

SOME PROBLEMS OF AFRICAN
URBAN FAMILY LIFE:
AN EXAMPLE FROM KAMPALA, UGANDA,
BRITISH EAST AFRICA

It has been asserted that the African family is the "most significant feature of African society" and its "central institution." (Phillips, 1953, p. ix) It has further been pointed out that African marriage is far more than a contract between two individuals but also represents the establishment of a link between two kinship groups. In this respect the payment of some type of wealth is an important part in the forging of a bond between the two kinship groups. Students of African sociology have paid great attention to the payment of cattle or money or other commodities as, perhaps, the most important aspect of the marriage contract. Not only has there been much discussion as to the best definition of this process but until relatively recently the exact significance of the "bride price" has not been too clearly understood. In part this was due to the fact that the wider implications

of this aspect of the marriage contract were not understood. There was a tendency to view the payment of "bride price" as the key to the contractual relationship. We now know that this is not the case: in addition to the "bride price"—which is far more than simple barter—other and equally important points of contact are established in ritual and economic and social affairs. In other words, marriage in African society is very much an integral part of the functioning of society as a whole. At one and the same time it establishes points of conflict and tension which are ritualized by a wide variety of sanctions, and leads to strengthening of the whole fabric of the society.

Clearly there are important differences between peoples in the complicated arrangements which bring two kinship groups together and in the subsequent working out of their lifetime contact. For one, there may well be more than just two kinship groups involved. In polygamous societies the points of contact may be so wide that they almost defy clear documentation. In those societies which trace their descent through the male line the institution of marriage will follow different arrangements in respect of residence and inheritance than among people who reckon their descent through the female line. Then there are those societies where in some cases both forms of descent are found: here the picture can be very complicated. Still another feature which is likely to be reflected in the institution of marriage is the manner in which the society organizes itself politically. Some tribes have a highly centralized form of political organization and the people are rigorously stratified into a hierarchical order. Here marriage tends to be an "in group" affair, i.e. peasants marry among peasants and royalty among royalty. This tends to be true, generally, of the Bantu kingdoms in East Africa. Alternatively there are those tribes who enjoy and value a highly decentralized form of social and political organization where relatively small social units have a great deal of autonomy. In addition, the nature of the economy, based on settled agriculture or a nomadic existence and the position and status of women all play a part in the nature of the marriage contract and the type of family life which results from it.

It is against the background of these many factors which are involved in African marriage that we must see the contem-

porary scene. It is useless to talk about the changes which have taken place in African life unless we have a clear understanding of the traditional forms of social life. Even then it is too often implied that the traditional social order was peculiarly static and the present scene remarkably dynamic and fluid. Whereas the latter may well be true, it is questionable whether any society yet known to us or studied with care could ever be described as static in any or all of its constituent parts. It is quite a different matter to talk of the *rate* or the speed of social change or the *degree* or isolation and contact with other people. Consideration of these points should make us cautious in applying the familiar rural-urban dichotomy.

Whereas some might describe these considerations as no more than academic juggling it is obvious and beyond question that with the development of commerce and industry and the rise of towns important influences are being brought to bear on African life. The extent and nature of these influences is a popular subject among students of African life, be they social anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, historians or economists, and to a lesser extent psychologists (UNESCO, 1956). Although many tribal monographs continue to be written, there are few students who are not struck by the differences, as they have documented them, between what was and what is. The focal interest of other research workers has been the study and analysis of African urban life.

It is certainly true that what we see before us over much of Africa does in many ways defy careful documentation and is difficult to interpret. Many of us, working in Africa, are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems which face us. As most of us have been trained in social anthropology we are often painfully aware that our tools for research are not adequate for the demands made upon us. I am thinking particularly of urban situations where the setting is vastly different from that in the rural areas. We have been taught how to look at the varied aspects of village life, which is specially limited and where it is possible for us to get to know most if not all the residents, but we find ourselves at a loss how to tackle the documentation of life in a sprawling colonial town with its large population and very varied composition. All we can do is to apply with some

modification here and there the concepts and the methods proved and refined in our studies of rural areas.

In some respects surely this is surprising as the great West African cities have long histories so that their origin and development is not exclusively the result of European contact. But only in very recent years have we taken any interest in these towns or indeed acknowledged their existence. Certainly as far as East African is concerned, with the possible exception of the East African coast, towns are the unique product of the colonization of Africa by the Great European Powers. Although many of them display similarities of development and composition there are also very important differences which are all too often ignored. The differences relate to the objectives of colonial rule as these are held by the administering power, to policies of urban development, and to the general political and economic background of the territories concerned.

In the numerous studies conducted in the urban areas of Africa we find references to the present state and possible future development of family life. But the conditions under which family life is being lived are closely related to the policies which guide urban development. In some situations entry into the towns is in some manner restricted e.g. South Africa and until recently the Belgian Congo; in others there is no such bar. Then too, family life is likely to be different in those towns where Africans are permitted to live within the boundaries of townships and municipalities as opposed to those whose residents insist on racial segregation or have an economic barrier, often related to the upkeep of housing standards, which keeps Africans away from full participation in urban life—with the result that in many African cities sprawling and uncontrolled peri-urban developments are springing up. Clearly family life in a highly regimented African housing estate, or location, is likely to differ from family life under completely uncontrolled peri-urban development (Gutkind, 1960; Southall and Gutkind, 1957).

What are some of the characteristics of African urban family life? In the first case can we talk about family life as the term is normally understood and used? This question brings to light the first characteristic of the African urban population. Who are those who come to live in towns? On the surface they may all

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look alike and act alike. In fact they are mostly young unmarried men or men who do not bring their families with them. Those who are single tend to be mobile, drifting from one type of employment to another and from town to village and back again. They are mostly unskilled workers who look upon their urban wage earning as an excursion from their subsistence or cash farming. They have come to town, more often than not, not to settle but to attain specific objectives such as earning enough to pay their taxes, to buy some clothes, to save enough to bring home a bicycle or some length of cloth or perhaps some cash to pay for a wife or for the construction of a house. Such workers, who tend to dominate the field, are sometimes referred to as target workers. As single men their social life rotates around the preparation of their food, the steady attendance at beer parties whenever they are not working, seeing the bright lights of the town and sharing the few single women who are available to the large number of men. Their contacts with neighbours are often strained due to a complete lack of privacy leading to endless quarrels, rumours and intrigue. Within the peri-urban area mobility may be very high as men move from room to room and from one area to another. The reasons for this mobility are varied but reflect some of the problems faced by these men. Failure to pay their room rent is perhaps the most frequent, followed by such considerations as not being able to get on with neighbours, regarding a place as "Unhealthy" or being driven out of the community for theft.

For the married men without their family around them the picture is not basically very different. Perhaps such men tend to return to their homes more frequently, depending on their employment and the distance and cost involved. At times their womenfolk will visit them and stay for one to three months at a time depending on a number of conditions such as their obligations at home towards their children and relatives, the cost of living in town and the need to plant and harvest crops. Although men like to have their womenfolk around to cook for them and look after their austere homes they find these pleasures a distinct financial strain as they have to buy all their food from local traders. The occasional provisions brought from the village by relatives or friends are clearly limited. No sooner does a

man's wife return to her husband's village, or perhaps to her parents during the absence of her husband from his village, than another relative may arrive expecting to be put up and fed or, even worse, depositing a brother's child to be looked after. Men resident in town live in constant fear that traditional obligations to relatives and clan brothers will strain their meagre resources still further or eat up their small savings.

But economic considerations alone do not explain the difficulties men face in their fight for privacy, a higher standard of living and advancement and promotion. The core of the problem seems to lie in the inability of the raw urban resident to cope effectively with the varied and pressing conditions which confront him. One of these conditions, which never fails to amaze and confuse the urban dweller, is the fact that he has to "eat his wages" a state of affairs totally new to the ex-rural dweller. Another problem, perhaps the severest test of all and one potentially most inimical to a stable family life, is the extreme heterogeneity of the town's African population. In Kampala, for instance, he and his kin and friends must rub shoulders with people from widely separated parts of Uganda and East Africa whose languages differ and whose customs he does not understand and hence abhors. As yet we cannot point to any development which could create a real "melting pot" in which different backgrounds and culture lose their identity to re-emerge as a new set of ideas and values which command a large measure of agreement and are eagerly and collectively pursued.

What of those men who come with their families? Do such men differ in any respect from the single men or the married men who come alone? More research needs to be undertaken before any clear answer can be given to this. But there are certain indications that the family men do differ in some important respects. They are older. They are better educated. Both these factors give them a better start and hence a better chance to make the most of town life and to lead a relatively stable existence. The educational factor seems as important as any other: most of these men come after having received some type of technical training formally or informally in, for instance, carpentry or tailoring. They are immediately able to earn higher wages, as their skill, however low, is in demand, and this is an

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important factor in their occupational and residential stability. Other benefits are derived from their better education and higher wages. They often manage to live in less crowded and more sanitary conditions. They are rarely content with their lot and give the impression of having aspirations to high status. As their needs and demands are invariably larger and more extensive than their purses they frequently sacrifice better housing and better clothes in favour of the education of their children or further education for themselves. In addition, a good part of their wages is consumed by their relatives who look upon their more educated and fortunate kinsmen as a bottomless pit in respect of money and all manner of services. The strains to which such men and their families are exposed often evoke cynical comments from them about their traditional obligations or even an open defiance of customs.

Even though the father of the home may be fortunate in having steady and well paying employment, wholesome family life under urban conditions is not easy to attain. As housing is short and waiting lists for houses on African housing estates are long, families have to do the best they can in the heavily populated peri-urban areas. Here rents may consume anything up to one quarter of their earnings for a room averaging little more than 12 × 12 feet. In Kampala, if mere floor space is taken as a possible index of overcrowding for the number of people per room then only about one in five persons are badly accommodated for. If the question of the need for adequate ventilation is raised then the picture is likely to be very different. Even though a family may live in accommodations large enough for their needs, their sanitary arrangements are often most undesirable. This condition is brought about by the inflated value of land which demands that every available space return rent to the landowner and by the complete lack of privacy in which families and individuals must share toilet facilities. If residents are lucky enough to have a private toilet they often find these broken into and dirtied.

Not the least danger to family life is the complete inability of families to shut themselves off from the feverish activity which is so marked a feature of the uncontrolled life in the peri-urban area. Beer brewing, prostitution, thieving and quarrels are inces-

sant, and the tempo of life such that all those living in these areas are to some extent caught in the ebb and flow of this life in some measure. Many a family finds that they must supplement their income through the brewing and sale of native beer which has to be done behind the scenes as this activity is generally prohibited. As neighbours quarrel about a wide range of petty matters and thieves roam about with great freedom, hardly a day passes when a crowd does not gather to be judge, jury and spectator in a fight, which as often as not results in severe injury to someone. Accusations of ill will and witchcraft are bandied about freely by anyone whose health is giving trouble or whose customers are falling off. In all these affairs the local minor chief can do little but act in his capacity as arbitrator. Invariably the chief is Ganda by tribe, so that members of other tribes have to face all the disadvantages of second class status resulting from the overall control by the Buganda Government, which is nominally in charge of these areas not under the direct control of the Protectorate Administration.

To all these events the children of the families are a party. Day in and day out they line the streets and paths and roam about in filth. Certainly few of the smaller children are left completely unattended although it is easy for the attention of the parents to be diverted as the panorama of community life passes their front door. On such occasions children are snatched from their meals and rest to be dragged to the place where some spectacular activity is taking place. Should the children be very small there is no hesitation in breast feeding them on the spot, often in an atmosphere of great excitement and violent physical activity. Older children are expected to provide their own amusement, which almost invariably means following the daily life of their area with great interest and hence being well informed about the activities which take place. In the course of this, the free play of sexual activity is a pleasant and satisfying pastime. Parents seem generally to take little notice of these activities and when children are discovered to be "playing with each other" they are as likely to be joked about as pulled apart. Of course the lack of privacy among the members of the family makes children aware of the sexual activity of their parents and older siblings.

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Family life and the position of children within it are intimately connected. Before we proceed therefore to an analysis of the demographic data we must very briefly refer to the position of children and adolescents in towns.

Because urbanization as a transitional process appears to involve a large number of varied marital relations which have departed from the norm, one of the more serious results is the position of young people (Chinn, 1959; UNESCO, 1957) and particularly the support of illegitimate children or children deserted by one or both parents and left orphaned or in the care of relatives (Bettison, 1956: 132-138). Men and women as they contract repeated irregular unions resulting in birth of unwanted offspring, place themselves in serious economic difficulties being unable to support all their dependents. Such children are not always taken in by relatives in the urban areas largely because under the special conditions prevailing the provisions of customary laws are frequently inapplicable. In the rural areas the burden of illegitimate children is usually borne by the woman's family. Whereas it is not usual that the child in village life will ever find himself robbed of affection by his parents or close kin in the town, however, there may be no relatives or none able or willing to take him in. Even if one or both parents are at hand the child may in effect be deserted if left alone daily while one or both parents work to support themselves and their children. Older children may have to forego their education in order to look after younger siblings. It has been noted that the community and neighbours often pay conspicuously little attention to the consequences of unattended children roaming the streets (Busia, 1950: 37; Hellmann, 1948: 66-69). Parents find it near to impossible to control their children who, at adolescence, "feel that they can fend for themselves and are not dependent on their parents for the necessities of life" (Hellmann, 1948: 77) as they become economically independent.

The kinship system in its wider setting involves a variety of socio-psychological parent-child, sibling, and structured group-child relations (Parsons, 1949) designed to make the child a successful bearer and transmitter of his culture. Under urban-industrial conditions an important characteristic of the unsupervised or illegitimate child is its frequent inability to find and

understand a clearly defined role and model. Recent sociological analysis has pointed particularly to the declining role of the father in the rearing and instructing of male children (Hellmann, 1946: 416; Romans, 1957: 277-280). This has given emphasis to the increasingly important role of women with a resultant instability in male authority in the family. Indeed Southall and Gutkind (1957) and Frazier (1953) have pointed to this aspect of change as being of greater significance than marital instability per se. Clarke (1957) and Frazier (1953) too have suggested that this might be a particularly serious problem in the male child as identification with the physiological father, or with the sociological father (Malinowski, 1930: 134-146), provides the basis for the future exercise of his male authority. Southall and Gutkind have pointed out:

But where there is no regular institutional provision for the role of paternity as well as maternity, the social system as a whole may suffer. In this situation there arises the so-called "natural family" which predominated among the negro slaves in America (p. 67).

The adverse effect on the development of children resulting from prolonged separation from parents or other forms of family instability is well documented in western countries. Yet as pointed out above where there is some measure of identification of the male child with its father, or close male relative, even marriages which are shortlived may not seriously prejudice the rearing of children. Yet it must not be overlooked that parent-child relations may suffer as the basic duty of the parent or guardian, that of rearing and "socializing" the child, is rendered difficult if not virtually impossible as a result of urban circumstances. It has generally been observed in urban areas of the Union of South Africa that little or "no emphasis is laid on that change from childhood, with its new duties, obligations and privileges, which is ritualized and dramatized in tribal initiation ceremonies" (Hellmann, 1946: 417) although seclusion of mother and child at birth—an important tribal birth ritual—"is still rigorously observed by urban natives" (Hellmann, 1946: 413). Otherwise much informal training has "disappeared almost entirely under urban conditions" (Hellmann, 1946: 416). Few students, however have dealt in detail with the modifications of the life-cycle

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in an urban context (Hellmann, 1948: 54-99; Longmore, 1959: 157-180) so there may well be important exceptions to the observations recorded above.

Frequently neither parents nor relatives are familiar with the ways of the town and are not able to prepare children for effective town life. Material from Kampala, Uganda, British East Africa, appears to indicate that some parents, generally those who are more educated, are aware of these difficulties. Parents are not merely aware of the cost of bringing up children in town, where there is considerable pressure to obtain wealth which can be externally exhibited such as clothes, but also they are conscious of the undesirability of exposing young people to the less desirable characteristics of town life as these tend to erode indigenous social structure, values and tribal loyalties replacing the latter with individuality and self-interest. Such disadvantages, many parents feel, are offset by the advantages of varied and better educational facilities in the urban areas compared with rural life (Mitchell, 1954: 6); even then many of the children born in a rural area stay there until adulthood (Hellmann, 1948: 66-69). On the other hand the overwhelming number of children born in the towns tend to be resident there. There seems therefore some indication that mothers resident in town who give birth to children there, feel reasonably confident that they can care for their children. Davis and Blake (1956: 230), however, have pointed out, while children may be "desired at the time of intercourse, subsequent events may alter this attitude."

One of the more serious problems, the extent of which remains to be determined, is the effect on children of collapsed and unstable unions. In Kampala one can hardly talk about the plight of a large army of deserted children. Yet it is perhaps more important that, as a result of a high degree of mobility of one or both parents, children frequently lack the sense of security and attachment which comes with a permanent home. Yet today kinship bonds and obligations are still such that few children would find themselves out on the street, although there are an increasing number of children whose parents or guardians find themselves unable or unwilling to provide for the basic needs of a child. Difficulties may also arise when a father wishes to

have his children looked after by a brother or a relative. But the economic realities which face the African urban population are often disregarded in respect of children. Whereas ties of mutual obligation have changed and are subjected to considerable strain, there are numerous examples of parents straining their limited resources to the very utmost to be able to give their children good food, good clothes and a little education. In part these efforts depend on the woman whose position in the society at large is, of course, undergoing rapid change (Chinn, 1959).

It is difficult to measure the effect on a child of separation from its mother, particularly as this might affect the female child quite differently from the male child depending on the pattern of authority and socialization acceptable and workable under local conditions (Parson, 1949: 188). We have already discussed the importance of the identification of a male child with male authority. It might well be argued that the identification of the female child with her mother or female relative is equally important if she is to learn the ways of the home and her role as a woman.

But there is much evidence that the congested urban areas are breeding entirely new practices, methods and values in respect of the socialization of the child and family life in general. Mair (1953: 155) has suggested in respect of the urban African family that: "There is no longer any organization outside the family for inculcating accepted rules and values in the next generation" [particularly] when mothers as well as fathers have to earn money ... which obliges them to leave their children in someone else's care." Yet it is on the whole too early to tell what the pattern is likely to be as it has barely unfolded. Perhaps we can point to the fact that in the peri-urban parish, from which the above data was drawn, 76 children (27%) of varying ages were not living with their mothers but were frequently looked after by an older sibling or a maternal aunt. At worst some of the younger children were looked after by neighbours particularly if both parents were out working. There were only 11 cases of young children roaming about during the day unable to get into their homes and making the best of kind neighbours for food and shelter. But these conditions are far from usual. Children tend to be shuffled about between the village and the town. Many a

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parent deplores this but finds it difficult to do anything about it. One woman expressed it in this way:

I do not think that the town is good for children. But education is poor in our village. Also I have a lot of friends living in Kampala and I like to visit with them. When I visit the village I take my children with me because I do not like leaving them with my relatives here. Then when I arrive back in Kampala I do not like to stay too long, but often I stay for two or three years before returning (Gutkind, 1953, 1955).

In short: under such conditions, it will readily be appreciated, the processes of socialization will differ somewhat from those of the rural areas. Parents usually realize the need to modify and adapt their views and methods in respect of the training of children. Many a parent appears to realize that in urban conditions children cannot be fed a steady dose of folklore or be trained in the activities and obligations traditional to the tribe. Children of school age whose fathers manage to provide school fees are expected to concentrate their efforts on their studies. School children who are "not clever" are often ridiculed by their parents, who treat the child's difficulties and failure as a personal disgrace. To have clean and clever children is an important factor in enhanced social status of parents in the community.

The absence of firm and consistent parental control over children is largely a reflection of the type of social organization prevalent in the peri-urban areas and of the realities of the economic situation which compel the father to search for work and be absent from his wife and children most of the day. If marital stability is somewhat uncertain and either parent enjoys extra-marital sex activity it is manifestly difficult for the father to exercise his parental authority. At best, in most cases the child's process of identification with its parents is likely to take a peculiar form in much of the peri-urban area.

Today over much of the peri-urban area of Kampala there is evidence that something of a "natural family" is emerging as the most suitable family unit under prevailing urban conditions. This family unit, the conjugal unit of father, mother and children stands in strong contrast to the extended family so commonly found in the rural areas. But here too it is questionable whether the extended family with its more stable background provides

more than a "natural family" can? This question is particularly pertinent to the Ganda tribe where the family generally tends to be a rather vague and spatially distributed entity. Ganda children are frequently separated from their mothers or fathers for long periods of time living instead with a wide range of relatives. Further research is needed to document clearly the differences in socialization and personality development between the extended and the conjugal type family. Certainly in the area in question it is common for smaller children to come and go—to shuttle between town and village and between mother and father and relatives and friends. Yet it is also of interest to note that when children are born in an urban area the majority tend to stay there (perhaps because of the availability of schooling) while few of those born in the villages become resident with any degree of permanency in the town.

It would be quite wrong to leave the impression that parents are unable or unwilling to give their children adequate supervision, and training cannot be adequately undertaken. Nor should we suggest that if the parents enjoy freedom from any effective restraints they are likely to impart this *ipso facto* to their children. Parents are proud of well behaved and helpful children and they do much to foster the ideal norms to which the community as a whole subscribes. Because of the economic realities facing the urban family, children must assist in the home. Looking after younger siblings is perhaps the most important task, followed by all manner of tasks in the home such as assisting mother in cleaning the house and courtyard, fetching food and firewood from the market, keeping an eye on the cooking while mother is away, running minor errands such as messages to neighbours and friends and helping with the family wash. Clearly the complete absence of any kind of agriculture precludes training and assistance in some aspects of life of great importance in the rural area. Parents are equally concerned to see that their children do not fall into the habit of stealing and begging. The former often leads to severe reprimand and occasionally a good beating, although ridicule and shame play a greater part. Children are generally not beaten for minor offences.

Certainly one of the most significant features of urban African family life is the difficulty which the institution of marriage

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encounters. Yet perhaps it is wrong to speak of difficulties: the term change might be more appropriate. Most description speaks of the absence of tribal customary sanctions and mores with a consequent widespread increase in prostitution and adultery, with frequent divorce followed by almost immediate re-marriage. To attribute all this to the rise of towns and the impact of a money economy would indeed over-simplify the enquiry. There are other questions to be considered such as the steady progress which is being made in the economic emancipation of women, particularly those resident in the town, and the frequent necessity for women to contribute to the family budget with the result that they tend to neglect their family role. It is also well to remember that the high rate of marriage breakdown in most urban African areas does not seem to be markedly related to the type of marriage contracted. The vast majority of Africans continue to contract marriages under traditional and customary law; only a small, yet growing, percentage marry under civil law or christian rites.

What then is the outlook for urban marriage? Is it that not only the form and function of marriage is changing but also its idea and purpose? Difficult as the latter is to prove one can only point to indications here and there. For example, there is a reluctance to settle down to a stable marriage and the raising of a family. Non-economic considerations appear to play a greater part here than financial problems connected with urban residence, the raising of children and the demands of women for fine clothes, drink and entertainment. Men and women are satisfied to "try one another out" a type of relationship which may go on for years or be purely temporary. Under such an arrangement the likelihood is that both parties get the best of both worlds as each will only stay in this kind of relationship as long as mutual satisfaction is obtained. At the time of separation the questions of sanctions and their enforcement or litigation in a native court do not arise. Should children have resulted from these "marriages of convenience" the position may well be more complicated as the "husband" may be called upon by the parents of the girl to make amends either by marrying the girl or paying compensation for "violating my daughter." No serious stigma is attached to such events and couples who have undergone civil or religious

rite live side by side with those in unrecognized unions. Certainly those with stable marriages, particularly those who have been married in a church, enjoy considerable standing in the urban or the rural community.

What of the future for the African urban family? Merely to reassert that we are in a process of transition is only to reiterate a well-worn cliché. We accept the fact that the social order under any conditions is not static and that change can be, and often is, uneven, proceeding with greater rapidity in some places than in others. We must also accept the fact that whereas some institutions may undergo extensive changes in form, their functions may change only a little and their purpose not at all. Some have argued that the institution of the family must be treated as "the most significant feature of African society." If this is so it could perhaps be argued that not only will the institution of the family persist whatever difficulties it faces: its basic purpose also is unlikely to be lost.

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