The Myth-Reality Nexus In Shona Oral Traditions In Zimbabwe: Mediating Contradictions And Sustaining Societal Values.

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Abstract

The Karanga and the Kalanga, due to language similarities between them, morphed into one ethnic grouping known as the Shona during the 19th and 20th century ethnic creation during the colonization process. Common among the Shona people is the identification of a particular clan with a myth or totem of origin, and other specific myths that are there to ensure political, physiological, economic, religious and social equilibrium. Some legends are portrayed as mythical, yet they remain very relevant to the contemporary societies as if they represent significant episodes of past lived reality. The Shona epistemological and ontological presumptions built and generationally sustained around the philosophy of 'ubuntu' are predicated on a system of myth transmission, validation and modification to ensure societal acceptance and group identity and cohesion. This article analyses selected myths that are universal to the Shona people so that contemporary societies develop an understanding and appreciation of how and why values in different myths have managed to survive through generations. Focus is on the inextricable link between myth and reality in social phenomena to determine the extent to which they have influenced Shona oral traditions over time and space. Most, if not all oral traditions, are replete with ambiguities that arise from the different interpretations of myths that specific groups of people give to them in their attempt to reconstruct the past as it really happened. The connection between myth, reality and oral tradition is discussed and historical probabilities that have become fact from a transcendentalist perspective are highlighted through this interpretive study. The position of this study is that myth and reality can often and contextually be used interchangeably to describe original traditions of the Shona people and that variations within the different oral narratives can be resolved and contradictions reconciled.

Key words

Myth, reality, oral tradition, reminiscences, cosmology, contradictions

Background of myth analysis

'Myth' is derived from a Greek word 'mythos' which originally meant "speech" or "discourse" but later came to mean "fable" or "legend"(Kyeyune, 2012). In this article, the word "myth," which is also formed from 'myo' to mean to teach or to initiate onto mysteries, is defined as a story of forgotten or vague origin, basically religious or supernatural in nature, which seeks to explain or rationalize one or more aspects of the world or a society (Doyle, 2004). Myth analysis is said to have begun in the 19th century. The Iliad, an epic poem by the ancient Greek poet *Homer,* recounts significant events of the Trojan War and the Greek siege of the city of Troy between the 7th and the 8th century BC (Black, 2012). The compilation was meant to convey the truth. The modern usage of the word "myths" connotes lack of authenticity and reliability as some people believe whilst others discount them. The structural theorist, Strauss, emerged not only to challenge interpretations, but also to question the validity of the methods used. Structure is an underlying pattern of symbols and the interaction of those symbols makes a myth a coherent unit susceptible for analysis (Miller, 1976). In most cases, these symbols must be treated as dependent variables so that any contradictions, divergences and relationships can be synthesized and reconciled. The social, political religious and economic significance of any such myth becomes apparent to a group of people- clan, family, tribe, ethnic group or country- as long as the values it represents can only be modified to meet changing needs and circumstances but without radically altering its essential meaning and purpose. Strauss further argues that oral traditions are composed of collections of universal symbols that are constructed in terms of set patterns of thought and that genealogies were, and still are, telescoped. This is so in order that people's names of ancestors who did not represent significant nodes in a system are forgotten. In this regard, structuralists view oral traditions as functional in reflecting social relations at a practical level. Arguably, they consider most historical narratives as mere cosmological speculations phrased in historical form and so have no bearing on events in the past.

Based on the structuralist perspective above, it is important to highlight the fact that they wanted interpretations of myths to be based on empirical logic in the spirit of positivism. That was the reason Strauss (1955) adopted the Hegelian (1831) approach (the law of didactics) in his structural analysis (De George, 1972). The approach involves formulating a thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The structure of a myth is a dialectical structure (Strauss, 1955) in which opposed logical positions are stated, oppositions mediated by a restatement, thus giving rise to another kind of opposition, which in turn is mediated. Strauss concludes that the value of any myth, even if it sounds like primitive poetry, is preserved even through the worst

translations (Clarke, 1981). However, it has to be pointed out that structuralism sought real underlying meanings of myths, yet reality in myths is contradictory due to various interpretations. For this reason, social and cultural anthropologists overtly criticize oral traditions as history and classify them as stereotypes, fiction or clichés.

Having up to this point discussed the link between myth, reality, history and oral tradition, I must hasten to pick on a few selected Shona myths to show how they are interpreted and interconnected. My aims are firstly, to compare and isolate the various levels on which myths evolve- whether geographically, cosmologically, sociologically or economically. Secondly, a comparison of the different versions of these myths will be made in order to look for meanings and discrepancies between them. Finally, an attempt will be made to illustrate the inextricable link between myth and reality in so far as they relate to narrative traditions

Theoretical/Conceptual framework

The paper evaluates the debate about myths and adopts the structuralist analytical framework to interpret Shona myths since the beginning of the 19th century. From an anthropologist perspective, myths are viewed as reservoirs of articulate thought on the level of the collective (or group) phenomenon and have an objective existence (Leach, 1961). They are not just stories, but tales with a logic of their own (Detienne, 1981; Edelstein, 2003). Muller, in his studies on myth and mythologies, identifies the precosmic, unhistorical primordiality and the cosmogonic or historical primordiality as two primitive types of myths (Jenson, 2014:178). For purposes of this study, the latter type-the cosmogonic or historical primordiality-was used to buttress the structuralist perspective deployed in the paper to analyse selected Shona myths. Detienne (1995) in his works '*The myth of the honeyed Orpheus'* concurs with classical scholars in anthropology and mythology led by Max Muller, in their comparative linguistic studies when they concluded that a myth is an unexpected product of verbal misunderstanding, a sort of a disease of language (Jenson, 2014:276). Myth is a contemplation of the unsuccessful compromises which compose social life (Clarke, 1981; Lévi-Strauss, 1981). To them, people's experiences of the contradictoriness of reality are made explicit. Unlike anthropologists, structuralists such as Pyysiainen (1998) view God as a conceptual postulate and argue that a myth is a symbolic construct which, like culture, is a particular form of communication that provides a logical model that can overcome or resolve a real contradiction. It can be discerned from this perspective that a myth mediates contradictions on the basic premise of culture. This work seeks to situate myths at the heart of culture, anthropology.

In his structural analysis of the Bushi myths, Sigwalt concluded that a myth is a reconstruction of an original tradition and that it is composed of mental units that transcend political and cultural institutions in time and space (Sigwalt, 1975). For purposes of this discussion, a myth is an account of a people's origin in the form of a legend, folklore, cliché, stereotype or tradition on one hand. On the other, it is explanatory and representative, dealing of course with historical, moral, economic, cultural and social discourses of diverse societies to which it relates.

Reality as a concept is both mythical and philosophical, and at times can mean the same thing as myth especially if looked at in the context of Kalanga mythology. Precisely put, the two are the same in meaning in a contradictory juxtaposition. Whereas a myth relies more on the abstract by expressing past or distant emotions through words, reality has much more to do with the real life experiences. Reality is viewed as social life of a people as influenced by a particular set of myths (Spear, 1978). He stresses the fact that the symbolic relevance of mythical stories is so much linked to experienced reality. In other words, reality refers to what actually happened and therefore serves as the harmony that exists between myth interpretation and social life as experienced by the people to which the myth refers. From all this, it can be safe to describe reality as something definable such as culture, population movement, common values, interaction and even self-identity.

Oral traditions are verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generations (Vansina, 1985). Since myths and traditions are transmitted through generations by word of mouth, there is very little scope for us to doubt the glaring misinterpretations and misrepresentations of values and symbols by both oral recounters and oral historians in their attempt to re-live the past as it really was. Oral traditions have different levels or typologies of myths. Myths of origin are known as genesis myths. They are original stories that explain people's origins, state, clan or lineage and dynastic formation (Vansina, 1985). These stories are related to history as it really happened. Origin traditions are essentially mythical and not historical, but remain oral traditions. Because genesis myths refer to the earliest period, they have a symbolic meaning. For example, the birth of a child can be transformed in time to the miraculous creation of a mythical folk hero. However, these origin myths make it impossible for one to place events in a logical sequence, let alone in chronological order, due to lack of a calendar.

 To give credence to the above, a few but very important biblical phenomena will suffice. The opening chapter of the Old Testament is referred to as the 'Genesis'. It is pregnant with origin

accounts of the Hebrews, and the trials and tribulations they went through up until the determined and resilient few, after so many years of suffering, succeeded in reaching the land of milk and honey. Although through the aid of Christian historiographical traditions the Israelites are portrayed as having had a proud history as a nation, the myth has found international validation not at all as a kind of history, but as a sacred tradition that one cannot dare reinterpret in any meaningful and scientific way without sounding heretical. Similarly, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ falls squarely into the same mysticism when the Virgin Mary gives birth to a son who was predestined to be the heavenly as opposed to an earthly king. Scientists and historians alike have certainly not been eager to challenge the conventional interpretation. Some have even chosen to align their thinking along established Christian doctrines despite all scientific evidence to the contrary.

Charter myths characterize the middle period (Henige, 1982). These myths are applied in the present-day social situations to justify facts (Malinowski, 1926). Events are seen as repetitive or cyclical in order that the values are maintained as they should be. The last level of historical narratives which in time perspective is viewed as linear, deals with events or things as they are. This takes the form of personal reminiscences which in most cases are erroneously confusedly reported in oral testimonies and written accounts as historical reality.

From the above, charter myths assume the character of a drama, evolving as they do episodically. They therefore represent major clans and show how linear genealogies were established. They are transferal myths in the sense that they represent a complexity of cross-cultural and socio-economic relations that were established over time immemorial. Both professional and community historians interpret the various types of myths differently in their attempt to come closer to reality and that is usually presented in literal form. What these historians come up with is not historical reality, although the values implied or symbolized are almost always retained.

The sexual intercourse myth

Shona mythology in Zimbabwe was analysed at a representative level by Aschwanden (1989). In this case the question of chronology or episodes is immaterial. Reference is made to allegorical myths of creation, myths of the symbols of life and death, myths as experienced reality and the Shona Welt bird [dreams]. According to him, one reality that permeates myth collection is the cosmological dimension and the psychological and biological expressions it portents to represent (Aschwanden, 1989).

The sexual intercourse myth about the snake is one of the myths of life and death. A happily married couple had one child when one day the sister of the wife came to assist her in the field. Whilst in the field, the wife realized that she had forgotten the child's porridge and sent her sister home to collect it. Her husband, too, realized that he had forgotten his tobacco and he hurried back home using the shortest route possible. When the girl entered the hut, she found a large snake which began to wind itself around her legs. This myth sounds like a folktale, but it represents the wisdom which is still very relevant today.

Snake symbolism is applicable in many Shona myths to represent evil intentions and good ones alike. The legless snake reminds us of the penis so that young girls know the bad side of a man. The snake's poison stands for the perforation of the vagina's hymen during sexual intercourse. It is equaled to a man who impregnates a girl without intending to marry her. The winding snake around the girl's legs symbolizes the act itself after the girl fails to resist the man's sexual advances. This myth, indeed, even if repeatedly told among the Shona typifies experienced reality. The biblical Adam and Eve myth is easily remembered as having the same symbolic significance of life and death.

In its broader symbolism, the snake represents its capacity to give life. It, in witchcraft, becomes the child of the witch, or a village symbol of an ancestor. The Shona today put it as 'the snake cannot permit' (*nyoka yaramba*) as a fertility symbol to refer to the uterus of a woman who cannot fall pregnant despite having regular sexual intercourse with her husband. Even when hungry and the intestines produce incredibly audible sounds, people say 'the snakes are crying' (*nyoka dzarira*) to symbolize the importance attached to food that gives life. Religiously for example, there are mystic snakes as those said to have made the pool at Matobo caves their natural habitat. People still regard the caves with sacral value at '*mutoro* or *mukwerera*' rain- making ceremonies. In some cases, when metaphorically or realistically the snake is used as a genuine transformation of a dead person, the presence of a particular snake at a specific hidden location is linked to locally remembered fallen personality so that killing it would be regarded as doing harm to the ancestor the snake represents. Given the interpretation above, myth and reality among the Shona are inseparable in that myth becomes experienced reality. It can also be deduced from this explanation that Shona history is but mythical, yet it is their myths that largely inform the present Karanga cosmological thinking. Their cultural, political, economic, religious and social values that derive from myths, of necessity, permeate and dominate Shona oral traditions in every way possible.

Forbidden sex myth

The forbidden sexual intercourse myth among the Shona has become a tradition in itself. It is represented by a hyena-man. A man who could change into a hyena had a wife and two children. No rain had fallen and people were starving to death. For that reason, the man decided to eat the son but the wife told him to go hunting. The wife opted to go to her parents' home to meet her relatives once her husband had disappeared into the forest. In her basket were calabashes filled to the brim with flies. One of the children was still too young to walk the long distance and she decided to carry it on her back. The woman heard the hyena howl because it wanted the son as food as it was hungry. In response, the woman emptied one of the calabashes that was full of flies for the hyena. After eating, the hyena had a brief sleep after which it rose again, hungrier and followed. On this occasion, the hyena remarked that 'if I eat this child (the one on the woman's back) it is not yours but mine, so I eat myself.' The woman emptied another calabash and she arrived on the sixth day, tired, and with the hyena in hot pursuit. She recounted the whole story to her people and the relatives decided to kill the hyena-man. Before killing the hyena, the people decided first to put him in a room where he was happy with younger sisters of his wife (*varamu*). A goat and a sheep were slaughtered and to the son-in-law was given the sheep's tail. People broke into song and dance and suddenly, hair filled the man's body and he quickly changed into a hyena. The girls cried for help and people came to kill the hyena.

The above myth relates to a taboo among the Shona which restricts sexual intercourse immediately after the birth of a baby in order to preserve the purity of the mother's milk which the baby needs to survive. It relates to men who fail to control their sexual drive as shown by the symbolic hyena that is not easily satisfied with meat. A woman from a far-away country symbolizes a woman who was not easily aroused in love play, or who could not violate the norm not to perform the sexual act with her husband before the baby was old enough to be weaned. The absence of rain represents absence of a monthly period after the woman's second birth. It is the husband alone who nearly starved in order to show men's unsatisfied sex drive when they are not permitted to resume sexual intercourse with their wives before they have had their first period after giving birth. The man's demand to have sex is equated with, or is as bad as, eating his own child in the sense that even today, the Shona are convinced that doing so results in untimely pregnancies that come too soon as to risk the baby's life if it continues to suck contaminated or spoilt milk from the mother's swollen breasts. The advice that the wife gave to her husband to 'go hunting' can be interpreted to mean that she was telling the man to

look for a prostitute (wild animal) so that he would get sexual gratification under the circumstances.

The visit by the woman to her relatives represents the tricks women up to now in Shona traditions use to evade husbands who are sexually restless. This strategy has been modified so that the woman does not have to move her sleeping place to the vicinity of the altar (*chikuva*) regarded as sleeping places for the ancestors where the husband had no right to force her. Instead, the wife would have to share the same sleeping hut with elderly women who also during the day keep watchful eyes on the man's movements, until the monthly period appears again, (arrival home). The taboo implied by the child walking too slowly signifies a very important tradition . The child was too young to let the couple perform the ceremony popularly known as 'placing the child in between them' (*kuisa mwana pakati*). The husband, in terms of this practice, is not allowed to ejaculate into the woman's vagina, but has to spread his sperm across the baby as sign to show that the couple can meet and mate after the ritual. The killing of the goat signifies the re-union of the couple, and the sheep's tail given to the husband represents the richest part of the female's body as the pleasure awaiting the man after what seems to be a long time of sexual inactivity.

The hyena-man taboo together with many others in the Shona society, are still much embedded in the traditions and belief systems of contemporary generations, albeit with inconsequential variations and modifications. In the process of preserving such mythical values that are reality in themselves, a new set of myths is created, modeled on the previous ones in a manner that suits in with present-day perceptions. In order for me not to become too Freudian, relating every interpretation to sex, for now let me briefly look at the myth of the bull that talked as signifying the cycle of life and death in Shona mythology.

The bull myth

A rich married couple prematurely died the same day they had been bewitched by the husband's relatives, leaving behind a son and many cattle. Before his death, the father told the boy that the black bull would take care of him: it would be father, mother, brother and sister to him. As advised by the father, the boy sold all the cattle save the black bull. Strangely enough, he later killed the bull by simply removing the intestines. He then put all his belongings inside the bull and decided to migrate. To make the bull walk, the boy had to sing a song and thus, a long journey led him to a foreign country where he spent most of the time inside the bull. The bull later asked if the people could give the boy a place to stay, but, at the sight of a talking bull,

they were frightened and regarded the talking of the bull as a sign of bad omen. At last, the bull approached a receptive old woman whom it praised and promised great wealth in return.

The bull led cattle to the pastures. One day the boy opened the bull's belly, started singing and heavy rains fell. That season that year, there were a lot of pumpkins and maize in the old woman's field alone to the effect that the chief was impressed and called the boy to his court. The boy argued that they had not treated him well on arrival, and that he could not promise him what he had done to the old woman. In the end, people made him king and he became the founder of a great people. It is from this that the concept of '*gono*' meaning a bull that serves as a host for the family's or clan's ancestors, among the Shona started and constitutes up to this day, a greater segment of people's social life.

The promise by the boy's father to remain closely connected with him, though mythical, almost reveals the strong Shona belief in ancestral worship. This myth is very real in that inherited wealth, it is believed, and ancestral spirits, are intertwined. As such, the wealth ought to be managed in accordance with instructions people give on the eve of their death. To the contemporary Shona societies, a bull is a sacrificial animal offered to God and ancestors as a fertility symbolism and as protection against all forms of vice. Being male, the bull symbolizes men's, not women's, role in society as that of family and lineage protection. As a fertility representation, in real life the bull produces the cattle (father, mother, brother and sister) that bring wives and children for the clan or lineage. The fertility from the ancestors suggests that the youth would beget children, become name bearers and genuine symbols of the deceased through special rituals.

In the above myth, it is reality that the dead are actualized and reunited with the living as evidenced by the continuation of the '*bira*' (beer which is occasionally brewed to honour ancestors) and '*kurova guva*' (home bringing ceremony done for the dead) ceremonies. For example, the slaughter of the bull at the '*bira*' ceremony represents the death of a family member which does not mean separation, but continued communication with the deceased. That is why in this myth, because the dead do not want to be separated from the living, the head and limbs are left intact. That is why also, it is a commonly held belief that the deceased, if aggrieved before burial, retains a second white shadow which should have disappeared with his death. In this myth therefore, the removal of the contents of the abdomen symbolizes the separation of the white and black shadows by death and the child becomes the symbol of the ancestor. The belly symbolizes the house in which the children are protected by the ancestors.

Aschwanden (1989) concludes that one is almost dressing in the ancestor's clothes, is within their protective wall and nothing can hurt him.

In line with the previously mentioned interpretation are the life connotations that the myth carries. The boy's song that brought the rains represents praise totem poems that help to link the living with the dead.' The song can also be used to refer to praise and totem songs sung during sexual intercourse and at the creation of a new life. Falling rains represent the semen and the woman's fluids both of which are necessary for the creation of a new life. The cooking and eating that characterize the period after the heavy rains symbolize sexual intercourse and a happy wait for the coming child. The growth of new plants symbolizes pregnancy and birth. When the boy moved to a foreign country, it symbolizes the belief among the Shona that a boy must find a woman of alien blood to marry as a safeguard against incest. It is the ordinary view that incestuous marriages among other traditional taboos bring shame to the people as a sign to show disapproval of the practice from the ancestors who are holding back rain leading to famine. Totems are seen as playing a very significant role. Before a boy proposes marriage to a girl, it is traditional practice that he first asks to know the girl's totem in order to avoid marrying his 'sister.' If that happened-which was quite rare- the son-in-law would be compelled to first annul the relationship by paying a cow (*mombe yecheka ukama*) to confirm the new estranged relationship. Religiously, begging for a place in a manner biblical beggars did symbolizes God as appearing among the rich people in the guise of a beggar. The myth is calculated to take cognizance of societal differentiation and to nurture the virtues of tolerance, respect and egalitarianism. The old woman represents a girl who is not attractive but has a golden heart. From this emerged the belief that beautiful girls are inherently wicked, or are witches, and so must be thoroughly scrutinized before they are to be considered for wives.

The Shona are not alone in their beliefs in mythological aspects such as taboos, folklore, legends, clichés and weltbird as they relate to witches, spirits, young children and the birth of twins. All these are still anchored in their ideology as living reality since they are found and experienced in everyday life. However, some myths have lost their ideological content. But the reality of witchcraft elsewhere in Africa is not symbolical at all either: it is experienced, so are the consequences of bad or dirty spirit influences and the problems of twins and abnormal births. It therefore makes sense to talk about mythological reality than to present myth and reality as oppositions with regard to Shona myths that are representative of their life view. To dismiss all oral traditions as mythical speculation would be to render the Shona a society without cultural values because it is these myths upon which they draw their history from, and

around which their traditions revolve as experienced reality. Myths have shaped their thinking, their beliefs and their history.

The weltbird (dreams)

The weltbird is part of the Shona experienced reality. A fictitious girl character in a dream refused to be host to a mermaid water spirit (*njuzu)* that wanted to possess her. Because of that refusal, she had problems in finding a man to marry. It was only after she had accepted that the recurring dream stopped. Still then, she was not allowed to visit town. She was torn between two worlds- ancestral and alien. She was not allowed to have sexual intercourse with her husband since sexual abstinence was, and still is, part of the pool spirit's virginity. It has to be pointed out that some of the alien water spirits such as *jukwa* and *nyusa* are part of the people's living memory. Most telling dreams do not need *n'angas* (diviners) for psychoanalysis because they only confirm, and in most cases modify, the dream with already known possibilities of interpretation. Having said that, the Shona weltbird shows the extent to which reality and mythology can become one in everyday life, as Aschwanden (1989) submits that reality of everyday life, recorded in symbols, is translated into mythological spheres so as to create a reality which always has actual validity as long as the myths are believed.

Dreams take place in the subconscious mind. Nobody is responsible for what they dream, and yet the same dream can frequently recur. Most of these dreams can be interpreted from an economic, social and religious point of view. The influence that water spirits have on marriages, and in particular, on girls who subsequently fail to marry because certain rituals must be performed first, is reality in itself. Pentecostal organisations in Zimbabwe's cities claim to proffer spiritual healing and are now host to victims of childless families and mermaid spirits. Public testimonies on television about the spiritual power of healing are still shrouded in mystery and therefore essentially mythical, but the reality of people having their lives restored is a reality society is experiencing.

Conclusion

The structural approach to the study of myths still remains the basis upon which the change in people's life perspectives, beliefs and traditions are shaped over time. Myths, through their transmission from generation to generation, coalesce into a people's tradition. For that society to keep remembering, the tradition is kept alive orally. This then forms part of a people's oral history. History researchers usually interview individual characters representing lineages that have made history and so regard their testimonies as applicable to all and sundry even if they

are terribly embellished. That explains why historical reality is difficult to fathom since history by and large derives from myths. Yet some myths are a direct product of individual imagination. Consequently, some very important cultural values are misrepresented, and others might never have been part of a past reality.

Some myths appeal to different levels of people in the society to which they apply. For example, there are totemic myths that suggest in most cases, the great feats attributable, say, to the Njanja clan, justifying their right to land, women and political power. These are artistically narrated to portray the impression they want even in the presence of data to the contrary. Some rumours, if repeatedly told whether orally or in written narratives, become myths from which traditions are generated. Tales therefore, are not historical chronicles, but symbolic dramas which, as they unfold, express fundamental values in the form of traditional historiography. Such was, and is, the manner in which mythical heroes who qualify for burial at the National Heroes Acre in Zimbabwe and at other lesser important shrines throughout the country have become not only historical, but also liberation personages.

We have in contemporary society different sets of myths that are totalizing in that a single myth can either be universally applicable or it can within the same social setting play different functions. In cases, it depends on the reality of lived experiences that the myth mirrors on the contemporary societies. Behind every myth is reality, and vice-versa. Origin traditions in Africa, based as they are on myths, are the sources from which oral accounts and oral traditions have become history. The relationship is but dialectical. For as long as history continues to be revised in an attempt to come closer to the truth of what in the past really happened, it is then safe to conclude that historical reality is non-existent and a façade. But for as long as the cosmological significance attached to myths by successive generations before us still guides and shapes our experienced values today, then there is ample proof that myths are the true sources of history, without which there would be little known about society's past. Oral traditions, albeit largely inaccurate, certainly assist in replenishing our scanty understanding of the lived past, and how different societies came to cherish their values as they do today. By and large, myth is the reality in oral traditions from which societies derive their history. It is, too, a social representation for all kinds of relationship such as respect, loyalty, religion, fear and pride.

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