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Baraka (as *Divine* Blessing) as a Bridge in Manding Languages (Especially in Jula of Côte d'Ivoire)

Fritz Goerling

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Abstract

This article examines the translation of the different contextual senses and functions of the biblical concept of "blessing/to bless" in six Bible translations and in a translation of the Qur'an in closely related Manding languages (from Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Burkina-Faso). Most of the qur'anic terms chosen in these arabicized languages to render *divine* blessing are either inappropriate or inaccurate. They are presented here with the hope of helping other translators, especially those working among groups with significant borrowings from Islamic theological terminology, by sensitizing them to the issues involved. The concept of "blessing" can be a bridge for conveying the biblical message to Muslims in West Africa in a relevant way. In addition, "blessing" is a strategic term to share the Gospel with any target group, especially since any receptor audience in all likelihood has a materialistic concept of blessing.

1. Introduction

In the Bible "blessing" is an outworking of God's love which is his dominant attribute. God's blessings are bestowed on the basis of his grace. In Jesus, in whom salvation history culminates, God's grace and self-giving love are ultimately shown. Jesus is the ultimate blessing (Ephesians 1:3). Thus, 'blessing' is a strategic term to share the Gospel, especially since any receptor audience in all likelihood has a materialistic concept of blessing.

In translating for the Jula of Côte d'Ivoire, the renderings the translators eventually adopted for the different biblical senses of 'blessing' are revealing and significant. They are presented here with the hope of helping other translators, especially those working among groups with significant borrowings from Islamic theological terminology, by sensitizing them to the issues involved. The concept of "blessing" can be a bridge for conveying the biblical message to Muslims in West Africa in a relevant way, as Larry Lenning has said (1980:66).

2. "Blessing" in the Old Testament

Blessings given by God or human beings can be either a speech act (benediction) or a bestowal of material goods (benefaction). The content of the blessing can be spiritual or material.

The Hebrew root *brk* is used whether the blessing comes from God or from human beings. Three main functions of *brk* need to be kept apart:

1. God blesses a human being
2. A human being blesses, i.e. praises or thanks God
3. A human being blesses another human being

These contextual meanings and functions need to be distinguished in order to produce a context-sensitive and functionally equivalent translation. Both the verb and participle have different meanings depending on whether they are predicated of God or human beings. The same applies to the noun *berakha* which can be

either a blessing (from God) or a gift (between humans). These relationships need to be kept in mind when translating the Hebrew concept adequately.

The Hebrew verb root *brk* 'blessing' has three main senses (Schenk 1967:39):

1. With God as the agent, it means "to endow with power."
2. With a human being as the agent, it means "to refer to God as the source of power; to praise; to thank."
3. When a human being blesses another, it means "to convey to someone God's beneficent power."

A good example is Genesis 14:18–20, where all the three senses of *brk* occur. In verse 18 we have God blessing another human being. In verse 19 we have a human being blessing, i.e. praising God, and in verse 20 we have a human being blessing another human being.

Another example where senses 1 and 2 occur in close vicinity is Numbers 6:23–27:

> [23] "Instruct Aaron and his sons to bless (*brk*) the people of Israel with this special blessing (*brk*):
> [24] 'May the LORD bless (*brk*) you and protect you. [25] May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you. [26] May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace.' [27] This is how Aaron and his sons will designate the Israelites as my people, and I myself will bless (*brk*) them."

The central meaning of *brk* in the Old Testament is "empowerment/enrichment." Murtonen argues that material or physical blessing is the dominant component of *brk* in the Old Testament (1959:175): YHWH's grace and blessings make every external area of life grow and prosper (Deut. 28:8–14).

3. "Blessing" in the New Testament

Greek εὐλογ- in the New Testament corresponds to Hebrew root *brk*. The verb εὐλογεῖν occurs forty-one times, the noun εὐλογια sixteen times, and the adjective εὐλογητός eight times. Thus, of the two hundred and fifty or so occurrences of "to bless" or "blessing" in the Bible, sixty-five are found in the New Testament. It occurs most frequently in Luke, the major writings of Paul, and in Hebrews.

The doxological application (i.e., a human praising or thanking God as the source of power) is by far the most frequent (forty out of sixty-five occurrences); blessing as a divine act (God to human beings) is next in frequency; blessing of one human being to another occurs less often.

It is interesting to note that in the Arabic New Testament εὐλογ- and its derivatives are translated by the Arabic equivalent of *brk* and its derivatives (which are very similar to Hebrew). This applies to blessing given by both God and human beings.

As a number of researchers have pointed out, the Old Testament concept of blessing is redefined in the New Testament. Westermann (1978:77) speaks of its christianization. One example of this is the transformation of the promise to Abraham, which is seen in the New Testament as fulfilled in Christ (Acts 3:25–26; Gal. 3:8–9,14). In the Gospels also we see Jesus introducing new meanings into the forms and customs by which blessing was traditionally communicated (Lenning 1980:72-74, 82-86). For example, by laying hands on children and blessing them Jesus emphasizes the fact that in order to enter into the Kingdom of God we must be humble and have childlike faith.

The central meaning in the Old Testament of blessing as enrichment or empowering still holds for the New Testament, but the sense is more often spiritualized in the New Testament. (Sometimes the meaning is spiritual in the Old Testament, too, especially in the Psalms as in Ps. 63:3–4 and 73:25). Jesus and Paul were not married and did not have physical children nor were they materially rich (which are signs of being blessed by God in the Old Testament), but they certainly had spiritual children. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was ultimately a blessing for him, because it brought him closer to God (2 Cor. 12:7–10*).* Fecundity, power or abundance are viewed not according to materialistic standards but in relation to the will of God for a believer's life. Believers are to seek first the kingdom of God with the promise that blessings will follow (Matt. 6:33). The gift of the Holy Spirit is the ultimate blessing, leading the believer to maturation, that is,

into deeper communion with God and abundant life characterized by spiritual fecundity and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23).

What is new about blessing in the New Testament is the idea of inheriting the kingdom through the coming of Jesus. Prince sums up the New Testament concept in one grand, all-inclusive word: *salvation* (1990:184). The outworking of this salvation includes a person's whole being—spirit, soul, and body. It is obtained through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross where an exchange from curse to blessing occurred.

Ephesians 1:3 is a verse that gives us insight into the New Testament concept of blessing: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." Christ is blessing personified; by accepting him, we are fully blessed (Rom. 8:32). In Christ, all values are redefined: 'blessing,' might include suffering. The ultimate value is not an increase in material power (fertility, prosperity), but communion with God, which might come through suffering. The discontinuity between the Old and New Testament concepts can also be observed by comparing the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:24–26) with the Trinitarian blessings in the New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor. 13:14).

Thus as we proceed from the Old Testament to the New, there is both a *continuity* in the concept of blessing (in that there is an increase in power) and also a *discontinuity* (in that whereas the Old Testament blessing predominantly means increase in power for success, prosperity and fertility, in the New Testament it is increase in spiritual power). Both the continuity and the discontinuity of "blessing" between the two Testaments have ramifications that affect the appropriateness of the terms of qur'anic origin *baraka*, *nèèma* and *dugawu* for Bible translation into Manding languages, as we shall see in the following sections.

4. "Blessing" in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, as in the Old Testament, blessing is visible in a person's life by fertility, prosperity, and well-being. According to Chelhood (1955:7), its root stem, *brk*, has the meaning of 'kneeling down' (as in Hebrew); the knee is often linked to the idea of procreation and power in the Semitic world. Thus it expresses blessing (empowering, enrichment) which is *baraka* in qur'anic Arabic. In the Qur'an, the idea of Allah being blessed occurs, but only rarely (7:52 and 23:14, verses quoted according to the Egyptian edition of the Qur'an). It is almost exclusively Allah who blesses (i.e., as the subject of the verb "to bless"). People, objects, places, and periods of time are described as blessed (*mubarak*) in the Qur'an, for example, in 3:90, 24:35 and 44:2. The noun *barakat* in the plural occurs only three times and refers to blessings God gives to his people (7:94; 11:50; 11:76). In the Arabic Bible, the verb and noun forms of *brk* are used extensively to refer to blessing by both God and human beings.

However, the folk conception of *baraka* in popular Islam also affects the way readers understand it, as for example in Luke 8:45–48 and Acts 5:15 and 19:12. The folk-religious meaning is in the forefront of people's minds: Anything filled with abundance and prosperity contains *baraka* inherently, and if something grows in number, volume, or prosperity, it also contains *baraka*. Thus, in their way of thinking, *baraka* signifies animistic power, rather than power from God. *Baraka* is thought to convey something tangible that can be gained by physical association. This strong folk-religious content pre-dates Islam and Christianity. It is found throughout the Middle East and West Africa south of the Sahara in both Christian and Muslim communities.

While *baraka* is indeed a central concept in Muslim minds worldwide, its precise meaning varies somewhat from one people group to another depending on the history of the cultural group in question. Among these groups there is sometimes a shift of meaning from the primary meaning of blessing/empowering to mere power itself (cf. Prost 1985 for West African languages).

Thus it is an overgeneralization when Lenning (1980:22) says that in Islam *baraka* is the universal word for "blessing." Based on that prejudgment and his view that *baraka* means 'blessing', he concludes that it is an excellent bridge between Islam and Christianity in West Africa. However, in so saying, he ignores the possibility of variations in meaning from one language to another and of other local terms for blessing.

For example, in many West African animistic groups *baraka* is one of the terms for "power" rather than

"blessing." This power is charismatic power or the magnetic emanation of persons endowed with it. It can be recognized by piety, spirituality, moral lifestyle, or healing gifts. Muslim holy men (like sheiks of Sufi orders) possess it, and they can communicate it to their followers through touch, saliva, and other means. (They are the inheritors of the sharifian power, in line with Muhammad, and they are the passers on of *baraka*.) Sufi saints achieve this power through inheritance (chain of blessing, or *silsalah*), intimate contact with God, and participation in religious orders. Certain objects contain *baraka*, for example, the Qur'an, the Ka'ba, and tombs of saints. Certain activities, such as the pursuit of holy learning, can bring *baraka* into a person's life. But *baraka* can also be lost by contamination or breaking a taboo (see Appendix "How Pharaoh obtained and lost *baraka*") .

As these examples show, often the meaning of *baraka* is 'power'; thus *baraka* needs to be carefully analyzed whether it is an appropriate term for 'blessing' and a suitable bridge of communication between Christianity. and Islam. However, the *concept* of blessing is indeed an excellent bridge, no matter what receptor term is chosen. In section 5, I will show how this is so in the Jula culture of Côte d'Ivoire. In addition I will compare the solutions adopted for Jula of Côte d'Ivoire with those adopted in translations in other closely related Manding languages (Jula of Burkina-Faso, Bambara of Mali).

5. "Blessing" in the Jula context of Côte d'Ivoire

In this section, I follow the format of Barnwell, Dancy, and Pope (2008), somewhat modified and with permission, to present the forms and uses of 'bless' in Hebrew and Greek and how they have been translated in Jula. (The Jula renderings of the Côte d'Ivoire translation of the Bible appear in parentheses in the scriptural examples.)

TO BLESS (the verbs *brk* or εὐλογέω or a derivative)

1. When God is the one doing the action, "bless" means that God does something good for someone, either materially or spiritually, or provides something good.

   Genesis 12:2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless (*baraka*) you."

   Ephesians 1:3b "For in union with Christ [God] has blessed (*baraka*) us by giving us every spiritual blessing (*baraka*) in the heavenly world."

2. When someone other than God is doing the action, "bless" means that the person uses the authority God has given him or her to convey to another person something good that God wants.

   a. A senior person blesses a junior person in a formal act.

      Genesis 48:20 "He [Jacob] blessed (*dugawu*) them that day."

      Mark 10:16 "And [Jesus] took [the children] in his arms and blessed (*dugawu*) them."

   b. Someone blesses someone else formally.

      1 Corinthians 4:12 "When reviled, we bless (*dugawu*)."

3. A third meaning of *brk*/εὐλογέω ('bless') is giving thanks to God for his blessings and praising God for His goodness.

   Genesis 14:20 "And blessed be (*tando*) God Most High."

   James 3:9 "With it we bless (*tando*) the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men."

As can be seen, then, the Jula language of Côte d'Ivoire has a number of terms available to convey the different meanings of *brk*/εὐλογ- ('bless' and 'blessing').

When a human being does the blessing, *tando* or *dugawu* is used, depending on who is being blessed.

1. If God is the one being "blessed" (in the sense of "praised"), *tando* may be used.
2. When a fellow human being is being blessed, *dugawu* is used. Human beings do the *dugawu*, wishing that God may accept it.

The pronouncing of a blessing (*dugawu*) is very frequent in Jula culture. This practice is tied in to their belief in God. They believe that if God exists, he certainly listens to the prayers of his children. Blessings are a form of prayer. *Dugawu*, the Jula word for blessing done by human beings, means, in fact, both blessing and spontaneous prayer. The latter meaning corresponds to the meaning of the Arabic root *d'w* from which the word is borrowed. Blessings are given on all kinds of occasions: birth, marriage, death, sickness, travel, feasts, and formal gatherings. Often many blessings are formulated one after the other, to which the receiver responds, "May God listen to your *dugawu*." He then responds with blessings also.

When God does the blessing, the word *baraka* of Arabic origin is the most suitable term in Jula of Côte d'Ivoire (sense 1). The Catholic translation into Bambara of Mali also uses it. It is better than *nèèma*, another term borrowed from Arabic, used in the Qur'an for "blessing" (see Cassis 1983, *Concordance of the Qur'an*). The problem with *nèèma* used as a rendering for *divine* blessing in the published translation of the New Testament into Jula of Côte d'Ivoire is that it also means "grace" as in the Qur'an. It is not always clear from the context whether "blessing" or "grace" is understood by receptors, which was borne out by testing and back-translations. The term *hèra* used in the translation of Jula of Burkina-Faso is debatable because of its foremost meaning of "peace." In all the six Bible translations consulted the translation of *divine* blessing differs and has posed problems and has been changed over the years from one polysemous word to another: *hèra* (peace/blessing), *nyumanya* (goodness/blessing), *nèema* (grace/blessing), *baraka* (power/blessing) and *duba/dugawu* (wrongly used also for *divine* blessing). We think that *baraka* is the most appropriate (although not ideal) solution for the Côte d'Ivoire Jula translation for *divine* blessing. The reasons will be given in the following section on *baraka* of Côte d'Ivoire.

6. The function of the term *baraka* in Jula of Côte d'Ivoire

From the section 5 examples of "blessing, to bless" in translation, it becomes clear that *baraka* is an appropriate term to translate *divine* blessing in the Jula context. One-to-one equivalents of terms are often hard to find in translation but receptor language terms can be reinterpreted. *Baraka* as divine *blessing* can be divested of the unwanted semantic component of "power" through context in translation itself. It is not suitable for the act of blessing among humans but to prove that was not the point of this article. These findings contradict Lenning's claim that *baraka* is a perfect bridge in the West African context. He seems to think it always means 'blessing'.

Baraka in the Jula context, if understood as "power," might serve as a bridge in the semantic domain of "power" terms (see the Appendix "How Pharaoh obtained and lost *baraka*"). Its semantic field includes other terms, the respective meanings of which are authority, headship, and divine power. Power in the sense of conferred authority is translated by *fanga* (Mark 2:10), which can also mean political power in Jula. Power in the sense of headship is translated by *kuntigiya* (Col. 2:10). Power in the absolute sense, that is, divine power, is translated by *se (sebagaya*).

In all its senses *baraka* in Jula, when predicated of human beings or objects, is a force (physical, moral, intellectual, psychological). The rare cases in the New Testament where the Jula translators used *baraka* to translate "power" are where it occurs in the sense of healing force (Mark 1:27), and authority to teach (Matt. 6:29).

Idiomatic uses of *baraka* in Jula show that it is used mostly with a physical or material meaning:

- *barakaden lo* = a child born to succeed
- *mògò barakaman lo/mògò barakatigi lo* = a strong/lucky person
- *barakamògò* = a person with charisma (one who succeeds without money)
- *lònni barakaman* = useful knowledge
- *naforo barakaman* = useful wealth
- *baraka be dugukolo nin na* = this soil is fertile

Baraka is the result of a blessing pronounced by an older person (*dugawu*) and, in the final analysis, of a God-given blessing (*baraka*). The appended story "How Pharaoh obtained and lost *baraka*" shows that Pharaoh was blessed (*dugawu*) by his mother and thus gained power (*baraka*). Given the central meaning of blessing, empowering, one can distinguish between *baraka* and *dugawu* precisely by saying that "power" (*baraka*) is the result of "empowering" (*dugawu*). Anyone can have *baraka*, as the saying goes: *baraka te mògò woloma* "*baraka* makes no distinctions." One can be poor and have *baraka* and be rich and not have *baraka*. *Baraka* power is held in higher esteem than the kind of power gained from age or wealth or knowledge. It comes with a relationship, and this relationship gives the authority to pass on blessing. One who has *baraka* always compels recognition.

The spiritual need for *baraka* is the most important felt need among the Julas. Hence, this word *is* a potential bridge for the Gospel.

I discovered how strongly the Jula feel the need for *baraka* when I conducted a study on the Jula concept of a good person. My study showed that respect can be earned through age, riches, good reputation, education, and wisdom, but authority gained through *baraka* is what counts the most. A person who has *baraka* is respected and also respects everyone.

In summary, we can see that *baraka* (in collocation with an appropriate verb) in Jula translates *divine* blessing and the verb "to bless" when it is predicated of God. It translates "power" only in certain contexts. Therefore it is wrong to assume that *baraka* automatically evokes "blessing" (or "power"). Interestingly, the Arabic Bible uses *baraka* extensively for blessing by both God and human beings. In Jula, however, the meaning of the word has changed. In view of this, I take issue with Lenning's statement (1980) that *baraka* is the all-purpose word for conveying the idea of blessing in all West African contexts. In at least one West African language, namely the Côte d'Ivoire Jula, this is not so.

For Côte d'Ivoire Jula, the following statements hold:

1. "blessing" and "power" are not the same
2. "blessing" is not tied to the form *baraka*; it is a good translation for *divine*—not *human*—blessing
3. "power" is not always best translated by *baraka*.

Bridges do need to be creatively exploited, it is true. But there are limits—they need to be critically evaluated as well. *Baraka* is a case in point. Lenning does voice a concern pertaining to *baraka'*s animistic sense in the West African context (1980:13–14). I share this concern. I also agree with him that we need to take risks and be creative. We can sometimes reconceptualize terms and christianize them which seems to be possible with *baraka* in the sense of "blessing."

7. Conclusion

The findings for the Jula of Côte d'Ivoire show that *baraka* is the appropriate term for *divine* blessing. It is used in Jula in an Arabic/qur'anic and biblical sense of blessing as "empowerment/enrichment." In addition, a semantic shift to "power" occurred in folk Islam when this term was borrowed into the Jula language centuries ago. This can be corrected in translation.

For Bible translation there is no need to avoid the Arabic term *baraka* just because of its Islamic origin. On the contrary, using *baraka* to translate blessing coming from God is an appropriate choice, as my analysis and comparisons of the concept in the Bible, the Qur'an, and the Jula context have shown. *Baraka* as *divine* blessing does have the same basic referential meanings in the Qur'an as its biblical equivalents, *brk* or εὐλογέω. Moreover, the term is well understood by both Christians and Muslims in the Jula context. It is used in the translation of the Qur'an into Jula of Côte d'Ivoire throughout as the rendering for *divine* blessing. Thus, it is a good term for building a bridge for communication between the two religious communities. The only reinterpretation that has to take place is a christianization of the concept as has happened in the New Testament (Eph. 1:3). This means moving away from any materialistic idea of blessing towards the idea of spiritual blessing. This spiritualization of the concept can take place in translation itself; we trust in the Bible's being the best tool for reinterpreting receptor-language terms.

APPENDIX: How Pharaoh obtained and lost *baraka*

Baraka is better than anything. If *baraka* is in something, it is not useless. How do we know? Here is an example. There has never been a greater king than Pharaoh. But Pharaoh became famous only because of his *baraka*. How did he obtain *baraka*? He obtained *baraka* through his parents. During all his reign he never failed to respect his parents, that is, his mother. When his mother was pregnant with him in the sixth month, his father died. When Pharaoh was born, he became a powerful man because he looked for the blessing (*dugawu)* of his mother. Every day, when he had eaten, he thanked his mother and he prepared her bed and sat at her side to chat with her a bit, before he himself went to bed. His mother blessed (*dugawu)* him.

God sent the prophet Moses to Pharaoh. Moses tried by all means to conquer Pharaoh but in vain. Then Moses met God on a mountain. God said to him, "This place is holy. Take off your shoes." Moses did. God and Moses talked with one another. Moses said to God, "My Lord God, it is you who sent me to Pharaoh. I tried everything against him but in vain. Why can I not conquer him?" God said to Moses, "Pharaoh has *baraka*. No one can overcome him. The source of it is the blessing (*dugawu)* of his mother. No one can conquer someone blessed by his mother." Moses said, "So what am I going to do because it was you who sent me?" God said, "No problem. I will show you."

Well, we know that women can spoil everything in this world. Be it a king, a woman can spoil his kingdom. Be it a wise man, a woman can spoil all his glorious wisdom. Be it a rich man, a woman can spoil his riches. We know that women are capable of anything in this world.

God instigated a woman against Pharaoh. God sent his angel who transformed himself into a woman. One day one of Pharaoh's servants went for a walk. He met this beautiful woman. He asked her to marry him. She accepted. Pharaoh's servant went with her to see Pharaoh. He said, "Master, I found a woman; I want you to give her to me." Pharaoh looked at the woman and said, "You are not a good servant. Is this woman a woman destined for a servant? This is a woman destined for a master, not for a servant." Pharaoh took the woman from his servant and wanted to marry her.

The woman said to Pharaoh, "You are a king. But you have four weaknesses. If you do not abandon them, I cannot marry you." Pharaoh said, "What is the first weakness?" The woman said, "You yourself prepare the bed for your mother. You, a king! That is not worthy of you. If you do not stop doing that, I cannot marry you. It is other people who prepare the bed for the king so that he can sleep. But every day you yourself prepare the bed for your mother, that is slavery." Pharaoh took his wife and showed her to his mother. He said, "I have always prepared your bed, that is why she does not want to marry me. Therefore I will not prepare your bed any more. If you like to do it yourself, do it; if you do not, leave it. As far as I am concerned, I do not do it any more." The woman said, "This is what I want."

Pharaoh asked her, "What is my second weakness?"The woman said, "When you feel a need to relieve yourself, you go three miles to do it. This is not worthy of a king. Do it in your house. Your servants can clean up. That is kingship. If you do not stop doing this, I cannot marry you." As Pharaoh liked the woman a lot, he stood up immediately, took off his pants in front of everyone and relieved himself. The servants came and cleaned up.

Pharaoh asked the woman, "Now, what is my third weakness?" The woman said, "When you wash yourself, you use a little water from a bucket. Even miserable people wash with more water than you. I cannot accept a dirty man like you. I know you are not clean, you smell; if you do not wash with much water, I cannot accept you." Pharaoh sent all his servants to the river Nile. They dug deep and directed the Nile to the palace of Pharaoh. Now they had water in abundance. They spilt water everywhere. There was water all over the place. They wasted and wasted it. The woman said, "That is what I want."

Pharaoh said, "There is one more thing." The woman said, "When you eat, you pick up even a grain of rice fallen to the ground and eat it like an orphan. It is orphans whose father and mother have died who do such a pitiful thing. You, a king! If I marry you and you continue to do this, I will die of hunger." Pharaoh called all the women in town telling them to prepare food. The women came with the food prepared and filled all the place with it. On his right side, Pharaoh put his hand into food and put it into his mouth. On his left side

he put his hand into food and put it into his mouth. From time to time he kicked pots and spilled the food all over the place. Small ants and big ants, all had enough to eat. The woman said, "This is what I want."

Pharaoh's *baraka* was finished that very night.

The angel Gabriel came to tell the prophet Moses, "God has given Pharaoh to you. The four things because of which no one could conquer Pharaoh are spoilt. Go after him…."

(The story finishes by telling how Moses conquered Pharaoh, which corresponds to the biblical account.)

told by Muslim holy man Madu Sanogo

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