

Public/Private Dichotomy in Pre-Colonial Yoruba Society and Gender Inequality in Sports in Contemporary Africa: Towards a Conscious Gender Neutralisation in Contemporary Sports

Ipadeola Abosede Priscilla

Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract: This paper traces the origin of gender inequality in Africa, specifically in the purview of sports in contemporary Africa, to the public/private dichotomy which existed in gender relations and activities in many of the African pre-colonial communities, with particular reference to Yoruba society. It is noted that in pre-colonial Yoruba society, games were seen as a means of relaxing after a day's hard work, usually on the farm. At such a time, a woman was expected to be cooking or to be attending to some other household affairs. The realm of games was considered to be strictly for men, not for 'women and children'; although, children also had some 'not-so-serious' games that they played. This has overtime come to have a discriminating effect on the consciousness of women concerning the roles of the female and the male. The distinction, however assumes a stance that parades it as emanating from nature rather than convention. This thereby inadvertently influences how contemporary African women view and participate in sports, especially, professional sports. The way out of the present predicament which this paper argues is that African women have to free their consciousness from the shackles of pre-colonial public/private dichotomy which is the basic support for the gender inequality that inhibits their participation in sports. It is by conscious gender neutralisation that the women can hope to achieve this in contemporary Africa.

Key words: Conscious Gender Neutralisation • Gender roles • Gender inequality • Gender equality in sports
• Public/private dichotomy • Pre-colonial Yoruba society • Contemporary Africa

INTRODUCTION

Play and games are taken by many people to be universal phenomena. Although, these are not always regarded as sports, their relation to sports is very enormous, so much so that we can state that sporting activities are also universal. This is not an attempt to equate games with sports as many researchers have pointed out that there is a significant difference between sports, on the one hand and play, games and physical activities, on the other hand. Although, sports are highly institutionalised, for the purpose of this work, we will occasionally refer to some of the aboriginal physical activities as sports. It is in this respect, therefore, that we will aver that sporting activities are found among many groups and peoples in the world. And that sport, to a very large extent, constitutes one of those fundamental activities that define a human social existence.

According to Delaney and Madigan, sport is 'an institutionalized, structured, competitive activity beyond the realm of play that involves physical exertion and/or the use of relatively complex athletic skills' [1]. Also, for Young, 'sport is the achievement of a non-utilitarian objective through engagement of bodily capacities and/or skills' [2]. In other words, the notions of competitiveness and skills are very fundamental to the idea of a sporting activity. Since the identified features of sports are found in human societies the world over, it is expected that sporting activities be regarded as a human practice; rather than a prerogative of a particular group or set of people.

However, if the two dominant sexes that constitute the human race are examined in relation to participation in sporting activities, not until very recently, it has been observed that women have generally been marginalised in the sports space. According to Kay, 'sports participation by women and girls is lower than participation by men and

boys in virtually every country in the world [3]. Nevertheless, this observation, it should be noted, is more emphasized and, thereby, an issue of grave concern in the context of contemporary Africa.

In terms of our consideration of sport as a ubiquitous practice among humans, this is true with regard to certain pre-colonial African societies, especially the traditional Yoruba society, which is the case in point for the current discourse. In other words, ever before the advent of colonialism, or ever before the Yoruba got in contact with the West, they had had their indigenous sporting games which they played. This means, therefore, that the genesis of sports and games in Africa, specifically among the Yoruba, dates back to their pristine existence as humans rather than to their importation from the West. However, the menace of gender inequality, especially in traditional games, can be traced to those earlier times even among the Yoruba people.

In this paper, the issue of gender inequality in the sphere of sports in Africa will be examined in relation to a plausible basis, namely, the public/private dichotomisation of gender roles and activities in pre-colonial African societies. The paper will make a particular reference to the pre-colonial Yoruba society with regard to how the dichotomisation of gender roles, activities and experiences engendered and entrenched a divide between the different realms to which women and men were believed to differently occupy. Pilcher and Whelehan elaborate on the public/private distinction thus:

The concept of the public and the private portrays social relations... as comprised of two, largely separate, realms. The public realm is characterised by activities individuals undertake in wider society and in common with a multitude of others, such as engaging in paid work and exercising political, democratic rights, under the overall jurisdiction of government and the state. In contrast, the private realm is characterised by activities undertaken with particular others, relatively free from the jurisdiction of the state. It is the realm of the household, of home and of personal or family relationships [4].

This dichotomy has survived colonialism and it still affects how activities like sports are viewed in relation to gender, even in the contemporary period. In other words, sporting activities were consigned to the public realm, a realm which was created exclusively for men. Meanwhile, in our contemporary globalised world, this has been

known to have certain grave and unfavourable implications for the overall development of the African states, especially with regard to the idea of gender egalitarianism. Put differently, women cannot be described as being truly free if a sphere of human endeavour is to all intents and purposes closed to them. Inequality in sports in contemporary Africa, it should be pointed out, is of two varieties. In the first place, there is the unwillingness on the part of women to take part in sporting activities. On the other hand, there is a form of inequality which arises as a result of unequal share of and access to resources and opportunities in the sports arena [5]. This paper will show that the two strands of inequality emanate from common fundamentals or bases and will thereby attempt to proffer a solution to the menace, in order to ensure a gender-balanced Africa, leading to an all-round development.

Meanwhile, it is pertinent to note that the current discussion does not focus on the issue of patriarchy or the idea of masculine hegemony; although, it has been vigorously argued that the traditional Yoruba society was a predominantly patriarchal society. Rather, this study is an attempt to examine the stratification of gender roles in the traditional Yoruba society in relation to how it manifested the public-private dichotomy of human activities and its consequent basis for the issue of gender inequality in the sphere of sports in contemporary Africa, especially, among the Yoruba people. Also, the idea of national development employed by this paper is not that of direct economic gains or opulence, but is that of cohesion, social order and a society that is built on the principles of egalitarianism and liberty.

Gender Roles in Traditional African Societies: The Case of the Yoruba: The Yoruba people of the south-western part of Nigeria are a people of rich social and cultural heritage who had practices and lifestyles defined before the advent of colonialism. For instance, Oludare Olajubu argues that the Yoruba have always been one of the most civilised peoples of the world as shown in their culture, ranging from their manner of greeting, gestation and birth processes; their christening; helping the other person; burial rites and inheritance; to issues like governance, work ethics, plays and games, guidelines for waging wars, reconciliation, communality and praying [6]. In corroboration, Abimbola affirms that 'the hallmarks of "Yoruba" are to be found in a unique set of religio-philosophical beliefs on the basis of which the Yoruba organise, regulate and moderate their day-to-day lives' [7].

However, the practicality of structuring the Yoruba society reveals that, to a very large extent, the Yoruba distinguish between the two sexes. Human beings are called eniyanin Yoruba traditional society and this refers to humans generally, regardless of the gender or sex of the person. However, the Yoruba further distinguish between the female and the male, by referring to a man as okunrin, while a woman is obinrin. Nevertheless, there are certain differences between the concepts of a man and a woman in traditional Yoruba society. And this also manifests in the expectations of the community from individuals. Gender roles refer to 'the traits, expectations and behaviours associated with men and women and what it means to be "masculine" or "feminine"...this gendered information influences attitudes, expectations and, ultimately, behaviour' [8].

In the same vein, the expectation of the traditional Yoruba people with regard to how individuals would relate to each other as stipulated by the culture was taken to be a function of the sex of the individual. This, for example, affects the style of dress that an individual could put on. In the same vein, since the Yoruba are a people who attach so much significance to giving of honour to the elderly ones, this is a practice which manifests this difference daily, especially in the manner of greeting. The method of greeting for women is different from the method adopted by men. While women and girls kneel to greet the elderly ones, men and boys are expected to prostrate. It is pertinent to also point out that while a woman is expected, if not required, to kneel in order to greet or appease the wrath of her husband whenever he is angry, it is not expected of a man to prostrate to greet or appeal to the wife. This could be attributed to the fact that, in most cases, men are usually older than their wives. Nevertheless, in a situation whereby the reverse is the case, a man is never expected, under any circumstance, to prostrate to the wife. All these practices were for the purpose of constantly reminding individuals of the particular sex that they belong to.

Even in the case of the type of activities that individuals commonly participate in, the gender of the individuals goes a very long way in determining this. For example, Yoruba women were preponderantly involved in trading and some were also potters, as opposed to the men, who were mostly farmers, hunters, sculptors and blacksmiths, palm wine tappers and so on. [9] One can argue that since the traditional Yoruba women were renowned traders, they could not be said to be strictly confined to the private sphere. Faseke notes that 'if farming in Yorubaland was primarily a family role,

trading was an economic role. Women were engaged in marketing not only in the local markets, but also in long distance trade' [10].

However, it should be pointed out those women who could participate in such long distance trades in the traditional Yoruba societies were not young women who were still in their childbearing ages. For most of the women, because of the opportunity that polygamy affords, they are only able to do this because their husband has married the iyawotuntun (the new wife). However, this condition is not required for a man. Put differently, one can say it seems obvious that if a woman wants to cross the boundaries from the private sphere, which is traditionally believed to be her space, to the public space, which is believed to be the men's space, she usually has a price to pay in order for her to do this. Even in spite of bearing the price, it should be noted, that there is a limit to the extent that a woman can 'cross over' to the 'other' realm. This is the reason why Faseke [11] mentions only three regents (women rulers) and only two prominent traders in traditional Yoruba societies. In Faseke's words, "although women were represented in the council of state by Iyalode and other female offices, their numerical weakness meant that women usually deferred to the superior judgment of the males' [12].

In other words, the traditional Yoruba women did not have such freedom to participate in the trading sector, or any other sector whatsoever, at the expense of their primary role in the private sphere. This means then that even if a traditional Yoruba woman was allowed to participate in or take up any other activity in the public sphere, this remains subservient to her primary role in the private sphere, as a mother and a wife. This is because, 'Yoruba culture was perpetuated largely through women. For this and other reasons, as mothers, women had been praised through songs and poems for their unflinching loyalty to their children. A good child is a child of the father while a bad one is that of his or her mother' [13].

The fact that women, in most cases, operated in the private realm, while the men did most of their activities outside the home further established a distinction between the public realm and the private realm. Over time, the notion of gender roles and the public/private distinction which it emphasised has therefore become, accepted as the norm. It was taken to have emanated from nature, rather than being seen as a mere social construct, which it actually is.

The assumption that the public/private distinction was natural also especially widened the gap between activities and reduced toleration on the part of society in

relation to what individuals in the sexes were allowed to do. Hence, in the pre-colonial Yoruba society, it was almost a taboo for a person to ‘meddle’ in activities that were believed to be the exclusive preserve of the opposite sex; most especially, for a woman to do what society believed was an activity in the male terrain. Sport, for example was believed to be an activity in the public realm and so women were not allowed to participate in the traditional Yoruba games. For instance, according to Komolafe [14], Yoruba traditional games include: Ere Ayo (Awore or Mancala Game), Ere Ijakadi (wrestling), Ere Aarin (Yoruba Traditional Billiards Game), Ere Okoto (Snail-Shell Game) and ati Ere Kanna Kanna (Slingshot Game). In addition to the games mentioned, Babalola [15] also identifies Ere Ogunor ere Ode (Hunters’ Games). In addition to discussing the games that have been mentioned, Komolafe also states explicitly that women were not allowed to participate in the games because of their responsibilities in the private realm, which society accorded a bigger priority. Even, regardless of whether such women had the required skills to excel in such games. In the words of Komolafe:

Won ri awon obinrin miran ti won mo ayo ta daadaa. Sugbon ise ounje wiwa ati ise ise ile pipamoni owo irole ki i jeki won ni pa ninu ere yi. [16]

There were some women who were very skilful in the ayogame. However, the duties of cooking and cleaning the house in the evening would never allow them to take part in this activity.

If one looks at the statement of Komolafe about how the Yoruba in the pre-colonial era organised their society, one cannot but notice that it was a society that emphasised gender roles and bifurcated the social spheres. However, because of the power of ideologies that underlie humans’ ways of life, this notion of the public-private dichotomy has survived through colonialism down to this post-colonial contemporary period. This has, therefore, shaped the opinion of the society about the notion of sports and gender. Sports are believed to be men’s activities even in this contemporary era and this belief affects, very significantly, the level of participation of women, especially Yoruba women, in sports.

At this point, the question of what has made it easier for the Yoruba women to cross the boundaries in some activities in the public sphere while their participation in sport has remained considerable low becomes relevant.

The reason for this is that like Oyewumi [17] argues, gender is a socially constructed concept and that is the reason why there are differences, albeit slight, in the conceptualisations of different societies about the idea of the woman. Among the traditional Yoruba people, the notion of a woman is not that of a fragile or infirm person. Rather, because the Yoruba perceive work as being fundamental to the idea of a human person (male or female), a person is expected to take his or her social responsibilities very serious. It is on this basis that the Yoruba women were famous as traders, although, as mentioned earlier, this was subservient to their primary role as homemakers. Therefore, although, they could participate in some other activities like trading and politics – that is in rare cases and under ‘abnormal’ situations - the sports terrain, however, remained, significantly, almost a forbidden terrain for the traditional Yoruba women.

The stated gender roles held in the traditional Yoruba society were, therefore, not such that the society expected, let alone encouraged people to cross. Olajubu says:

Women who transcend the boundaries of gender roles are often described among the Yoruba as “obinrin bi okunrin” (woman like man). Examples include female warriors and hunters who are regarded as the exceptions rather than the norm [18].

Although, this quotation presumes that the distinction between the gender roles in traditional Yoruba society is fluid rather than rigid, we can interject that when a woman’s achievement is so measured against that of men and such conclusion is drawn, it is rather a sarcastic way of describing the men in the community – as this suggests gross irresponsibility and negligence on the part of the men who have left leading roles to their women. In addition, the statement which describes a woman as a man because of a heroic display is, no doubt, a statement which can only emanate from a world-view which has beforehand drawn a boundary between the sexes. This implies that the concept of a man carries with it a particular set of attributes and meaning which the concept of a woman essentially lacks. Hence, in spite of the argument that traditional Yoruba women really figured in the public realm in some instances or the other, the traditional Yoruba society, to a very large extent, can still be described as a society which emphasised distinctions in gender roles.

Professional Sports as an Apparatus for National Development: The issue of gender equality in the sphere of sports is a very germane one because of the significance of sports to the idea of national development. The notion of development has been theorised by various scholars, over the centuries. The reason for the copious theories on the idea of development signifies its ambiguous nature.

For the purpose of this study, however, the view of development as developed by the Indian Nobel Laureate, Amartya Kumar Sen will be adopted. This refers to a sense of development which does not emphasise the dogma of equating development with opulence and acquisition as is prevalent in most of the earlier theories on development.

What especially makes Sen's 'development as freedom' relevant to the current discourse is the fact that his idea of development is inclusive of women, who have been greatly marginalised in a considerable number of theories and practices. Put succinctly, Sen defines development in terms of freedom and capability. The emphasis of Sen on the idea of agency is very striking. In order for women to overcome gender inequality in sports, the issue of agency cannot be overlooked. Russell describes agency as involving 'the agent's knowledge of what he or she is trying to do in goal-directed action (that such) has a degree of first-person authority of an experiencer of a sensation' [19] According to Amartya Sen's notion,

The nature of this shift in concentration and emphasis is sometimes missed because of the overlap between the two approaches. The active agency of women cannot, in any serious way, ignore the urgency of rectifying many inequalities that blight the well-being of women and subject them to unequal treatment, thus the agency role must be much concerned with women's well-being also. ...Understanding the agency role is thus central to recognizing people as responsible persons: not only are we well or ill, but also we act or refuse to act and can choose to act one way rather than another. And thus we – women and men must take responsibility for doing things or not doing them [20].

In the light of the foregoing, it is worthy of note that if women, who constitute not less than half number of the population of the world, can have the freedom, capability and agency to choose what they want to do, it is an

indicator that a country is developing. Talking about the economic gains too, unless women are free and they also have the power to exercise their freedom, the economic gains which a country could realise would become impossible. This accounts for the reason why the issue of gender inequality has to be taken seriously.

Disparity in Sporting Activities between the Genders in Contemporary Africa: The issue of gender inequality in the sphere of sports is not news. Some theorists hold that even the concept of gender implies an imbalance in human experience, roles and relations (de Beauvoir [21], Butler [22], Oyewumi[23]). It is argued that gender is a socially created concept which attributes differing social roles and identities to men and women. Also, gender is defined as a critical factor in structuring the types of opportunities and life chances faced by individuals and groups and which strongly influences the roles they play within social institutions from the household to the state.[24] Hence, the idea of gender inequality indicates 'the difference in the status, power and prestige women and men have in groups, collectivities and societies' [25].

Meanwhile, the notion of gender inequality is greatly emphasized in the context of sports as many people hold that the sports sphere is exclusively for the male gender. For the gender-power objectivists, opportunities for participation and leadership in sport (i.e., access to sport for men and women, coaching and administration opportunities, economic power positions in sport and so on) are structured rigidly by traditional ideologies that place masculinity (i.e., strength, power, aggressiveness, authority, intelligence) as the gender norm and femininity (i.e., weakness, passivity, subjection, dependence, domesticity) as the deviant gender [26]. Hence, the outcome of this is that more men participate in sports than women.

Messner [27] outlines the disparity between girls' participation and boys' participation in sports. Although, one can see a measure of improvement in Messner's observation between the levels of participation over a period of thirty years, it is still obvious that the 'gap' has not completely 'shrunk' [28]. Consequently, Kay avers that 'sports participation by women and girls is lower than participation by men and boys in virtually every country in the world' [29].

If one considers the continent of Africa, in relation to the issue of low participation of women in sporting activities the findings are quite alarming and disheartening. For instance, consequent to the analysis of

a research carried out in Nigeria, Babatunde points out that 'female sport participation in Nigerian universities is still far below expectation' [30]. In the context of sports, therefore, whether one considers professional sport or educational sport, there seems to be a marked difference between the levels of participation among boys and men on the one hand and women and girls, on the other.

It should be noted that inequality in sports in contemporary Africa manifests in two principal forms. In the first place, there is the unwillingness on the part of women to take part in sporting activities. On the other hand, there is a form of inequality which arises as a result of unequal share of and access to resources and opportunities in the sports arena [31]. This paper argues that the two prime indices of gender inequality in sports have originated from the same underpinnings: the traditional societies' polarisation of gender roles and an eventual dichotomisation of the public and private realms.

The Process of Conscious Gender Neutralisation: The idea of Conscious Gender Neutralisation, which is the central argument of this paper, is locatable in the radical-libertarian feminism. According to Porter, 'radical-libertarian feminists at least reject the equation between sex and gender and that it is patriarchal society that imposes rigid gender roles and justifies them by reference to biology' [32]. In essence, the notion of Conscious Gender Neutralisation does not refute the fact that there are certain physical or sex differences between men and women. However, Conscious Gender Neutralisation contends that such differences should not be the bases upon which to erect differential gender roles. Dividing roles and activities along the line of gender, especially in these contemporary times, is deemed oppressive and unproductive. The reason for this is that, according to Sen's notion of development earlier alluded to, development involves freedom and rigid gender roles cannot enable or ensure such freedom for the contemporary African women.

It is imperative to note that much as the pre-colonial Yoruba women were part of the culture, it might not be completely appropriate to aver that the system adopted in the pre-colonial era was cruel or oppressive. This is because the women mostly believed and are usually portrayed as being fulfilled even in the private sphere which they occupied. However, since cultures are dynamic, there is no proof that there would not have been the need to review this pattern, even if there was never a colonial experience.

In other words, since times have changed, it is necessary that women dissolve the rigid dichotomy between the public and the private realm. This is very significant in relation to sports. The process of Conscious Gender Neutralisation, which this paper proposes as a means of overcoming the rigid aperture between the public and the private spheres, involves three main complementary stages, which will be discussed in the remaining section of this paper.

The Phase of Self-Analysis: This is the first step in the process of Conscious Gender Neutralisation. What this means is that the past generations of men have defined women in a particular way. However, the onus is on women to attempt a redefinition of self. In other words, other than what cultures and stereotypes have taught women to believe about themselves, there has to be a conscious re-evaluation of self, before women can surmount the menace of rigid gender roles, which they have unconsciously imbibed overtime and which has perpetually kept them from participating in certain human activities.

This is similar to what Kolawole proposes for 'repossessing the African space' by Africans in the diaspora. According to Kolawole,

As the empire writes back, African women locate themselves at various epistemological positions that are relevant to this in various ways. They are deconstructing imperialistic images of the African, rejecting luminal and negative images of women that are prevalent in literature [33].

This calls for a task on the part of the contemporary African women to rise up to the challenges of ambivalence and negative notions about their gender in order to attain the freedom that is a necessity for development. This stage of resurgence requires a sense of self-discovery, self-esteem, self-definition, self-valuation and self-retrieval. [34] This means that women should begin the process of gender neutralisation by first rejecting all the gender-biased and socially constructed notions that have limited them and rather ask themselves the question of who they really are. A conscious and thorough self-examination will reveal that women can actually do a lot more than they have been made to believe.

It is when this attempt has been successfully carried through that such notions of belonging primarily to the private realm can be found to be fundamentally erroneous.

More so, after a woman has discovered herself, the fear of going against her nature or failing in her fundamental role as a home-maker will be allayed. It will be discovered, therefore, that if a woman wants to pursue a career in the sports sphere, she is not acting against her nature.

The Phase of Sports-Analysis: After a conscious evaluation of self, women also need to evaluate and analyse the idea of sports. Many women in Africa have grown with the erroneous beliefs that sporting activities are exclusive preserve of the male gender. Meanwhile, it should be emphasised that women, rather than accepting this as a norm, need to do an analysis of sports themselves.

For instance, women should consciously attempt to know the attributes and features that have underlined and sustained the notion that the sports sphere is exclusively for men. However, since women have discovered who they really are as opposed to the wrong ideas that cultures and societies have foisted on them over the years, then they can know whether those features are truly peculiar to the men.

A scrupulous examination of the characteristics associated with sports, characteristics which were deemed intrinsically masculine, will show that those characteristics are merely human, rather being for one particular gender type or the other. For example, such notions as courage, resilience, strength, aggressiveness, pride, are merely erroneously associated with the male gender. However, the reason why it has been argued that such traits are generally lacking in women is that society, especially cultures, like the Yoruba people's culture that we have discussed in this paper, bring their children up to appreciate the issue of gender roles and the options available to the members of each particular gender.

It then becomes highly important that women interrogate the sports space. It is after this is carried through that women can confidently cross the boundaries to the sports space, knowing that they are not trying to traverse a forbidden terrain.

An Erasure of the Erstwhile Notion of Gender: As a result of being informed by the idea of gender roles, the notion of gender, as this paper has shown, is replete with misconceptions about what someone has the freedom to attempt, as well as what one must not venture into, based on one's gender. The sports space is one of such spaces, which the idea of gender role has given to the male gender, while the female gender is believed to belong to

some other 'less-aggressive' spaces. It is important to note, however, that the most bizarre issue about the idea of gender roles is that as observed by Sudha,

Right from the birth and throughout her formative years, society forces a woman into a place, a status and a role. Therefore, it becomes difficult for her to deviate from the pattern which is associated with its own images and values [35].

Although, it may be difficult to overcome the problems associated with gender roles, women should know that it is possible to actually surmount the problems. Just like the other stages involved in the process of Conscious Gender Neutralisation, it will require some efforts on the part of women to de-emphasise the synonymy of sexes with differing roles in the social sphere.

The previous two steps lead to this final stage. Apart from discovering themselves and discovering the sports space themselves, women should also see themselves as being empowered to overcome the problem of inequality in sports.

In a bid to liberate other women from the hold of gender roles, women will need to use education, awareness and propaganda. They should also get other women to understand the reasons why they need to let go of the preconceived erroneous ideas about what a woman can do or cannot do. These women would in turn also get some other women to be aware of the problem of gender roles and how to overcome the problem. This process will continue and women, in no time, will be free to participate in sporting activities, without any restraint that they are crossing into a forbidden space.

CONCLUSION

It is important to know that having thrived for so long; the issue of gender roles will not give way in a day. Similarly, gender equality and equity in sports cannot be attained in a day either. However, when we consider the idea of gender equality in sports, persistence is the known virtue that can enable us to achieve this. This, then, is the reason why Conscious Gender Neutralisation has been termed a process.

Women in Africa need to rise up to the challenge of gender inequality in sports and they firstly need to look inwards by re-defining self. Also, there is a need for these women to look outwards by re-defining sports in a sense

other than they have been taught to view it by men and society at large. Lastly, unlike women have unconsciously and passively imbibed the idea of gender roles, which has led to the menace of gender inequality, they should consciously rise to the challenge by using education and propaganda to get it to the awareness of other women and men that both women and men are ontologically equal. This also requires that women insist that they should not be treated differently or denied an opportunity because of their gender.

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