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Discussing ethnohistory: The Blin between periphery and international politics in the 19th century

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Discussing ethnohistory: The Blin between periphery and international politics in the 19th century

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1. The study of borderlands

So far, classical historiography in the Horn of Africa has focused almost exclusively on the centre of the Christian Ethiopian kingdom. The Ethiopian kingdom (calling itself Ityop'ya, which refers to the Aithiopia of the Bible¹), ruled by a Christian *neguse negest* (Ge'ez: king of kings) and his princely governors and feudal vassals, appealed to historians either fascinated by hegemonic powers² or attracted by this quasi-medieval feudal kingdom of most ancient origins, a living witness of eras long forgotten in Europe – forgotten Christianity,

¹ This, however, is a self-designation, which was adopted at a comparatively late moment. The Aksumite kingdom started to identify the highland-centre of the kingdom with the biblical Aithiopia only in about the 4th century, after the kings had converted to Christianity and the Bible had become the central reference book for politics and culture. The biblical Aithiopia, however, originally rather meant the Sudanese kingdom of Meroe or Nubia or simply the areas of the «blacks» south of Egypt; the term was coined long before Aksum came into existence.

² Characteristically, the eminent historian and specialist of modern Ethiopian history, Harold G. Marcus (Michigan), never discussed in any detail the history of populations of the peripheries. He rather focused on great personalities and actors of history such as the Emperors Haile Sellassie I and Menilek II, the conqueror of the southern kingdoms and ethnic groups (e.g. Marcus, 1995). However, an approach confined to the subject of the centre tends to remain content with writing history from this sole perspective. Easily blocked out is that «multi-faceted» countries such as Ethiopia are marked by a plurality of historical identities. Regions that were part of the Empire from time to time, and then again part of other polities or autonomous, are misrepresented as simply «Ethiopian». This has also been the case with the Blin.

forgotten heroes, forgotten feudal lords. Yet, local history and ethnohistory³ deserve more attention and, as such, the history of borderlands and peripheries stands as a particularly promising field of inquiry. Accordingly, central to the study of Eritrea is an approach attuned to the importance of those regions and peoples who were submitted by the Empire (or integrated in other ways) and differed, culturally, religiously and politically from the center. The history of these sites and societies has not been mapped out yet. Writing the history of peripheries implies discussing the merger of identities, often said to exclude each other. It means studying the creative responses elicited by cultural and political institutions to challenges by neighboring powers and ethnic groups. Peripheries are particular geographical sites where social transformation is best observed. Lying in between greater powers, their political situation is often a rather precarious one. Peripheries are places where cultures intersect and interact. This accounts for the fact that they consist in a «laboratory» for new political or cultural projects and solutions. To attend to these regions is to illuminate social change and its constructive and disruptive effects. As regions of challenge and change brought in response, peripheries are precisely where history takes place.

Little has been written so far on such regions in the Horn of Africa. Alessandro Triulzi's book on the Beni Shangul (1981) stands as a pioneering work. Borderlands often combine traits of more than one dominant culture, and develop creative political responses to threats against local stability. In a sense, the whole Erythraean area can be framed in these terms⁴.

³ This article was the basis for my presentation on the importance of ethnohistory for modern research on culture(s) at the «Workshop su Etiopistica oggi», Università degli Studi di Napoli «L'Orientale», 25th March 2004. It is based on archival research, especially in the ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris (Consulat de Massouah), in 2001, and research carried out in the Blin area (Keren) and with Blin informants in Eritrea during my research trip of 1997/98 and my field research in summer 2000 and January 2001. I thank CEFAS for the financial help, which made the latter trip possible. Special thanks should go to my main informant Awet Ermias Eyasu from Keren for his explanations and all his help during my stay in Eritrea, and to Nair Fessehazion, Sweden, for his explanations on Blin terminology and genealogy.

⁴ To avoid confusion with today's Eritrea: The term «Erythraean area» should describe the culturally closely interconnected and also quite diversified borderlands between the core of the Christian Ethiopian kingdom and the Red Sea, i.e. the «Mare Eritreo» (as it was sometimes called in 19th century Italian), «Erythräische See» (old-fashioned German) or «Bahre Eretra» (a term used in the Ge'ez Bible). All these terms derive from Latin «Mare Eritreum» and Greek «Erythra thalatta» (the Red Sea and Indian Ocean). - The Pseudo-Greek «Erythraea» already appeared as a geographical term in the 1870's, similar to «Abissinia Eritrea» in the 1880's. Originally «Erythraea» meant, rather vaguely, both the Red Sea and the adjacent areas (on the African shore). For the use of that geographical term see Hildebrandt, 1875, pp. 14, 27. For the Italian term «Abissinia Eritrea» see Sapeto, Íssel, NN., 1885, «Gl'italiani...» [based on a conference with Giuseppe Sapeto and Arturo Íssel], p. 188-98. - The choice of the name «Colonia Eritrea» for the Italian Red Sea colony (proclaimed in 1890) is evidently influenced by the earlier use of the adjective «eritrea» (meaning «Erythraean»); instead of calling their colony «Colonia del Mar Rosso», the Italians chose the more romantic term, thus somehow recalling ancient Rome.

2. The Erythraean borderlands

In the second half of the 19th century, this region was subject to a most dramatic reorganization of local political structures, which preceded and, to some extent, prepared later Italian colonization. My research on the pre-colonial history of the Erythraean area (started in 1999) tries to combine historical anthropology with political history – both based on documentary and field research⁵. International interferences (within the framework of rapidly growing imperialistic interests) responded to local developments within and among quite ancient local ethnic groups, and reciprocally. In order to locate sources (e.g., diplomatic reports from Massawa, letters of local leaders, reports of European settlers), I visited archives and libraries in Eritrea, Ethiopia, France, Great Britain, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, among others. While carrying out fieldwork in Eritrea and in Tigray, I got access to oral tradition.

To write a «History of Eritrea» before the foundation of the Colonia Eritrea in 1890 would certainly be anachronistic. But it makes sense to describe the pre-colonial history of this Red-Sea-region in other respect: for centuries, this area has been a periphery of both Ethiopia and its Arabic neighbors, e.g. the Ottoman Empire. As a range of interconnected borderlands, it has a longer run history of its own, albeit not in a modern national sense. Later, after the cession of Massawa to Egypt in 1865/66 by the Sublime Porte, a phase started, in which large swathes of contemporary Eritrea's territory became successively part of a single larger administrative unit⁶.

The Tigrinya-speaking provinces Ḥamasen⁷ and Akkele-Guzay, the Blin-speaking Bogos lands (the country of the Blin⁸) and the tigrephone Barka played a decisive role in the

⁵ Volume to be published in 2007 (forthcoming).

⁶ There is now a number of Eritrean books on that topic published in Tigrinya (e.g. Yishaq Yosef, 2000), but very few in European languages. See for one of several possible perspectives Erlich, 2005, pp. 358-59, and his book on ras Alula (1996); a most excellent work from the Massawa perspective is Miran, 2004; for an overview over Eritrean history until 1906 see Smidt, 2006. Further publications on that period include: Smidt, 2003, pp. 39-58 (based only on missionary archives, which are quite rich, but limited in perspective). See also my biographical study focusing on the same pre-colonial period: Smidt, 2005, pp. 1-36. The best studies on the neighboring (and sometimes dominating) powers Ethiopia and Egypt, from which one can learn most about pre-colonial Eritrea are Rubenson, 1978 and Douin, 1933-41; see also Caulk, 2002.

⁷ Its leader ras Woldenki'el in the 1870's allied himself for some time with the Egyptians (1876-79). For that time, he took refuge in the Egyptian Bogos country, running his yearly raids on his province Ḥamasen; his inherited province was mostly under control of chiefs appointed by the Ethiopian Emperor.

⁸ Often «Bogos» has been used as a synonym for «Blin». Strictly speaking, this is not correct. The northern Blin are the inhabitants of Ḥalḥal, the southern Blin those of Bogos (with Keren as their main city). To identify and refer to the area of the Blin in the 19th century, Europeans started to call it (and adjacent regions) «Bogos lands».

process of Egyptian unification of autonomous regions and ethnic groups.

3. The country of the Blin in the 19th century

The Blin are an ethnic group located in the Northern Eritrean highlands and, for the greatest part, living in and around the city of Keren and north of it in the region of Ḥalḥal. They speak the Cushitic language, Blin, a branch of Agew (Central Cushitic), which is mainly spoken in Ethiopia. Scholars have studied them since the 1850's⁹. Hence, one would expect the Blin to be thoroughly known by today. Yet, knowledge on them is fragmentary and sometimes confused. This is partly due to the fact that, as a rather small ethnic group (max. 100,000 members today – a figure including non-Blin-speakers who still identify themselves as Blin), they always entertained close connections with the dominating neighbors, diverse Tigre groups and Tigrinya speakers. Thus, obfuscated by these dominating cultures, they lost visibility.

Since the 1850's, not only were they studied, but they also acquired relevance in Red Sea international politics. Virtually every report emanating from French or British diplomatic representatives residing in Massawa contains information about the « Bogos lands ». As stated in a letter sent by a number of Bogos chiefs to the French government in the 1860's, they had lived isolated and peacefully for about two hundred years, that is, after they got separated from the Christian Ethiopian kingdom due to the latter's loss of power and territorial extension¹⁰. They complained about having lost peace following the establishment of the Egyptians in nearby Sudan.

In effect, under the rule of Mehmet Ali, in the early 19th century Egypt had become a regional power and virtually independent from the Sublime Porte. The Sudanese kingdoms were subsequently annexed. In 1840 Kassala (today the Sudanese border town on the road to Eritrea) was founded by the Egyptian administration. The Barka lowlands (named after the river Barka, Arabic Khor al-Baraka), mainly populated by the autonomous Beni Amer herders and diverse Tigre groups, were officially included into the province of Taka, with Kassala as its administrative centre. As the Beni Amer did not submit, this annexation remained rather theoretic. However, in the 1840's and 1850's the Egyptian troops' recurring raids eventually reached the areas of the Blin. Harassed by raiding neighbors too, especially the Beni Amer, the Blin were subject to mounting pressure on their habitat in their agricultural extensive, fertile highlands. The northern group in Ḥalḥal succumbed and

⁹ E.g., Munzinger, 1859; Sapeto, 1857.

¹⁰ Letter to Emperor Napoléon III., 21 April 1864, in which they also formally asked to become a French Protectorate (more on this odd episode below); reprinted in Rubenson, 1994, 145 (pp. 236-37).

converted to Islam.

4. The ethnic subgroups of the Blin

To clarify the diverse ethnic (self-)designations of the Blin (in Western tradition *Bilin*, in Tigrinnya *Bilen*, *Bileyn*), which are sometimes confused in the literature, I shall now go into some details. «Blin» stands for the Agew (Central Cushitic) language of the diverse Blin groups, and is nowadays used as an ethnic term to refer to all these groups, lumped together. Originally, the term «Blin» might only have been a name serving to designate an important sub-group¹¹, which by extension lent its name to their language itself.

In local terminology, the Blin inhabitants of Ḥalḥal were called, after their ancestor, *Ṭa'a-qur*, 'the children of Ṭa'a'¹² [Ṭa'a being the apic ancestor] (variants: *Ṭa-qur*, or, in Tigre, often used by the Blin themselves, *Bet Ṭawqe*, *Bet Ṭaqwe*, or even *Beni Ṭa'a*). Their southern neighbors, the Bogos¹³, with their centre in the city and ancient central caravan post of Keren, stayed nominally Christian for most of them, but also got under pressure - raiding groups and armies reached them from the Sudanese lowlands and later the Abyssinian highlands. They were called *Bet Gebre Ṭarqe* (or, in pure Blin, *Gebre Ṭarqe qur* or *Ṭarqe-qur*). Taken together, the inhabitants of Ḥalḥal and of Bogos were known as *Ḥalḥale Bogos* (cp. Kolmodin, 1915), especially by neighboring Tigrinnya-speakers (sometimes simplified into *Bogos*, incorrectly meaning all the Blin), before the self-designation Blin was generally adopted in the course of the 20th century.

The internal political structure of the Blin seems to have remained unchanged for centuries. Their traditional law (the best known being that of the Keren area, the *Fetḥa Mogareḥ*¹⁴) retains characteristics of the ancient law of the Ethiopian kingdom, which, in turn, had been influenced by the Byzantine Empire's Roman Law in late antiquity. Christianity was remembered in Blin society (called *Kistan* by Muslim neighbors, i.e. «Christian»), but there were almost no priests to convey knowledge on the doctrines of the

¹¹ The 1840's Basque traveler Antoine d'Abbadie notes that a subgroup living north of the Bogos in the plains West of the `Anseba river was called Blin. However, it is established that, as early as in medieval times, the Tigrinnya-speakers identified a big Agew group living north of Ḥamasen with the «Bilen»; the 14th century leader of the Adkeme Milga' was called Bilen Segede, literally «the conqueror of the Blin» (see Lusini, 2003). It is quite plausible that, due to the hierarchical socio-political organisation of the Blin ethnic group, the term «Blin» originally meant a leading group, the other Agew groups in the area being their serfs.

¹² Reinisch, 1887, p. 24. (NB: The phonetically wrong use of the spelling «Bilin» by European scholars originates from this publication; Reinisch, however, used special diacritica, which made clear that the two «i» are different, a trait forgotten later. I suggest therefore to give up the spelling «Bilin» and replace it by «Blin», which is much closer to how the members of the group pronounce their name themselves; it is also used by Mikael Ghaber, a Blin himself).

¹³ See, e.g., Mikael Ghaber, 1993.

¹⁴ See Favali, 2005, compare also Munzinger, 1859.

Church. Political leadership rested in the hands of chiefs of kinship groups, who acted autonomously. Leaders depended on their own families, who were bound not only by their genealogical links to other leading groups, but also by their duties to their vassals. The hierarchical Blin society encompassed a large number of leading families (*shmagile*, literally «elder») and vassals (mostly called *tigre*, «vassal») – following the model of neighboring Tigre-speaking groups. However, in assemblies bringing together representatives of all Blin groups, questions of law and other matters of mutual concern were discussed by all Blin kinship groups, thus representing both social strata. Every representative of a Blin subgroup could act quite autonomously – a fact which prevented any great leader to emerge and dominate all other Blin groups. This, again, reinforced the general need for collaboration among all groups, despite repeated internal conflicts¹⁵. The Blin formed a sort of loose confederacy which also included non-Blin groups. The neighboring small Tigre-group Bet Juk, located in the `Anseba valley (see Miran, 2003), was closely associated with the Blin, at least until the 1880's, to the extent that they practically became part of their confederacy. This formula provided for mutual help in crisis situations, including attacks by raiders.

Most Blin were living in small rural settlements, scattered over «Halhale Bogos», but also controlled a trade center which quickly rose to importance during the 19th century – and this added a new aspect to their originally mainly rural identity and socio-cultural organization. The caravan post of Keren – also the centre of the Catholic Bogos mission dating from the 1850's – became a sort of urban centre at an early stage, like the port of Massawa well before and the (later colonial) capital of Asmera a bit later. One effect of such far-reaching transformation was that Keren became a multiethnic center, where many languages were spoken. In the process the first urban identities developed. An unusual feature – that is, for the Horn of Africa – was that a few merchant families started picking family names, a commonplace phenomenon in urban centers elsewhere, especially in medieval Europe. In the Horn of Africa, however, family names were largely unknown, the second name normally being the name of the father, and the third, if at all used, the name of the grandfather. Now urbanized families emerged, who adopted names referring to their origins. For instance, the Keren family Habash chose this very name as an allusion to their origin from the Christian Tigrinya highlands. Merchants from Keren also settled in the port of Massawa and selected the family name Karani («from Keren»).

¹⁵ Blin historiographical tradition summarizes this experience as follows: There had been great feuds between competing Blin kinship groups, but they were always completely set aside at the time of attacks perpetrated by non-Blin. Historical detailed studies yield a slightly different account than the aforementioned: attacks against one group (e.g. by Barka slave raiders in the 1850's) often did not result into action taken by other Blin groups. But it remains true that Blin networks were far-reaching and many Blin groups who were normally living independently from each other could assemble and offset an attack by «outsiders». Also, decisions regarding change of political affiliations, that is, aiming at enhancing Blin collective security, like the decision to join the French Empire (see below), were taken collectively.

5. The Blin in 19th century imperial and religious politics

A closer look into the involvement of the Blin in international politics reveals some interesting details, which foreshadow late 19th century-colonisation. The arrival of a French-sponsored Catholic mission in the early 1850's in Keren had a lasting influence on the future of the Blin, especially those of Bogos.

In an attempt to respond to the growing British influence in the Red Sea area, the French had sent a consul to Massawa by the 1840's. Their friendship seemed to appeal to the Blin. When Blin elders complained over attacks perpetrated by Muslim neighbors coming from Egyptian territory¹⁶, the French managed to exert enough pressure on the Egyptian government to extract generous compensations. This did not put an end to raids, but from that time onwards the Blin resorted to the services of the Christian powers present in the area to shield themselves from such attacks. In one instance, the British too advocated that Egyptians paid compensations.

Religion was traditionally identified with political alliance. The conversion of many inhabitants of Keren and surrounding villages to Catholicism led to a growing identification with French influence. In a letter, the Blin leaders even call their territory a « *devlet fransa* » (Ottoman Turkish for « French province »). French settlers arrived and cultivated tobacco. The French government *de facto* accepted to exert a weak protectorate over the Blin people, which was managed by the French consul residing in Massawa. Simultaneously, however, the traditional leader of Ḥamasen, from the local Deqqi Teshim dynasty, would still regard the Bogos lands as his dependency. A curious, but interesting manifestation of their ambiguous political status is the fact that in the late 1860's the leader of Ḥamasen appointed a local French settler as governor (a post which consisted mainly in tax collection). In sum, from the 1840's onwards, the Blin, preserving their age-old local political autonomy, had to accept their quasi-incorporation into the Egyptian province of Taka, while remaining a dependency of the Christian province of Ḥamasen. To the former was added the establishment of a French protectorate. Stemming from the French « protection of Oriental Christians » (here, Catholic converts), this status was subsequently coined into the terms of « our protectorate over Bogos » – a process readily observed in the French documents written in Massawa over these years.

Yet, neither the French government resolved to make active use of the mission, nor the French settlers and the converts to establish a true colony. They actually disappeared from the scene after Germany defeated France in 1870. New insecurity erupted, making it necessary to find a new « protector ». In July 1872, the Blin were occupied by large Egyptian mili-

¹⁶Chiefs of Bogos to Vice Consul Lejean, 1 January 1863, in Rubenson, 1994, 119 (= p. 204-05).

tary forces from Massawa and formally included into East-Sudan. Interestingly enough, the Egyptian governor responsible for the operation was one of the scholars who first described the Blin in the 1850's (Munzinger, 1859; s. also Munzinger, 1864); he then married a Blin woman, and now turned into a local « Erythraean » politician: Werner Munzinger, the son of the former Swiss Head of State Joseph Munzinger.

The Blin unknowingly acquired a certain salience in European debates on international politics in the Red Sea area (s. Sapeto, 1857; Munzinger, 1864; Íssel, 1876; de Rivoyre, 1885; Traub, 1888-89). More than once the « Bogos » contributed to hectic exchanges of diplomatic notes between European powers on the « Bogos question »: Egypt claimed Bogos which connected the Sudanese province of Taka with the port of Massawa, and so did emerging Ethiopia, basing its argument on the old vassal-relationship of the Bogos with Ḥamasen. At the time when the Ethiopian Empire extended again and stabilized under the reign of aṣe Yoḥannes IV (ruled 1872-89), raids by ras Alula Qubi, the new governor of Mereb-Mellash (central Eritrea, mainly Ḥamasen), threatened the political and economic stability of the Blin. After the occupation of Egypt by the British (1882) and the emergence of a powerful rebel state in the Sudan, the Mahdiyya, the British and Egyptian officials were ready to give up Bogos. For a short time, the area was actually ceded to the Christian Ethiopian State under Yoḥannes IV, according to the belief that this would contribute to a greater stability in the region (1884/85)¹⁷. However, shortly thereafter the Italians took over Massawa (1885) and, having struck alliances with a number of local ethnic groups like the Tigre-speaking Ḥabab in Saḥel (1887), they peacefully annexed Keren (1888). Thus, the Blin again changed their political affiliation and became an important territory, the province of Senḥit, part of the new « Colonia Eritrea » (proclaimed in 1890).

6. The Blin as a peripheral group

The case of the Blin epitomizes a specific instance of borderlands. Their constant change of alliances, including of religion, helped them preserve their inner cohesion and their local cultural traditions within a framework of growing involvement in regional conflicts¹⁸. Until the arrival of the Egyptians in the area, the Blin appear to have lived a rather calm, but isolated life. Within a few years they got involved in regional power struggles and international imperialism. The responses the Blin elicited to this new situation stemmed from their already age-old position as a borderland people – culturally linked with the Christian highlands of Abyssinia, politically autonomous, and neighbors to Muslim groups. These responses demonstrated a great capacity of adaptation and accommodation. By effecting quick changes of religious affiliations, which went hand in hand with the constant change of political alliance, the Blin transformed, and thus preserved their conscience of « Blin-

¹⁷ By the so-called Hewett Treaty (1884).

ness». Challenge and change seem to have been an integral part of the group's identity before the advent of imperialist expansion. This proved to be the most appropriate response in a situation where only changes of affiliations could save them from complete assimilation into other groups. Only by accepting these changing affiliations, that is, a partial assimilation, the group's internal structure could be preserved. This adaptive strategy was the most productive response to the issue of safeguarding the socio-political and cultural identity of the group. Identity, in this case, was not defined only or mainly by religion or language (many Blin being Tigre- oder Tigrinya-speakers), but by the Blin's internal political system, based on a loose confederacy led by elders and relying on genealogical networks. The 19th century was the «laboratory» in which Blin-ness derived from the idea of membership to a genealogically linked network. The heir of a Blin is a Blin. The lineage carries the *duty* to and the *offer* of alliance. A Blin is the one who defends the Blin because he is a Blin, whatever language he speaks and whatever God he worships¹⁹. This seemingly tautological definition is based on a simple and stable concept: Blin society is modeled after the idea of an extended family, in which the «We-group» is formed out of inheritance – one of the strongest possible responses of a traditional society to cultural and political challenge. In fact, 19th century's transformations never challenged this dimension of society. Well into the 20th century, local autonomies remained unchanged under every government, and local affairs were in the hands of widely autonomous networks of leaders. The sense of belonging assumed the practical dimension of mutual solidarity and help – a powerful stabilizing factor.

Many Blin participated to the Eritrean liberation struggle, both as fighters and as intellectuals. The aspiration to Eritrean independence nicely fitted in with the older dream of an open and tolerant Blin society, trading with everyone in all languages necessary, while preserving its internal autonomy. Only at the end of the 20th century were local-patriotic feelings challenged by the rise of a modern independent state of Eritrea – the latter fearing nothing more than lack of control. While issues of language and religion did not alter the stability of Blin society in the 19th century, the challenges posed in the 21st century might well demand new solutions²⁰.

²⁰ A great potential lies in the Eritrean policy to respect local culture and language. Local languages are taught at school. It is believed that the one who masters his «own» language will more easily master other languages. The multi-linguist reality of Blin society is acknowledged and even positively valued. Even in a situation of great economic pressure and political insecurity, at the very local level, people used to chose their rural representatives for local decision-making bodies. Though transformed, the Blin political society endures. However, due to economic pressure and to military conscription, youngsters are leaving their regions of origin. The traditional networks of belonging might be replaced by new political structures, which may make the ethnic dimension of identity and culture less and less important. An aspect illustrating Blin peripheral position is the modern discussion over which script should be adopted for the language.

In the 1960's Eritrean autonomy was subsequently destroyed and the official Ethiopian language Amharic started to dominate. However, the Blin language remained prominent in rural areas. Especially in communications among Blin, one switched actively to the Blin language, as an expression of the strong identification with the ethnic group, thus also underlining the strong connection between both speakers (I thank my informant Awet Ermias Eyasu for his explanations on this subject). During a short period of reform, teaching in local languages was discussed and reading material developed in Blin language. The *fidel* script (used by Ge'ez, Amharic and Tigrinnya) was adapted; a consonant not known to these Ethio-semitic languages (ng) got its own newly created sign. However, language committees set up by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) later gave up this idea. A general Latin letters system, which was to be applied to all non-Ethiosemitic languages of Eritrea, including Blin, was introduced. This is yet another example of changes affecting Blin language and, possibly, identity.

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