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Reading the ‘Military Virus’ in Postcolonial African Novels: Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* and Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* in Context

EDWIN ONWUKA

Abstract:

The novel in Africa plays a pivotal role in social re-engineering. By making its immediate society its subject matter, it often achieves in one swift stroke a kaleidoscopic reflection of socio-political ills that hamper growth and development. In exploring these problems, the African novel not only illuminates them, but challenges society to surmount them. Military leadership is among the worst challenges in African countries; therefore, a deeper understanding of military characters and their conduct would aid society respond appropriately to it in future. This paper probes military characters in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* and Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* in order to highlight the personality traits associated with soldiers in politics.

I

Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* and Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* belong to the fast growing class of fiction dealing with the military in African politics. This trend of military presence in the nation’s literature, Adeoti observes, is because they are entrenched in the psyche of the Nigerian man and woman (n.pag.). They are portrayed in two main categories of Nigerian novels: war novels and novels of critical realism. Nnolim asserts that the second category, in which Achebe’s and Ndibe’s novels belong, portrays the military in a critical light (62-23). Ojinmah agrees with him in his study of Achebe, where he concludes that *Anthills of the Savannah* is a scrutiny of “the military in power in the new nations of Africa” who have failed to liberate the continent from the muddle of corruption and materialism that had been the

singular factor that destroyed their civilian counterparts (86). Benson and Conolly also declare that Achebe's novel "criticizes savagely Nigeria's military regime[s]" (1160).

The two novels explore power relations between the military and civil society, and similarly depict character types that define the image of the military in contemporary times. However, the military in *Arrows of Rain* are more tyrannical in their style of leadership. The Head of State, General Isa Palat Bello, after twenty years in power desires like His Excellency, his counterpart in *Anthills of the Savannah*, to be the Life-President of his country, Madia (15). He succeeds where the latter fails, a feat achieved through raw brutality and a fearful orgy of blackmail, intimidation and bloodshed. The novel focuses on just a single military character and projects his disposition and behaviour as representative of soldiers in the polity. General Bello (a Major before he became Head of State) is an infamous, bloodthirsty and vengeful character with a propensity to cause great injury to others long before he became a despot in Madia. At different times he brutalizes, rapes and eventually murders Iyese, a prostitute he dated. His atrocities against such civilians foreshadowed the mass raping and killing of prostitutes by faceless soldiers when he eventually became Head of State.

Arrows of Rain explores the oppressive character of the military which invariably engenders fear in the society. This is manifest in the life of Ogugua (Bukuru), the protagonist of the novel, who becomes a lunatic to escape a military manhunt. The military stranglehold on the Madian society is so pervasive that none could criticize them openly without endangering himself. When Ogugua publicly declares that General Bello was a rapist and murderer, the judge silences him and bars the press from reporting the matter, a ruling he made for his own safety. Later, the police arrest Ogugua after he told them that soldiers are responsible for raping and killing of prostitutes at the B. Beach. He is detained for the crimes because they dare not

confront the military. It is ironic that his testimony in court is rejected because he is ‘mad’, a condition he voluntarily placed upon himself to escape Major Bello’s ire years before. Such is the Madian society where everyone is haunted by the military, a situation that explains the gloom and listlessness that pervade all aspects of life in the country.

Military leadership is synonymous with misuse of power. Their totalitarian control of Madia makes the government of His Excellency in *Anthills of the Savannah* almost a benevolent one. While Ikem could freely criticize the military in the years before His Excellency lost his bid to become a Life-President in a country Richards proclaims is “deracinated and silenced by a regime which elevates [the] conditions [of oppression] to a fact of life” (134); at no point in *Arrows of Rain* could anyone either in the press or outside it utter any criticism against them in Madia without coming to great harm. They are so high-handed that the first journalist that attempts to photograph soldiers in the post-coup euphoria that greeted the ouster of the civilian government gets beaten up and dies subsequently. In fact, there is seldom any military act in Madia that endears them to the society as they inflict one manner of brutality or another on the people. The novel shows that military brutality did not begin with their intrusion into politics; rather, it has been a way of life with soldiers to place themselves above the laws of the state. Major Bello’s assault on Iyese and his utterances in her apartment are instructive of how the military perceive themselves in the polity. He declares boastfully:

I will kill you without consequence! I will show you that you’re nothing but a common filthy prostitute! Because I brought myself low to sleep with you, you open your dirty trap and tell me you’re not interested. I will show you who is who in this city! (158-159)

And he did ‘show’ her by stabbing, raping (166) and killing her eventually (179). However, it is after the military have taken over political power that their unbridled brutality comes to the fore. Under the guise of waging war against prostitution, soldiers abduct, rape and murder many young girls and women.

Arrows of Rain echoes the experiences of many African countries in the immediate post-independent years. The performance of the military leadership in Madia runs totally against the expectations of the people that had welcomed them into power as redeemers (209). The Madians actually celebrated and joyfully endorsed them for dismissing the corrupt politicians they had voted in to represent them. Few Nigerian novels portray the level of exultation reflected in *Arrows of Rain* at the overthrow of a civilian government. This shows that the military enjoyed unparalleled popularity when they marched into power. They equally received popular approval when they took over power in *Anthills of the Savannah*. It is therefore ironic that the people find themselves at the receiving end of their brutality. They realize too late that while the soldiers could rescue the state from reckless politicians, none can save them from military oppression. The two novels depict the tragic reality of military leaderships and their inability to manage the intricacies of politics. Where tact and statesmanship are required, they apply brute force like their dastardly attempt to stop prostitution by exterminating prostitutes. They fail to realize (or refuse to accept) that the rapid increase in prostitution is a consequence of their mismanagement of the country because prostitution is often a corollary of poverty.

Arrows of Rain depicts the rigid and unforgiving character of the military. Just as His Excellency in *Anthills of the Savannah* punished the Abazon province by starving it of development funds because its people voted against him in the referendum on his life presidency, Major Bello kills Iyese for rejecting him and haunts Ogugua [his rival for her love] first into

insanity and then to suicide. The military's vindictiveness and passion for revenge against civilians in the two novels clearly show their contempt for society. They only tolerate 'bloody civilians' when necessary. For instance, it is typical of them to seek the goodwill of the masses when they are fresh in government to spite the ousted politicians. But as soon as they settle fully in power, they promptly turn against the same people whose support had given their government a semblance of acceptance and legitimacy. Thus, the military in *Anthills of the Savannah* and *Arrows of Rain* show no sense of patriotism, loyalty and discipline; rather, they manifest their opposites with flagrant abuse of human rights.

The role of the police under military leaderships leaves much to be desired. In many Nigerian novels, they often join forces with the military to terrorize the masses, especially the poor. *Anthills of the Savannah* and Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) show that police brutality rivals military autocracy. They seldom identify with the masses even in matters that fall exclusively within their purview. More often than not, they side with soldiers against the civil society. The only time the police confront the military in the polity is when either attempt to assert their superiority over the other. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, the police are widely condemned and described as "rock of mindlessness" after they left a trail of destruction at the University of Bassa. Their vengeful attack on the students was to make up for their failed attempt to arrest their union leaders (173). The attack occurs barely two years after a similar "bloody invasion" have taken place (173). They "went berserk with *koboko* and truncheons [and] fell upon their fleeing victims and chased them into classrooms, the library, the chapel and into dormitories. In the Women's Hostel...they all finally congregated and settled into a fearful orgy of revenge, compounding an ancient sex-feud with today's war of the classes" (173). And when they eventually left the institution; "ambulances screamed in later to collect the wounded

and move them to hospital” (173). Similarly in *Arrows of Rain*, the police attack students with devastating consequences. At the end, “between twenty and thirty corpses were taken away in two police trucks” (*Arrows* 191).

II

Military characterization in *Anthills of the Savannah* reflects inclinations common among soldiers in Nigerian politics. They manifest attitudes of violence, intimidation, aggression, coercion, destruction, distrust of politicians and contempt for civilians. They are hostile to opposition and change, and dread civil uprising or mass protest that could threaten their hold on power. Six military characters are delineated in the novel. These are His Excellency and Head of State, General Sam; Major Samsonite Ossai, his Chief Security Officer and Head of the Secret Police; Major-General Ahmed Lango, his Chief of Army; Captain Abdul Medani, an officer in Major Samsonite’s squad; a nameless Sergeant that searched Beatrice’s apartment and a soldier at the Gelegele market. All other soldiers in the novel operate in groups, a subtle reminder of their penchant for group action in their escapades in society. The novel’s denial of individuality to them reflects a military trait of disclaiming their men’s villainy where positive identification cannot be ascertained. It is also an indictment of the group or regimental mentality they deploy to terrorize civil society.

His Excellency Sam is the major military personality in *Anthills of the Savannah*. He is a typical African tyrant who crushes all real and perceived opposition to his authority. Carrol describes him as “the military ruler of the African state of Kangan [that] disdainfully [treats] his Cabinet like children” (167). He is extremely fearful with a pathological sense of insecurity. His vain and contemptuous attitude toward the masses of the country he rules is a major issue in the novel. When the delegation from Abazon calls to pay their respects, he sends a commissioner to

receive them because he considers it demeaning to grant them audience personally. According to him, “If I should agree to see them, what is there to stop the truck pushers of Gelegele Market marching up here tomorrow to see me. They are just as loyal. Or the very loyal market-women’s organization trooping in to complain about the price of stockfish imported from Norway” (16-17). He is diabolically manipulative and adept at keeping the problems and complaints of Kangans out of the press. He craftily rules out television coverage for the delegation to avoid giving them “undue publicity” that could tempt “everybody” else into “staging goodwill rallies all over the place so as to appear on television” (19). But his motive is clearly to prevent them from rousing other Kangans suffering in silence into agitating for change in the country. He knows that the people have borne so much pain and deprivation but are stifled by fear. Still, they might be roused to action when incited. This captures the kind of military leadership in Nigeria from the mid-eighties to the late nineties.

Sam is an egoistic leader who believes that no other person is capable of succeeding at any task; so he mocks and criticizes his civilian Cabinet for gross incompetence and ineffectiveness. When he instructs Professor Okong to receive the Abazon delegation on his behalf, he practically chooses the very words the intimidated academic should speak. He condescends to him as if he were instructing a moron:

Find some nice words to say to them. Tell them we are tied up at this moment with very important matters of state. You know that kind of stuff... Tell them, if you like, that I am on the telephone with the President of United States of America or the Queen of England. Peasants are impressed by that kind of thing. You know... Humour them, is what I’m saying. Gauge the

temperature and pitch your message accordingly... Now if indeed they have brought a petition, accept it on my behalf and tell them they can rest assured that their complaints or rather problems – their problems, not complaints, will receive His Excellency’s personal attention... But for God’s sake, Professor, I want you to look at the man you are shaking hands with instead of the camera... (17-18)

Sam is opinionated and disdains politicians and intellectuals. He tolerates them when he needs their services but generally treats them with contempt. He ridicules them for their instability and readiness to compromise to gain favours. These “colonized intellectuals” (Fanon 37) often pander to anyone in power and their sponsors. Because they jostle for political appointments from the military regime, Sam has no respect for them. This is obvious in the manner he handles Professor Okong in his office. First, he watches with amusement as the Professor attempts to discredit another commissioner, Chris Oriko; then he dismisses him ignominiously and reflects thereafter:

Disgraceful! Soft to the core, that’s what they all are. Professor!
But come to think of it, whatever put it into our head when we [the military] arrived on this seat that we needed these half-baked professors to tell us anything. What do they know? Give me good military training and discipline any day! (21)

This incident wipes out what little regard he has for intellectuals. Subsequently, his government becomes fully militarized and he prides himself as the most feared person in his country. Progressively, he degenerates and cultivates a belligerent attitude against anyone that contradicts

or criticizes him, finally joining the league of notorious African military tyrants like the late Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), Jean Bokassa of Central African Republic and Idi Amin Dada of Uganda to mention just a few.

Sam rules Kangan with an iron fist. Not even his closest ministers are immune to his tyranny, and he ensures that each man never forgets who the boss is. Chris Oriko, 'the first witness' describes his domineering attitude at a Cabinet session thus:

For a full minute or so the fury of his eyes lay on me. Briefly our eyes had been locked in combat. Then I had lowered mine to the shiny table-top in ceremonial capitulation. Long silence. But he was not appeased. Rather he was making the silence itself grow rapidly into its own kind of contest, like the eyewink duel of children. I conceded victory there as well. Without raising my eyes, I said again: 'I'm very sorry, Your Excellency.' (1)

It is such subservience by all the commissioners that keeps them out of detention. Sam's only worry is mass uprising. His anxiety over the crowd that accompany the Abazonian delegation to the Presidential Palace reveals a weak side of him. He rules with fear. It shows that the military are conscious of the power of the people when they unite in action. Chris reflects on His Excellency's phobia about mob actions:

This is something I have never been able to figure out: Why the military armed to the teeth as they are can find unarmed civilians such a threat. For His Excellency . . . I can see no other explanation for his quite irrational and excessive fear of demonstrations, for example. Even pathetically peaceful,

obsequious demonstrations His constant nightmare was of the people falling into disaffection and erupting into ugly demonstrations all over the place, and he drove himself crazy worrying how to prevent it. (12-13)

Sam is very fearful of falling short of the expectations of foreign powers. It is a denunciation of the military in developing countries who often strive to please their foreign collaborators. That Sam strives to win the approval of the West while his government remains very unpopular at home is a satiric reflection of many past military governments in Africa that spend more resources laundering their image abroad than on providing for their citizenry. His persistent apprehension that “Entebbe” could happen in Kangan is a sad commentary on African militaries who believe that because they have emasculated the people, only foreign powers could arrest their tyranny. Invariably, where the military believe they have the goodwill of Western powers, they oppress the people with little restraint.

A common feature of the military in politics is their inability to appreciate the true situations and problems in the polity. Sam develops a penchant for the theatrical because he is out of touch with reality; and like most tyrants, he regards Kangan as a stage upon which he plays out his fantasies. At a convention of Heads of State he attended, he finds inspiration in two of the worst tyrants in the continent and returns home wearing the visage of one (an octogenarian) and mimicking the speech habit of the other. Ikem Osodi, another witness, considers the absurdity of the situation and wonders in disbelief why “a young man [should wish] he could look like an octogenarian!” (52) Sam is the most developed military character in *Anthills of the Savannah*. He represents the type of soldier that is despicable and unworthy of leadership in society.

Major Samsonite Ossai represents another type of soldier. He is the physical embodiment of the terror that hangs over society. He represents the type that is brutish and monstrous with a singleness of purpose in carrying out his duty. As a favourite of His Excellency, Major Ossai performs his nefarious duties so well that he becomes the sole officer in the novel that earns the full admiration of the military despot. His description as “young, brilliant and aggressive” (14) negates the humane character of an ideal soldier. It is an unequivocal denouncement of a character that perfects the art of torture and pain to inflict great misery on his victims. With him in charge of His Excellency’s elite security organization, he ravages the military hierarchy with “secret trials and executions in the barracks” (14). He carries with him an evil aura and a sense of foreboding wherever he goes. All fear him including his superiors in the army. He is introduced in the novel as:

[T]he man who, as rumour has it, returned from an intensive course in Latin American army and invented the simplest of tortures for preliminary interrogations. No messy or cumbersome machinery but a tiny piece of office equipment anyone could pick up in a stationery store and put in his pocket – a paper stapler in short, preferably the Samsonite brand. Just place the hand where the paper should be – palm up or down doesn’t really matter – and bang. The truth jumps out surprisingly fast even from the hardest of cases. (106)

Major Ossai is therefore the military vehicle of pain, torture and death. He symbolizes that dark aspect of soldiers that is hardly decent or civilized. The fact that he is not given any family background in the novel puts him farther away from humanity. His relentlessness and

notoriety for hunting down his victims by extra-judicial means speak volumes of the military's disregard for the rule of law. He is one of the most despicable military characters in Nigerian novels.

Two other significant military characters in the novel are General Ahmed Lango and Captain Abdul Medani. Though they are less developed than the two above, their personalities are quite instructive about the character of the military. General Lango is an intimidating presence and is presumed to be the second in command to His Excellency as Chief of Staff. But like all despots, Sam gives no significant power to anyone else and he plays second fiddle just long enough to overthrow his boss. He assumes power after the death of His Excellency and attracts much skepticism from the people whose lot has not improved after many years of military government. General Lango's 'coup' does not receive the almost ritualistic celebrations that greet sudden changes of governments in the past. In place of celebrations are questions raised on "where this loyal officer [General Lango] was hiding in the first twenty-four hours after his commander was kidnapped from the palace by 'unknown persons', tortured, shot in the head and buried under one foot of soil in the bush" (218-219). This rise in the peoples' consciousness indicates that they have become less gullible through past experiences under the military. General Lango is therefore adjudged disloyal and treacherous because his loyalty to his commander-in-chief is false, his patriotism to his nation porous and his selflessness in service questionable. The people refuse to celebrate him because they know their situation will not improve from what it has been under His Excellency. He is just another soldier that has shot his way to power to continue the dynastic military tyranny.

In contrast, Captain Medani is 'a good soldier' from a moralistic view because he identifies with the oppressed and the struggling masses of Kangan. However from a military

perspective, his actions are tantamount to disloyalty and betrayal. He compromises the military government of Kangan which he serves by working against it and undermines the success of the mission he is part of. If he had been caught before the coup, he would have been executed. Nonetheless, he escapes detection and his sabotage of a military 'mission' goes unpunished. He therefore represents the conscientious soldier who can discern between 'good' and 'bad' orders. On the surface, he obeys the commands of his superiors but covertly subverts them to satisfy his 'conscience'. In other words, he does not allow his sense of duty to his country becloud his moral sense of right and wrong.

Captain Medani's character in the novel is very complex and controversial. Firstly, he represents the ideal soldier who subjects the orders of his superiors to moral scrutiny before acting on them. Though he is 'loyal' enough to accept their orders, he truncates them when he assumes 'command.' His character is a strident revelation that a soldier can be sensitive to the injustices in the society. He strives to uphold justice even at the risk of losing both his job and his life. Secondly, his character punctures the myth that the military are monolithic in thought with a calcified ideology that obliterates in them all sense of justice. His actions further illustrate that the armed forces embody characters with disparate moral dispositions and socio-political views. With two significant actions in the novel, captain Medani demonstrates that the propensity for violence and destruction common among soldiers are alien to him. When he leads the search for Chris to Beatrice's apartment, he is courteous and keeps the vengeful Sergeant from tearing apart the whole flat (176). The "flash from the utmost depths of contempt and hatred" in the sergeant's eyes (177) indicates that the captain is definitely not his idea of a 'good' officer. To the Sergeant, the captain is an encumbrance to his determination to do 'a thorough

job' on the apartment. So he considers him a clog in the wheel of military efficiency; a type too soft to be a soldier in the first place.

Four other soldiers in *Anthills of the Savannah* are: the soldier of the Gelegele Market episode; the sergeant that searched Beatrice's apartment; the escort sent to take Beatrice to the Presidential Retreat, and the chauffeur of the vehicle that conveyed the two. All four are not named in the novel. The first two represent the worst type of soldiers while the last two show that soldiers are not different from the rest of society. The brutality and aggressiveness of the first two are diametrically at variance with the courteous civility of the escort and the chauffeur. Perhaps the status of the persons involved with the soldiers informs the ways they respond to them. The Gelegele soldier treats his victim contemptuously because he is a mere commoner. This is tenable when considered in the light of the escort's and chauffeur's attitudes toward Beatrice. They address her with great civility and respect because she is eminent enough to be a guest of The Head of State. However, by the time her apartment was searched by the sergeant, she has become 'an enemy of the state.' So the sergeant does not hide his contempt for his superior officer who insists on addressing her courteously. These events suggest that soldiers are class conscious and biased with regard to status in their relationships in society. These tendencies are also portrayed in Iyayi's *Heroes* (1986), Okpewho's *The Last Duty* (1976) and *Tides* (1993) and Habila's *Waiting for An Angel* (2002) where soldiers show deference to highly placed persons but treat commoners condescendingly.

III

The equivalent of His Excellency in *Arrows of Rain* is Major [and later General] Palat Bello. Osundare describes him as a "spoilt, foul-mouthed alcoholic scion of an oligarchic dynasty" (n. pag.). He is the image of the brutal, aggressive, heartless and vindictive soldier; a

type that casts a dreadful shadow over the life of any that crosses his path and will not relent till he destroys the victim. That is the fate of Ogugua in the novel whose life became a nightmare after he encountered him. Bello's character is achieved by a deliberate concentration of negative and repulsive attitudes common with misanthropes in a single personality. His background in the novel reveals that he is evil by nature; not because he is a soldier. The military is merely a haven from which he pursues his diabolical desire to be "a man from whom people skulked away in dread" (162).

Major Bello has been of erratic character from his youth. Being the son of an Emir, a highly venerated political and religious leader in the Nigeria, he is a law to himself and bullies with impunity persons he considers below his social status. The military training he receives at Sandhurst only emboldens him and increases his propensity for violence against others. With a bad temper compounded by alcoholism, his destructive and sadistic tendencies turn him into a social miscreant. He is eventually banished from his father's palace when his shameful conduct became unbearable for his parent to condone (162). However, the expulsion fails to deter him and he continues his reckless lifestyle into marriage and the senior ranks of the military.

The implication of the foregoing is better appreciated against the backdrop of a society where the military are regarded as 'super-citizens' above the common laws of the land. Eghagha describes their activities in the novel as irresponsible, deceptive and destructive to the psyche of the citizenry (17-19). Major Bello's excesses continue unchallenged because the police are in a dilemma at what to do with felonious soldiers like him as past attempts to accost them have degenerated into violent confrontations between the two forces. Until recently in Nigeria, hardly a year passes by without the nation witnessing a confrontation between policemen and soldiers

resulting in large scale destruction in the ensuing mayhem. Such occurrences are telltale signs of a country in a state of anomy.

Though Major Bello appears just in one episode in *Arrows of Rain* in chapter sixteen where he invades Iyese's apartment, it is enough to reveal the character of the recalcitrant army officer. This brief appearance presages what the man is capable of doing. His bestiality in the gory raping of Iyese (reported in chapter seventeen) and her brutal murder (reported in chapter eighteen) show he is a demented character. His hatred for society is so gruesomely delineated that a cursory reading of the novel could leave an impression that *Arrows of Rain* is an indulgence in the gory and the melodramatic. However, atrocities of soldiers in other Nigerian novels like Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Eddie Iroh's *Forty-eight Guns for the General* (1976), Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1986), and Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) are testimonies of what some soldiers are capable of doing. Still, the difference between these novels and *Arrows of Rain* is obvious: they are war novels. That a group of soldiers could invade a woman's home outside a war situation, stab her in the most delicate of places, rape her and go scot-free is a denunciation of society where the military take control of political leadership and hold the people hostage. Such society not only alienates the people, but allows their oppression by an institution that should protect them. It is a society where impunity thrives, where the strong dominate the weak without fear of being challenged.

The weak link in Major Bello's personality in *Arrows of Rain* is its achievement through indirect reports and hearsay from unnamed persons. These make his image rather hazy and imprecise in the story. In other words, there is more 'telling' than 'showing' in his characterization. Such delineation comes about because of the social gulf between the military and the rest of society. Another significant element in the novel is that none of the events is

presented from the point of view of the military. This is why Major Bello is portrayed as one of the most diabolical soldiers in the Nigerian novel. The other military characters in the novel lack individual identities just as in *Anthills of the Savannah* where soldiers acted in groups rather than individually. Thus, in both novels, witnesses relate or report the ‘brutal’ activities of faceless soldiers operating in groups like a pack of hyenas.

IV

In conclusion, the depiction of the military in both novels reveals the bestiality of soldiers against civil society. Though the two succeed in exposing the diabolic and misanthropic elements in the military, only one military character is well developed in each. Despite the fact that other military characters in *Anthills of the Savannah* are better realized than those in *Arrows of Rain*, their image in both is achieved through replication of stereotypical attitudes often associated with soldiers. The most telling is their use of violence, intimidation, aggression and coercion rather than compromise or negotiation when dealing with conflicts in society. They are equally very conservative and distrustful of politicians and believe that civilians are inferior to them. These, generally, are the hallmark of military characterization in most Nigerian novels.

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