pleases. Humility is the surest root to happiness. We trust by the end of the day our hopes shall be raised. Breakthrough shall come our way in every domain.

“ Ajimsimbom” ----- I surrender all to the creator. This is just a continuation of the previous philosophy. You have placed all in the hands of the Lord. The waiting period must be good and you have internal peace.

“Ghiabôbo” ----- The voice of the lord. I am not on my own. I listen to his voice. The message communicated through this name is sufficient to every speaker and hearer of the name.

“Bimisimbom” ----- Believe in God, accept God. In other words, everyone who will pronounce the name will have the meaning sink into his heart.

“Beitiimbom” ----- Remind the creator. In other words, whatever the situation, remind the lord and do not lose hope. You assume god has seen and knows you pain, but you need to remind him like the Blind Baltimore did in the Gospel. Jesus saw a blind man who called after him and asked what I can do for you. He said he wished to see again. Tell God your needs. Do not be presumptuous. Pray without ceasing.

“Ankinimbom” ----- “The lord is my shepherd”. This is not just the first verse of psalm 23, but it is to tell you that language has power through symbolism. Names communicate in the Kom economy.

These and others are commonly used these days. These names do not only have good in them but communicate meaningfully. So, the western names that are considered Christian names are not totally replacing our African names but co-habit. Remember that a naming ceremony of a child is a whole ritual of initiation or initiation rite. This initiation defines your identity and belonging. It then gives you generational authority. Go and do same to your children. It involves the burying of the navel, sending it back to mother earth and making you sons and daughter of the soil. Whatever declaration and pronouncements made are so binding and powerful.

Most African societies observe patronymic rules in naming their children. Usually, a name is selected from the living or the dead. Most names only have nostalgic, and sentimental symbolism, but in some African societies, they articulate specific messages. This is true among the Yorubas and the Igbo, sometimes the Ewe may have names with specific meanings. This assertion holds true even in the Kom economy.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the new religion appears to be a threat to the Kom religion (animist) and culture. It is really a threat to the culture and tradition of the Kom people. The belief system has collapsed and needs cleansing. Resistance to the White man’s religion was so strong that it only went through by means of brain washing of a few individuals who now were later considered traitors. Submission came years after and the whole culture has been usurped. If the new religion

did not come the people would live peacefully with what the ancestors handed down to them. The White man came and the host normally should have assimilated them. The reverse was true. They assimilated the host and imposed a language and a religion. Western names were called Christian names and African names were considered pagan ones.

This transposition of a new culture has put the Kom culture in confusion and the people too. Names that carried meaning and power are now scary. Language is contextual. Wherever discourse has to make sense there must be semantics and pragmatics into play. Names were given with reasons and according to the season of birth. These names could be interpreted. People new circumstances surrounding names. Being a matrilineal heritage, men could even bear feminine names since a child's mother's name was attached to the child's given name too to reinforce identity. May be this was an overload of pragmatics. The white man culture then, has it made meaning lighter?

In her article "Avoid Pragmatic Overload", Regine Eckardt (2003) suggests that the role of pragmatics in language change might not be restricted to implicature, but that presupposition (failure) is equally a driving force in meaning change. It is well-known that utterances may carry presuppositions that, if new to the hearer, will have to be accommodated. This is unproblematic in all those cases where the accommodated information is plausible and uncontroversial. Problems arise, however, when the speaker relies on presuppositions, which are implausible, controversial or hard to reconcile with other pieces of knowledge. Eckardt proposes that when faced with option of accommodating with the impossible, hearers may instead prefer to reanalyse the meaning of parts of the utterance.

Thus, hearers avoid pragmatic overload (= problematic presuppositions) and hypothesize new meanings instead. The proposed analysis is supported by several attested cases of semantic change to which it can be fruitfully applied. Among others, the author discusses the reanalysis of German intensifying "selbst" ("-self") as a focus particle ("even"), and of German fast ("immovably tight") as an approximative ("almost"), as well as the development of English even from a level adjective to a focus marker, and she takes a brief look at the case Italian "perfino" which likewise develops an "even"-like reading from its earlier sense "through, to the end" (Visconti 2005). For each item, it can be argued that the turning point of the development is characterized by the appearance of uses where the presuppositions of the sentence, if spelled out, are tantamount to contradictory, or at least highly implausible, information. The proposal confirms the vital role of pragmatics in language change and identifies yet another type of pragmatic enrichment of utterances that has, so far, not been widely explored in diachronic linguistics.

The change in culture and the new way of being church has transformed minds. The gospel no longer seems to be that of the suffering Christ whose followers have to carry their crosses and follow his footsteps. It is now a gospel of prosperity. Every witness does soul searching to know where he or she actually belongs. When you recount a few mishaps and failures, your hearers and pastors immediately tell you the cause. "Your name portended evil, there are witches in the family" and so on. The easiest one to carry home is the wrong naming. Parents are blamed for not having thought twice like the parents of Goodluck Jonathan. Some change or readjust names and some just vow to adopt the names that befit the new-found religion. What happens to the power and symbolism of the traditional names?

Jick H. & Ngeh, A. (2015), argue that Mongo Beti is very political in his search for liberty in the choice of his pseudonym, the names of some of his major characters and consequently, his fiction. Before he discovered the hypocrisy in the practice of assimilation, Alexandre Biyidi Awala did not

see himself as different from the real Frenchman. When the dawn of realization came, withdrawal syndrome showed. Thus, the French intellectual still lurking in the Cameroonian Biyidi, informed him to adopt a pseudo-identity to be able to express his disgust with a system that enslaved him for a long time. This search for a second, concealed personality yielded at a set of symbolically charged names: EzaBoto means “the alienated people” or people without any “authenticity or autonomy. Mongo Beti , “ the son of soil, the child of Beti land . These names tell us what Biyidi thinks of the system he represents in his fiction.

A writer responds, with his total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers, with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. (NgugiWaThiong’O 47. If Mong Beti criticizes the political issues that he focuses on, it is because he intends to contribute to the struggle to liberate Cameroon in particular and Africa in general, from the grip of western imperialism and the African stooges, who are constantly supported by their western masters. Mongo Beti’s fiction in its socio-political context will yield to the sociologist or anyone else, a better understanding of the Cameroonian society at the given time portrayed in his writings. The French policy of assimilation, for instance, influenced Beti’s choice of pen names as well as his writing to a large extent.

Before he discovered the hypocrisy in the practice of assimilation, Alexandre BiyidiAwala did not see himself as different from the real Frenchman. When he finally realized that he was not a true Frenchman in his black skin as the policy had made him to believe, the French intellectual still lurking in the Cameroonian Biyidi, informed him to adopt a pseudo- identity to be able to express his disgust with a system that enslaved him for a long time. This search for a second concealed personality yielded a set of symbolically charged names: ‘EzaBoto’, in Ewondo language, the first pseudonym he used literally means ‘people who are alienated, without authenticity or autonomy’. ‘Mongo Beti’, Which Alexandre BiyidiAwala has permanently adopted, etymologically means, ‘child of the swamps’, literally, ‘son of the soil’ that is of the Beti people, by extension, an ‘African child’. That is why she has to drop the French name ‘Alexandre’ which makes the BiyidiAwala, an alienated Cameroonian in particular and an African in general.

The naming of Places in the Kom language too is a call for concern. It is an unfortunate situation that with the changes in personal names, no one thinks of changing the names of places and things that seem a taboo. We have names like:

“Aku-a deble”----- This means the devil’s forest. The name communicates. It Symbolizes evil. Whatever circumstances surround this name is known to a few. The name carries fright. As a consequence, many will not dare tread. If this forest is the only way one needs to go across to obtain something useful on the other side, it will be better to forego. The denotative meaning behind the name as well as the connotative meaning can in no way contradict themselves. They live no room for presuppositions. The name sounds a warning of no thoroughfare.

“Aku-a mefiil” ----- The forest of medicine is the meaning. The medicine gotten from there could still be beneficial, but not any one would dare visit it. Only those who are users will dare and with care. The name carries a message. It communicates.

“Achiim-a deble” ----- This means the devil’s pool. This pool is abandoned by many. It is believed those who have a contract with the devil meet there. Every other person or the ordinary man does not need to be warned. The name communicates There is power in the word. Many people have just grown up to hear such names and have not bothered to find out why or

what circumstances surround the name. As such there is stigmatization on those who visit the area and even their relations. Every new person in the community is warned about the pool and the stakeholders.

The juju society in the KomFondom is highly revered. Those who are believed to be Christians or the followers of Christ must not associate with the jujus. The jujus are categorized or graded according to their magical strength, the power to do evil, to kill or curse. Those in authority have the power to curse and it takes immediate effect. Once pronounced you only get the results. “Quand dire c’est faire”.

In Austin’s speech acts, most statements and pronouncements are themselves acts. He calls them performatives. Austin pointed out that we use language to do things as well as to assert things, and that the utterance of a statement like “Je vousmarie”. “Je vous baptise au nom du Christ”. “Je promets que...”. “I declare you husband and wife”. “I baptize you in the Christ’s name”. “I promise to do so- and- so” etc. is best understood as doing something making a promise rather than making an assertion about anything. Hence the name of one of his best – known works; *How to do things with words* Austin, in providing his theory of speech acts, makes a significant challenge to the philosophy of language; far beyond merely elucidating a class of morphological sentence forms that function to do what they name. Austin’s work ultimately suggests that all speech and all utterance is the doing of something with words and signs. Challenging a metaphysics of language that would post denotative, propositional assertion as the essence of language and meaning. In other words, language has power especially in symbolism. We see that in these other Kom expressions:

“Manwii-Nantang...” This simply means I swear by Nantang which is a powerful juju. Its magical strength and witchcraft are such that there is an immediate effect when you swearing by it. Once said it is done. But again, you need to belong to the cult and be an authority there before the pronouncements can work. Swearing by it is often for evil to take place. There is usually much anger in whoever is swearing. The knowledge of this has instilled fear in the community.

The new generation does not quite master what obtains. In short not everyone is conscious that you need to be an authority in the cult to be able swear. Many too do not know exactly who belongs. The community lives in fear. Ordinary people who do not even belong to the society or this cult could just take advantage of their victims or someone they have problems with and just swear. In this case the victim may panic or die even out of fear. This fear generally begets earnestness in the people and equally instills discipline in the community. Unfortunately, those who think that they belong or are in control die out of pride and conceit. The fact that they possess knowledge of the inner core makes them haughty. They presume they are above all and even invincible. Unfortunately, they too are mortals and are taken unawares when the time comes.

“Manwii-Lum a na-Iwoi-yeiniikehnaghisaankang a wayeinsibangkang”. This means I swear by Lum that if this matter is false, then you will see hell. In the native tongue it sounds more frightful than if it were said in English. The language has power. The fear of jujus and the ancestors is a living thing in the minds of the Kom people. Since christians and pagans live in the same community, one is forced to worship the Living God and remain subservient to the gods of the land whom they believe protect them daily.

“Manwii-angkukum...” This means I swear by Angkukum. Some of the names are so frightful. They represent terror. Ordinary people fear calling such names. Unfortunately, some names given

to jujusare given to children. Children are given dreaded names. When some get enlightened, they adopt new names which will project them positively. They adopt names that carry a better message that can earn them breakthrough.

The fon of Kom after his enthronement is a symbol of authority and power. He is the law incarnate. He is the only one who can utter blessings and curses in every domain with effect. He has command over all the secret cults that exist. None of them can affect him. He is the custodian of the customs and tradition of the people as handed down to him by the ancestors. He still believes in his authority over the churches and their God. He holds fast to the ancient way of naming that kind of immortalized the old or the ancestors. One cannot be made fon without picking up an ancestral name. He like his entire government sees madness in the new revolution. They believe the people will one day come back to their senses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that names can be an effective vehicle of communication. Overall, naming is an important aspect of identity. When we begin to fight what gives us an identity it may sound quite strange. With the dawn of realization brought by modern way of being church and new churches, the withdrawal syndrome showed up. It is another struggle for liberty and Freedom. Therefore, names can communicate so powerfully as to enslave or liberate souls.

“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord by your lives”. The message gives a mission and a vision. Thanks be to God. It is done. Quand dire c’est faire.

The ‘speech act theory was used in this study to show how language can influence objectives, perceptions and actions. Language has power in as it has the capacity to effect action.

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