

# 'Flagging the Homeland(s) Daily': The role of food in the construction and reproduction of national identities amongst migrants.

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*Extended Essay, MA Anthropology of Food*

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When meeting someone for the first time it is customary to ask: where are you from? It seems quite natural to respond with the name of a country. But this hasn't always been the case. Given the extent to which politicians and the mass-media call upon and, in so doing, reproduce the notion that we share a national history which stretches back to "the misty dawns of time" (Billig, 1995: 70), the average citizen may be surprised to learn that the nation, as we know it, is a relatively recent phenomenon and that the carving of the world into nation-states is far from 'natural'.

"The rise of the nation-state brought about a transformation in the ways that people thought about themselves and about community" (Billig, 1995: 61). People started to think of themselves in terms of their nationality, as well as other forms of identity, such as kinship, religion, ethnicity, gender and class. Michael Billig (1995: 37) argues that in the established nation-state people rarely question their national identity. But for migrants, who may feel they belong to more than one nation, it is different. In the words of Parvathi Raman:

"We learned to create more complex stories of belonging, and in the process we also changed the way we thought about ourselves. [...] We no longer had a straightforward narrative of "here" and "there." For us, home became more liquid, a shifting reservoir of our hopes, desires and dreams" (2011: 168-169).

Since it forces the individual to think more consciously about their identity(ies), migration provides an interesting context in which to consider the way that national identity is constructed and reproduced. Raman (2011), like a number of other authors who will be discussed in this essay, highlights the significance of food in this process.

In the first section of this essay, I position the paper within the discourse on nationalism. This leads into a more in-depth discussion of Michael Billig's (1995) book, *Banal Nationalism*, in which he argues that, far from being an extremist ideology, nationalism is so entrenched in our consciousness that it becomes a common sense assumption and is, thus, naturalised. This is reinforced by constant reminders, or a routine 'flagging', of ideas of nationhood in our everyday lives. The title of this essay takes its name from chapter five of Billig's book, 'Flagging the Homeland Daily', with a slight modification: homeland is pluralised to signify the view that migrants often identify with dual or even multiple nationalities.

Billig's (1995) thesis of banal nationalism is used as the starting point to explore the role that food plays in the construction and reproduction of national identity. Billig uses the metaphor of 'waved' flags versus 'unwaved' flags to signify conscious reminders of nationhood versus routine reminders. I argue that this can be loosely elaborated to encompass national foods or elements of a national cuisine (waved flag), in contrast with the everyday food and foodways<sup>1</sup> of migrants (unwaved flag).

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<sup>1</sup> I use 'foodways' to refer to habits and practices relating to the production and consumption of food.

However, this is not to imply that migrants do not express a certain amount of agency in their decisions about everyday foods. The ethnographic case studies I have consulted in the literature on food and migration suggest that when reflecting on their everyday foodways, migrants do draw connections between food and identity. In addition, I argue that their everyday foodways tend to be influenced by the country of origin as well as the new context and, thus, contribute to the construction and reproduction of national identities amongst migrants. This is mirrored in the hybridisation of their everyday food habits.

After looking at these ethnographic case studies in more detail, I consider why national identity is so important and, in particular, why food plays such a significant role in its construction and reproduction by migrants. Lastly, I follow Billig's (1995: 125-127) lead, delving momentarily into some personal reflection, before drawing some final conclusions.

## Theorising nationalism

The theories of three authors, in particular, have influenced this paper. That is, Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]), Anthony Smith (1991) and, above all, Michael Billig (1995)<sup>2</sup>. One thing that all three agree on is that nationalism is a modern phenomenon. However, when it comes to defining the nation, these authors have different ideas. Anderson provides the following definition of the nation: "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (2006 [1983]: 6). Implicit in this definition is the idea that the nation, like nationalism, is also a modern phenomenon. Billig (1995: 16, 19) agrees with Anderson on this front arguing that there would be no nationalism without nation-states and, therefore, that both are products of a specific historical period (ours).

On the other hand, Smith defines the nation as "a named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate common laws and shared customs" (2005 cited in Özkirimli 2010: 155). This is a more inclusive definition, which Smith has amended overtime to reflect his thesis that earlier forms of cultural community, namely ethnic ties, provided the building blocks of the modern nation (Guibernau, 2004: 127-129; Özkirimli, 2010: 148-155). It is beyond the scope of this essay to enter into the debate about the origin of nations<sup>3</sup>, but what can be taken from Smith's definition, which is absent in Anderson's and Billig's conceptions, is the notion of self-definition. This aspect is important with relation to the migration literature, since it implies a certain amount of agency on the part of individuals.

Nonetheless, Smith has been criticised for placing too much emphasis on a potential link between pre-modern ethnic traditions and modern nations, with Craig Calhoun highlighting

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<sup>2</sup> Undertaking a full review of the vast literature on nationalism was beyond the scope of this essay. I rely, therefore, on Umut Özkirimli (2010) for an overview of all the key texts on nationalism and for his synthesis of the major criticisms levelled at each of them.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the literature on nationalism concerns itself with the question of when nations arose and what historical processes led to their formation (Özkirimli, 2010: 199).

that traditions are not simply inherited, but must be reproduced (1997 cited in Özkrimli, 2010: 161).

### **Banal Nationalism**

The notion of reproduction is central to Billig's (1995) thesis of *Banal Nationalism*. The book springs from his concern that much of the literature on nationalism aligns it with extremists and associates it with the dangerous or exotic emotions of 'others' (1995: 5, 37-38, 43-46). Billig argues that such a view overlooks the everyday nationalism of established nation-states. His central argument is that we are constantly reminded of nationhood by its routine 'flagging' in daily life. He introduces the term 'banal nationalism' "to cover the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced" (1995: 6).

Throughout the book, Billig (1995) continually returns to the image of an unwaved flag hanging on a public building. This is contrasted with 'special occasions', such as national celebrations or crises, when flags are consciously waved with patriotic zeal (1995: 5). This image is more than just a metaphor for banal nationalism; flags are everywhere and, although we pay the unwaved flags no special attention, they are constant reminders, albeit unconsciously registered, of our nationhood (1995: 40-43). However, this alone is not enough. In chapter five, Billig argues that we are daily, discursively reminded of our national identity in the deictic language employed by politicians and national newspapers, which conjures a national 'we' that positions 'us' in 'the' homeland. This is also reflected in the structuring of newspapers into national or 'home' and international sections.

As outlined in the introduction, I argue that Billig's (1995: 8) metonymic image of the 'waved flag' versus the 'unwaved flag' can be loosely applied to food in the context of migration; the waved flag representing foods consciously acknowledged and used as part of a national cuisine, in contrast with the unwaved flag, which represents the everyday food and foodways of migrants.

### **Food in the construction and reproduction of national identities**

In some ways this distinction reflects that made by Richard Wilk (2006), following Jack Goody, between cooking and cuisine. Wilk uses 'cuisine' to refer to the overt, public and sometimes performative aspects of foodways, whereas he uses 'cooking' to signify the private, 'taken-for-granted', "unconscious and unreflective form of preparing and eating food" (2006: 106)<sup>4</sup>. This roughly approximates to the waved and unwaved flag. However, looking at other ethnographic studies from the food and migration literature, it becomes apparent that migrants do make some conscious decisions with regards to their everyday foodways, particularly when reflecting upon them. Everyday foodways cannot be 'taken-for-granted' in the same way as they might have been before they were immersed in the new culture. In a later paper, Wilk accounts for this, arguing that migrants appear to "have

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Wilk is critical of authors who suggest that there is a clear distinction between the public and private spheres, emphasising that boundaries are always blurred (2002: 69-70; 2006: 106-107)

acquired the distance necessary to view goods as tools to be manipulated rather than signs to be accepted or rejected” (2008 cited in Rosales 2012: 252).

Like nationalism and the nation, ‘national cuisine’ is a contested concept. Indeed, some, including Wilk (2002, 2006, also see Mintz, 1996: 97), are cynical of its very existence. It is beyond the scope of this essay to enter into this debate but, suffice it to say, that migrants in the ethnographic studies I will be examining do make reference to foods that they perceive to be national or part of a national cuisine, and, thus, this does play a role in the construction and reproduction of their national identities in diaspora.

### ‘Waved flags’

Monica Janowski (2012a), Efrat Ben-Ze’ev (2004), Parvathi Raman (2011) and Marta Vilar Rosales (2012) all demonstrate how migrants use national foods on special occasions as a conscious marker of their migrant identity. Billig (1995: 45-46) suggests that such special, ‘flag-waving’ occasions can range from national celebrations, such as Thanksgiving, to crises, such as warfare. These ethnographic studies present examples of both extremes.

Janowski (2012a) focuses on seven Polish women who were deported from the eastern borderlands of Poland by the Soviet Union in 1940. They each had different journeys, via Russia, the Middle-East and Africa, before ending up in London in the late 1940s (2012a: 327). Janowski shows how Polish food and foodways played an integral role in maintaining a sense of ‘Polishness’. Family was an important part of Polish identity, but even more so in the context of deportation. The family meal and the structure of the meal itself were central to Polish foodways (2012a: 332-333). At certain points along their various journeys to London it was not possible to maintain this structure due to families being torn apart and lack of access to food; “Family breakdown was seen as mirrored in the breakdown of food habits” (2012a: 334).

In the African camps, where food was more readily available, there was “great emphasis on maintaining ‘Polishness’ [...] and this was expressed through the preparation of foods seen as iconic of ‘Polishness’ for communal meals on special occasions” (Janowski, 2012a: 339). One such occasion was Polish national day, when they made *pierogi* (dumplings). Interestingly, these are considered simple, everyday fare in Poland, but in Africa, where flour was scarce, they were only made on special occasions. This meant they gained increased significance, coming to symbolise “the kinship of all Poles, as one big family” (2012a: 340).

The significance of food in exile and as part of ceremonial occasions is also exemplified by Ben-Ze’ev (2004) who discusses how Palestinian refugees continued to make return visits to their former villages. An important part of these visits was the gathering of plants, including herbs and fruit. Both the visit and the act of gathering plants were seen as ritual occasions and, for the Palestinians too, sharing the foods with family and friends was particularly important (2004: 143, 145). These visits were often met with hostility from the Israelis now

residing in these places and in one case led to a dispute over the proprietary of the olives being picked. This was especially significant given the status of the olive tree as a national symbol and olives as “the most treasured fruit for Palestinians” (2004: 144). Thus, Ben-Ze’ev introduces another example of food as ‘waved flag’; the political act.

Raman (2011), discussing her own experience as a migrant of Indian origin in the UK, also highlights the potential for using food to make a political statement in the context of migration. She explains how the rediscovery of her ‘Indianness’ was a conscious, political act; “a defiant challenge to late 1960s Britain and its shifting relationship with its colonial others” (2011: 179). As part of this rediscovery, Raman taught herself to cook Indian food; “My new conscious Indianness was painfully acquired, and learning to cook Indian food conjured up a vital part of who I thought I should be” (2011: 179). That Raman made a ‘conscious’ decision to mark out her Indianness in various ways, including cooking, supports the idea that migrants can and do use food as a tool to be manipulated. The 1960s also saw “the expanding horizons of London” (2011: 173), including culinary tastes. In this context her family felt comfortable hosting extravagant dinner parties attended by a ‘cosmopolitan mix’ of guests (2011: 173) – an overt display of identity.

The centrality of national cuisine to festive occasions is also a theme picked up by Rosales (2012) in her article focusing on five Goan families who migrated first to Mozambique and later to Portugal; “independently of the cultural background of the guests present [...] formal and family celebratory meals consisted exclusively of Goan food” (2012: 245). Here, too, the attendance of guests from other backgrounds is mentioned, once again, waving the identity flag. However, it should be noted that, in both examples, these external-facing events only occurred when the migrants were in places that were open to their foreign identity. For Raman (2011: 173) that place was the ‘swinging sixties’ in London. For Rosales’ Goan migrants, this only occurred in Portugal, where, in the words of one respondent, “more people are now proud to be Goan” (2012: 249). In contrast, their inferior status in the colonial context of Mozambique meant that Goan food was confined to the private sphere (2012: 253).

### **‘Unwaved flags’**

Billig argues that we are surrounded by constant reminders of nationhood – the unwaved flags on public buildings, the news and army uniforms, as well as bank notes and coins (1995: 40-43). We are also faced with many food choices, and the choices we make can say a lot about our identity, particularly in the case of migrants. The word ‘choice’ is important as we turn to examples of the ‘unwaved flag’. In Billig’s rendering, the routine, banal flagging of national identity tends to be unconsciously registered and reproduced. What is different in my application of this concept to migrant foodways is the extent to which individual agency plays a role. The ethnographic studies I have looked at suggest that migrants do make conscious choices between foods from ‘back home’ and the new context, and that this plays a significant role in the construction and reproduction of their national identities. In many

cases, migrants blend elements from both cultures in their foodways and I argue that this hybridisation reflects the multiple identities of migrants.

Raman (2011: 170) discusses how her mother had to learn to cook from scratch upon arrival in the UK, having left behind the luxuries of servants in Madras. A conscious decision was made not to cook English food, but “Some western foods inevitably entered our culinary lives” (2011: 171). In addition, her mother’s cooking had to rely both on the ingredients available in London and on knowledge gained from other Indian migrants living in London. While her mother mostly cooked South Indian cuisine, reflecting their Tamil origins, she was also influenced by other regional cuisines (2011: 173). The importance of modernising is also a recurring theme in Raman’s article; “Experimental ingredients became the order of the day. We became truly modern, doing away with the grinding, fermenting and sifting which defined much cooking at home” (2011: 172).

There are several parallels here with the Goan migrants in Rosales’ (2012) study. They, too, came from a privileged background. Rosales explains how their food habits changed from the colonial context in Mozambique, where they had servants to cook for them, to Portugal, where they did not (2012: 250). They adapted to these pressures in a different way. In the words of one woman, “Goan food is very difficult to prepare and very time consuming” (Rosales, 2012: 250) and so it was prepared less frequently in Portugal, mainly for special occasions, as outlined earlier. Interestingly, when these individuals talked about Portuguese food with relation to the Mozambican context they were quite disparaging (2012: 247). However, nothing is said (at least not by Rosales) of the food consumed on an everyday basis in the Portuguese context. Presumably, this must have been profoundly influenced by Portuguese foods if Goan cuisine was reserved for special occasions.

The impact of the (un)availability of ingredients on migrants’ foodways was perhaps most keenly felt in the case of the Polish women in Janowski’s (2012a) case study. Like Raman (2011) and her mother, they often had to substitute traditional ingredients for those available. In addition, there were points on their ‘odyssey’ to London when there wasn’t just a lack of ingredients, there was no food at all. “Due to the shortage of food, the women’s memories from Russia are almost entirely focused on food” (2012a: 333). Bread – “the symbol of home” (2012a: 335) – was a particularly important food in these women’s stories and gained a special significance in exile, when it also came to symbolise life. One woman said she “dreamt about bread every night” (2012a: 333) when she was in the Soviet Union.

The quality of the bread, when it was available, was also a recurring theme, and one which is paralleled in Linda Coakley’s (2012) study of Polish migrants in Cork. She explains that “bread has long been a symbol in the Polish imagination for fulfilling basic needs” (2012: 313). Although they had access to it in Ireland, many of her respondents thought it was of inferior quality. Indeed one person said that she and her husband had cried when they smelt fresh bread on a return visit to Poland (2012: 314). “For many Poles bread symbolized their sense of up-rootedness in Ireland” (2012: 313).

It is important to note that, whether conscious or unconscious, the construction and reproduction of national identities amongst migrants is never a simple or easy process. Food is often used as both a marker of difference and as a way to assimilate with the new culture. Coakley argues that “migrant foodways are not solely a question of finding ontological security through familiar foodways; migrants can also be re-grounded, making positive connections with place through the discovery of new tastes” (2012: 309). Some of the migrants Coakley studied showed a greater openness to change than is evidenced in Janowski’s (2012a) case study, which may reflect the fact that her respondents chose to migrate from Poland, rather than having been deported. That said, in both cases the authors highlight that a willingness to adapt to the new circumstances is more evident among the younger generation (Coakley, 2012: 318-321; Janowski, 2012a: 344-345)

These case studies exemplify how migrants are often caught in a complex dichotomy between ‘back home’ and the new home, between one culture and another. In several of the case studies (Raman, 2011; Janowski, 2012a) migrants express a sense of not belonging to any place. In Raman’s words, “Never again would I simply be an “Indian.” And none of us were ever to feel “at home” again in any straightforward way” (2011: 68). In other cases (Coakley, 2012; Rosales, 2012), the situation is viewed more positively as they draw on the cultural repertoires of their multiple national identities to create their own ‘syncretic identity’, to borrow Janowski’s term (2012b: 176). This is reflected in the hybridisation of foodways, as “Migrants continuously engage with the new foodscape” (Coakley, 2012: 309).

### **Why national identity? Why food?**

This discussion may lead us to ask two further questions. Firstly, why is national identity so important? Secondly, why is food such an important tool in the construction and reproduction of national identity?

Anderson (2006 [1983]), Smith (1991) and Billig (1995) are all interested in the first issue, each raising the question of why people are willing to sacrifice their lives for their nation. Even if the nation is ‘imagined’, nationalism is a powerful ideology and they all agree that the modern nation-state is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Anderson proposes that the ‘imagined community’ of the nation amounts to “a deep, horizontal comradeship” and that “it is this fraternity that make it possible [...] for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly die for such limited imaginings” (2006 [1983]: 7). Like Smith, he believes these bonds arise from the cultural roots of nations, though they disagree on what those are<sup>5</sup>. Billig (1995: 24, 70) agrees that national identity is linked to an imagined sense of community, but he places less emphasis on how these feelings were originally cultivated, and more on how they are reproduced. He suggests that it is more important to “look for the reasons why people in the contemporary world do not forget their nationality” (1995: 7). I have argued that food is one such reason.

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<sup>5</sup> As per the introduction, a discussion of their various theories on the origins of nations is beyond the scope of this essay.



With regards to the second question, the authors of the ethnographic case studies I have discussed put forward some ideas. Rosales highlights that “Food-related practices hold a remarkably expressive potential, arguably greater than all other daily practices” (2012: 252). Further, she suggests that because food is highly mobile, that is, easily carried from place to place, it can provide a useful tool for individuals, who are able to manipulate it “in the production and materialization of a coherent and original project of being and belonging” (2012: 252).

The links between food and memory are a central theme in all the ethnographic examples I have reviewed. In this area they tend to draw on and build upon Sutton’s (2001) book, *Remembrance of Repasts*. In chapter three, Sutton argues that the sensory experience of food endows it with a particular power in the evocation of memories and, thus, that it is particularly significant in the migrant context since the sensory plays a role “in reconnecting and remembering experiences and places one has left behind” (2001: 74). Coakley (2012) also emphasises the sensory nature of food, stressing its affect on emotions. She suggests that because eating is a visceral and corporeal experience, it has the power to stir feelings and emotions in the body (2012: 308). This, too, is evident in all the ethnographic examples I have reviewed and ties in with some of the more recent literature on nationalism. Ronald Grigor Suny highlights how emotion underlies processes of identification; “They are stimulus to action; they are fundamental to self-identification, to thinking about who we are and who the “other” is; they are involved in the social bonds that make groups, even whole societies, or nations, possible” (2006 cited in Özkrimli 2010: 202).

Governments also appear to recognise the significance of food to processes of identification. Igor Cusack (2000) and Steffan Igor Ayora-Diaz (2010) argue that the state plays a leading role in constructing national cuisines in support of their nationalist agenda. Their papers support Eric Hobsbawm’s proposition that “ ‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (1983: 1). Ayora-Diaz and Cusack emphasise the exclusionary power of such processes, for example, as elements of regional or ethnic cuisines are selected and modified as befits the nation-building project. Jeffery Pilcher (1998) agrees that these processes take place, but he also acknowledges the role of the ordinary citizen: “Cuisine illuminates the complex interplay between regional and national identities, as well as providing a view from below of how women and the lower classes have influenced nationalist ideology” (1998: 2). The literature that I have reviewed on food and migration tends to support Pilcher’s point of view, that is, that individual agency also plays a role.

## **Towards reflexivity: confessions and conclusions**

It is increasingly accepted that all social science, by its very nature, contains a certain amount of reflexivity (Janowski, 2012: 329). Billig agrees; the whole premise of his book arises from his apprehension about the lack of reflexivity amongst nationalist theorists who, like most people, struggle to rid themselves of the common sense assumptions that come

from living in the world of nations (1995: 5, 37, 43-44). He seeks to redress this in a 'concluding confession' at the end of chapter five. Here, he admits that he is more interested in the 'home' news than the world news and that when he reads the sports pages he feels pleasure when a fellow citizen wins. "Why I do not know" (1995: 125).

Following in Billig's (1995) footsteps, this final section includes some reflection on personal experience:

*Like Billig, I am also more interested in 'home' news than international news. Unlike Billig, this is confused by the fact that I have two homes. When asked where I am from I'm not sure what to answer. I feel both English and Australian, but at times I feel more one than the other.*

*I was born in England, but grew up in Sydney, where the colonial history is evident in a cosmopolitan, multicultural foodscape. When I first moved back to Cambridge, I was disappointed with the lack of variety and often poor quality of food. I love to cook, but even getting hold of the right ingredients was not easy there. Most of all I missed the pungency and vibrance of good South-East Asian cuisine and the freshness and diversity of seafood available. I also bemoaned the expense of good food in the UK; there was no doubt that it existed, but it was well outside my budget.*

*Ten years on I live in London, a city that seems to have woken up to the possibilities of good food, variety and, most importantly, accessibility. I still have my Mum bring my favourite chilli sauce over when she visits from Australia but, for the most part, I can find the ingredients I need to make the foods that remind me of (my other) home and, in some cases, I can find those foods in restaurants.*

*I remember what it felt like to long for certain foods and I still feel a thrill when I encounter an ingredient or dish that I haven't seen here before; a welcome reminder of my childhood in the sun.*

Through reading widely and supporting my conclusions with those of others, I have tried my best not to let my personal experience cloud my argument, but I admit here that my interest in this subject stems from the parallels between my own experiences and the stories of the migrants in the ethnographic literature. That I identify with their stories means that I can never remove myself entirely.

## **Conclusion**

Billig (1995) dedicates most of his book to exposing and examining examples of how nationalism is reproduced in everyday life. This essay has looked at one more. Using examples from the literature on food and migration, I have argued that migrants draw on elements of national cuisines as overt, public markers of their identities. In the process, I have shown how migrants who feel comfortable and proud of their migrant status use food in the public sphere to signify their identification as 'other'. In addition, I have asserted that

it is in their everyday foodways that migrants display the syncretic, hybrid nature of their identities, which blend elements from 'back home' and the new home.

One of the aims of Billig's (1995) book is to remind us – that is, citizens of the established nation-state, but also social scientists looking at these issues – of the common sense assumptions which routinely reduce nationalism to an extremist phenomenon and which ignore everyday nationalism. "If a narrowing of the concept of 'nationalism' has led to the forgetting of banal nationalism, then it is hoped that a widening of the concept will lead to a remembering" (1995: 39). The examples I have drawn on show that the context of migration, in forcing individuals to think about their everyday foodways, presents a case in which this 'remembering' is already occurring.

Umut Özkrimli (2010: 170) highlights that since the late 1980s the nationalism literature has benefited from a renewed emphasis on interdisciplinarity. New approaches have turned their back on 'meta-theories', focusing instead on areas such as gender, postcolonial studies and the reproduction of nationalism in everyday life. I suggest that an anthropological perspective, particularly the use of ethnographies, could contribute to research on these key issues going forward. This essay provides just one example, demonstrating how a focus on the everyday lived realities of migrants' foodways can help shed light on the processes by which individuals construct and reproduce their identities. "It is now widely recognised within anthropology that the study of 'foodways' is important in understanding the ways in which people construct their ideas of who and what they are" (Janowski, 2012b: 175).

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