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Pigs, Two Women and an Island: A Reality of Subsistence in Bahinemo Mythology

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The Bahinemo speaking people who inhabit the Hunstein Range, known as the Sepik Hills located on the southern part of the Sepik River, are a small linguistic group. Although they are an autonomous linguistic group they are closely related socioculturally to the other people in this area. Some features of language, subsistence, forms of residence and social structure should be common to all the people of the Sepik Hills. However, a lack of data has obstructed the elucidation of this. In addition to neighbors in the Sepik Hills, the Bahinemo have relationships with their uphill and downhill neighbors, and are not a self-contained society by any means. Their myths describing the origin of game in bush provides us with useful information about this. My aim in this paper is to show how their myths represent relationships with other people.

Regardless of Functionalism or Structuralism, the relationship between myth and reality is one of the most important and typical problems in anthropology, so that many anthropologists have wrestled with myth from all perspectives. Myth is certainly full of vivid expressions so that it stimulates not only our interest but also that of the people concerned. But anthropologists are liable to contrast myth with reality. Indeed myth denotes a special form of communication and forms an autonomous region, as shown by the Levi-strauss suggestion [1963, 1969]. However, it is a fact that people cannot live vitally without myth. Myth itself gives actuality, and so it is in myths that reality exists. But we grasp this fact in the ordinary time span only, so that we might distinguish reality from myth. Reality emerging from myth is not an image or a sense. It becomes a real incident.

In this paper I attempt to show how myths provide a reality for incidents in their stories and social and/or cultural order to relationships with other people. The meaning of "reality" here is neither fact nor manifest truth. It is the basis of an enclosing experience and recognition that gives them meaningfulness. Hence each society has its own reality. This study will show some features of Bahinemo culture, which is not self-contained, and provide helpful data when we think about the sociocultural interactions of the ethnic groups in this area.

1. The Bahinemo and Their Neighbors

The Bahinemo-speaking people inhabit the Hunstein Range (usually known as the Sepik Hills) to the south of the Sepik River in East Sepik Province. They number approximately 400. Two S.I.L. linguists, Wayne and Sally Dye, conducted a linguistic study of the Bahinemo language, though no ethnographic data is available concerning them except for Newton's brief accounts of their male initiation [1971].

According to Bahinemo mythology, their ancestors originally lived in a village called Wabi near Mt. Samsai, one of the highest peaks of the Hunstein Range (about 1500 meters a.s.l.), though most of their time was spent in a number of small hamlets along the three main ridges of the Range. Nowadays all their villages, *Wagu*, *Igai*, *Inaru* and *Gahom*, are located along the river. The villagers insist that the Australian Administration ordered them to move their villages near the river.

The Hunstein Range forms the northeastern edge of what is called the Sepik Hills. This hill area is occupied by several small ethnic groups; the Bitara and Sanio in the April River basin, the Mari and the Watakataui (Waxeï) in the Krosameri River basin, and the Bahinemo. They speak different languages, though they share many social and cultural features [DYE, TOWNSEND and TOWNSEND 1968]. For example, their villages are relatively small in size and scattered about their territory; their staple food is sago and they depend heavily on hunting and gathering wild animals and plants; they frequently move their villages.

The Bahinemo always refer first, in their accounts of neighboring peoples, to "what language they speak". In fact, all of these neighbors were regarded by the Bahinemo as potential enemies in traditional fights in pre-contact times, and their first concern was that "which language speakers would attack us from which direction". Language is the important factor that solidifies their community.

On the other hand, the Bahinemo often distinguish Sepik Hills enemies from the "mountain" peoples and the "lowland" peoples according to the ecological situation of villages. To the south of the Sepik Hills, there live taro cultivators in the Double Mountain Range; the Poka and Bikaru. The name Poka originates from the Bahinemo word for taro, *buka*. To the north of the Hunstein Range, there live the Iatmul, Manambu and Kwoma peoples along the Sepik River. They subsist on yam and their population is much larger than that of the "mountain" dwellers (see Figure 1 and 2). This shows that they also classify their neighbors from the ecological point of view. It seems, however, that their classification of the neighboring peoples on the basis of ecology is secondary in social context.

The culture of the lowland peoples especially, the Iatmul, Manambu, that share with the Bahinemo culture spiritual house and the form of the initiation rite is more elaborate than that of the Sepik Hills sago-eaters. Historically the Australian Administrative patrol started at the main river of the Sepik in the early 1920's, but the first contact with the Bahinemo was in only 1964. Thus the civilization of the Bahinemo came from the lowlands, or the Sepik river.

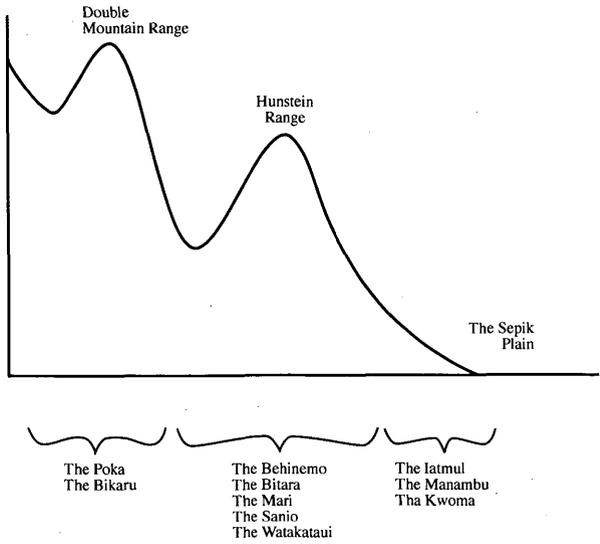


Figure 1

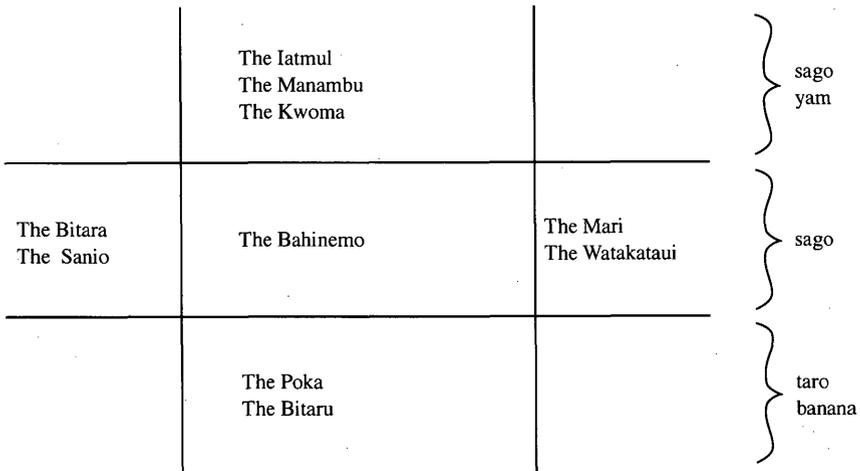


Figure 2

2. Subsistence

The Bahinemo subsist on a staple of sago starch supplemented by various kinds of vegetables grown in gardens. Taro, banana, and sugar cane are also planted in gardens, while pandanus is grown around the village, but not in garden plots. They also fish nearby rivers and hunt wild pigs and other small game in the bush. Domestic pigs are usually kept in small numbers. For example, only one domestic

pig was seen in Gahom village in 1990.

Sago starch is a very important food item in the Bahinemo diet. More than twenty varieties of sago palm are terminologically distinguished. This is comparable with the folk classification of sago palms among the Iwam of the May River to the west of the Bahinemo [YOSHIDA 1986]. Young suckers of sago are planted in any damp ground and left untended. The man who plants a sago sucker claims that it is his own.

Among the Bahinemo planting and felling sago palms is considered men's work. Women are in charge of beating and washing sago pith and collecting the starch. To cook sago starch is also women's work. Men do, however, sometimes process sago while their wives are secluded in their menstrual huts. Women usually process sago cut down by men twice or three times a week, while men plant or fell sago much less frequently.

Most of the Bahinemo's animal protein is supplied by their hunting activities. While women process sago and care for gardens, men go hunting in the bush. Wild pigs are their major game and Bahinemo hunters have a good chance of killing them, while cassowaries, marsupials, flying foxes, and other small game are caught less frequently. Men sometimes build a small lodge at their hunting ground and spend some nights there, when it is too far (more than a day's walk) from their home village. As the bush supplies the Bahinemo with wild pigs, other small animals, and some edible kinds of insects, they prefer spending their time hunting and gathering in the bush to doing their routine work of gardening and processing sago near the village. They sometimes add that they love to stay in the bush because they are free from social conflicts with other villagers there. The fact that they are heavily dependent on sago prevents the Bahinemo from leading the nomadic "band" life of hunters and gatherers such as the Australian Aborigines.

3. Social Structure and Myth-Telling

The minimal unit of the Bahinemo social system is the "patri-lineage", a group of agnatically related persons four or five generations in depth. The size of each patri-lineage varies between five and thirty members. Two or three agnatically related patri-lineages comprise a "clan", or *tebi* (lit. "skin"), the most important social unit among the Bahinemo. At present there are twenty-one clans among the Bahinemo. The clan, always named, is a land-holding unit, and its male members occupy a ward in the village community. Marriages are arranged on the principle of clan exogamy. Clan members act cooperatively to raise bridewealth for their male members and distribute the bridewealth of their female members. Mortuary rites are also held by the clan. The clan possesses a body of myths, ancestral names, and some specific names of various objects, such as ritual objects, *ga* (slit gongs and bamboo flutes), canoes, bows and arrows, domestic pigs and dogs, and so on. The clan is also associated with particular animals, plants, mountains, rivers and streams which appear in the texts of its own origin myths. Clan members

are entitled to make a claim for myth-telling or name various objects concerning myths.

Moreover, several (three to six) clans usually comprise a tribe, localized and named. The size of each tribe varies, but rarely exceeds fifty members. A Bahinemo village usually consists of one tribe, though some villages are comprised of two tribes. All the Bahinemo tribes (Moi, Bida, Hobahu, Bukuhu, Yegenou, Mfal, Kitol, Inifu and Uwahei) are said to have migrated from a legendary land called Wabi. I have so far described the Bahinemo social system on "segmentary" terms. Indeed it may be analyzed as a sort of segmentary lineage system. Each segment at any level, however, is so small in size that the Bahinemo system is quite different from that of the Chimbu or Enga in the central Highlands.

It is clear that the Bahinemo have one agnatic descent construct. It symbolizes the unity and continuity of all the Bahinemo, who descended from a single ancestor, Nei. Moreover, Bahinemo lineages, clans and phratries are comprised of agnatically related kinsmen. New members are always recruited on the basis of agnation. Although non-agnates, such as affines and matrilineal kins, are temporarily recruited to the Bahinemo descent groups, they are never fully incorporated, and their names are never included in genealogy.

Each Bahinemo clan has its own origin myth, which is transmitted along the agnatic line. In this myth the origin of the clan and the particular activities of its founding ancestor are described. Lineage heads, usually the most senior members of the lineage, secretly teach this myth to their first son when he has passed through the male initiation. Apart from these origin myths secretly held by each clan, there are other sorts of myths which are freely transmitted among the Bahinemo. Lineage heads, who are also *ma la hoku* (men of knowledge), usually know a number of these myths and relate them to anyone if requested. These myths are, therefore well-known among the Bahinemo. Through these widely shared myths, the Bahinemo can maintain their identity as a social unit, even if each Bahinemo clan is socio-politically autonomous and holds its own origin myth.

4. Myth and Experience

During my stay among the Bahinemo, they related a number of stories to me concerning past events. At first I thought that the villagers were giving me these historical accounts to teach me their history and, at the same time, to entertain me, so I collected as many of them as possible. However, I gradually realized that these accounts were not necessarily real historical records of the past, but that they were a "living" oral tradition showing the Bahinemo recognition of their actual history, *i.e.* explaining how the Bahinemo come into being in the world.

Here I analyze a Bahinemo myth about the origin of animals in the bush. When I asked the Bahinemo why they go hunting wild pigs so often in the bush, they always gave as an answer to my question some stories which explain the origin of wild pigs. A number of anthropologists specialising in the study of New

Guinean cultures have found that in this region myths in general have a function of explaining the peoples' lives, profane or sacred [e.g. GEWERTZ 1978; HARRISON 1984; SACK 1975]. Roy WAGER, in his analysis of Daribi mythology, however, separated myth itself from its function, and further pointed out that myth should not be reduced to the actual lives of the people. He, as a "cultural" anthropologist, established a theory of symbolic obviation and analysed Daribi myths as texts of Daribi culture [1978]. He is, I think, too "cultural", and, in fact, it is clear that his study of Daribi mythology may only be fully understandable after we have read his excellent ethnographies of the Daribi [1967, 1972]. My approach here is less "cultural" than Wagner's. I emphasize the function of Bahinemo myths as explaining their everyday lives.

The Bahinemo term *behi* means language in the first place. Story-telling, however, is also called *behi*. Further, the term means voice, cry, sound and noise, human or non-human. *Uya behi* (lit. "ancestor language") is therefore, a story of ancestors, and, at the same time, voices and sounds made by them. In other words, when *uya behi* is related, the listeners hear the voice and cry of the ancestor. In this manner they are deeply moved by *uya behi*. The impression the story teller gives to the listeners varies according to his narrative skill, and the degree in which each listener is touched differs individually, of course. It is certain that the listeners consider myth-telling as a kind of entertainment. At the same time, however, they experience for themselves what their ancestors went through.

To show the significance of language, voice and sound in myth-telling among the Bahinemo, I mention one experience I had in one of the Bahinemo villages. One day one of my informants, well-known to be a man of knowledge in the village, requested me to tell stories of Japan, after he had finished telling me some Bahinemo myths. I related a well-known story. When I had finished, he told other villagers to come and listen to a Japanese story. He started narrating his own much dramatized version of my story as if he had really been in Japan. His story seemed to me to be excellent, but the audience was not so interested in his version of my story. Later I realized that *behi* Japan, i.e. stories and/or voice, sound and noise of Japan, must be expressed in Japanese. The Bahinemo audience had never been to Japan, could not speak the Japanese language, and had never heard the sounds of Japan—people walking in the valley of skyscrapers, many cars on the street, railways, factories, and so on. In other words, they can not hear *behi* Japan in Bahinemo. *Behi* Japan is beyond their experience and imagination. This is why, I think, they were not moved by the Bahinemo version of the Japanese story. It is not correct to say that the Bahinemo like to listen to myths. Rather, they like to "experience" them.

5. Origin of the Wild Creatures in the Bush

The Bahinemo myth of the origin of wild animals in the bush is as follows:

There were once two women living together. They had never got married, but had a son born from their bodies. One day their son, now a young man, died. The two women carried the body on their backs and left their home. When they arrived at a village called Sinawi, they tried to leave the dead body there. The villagers refused to receive it, for they did not have any idea of what death is. In fact, in those days, human beings were immortal. The two women left Sinawi for another village called Suba. There the villagers also refused to receive the dead body, saying "We do not want to take your son." The two women left the village. In this way, at every village they visited, they were refused permission to leave the dead body.

Finally the two women decided to go down from the hill area. They arrived at Niksak, where the Setipa River flowed into the April River. They went downstream along the April River, and reached a juncture where the April River flowed into the Sepik. They further went downstream along the Sepik, and arrived at the Wilio River, a tributary of the Sepik. Then they went upstream along the Wilio River till they came to Knakusua Island, where they saw a man standing. They landed on the island and said to him, "Who will take care of our son? He is already dead." He said to them, "O.K. Come along. I will make a bed for your son. You can put your son on it." He made a bed, on which they put the body of their son. Then, suddenly, the corpse swelled up and burst, and a number of pigs, cassowaries, hornbills, and other animals and birds appeared from the body. The two women were very surprised to see this and jumped back. Then they felt hungry. "We are very hungry, but we do not know what to do. Let's kill the pigs and eat them."

They shot arrows at the pigs and tied them to a stick with a rope. They then put dried sago leaves into the fire and singed the hairs of the pigs. When they cut up the pigs, one of the women said, "Please give me only a small portion. A half of the heart is enough for me." She ate a half of the heart, and the other woman ate a leg of one of the pigs. After a while, when it was getting dark, the two women felt pains in their stomachs. They vomited up all they had eaten. "What happened to us? We ate pig meat only. What else did we eat? We ate pig meat, or rather human meat, the body of our son." Their stomach aches were soon soothed, and they fell asleep.

Next morning, the two women covered with sago leaves the pigs, cassowaries, hornbills, other animals and birds which had appeared from the body of their son. Then they said, "Pigs! Cassowaries! All of you, run away from here. People will come and take you all." All the animals and birds went away into the bush. The two women fell asleep again.

Next morning, when the day broke, one of the two women said to the other, "What shall we do? We are now on the island. This is a place of the

islanders. We had better go back to our own village." They took their baggage to one of the canoes of the islanders. Then they put two pairs of pigs, which they had stolen from the islanders, into the canoe. They paddled up the river toward their home village. Just before they arrived at their village, they left the canoe on the bank and started to walk. Somewhere on their way to the village they were transformed into rocks.

I collected another version of this myth, which has a different ending, as follows:

The two women left the island and paddled upstream toward a river in their own land. They came up straight to a mountain called Guna without a break on the way. They left the river and climbed the mountain. When they arrived at a craggy place, they were also transformed into rocks. Even now we can see the rocks of the two women at Mt. Guna.

In this section I have described the Bahinemo myth of origin of wild animals in the bush as a text. As mentioned in the previous section, however, when this myth is narrated, the audience hears the voices of the dramatis personae (the voices of the two women, villagers, islanders, pigs and so on), and they experience the events which occurred in the past. In the next section I shall analyze this myth in structural terms.

6. From Myth to Life

As mentioned above, the Bahinemo have two distinguishable kinds of neighbors, those of different language and those of different subsistence. Thinking especially about the historical impact of civilization, the main river basin of the Sepik is the important area. It seems that the Bahinemo cultural and/or social system has been influenced from the Sepik.

To analyze the Bahinemo myth of origin of the wild animals, I adopt here the "structuralist" approach, which was originally established by Levi-Strauss [LEVI-STRAUSS 1963, 1969]. Many other anthropologists have also adopted this approach in their studies of the mythology of New Guinea [e.g. KAMMURA 1988; FINCH 1985]. I think it insufficient here, however, to "structurally" analyze a myth just to find out universal similarities but never to associate it with the life of the people in question. I "structurally" analyze the myth to see what relationships it has to the Sepik area and how the Bahinemo received culture from the Sepik. First I take apart significant elements of the myth and show what they represent.

1. The two women's visit to the villages. This represents the first visit of death to the villages, for people had never died before this.
2. The villagers' rejection. This represents their ignorance of death. In fact they did not know what to do when they saw the dead son.

3. The two women's movement down the river on foot. Finally the two women left the hill area and went downstream on foot.
4. The two women's visit to the island.
5. The islander's acceptance of the corpse. They made a bed for the dead. This represents the islanders' knowledge of death. They taught the two women how to deal with death.
6. The appearance of the animals from the corpse. The body of the dead man burst and the animals appeared. This means that the dead man was resurrected on the bed in the form of the animals.
7. The two women's eating. They felt hungry, killed pigs which appeared from the corpse, and ate the flesh. This means that a new order of the world emerged, for they regarded the animals as foodstuffs. In fact at no. 6 they were surprised to see the wild animals appearing from the dead body of their son.
8. The two women's vomiting. The two women vomited all they had eaten and realized that they had eaten their son. This represents punishment for cannibalistic eating of their son.
9. The animals' liberation. The two women let the animals go away into the bush without being noticed by the islanders. This means that the animals broke their ties with human beings and established new ties with the domain of the wild, *i.e.* the bush.
10. The two women's movement up the river by canoe. The two women left the island by canoe with two pairs of pigs. This means that the two women obtained something new, *i.e.* the canoe and the pigs, as well as a knowledge of the treatment of corpses.
11. The two women's transformation into rocks at the mountain. This represents the end of their activities. The two women turned into spiritual beings. According to another version of this myth, they introduced domestic pigs to the people of the hill.

It should be noted here that similar motifs in each element are repeated and significant oppositions are formed. These elements, which go along with the movement of the two women, comprise a set. The two women first visited some villages in the hill area (perhaps the Bahinemo territory). Then they left the hill area, went downstream along the river and arrived at the island (the Sepik river) and gained a knowledge of funerals. Finally they went upstream along the river toward the mountain. Thus these two women's movements represent the three domain of the world: the villages (the Bahinemo), the island (lowland, the Sepik) and the mountain (highland). In this domain, several distinctive features, such as lands, peoples and means of transportation are clearly contrasted. These features are under a dialectic process of transformation (Figure 3)

1. <outside> vs. <inside> mediated by <passage>. The myth begins

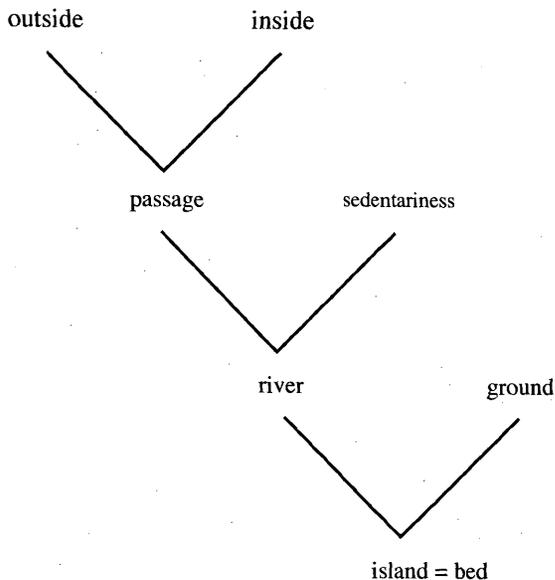


Figure 3

with the two women's visit to the village from the outside. They brought their dead son. They left there for another village, for the villagers refused to accept them and their dead son. This means that the two women were mere passers by, that is, they never stayed anywhere.

2. <passage> vs. <sedentariness> mediated by <river>. The villagers remained in the village, while the two women continued to move. This shows the immobility of the villagers and the mobility of the two women. Moreover, these two attributes, mobility and immobility, are mediated by an ambiguous object, the river. The river is, as a spatial domain, ambivalent, since it is a passageway between the villages of the hill and of the lowland, and water flow down the river carrying various things.
3. <river> vs. <ground> mediated by <island>. First the two women walked down along the river on foot. This means that they touched the ground with their feet while moving downstream. Then they arrived at the island, an ambiguous place, for it is "floating" in the river and, at the same time, it is a sort of ground. In other words, it is neither the river itself nor the ground. The bed that the islander constructed for the two women to lay the corpse is also associated with the island in the sense that the corpse on it did not touch the ground directly but was "floating" in space.

Other oppositions found in the attributes of the personae in the myth are shown in Figure 4.

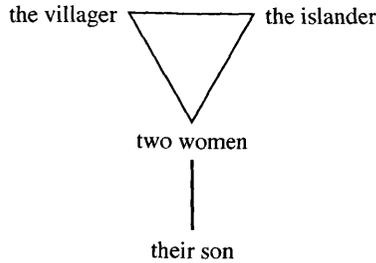


Figure 4

1. <villagers> vs. <islanders> mediated by <two women>. The villagers in the hill area rejected the two women and did not have any idea of what death is, while the islanders accepted them and taught them how to deal with death. The two women mediated between the villagers and islanders and went back to the hill to introduce to the villagers the treatment of death.
2. <two women> vs. <son>. The two women carried their son on their backs and, finally, they killed and ate pigs which appeared from the body of their dead son. The pigs are identified with their son. In this sense they ate their own son. The opposition between the two women and their son is that between eating subject and eaten object, or cannibals and their victims. In this opposition, however, only the pigs are put in question. Where have all the other resurrected animals and birds gone? They will come to the villages of the hill area.

A mythical model should match to the everyday thinking of the people. A key to the mythical model here is the island or the Sepik river. In the myth the corpse is also “processed”; the two women put the body on the bed. Under this process the corpse turned into living animals and birds. To put a corpse on a bed is the islanders’ way of dealing with death. As the villagers of the hill did not know how to treat the corpse, it did not change into anything. In this sense the islander is an instructor in culture.

7. Conclusion

The myth presented here, which, as a *behi*, recalls the two women’s activities, represents a reality of Bahinemo life. The animals in the bush are not really “wild” because they have already been “processed” in the past on the island. The Bahinemo put a dead body on a bed, which represents the island where the dead son of the two women was once resurrected. If it had not been for the island, a place of resurrection and processing, the Bahinemo would have had no pigs. Here the island occupies a very important position in Bahinemo culture. In other words, the

Bahinemo need a domain outside their world, the island or the people of the Sepik river.

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