



# The role of *uMkhosi WoMhlanga* (Reed Dance) and Indoni Cultural events through the eyes of young women in KwaZulu-Natal: A Cultural Tourism Approach

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## Abstract

Cultural tourism is one of the cornerstones and a rapidly growing segment of the tourism industry worldwide. The celebration of cultural events as part of tradition, evoke a sense of national pride to those who have an interest in taking part in them. *uMkhosi Womhlanga* (Reed Dance) is an annual ceremony celebrated by the Zulu nation of South Africa in September, annually. Thousands of Zulu maidens and visitors gather at the Zulu Royal Residence, eNyokeni in KwaNongoma and later eMachobeni Royal Residence in Ngwavuma to participate. Indoni is also an annual cultural programme with a series of events aimed at addressing different social problems facing young people today. These events inculcate traditional and social values that are at the verge of being collapsed. This exploratory research paper aims to reveal the influences and motivations that propel the young girls to attend these cultural events. The study highlight the role of the cultural events in the lives of the young maidens and provides an overview of limitations and challenges which come with *uMkhosi WoMhlanga* and Indoni. *uMkhosi WoMhlanga* is surrounded by controversy, accidents and other unsafe incidents that would discourage the young women from attending the cultural ceremony but instead, maidens flock in numbers each year to celebrate the event. Further research will assist in documenting the maiden's feelings and perceptions about the event. This will also assist event planners and policy makers in making informed decisions to ensure the growth and continuous success of these unique successful cultural events.

**Keywords:** Cultural events, *uMkhosi Womhlanga*, Reed Dance, Indoni, maidens.

## Introduction

Cultural tourism opens up opportunities to access traditions, customs, rituals, cuisines and even other aspects such as social, economic and environmental (Moswete et al.,2016) of a particular nation. In the Sub-Saharan Africa region, culture, heritage resources and other tourism products are considered as "key factors" that attract the fast growing market of foreign and even domestic tourists interested in experiencing and indulging in other people's way of life (Ritzer 1999; Richards and Hall, 2000; Novelli, 2015). Cultural tourism has significantly contributed to tourism development and growth in many African countries (Christie, Fernandes and Messerli, 2013). Celebration of cultural events, like *uMkhosi Womhlanga*, Indoni etc. are a key to restoring and instilling cultural traditions of value to the nation.

Due to modernisation and western influences, these valued traditions are on the very verge of being collapsed. *UMkhosi Womhlanga* and Indoni are annual cultural events which are aimed at showcasing Zulu culture and heritage through traditional dance, music, art and craft, to mention just a few. What Indoni and *uMkhosi Womhlanga* have in common is the quest to take the young generation back to their roots and address the social ills facing today's youth in a troubled society. As a result of 'civilisation' the valued traditions are slowly dissipating into non-existence hence there is a dire need for the introduction and revival of cultural events such as *uMkhosi Womhlanga* and Indoni. The Reed Dance provides young maidens with the

opportunity to partake in an event that invokes national pride, a sense of belonging and which offers them immense emotional gratification for keeping their purity.

This paper aims to contextualize uMkhosi WoMhlanga (Reed Dance) and Indoni Cultural events, secondly to examine the influences and motivations that propel the young girls to attend the cultural events. Thirdly to highlight the role of the cultural event in the lives of the young women. Fourthly, provide an overview of challenges and encounters that comes with attending these cultural events (uMkhosi WoMhlanga and Indoni). These events have become popular as part of the KZN events calendar and contributes significantly to the economy of the province.

## Methodology

For this study, the researcher identifies, analyzed and synthesized available relevant research related to the famous Reed Dance and the important Indoni Cultural events. The reviews of previous literature in the paper are not summaries of every article read, but rather an exposition of the existing knowledge and reasoning which led the researcher to believe that what was done was worth doing in the way that it was done and written, so as to convince the reader of the value of the study. Use was made of mainly secondary sources and academic journal articles.

## uMkhosi WoMhlanga (Reed Dance) and Indoni Cultural events

It is essential to set the scene for this paper by providing the background and procedures involved in these events. Cultural events usually have a specific theme that must be clear so that potential tourists know what to expect (Ivanovic, 2008). With cultural events, the image of the destination plays an important role in attracting tourists seeking a unique event experience (Richards and Wilson, 2004; Povey & Van Wyk, 2010).

**Figure 1:** Image showing the royal palace (the Zulu Royal Residence eNyokeni, kwaNongoma), arena, reed collection spot, route taken by maidens to present the reeds, sleeping tents, bus parking, local vendors site and Queen KaMsweli Primary School.



Source: Google Earth Image (2018)

a) Enyokeni Royal Palace b) Reed presentation spot c) Dome under construction d) Arena  
e) Exhibition Site f) Maiden sleeping Tents g) Bus Parking h) Local Vendors Site i) Queen  
KaMsweli Primary School – registration and accreditation spot j) Reed Collection Spot.



uMkhosi Womhlanga in KwaZulu-Natal is divided into two. The main event takes place at the Zulu Royal Residence, eNyokeni in KwaNongoma, and the subsequent part takes place at eMachobeni in Ngwavuma. The latter event is smaller in scale and a replica of the main event often celebrated a week after the Enyokeni event in KwaNongoma. The aim of uMkhosi Womhlanga is to celebrate the maiden's purity, showcasing that they are proud of their bodies while they are being prepared for womanhood, at the same time giving the King and the nation a spectacle to marvel at, and motivate the young maidens through words and joyfulness. According to the Zulu myth, if the young maiden carrying the reed is no longer a virgin the reed breaks, thus embarrassing the maiden in public (Bennet, Mills & Munnick, 2010; Nkosi 2013; Maytham-Bailey, 2014).

The event initially started when young girls (maidens) who used to stay at the King's palace, would go to the forest to collect fire wood as part of their household chores *uMntwana* (Princess) uThembi (2008). While collecting firewood, young men would approach and propose to them with the aim of "stealing" their virginity. A fight would break out between the young men and the girls. Firewood was used to fight the young men, and ultimately win the fight. As a symbol of victory, the maidens would leave firewood, descend to the river, cut reeds, pile them up as firewood and carry it back to the palace. Upon reaching the palace, maidens chanted *amahubo* (traditional hymns) indirectly narrating what had happened and victory. From then on, the reed symbolized that a maiden had succeeded in protecting and preserving her virginity.

Pre-event ceremonies are held in 11 District Municipalities (Amajuba, Zululand, uMkhanyakude, uMzinyathi, uThukela, King Cetshwayo District, uMgungundlovu, iLembe, eThekweni Metro, Sisonke and Ugu) and all the Local Municipalities leading to the main events in September. These pre-event events provide a chance to all the maidens celebrate their purity through singing, dance and beads. The pre-event events are part of the *Siyaya emhlangeni* (we going to the Reed Dance) programme driven by the Provincial Department of Arts and Culture together with District and Local municipalities. This programme caters for maidens, especially very young maidens (below the age 14) who are not capable of looking after themselves and endure long travel associated with the main events. This encourages the tender age maidens to take pride in their purity until they are able to attend the main events at eNyokeni or eMachobeni.

UMkhosi Womhlanga lasts for three days, but preparation of the main events begins three weeks before. The event starts when *ibutho* (a group of men or regiment) set off to eHabeni, about 30 km west of eMpangeni, to harvest thousands of reeds later transported by trucks to KwaNongoma, Enyokeni Royal Palace. The initial spot to harvest the reed(s) was in KwaSokhulu about 50 km north of Empangeni. Owing to increasing numbers of reeds to be harvested and fearing the depletion of the natural resource, a new harvesting site was developed in eHabeni. On Wednesday, prior to the arrival of the maidens, a cow is slaughtered in a ritual ceremony so as to inform the ancestors about the event to take place. The lead princess chosen by His Majesty the King, wears a cow's gall bladder [emptied, inflated and dried] on her head.

The princesses accompanied by other maidens from KwaNongoma, set out in a bus to oBuka, the homestead of iNkosi uBiyela. According to the Zulu custom, iNkosi uBiyela slaughters a goat to welcome the maidens, and then also a cow, as a special welcome for the lead princess (the king's daughter). The lead princess wears the second cow's gall bladder (emptied, inflated and dried) on her head. The cows gall bladders symbolize that the princess is chosen to lead the maidens for the event in that particular year. Very early the following morning, Thursday, the lead princess and other maidens, joined by maidens from oBuka, go to uMhlathuze River Bend to bathe. The lead princess cuts the first reed with



a *itshakaza* (tassel), which is considered to be a special reed. This symbolizes that the maidens have gone out to cut the reeds. On their return they sing and dance which is a rehearsal session for the main event, the famous Reed Dance. On Friday afternoon maidens pack their belongings, leaving oBuka to go back to KwaNongoma, taking the special reed with them.

On the first day (Friday), maidens start arriving in the afternoon until the early hours on Saturday morning at eNyokeni Royal Palace in different forms of transport (buses, taxis, trucks or private cars) for the main event. Maidens who descend to the palace on Friday sleep in marquees hired as temporary accommodation. At times maidens do not sleep at all owing to the long distance to travel, and others are far too excited to sleep even after their arrival at the palace. For safety and security purposes, maidens register on arrival. For the 2010 Reed Dance, maidens had to produce indemnity forms completed and signed by parents and guardians. The aim behind the indemnity forms, registration and wristbands is to a) create a database of all maidens b) protect the Department of Arts and Culture and the Royal Household of uMkhosi Womhlanga against any unforeseen circumstances and c) identify maidens easily according to districts as wristbands are colour-coded (Nkosi, 2013).

Maidens are accompanied by one or two women from each *isigodi*(village), called matrons. Some of the matrons mentor the young maidens and even perform virginity testing (Scorgie, 2006, Bennet et al., 2010; Nkosi, 2013) in preparation for the Reed Dance each year (Ndimande, 2010). On day two, the maidens wake up and go down to the Ntsonyane River to bathe and regroup to pick up their reeds piled up at oSuthu Palace before proceeding to eNyokeni Palace and present the reeds to the King. In the Zulu culture, it is the Zulu princesses that pick up the reeds first and lead all the other maidens to the palace in a procession. All maidens are not allowed to enter the royal palace on Friday, except for the princesses. OSuthu Palace is not a fixed traditional spot for maidens to pick up the reeds, in the 2010 a different spot near oSuthu was used. In 2018, maidens collected reeds at Figure 1 – J and proceeded towards G joined the main road to the palace then presented the reed at B. This route is estimated at ± 2 km and maidens never feel the gently steep as they often chant, sing and dance all the way up to the presentation spot.

The first reed is presented to the King by the lead princess, who is the last to receive her first menstruation period before the event. The reed that is carried and presented by the lead princess is the one that was harvested at oBuka area with a tassel, a mark is made on it to ensure that it does not get lost. In a very long procession, maidens walk towards the royal palace to present their reeds, each maiden is advised to talk to the reed along the way, appealing to it to give her strength to withstand any pressures and preserve her purity until the following year, so she can then participate again in the Reed Dance (uMntwana uThembi, 2008). After presentation of the reeds, the King and his entourage are escorted by the regiment from the palace to the arena. Upon arrival the entourage is guided to the reserved seating inside the VIP marquee divided into different sections according to the people in attendance such as the *abantwana* (royal family members), *amakhosi* (chiefs), *izinduna* (herdsmen) and their entourage, other dignitaries from government, business etc.

When His Majesty, the King arrives in the arena, *imbongi*(the praise singer) recites the King's praises while His Majesty gets out of the car and takes his royal seat. During the King's entrance all men within the arena stand up and take off their hats as a sign of respect. Only women are allowed to remain seated. When the praise singer has finished, the proceedings of the day can resume, protocol is carefully observed. After the speech by the King and other guest speakers, the maidens showcase their Zulu dancing. Dignitaries are later invited to join His Majesty, the King and his entourage for lunch, and all other people are guided to different



points where they will be served. At the dignitaries' marquee, all men stand up as the King enters, and the praise singer recite his praises. Once the King is seated at the main table, his entourage sit according to their rightful status positions, the food is blessed and serving begins. It is interesting to note that guests are not allowed to start eating before *Ongangezwe lakhe* (the King) starts eating. At the main table the King is served only by the person tasked with that duty and all protocol is carefully observed (van der Wagen & White, 2010).

After lunch, guests are not allowed to leave before the King leaves the marquee, this is done as a sign of respect. It is important to mention that the sequence in observing these royal protocols makes uMkhosi Womhlanga uniquely interesting to the guests from foreign lands such as Japan, the United States of America, Germany and the United Kingdom. On day three, the last day of the event, the maidens wake up early to bathe at the Ntsoyane River before moving up to the arena to sing and dance for the King and nation. On this day different groups per district present, showcase their beads, songs and Zulu dance styles. After the festivities, His Majesty the King extends an invitation for the Reed Dance at eMachobeni in Ngwavuma and then King bid farewell to all present and people depart. There are specific songs that maidens sing during this ceremony which are easy to learn. The special songs, *amahubo* are relevant for the event, and the lyrics are about the pride of the maidens and their King, current issues concerning the royal house, the government and their communities. Idziak, Majewski and Zmysłony (2015), emphasize that the local community must be accountable for the effective use of a range of tourism products (cultural events, crafts, traditional cuisine etc.).

### **Indoni Cultural event**

Indoni is a unique cultural event targeting the youth in South Africa and it is popularly known as Indoni SA. This non-profit making organization is registered with the National Department of Social Development ([www.indoni.org](http://www.indoni.org), 2018). The event was founded and launched in June 2011 by Dr Mthembu, a female medical doctor. Indoni is based on bringing social cohesion, unity, behavioral change and seeks to address social ills facing South African youth. Lack of respect, skilled youth, high rate of unemployment, substance abuse, high teenage pregnancy, low moral degeneration, prevalence of HIV and AIDS amongst the youth are essentially what led to the birth of Indoni. The event is named after a *Nguni* name, "indoni" a sweet black berry fruit that grows along the tropical coastal areas. The fruit is a symbol of beauty, love, culture, pride that young men cherish and show to their women. Hence a popular Zulu saying "*indoni yamanzi*" (the berry of water) meaning a young, beautiful, dark skinned young women with respect, pride and dignity ([www.indoni.org](http://www.indoni.org), 2018).

This gender inclusive cultural event targets both young males and females unlike uMkhosi Womhlanga which is only for young girls. The Street Carnival, Fashion and Exhibitions, Africa in Dialogue, Cultural SA (South Africa) pageant, music and arts are part of a series of activities of the colourful and fun National Culture and Heritage Festival aimed at celebrating cultural diversity and heritage of the African people. The Street Carnival is a colourful display of indigenous beadwork, art, music, dance. The event doubles as a celebration of culture and heritage yet promoting tourism and contributing to the economy of the region (Richards & Wilson, 2004). Like uMkhosi Womhlanga local communities benefit through the creation of job opportunities, economic development, skills development, re-kindling of the spirit of "ubuntu" (humanity), morale regeneration and respect amongst others (Ezeuduji & Nkosi, 2017; Lenao and Saarinen, 2015).

The Street Carnival takes place in Durban from King Dinizulu Park to the City Hall lined up with ululating and cheering event attendees. The Fashion and Exhibition presents a platform to South African small medium and micro enterprises as well as affiliated neighboring African

businesses to show-case various clothing lines, indigenous products and services (www.indoni.org, 2018). Only three exhibitors are allowed to participate from each province or country, thus providing an ample opportunity to benefit.

**Figure 2: Image showing the Carnival Route (from King Dinizulu Park to the City Hall) and Durban ICC.**



Source: Google Map Image (2018)

For the Indoni Miss Culture, princesses accompanied at times by chaperones selected from different ethnic groups around South Africa, including Swati, Ndebele, Pedi, Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, Sotho, Mpondo, Venda, Mthembu and Khoi-San, attend. The finalists are selected by a panel of judges based on a set criteria.

### **Factors influencing young girls to attend cultural events.**

There are different factors that influence and motivate people to attend cultural events as it is the case with uMkhosi Womhlanga and Indoni. Tassiopoulos (2010) categorized festivals as cultural events which are traditional in nature with a long history, celebrated in a form of a parade or procession by a particular community or nation. Maeng, Jang & Li (2016) reviewed various studies on the motivational factors for festival attendance. Ralston and Crompton (1988) reviewed a 1987 Dickens on the Strand in Galveston, Texas study and came up with seven motivational factors that drive people to attend events (a) stimulus seeking, (b) escape from personal and social pressures, (c) social contact, (d) meeting and observing new people, (e) family togetherness and (f) nostalgia. Uysal, Backman & Potts (1991) conducted a study which identified five different motivational factors (a) excitement, (b) external (c) family, (d) socializing and (e) relaxation. Later on Crompton and McKay (1997) added culture explore, Zyl and Botha (2004) further identified self-esteem as another motivational factor pushing and pulling people to attend events.

In a study conducted by Nkosi (2013) on the participation of uMkhosi Womhlanga, it is revealed that eighty-nine (89%) of the young maidens willingly attended the cultural event to showcase their purity and pride without any external force or pressures. About seven (7%) of the maidens indicated that they were forced by parents attend the event. Some parents



believe that by forcing their daughters to attend uMkhosi Womhlanga will force the maidens to keep their virginity (Ndimande, 2011). Thus refrain from promiscuous behaviour, avoid teenage pregnancy and getting infected with diseases like HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. There were two (2%) of respondents respectively, who indicated that they attend uMkhosi Womhlanga as a result of peer and local community pressure. This finding implied that the maidens only attended the event under pressure exerted either by the maidens' peers or by the local community. In other parts of KwaZulu-Natal, especially those who still reside within tribal authorities, the maidens are expected to attend the event. In fact, it is a must that they do make an effort to participate.

This concurs with the motivational factors identified earlier in other studies investigating reasons behind peoples decision to attend events. For Indoni, young girls or princesses as they are often referred to, and their chaperones, eagerly attending the event on their own free will is important. Motives behind participation included pride, celebration of one's culture, excitement of meeting new people, making new friend, socializing and improving their self-esteem.

### **The role of the cultural events in the lives of the participants**

Cultural events play a pivotal role in the lives of the participants, hence some repeatedly attend these events willingly. Such events can provide opportunities for intercultural interaction (SACO, 2017), building social cohesion, fostering a sense of belonging and national pride within a particular community or nation, strengthen relations, provide a sense of ownership and commitment within the host community amongst other factors (Nkosi, 2013). Furthermore, attending events like uMkhosi Womhlanga and iNdoni provides the participants with a number of personal benefits such as learning, self-expression (Derret,2003), building one's self –esteem, gaining confidence, socializing, meeting new people and satisfaction amongst others. Yolal, Gursoy, Uysal, Kim & Karacaoglu (2016) examined the role and influence of attending festivals on the subjective well-being and quality of life of the residents. Diener & Suh (1997) unpacked the concept "*subjective well-being*" in two fold. Firstly, as cognitive evaluations which refers to how an individual weighs the influence derived from attending an event on his or her level of satisfaction. Secondly, effective evaluation occurs which deals with personal feelings, emotions and moods presented by the event. Subjective well-being, on the other hand is also associated with the ability to overcome any life challenges.

Shone & Parry (2004) point out that events are associated with different implications. The results can be social (SACO, 2017), economic (Paiola, 2008; Khoza, 2009; Tanford & Jung, 2017), political or developmental depending on the scale and nature of the event in question. The event outcomes can be either positive or negative. For events to be successful, positive elements should outweigh the negative elements (Nkosi, 2013). The events contribute significantly to the economy of KwaZulu-Natal Province. During these events, it is not easy to find accommodation around the host areas as these events attract both domestic and international tourists. These events have a potential to bring positive economic spin-offs for the surrounding communities (Liang, Illum and Cole, 2008) and they invariably contribute in promoting the image of the destination and draw tourist and local to attend (Tanford & Jung, 2017).

This paper documents the history, procedures and activities associated with the two cultural events. It also records indigenous knowledge, customs and traditions that are on the verge of disintegrating if not recorded. This paper has thus documented oral history, event procedures, activities and rituals that are part of these events. Jacobs (2013) points out that the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights encourages citizens to partake in cultural beliefs, rituals, practices and traditions of choice. Highlights the significance and value of celebrating uMkhosi



Womhlanga and iNdoni as cultural events that can bring social cohesion, appreciation of traditional practices for different stakeholders.

### **Challenges face when attending cultural events**

Attending cultural events comes with challenges that the participants have to endure and overcome each time they attend. For uMkhosi Womhlanga, the maidens need to deal with a number of challenges such as 5.1) lack of transport, 5.2) safety and security not guaranteed, 5.3) lack of accommodation 5.4) shortage of water and 5.5) catering system.

#### **Lack of transport**

The main challenge for most maidens is the lack of transport for taking them to the event. The Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) provides transport for different areas around KwaZulu-Natal to take maidens to the main Reed Dance at eNyokeni Royal Residence in KwaNongoma, but it is often not enough to cater for the demand and high numbers of maidens willing to attend the event. It is for this reason that some maidens resort to hiring private transport which involves high costs depending on the distance to travel. In some cases, due to lack of funds maidens end up utilizing unsafe forms transport such as unsafe taxis, trucks or tractors.

Transport related accidents are also a major challenge, while other incidents that occurs tend to fall between the cracks. On Sunday, 01 September 2013, as maidens in a bus were on their way home back to Mzumbe, near Hibberdene, a horrific accident took place along Route 66, near Melmoth in KwaZulu-Natal. It was alleged that the driver lost control of the bus, hit the rails and capsized leaving nine maidens and also two matrons dead on the scene, and about sixty people injured. This incident shook all the stakeholders involved in uMkhosi Womhlanga and from there onwards, the safety and security of any form of transport became a priority. Every year, the Department of Transport, Road Traffic Inspectorate (RTI) conducts roadworthy inspections on the buses contracted to transport maidens and it provides needed approval certificates. Currently, along all the routes that lead to eNyokeni Royal Palace, there is high visibility of Traffic Officers conducting road blocks randomly.

#### **Safety and security**

Safety and security is provided during the entire event with a very tight security plan in place. During the day there is high visibility of the South African Police (SAP), traffic officers' and private security to ensure safety of all attendees. This plan is somehow compromised by some of the maidens especially during the night. After supper maidens change their colourful traditional attire and wear their own clothes. At this time some maidens go outside the designated sleeping temporary structures and then it becomes difficult for the security personal to identify them. Maidens become unruly and the security personnel are usually not enough to control the young teenagers. To bring order and ensure safety and security of the maidens the members of the SAP must be deployed for the entire duration of the event, both day and night. Another extreme measure would be to source the services of the army in order to ensure enhanced safety and security.

#### **Lack of accommodation**

As the event gains its popularity, the places in which to sleep are often not enough. White big tents are pitched near the arena, for maidens and matrons to sleep in for two nights. In this temporary accommodation, maidens and matrons are supplied with foam mattresses which often run out due to inadequate provisions and those without mattresses are obliged to sleep on the ground. The situation becomes worse when it rains, as the tented area becomes





muddy and it is then not a healthy habitable space at all.

### **Shortage of water**

In 2018, South Africa experienced a serious drought and as a result scarcity of water was very high. The river in which the maidens are supposed to bathe in as part of tradition has run 'bone dry'. As a solution to this predicament, water tanks were provided. A temporary shelter for girls to shower was set up which often creates a muddy patch since the drainage system is not properly done. This is problematic for movement.

### **Catering plan**

Catering for thousands of young girls for two days is not easy. This requires the Department of Arts and Culture to spend a lot of funds and other resources. A number of caterers are given a chance to provide the needed catering services. This on its own presents a significant number of challenges. The quality, taste and food safety is not always guaranteed. At times food gets finished before everyone is even served, so there are shortages. The ink system used to mark and identify maidens who have been given food often results in long queues. Some maidens and matrons bring their own food which gets spoilt due to the lack of proper storage and the usual hot humid weather conditions which prevail in this part of the country. This unfortunately often leads to food poisoning. Despite all these challenges every year more maidens turn up in their numbers to attend the famous and unique Reed Dance.

### **Conclusions**

This paper attempts to fill in the gaps that exist in current literature, in studies which have been conducted on the planning, management, costs and benefits of hosting and attending events, visitor motivations and behavior, and the organizer's perspectives. The study further highlights the significance of the cultural events in the lives of the participants, and the positive role the events play in the lives of the young women. Different platforms of media indicate how the young women appreciate being part of these cultural events. The paper points out the challenges and encounters that participants are likely to endure when attending the events. Despite all adversities the young women and men (for iNdoni) never give in, or cease to attend the events. Therefore, it is recommended that cultural events, like uMkhosi Womhlanga and iNdoni be sustained not for the present generations only, but especially for future generations as well. Events are seen as vital tools for promoting and stimulating tourism development and thus require greater attention.

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