Traditional Houses of the Paiwan in Taiwan: The Perspective of “House-based Societies” Reconsidered

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**Abstract** – The Paiwan, an Austronesian-speaking ethnic group, are one of sixteen Aborigines of Taiwan. This is an essay about the ethnography of traditional houses of the Paiwan. I will describe structures, functions and construction process of traditional houses, and discuss briefly the social process and cultural meanings of houses. I have argued in an earlier paper that the Paiwan is a ‘house-based society’, in which social and cultural reproduction are bound up with the reproduction of houses. The goal of marriage is the mission of reproduction, and the ideal conjugal relationship is the one in which the couple share a common devotion to the reproduction of the house they created. In this paper I reconsider this point of view, and I propose that the parent-child relationship and the siblingship in the family are equally important. Because the traditional houses of the Paiwan are made of stone slabs, the process of making houses is quite long. In contrast, marriage may be short-lived and fragile. Even when the marriage relationship is terminated due to divorce, the process of building and maintaining a house will not stop, and this motivation could be maintained by the parent-child relationship and the siblingship.

**Keywords:** Traditional houses, Paiwan, parent-child relationship, siblingship, house-based societies

I. INTRODUCTION

The Paiwan, an Austronesian-speaking ethnic group, are one of sixteen Aborigines of Taiwan. There are about 67,000 Paiwanese inhabiting 80 villages in southern Taiwan in 2021. They are quite different from the majority Taiwanese (about 23 million) in language, culture and physical traits. They share more similarities with the Austronesian people of Southeast Asia and Oceania. The history of the Paiwan is a part of the general history of Taiwanese Aborigines. With the increase of Han immigrants from southeast China since 17th century, they gradually became minorities and were forced to retreat to the mountains. They have engaged in trade relations with the Dutch who occupied Taiwan from 1624 to 1661. They have been governed by three political regimes: Chinese Tsin Dynasty (1662-1895), Japanese colonial government (1895-1945), and Taiwanese government (after World War II). The introduction of market economy and the commoditization of land and labor from the 1960s in aboriginal societies has intensified their dependence on global capitalism and cash economy (Huang, 1976). Their cultural difference was suppressed by the national policy of assimilation before 1980s. The Aboriginal movement which has arisen since 1983 made appeals to the restoration of land rights, multiculturalism, and self-determination. It has achieved a certain success. A national Committee of Aboriginal Affairs
was established in 1996, which is active in promoting research on Aboriginal traditions. Under these circumstances, discourses about traditions of Aborigines and the Paiwan are involved in a cultural politics, in which academic perspectives are constantly contested.

This is an essay about the ethnography of traditional houses of the Paiwan. The author will describe structures, functions and construction process of traditional houses, and discuss briefly the social process and cultural meanings of houses. The term ‘tradition’ follows a similar word in Paiwanese: ‘kakudan’, which refers to the custom passed from ancestors. Kakudan is a set of rules and taboos which should be followed by descendants as normative codes of practices. What The author will present in the following section is the normative aspect of house structure, function and construction process.

Before discussing the house, The author should point out that a salient feature in traditional Paiwanese society was the distinction of two social categories of hereditary rank, aristocrats and commoners (Chiang, 1983). Each house of an aristocrat attracted some houses of commoners as its clients or tenants. In a settlement, there might be more than one aristocratic houses, and the identities of their followers were multiple and flexible. A powerful aristocratic house would become a political, economic, and ritual center of some subordinate aristocratic houses and houses of commoners. It would be identified as a chief house (Matsuzawa, 1979).

II. TRADITIONAL HOUSES: STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS

The whole life of the Paiwan can’t be separated from their home. Home is the anchor of their deepest and most sincere feeling. There are three elements in a Paiwan home: house, house-name and the families. The house is not only an architecture with material basis, but also a foundation of ideas and values the Paiwan cherish. House-name is the common emblem of the people living under the same roof, and also the representation of their background and social status by birth. The families not only give lives to each other, but also live together as they grow up and share their experience of happiness and sadness. The social life of a home begins from a couple, and their relationship from falling in love to be married is one of the major dynamic force to promote the building and expansion of the house.

The built environment of an ethnic group can reflect the cultural impacts, particularly the design and the use of the house, which can convey the idea and the symbols about ‘home’ (Waterson, 1990; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995). The Paiwan call the house ‘Umaq’. Umaq is the dwelling place of their daily lives, and also the hub of kinship and marriage relationship. It also represents their relationship with ancestors and a variety of spiritual beings in supernatural word. In this sense, Umaq is exactly a micro-cosmos of the Paiwan. Therefore, Umaq is an excellent starting point for understanding the Paiwan culture.

The whole-scale and systematic study of the build environment of the Paiwan began from Japanese scholars during Japanese colonialism. The most important scholar is Chichiiwasuke Taro (Taro, 1960), who classified the Paiwan houses into six kinds according to the difference of regional groups. Actually there is an obvious overlap between the architectural difference of house forms and the distribution of regional groups. Roughly, we can find clear distinctions among North-Central Paiwan, Southern Paiwan, and Eastern Paiwan. The most interesting point is that people in North-Central Paiwan called the house as Umaq, and working hut in the field as Tapau; whereas in Southern Paiwan, people call Umaq as the tomb and call Tapau the house. Perhaps this is because Southern Paiwan was once upon a time the colonial area of North-Central Paiwan, so called the working hut for temporary use of people in North-Central Paiwan becomes the house for long habitation for people in Southern Paiwan, while the house of people in North-Central Paiwan becomes the tomb for burying ancestors for people in Southern Paiwan. Concerning architectural forms, the outlook of the house of Southern Paiwan imitates the barn of Northern Paiwan, and this probably implies that people in Southern Paiwan remember their original homeland through the practice of building house forms.

Because there are more studies about houses of North-Central Paiwan, the following description is based upon the literature of houses among North-Central Paiwan (Li, 1994). The following are the floor plan of two typical traditional houses of North-Central Paiwan: figure one (Fig. 1) is the floor plan of a commoner’s house, and figure two (Fig. 2) is that of a chiefly house. The name and use of every spatial part inside the house are as follows:
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a) *Asingtan* living room: the main part inside the house, where ordinary daily activities happen here. If there are too many members in the family, this is also the place of sleeping after laying a shell-flower mat. Here is the place with a taboo of forbidding drinking rice wine. The reason is that living room is the place of performing family rituals for ancestors, while rice wine is a foreign good brought in by the Han Chinese.

b) *Luvang* the tomb cave where corpses were placed: The Paiwan performed burials inside the house before Japanese colonial government disallowed. Normally in the beginning of building the house, workers would dig a tomb cave under the ground of living room. The were no stone slates in cave bottom, so that corpses would touch the earth directly. This was because the Paiwan believe through this practice their ancestors would bless their decedents and enhance the fertility of grains. Initially there was only one tomb cave, under the following two circumstances another tomb cave would be built: Firstly, after the first use, there were dead families within three or four years; it was not convenient to open the old tomb cave because the corpse was not rotten yet. Secondly, the space of the old tomb cave was not enough after long ages.

c) *Avuanvuan* hearth: the place for cooking and eating meals, with both functions of kitchen and dining room. The literal meaning of *Avuanvuan* is ‘the remains after burning fire’, and its meaning is extended to include the hearth and the space around. There is also the implication of ‘all members are together’.

d) Tala bedroom: a platform 20 centimeters higher than the living room, laid with stone slates. There were weapons hung on the walls of the bedroom of the male house head, in order to take them off quickly to protect the families when enemies attack suddenly.

e) *Pasalauz* the long stone slate in bedrooms for sitting and resting.

f) *Erengan* the bed of stone slate: Generally speaking, there is no strict limit or taboo in terms of who sleeps where. Normally adult members would sleep on *Erengan*, children slept on tala with a shell-flower mat. The elderly, who had no specific place to sleep, could sleep any place they liked. When there were guests coming to visit, the house head would sleep on tala and let guests to sleep on *Erengan*.

g) *Salan* the granary of millet: There were two forms of *Salan*. Firstly, *Salan* could be box-type, made of stone slates. Secondly, *Salan* could be an independent room designed for storing millet. The independent *Salan* usually was located in the back half of the main house, and the door of salan was next to the hearth.

h) *Tavi* the altar for offerings: Located on the back wall, this was a hole to give offerings to guardian gods of the house. Ritual leaves, pig bones, potteries and other sacred objects for performing rituals were put here. Usually each house had one *Tavi*, whereas houses belonged to chiefs, female shamans, and male priests might have two, three, or more.

i) *Puzayanzayan* the passage way in front of *Tavi*: Located in the back half of the house, *puzayanzayan* was separated from other space by a *Salan*. This was the major taboo space in the house. If a house member ate rice, rice wine or other rice products made from Han Chinese, he/she could not enter this place in that day; and the * taboo* was lifted after a sleep overnight. In this place there were no other objects apart from *Tavi*, and house members would not enter here in ordinary time. Only on the occasion of performing life cycle rituals or annual ceremonies, the house head and female shamans responsible for holding rituals would enter.

j) *Puatsangan* the toilet and pigpen: House members could go toilet here, by setting a foot step of stone slate to stand up. Under the foot step was the pigpen for raising one or two pigs. Usually pigs were driven outdoors during daytime, eating and urinating outside, and driven back for sleep in the evening.

k) *I pu lumamadan*: When a baby was born, this was the place for burying the placenta and umbilical cord of the new-born baby.

l) *Tsukes* the central post: This was the long stone slate for supporting the big beam of the house. Due to the difficulty of finding large and long stone slates, commoners would replace with shorter stone slates as the central post. As a result, commoners’ houses would be lower. On the contrary, aristocratic and chiefly houses were higher because they could mobilize more human resources to find larger stone slates for build their houses. Besides, there were carvings on the central posts of
aristocratic and chiefly houses. The majority of carving images were human figures and one-hundred-paced snakes, which represent ancestors, gods, and spiritual beings.

m) Palin door: Palin was made of wooden plunk. Two sides of Palin were different: the side facing outward was smooth and seamless, while the other side was rough, fixed by several horizontal bars. To open the door, one had to dismantle the entire door and put against the wall; and to close the door, one had to put the entire door back. Apart from practical function, Palin also represented a threshold of religious taboo. For example, rice, rice wine and rice product made from Han Chinese could not be brought into the house from Palin, instead they had to be brought in through windows.

n) Ezun window: During house building, the front wall would be retained a hole of appropriate size for making windows. Ezun were made of wooden plunk. There were two ways of opening windows. The first one was to dismantle the entire window, and the second one was to push and pull the window through a slide.

o) Litilitin courtyard chair: This was a long stone slate connected with the house, which could be a chair for visiting guests. This was also a place of social activities, where women often sat to do housework and chat with neighbors and friends.

p) Aluvelun courtyard: Aluvelun, made by laying stone slates, was the courtyard in front of the house. Aluvelun had multiple functions including socializing, production, and storage. Walking in the tribe, one often passed courtyards of other residents. Therefore, everyone would dress more formally and neatly when passing other houses’ courtyards and doing some greetings and chats. In addition, architectural forms of traditional houses were put more emphasis upon defensive functions, so it was poor lighting and dark inside the house. The courtyard was much brighter in contrast and many family activities would take place here, including women’s housework of weaving, embroidery, and men’s work of carving and repairing tools. On occasion of performing ceremonies and festivals, animal sacrifices would be killed, chopped, and cooked on the courtyard. Usually the courtyards of chiefly houses were larger and more spacious, which became the good places for children playing and the elderly chatting. Actually, the courtyards of chiefly houses were the major places for gathering tribal people, for feast and collective activities of dancing and celebrating.

Fig. 1. Traditional Paiwan Commoner’s House
III. CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

The following is a restoration of construction process of the traditional house among the Paiwan. The recovered data, reported in Li (1994), mainly based on interviews with people who lived in the old settlement before moving to the present village and have experience in building traditional houses. It is supplemented by a visit to the demolishing process of an improved traditional house. In general, the construction process is long and complicated, and we can find more than 30 stages in total. The author can just provide a brief account for the limit of essay length.

A. Building materials collection

The main building materials for house construction are stone and wood.

1) Stone

The stones needed for house construction are flakes and slabs. In the vocabulary of the Paiwan, the general term for stone is Qatsilai. The size of Qatsilai is classified as follows: the whole rock wall is called Rerapa, among the massive stones, the larger stones are called Diagu, the smaller stones are called Arulai, and the smallest stones such as pebbles are called Rag. Except for the difference in size, which gives different names, there is no difference in names for the differences in materials. However, if it becomes an element in the construction of a house, the stone at a specific location has a different name, and often when the material is taken, the function of the stone is determined on the spot.

In the Paiwan society, the size of the stone slabs used in the construction of houses often represents the status and financial resources of the family. Regarding the acquisition of large stone slabs, in addition to the large stones that naturally fall from the mountain wall to provide the base material, it is impossible to divide and transport them by only one person and a family. Therefore, those who use large slates must
mobilize more people because of their power and financial resources and using large slates have become a symbol of social status.

The acquisition of large stone slabs is limited by traditional tools and techniques, and cannot be taken directly from the mountain wall. Independent large stones must be obtained by slicing one by one. Independent large stones are not available everywhere. Usually after heavy rains, the river water soared and caused strong scouring of the mountain wall, causing the mountain wall to fall in blocks. After these large stones are divided into pieces, they are the best building materials. Therefore, a few days after the heavy rain in summer, the villagers will take time to search for the newly fallen stone in the quarry because it is easier to find the stone during this time. Furthermore, slate-making has naturally become a seasonal job.

The work of quarrying and transporting slabs from the quarry back to the tribe is customarily performed by men. Since there have been no women participating in this work for a long time, it is not clear whether there are any taboos in areas such as women banning quarrying. However, women can also perform short-distance slab handling tasks, such as the delivery of stone slabs in the construction of houses.

2) Wood

In Paiwan houses, timber is used as building material for beams, roof planks, doors, and windows. As wood is easier to obtain, and wood is more prone to rot, unlike slate that can be stored for a long time, usually villagers go to the mountains to obtain wood materials when they are necessary.

Timber is collectively called Kasiu, and usually two or three men go up the mountain together to find it. The primary consideration when drawing materials is that the tree must be Saezu. The so-called Saezu means: "straight, big wood." The two most commonly used woods are Taren and Deves. Taren is a conifer, which is generally used to make roof planks and can also be used to make girders. Deves is the hardest and strongest wood. It is not easy to decay in rain or moisture. It is most suitable for girders.

After finding the right wood, if the manpower is enough to carry it down the mountain, it can be chopped down and transported back. If the manpower is insufficient, one can engrave a mark on the tree with a knife, which means that the tree is already under someone, and others will not be felled if they see this mark. After making the mark, one can go home and ask his family for help.

The work of picking wood and moving wood up the mountain is different from the work of picking and moving stone in terms of human resources. When picking and moving wood, if there is not enough manpower, one can go home and ask for help. In addition to men, women in the family will also go up the mountain to help. It is unlike quarrying which excludes women from participating. Since most of the working population at home can already afford the work of picking and transporting timber, they rarely ask people other than their family to help.

B. Location

The land of the Paiwan tribe belongs to the chief, and commoners have no land ownership. Therefore, when commoners need land to build a new house, they must obtain the consent of the landlord’s chief after selecting a site to build a new house.

The choice of location is deeply influenced by the concept of hierarchy. Several important chiefs in the tribe live in the central part of the settlement. Therefore, if a younger sibling of the chief’s family needs to build a new house, usually the chief will find a place closer to his/her home for the younger sibling to live in. Therefore, when villagers choose to build a site, they usually follow their own status.

In addition to being limited by the concept of hierarchy, after a long period of operation, there is not much land available for construction within the tribe. Therefore, if someone wants to build a new house, it may be restricted by the environment and he/she must choose the periphery of the tribe. When selecting the site, there is no specific orientation except along the contour line and the back of the mountain and the valley. The topography is preferably flat.

C. Land preparation

After the construction site is selected and the building materials are also collected, one can enter the on-site construction steps. The first step is to prepare the ground. The main work of land preparation is to remove plants and debris from the base and level the land.
D. The ritual of building a house

Before building a house, the owner must first perform ritual offering. The house owner himself/herself is the central performer, and there is no need to invite female shamans or male priests. The objects of the offering are the ancestor spirits, and the main purpose of the offering is to ask for the help of the ancestor spirits so that the work of building the house can go smoothly. According to the house owner’s wishes and abilities, the preparation of the offering does not necessarily require the killing of pigs. The common cultivated grains, such as sweet potatoes and taro, can be used.

E. Masonry

F. Building vertical side wall and back wall

G. Building standing wall

H. Making Tavi and wall cabinets

I. Erecting the central post (Tsukes)

J. Setting upper beam

K. Carving images on the eave

L. Setting eave

The eaves of commoners’ house cannot be carved, and only chiefly houses or houses receiving the consent from chiefs can be carved. The engraved image content includes human figure, human head pattern, hundred-step snake pattern, and hunting situation. The eaves of the paramount chief of some tribes are carved with a tall piece of wood, which the villagers describe as “long as a train.”

M. Digging a grave (Luvang)

The number of tombs in the houses of the Paiwan is not always the same, and their locations are also different, but most of them are in Asintan. When a new house is built, a tomb will be built first, and when it is not enough, then another tomb will be built at that time.

When building a new house, the steps of digging the tomb must be earlier than laying the roof planks, because once the roof planks are laid, the indoor light will obviously become darker, which is not conducive to the work of digging the tomb. When digging a tomb, a pit is dug out at a predetermined location. The width allows two people to sit side by side, and the two sit with their knees bent, which means that a total of 4 people can sit, about 3 feet by 3 feet to 4 feet by 4 Feet; height is about a person standing upright, about 6-7 feet.

After the pit was dug, slate was laid on four sides, but the bottom of the pit was not laid with slate, so that the corpse was in contact with the soil. The opening of the pit will be covered with one or two stone slabs. On the one hand, it is not easy to see the location of the tomb from the appearance, and it can also isolate the smell.
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N. Laying roof planks
O. Chiseled sky window
P. Laying roof slabs
Q. Put the roof pressure stone
R. Standing front wall
S. Making windows (Ezun)
T. Making a door (Palin)
U. Laying the floor
V. Making the threshold
W. Building a stove (Avuanvuan)
X. Making sets of box-type barns (Salan)
Y. Building a pig house and toilet (Puatsangan)
Z. Completion Ceremony

One of the main features of the traditional houses of the Paiwan people is the use of slate as the main building material. Because the slate is not easy to obtain and the amount required is large, the collection time must be lengthened. In addition, the construction of the house is done by the owner and the strength of relatives and friends, rather than by professional craftsmen. Therefore, the construction time must be matched with the production season, and the slack period of the farming period should be used to build the house. Therefore, it is impossible to work around the clock by specialized craftsmen within a certain period of time like the Han people.

IV. SOCIAL LIFE OF HOUSES

The process of building, expanding, repairing and discarding the houses of the Paiwan people is closely related to the life and growth of the people who live in them. Therefore, Paiwan people have deep emotions about their houses, and they see their houses as partners who accompany them throughout their lives. Along the life stages of birth, aging, illness and death of the inhabitants, their houses will be changed in different states.

The motivation to build the house is closely linked to the marriage process of a newlywed couple. Due to the implementation of the first-born succession system, the first-born heir will stay in the original family and inherit the house, while the younger brothers and sisters who are not the first-born heir will be married. If the siblings are married to the first-born heir of another family, there is no need to build a new house. Only when they encounter a marriage between a non-first-born heir and a non-first-born heir, a new house must be built. Since men and women can get married when they are about 17 or 8 years old, it usually takes only a few years from adulthood to marriage. It is quite difficult for them to build a house on their own. Therefore, in the process of building a new house for non-first-born couples, both the parents and first-born heirs of both newlyweds will provide assistance.

Building a new house is a long process, often requiring the efforts of two generations. Because the slate has good durability, generally couples store slates at any time after marriage. On the one hand, there are materials to replace when the house is renovated, and on the other hand, when the children need to build a new house when they are married, they can provide the materials they need. After the heirs reach adulthood, they must participate in or take over the work of reserving slates. Therefore, although the first-born heir does not have the need to build a house, he/she needs to collect building materials for a long time and provide manpower to help his/her younger siblings to build a new house. After entering the actual construction process of the house, the owners of the new house (non-first-born
heir and his/her spouse) are often unable to master the method of building a house because of their young age and little experience. Most of the people who actually dominate the construction process are their parents or first-born heirs. After the house is built, when the first child is born, there will be a first-born heir in the family, and the family property will be inherited by him/her. In this way, the continuation of the family is also the continuation of the house, and the reproduction of the family is also the reproduction of the house.

After long-term use of the house, if the wood rots, the beams are bent and deformed, the stones and slabs are displaced or collapsed, they will be renovated by replacing the old materials with new materials. No bonding material is used between the various components of the traditional house, so it is quite convenient to disassemble and replace. Since it is easier to rebuild a house than to build a new house, and it is not easy to find a new place, most people will not abandon the house at will, but will try to renovate it over and over again. Apart from the fact that the house is abandoned because the original house is too small for use, it may also be relocated due to external influences, such as the order of chiefs or foreign governments. Another important reason is the death of pregnant women in the house due to dystocia. Since Paiwan people believe that death in dystocia is a bad death, they are afraid that it will bring bad luck of no offspring. Therefore, if a woman dies in a dystocia at home, the dying pregnant woman will be buried hastily, and the family will quickly move away from the house. All the building materials and items that can be used in the house are left, because these things have been contaminated with bad luck, and if anyone takes them away, he/she will encounter misfortune. As for the house, it is left abandoned and has become a taboo place in the tribe, which can no longer be used to build houses or grow crops. The family name of the house has also become taboo and is no longer used.

V. RECONSIDERING THE PERSPECTIVE OF “HOUSE-BASED SOCIETIES”

In a paper published earlier (Tan, 2001), the author cited the viewpoint of house-based society to discuss the traditional houses of the Paiwan. Influenced by Levi-Strauss (1983) and Bloch (1995), the author proposed that marriage and conjugal relations are the main driving force for the construction, expansion and maintenance of houses. But now rethinking this point of view, the author think the parent-child relationship and the siblingship in the family are equally important. Because the traditional houses of the Paiwan are made of stone slabs, the process of making houses is quite long. In contrast, marriage may be short-lived and fragile. Even when the marriage relationship is terminated due to divorce, the process of building and maintaining a house will not stop, and this motivation could be maintained by the parent-child relationship and the siblingship.

Therefore, after the birth of the first-born heir, the ownership of the house and property was transferred to the first-born heir. This also shows that inheritance is a matter of great importance to the Paiwan, and it also closely connects the family house and the first-born heir. In this way, even if the relationship between the husband and wife ends, because the ownership of the house already belongs to the first-born heir, the change in the marriage relationship will not affect the ownership of the house, and the development and maintenance of the house can continue.

We must also consider the relationship between brothers and sisters, because brothers and sisters were born in the same house, so there is a strong connection between siblings. The Paiwan have a traditional ideal that they should return to their original house for burial after death, that is, go back to the house where they were born to bury, so that brothers and sisters who were born in the same house will be buried together (Hsu, 1994). Paiwan couples have to return to their original houses for burial after death. This also means that if the marriage relationship is terminated due to death, the couple will separate.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the author has introduced the traditional houses of the Paiwan people. The author described briefly the structure, function, and construction process of traditional houses. From these ethnographic materials, we can see that the spatial structure of the house reflects the hierarchy of the Paiwan. For example, the house of the chief will have more space than the commoners, and there will be carved patterns on the center pillars and eaves of chiefly houses. We can also notice that in the process of building a house, commoners need to get permission from the chief to have land to build a house. On
the other hand, we also found that the distinction between gender is not obvious in the structure of the house. Unlike many Southeast Asian houses, the space inside the house is strictly divided into a space for men and spaces for women. This may be because the Paiwan’s inheritance system is not limited to male or female heir. As long as they are the first-born children, regardless of gender, they can become heirs. In addition, the author also briefly discussed the connection between the idea of house-based society and the traditional houses of the Paiwan people. Regarding the discussion of house-based society, some authors emphasize the importance of the relationship between husband and wife, and some emphasize the importance of the relationship between brothers and sisters. But the author thinks that taking the Paiwan as an example, whether it is the relationship between husband and wife, parent-child relationship, or sibling relationship, all have a close and inseparable relationship with the construction, development, and maintenance of homes. Therefore, future researches must comprehensively explore the multiple relationships and the relevance of house architecture in order to obtain a more holistic view.

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