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# Sportswashing and the Antecedents of Sports Diplomacy in Kenya, 1920-1964

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Despite a growing body of literature on sports diplomacy in Kenya, the colonial antecedents of diplomacy through sports in the country are largely unexplored. This article delved into the colonial past to understand how the state employed sportswashing as a form of public diplomacy within Kenya and in enhancing its image globally amidst racial injustices against Africans. The article explores the place of sports in epistemic violence, Cold War politics, and anti-Mau Mau propaganda. The author examined primary and secondary sources to understand the practices of sportswashing in Kenya and around the world between 1920 and 1964.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sportswashing in Kenya has a historical background to the colonial period. The term implies the use of sports persons and events by oppressive regimes to detract from their

oppressive practices<sup>1</sup>. Though it is an anachronism to claim that colonial agents were consciously engaged in Sportswashing as the term has gained currency in the recent past, the practice has a long history across the world. This article

<sup>1</sup> Sarah K. Ganji, Rise of Sportswashing, *Journal of Democracy*, 2023, p.5

dives into history to understand how colonial agents such as administrators, Christian missionaries, and security officials used sports to detract the local and international public from colonial ills and epistemic violence. It also establishes links with the practice in the West at the time. The article covers the period between 1920 when Kenya became a British protectorate and 1964 when it gained full independence.

The subject of sports diplomacy in Kenya has increasingly received substantial scholarly attention. Wasonga and Sati documented how Kenya has leveraged the outstanding performance of its sportsmen and women to enhance its political image and economic interests. The authors noted that outstanding performance on the international stage and sports tourism have massive commercial benefits. For them, Kenya has a good landscape for high-altitude training, canoeing, golf, and kayaking. Hotels and the tourism industry greatly benefit from this. Adventure camps have capitalized on these experiences and provide services to help tourists navigate through the landscape. Historically, the authors traced the origins of Kenya's success to international competitions during the colonial period such as the Indian Ocean Competitions, the Fifth British Empire and Commonwealth Games, and debutant Olympic participation in 1956. However, the authors did not investigate how colonial authorities employed sports in discrediting the Mau Mau or how fielded multi-racial teams to international events as a cover-up for racial segregation and atrocities it meted on the Kenyan people.<sup>2</sup>

Kinyili and Chaudhry observed that although sports diplomacy has made great strides in achieving international, regional, and local unity, little is still known about its influence in developing countries. Their study examined the means of incorporating sports in diplomacy in Kenya. The authors observed that sporting events

in athletics and volleyball improved diplomacy and restored peace in several areas of Kenya. For them, peace was promoted through sports by respecting human rights, the rule of law, and equality among the conflicting groups. Sports also enhanced unity, trust, loyalty, friendship, and team building among the conflicting communities. The authors thus recommended that sports should be used to enhance diplomacy since it is less used in this field. Further, they encouraged the government to appoint more sports ambassadors with proper diplomacy knowledge to help in diplomatic relationships.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the authors superficially treated the colonial origins of sports diplomacy. Additionally, their scope did not include the use of sports as a cover-up mechanism for colonial injustices in Kenya.

Mathew Carotenuto examined the resurgence of traditional wrestling in Kenya's correctional services after independence. The author noted that wrestling and other forms of indigenous martial traditions were marginalized because they did not fit the colonial sports policy of social discipline, political obedience, and notions of muscular Christianity. Carotenuto further argued that the resurgence of neo-traditional wrestling in Kenya's prisons provided an opportunity for understanding the history of state patronage of sports. It revealed continuities with the colonial past such as the use of sport as a pacifying moral force for the youth, colonial criminal justice systems and state role in centralizing and controlling sports.<sup>4</sup>

Bryon Kipchumba and Rose Chepyator-Thomson traced development of sports policy to the colonial period during which sports were riddled with racial discrimination. According to the authors, authorities encouraged sports among Africans as a means of instilling discipline and stopping political agitation. Among the Europeans, sports served as an integrative factor. At independence, the government adopted African Socialism as a

<sup>2</sup> John Wasonga and Sati, T. The Use of Sports in Promotion of Kenyan Diplomatic Interests and Tourism Industry, *Sports Management* 2023

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Mutuku Kinyili & Shazia Chaudhry, Sports in Advancing Diplomacy in Kenya (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Mathew Carotenuto, 'Crafting Sport History Behind Bars: Wrestling with State patronage and Colonial Confinement in Kenya', *History in Africa* 43 (2015): 21–37.

blueprint for social, economic, and political development. In line with tenets of African Socialism, the government essentially became the catalyst for sports administration and development. Today, professionalization and globalization of sports have challenged the government's position as the most important determinant of sports policy.<sup>5</sup> Although the authors examined the extent to which political trends reflected in sports policy in Kenya, the authors did not engage in sportswashing and cover up for injustices meted out on the people by the colonial and post-colonial authorities. The foregoing review reveals existing knowledge gap on the beginning of manipulation of sports events to cover up the ills of the colonial regime from the eyes of Kenyan and the international community.

### Methodology

The researcher employed ex post facto design to identify events that have already occurred and then collect data to investigate a possible relationship between the factors. The design is suitable as the researcher investigated antecedent events and causes using primary and secondary data to make logical conclusions and inferences (Best & Khan, 1995, p. 85; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

The researcher used different primary documents to explore the practices of sportswashing in colonial Kenya. First, official records such as minutes of meetings, reports, and organizational policies on gender among other documents from the stakeholders of sports management. Second, pictures and video recordings of events in Kenyan sports from the periods. Third, relics such as sport goods, trophies and art objects depicting the theme of sportswashing in Kenyan sports. Secondary sources of information were pivotal in obtaining scholarship into the subject. Important secondary sources included books, scholarly

articles, monographs, historical novels, and other reproductions of information.

The cultural theory of history provided the main analytical lens. Cultural theory is a multidisciplinary framework for interpreting culture, power, gender, identities, social systems and historical change. The theory can generally be traced through the theoretical waves of structuralism, post-structuralism, post-modernism and post-colonialism and their imprint on the study of the past. It combines concepts of meaning and culture drawn from linguistics, cultural anthropology, literary studies, sociology and philosophy. The theory's concepts are divided into 'soft' versions, dealing with interpretation, representation and meaning, and 'hard' versions which are directed towards knowledge, politics and social control.<sup>6</sup>

The researcher also employed the concepts of historical time and historical space in making sense of data. After carefully analyzing and interpreting data, the researcher began to make inferences and generalizations. The researcher largely used inductive reasoning. The researcher employed an operating framework that is thematic and contextualized through narratives to report the findings. This is because the article set out to understand the link between the use of colonial agents and the practice of Sportswashing.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Practices of Sportswashing in Colonial Kenya

Pre-colonial Kenyan societies organized competitions to offer spectacle to members of the community. Competitions in sports such as wrestling could be organized pitching wrestlers from different villages and sub-clans against each other. Such events could also be organized as competitions between clans. The inter-clan competitions were higher in profile and attracted more interest from community members.

<sup>5</sup> Bryon Kipchumba and Rose Chepyator-Thomson Jepkorir, 'Sports Policy in Kenya: Deconstruction of Colonial and Post-Colonial Conditions' *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 7, No. 2 (2015), pp. 301–313.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), p. 188; Lloyd Kramer, Review of Simon Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2006) in *The Journal of Modern History*, 80, (2008), pp. 905–907.

However, after the British occupied Kenya, communities gradually began to organize competitions based on the colonial administrative boundaries in addition to competitions within and between clans. But such competitions increasingly became fewer and far between as authorities and missionaries unleashed epistemic violence on African cultures.

### ***African Sports, Games, and European Epistemic Violence***

Missionaries used sports to distract Africans from what they perceived as licentious and retrogressive recreations. Europeans operating in Kenya in the early colonial period compared the values of African games and sports to those of the pleasures of the so-called civilized people. For instance, an editor with the only daily in colonial Kenya opined that although games and sports had always been part of African life, their influence was degrading akin to the pleasures of those he regarded civilized people. The editor further warned missionaries that continuation of what he considered harmful African recreations would retard and hamper education and Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

There was consensus among European sports managers that the speed of acceptance of athletics and football by Africans depended, to a large extent, on effacing or defacing indigenous games and sports. As such, the popularization of the two sports went hand in hand with the denigration of African sports. In 1928, for instance, an editor with the only daily in colonial Kenya compared the values of African games and sports to those of the pleasures of the so-called civilized people. The editor wrote:

*Play has always occupied a great part of the primitive people. Much of it has been degrading in its influence as are many of the pleasures of the so-called civilized community*

*... the influences of education and religion are weakened by the continuation of harmful amusements and in an African colony every section of the [European] community has discovered in its work the retarding and hampering effects of the worst forms of amusement.<sup>8</sup>*

Europeans seem to have looked down on African games and sports not only because they differed from theirs in form but also because of the contrasting moral values. The introduction of European forms of sports was thus part of the wider epistemic violence unleashed on different forms of African culture.

In any case, the entire missionary project was meant to salvage Africans from what missionaries considered heathen to righteousness. In this binary thinking, Europeans easily dismissed African games and dances as acts of ribaldry. For some missionaries, the term ‘evil dance’ became a metonym for African forms of leisure, games, and sports. For instance, in praise of adoption of the European games at Tumutumu schools, Marion Stevenson, arguably the most thoroughgoing CSM educationist of her time commented on the schoolboys’ play, ‘They had this healthy outlet of their energies in great contrast to the evils of the village which soon sullied their young minds.’<sup>9</sup> Football and athletics were thus substitutes for African games and leisure practices. In some cases, missionaries colluded with authorities to outlaw African dances. For instance, the Municipal Council of Mombasa finally legislated to outlaw Swahili dances designated as immoral. Selected types of dances could only be performed under a permit from the district administration.<sup>10</sup> However, the socialization of African children into European sports did not entirely determine their understanding of sports.

<sup>7</sup> Editor, ‘African Sports’, *East African Standard*, January 30, 1928, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Editor, ‘African Sports’, *East African Standard*, 30 January 1928, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Marion Stevenson as cited in Cunningham, *These Our Games*, p. 271. For missionary classification of the customs

and practices Kenyan communities, see ‘Report of the United Missionaries Conference, Nairobi, 1909’ in G. H. Mungean, *Kenya: Selected Historical Documents 1884–1923* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1979), pp. 167–68.

<sup>10</sup> A. I. Salim, *Swahili Speaking Peoples of Kenya’s Coast 1895–1965* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973), p. 158.



World War I presented a unique moment of legitimization for missionary education. The government issued a Compulsory Service Order that required the recruitment of 40,000 Africans for military labor in German East Africa on 26 March 1917. The CSM led other missionary societies in responding to the service order. John Arthur, the head of the CSM mission at Kikuyu, turned first to the boy's brigade and then to other schoolboys and teachers for his scheme of a missionary carrier corps. Arthur was convinced that sports and physical training offered prepared the groups for this 'call of duty'. On the necessity for African schoolboys, teachers, and other workers to join the war, Arthur opined:

*They [have] the opportunity of ... walking in the path of duty's call ... [to] go forth willingly in obedience to that call. Further, it would be a testimony to the government that they are not afraid to help; to the whole white community that the abuses hurled on the heads of mission boys were untrue, and without foundation; to the chiefs and the whole of their own Kikuyu people that the teaching they received with us was not such to unman them, but rather to make them better and truer men.<sup>11</sup>*

As the war raged in Tanganyika and as people died and others got maimed, sports became the most important means of lighting the spirits and stimulating enthusiasm in the dull camps.<sup>12</sup> Sporting thus served as consolation for dragging Africans to die and get maimed in European wars.

### ***Colonial Provincial Administrators and Sports Safaris: the Case of Nandi District***

Sports competitions among the Nandi took a new turn in the immediate post-World War II period. While competitions had hitherto been organized largely to mitigate cattle raiding and contain the restless youths, the post-World War II saw their

organization as a way of boosting the spirit of the community. Perhaps as a 'reward' for their perceived loyalty, provincial administrators organized what they termed 'sports safaris'. The 'safaris' were soon extended to areas occupied by the Kipsigis and Abagusii culminating in what became known as Athletics Triangular Meeting.<sup>13</sup> During the 'safaris' the DO traversed locations to preside over competitions. In 1950 the DO praised the Nandi for what he perceived as loyalty and insinuated sports as a means to sustaining the loyalty. The DO wrote:

*It was encouraging to observe and meet such healthy and open-hearted men who certainly do not give any obvious impression of being in the least politically minded, or burdened with a sense of injustice. I have heard that in many places the carefree African of former days has given way to a harassed humourless mal-content. I am glad to be able to say that my impressions of this [sic] people are that the former portrait is still largely true of the Nandi.<sup>14</sup>*

For such people thought not to pose an immediate threat to British rule in Kenya, the DO prescribed sports with a lesser emphasis on their use as a means to check agitation. He suggested that athletics 'might give a new opportunity for articulate expression and encouragement to the valuable communal spirit innate in these people at a time when the ingress of Western ideas seems likely to cause some disintegration of the traditional pattern of life and outlook.'<sup>15</sup>

### ***Sportswashing and Politics of Global Sports during the Cold War***

It is important to characterize the politics of sports as Kenya joined the international sports arena in the 1950s. These were the early years of the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union, the main protagonists of the war, sought to make

<sup>11</sup> John Arthur, 'Letters from Dr. Arthur', *Kikuyu News*, 1917, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Max Yeorgan, 'The Y.M.C.A with Native Troops and Military Labourers in East Africa' in G. H. Mungean, *Kenya: Selected Historical Documents, 1884 – 1923* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1979), p. 256.

<sup>13</sup> See KNA/DC/KAPT/1/20/2: Athletics Triangular Meeting.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp. 4–5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

sports a frontline of their propaganda wars. The protagonists placed sports ideologies, particularly amateurism and professionalism, at the heart of propaganda through sports. In this sense, amateurism was embodied through athletes' sacrifice for their countries, adherence to fair play and non-monetary motivation. Professional athletes were believed to represent the opposite of these values. To proclaim a high moral ground in international sports, both protagonists claimed to advance amateur ideals in sports. They also branded athletes from the opposite divide of the Cold War as being professionals and of being states' agents. Such polemics continued despite the heavy involvement of the United States and Soviet Union secret services in projecting national character through international sports.<sup>16</sup>

Another defining feature of the international sports arena that Kenya entered in the 1950s was the place of politics in sports. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Olympic movement in general, presented itself as the exemplar of the separation of sports and politics. This was a far cry from reality. Sports historians like David Goldblatt, the author of *The Games: A Global History of the Olympics*, argue that the IOC's dominance of international sports was propelled by the politics of the Cold War. Such historians observe that, although Olympic Games were part of the biggest world sporting spectacles before World War II, the Cold War transformed them into the most dominant international sports events they are today. This is because the war created an environment of 'good guys and bad guys' that resonated with the creation of Olympic narratives that transcend respective Olympiads. The Olympics thus became the theatrical stage of great storytelling and deconstructing Cold War enemies. And the advent of the television in the

1960s cemented the marriage of sports with Cold War politics thereby allowing the dramatization of rivalries and soft power projection through the Olympics.<sup>17</sup>

Race relations in the United States were an easy target for the Soviet Union. The US State Department hatched a scheme of using black sports persons as a symbol of progress in the leveling ground for marginalized races in American society. One aspect of the scheme involved using African-American athletes as cultural and career diplomats. Such diplomats were sent to coach and give talks on American domestic and foreign policy in African countries as a means of thwarting communist influence. Although black athletes accepted such deployments to Africa, sports historians doubt their dedication to falsifying progress in race relations back home. The other aspect involved athletic scholarships in the United States. Kenya and Ethiopia, the most dominant nations in contemporary distance running, were great beneficiaries of United States cultural diplomacy in the Cold War era.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Sports at the Twilight of Colonialism***

For the colonial masters in Africa, sports presented opportunities for continued influence as colonialism began to cede ground to self-determination. They fashioned sports competitions as a part of the change from an empire system to a relationship of friendship and 'assistance' to Africa. Britain, for instance, opened doors for athletes from its colonies like Kenya to participate in the 1954 British Empire and Commonwealth Games 1954. In the early 1960s, France organized two editions of the Friendship Games for Francophone territories before allowing non-Francophone countries to

<sup>16</sup> Vince Hunt and Sport in the Cold War Episode 13: Sport and Statecraft in the US produced by Wilson Centre, podcast, MP3 audio, accessed 16 May 2022. <https://www.digitalarchives.org>.

*Sport in the Cold War* is a series podcast started as part of the build-up to the 2012 London Olympics and is hosted by Vince Hunt, a British radio producer. Each episode is based on interview with sports historians and is based on archival data, artefacts or events that changed the course of sports during the Cold War era. The series is sponsored by the

Woodrow Wilson Centre and may be accessed at the Wilson Centre Digital Archive.

<sup>17</sup> Vince Hunt and David Goldblatt, Sport in the Cold War Episode 32: Politics at the Olympics produced by Wilson Centre, podcast, MP3 audio, accessed 16 May 2022. <https://www.digitalarchives.org>.

<sup>18</sup> Vince Hunt and Kevin Witherspoon, Sport in the Cold War Episode 11: 'Marvelous' Mal Whitfield produced by Wilson Centre, podcast, MP3 audio, accessed 16 May 2022. <https://www.digitalarchives.org>.

participate in consequent competitions. Colonial powers like Portugal that were unable to stage mega events for their colonial subjects allowed sportspersons, especially footballers, to join teams in the metropole and even play for the Portuguese national team. But this interest in sports in Africa was also a means of checking the Soviet Union's influence in emerging nations after Guinea Bissau aligned with the union after independence in 1958. Even the IOC was an anti-Soviet organization. During the Presidency of American Avery Brundage (1952–1957), it took interest in offering technical and logistical support during the All-Africa Games right from its inception in 1965.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, in areas of Kenya where agitation gave way to the Mau Mau Uprising sports competitions were organized largely for resistance from 'crime'. The Mau Mau was a guerilla movement that fought against British colonial machinery between 1952 and 1957. In the aftermath of the Mau Mau war, authorities advanced the sports as forms of therapeutic recreation and rehabilitation. The target was the youthful population, especially males, considered to harbour the highest tendency for rebellion and antisocial behaviour. Beginning in 1955 in Nyeri and Meru, for instance, mass physical recreation schemes were organized in the villages. Mr. G. A. Orlos, Rehabilitation Officer and Physical Trainer conducted training courses for African Rehabilitation Assistants, tribal policemen, and two men from each location with the object of organizing sports programs at the locational level. In some cases, voluntary village sports organizers would attend the training courses.<sup>20</sup> The Colony Sports Officer and DCs in the region agreed on the rationale for the recreation schemes and training courses. They felt 'that the organization of physical recreation in the villages was of

paramount importance particularly for the younger grades whose spare time previously had been spent in political activities.'<sup>21</sup>

In some places like South Tetu, divisional sports were publicized as celebrations of the downfall of the Mau Mau and the opportunity to put across anti-Mau Mau propaganda.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the expectation of mutual disapproval of the Mau Mau guerillas was premised on that in numerous cases they raided the civilian populations for supplies. Additionally, the *Komerera*, arguably a Mau Mau renegade group, was accused of atrocities including rape of women and girls.<sup>23</sup> While this study does not repudiate the potential of sports in mitigating crime and antisocial behaviour, it points to the uncritical dimension that sport, organized based on *esprit de corps* or recreational therapy, was powerful enough to erode the feeling of injustice and the desire for self-determination among all African communities. It also points to the link between sports and European paternalism epitomized by their presumption of the position of asking moral questions about Africans.

### *Colonial State and Sports Diplomacy in the Olympics*

The need to legitimize the colonial state made authorities favoured deportment over sporting prowess and fitness in the selection of teams for international competitions. For instance, during the selection exercise for the team for the 1956 Olympics, R. S. Alexander, KOA's Chairman, reminded those in charge of the exercise of the selection policy, 'The eyes of the world will be on Kenya in Melbourne, and so anybody with fancy ideas or peculiarities has no place in the Kenya side.'<sup>24</sup> At the ceremony to present Olympic Colours to the team that was to represent Kenya

<sup>19</sup> Vince Hunt and Matt Centrowitz, Sport in the Cold War Episode 29: the African Friendship Games produced by Wilson Centre, podcast, MP3 audio, accessed 16 May 2022. <https://www.digitalarchives.org>.

<sup>20</sup> KNA/AB/4/15 Community Development Report: Sport, 1955, p. 9

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>23</sup> See P. K. Kiragu, 'A Biography of "Field Marshal" Muthoni Kirima of the Mau Mau Movement, 1930–2015' MA Thesis, Egerton University, 2016, p. 40

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. For atrocities committed by the authorities during the Mau Mau War see Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

in the 1960 Olympics in Rome, Governor Renison asserted:

*I would like to take this opportunity to emphasize... the responsibility that you carry with you when you go to Rome ... It will be a vast international concourse at which you will be judged not only on your individual prowess at the Games but, infinitely more importantly, on your sportsmanship, your bearing and your conduct. It is not so much you who will be judged, but Kenya which will be judged through you.*<sup>25</sup>

This conceptualization of sports added to mechanisms of exclusion that riddled all aspects of life in colonial Kenya. Despite incorporating the goal of forging unity regardless of race, creed, status and other social dynamics, those who ‘failed’ the deportment test, such as Surjeet Singh who spoke about racial divisions within Kenya’s contingent to 1956 Melbourne Olympics, were sanctioned and condemned.<sup>26</sup>

Another link to sportswashing was the appointment of attaches to Kenya’s teams during international competitions. Colonial authorities appointed attachés to the Olympic teams from European residents of the countries hosting the respective games. The practice served to elevate the ‘diplomatic role’ over the actual competition. Furthermore, the credentials for attaché inclined more towards their ability to enhance the image of the colonial state and had little to do with either their knowledge or interest in sports. Recommending Peter Howson’s appointment as attaché to Kenya’s team to the 1956 Olympic Games, Harold Holt, an officer at Australia’s Immigration Ministry, outlined his suitability to include: service as a Lieutenant of the British Naval Force, fellowship of the Australian Institute of Management, delegate of the Church of England Synod, and chairman of committees of the Prahran Boy Scout’s Association.

Interestingly, Holt admitted to knowing very little of Howson’s sporting background and interest.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

As a sports powerhouse, Kenya has a long tradition of using sports diplomacy as a means of enhancing her image. Sports diplomacy has served to advance Kenya’s political, economic and social interests. However, the country’s sports diplomacy tradition has origins in the colonial period during which authorities utilized sports events locally and internationally to cover up the ills meted on Africans and their traditions. This article uncovered practices of sportswashing as employed by the colonial authority. The uncovering is crucial in foregrounding some of the mechanisms that inform the misuse of sports in Kenya today. The author recommends further studies on the history of sports in Kenya to enable stakeholders to understand the entwining of different interest groups and how the entwining structures different aspects of sports in contemporary times.

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Governor Presents Olympic Colours’, *Kenya Olympic Review*, Vol. 1, No. 6, June/July, 1960, 1.

<sup>26</sup> See KNA/A2G1/30/1: Asian, Arab Africa, ‘Report of the Committee of Investigation into the Poor Performance of the Hockey Team to the Melbourne Olympics.’

<sup>27</sup> KNA/A2/G1/30/1 Asian, Arab, African: Harold Holt to Reggie Alexander, 26 November 1955.



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