

## The initiation route of the orphan in Bernard Dadié's two folktales: "The Black Cloth" and "The Pitcher" from *The Black Cloth*

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### Abstract

*African folktales in which the orphan, male or female appears constitute a category distinct from other African tales because the orphan is given particular attention in the society. The orphan's social condition and the ill-treatment he undergoes in his family make him naturally attract the compassion of people around him and even of the providence. The wickedness of a step mother or a guardian causes his departure from home. After going successfully through the different stages of his initiation route and obtaining what he asked for, he returns home completely transformed; with more experiences and often wealthy. The purpose of this article is to show the initiation dimension of the two folktales, "The Black Cloth"<sup>i</sup> and "The Pitcher"<sup>ii</sup> and the role played by the orphan in such tales.*

**Key Words:** folktale, orphan, stepmother, tests, transformation

### Résumé

*Les contes africains dans lesquels figure l'orphelin ou l'orpheline constituent une catégorie distincte des autres contes africains parce qu'une attention particulière est accordée à l'orphelin dans la société. Ses conditions sociales et le mauvais traitement qu'il subit dans la famille font qu'il attire naturellement la compassion de son entourage et même de la providence. La méchanceté de sa marâtre ou de sa tutrice l'amène à quitter la maison. Après avoir franchi avec succès les différentes étapes de son parcours et obtenu ce qu'il désire, il retourne à la maison complètement transformé, avec plus d'expériences et souvent matériellement comblé. Cet article a pour but de montrer la dimension initiatique des deux contes « The Black Cloth » et « The Pitcher » et le rôle joué par l'orphelin dans de tels contes.*

**Mots clés:** conte, orphelin, marâtre, épreuves, transformation

### 1. Introduction

African folktales dealing with orphan, girl or boy, constitute a category distinct from other African tales. Each culture in the world has its set of orphan tales because the orphan is given a particular attention in the society. His social condition and the ill-treatment he undergoes in his family make him naturally and sometimes legally attract the compassion of other people around him. But the hellish life he lives near his stepmother catapults him into a new world full of obstacles and a series of tests he has to overcome before reaching the object of his quest. What narrative elements show that the tales "The Black Cloth" and "The Pitcher" by Bernard Dadié are initiation orphan tales when we trace the orphan, Aïwa and Koffi, on their routes from and back home?

As orphans, what role do they play in the tales? Structuralism approach will help to point out the narrative and topo-structure of the two tales while the socio-critical approach will be used to deal with the social and cultural environment in which live the orphans. This study will be carried out in three stages: the theoretical frame, "The Black Cloth" and "The Pitcher" as initiation tales and the role of the orphan in such tales.

### 1. Theoretical Frame

An initiation route in a folktale is an itinerary followed by the hero from a departure point to an arrival point and during which he has to overcome many obstacles before he returns completely transformed as a result of his efforts and experiences.

At the beginning of an initiation journey, the hero is ignorant and inexperienced as if he embarks in an adventure since he does not know what will happen and what he is going to discover as obstacles on his way. An initiation route is paved with a certain number of tasks and obstacles that cover a relatively long time and often imply suffering over which the character must triumph and out of which he comes stronger and experienced. The hero always comes out of the obstacles positively transformed whereas the anti-hero is punished.

An initiation route, like in any ordinary folktale, contains an initial situation, a disturbing element, some elements of transformation, an element of resolution and a final situation, with the difference that the hero or the traveller is not an animal but a human being, particularly an orphan in the case of this article.

During his journey or initiation route, the hero is patient with the people or the creatures he comes across until he feels disengaged to continue his way. He has no choice because he does not know when his journey will end. He does not also know how many obstacles he will have to overcome on his route. The difference between a sacred initiation and an initiation journey is that in the case of a sacred initiation, the different stages are performed secretly; the common point is that the neophyte is transformed at the end.

## 2. *The Black Cloth And The Pitcher As Initiation Folktales*

As any folktale, the two folktales have an initial situation, a disturbing element, transformation elements, an element of resolution and a final situation. But the elements of transformation are made up of a series of tests which the heroes must pass before reaching their goals. These are summarized in table 1 & 2 below:

**Table 1: Narrative structure of “The Black Cloth”**

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Initial situation:          | Aiwa’s daily life at home with her wicked stepmother.  |
| Disturbing element:         | The orphan is given the assignment to go out and wash a black cloth.   |
| Elements of transformation: | 1-She grabs the black linen and leaves home.<br>2-she immerses twice the cloth in the yellow water inside the trunk of silk-cotton tree but the cloth is not wet.<br>3-the water of a spring that flows through a village of chimpanzees cannot also dampen the black cloth.<br>4- Aiwa washes the black cloth with the water of the spring in a forest. The water dampens the cloth but it still remains black. |
| Element of resolution:      | Her mother appears to her and gives her a white cloth.   |
| Final situation:            | Aiwa comes back home with a white cloth to the stupefaction of her stepmother.   |

**Table 2: Narrative structure of “The Pitcher”**

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Initial situation:         | Koffi is victim of his stepmother’s insults and humiliation.   |
| Disturbing element:        | Koffi, the orphan, must go out and find a pitcher like the one he has broken.  |
| Elements of transformation | 1-Koffi leaves home in a happy mood.<br>2-He meets a crocodile whose back he rubs on the latter’s request.<br>3-He comes across a monster whose hair he combs on the latter’s request.<br>4-He meets a devil who gives him two keys. As required by the latter, he lets himself fall off the mountain at the bottom of which there are two doors.<br>5-He tells his story to the old women inside the right door he has opened and combs their hair, cleans their fingernails and toenails, fetches water for them, washes and dresses them all as he is asked.<br>6-The oldest woman gives him two gourds and the recommendations to use them.<br>7-Koffi throws the first gourd and finds himself in a company of his mother who gives him a pitcher and three other gourds and the recommendations to use them.<br>8-He throws the first gourd his mother had given him and found himself in his own village. |
| Element of resolution      | -He hands the new pitcher over to his parents (the stepmother and his father.)   |
| Final situation            | 1-He breaks the second gourd and golden castles spring up everywhere.<br>2-He breaks the third gourd and from it come men, riches, women and children to people the castles.<br>3-He becomes king. (Having noticed that Koffi’s life has completely changed to the best, the stepmother asks her own son to go in search of a pitcher and come back as wealthy as Koffi. But instead of gaining golden castles, the son and his mother lose their lives.)  |

The narrative of orphan tales always starts with the suffering of the orphan at home. He is given more labors, beaten, insulted and humiliated by his stepmother. The character of the stepmother is the most antipathetic in the orphan tales. She hates the orphan who always attracts the sympathy of people outside. Her cruelty toward the child reflects the hatred she bears for her departed rival. She thinks the boy or the girl must pay for this antagonism. She discharges on the orphan the feelings of jealousy, scorn and revenge she used to have for his mother. She sees the orphan not only as a rival who, like his mother prevents her from enjoying alone the marital affection but also as her children's enemy. That is why the stepmother in "The Pitcher", asks her son to go out and follow the same route in search of a pitcher and experience the same process of transformation as Koffi's one. But the latter's impoliteness, pride and lack of determination lead him to suffering and death. The stepmother has one thing in mind: the loss or the death of the orphan. For that reason, the people around, have a bad impression on her. Her attitude toward the orphan is condemned by the community, all the more because traditional African community accepts polygamy. The orphan has a negative image of the stepmother. In his eyes, the stepmother is a heartless and mischievous woman. The antagonism between the two is maintained by the way the orphan is ill-treated.

The disturbing element in the narrative structure is justified by the cruelty of the stepmother. In "The Black Cloth" as well as in "The Pitcher", the stepmother gives the orphan a difficult task almost unachievable and which must be accomplished out of the house at the risk of the young boy or girl. For the one, a very black cloth must be washed until it becomes completely white. For the other, the same kind of pitcher must be found. The two objects, the cloth which needs to be washed by Aiwa and the pitcher which is broken by Koffi, are symbols associated with woman. The orphan must repair the two objects deteriorated in order to bring back the womanhood of the stepmother. Otherwise the conflict between the orphans and the stepmother is the one between innocent victims and the stepmother's womanhood which the orphans reject.

The initiation route of the orphan is made up of a series of tests. His progression on his way depends on the success of each test. Aiwa's patience to brave time is softened by her smile. If her journey must have a happy end, she cannot do otherwise. On an initiation journey, the neophyte is not in a hurry. He must be patient until he reaches the object of his quest since he does not know when his fears and suffering will end.

The element of transformation of Aiwa's initiation is made up of endurance tests punctuated by a song addressed to her deceased mother. When she immerses the black cloth and it does not dampen, she is not discouraged. She keeps on walking, tired, feeding on fruits and drinking morning dew deposited on the leaves<sup>iii</sup> until she finds another source of water to repeat the same action.

During her journey, Aiwa has braved time, fear and suffering. In-between one place and the next on the journey, she spends many moons. Before she comes to the first place, she spends one moon. "After walking for a moon, she arrived on the edge of a stream."<sup>iv</sup> It takes her six moons to reach the second place "She walked for six more moons."<sup>v</sup> She arrives at the third place after uncountable moons. "She walked for moons and moons, for so many moons that no one remembered the exact number any longer."<sup>vi</sup> The narrator leaves out the time spent between the third and the fourth place which is the last, to imply that the orphan girl is accustomed to walking for hours, weeks and months.

All the creatures Aiwa meets at different stages of her journey are fearful, likely to discourage the girl. At the first stage of her journey, on the edge of the stream, she could hear, "the frogs which swelled the voices as if to frighten the little orphan girl."<sup>vii</sup> At the second stage, when the orphan girl arrives and sees a huge tree whose trunk contains yellow water, the water is surrounded by enormous ants. On one of its branches, has perched a huge vulture whose phenomenal wings obscure a great part of the sun: "its eyes threw out flames like flashes of lighting; and its talons like powerful aerial roots, dragged the ground..."<sup>viii</sup>. At the third stage she meets chimpanzees who, instead of frightening her show her the way to the nearby spring whose water refuses to dampen the black cloth. At the fourth stage, she finds herself in a mysterious place where "everything talked: the trees, the birds, the insects, the earth dead leaves, the fruits"<sup>ix</sup> and afterwards, in the heart of a very quiet and fearful forest. On her journey, she endures all sorts of suffering: hunger, tiredness, and wounds.

The topographic structure of her journey reveals four stages corresponding to four different places. The first place is a stream side: "she arrived at the edge of a stream (...) the water flowed calmly, little fish and water lilies playing on its bed."<sup>x</sup> Although the stream looks naturally beautiful, it refuses to dampen the black cloth. The second place is near a huge silk cotton tree lying across the road, containing yellow water "In the trunk there was some water, completely yellow but very clear water"<sup>xi</sup>.

In this yellow and limpid water, Aïwa immerses the cloth, but the water refuses to dampen it. The third place is the village of chimpanzees through which flows a spring. She discovers the string thanks to the chimpanzees who are shocked by Aïwa's story. But the spring also refuses to dampen the black cloth. The fourth place is a very strange place where Aïwa comes across a spring which rises up out of the earth. "*There was a clearing in front of her and, at the foot of a banana tree; a spring rose up out the earth.*"<sup>xiii</sup> Aïwa immerses the black cloth into the spring, the cloth becomes wet. But after washing, it still remains black "*The cloth became wet (...) but it still remains black.*"<sup>xiii</sup> It is at this fourth place that her deceased mother appears to her and gives her a white cloth in exchange of the black cloth. "*She had scarcely sung when there stood her mother holding a white cloth, a cloth whiter than chalk. She took the black cloth without saying a word, melted into the air.*"<sup>xiv</sup>

The topographic structure summarizes the whole story of Aïwa because it puts in relation the actions and their places of occurrence. In a narrative, there is no action without the place where it occurs. In the same way, there is no place without an action. That is why the topographic structure without the actions does not give us the morphology of the tale.

One characteristic feature of an orphan tale is its ascending type. In his classification of the morphology of folktales, Jean Gauvin describes the ascending type as follows: "*type 1: ascendant: situation de manqué; amelioration; manque comblé.*"<sup>xv</sup> The element of resolution and the one of final situation contrast with the initial situation, the disturbing element and a great part of elements of transformation. Karen Hatch summarizes the structural type of orphan tales in the following terms: "*The story opens with a picture of hardship, and though the character is tested again and again (and often to the verge of despair), the hardship is eliminated and a better world reigns at the end.*"<sup>xvi</sup> In the case of the second tale "The Pitcher", the orphan boy suffers greater hardships but receives higher rewards.

The orphan figure in "The Pitcher" is Koffi, a boy, who like Aïwa loses his mother at birth and also suffers physically and morally at the hand of his stepmother. After being given the task of looking for the broken pitcher, Koffi has to undergo eight stages which constitute the elements of transformation compared to Aïwa's four stages in "The Black Cloth"

The difference in the number of the stages of transformation reveals that the number of tests Koffi has to face is greater than that of Aïwa. But it does not imply that an orphan boy suffers more than an orphan girl. It shows instead the proportionality of the number of tests to the importance of the reward. The more the stepmother cares for her own child, the more she makes the orphan suffer whether the latter is a boy or a girl. Nemesis, the Greek goddess of punishment and reward acts proportionally. George Elliot is one of the writers who has most used the concept of nemesis in her novels showing impartiality toward the good characters like Silas Marner<sup>xvii</sup>, a village linen weaver, who is rewarded with a baby girl in the place of his stolen golden guineas, and toward the evil characters like Godfrey Cass whose wife, Molly, dies in the snow leaving alive, a baby girl who becomes Silas Marner's natural daughter in the novel *Silas Marner*.

Comparing African orphan tales to European fairy tales, Karen Hatch finds that both apply the rule of reward and punishment: The reader familiar with European fairy tales will at once recognize certain common features: a wicked stepmother, an orphan outcast who must journey into an unknown-often frightening-world, magic, miracles and helpful assistants. The good characters are, of course, rewarded; the evil one punished.<sup>xviii</sup>

A common point between Aïwa and Koffi is their smile. Aïwa uses her smile as a weapon to break the wickedness of her stepmother. But Koffi's smile marks the transition between a close space, the home which is a sort of prison for him, and an open space, when he comes outside:

So Koffi left and he was happy to go, happy to leave this house where ever since he had lost his mother, he had never found a moment's rest, a moment's joy. The farther away he got from the house - where everything he knew had been in the form of insults, forced labor, and punishment - the happier he felt.<sup>xix</sup>

The close space is characterised by tears, loneliness, frustration and fear whereas his open space is marked by joy, freedom, good understanding with people he meets and courage. He braves time and distance not in terms of moons like Aïwa but through the narrator use of short clauses "*the farther away he got....*"<sup>xx</sup> "*Koffi continued on*"<sup>xxi</sup> "*Koffi still walked on*"<sup>xxii</sup> "*And still Koffi kept going*"<sup>xxiii</sup>

Physically, Koffi suffers to satisfy the needs of the creatures he meets up with and receives helpful assistance from them. He scrubs the jagged- back of the crocodile and he is rewarded for that. He combs the stinky hair of the gigantic creature who after his desire is satisfied, hands him over mysteriously to a devil. The devil gives him two keys as viaticum for the rest of the journey.

Koffi opens the door on his right hand as recommended and finds himself in the village of old women. After listening to Koffi's story, the old woman gives him a series of assignments. *"Before you go, you must comb our hair, clean our fingernails and toenails, fetch water for us, and wash and dress us all."*<sup>xxiv</sup> As a reward of the fulfilment of these assignments, the old women offer him two gourds as viaticum. The practise of viaticum is common in African culture. It consists not only in the prayer made for someone who is leaving home for a long time but also in the sacrifice performed for him and sometimes the sacred objects he is given for his protection on his way. In Birago Diop's poem "Viaticum"<sup>xxv</sup>, a mother performed a farewell sacrifice to her son who is leaving home for Europe. The aim of such sacrifice is to invoke the ancestors' protection and guidance on the young traveller. With the keys and the gourds given to Koffi, the devil and the old women behave as intermediaries between the orphan boy and his deceased mother. As evidence, the crocodile guides him and makes him a firm promise to see his mother and find back the pitcher if he scrubs his back. *"If you scrub my back you will not only see your mother but you'll also have a pitcher exactly like the one you broke"*<sup>xxvi</sup>. The orphans received either order that they put in practice or assistance to ease their journey. But what roles have they played themselves among so many mythical characters?

### 3. *The Role Of The Orphan In Two Initiation Orphan Tales*

Among the acting forces the orphan is the main character, the hero, the subject and the receiver of the object of his quest. The opponent is the stepmother, the one who pushes the orphan girl or the orphan boy to action. The other mythical characters like the chimpanzees, the crocodiles, the strange creatures, the devil, the old women whom the orphans meet on his journey behave as his antagonists with their frightening appearance, then as helpers to his quest. So, he becomes the hero in the tale because of the cruelty of his stepmother. If he were well treated as the stepmother's child, no one would pay attention to him. His heroism starts from his miserable condition which naturally attracts people's pity, solidarity and charity on him. The orphan is consciousness arouser among the adults. His poor living condition is a starter of the adults' sense of solidarity and generosity toward him. Although he is a victim, a human being without defence, the orphans play an important didactic role in the tale. For the children of his generation, he is a model of hard work, patience, courage, politeness, obedience, altruism, and discretion.

At their age, the two orphans, Aïwa and Kofi, work harder than children of the same age. They spend their time working at home for the stepmother *"Aïwa was the first to rise and the last to go to bed"*<sup>xxvii</sup>. Koffi was happy to leave behind him *"forced labor"*<sup>xxviii</sup> when going for the pitcher. Having been trained to hard work at home, it is not difficult for them to help the strange creatures and the old women in exchange for their assistance during their journey. The labor they have done by obligation, with patience can now be done freely with patience.

They take seriously and accomplish with patience the tasks they are given without complaining through words or gestures except when Koffi stares at his stepmother at the moment he is sent out for the pitcher. Aïwa's response to the insult and humiliation of her stepmother is her smile. *"no hard labor that she did not do! And yet would smile all the time"*<sup>xxix</sup>. Aïwa's smile is a shield which protects her against the negative vibrations of the stepmother who, on her turn, takes it as a form of sarcasm.

Both orphans are courageous. Their courage is revealed by the number of moons and the long distance of walking on the route of their journey. No one of them has given up the walk until their goal is achieved. The suffering and the frightening creatures do not stop them from progressing. Compared to the stepmother's son, the two orphans are models of politeness. No matter how difficult the task they are given by the strange creatures and the old women, their speech remains mild and unchangeably courteous. Not only are they courteous with their interlocutors, they also follow obediently their instructions. They respect the instructions about the way to take to continue their journey and strictly follow the ones about the usage of the gourds. As a result of this attitude, a spontaneous confidence is established between them and their new acquaintances. Every time they come across a mythical character on their way, they tell their story to him starting from the death of their mothers in such a way that arouses the compassion of the listeners. The behaviour of the two orphans all along their route is the one of an initiation process. It prepares them physically and morally for a positive change and a progressive adaptation to the world of adults. Talking about Koffi's metamorphosis, Karen Hatch puts:

The journey the orphan Koffi undertakes and the task he performs are all parts of an initiation process. We watch young Koffi grow up. And the way in which he approaches the tasks courageously, willingly, as well as the manner he does them thoroughly prepares him, in the end, for his new role as king<sup>xxx</sup>

The route of the orphan in orphan folktales is paved with hardships but also with successful facts which culminate in a climax. The story always ends up happily. Like Koffi, the orphan boy, at the end of his experiences becomes chief in B. Holas's tale "l'orphelin qui devient chef"<sup>xxxii</sup>. Many factors contribute to the qualitative transformation of the orphan-hero and to the degrading one of the anti-hero, the stepmother's son. The success of the orphans is due to their suffering in early childhood, their habit of working hard, their patience, their courage, their politeness, the assistance of the crocodiles, and the ones of the strange creatures and the old women, and the appearance of their deceased mothers for rescue.

The loss of the anti-hero comes from his mother's blind jealousy, his laziness, his impoliteness toward the crocodile, the strange creatures and the old women and his mother's eagerness to see him wealthy like Koffi. "Our castles must be made of diamonds and cover the entire earth. Go! Do as Koffi did. Get rich."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Apart from being the natural law of Nemesis, what happens to the stepmother's son and his mother is the mother's disrespect of the warning about orphan in the Holy Scriptures. The Quran and the Bible warn against the ill-treatment of orphans more than once:

And your Lord is going to give you and you will be satisfied. Did He not find you an orphan and give you refuge? So as for the orphan, do not oppress him. (Surat 93 verses 5, 6, and 9)<sup>xxxiii</sup> Do not mistreat or abuse widows or orphans. If you do, they will beg for my help, and I will come to rescue. In fact, I will get so angry that I will kill your men and make widows of their wives and orphans of their children. (Exodus 22: 22-24) The verses from the two sources show that orphans are under God's protection. For that reason, He advises to treat them as one's own children and states the punishment incurred in case of disrespect of the warning.

### Conclusion

"The Black Cloth" and "The Pitcher" are two complementary orphan tales. The first narrates the story of an orphan girl while the second relates the story of an orphan boy. "The Pitcher" completes "The Black Cloth" by adding a contrast between the orphan and the stepmother's son. The orphan boy succeeds and becomes not only wealthy but also a king. The stepmother's son and his mother perish at the end of their experiences. Aiwa in "The Black Cloth", and Koffi in "The Pitcher", have taken different routes with almost similar tests. What makes the difference between them is the way they have handled the tests given to them by the mythical characters they have met on their respective route, a route here being "the way taken from one place to another"<sup>xxxiv</sup>. But their initiation routes start from a known place to an unknown destination from where they return to the known place. The study of the two orphan tales reveals a convergence of many functions: entertainment, social, moral and spiritual. First and foremost, the tales are meant for entertainment. Adults and old persons in villages tell tales to young people at night to relax them after a busy and working day. It is also an opportunity for the listeners to draw moral lessons from the content of the tales for the improvement of their behaviour in the community, like the lessons of good breeding arising from the orphan tales which are reinforced by the divine recommendations. In a nutshell, an orphan must not be ill-treated wherever he may live. The two orphan tales point out great social and moral values and let us see through the different experiences of Aiwa and Koffi the main stages of initiation which allow the transition from childhood to maturity and to the integration in the world of adults.

Progressively, the theme of orphan has been introduced into fiction, drama and movies. In a novel like *The Insiders*<sup>xxxv</sup> by A. S. Ogundimu, the orphan-hero, Bayo is disowned of his father's heritage and lacks his family assistance when he is going to get married. In the novel, the author shows the impact of African extended family on an orphan's social fulfilment.

<sup>i</sup> Bernard Dadié. *The Black Cloth* (Translated from French by Karen C. Hatch). Massachusetts: the University of Massachusetts Press. 1987. pp. 12-16

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. pp. 17-27

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. The Black Cloth p. 15

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. p.13

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. p. 14

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid. p.15

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid. p.13

- viii Ibid. p.14  
 ix Ibid. p. 15  
 x Ibid. p. 13  
 xi Ibid. p.14  
 xii Ibid. p. 15  
 xiii Id.  
 xiv Ibid. p. 16  
 xv Jean Gauvin. *Comprendre les contes*. Abidjan: Editions Saint Paul. 1980. P 13 (type 1: ascending: situation of lack, improvement, lack satisfied.) my translation  
 xvi Karen C Hatch. "Translator's Preface to Bernard Dadié's *The Black Cloth*" Massachusetts: the University of Massachusetts Press. 1987. p. xxxiii  
 xvii George Eliot. *Silas Marner*. London: Penguin Books. 1994 pp. 138-148  
 xviii Karen C Hatch.op.cit. p. xix  
 xix The Pitcher. p. 17  
 xx Id.  
 xxi ibid. p.18  
 xxii Id.  
 xxiii Id.  
 xxiv Ibid. p.12  
 xxv Donatus Ibe Nwaga. *West African Verse*. London: Longman. 1974. pp. 107-108  
 xxvi The Pitcher. op. cit. p. 19  
 xxvii The Black Cloth op. cit. p. 12  
 xxviii The Pitcher. op. cit. p. 17  
 xxix The Black Cloth op. cit. p. 12  
 xxx Karen C Hatch.op.cit. p. xx  
 xxxi B. Holas. *Contes Kono*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose. 1975. pp. 283-289  
 xxxii The Pitcher. op. cit. p. 24  
 xxxiii *The Quran: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings*. London: Sahee International. 1997. p. 892  
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