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Among Culture, Nature and Supernatural. Soundscapes of Sainte-Marie, Madagascar

ABSTRACT: This article explores the soundscapes of Île de Sainte-Marie (Nosy Boraha), an island off the northeastern coast of Madagascar, by combining ethnographic fieldwork with perspectives from sound studies and postcolonial theory. While the research so far has focused on the sonic characteristics of Madagascar's forests, this article investigates everyday urban, rural, ritual, and natural sound environments. Drawing on field recordings, participant observation, and interviews conducted during a 2024 ethnomusicological expedition, I analyse how sound mediates space, shapes identity, and reflects broader social dynamics. Through the lens of acoustemology and soundscape theory, I argue that sound in Sainte-Marie Island is not merely a backdrop but a cultural force – one that negotiates memory, community, and belonging in a postcolonial context.

KEYWORDS: Madagascar, soundscape, postcolonialism, cultural identity, hybridity

Introduction: Listening to Sainte-Marie

In recent years, sound studies and ethnomusicology have increasingly turned their attention to sound as a key medium of cultural meaning and spatial negotiation. Sound is not merely a backdrop to social life; it is a force that shapes perception, encodes memory, and configures the experience of place. This is especially true in regions marked by layered colonial histories and intense local-global frictions, where the soundscape becomes a space of temporalities and identities. Following scholars such as R. Murray Schafer (1993), Steven Feld (1996, 2012, 2015), and more recently Jennifer Stoever (2016) or Brandon LaBelle (2019), this article proposes to approach Île Sainte-Marie (Nosy Boraha[1])

[1] Nosy Boraha is the Malagasy name for Sainte-Marie Island. I use the French and Malagasy names interchangeably in this article.

in Madagascar as an auditory field – a space where cultural identity, colonial past and ecological specificity intersect through sound. This stems from the fact, that 'sound and music are significant place-based resources in developing both self and group identities because their understanding is rooted in the context of where they are heard' (Gregory, Rikhotso 2024, pp. 4–5). The words take on these particular meanings in the case of places like Madagascar – places at once culturally distant from the global West, yet in many ways close because of the colonial past and its still reverberating echoes. Because of Afrodiasporic cultures' deep engagement with sonic expression it is necessary to cover both the cultural and the technological in order to investigate modern culture and sound (Newman, Sacks, 2023, pp. 253–255).

The central question of this article is then: how do the inhabitants and visitors of Sainte-Marie Island experience and make sense of the island through sound? More specifically: what kinds of acoustic markers dominate daily life, and how are these sounds entangled with notions of tradition, modernity, and postcolonial identity? My goal is also to document the reception of Sainte-Marie's soundscape, both by locals and outsiders.

Madagascar's soundscape, like its music, combines African and European characteristics. This hybridity is common in former colonial countries in Africa. As Chidi Obijaku stated:

> Since music (and the arts in general) exists as a reflection of the society and time within which it is created, the thesis analysed hybridity in African art music as a representation of the realities of postcolonial African societies, particularly in urban spaces. Therefore, hybridity in African art music was interpreted beyond the narratives of national cohesion, colonial resistance and indigenous cultural identities (Obijaku, 2020, p. 3).

In African studies, this trend is visible in the work of Scott Newman, Susanna L. Sacks, and others who explore how sonic environments mediate cultural and postcolonial experiences. Cities like Lagos (Nigeria), Maputo (Mozambique), and Tshwane (South Africa) have been analysed through their sensory regimes, revealing sound as a crucial infrastructure of social life. While Madagascar has been the subject of several ecoacoustic and bioacoustic studies (Rankin & Axel, 2017, pp. 129–144; Dröge et al., 2024), most of these focus on the sonic characteristics of forest environments or wildlife and remain rooted in quantitative methodology, like Marjolein Pijper's research in Ranomafana National Park (Pijper, 2023). Madagascar appears briefly in chapter entitled *Tromba Children, Maresaka, and Postcolonial Malady in Madagascar,* published in *Austronesian Soundscapes. Performing Arts in Oceania and Southeast Asia*, edited by Birgit Abels (Emoff, 2011, pp. 135–152), but even there, sound is framed through ritual performance rather than as a pervasive, embodied and affective field. In contrast, this article investigates the socio-cultural dimensions of sound in urban, rural and ritual contexts, drawing on the method of acoustemology – the understanding of the world through listening (Feld, 1996; 2015). I argue that sound on Sainte-Marie functions as a key cultural resource – it mediates daily rhythms, stages symbolic power, sustains ritual practices, and embodies the island's historical and political ambiguities.

The reflections presented here are grounded in ethnographic fieldwork carried out during a three-week expedition to the north-eastern coast of Madagascar in July–August 2024. While part of the journey covered mainland locations such as Toamasina, Andasibe, and the capital Antananarivo, the majority of the research was conducted on aforementioned Île de Sainte-Marie, a narrow, lush island off the northeastern coast of Madagascar. The island served as a principal field site, allowing for an immersive engagement with diverse acoustic environments. Easter coast of Madagascar, to which Nosy Boraha belongs, thanks to its low elevation, is covered in dense, wet forests, compared to dry highlands making most of the area of Madagascar. The climate on Sainte-Marie is equatorial, so there are two distinct seasons: a hot rainy season lasting from November to April and a cooler dry season starting in May and lasting until the end of October. The daily temperature throughout the year does not fall below 20 degrees Celsius[2]. As a result, Nosy Boraha has a rich fauna and flora, what should make a significant impact on the areas soundscape.

Theoretical framework and methodology – Listening as Knowing, Sound as Social Practice

My approach is shaped by the descriptive-reflexive style of the Wrocław – based Soundscape Research Laboratory [Pracownia Badań Pejzażu Dźwiękowego], which advocates for grounded, situated accounts of sonic experience. In this spirit, I do not separate the analytical from the affective – description, memory, and musical detail intertwine. What follows is both documentation and reflection, a mapping of place through listening. Methods included field recording, participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and note-taking. As a researcher embedded in a small traveling group, my presence was simultaneously that of a listener, participant, and occasional intruder – a positionality I reflect on throughout the article. As Howes (2013) and Feld (2015) have emphasized, listening is always relational and political. Recognizing this, I approached my recordings and recollections not as transparent data, but as situated fragments of lived co-presence.

The structure of the paper follows three primary spatial contexts – urban (Ambodifototra), rural (Ifotatra), and natural (omnipresent) – interwoven with episodes of ritual and festival activity. By examining how sound moves between the natural and the anthropogenic, the sacred and the touristic, I approach it as a socially and historically embedded practice of meaning-making (LaBelle, 2019). Feld (2012; 2015) has argued that listening is a culturally situated act, because different communities do not merely hear differently, they value and structure sound differently. On the island of Sainte-Marie, this becomes evident in the way certain sounds – honking moto-rickshaws, festival drumming, nocturnal insects, or whale calls – are invested with symbolic weight and social meaning.

[2] https://www.nodc.noaa.gov/archive/arc0216/0253808/1.1/data/0-data/Region-1-WMO-Normals-9120/Madagascar/CSV/SAINTEMARIE_67072.csv (access: 25.03.2025).

These auditory markers not only reflect but constitute cultural identity, often in hybrid or contested ways. Another conceptual anchor is R. Murray Schafer's (1993) foundational work on soundscape, particularly the categories of keynote sounds, sound signals, and soundmarks. Schafer's analytical triad helps to classify sonic elements according to their function and familiarity within a given context. However, as critics such as Brandon LaBelle (2019) and Jennifer Stoever (2016) remind us, soundscapes are also power-laden – they can include, exclude, discipline, or liberate. A honk in Ambodifototra may signal safety, irritation, or kindness – depending on the listener's position and cultural code.

These frameworks are complemented by postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, which call for attention to how auditory regimes are shaped by colonial histories and how communities reclaim listening as an epistemic tool. Ana María Ochoa Gautier (2014) points out that listening has often been co-opted by colonial powers as a tool of control (e.g. through mapping, measuring, 'civilizing'), yet it also holds emancipatory potential when reclaimed by subjugated voices. In the Malagasy context, the hybridity of musical and sonic practices speaks to such a negotiation between imposed structures and vernacular reappropriations (Obijiaku, 2020).

Finally, this study draws on ethnographic and sensory methodologies (Pink, 2009; Howes, Classen, 2013), treating sound not only as data but as a medium of co-presence, allowing for a deeper engagement with the lifeworld of the communities encountered. Listening here becomes a multisensory, reflexive, and political act – a form of dwelling in the field rather than observing it from a distance. The goal is not to extract 'pure' sound objects, but to think with sound – to ask what listening reveals about space, identity, memory, and relation in a place as entangled as Sainte-Marie.

Urban Soundscape: Ambodifototra

Ambodifototra is the largest city on the island of 30,000 inhabitants. It is located in the southern part of Sainte-Marie, on the west coast. The city is not only the island's main administrative centre, but also a tourist hub. Hence the many hotels, restaurants and shops, as well as the market streets where you can buy everything from live poultry and vegetables to ceramics and photovoltaic panels. Due to the high density of stalls and the heavy pedestrian traffic, especially around midday, Ambodifototra teems with sonic activity that oscillates between routine and disruption. The core of its auditory texture lies in the polyphony of human and mechanical presence. Vendors negotiating prices, tuk-tuks (motor rickshaws) signaling their path with sharp, coded honks, battery-powered radios crackling salegy[3] rhythms into the market's open air compete with the clang

[3] Salegy is one of the most popular genres of popular music in Madagascar, distinguished by its fast tempos, 6/8 meter, polyrhythmic percussion, and the integration of traditional Malagasy musical elements with amplified instrumentation. Salegy developed and gained popularity in the 1970s in the light of political changes in the country, functioning both as a marker of regional identity and a vehicle for mass entertainment.

of cookware and the flutter of plastic tarps in the coastal wind. Last, but not least, poultry. The chickens, ducks, geese and roosters are straightforwardly equal 'pedestrians', and their sounds meld with the harmony of the streets. There are makeshift chicken coops next to many houses, but the animals tend to roam freely in the area, especially in the case of ducks and geese phonically making their presence known.

Sounds rarely clash, rather they form an audible texture in which voices, motors, and birds intermingle without hierarchy. Auditory signs of postcoloniality are everywhere – from the whir of decades-old French cars to the linguistic layering of tourist exchanges. French still remains the official language in Madagascar, but Malagasy, the second official language, is the most widely spoken among the people of Ambodifotra. The use of loud but degraded sound systems, typical of street commerce and festival spaces, is indicative of both resourcefulness and sonic aesthetics shaped by infrastructural scarcity. The town's aural ecology reflects therefore a layered social fabric, where postcolonial residues mingle with global mobilities. The horn, in particular, functions as more than a utilitarian device. Cars, motorbikes and motorbike rickshaws honk. It is trumpeted during the day, at night, during the week and at weekends. One of our informers, 19-year-old Palestinian living in Germany, then volunteering in Madagascar as a whale watcher, asked about characteristic sounds for the area, he instantly mentioned constant honking, day and night, in his opinion without clear purpose. Wioleta Muras, polish musicologist and soundscape researcher explain, that the frequent sound of car horns at intersections with traffic lights can be a sign of impatience, frustration, lack of understanding for other users (Muras, 2015, p. 42). Drawing from Nwoka's (2023) typology of Nigerian road-signaling, I suggest however that the honk in Ambodifototra performs as a multi-purpose utterance, quite common in many African, Asian and southern European countries, among others (Dong et al., 2024; Mahmood, 2021): a greeting, a claim to space, a helpful warning, a negotiation of visibility. In Madagascar the horn is an extension of sociability. It announces one's presence on a blind curve, signals greeting, or politely requests space. I noticed this many times when travelling in tuk-tuks, as the honking of passing vehicles was always accompanied by a gesture of greeting – a raise of the hand, a smile or a short shout. Here, the horn is not merely an acoustic irritant, but a tool of spatial negotiation, audible evidence of a social rhythm based not on silence, but on active mutual awareness.

Interestingly, despite the density of activity, the town rarely feels sonically oppressive. There is order within the chaos, structured by shared expectations. Loudness is not interpreted as rudeness, but as a mode of sociability – what Stoever (2016) might describe as a sonic normativity rooted in communal audibility. The urban soundscape thus invites us to hear beyond mere volume – to attune to its social rhythms, textures, and codes.

Rural and Ecological Soundscape: Ifotatra

Ifotatra, a small fishing village on the northwest coast, lies around 30 kilometres from Ambodifototra. It is composed of several dozen wooden hous-

es, a small café, a few shops, and a beachfront lodge. In these places, the negligible occurrence of urban noise, especially from motorised traffic, allows natural and domestic sounds to take centre stage and opens a perceptual space for subtler acoustic events. Exploring the village allowed us to experience a wealth of household sounds instead. In the village, albeit small, there was a cottage converted into a café where popular Malagasy music played loudly from a battery-powered radio. Plant litter crunched underfoot, mixed with empty plastic packaging (public rubbish bins are hard to come by in Madagascar). The sounds of animals – ducks, geese, hens, the occasional barking of a dog – came from all sides. Interestingly, the sounds of the fishermen's work were virtually inaudible, as they used wooden boats without motorised propulsion, and the moment of casting and hauling the nets was drowned out by the sound of the ocean waves. At low tide, women would pick seafood from the shallows, but this activity was also silent.

To establish a deeper connection with the villagers, we made our own sounds by playing the ukulele and singing polish songs. As the first to take an interest in us were the children, who laughed and played with the balloons we gave them, accidentally puncturing some of them with loud bang. Despite everything, a sense of calm was palpable in the village, and after walking just a few steps away, the sounds quietened down.

One day, from behind a fence of our resort and a clump of trees came the joyful singing of a young girl. She was bustling around the house, most likely doing her daily chores. The music was accompanied by the typical sounds of animals in the village – ducks, chickens and roosters – as well as the footsteps of the strolling residents and the peaceful sound of the ocean. These are sounds of proximity – not spectacular, but intimate.

Most interesting, however, were the observations of diurnal changes in the sound environment. Around five o'clock in the morning, the world of sound became crowded. The day began with the soft calls of the birds, which became more insistent with each passing moment; until finally they were interrupted by the raucous crowing of the rooster, waking all the household members. The people, attuned to the rhythm of sunrise and sunset, began their work with the first rays of sun. This gradual awakening is not a backdrop, but a daily acoustic ritual – a natural clock shared across the village.

At night, soundscapes shift dramatically. Drone of crickets dominated the auditory field with such intensity that earplugs sometimes become necessary to fall asleep. Rain on the palm-thatched roof created a deep, muffled reverberation – an enveloping, almost womb-like echo chamber. The air itself, thick with humidity, altered sonic perception, enhancing low-frequency resonance. In these quiet intensities, nature ceases to be backdrop – it becomes acoustic infrastructure. On one occasion, around 1 a.m., our group heard a distant high-pitched roar accompanied by the telltale exhalation of surfacing whales. Though we rushed to record it, the whales had already vanished, leaving only memory and sonic anticipation. Their sometimes elusive presence is embedded in the island's cultural imagination, resurfacing in songs and rituals that weave nature into collective memory.

From Feld's reflections on acoustemology (2015), it can be concluded that the relationship between sound and place is not descriptive but constitutive.

The sounds of Ifotatra do not merely occur in these places – they make them. More than geography or architecture, it is the overlapping timbres of birds, waves, tools, and voices that define the village as a lived space. In this rural soundscape, ritual sound and domestic quietude are not opposed but co-constitutive. Music is part of everyday routine, not staged performance. It is this seamless movement between ordinary and sacred, between presence and reverberation, that gives Ifotatra its unique acoustic signature.

Ritual and Festive Soundscape: Tromba and Festival des Baleines

Ritual and festive sonorities form a distinct dimension of Sainte-Marie's acoustic life. The *tromba* ceremony – a spirit possession ritual practiced by the Betsimisaraka people – remains aurally striking. Ifotatra is where we encountered a visit by the Vitavy Mitambra women's association. They performed a fragment of the tromba ritual used to channel ancestral spirits, using *kaiamba* rattles and *bingy* drums in addition to singing. The sound was raw and ecstatic, marked by shouted call-and-response, and it extended beyond the formal presentation. After a lively performance, the group members gave us an interview, and we thanked them with refreshments and a financial donation to the association. Although the women expressed their joy and gratitude while still in our presence, its true expression was heard minutes after the farewell. From a nearby village came the booming voices of drums and singing. They echoed across the dormant island, interspersed with the sound of crickets chirping and the distinct sound of the ocean.

Sound in such circumstances is not simply a plaything – it has the power to make things happen. It calls spirits, binds communities, and affirms cosmologies. As Emoff (2012, pp. 150–151) notes in his study of *tromba*, these practices are forms of sonic sovereignty, ensuring cultural continuity in the face of political and economic marginalisation, in order to come to terms with the colonial past while mitigating the post-colonial present. Even when performed symbolically for outsiders, the power of the ritual remains sonically palpable. In this rural soundscape, ritual sound and domestic quietude are not opposed but co-constitutive. It is this seamless movement between ordinary and sacred, between presence and reverberation, that gives Ifotatra its unique acoustic signature.

In contrast, the *Festival des Baleines* transforms Ambodifototra into a carnival of sound. Each July, as humpback whales migrate along the eastern coast of Madagascar. This week-long event blends ecological spectacle with musical performance, religious meaning, and economic ambition. The central festival village, built around a small stage by the harbour, becomes a temporary sonic hub. Its speakers project into homes, restaurants, and streets, collapsing private and public space into one shared auditory field. Amplified music, theatrical shouting, and audience reactions intermingle across streets, balconies, and bars. The overdriven and fraying festival sound system blares popular Malagasy genres like salegy, alongside fragments of Western pop. At night, echoes carry across the bay.

The auditory intensity can be overwhelming. Volume, it seems, is part of the spectacle, part of the joy. This is the Malagasy philosophy of 'falifali' (happiness). To quote Tamba Norbert, traditional musician we interviewed: 'When you are sad, you have neither the strength nor the desire to move; when you sing, your mind must connect with the moon and the stars'[4]. The most common music sounds were acapella singing, often in groups, and drums – *bingy* and *kaiamba*, usually made with their own hands from available materials, such as used food or cosmetic packaging. Many homes have aforementioned small battery-operated radios from which Malagasy popular music, especially salegy is played. Radios with MP3 playback capabilities are indispensable in tuk-tuks or the few passenger cars. This has to do with highly developed and widespread piracy. In addition, national as well as local radio stations can be received on Sainte-Marie Island.

The juxtaposition of sacred and spectacular highlights a key theme of this article: sound as cultural articulation. Whether invoking ancestors or entertaining tourists, the sounds of Sainte-Marie give form to experience. They summon memory, claim space, and perform identity – loudly, proudly, and with unmistakable presence. In the festival's layering of the sacred and the popular, we see how auditory culture negotiates identity. It provides a space where urban youth, fishermen, elders, and tourists listen side by side. The music both affirms and reinvents tradition. It calls forth a collective memory that is not fixed, but performed – each year, anew, in rhythm with the whales.

Sound and Hybridity: Intersections of the Audible

Across the sonic zones of Sainte-Marie, one hears not a sequence of isolated registers, but a fluid interplay of voices, materials, technologies, and temporalities. These auditory overlaps – chickens and car horns, drums and distorted salegy, rain on ravinala and European pop – are not anomalies but the norm. This is a hybrid soundscape, one that resists binary categories such as traditional/modern or local/global. I propose the idea of some kind of auditory creolization: the continuous processes of the emergence of new and complex soundscape forms and listening practices at the intersection of the local and the global, tradition and modernity, technology and orality. Although partly coinciding with many of the previously cited terms grounded in the literature, it can act as a heuristic tool to describe complex cultural-sound interactions in postcolonial contexts. The island's sonic textures are not simply mixed; they are negotiated. They speak of coexistence, but also of friction – between silence and amplification, ceremony and commerce, rootedness and mobility. In this context, sound becomes a mediator of ambiguity. A drumbeat may signify

[4] Translation by the Author. Interviews were conducted in Malagasy or French. They were then translated into English by dr August Schmidhofer, a retired musicologist from the University of Vienna, participant in our expedition and an expert on the musical culture of Madagascar.

a wedding[5], a possession ritual, or a staged performance – depending on the context, the intention, and the listener. Likewise, a honk may express aggression, solidarity, or spatial awareness. These ambiguities do not indicate confusion, but rather the semiotic richness of a community in which multiple orders of meaning overlap in the acoustic field. To understand the soundscape of Sainte-Marie is therefore not to reduce it to symbols or indexes, but to enter its dynamic ecology of listening, where identity is sounded into being.

I've already mentioned plenty of sounds of nature. It's just inevitable on Sainte-Marie, no matter if you are in town, in a village or far away from human settlements. During the day one can hear birds high in the trees (although, surprisingly, they were somehow not many of them, but well heard), farm fowl, such as chickens, roosters, ducks and gooses, individual dogs (there are a lot of stray but friendly dogs wandering around Sainte-Marie, although they rarely bark as this only applies to individuals defending the property), even less cats. During the night the soundscape transforms significantly, and I would even consider it peculiarly noisy. The crickets are so loud that I happened to put earplugs in my ears to be able to sleep peacefully, although if my bungalow had windows, the problem would be less noticeable. It is worth mentioning, however, that nights in July, i.e. during winter in Madagascar, are very warm and quite humid, and the temperature could reach around 18 degrees. This is just a few degrees less than during the day. High humidity increases sound propagation, which may have influenced my experience. The crickets were less noticeable in the town of Ambodifototra,

In the previous paragraphs, I have repeatedly mentioned the sounds of farm animals. I did also mention them here, but I would like to emphasise that they are primarily indicative of human activity. On the other hand, however, ducks, chickens or geese usually stroll freely on roads where vehicles rarely pass. Both physically and sonically, they are an integral part of the landscape of the East Madagascar countryside. Their status in the soundscape is therefore ambiguous, depending on perspective and context placing them between anthropogenic and natural. The situation is similar with dogs or cats, which are rarely treated as pets (especially the former). More often than not, they are strays and form one of the layers of the animal sound factor, although their introduction came at the hands of man.

Conclusion: The Island as Audible Archive

The auditory environment of Île Sainte-Marie, as explored through urban cacophonies, rural silences, ritual intensities, and ecological whispers, reveals a complex negotiation between history, identity, and material presence. Sound here is not simply a backdrop to social life, but an actor, shaping perception, encoding memory, marking boundaries, and forging belonging. By applying concepts from soundscape studies, acoustemology, and postcolonial theory, this article has

[5] On the last day of our stay on Sainte-Marie, in Ambodifotra, a lavish wedding was taking place in one of the restaurants. Unfortunately, our duties did not allow us to attempt to record the event, but there was singing and a clear pulse of percussion instruments coming from the wedding hall.

shown how listening becomes a form of situated knowing. Whether through the omnipresent honks that serve as informal codes of interaction, or the polyphonic layering of festival music, ritual drums, and battery-powered radios, sound on Sainte-Marie is imbued with cultural density. It embodies both continuity and disruption, both ancestral resonance and global intrusion.

In this context, the concept of hybridity becomes particularly useful – not as a theoretical cliché, but as a lived reality. The island's soundscape is neither untouched tradition nor imposed modernity, but a zone of entanglement, where competing sonic regimes coexist, conflict, and merge. The whale song and the distorted salegy track, the ancestral drum and the Italian tourist's playlist – all occupy the same acoustic field.

From a methodological standpoint, this research underscores the value of reflexive, sensory ethnography. By embracing listening not only as a means of data collection but as a mode of engagement, the researcher opens themselves to the temporalities, vulnerabilities, and ambiguities of the field. This is particularly important in postcolonial contexts, where the auditory landscape often speaks what the official archive does not. Sound, as it emerges from this small island, reminds us that culture is not merely what is said or seen, but what is sounded, shared, and felt.

Although derived from a relatively short field trip, this study highlights the need for further research into Madagascar's soundscapes beyond the ecological. Current research has largely been concerned with the island's natural areas but the sonic dimension of urban and rural environments remains under-researched. The island's musical culture, also hitherto undiscovered by researchers, is based both in formal events such as the Festival des Baleines and in daily routine, therefore illustrates the ways that sound is used to portray identity and foster community. Thanks to its hybridity – that is, the fact that it is marked by the presence of indigenous traditions, postcolonial inheritances, and globalized media – Madagascar's soundscape offers an important observation about the ways that sound can be both a marker of culture and a vector of transformation.

This research, together with the other articles in this volume, which deal with soundscape topics, contributes to the growing body of literature on soundscapes with a first record of Sainte-Marie's auditory environment. Future studies can expand on this perspective through long-term ethnographic engagement, interdisciplinarity, and comparative research with other regions of Madagascar. Soundscapes not only tell us about specific cultural contexts but also about how people experience and negotiate their environment sonically.

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