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The Oral Poet in Africa: Understanding the Performer in a Changing Milieu

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Abstract

The biggest undoing of early anthropologists and their approaches to the study of oral literature is the concentration on the functions that oral literature plays in society. This perspective invariably relegates to the uncharitable background, the role of the performer of the verbal art. This study unquestionably examines the personality of the oral artist or poet in the whole gamut of the realisation of the oral art forms. The oral poet is seen, therefore, as a vehicle in the entire concept of performance. The poet's persona and his internal configuration speak volumes about the kind and quality of vocal performance the community and audience experience, against the backdrop of the avowed position of the occasion of such performance in the African setting.

Keywords: Oral poet, performance, personality, literature and tradition

Introduction

Oral literature abounds in every culture. It is ubiquitous, and therefore, transcends every boundary and culture. Also, it is pertinent to underscore that oral literature in all its forms depends on the verbal artist who formulates it in words and on a specific occasion. Interestingly enough, in talking about oral literature, the focus is on a large body of materials that can have its total integrity, impact and realisation only within the scope of performance, transmission and occasion. It therefore follows as Ime Ikiddeh identifies, "oral literature embraces such forms as traditional epics, dirges,

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praise poems, ritual and topical songs, festival and occasional drama and other forms of poetic and dramatic performances that are traditional in form" (55). The performer of oral literature, therefore, gives body to the material, formulates it and realises it within regulated and specified events such as funerals, title-taking ceremonies, and many others. Ruth Finnegan emphasizes this point in her pivotal book, *Oral Literature in Africa*. She discloses that "oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion." (2)

Oral poetry in Africa emanates from oral literature. The oral genre particularly embraces the poetry, drama and prose forms. However, oral poetry is known to have the element of charged ceremonially lacking in prose narratives. Weighing in on this in *The Breast of the Earth*, Kofi Awoonor argues that: "In poetry, we draw nearer to a more significant dimension of language that can be discerned in the other forms designated ritual drama or "prose". Poetry depends on voice performance which has its scope, meaning, and strength at the linguistic level" (78-79). Thus, distinctively oral poetry stands markedly different from others, particularly in the intensity of its rendition which heightens emotions and feelings during its presentation.

Oral Literature and its Ubiquity in the Society

As many scholars have adduced, culture encapsulates the peoples' way of life. That in itself continues to hold sway in the African continent. Eric Ayisi intimates that "culture embraces everything which contributes to the survival of man and this will comprise not only physical factors but also sociological factors." (2) The totality of man's existence is encapsulated in his culture. In this vein, therefore, one can adequately opine that oral literature is ubiquitous and transcends every race. This point finds vent in Ikiddeh's submission in *Historic Essays on African Literature, Language and Culture*: "Oral literature belongs to the general corpus of oral traditions, and by their very nature oral traditions are the common property both of the societies which possess them for one purpose or the other" (58). Thus, the society owns both. This realization is not lost on Isidore Okpewho, whose book *Oral Performance in Africa* is credited as the first to examine in a much deeper sense the circumstances that underlie the production of African oral literature and the implication it raises for both the traditional art and its practitioners. Okpewho identifies, albeit clearly, that one of the significant issues in performance studies borders on the emergence of performance elements or qualities (6), but while recognizing the apparent cooperation in the study of oral performance, it is important to state the "aestheticist model differs from the sociological model" (7).

In a similar vein, R. N. Egudu in his study examines H.A.S. Johnston's delineation of two schools of thought in oral literature; the entertainment school, which presupposes that "oral literature was a form of primitive art and that as such it had no real purpose except to entertain" (xiii), while the Functional school holds that a social motive lies behind folk literature. For Egudu, therefore, oral literature embodies those two elements, and the distinction does manifest in a piece of oral literature where one purpose is dominant while it is subsidiary to another (35). Emphasizing the place of oral literature in society, Nkem Okoh's *Preface to Oral Literature* accentuates the point that in almost every traditional African society there is an abundance of oral poems and songs which have been passed down from one generation to another (140). The contention is that Africa remains the place for song, dance and music and that the continent has been blessed not only with such a rich retinue of oral forms but most importantly evidence of its traditional life which distinguishes it in a world that has gone giddy and in perpetual flux (140). For Helen Chukwuma, she welcomes the place of the traditional artist as, "every man and any man and woman sufficiently knowledgeable in the literary traditions of the people and capable of communicating this in an entertaining way to an audience" (220). Thus, her study draws strength from Igbo society, one she happily describes as "a highly culture-conscious one which strives continuously to preserve its norms and to remind its members of them" (221), and it particularly accommodates the oral artist. Also, in a closely related but strikingly detailed interrogation, F. B. O. Akporobaro in his book, *Introduction to African Oral Literature,* acknowledges that the forms of African oral poetry are extensive and numerous and more significantly vary in form from one society to another (49). He emphasizes that oral poetry remains also an integral part of traditional African life which incidentally "permeates all aspects of the cycle of human life from birth in tradition marriage, death and burial" (55).

Oral Poetry and Its Functionality in the Traditional Environment

The oral poetry genre has in its fold panegyric, elegy, epic, lullaby and a host of others. In an attempt to address the make-up of oral poetry in Africa, Awoonor embarks on an elaborate configuration with an emphasis on content or form and posits occupational, cult, and social poetry (79). In this peculiar delineation, professional poetry is specific and tied to certain trades or occupations like hunters, fishermen, farmers, etc. Also, cult poetry incidentally covers religious, medicinal poetry and oracular poetry, while social poetry covers dirge, work, children, praise, love and war poems. However, in a cursory look at oral poetry, Finnegan focuses on the

African oral poets and the conditions in which they produce their art, but in particular, also, their audience (81). Burrowing in on this, she stresses that, "The central place of performance in oral literature goes beyond a mere matter of definition: for the sheer nature of production in itself can make an essential contribution to the impact of the particular literary form being exhibited" (2-3). In other words, whatever form of oral literature we are concerned with; stories, proverbs, riddles, songs, etc., performance is central to its realisation and interpretation, as the gestures and other paralinguistic features are employed to communicate the feeling and meaning of the art form.

In furtherance of the above scenario, it is proper to agree with Finnegan here that the most specialised genres of oral poetry are obtained in the royal courts. These are traditional kingdoms of Africa with their royal courts, distinguished by so much power, wealth and leisure that made court poetry flourish. Instructively, poets were attached to these courts of influential and powerful kings, nobles and even somewhat lesser chiefs, and thus were involved in poetic collaboration. Again, it is essential to state that the speciality of these court poets was panegyric. It is a praise poem often linked with rulership, power, achievements and exhibition of status symbol which the society welcomes with wide open arms. It praises the qualities and attainments of individuals, families or even a whole clan or community. Some of these poets who are associated with royal courts receive the reward as professionals. In acknowledging the lofty position of court poets, attention must be given to other poets, who depend and survive on personal or private enterprise, moving from one patron to another and surviving on their abilities. Again, there are others, whose means of primary livelihood is farming, fishing, hunting, and cattle-keeping, but rely on their expert skill to perform as occasion demands and gets benefit from it no matter how small. As soon as their performance is completed, they slide back in to their daily routine and task of primary livelihood seamlessly.

It is proper to appreciate the responsibilities of the court poets who embark on elaborate praise poems of kings. The praise poem of Shaka Zulu in South Africa, the Yoruba Oriki or praise poems, the high praises of Hausa emirs, and others epitomise this group. In particular, in these areas, the ruling monarchs and their ancestors were glorified in effusive language. Remarkably the court poets come across as preservers of the historical records of the community or people and their genealogies, kinship and lineage.

Elaborating on this in *African Oral Literature*, Isidore Okpewho identifies that the significant role of court poets was to swell the image of the ruler. He explains further that:

> It was the duty of the court poet to record in his mind the occasional successes of the king during his reign – e.g. in war, government, acts of generosity, etc., - so that it blends into the body of praises that the poet sang from day to day; the king's failures or weaknesses would be either entirely left out or twisted to sound mild, if not positive (26).

Therefore, the actual position and duties of these court poets include, remembering and expressing the appropriate eulogies. In some cases, a whole band of poets are involved with various members making their expert contributions to the performance. Various elements, including musical elements as well as verbal factors, play a part in it. The skills of performers are necessary. These kingdoms and monarchs like the Bantu of Southern Africa. Various empires in Congo, Sudan, and the Hausa of Northern Nigeria, and the many West African kingdoms abound with these poets.

However, despite the differing status, there exists a common ground in the position of all court poets. The fact is that they all depend on royal or chiefly patronage given to them in an official capacity, which in turn exercises exclusive rights over their services. Thus, they are bound and must remain loyal and faithful to these kingdoms and royalty. Again, their performances were public with the emphasis being on their ceremonial functions rather than their entertainment value. Most revealing also is that their audiences were primarily those who attended either the royal court or even state occasions in the imperial capital.

In the economic sense, it is worthy to note that as true professionals, most of the court poets seem to have gained a livelihood from their art. This financial assurance is so because of the belief that their official position in court will inevitably give them a share of more exceptional luxury and leisure as the court life offers. That notwithstanding the exact economic standing of court poets remains a mirage. However, Okpewho, on the other hand, sheds more light on this, acknowledging that for rising to his responsibilities, the court poet benefits in a variety of ways. He further clarifies:

> In some cases, the poet gets a residence in the palace or its immediate environs. If not paid a regular salary, the poet receives at least some handsome gifts and occasional allowances, sometimes even a portion of land on which to farm. Every poet enjoyed the protection and the privilege of being the official mouthpiece of the ruler of the land. (26).

The point here is that the poet is not abandoned as it were to his fate but instead given attention deserving of him and his art to exist and flourish according to his strength.

Chukwuma in *Igbo Oral Literature* assesses the whole issue of the oral performer, not just court poets. Being an oral performer, she sees what role-specific individuals ascribe to and which they take on themselves because of their aptitude and ability (219). The result is that such individuals who are engaged in oral performance do not constitute a profession on which livelihood depends. This contention holds sway because no artist in the traditional environment could survive only from the token of his narrative art. Instead, what is obtainable is some kind of economic "bail-out mechanism" or approach. Chukwuma points out that they constitute themselves into performing outfits so that when invited to perform on certain occasions, they may end up receiving some token amount. Instructively, this is more rampant with dance groups and praise singers (220). A typical example is the *Abigbo* group in Lorji, Aboh Mbaise, Imo state. Their activities within the autonomous community are well documented, and their exploits also span the entire Mbaise clan where they have gone to perform at both public and private ceremonies.

Again some are equally gifted within some families and are usually prodded on by family members. At such events as second burial, title-taking ceremonies and many more, they prove useful in reciting praise poetry and eventually get something at the end. It is vital to call to mind that an oral artist is a professional in his own right like a farmer, blacksmith, fisherman, or hunter. Therefore, the artist's role is fundamentally secondary since oral literature depends on the occasion and is marked by fixed times. Thus, it gives the artist time to follow his profession all day long and revert to an artist's role in the evenings or when such occasion demands it. In this case, he receives few rewards for his performance, like food, money, and drinks, which are just tokens of appreciation for the quality of his performance, but certainly not as payment for his exercise.

It brings us to the next kind of poet, the freelance specialist. It is a group that finds vent in praise poetry, though it has some element of blame or abuse. It is so, given the fact that within many traditions, the transition between praise and guilt could be entirely metaphorical. Examples of note include the Yoruba Oriki, or praise poems; the halo poems that suggest abuse among the Ewe and the praise poetry of the Zulu which often appears as heroic recitations. Among most African peoples, praise-singing is an art that can be part of a chief's court as epitomised by the Ashanti and the Hausa, or as professional praise singers found among the Yoruba or

the Wolof. Accordingly, Awoonor categorises them as "strolling performers who follow their patron through the streets, beating out his patronymic salutations and heaping upon him an exaggerated array of praise epithets" (85). They may liken him to an elephant to signify his strength and to the fox for his ingenuity. Also, he could be likened to the cow for her humility. The exciting development here is that if the patron recognises their work and aptly rewards them, he may quickly be elevated to the status of a lion or a leopard in just one breadth. But, if he makes the mistake of shunning them, he could be likened to the greedy goat that ate so much at his own mother's funeral and ended up befouling the funeral compound which speaks volume of their avowed philosophy.

In a similar vein, Finnegan submits that the freelance specialist is "a poet who migrates from place to place looking to find a wealthy patron or audience who can reward him in return for his poems" (92). Sometimes, he appears as an official court poet, but then even if he spends some time at the court, he does not hold a formal or exclusive position. It means that he relies on occasional rather than permanent employment for his survival. Thus, the existence of court poets may facilitate the development of this type of freelance professional tradition as there exists large quantities of movable wealth to encourage patronage since people want their names praised too like rulers.

The lure for these poets is generosity and economic resources akin to political power connected with state officials. It is important to note that poets' reliance on their art and their wits for a livelihood also affects the subject matter of their compositions. Over begging, innuendo and even subtle threats toward individual patrons are usually features of this poetry than in the praise and occasional verse associated with state ceremonies of the official court poetry. There is more focus here on entertainment than on the official or formal pomp associated with court poetry. The reward to him looks like a buying-off, rather than an appreciation of his immense talent and attributes. Shaka, the nineteenth-century warrior kind of Zulu, utilised praise poems as an essential aspect of war and heroism. They imbue these poems with exaggeration and among the Zulu, these are chanted with a shrill voice, with the poet beating time with a long stick, to refer to real acts of heroism. Shaka was the thunder that bursts open even where it is obvious that mimosa trees do not exist; and the giant camouflaged with leaves in the track of Nxaba's cattle.

Some of these praises were addressed to animals, especially among the southern Bantu people, particularly the Zulu Xhose and the Swazi. However, in his study, "Oral Literature and National Consciousness", Clement Okafor argues that:

> The practice of using praise poems as a medium for generating national consciousness and imparting good and commendable social behaviour is not limited to Southern and Central Africa. On the contrary, such a system of creating widespread awareness is practised in West Africa, as demonstrated in *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (101).

In some French and English areas, these freelance poets are called the Groits, from Fulani translation *gaoulo* (wandering poet or praiser) or *Wolof gewel* (poet and musician).

Poets of Senegambia and Western Fulani sang praises of chiefs and leading men at public functions and could gain considerable influence with local rulers. Traditionally, a *Wolof gewel* has the power to insult anyone and in some instances, could resort to outspoken abuse, if there is not sufficient reward forthcoming. These troubadours have more scope than the court poets who are exclusively employed by the state. The bard must think about himself as well as his patron and can more easily vary conventional styles and motifs than his traditional counterpart. And no premium is placed on verbal accuracy or even near efficiency as in some politically sanctioned court poetry.

Another group of poets under searchlight are the less specialised ones. But surprisingly, they are found coexisting with their more professional colleagues. They come across as the most skilled proponents of poetic art in cultures as in many of the traditional decentralised societies of Africa that do not possess full-time literary specialists. Remarkably here, women are at the forefront of performance or as lead performers, who sing or deliver them, with particular reference to laments, lullabies, mocking verses and songs to accompany them at work and ceremonies.

The funeral dirge, for instance, represents one of the most common types of poetry in Africa that involves the less specialised poets. Its horizon is essentially that of lament and manifests "through elaborate use of imagery, symbolism and allusion" (Nketia 95). Awoonor offers more insight and discloses that "the dirge is the preserve of women performers among many groups, and it is important for the full realisation of this poem to visualise the atmosphere of mourning punctuated by the sobbing and the weeping of the women's chorus" (98). Its realisation is by a wailing voice, with words receiving unfiltered prominence at all times. Here, the performance embodies special musical conventions, and interjections as well as shrill outbursts from the other celebrants who take up the position of a chorus to the whole ritual. These poets also earn their living in some other way, supplementing their incomes with their art; they are also often not equally experts in the field of oral skill.

Significantly in this discussion of poets and their poetry is the cult poetry that embodies religious poetry. It has a strong semblance to Awoonors' delineation of occupational poetry as specific to particular trades, and for one to be a member, he must exhibit the lore of the tradition of that group. For instance, hunters among the Yoruba are bound by their allegiance to Ogun, the god of the hunt, fire, iron and war which unites them with blacksmiths and hunters. But then again, hunters equally share the lore of the animals and forest too, which accounts for their participation in a more cultic essence of Ogun.

In his groundbreaking book, *The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala,* S. A. Babalola espouses the nature of Yoruba Ijala, describing it as a speech-like song chanted at the gathering of the devotees of Ogun. The Ijala covers all aspects of existence. It contains a salute to plants and their medicinal potency, salutes to particular lineages and distinguishes individuals sharing similarities with the Yoruba Oriki praise poem. And like religious poetry, it includes praise poems of gods as could be deduced by the Yoruba god Eshu-Elegba, the message deity, or the praise of Shango, the god of thunder.

Commenting on this, Oludare Olajubu in his incisive study, "Iwi Egungun Chants", points out that:

> Ancestor worship remains a significant feature of the Yoruba religion. And that Iwi Egungun, a form of Yoruba Oral poetry, is an essential genre of the traditional verbal art of the Oyo Yoruba. In many ways similar to Ijala, it is chanted exclusively by members of the Egungun cult during annual Egungun festivals, and the Egungun ceremonies and performances (3).

The worship, therefore, is based on the firm belief that the spirit of a man never dies. Thus, even after his death, his vision continues to influence the life of the community from another sphere. In the face of a challenge, the Yoruba, like most Africans, summons and invokes the spirits of their ancestors. He swears by the name of his dead father. He ascribes all success in his human endeavours to the support he receives from his ancestors. During festivals that occur yearly, the spirits of the ancestors are reincarnated and materialised in the form of masquerades known as Egungun (3).

The Poet, His Persona and Societal Demands in the African Setting

Interestingly, this leads us to another heightened point in interrogating the oral poet and his make-up, especially in Africa in terms of performance. It is important to

restate here that even in the earlier discussed court poets, the question of specialised training is not entirely distinct. However, it does appear that some kind of apprenticeship was involved informally. And for places like Hausa and Yoruba, there is that tendency for some hereditary influence that is difficult to shake off. Finnegan contends though that there must be a certain amount of quite formal training in the case of highly specialised skills, and cites the example of Ashanti players of the speaking drums and highly skilled bards of Ruanda. (87)

Okpewho (1992) on the other hand, lays out an impressive distinction and process necessary for one to be an accomplished oral artist. He calls it informal and formal training. He points out that, "informal training entails a kind of loose attachment whereby the future artist happens to live or move into an environment in which a particular type of oral art is practised and simply begins to acquire and absorb the skill in it as time goes on" (21). Okpewho stresses that for this to happen, the learner's mind or nature must be predisposed toward art before the skill can take root in the person. (21) This is quite instructive, as the future artist must be a person who possesses a considerable amount of natural genius with an interest in the type of oral art that goes on around him. Also, such a person must look and listen carefully to be able to absorb ideas, idioms, and techniques peculiar to the art. Besides, intending oral artists must use their imagination to give and select relevant materials from the mass they have acquired.Therefore, it is a painstaking art that places a considerable exertion on the persona of the budding artist.

Turning to formal training, it is very much like informal, the only significant difference being that it is better organised and the relationship between teacher and trainee well spelt out, in that, the process and duration are shorter. As duly observed, formal training is more useful for complicated types of oral literature like ritual poetry which the artist could depend on as a means of livelihood. It is fit here to illustrate with Ijala poetry. According to Babalola, in his essay, "Ijala Poetry among the Oyo-Yoruba Communities", the first stage of training is a period of merely listening to the Ijala chants performed by the teacher at his house or any social gathering where he entertains people with Ijala. The second stage embodies imitating the teacher word by word as he chants Ijala on his own and at social gatherings; and the third stage is when the master orders his pupil to give a solo performance of Ijala at social events in a confidence-boosting measure (4). Okpewho in *African Oral Literature: Background, Character, and Continuity* also chronicles the second kind of formal training, citing Wande Abimbola's "Ifa Divination Poetry" which is practised by traditional priests, healers, fortune-tellers and counsellors on the problems

of life. And particularly so, outlining in the process the various stages of training of the Babalawo, the Ifa expert. The first stage involves the use of the divination chain and sacred palm nuts while the second stage is the proper initiation into the profession (24).

These training programmes for the oral poet do go a long way in enhancing their art and performance in particular but equally, help to ensure the personality of the individual poets. Awoonor also reveals that the calling of the poet is intuitive. At times it is hereditary but only in the sense that a son may possess the talent of his father (115). He submits further that a poet emerges, he is born, out of traditions of songs, and most remarkably, he is the bearer of exceptional skill in words and, of course, has immense talents to weave those words into coherent poetic statements. This submission finds vent in Chika Nwankwo's study, "The Oral Foundations of Nigerian Written Poetry". He opines that:

> The traditional African poet is not always just a collective voice speaking to his community about community experience. He is that, but he is at times also a visionary, capable of taking spiritual/aesthetic excursions into his own experience and consciousness to provide entertainment and enlightenment. His themes range from the private and personal to the public and communal (322).

Also, Edris Makward in his article "Two Groits of Contemporary Senegambia", argues on the personality of groit acknowledging that honesty, trustworthiness and even moral distinction remain pivotal and it should also be discernible in the text he is reciting (24). It is so, because of his person which rubs off on the version that he is presenting to an audience. With the exploitation of other paralinguistic features, the oral poet or performer engages in conveying to an audience an experience or message he wants them to appreciate. As Richard Dorson stresses in his study, "African and the Folklorist", that "the bard and narrator facing their live audience employ gestures, eye contact, intonation, pantomime, histrionics, acrobatics, and sometimes costumes and props, as the author of the written word never does" (11).

The oral poet faces a lot of challenges, and it means, therefore, that his personality will continue to elicit attention. Accordingly Idaevbor Bello, in his essay, "Traditional African Performance as an Art of Theatrics and Spectacle" recognises that a spectacular display by the bard or tale-teller arrests audiences' interest and mainly brings to life the experiences of the characters the storyteller mimics. This sometimes accounts for the audience's preference of one oral artist over another even though

the same story is on display (208). Zeroing in on the persona of the oral artist, Ndubuisi Osuagwu, in his study "African Oral Literature and Cultural Affirmation in the New Millennium" discloses that:

> The oral artist deals with the non-material culture, which he reviews and weighs in the perspective of contemporary reality for affirmation, confirmation or rejection. What determines the creative ability of the oral artist is, therefore, the extent to which he can exploit and harmonize the various elements to teach, affirm and entertain society (134).

Chukwuma corroborates the above position, pointing out that the oral artist adopts a creative memory approach in presenting his materials by injecting some element of freshness and spontaneity into his presentation (222). The things the verbal artist says are known to the audience, but the manner and style of rendition mark a difference. And he is seen as a repository of collective knowledge, a culture bearer and a preserver.

It inevitably raises the question of how much the personality and lifestyle of the oral artist could impact his work. Sometimes, the artist's personality does thoroughly rub off on the story, and a comparison of the tale may be necessary. Okpewho (1992) writes that "a comparison of versions of the same subject by different artists could also reveal differences which point to the upbringing and personal lives of the artists" (37). Thus, most of the times, the personal characters or traits of oral artists do stray into their works. One recognises that the merits of any oral literature rest on the peculiarities of the artist's personality. Chukwuma's statement should call to mind, that as a cultural reservoir, that embodies common symbols, values like morals, religious feelings, and social relationships, are all stored and propagated by him (222). This, therefore, has added to it a new keen sense of responsibility. Those who sing chants or tell stories must have a deep respect for the material in their possession since that material is part of the cherished heritage, lives and history of their people.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the oral poet occupies and deserves a special mention in society. The excellent position they enjoy as custodians of people's history and culture remains topical. Homer's *Iliad* is a typical example of the work of an oral poet, who showcased, as it were, the heroic exploits of strong and valiant men. It therefore goes without saying that by extolling the virtues and valour of these men, the young ones are particularly inspired and motivated to emulate these shining

examples who, not only bring honour to the community but also to themselves and their kith and kin. Oral literature is a living art and does not dwell in the past. Oral poets and artists have the added responsibility of making verbal art confront the challenging realities of present-day society, particularly in affirming those issues that bind us together as one people rather than the ones that divide us. Okafor acquiesces that modern societies can emphasize things that bind them together amongst the various ethnic nationalities (104). This realisation has become significant, especially against the perceived influence of Western social mores and technological advancement, which impinge on strong-held African beliefs and values. In this vein, one effective way is to diminish those peculiarities in the personality of the oral artist which tends to inhibit the growth of this beautiful and spectacularly oral tradition.

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