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AFRICA VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF 'BLUE TRAVEL': VISUAL TOURISM AND COLONIAL IMAGERY

1. Introduction

J. Urry, in his hyper-quoted *The Tourist Gaze* (1990) called attention to the fundamentally visual nature of the tourism experience. Tourism is focused in gaze. The aestheticization of the "real world", from what tourism lives off, consists in changing everything – places, people, societies – into simple images for consumption by bringing with it what Gregory (1994) appointed as a new idea of "world-as-exhibition". The space is reduced to the status of mere landscape – a sight to be consumed and enjoyed – and the diversity of its peoples and cultures presented as if were pure spectacle. That is why the production, circulation and consumption of images are so crucial in the tourism business.

This study addresses that relationship of tourism with images and visual consumption. Various approaches towards this study would be possible. If the concern were the competitiveness of destinations, it would justify that we look into until what point these promotional images weigh in travel options, or how much importance do the promotional supports (tourist brochures, TV travel channels, the internet, etc) have on the construction of the destination images. My point of view, however, is another. As part of a critical theory of tourism, I am more interested in understanding the cultural meanings contained in the destination images and how they reflect

and reproduce ideologies and power relations. My reflection situates, thus, at the crossroads of tourism studies with cultural studies. Using visual methods, namely semiotic analysis of iconographic material, I intend to analyze and decipher the culture that shapes the travel imagery and destination images. Delineating more specifically the objective of this study, I would say that I intend to look at the photos in travel magazines and investigate to what extent they reflect and propagate myths about places and their inhabitants and cultures. The destination images belong to the universe of the visual culture, shaped by a vision that is socially constructed and shared by other forms of visual discourse. Such images are not therefore unharmed to cultural hegemony. In this case, I particularly want to know how the sub-Saharan Africa is represented in Blue Travel, a Portuguese travel magazine assumed as independent and alternative, so as to understand until what point imperialistic mythology and colonialism as an ideology continue to mark the post-colonial tourist imagery.

2. Tourism, photography and visual consumption

Visual consumption is a key concept for understanding contemporary societies and the role that images play in them. As explained Willis (1991, p. 31), "In advanced consumer society, the act of consumption need not involve economic exchange. We consume with our eyes, taking in commodities every time we push a grocery cart up and down the aisles in a supermarket, or watch TV, or drive down a logo-studded highway". The notion of visual consumption refers to all this universe of behaviors and practices of visual-orientated consumption related to the leisure sphere, ranging from the simple pleasure of window shopping to the advertising consumption, the consumption of audiovisual content and multimedia, and tourism itself.

The consumer society explores the voyeurism and fetishism and that explains why visual consumption has such a significant meaning. The consumer society plays with the pleasure of seeing so as in generating a desire of possession. If we want to go back even further, we can say that

at the base is the ocularcentrism of contemporary life. Several authors have argued that this supremacy of vision over the other senses is a product of Modernity (Cosgrove, 1985 and 2008; Bauman, 1993; Adler, 1989). Modernity has opened a new way to experience the world primarily organized around the vision. First with the figurative realist painting, to which the invention of perspective was decisive, and then with the development of optics and its extensive and sophisticated technological apparatus, people assumed that seeing is the most clear and transparent way of accessing reality as images are the best form of representing it.

Today, in the Information Age, there are many reasons for thinking that this centrality of vision and image is even greater than in the past. They are basically images that circulate through modern information and communication technologies. It is undeniable that the image has become an absolute key ingredient of the 21st century economy. Brands are defined based on images, goods are advertised and commercialized based on their images, and even the corporate images have become critical for business success: "If we understand that the market is based on images – brand images, corporate images, national images, and images of identity, then we realize that vision is central to understanding management in the Information society "(Schroeder, 2002, p. 5).

The optical technologies meddled themselves everywhere. Few technologies produced so many changes in the way we live and think about the world as the lenses. Images taken from telescopes, microscopes, cameras, videos, satellites, x-rays, infrareds, etc. surround us everywhere. At all times do we come across them and it is through them that we essentially imagine the world today. The images captured by the simple 'naked eye' have long been surpassed by the images obtained and retained throughout this huge optical apparatus that Modernity invented. The lenses have come between us and the world, mediating and filtering our perception of reality. Coleman (1998) says for this reason that we are immersed in a "lens culture".

Photos are the most common and representative elements of the lens culture in which we live in. Maybe not exaggerating when I say that they are also the most problematic because, more than any other product of the modern lens culture, the photographs play with the concept of authenticity. In the face of a photo we are easily led to believe that not only is it a mere representation of reality, but the pure and unpolluted reality itself revealed in front of our eyes. Photographs are found over an arresting rhetoric of neutrality which makes them extraordinarily competent tools in 'naturalizing' ideologies. We see the photos as if they were a transparent window over reality, and never as a 'staging' of the world and society. However, "Photographs do not 'show how things look', since there is no one way that anything looks" (Coleman, 1998, p. 57); photographs merely reveal one of the possible ways of something being seen and shown; photos are positional human creations, genuine artifacts, not 'natural' emanations from the world: each photo record a moment captured by an author at a given time from a certain angle of vision, under specific lighting conditions, and using certain technical media and resources.

Because of the importance that visual consumption has on tourism, photographs actually are a key element in the business. Images are crucial to travel decisions. Destinations are generally chosen based on images. Besides, images influence how the space and the places are lived and experienced by tourists in view of the fact that they create expectations about what to see and do at the destinations (Chon, 1990; Molina, Gómez, and Martín-Consuegra, 2010). Photos play an essential role in all that. Apparently, the elements in brochures that contribute most to the formation of the destination images are the photographs: there is some evidence that the photos are the elements in tourism advertising that cause the most lasting and sharpest impression on consumers (Molina and Esteban, 2006).

An investigation into the photographic material that circulates in travel and tourism discourses makes, by what I just said, all sense. Most work on this subject has been focused on the analysis of tourist promotional materials published by the official authorities and the sector's industry, namely brochures and posters (Dann, 1996; Ateljevic and Doorne, 2002; Echtner and Prasad, 2003; Buzinde, Santos and Smith, 2006; Aurindo, 2006). However, these are not necessarily the most important sources of information mobilized for creating a destination image in the minds of tourists (Camprubí, Guide and Comas, 2008). Some studies even suggest

that there are nowadays other sources of information much more influential in shaping the mental geography of tourism, such as TV, press and the Internet (Govers, Go and Kumar, 2007). This explains why I preferred to analyze the photographic material contained in a travel magazine in this study. On the other hand, I believe that the visual consumption of this type of content sets itself a particular form of tourism experience today, something equated to a kind of visual tourism without physical movement – an "armchair tourism" according to Urry (1995). In fact, many of the readers who consume these kinds of magazines do not plan to travel or fly; they simply use the magazines as a form of distraction and alienation, in order to enjoy the pleasure of seeing exotic and idyllic places and imagining themselves living the sophisticated and exclusive experience described in those pages.

3. Tourism and postcolonial theory

In a critical approach of tourism, travel imagery and travel discourses must be weighed in relation to the society in which they are produced and the ideologies that dominate it: as Mellinger puts, "One needs to situate tourism representations politically, examine what they include and exclude, and expose whose interests they serve. A critical analysis of tourism representations must recognize the political linkages between tourism discourses and technologies of power to uncover the ideologies and practices that structure touristic relations "(Mellinger, 1994, p. 776).

A key concept in this critical approach is therefore the concept of ideology. Ideology consists of a vision of reality that is meant to pass through as free and neutral but in reality reproduces ideals and serves special interests within society. An ideology is hegemonic if it is so deeply set in the minds that it dominates all social life and also serves as a filter on the people experience of reality, not allowing them to look at the facts objectively. Hegemony is never imposed by force, as explained by A. Gramsci, but rather the result of silent strategies of seduction and consent. The key issue in hegemony is to know how to pass particular

views of the world off as unquestionable facts, rescuing them from critical scrutiny, and thus producing broad consensus in society.

The media and advertising are arenas where the hegemony is expressed and at the same time reproduced. For these forms of discourse be effective and easily adopted by mass audiences, they must be – at least to some extent – in accordance with what advocates common sense. The same happens with the various forms of discourse produced by and for tourism; thus, one can say that travel narratives inevitably reflect and reproduce certainties of common sense, thereby integrating the circularity of knowledge and power (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2002).

In this respect, a particularly sensitive aspect that deserves attention is how the different places and cultures are portrayed in the tourism and travel discourse. If it is true that, in theory, tourism and travel can open up good opportunities for dialogue between cultures by putting people from different places in contact with each other, however, what one finds is that tourism tends to reinforce essentialist modes of thinking over-emphasizing the differences between tourists and hosts, reducing the representations of places, people and cultures of destination to the stereotypes in circulation in the societies where the tourists are originated from (Schroeder, 2002).

Where this risk is more strongly noticeable is in the Global South, where tourism brings together not only people belonging to societies with big disparities in income and power, but also with a history of colonial domination. For a full understanding of what is at stake in these circumstances, the postcolonial theory provides very useful theoretical and conceptual tools. It is sustained that the overcoming of the formal and political colonialism obtained with the independence of the former colonies did not represent the definitive end of colonialist ideology and colonial inequalities. In the new post-colonial context, colonialism remains active, albeit in a disguised and diffused form, as an economic and mental colonialism. Colonialism continues to dominate the minds of the various actors involved (especially the former colonial societies, but also in part of former colonized societies), shaping the images they have about the world and, thus, influencing the way societies relate to each other. Whenever the people from the Global South are 'otherized' and

reduced to their racial and cultural difference in the contemporary daily discourses, being presented as exotics and primitives, one can sense yet the maintenance of colonialist ideology operating.

Several authors, using the post-colonial theory, have argued that tourism represents a new form of economic and cultural colonization of the 'Third World' since his speech follows on and reproduces many of the basic principles of the colonialist ideology (Dann, 1996; McRae, 2003; Echtner and Prasad, 2003). Each time the 'Third World' is portrayed as exotic, primitive, servile and dependent in the tourist discourse, West is silently enhanced as rich and powerful, advanced and sophisticated, being confirmed as an indispensable power to the modernization and progress of those regions and societies. Exposure to this type of discourse and representations reproduces mental images and prejudices on the Global South which will then influence the way tourists look at and behave in the destination regions and interact with the host societies. These images which are uncritically internalized and consumed by tourists reflect then in what tourists will want to visit, the actions they do or the photos they take, thus closing a "hermeneutic circle" in which the tourists also perform as authors (Caton and Santos, 2008).

All the old arrogance of the colonizer and the perversions of colonialist thinking are injected in these images, through which run surreptitious political messages. Indigenous people and their cultures are reduced to mere objects for visual consumption. In texts and images that fill brochures, guidebooks and travel magazines, inequalities between the societies in the access of goods, services and technologies are never shown as problems, nor discussed in their economic and political roots, but shown as mere cultural differences, and, accordingly, converted into simple exotic attractions to the delight of tourists (Lutz and Collins, 1993; Dann, 1996; Buzinde, Santos and Smith, 2006). A perverse consequence of this 'exoticization' of the difference is that inequalities between societies end up being perpetuated under the defense of an alleged authenticity of indigenous cultures: as McRae (2003) has said, by insisting on this idea of an exotic authenticity that must be preserved, "Non-modern cultures are not allowed to progress, to grow and change. They are placed in stasis,

always ready and available for 'Western' consumption of an imagined, nostalgic past "(McRae, 2003, p. 239).

4. Going through the visual material of Blue Travel

The appearance of a periodical press specialized in travel and tourism is a recent thing in Portugal. It is related to the restructuring and modernization of the economy and society and the period of sudden prosperity of the '80s and '90s, in which on the one hand, we had the re-privatization of large sectors of the economy, including the media, and, on the other hand, a new urban middle class developed, with people more affluent and cosmopolitan, significantly more demanding and sophisticated, who began traveling more and more often.

The first Portuguese travel magazine was *Volta ao Mundo*, which appeared in 1994. In the following years, several other were born, although some had short life spans. The most aggressive and competitive environment that was installed in the media sector after the privatization of the press and radio and the opening of private television has come to favor the concentration of capital in large groups which developed strategies for multimedia integration and sought to extend its field of action, focusing on the diversification and specialization in order to reach the largest possible set of market segments.

Currently in the editorial spectrum, there are half a dozen Portuguese travel magazines, nearly all in the hands of large media groups. Volta ao Mundo, which began as an independent editorial project, had been integrated into the Pressmundo group in 1999, acquired by Lusomundo in 2003 and became the property of Controlinveste in 2005. It remains as a market leader in this segment, with an average monthly distribution of about 20,000. The same media group, which also controls the radio TSF, Sport TV, and owns daily newspapers such as *Jornal de Noticias* and *Diario de Noticias*, also has another travel and tourism magazine titled *Evasões*. *Rotas & Destinos*, published since 1995, which also has great audience, became the travel and tourism magazine of the Cofina group, when its

business area had expanded to the media sector. Meanwhile the Impala group created the *Nova Gente Travel*, associated with the brand *Nova Gente*, its famous celebrity magazine. The Impresa group, which controls the TV channel SIC and the weekly newspaper *Expresso*, edited the *Rotas do Mundo* (a Portuguese edition of a Spanish title) between 2005 and 2008 and has been publishing the *Visão Travel* since then.

The situation of the *Blue Travel* is something unique in this panorama. The difference lies, first, in not being in the hands of any major economic group, but associated with a small publisher - Blue Media, which means that Blue Travel is an independent publishing project. Blue Media was founded in 2003 on the initiative of Paul Ferreira, a former director of Volta ao Mundo. When Volta ao Mundo was acquired by Lusomundo, Paulo Ferreira launched himself in the creation of the Blue brand. The idea was to create a different publishing project, unique, independent, with a strong and clear identity. Paulo Ferreira believed a travel magazine with a marked difference from the mainstream publications would be able to survive and succeed in an environment increasingly dominated by large publishers and controlled by powerful economic groups. The renowned American magazine Wallpaper*, launched in 1996, was a major inspiration for the Blue concept. The same basic issues of Wallpaper* - fashion and lifestyle, design, restaurants and wine, travel - give content to the Blue brand, unfolded by different magazines (Blue Living, Blue Wine, Blue Travel). A modern graphic design, elegant yet youthful, an informal and direct language, and the use of recycled paper, are aspects that reinforce this affinity with Wallpaper* and help differentiate the brand Blue from their domestic competitors. For Blue Travel in concrete, another reference and inspiration is the Condé Nast Traveller. Like this well-known American publication of luxury travel, who chose the motto 'Truth in Travel' for brand image, the Blue Travel is assumed as "a magazine for travelers, not tourists", which means people of independent spirit, informed, accustomed to travel, that - in the words of its publisher - "avoid the school of tourists and demand something more authentic" (interview with Rosário Sá Coutinho, February 24, 2011). Therefore, as Condé Nast Traveller, Blue Travel is not lost in descriptions of the known and predictable aspects

of the destinations, its history and monuments, preferring to talk about ambiance and feelings, to suggest looking for different experiences, and showing the less known facets and the most exclusive hotels, restaurants, shops, etc.. The *Blue Travel* target is formed by independent travelers, but not the backpackers from *Lonely Planet*; they are affluent people with refined taste, who want to enjoy life soaking up the atmosphere of places and relaxing.

Between 2003 and 2010, in the 84 issues published, *Blue Travel* has published 14 reports on the Sub-Saharan Africa, totaling 280 pages and 408 photographs. I am not considering in this accounting two reports on the Maldives and on the Seychelles, destinations that are not assigned to the African world in the magazine, but located in a quite indefinable and uncertain Southern Ocean, apparently more related to the Asian world. These nearly three hundred pages in total represent, however, a small part of the material published in the journal. Basically, this means that on average a report on the sub-Saharan Africa is published every 6th issue, while, in contrast, European destinations are present in almost all numbers, and even other tropical and subtropical distant destinations, such as Brazil or Southeast Asia, are portrayed with much more frequency.

The presence of sub-Saharan Africa in the pages of Blue Travel is restricted to the archipelagos of Cape Verde and Sao Tome and Principe, and some localized regions of Eastern and Southern Africa, which are either wildlife sanctuaries and nature parks (Kruger Park, Masai Mara and Serengeti, the Okavango Delta, Lake Malawi, Victoria Falls, Namib Desert), or idyllic tropical beaches (Bazaruto, Quirimbas islands and Zanzibar). Therefore, from the perspective of the *Blue Travel*, the many thousands and thousands of square miles that cover the waist of the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, the Gulf of Guinea and Central Africa, in short, most of the African continent, is simply a blank space where there is nothing which deserves attention, or it is understood as an impractical space for tourists, even if we talk about tourists who call themselves travelers. Thus, the geography of 'armchair tourism' of travel magazines does not differ much from 'real' tourism. The journalistic silence on all that immense part of Africa and its millions of people reproduces the exclusion of this

region from the large flows of international tourism. In 2009, the entire Sub-Saharan Africa received just over 3% of international tourists in the world, and almost 60% of this demand had been precisely registered in the countries of Eastern and Southern Africa that appear portrayed by Blue Travel – South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Kenya and Tanzania.

In the mental cartography of contemporary tourism, much of Africa is still the no-man-land in the maps of the 19th century. This darkness reaches out to an Africa imagined as a space of virgin wilderness, waiting to be explored. The Africa of the booming mega-cities of large millions inhabitants (Lagos, Kinshasa, Khartoum, Abidjan, Luanda, Johannesburg, etc.), of the slums and shanty towns, of the urban afropop rhythms (afrobeat, kapuka, kizomba, kuduro, makossa, etc.) and vibrant cosmopolitan life; the Africa of millionaire businesses, oil, diamond trafficking, plutocratic elites with private jets, mega-projects of public works as giant dams for hydroelectric production, football stadiums, or monumental cities built from nothing by megalomaniac dictators; the Africa of tragic droughts and endemic malnutrition, civil wars and refugee camps, epidemics, acid rain and depleted soils by intensive agriculture, or poisoned by decades of waste and untreated sewage; all these contradictory dimensions that also define the "authentic" Africa, are forgotten, overlooked, excluded from the pages of Blue Travel. The beauty and harmony invented by the tourist gaze require keeping silence about it. Therefore, the same aseptic vision of a 'Third World' without wars, without hunger or sickness, with smiling and hospitable indigenous as Lutz and Collins (1993) identified in the images of National Geographic Magazine, we too can find in the Blue Travel imagery.

The *Blue Travel*'s Africa is organized around two poles, on one hand the turquoise sea beaches, with palm trees bending over the white sand, and on the other hand the splendor of wildlife, the beautiful and menacing nature of the jungle and the savannah with its flora and fauna and safaris. In one case as in other, the marks on the landscape of the human presence are always very few. There are no cities, no traffic and no crowds in markets and even the cultivated fields are rarely present in the photo-

graphs that appear in *Blue Travel*. Basically, there are natural beauties, representations of the nature in its absolute pristine state, selective and isolated resorts, and beaches. Most photographs do not have people, and people who appear are regularly represented in pictures of some solitude – whether tourists, alone gazing at landscapes or romantically as a couple; if local people, close-up portraits or pictures of a few isolated groups with nothing around except the immense and beautiful décor of the natural landscape. Escapism and serenity dominate, raising myths of an Edenic harmony from the principle of the world. Both issues – the safari and wildlife, and the deserted beach paradise – meet the idea of a virgin space, untouched, primitive, and very softly transformed by human action, which appears to be dominant in the tourism representations of Africa.

Such similar findings came across Echtner and Prasad (2003) who analyzed more than two hundred tourist brochures relating to twelve destinations in the 'Third World'. For these authors, the insistence on the nature theme plays three "un-myths" which serve ultimately, by contrast, to enhance the modern, controlled and civilized West: the myths of "unchanged", "unrestrained" and "uncivilized" destinations.

The idea of an "unchanged" destination involves common clichés such as the visual emphasis on crafts and obsolete machines, in the ruins and decaying buildings, or pictures of local people dressed in tribal, outdated or poor mode. All this serves to confirm the idea of places left behind in time. The reports of the islands of Sao Tome and Principe, published in Travel Blue 25 (July 2005), are an excellent example of this. The report on Sao Tome opens with a photograph of five black boys, laughing, naked, hidden behind wooden planks that serve as their boards on a background of white sand and turquoise sea. The photo, by allusions to rafts, shipwrecks and tropical seas, suggests a small image of happy Man Friday boys left behind on a remote island by their white masters. The rest of the report is mixed with pictures of beaches, mountains covered with lush greenery, crumbling Portuguese colonial houses, abandoned gardens, drugstores such as those in Portugal fifty years ago and an announcement to the Sandeman Port, a classic of the Portuguese visual culture. The whole environment reflects the nostalgia of a tropical 'Portugueseness', passing the idea that the few flashes of modernity that Africa can benefit today are due to the European legacy, and that the way of progress was interrupted with decolonization. The report closes with an extraordinary picture of the departure lounge of the airport of Sao Tome. Five black men dressed in a formal and old-fashioned way, five white men dressed in an informal, modern way, two black women and two white women, wait without talking to each other in a small room. The architecture is Portuguese, vaguely Art Deco; nothing that you would expect to see in a modern airport you find there, there are no plastic nor metallic chairs but wood benches, there are no digital screens, there are no telephones or computers, no electric vehicles, nobody hurries; everything is old-fashioned; the idea of an Africa that was idly standing in time is enhanced by the antique clock on the wall; everything looks suspended in the past. The room is lit by a bright light from the outside which tapes a black man at the center of the image; this light comes out perhaps because, in the coded way as Europeans see the world, any light for Africa does not coming from the outside can be imagined...

The imagery associated with the romantic and adventurous 19th century explorers and to big game hunting is another strong feature of the image of Africa projected by Blue Travel. Sometimes the trips reported in the magazine, especially those involving more remote destinations, are sponsored by tourism companies. Therefore, part of the photographs published in the journal depicts the atmosphere of the resorts, with overviews of the social and rest areas of hotels, and details of the rooms decoration. The architecture and decoration of these resorts, namely those that sit on large natural reserves and parks, use emphatically rustic and colonial African ways (wooden decks, thatched roofs, mosquito nets, canvas tents, canvas folding chairs, leopard skins and zebra over the ground, oil lamps and torches, etc.). The environments, very cinematic, are those from the novels such as Hemingway's Green Hills of Africa or Karen Blixen's Out of Africa. One finds African employees impeccably uniformed and exquisitely set tables with china plates and cloth napkins, under the sky of the savannah. In the bungalows, the roofs are thatched, but do have electricity. This type of environment puts in

clear confrontation the European elegance and sophistication with the simplicity of the wild Africa, reproducing once more the classic colonial binary civilized/uncivilized.

Caton and Santos (2008) in a study of the photographic material produced by tourists traveling in the 'Third World' found that the binary master/servant and subject/object are two other basic structures of the representations. The same is trueif we consider the images of *Blue Travel*. Tourists are invariably white people and the hosts almost invariably black. Tourists are systematically photographed from behind, taking the view of the magazine reader, and hosts photographed posing in front of the lens, which means that some look and others are looked at. If in the same picture black and white people appear, then the white people are normally dressed casually and in a position of rest, and the black people are wearing uniforms or providing services. It is also not uncommon for tourists to appear in the images on a higher ground, on a deck at the top of the stairs, sitting on the hood of a jeep, and hosts in a lower plan.

5. Conclusion

The style cultivated by *Blue Travel*, the so called brand identity that claims differentiation from the rest of the Portuguese editorial panorama, corresponds to what we might call a sophisticated-relaxed style, cosmopolitan but also youthful and cool. This characteristic is passed to the magazine's pages in several ways, using a good toned language, polite but informal, a lively, cheerful and clean design, and finaly in the type of locations and environments that are portrayed. The photographs play a fundamental role in the construction of this identity. Tourists who appear portrayed are invariably young, natural looking but cared (long wavy hair, tanned skin), and wear casual and comfortable clothing (linen shirt or tunic or cotton scarves, shorts, flip-flops, etc.). The environments are usually portrayed as refined, serene and diaphanous. Most photographs are taken at dusk or very early in the morning, in order to benefit from a sweeter and softer light.

The *Blue Travel*'s Africa has to do with this environment. It responds to an eco-hippie-chic aesthetic that goes perfectly along with wooden bungalows on empty sandy beaches and big hunting camps in the solitude of the African savannah. Colonial nostalgia appears as a major ingredient of the *Blue Travel* imagery about Africa. Basic structures of the colonialist thinking are still active in the *Blue Travel* photos, encoding their production and reception. Through those images, aesthetically pleasing and seemingly harmless, old colonial myths are reproduced and perpetuated yet again, continuing their diffuse and dissimulated circulation in the post-colonial society.

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