Othering by naming. The function of unconventional names in German colonial literature

Marie A. Rieger

University of Bologna, Italy

Abstract: German colonial literature celebrates the colonizers' domination of a foreign people, while justifying the domination by the colonizers' mission to civilize the allegedly inferior *Others*. The underlying colonial ideology is overtly expressed by the storyline in general and by stereotyped and mostly negative representations of the *Others*. In this article I will argue that the authors of German colonial novels also used the opposition between *conventional* and *unconventional* names in order to emphasize the alleged otherness and inferior status of their African characters. The analysis will include 25 novels set in German East Africa and published between 1891 and 1955.

Keywords: German colonial literature, literary names, unconventional names, onomastics, colonial linguistics.

Introduction

Within German literary studies the term *Kolonialliteratur* (colonial literature) refers to fictional texts, first published approximately between 1890 and 1945, that celebrate the appropriation of remote territories and the concurrent subjugation of their inhabitants (cf. Gutjahr and Hermes 2011b: 7). In contrast to what may be expected, my interest in colonial novels is not that of literary scholarship, but that of the broader research field of *Colonial and Postcolonial Linguistics*[1]. Within this general research program, my personal focus is on the continuity of colonial thought and racism in present German and Italian culture. Put differently, I want to uncover the often unconscious remnants of colonial and racist thinking (which are still all too present in current ideas about *Others*) by comparing past and present representations of Africa and African people. In this context colonial novels are inexhaustible source texts.

In line with their main objective, i.e. that of indoctrinating their readers with colonial ideology, the novels are unsurprisingly frank in expressing the underlying colonial ideology by the storyline, by stereotyped negative representations of the allegedly

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[1] This new interdisciplinary research program "investigates how language is affected by colonial and postcolonial conditions and how colonial and postcolonial constellations of facts are reflected, shaped and negotiated by language". For more details cf. http://www.cpl.uni-bremen.de/welcome/ (accessed September 19th, 2015).

inferior *Others* and, in general, by what I want to call a *language of contempt*.[2] But literary authors have – at least – one more means by which they can engage in the process of *Othering*[3]: that is by the names they decide to assign to their characters. In looking for general naming patterns in German colonial novels, I was able to find different types of names which emphasize the purported otherness and inferior status of Africans, the most important result being that only a very small number of African characters bear names, while even the most minor German character is called by his/her name (cf. Rieger 2015). In line with the conference theme, I took a deeper look into the concept of unconventional anthroponyms. With this new theoretical approach I enlarged and reanalyzed my original data. In what follows I will show that the opposition between *conventional* and *unconventional* naming is used consistently by German colonial writers for marking the difference between *Us* and *Them*, between the members of the presumed "master race" and the presumed "inferior" *Others*, which includes the overt – and still unpunished – use of disapproving nicknames given by African characters to the European ones. In the next chapter I will present the selection criteria and composition of my corpus before discussing the results in the third chapter. The paper will conclude with a brief summary.

Corpus

The most important selection criteria were the stories' setting in German East Africa, since this former German colony, present-day Tanzania, is the only part of Africa about which I have sufficient historical, cultural and linguistic knowledge to be able to contextualize the novels in an appropriate way. Furthermore, the selected novels should cover the whole period during which colonial novels where published, i.e. the time span between 1890 and 1955[4] circa, and should represent as wide a variety of authors as possible. The corpus thus assembled contains 18 novels (60–470 pages) and 7 short stories (about 30 pages) written by 9 male and 3 female authors.

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[2] On the evolution of the image of Africa and Africans in Germany cf. e.g. Arndt 2006, Aßner et al. 2012, Martin 2001; on African figures in colonial German advertisements cf. Ciarlo 2011, Wolter 2005, Zeller 2008.

[3] Though it has earlier origins, the notion of *Othering* was first systematically employed and popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "Othering describes the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects. In Spivak's explanation, othering is a dialectical process because the colonizing *Other* is established at the same time as its colonized *others* are produced as subjects." (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 171).

[4] For the time span in general cf. Schmiedel 2015: chapter 1.2 and Schneider 2011: 11. Within this period three different phases can be distinguished, since the particular storylines followed the course of the historical events (cf. Wieneke 1989: 73). Details about the very late 1955 edition are given below. The founder of the German *Kolonialliteratur* is considered Frieda von Bülow (1857–1909), whose first colonial novel *Am anderen Ende der Welt* [At the other end of the world] was published in 1890 (cf. e.g. Gutjahr 2011: 39–75, Bechhaus-Gerst 2009: 66–69 and 2013: 365–372). The number of colonial novels even increased after Germany's loss of the colonies in 1919. In this very particular "postcolonial" literature the factual colonial times were celebrated and mystified with the underlying hope of regaining them (cf. Conrad 2012: 117).

Conventional and unconventional names in German colonial novels

In her monograph about the origin and impact of German colonial novels, Sibylle Benninghoff-Lühl stated that her bibliographical research resulted in more than 500 colonial novels published between 1884 and 1914. She found it unnecessary to read them all because after having read about 300 of them she ascertained that the storylines were always nearly identical (cf. 1983: 7).[5] My much more restricted corpus pertaining just to German East Africa, but comprising a more extended publishing period, confirms the monotony of the plots. At the centre of the story there is a German male expatriate who encounters an endless series of problems and obstacles, such as the unwillingness of rebellious natives to be colonized, the hostility of European powers during World War I and/or the climatic and geological difficulties threatening his agricultural endeavors. But because of his perseverance and outstanding character virtues, he is able to overcome all adversities. Therefore, he is the perfect role model for future conquerors, soldiers and/or settlers or, at least, for supporters of the colonial idea in the Metropole.

The basic scenery of this absolutely Eurocentric narrative is formed by an oversized centre which stands out against a surrounding background. While the centre is a known, illuminated, secure and ordered place, the background is unknown, dark, hostile and threatening. These two fundamentally distinct environments are linked together by a very small *contact zone* which is perceived as an unavoidable necessity for survival. Each of the three ambiences comprises two different levels with respect to the kind of living beings inhabiting them. At the very centre there is the White[6] male hero, who shares the ambience with his equals. The White community has clearcut, impermeable social boundaries which not only keep out the *Others* but also guarantee its members their inviolable human status. Furthermore, the centre is the place where standards are set, surrounded by an "Africa" that is formed by four different habitats, with blurred, permeable boundaries between them. The inner part of the contact zone is inhabited by a very small number of servants and, occasionally, by African dignitaries. These are the only outsiders who are in direct contact with members of the White community. The outer part of the contact zone is populated by the staff necessary to run farms or to undertake expeditions or warfare. Generally, this group of people has no direct contact with the Whites. The immense background is populated by an indistinguishable mass of African people and African nature. According to the requirements of the narrative, African characters are moved freely between these habitats: the closer they are placed to the centre the more human they are, the more distant the more animal-like they become. Put differently, the different African habitats are distance markers between (the ones like) *Us* and (the ones like) *Them.*

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[5]   On German colonial literature cf. also Gutjahr and Hermes 2011a, Mergner and Häfner 1989, Schneider 2011.
[6]   The capital letter is to indicate that the concepts of *white* and *black* are not "harmless" phenotypic descriptions but highly discriminating sociocultural attributions.

This socio-cultural and biological stratification is supported by different ways of addressing and reference. Only characters pertaining to the centre and those placed in the very small inner contact zone are foregrounded by proper names, while the people of the outer contact zone are generally identified by their job title only and the ones pertaining to the background by derogatory ethnic markers such as *Blacks, Negroes*, etc.

As far as proper names are concerned, there is a further distinctive feature which keeps the center separate even from that small part of the African environment where proper names are used. This feature is the opposition between *conventional* and *unconventional* names:

> Unconventional anthroponyms (opposed to conventional anthroponyms) make up the category of proper names that are not in agreement with the official rules and regulations of a community, as regards the giving of personal names and their usage in public space (D. Felecan 2014: 20)[7].

There are two different types of *unconventional* names in my corpus: the first type consists of names perceived as unconventional because of their lack of a number of features which are typical of – the standard setting – European conventional names. The second type, instead, consists of names which are unconventional because they are substitutes for conventional names, i.e. nicknames.

Perceived unconventionality

Naming is a cultural practice that has developed over time. Since Western societies conceptualize *development* as a teleological progression from simple towards ever more sophisticated forms and themselves as the spearhead of cultural evolution and civilizing progress, we can conclude that modern western naming conventions are understood both as standard and as a tangible sign of cultural achievement. This applies all the more in a Euro-centered colonial frame of reference.

In Germany conventional personal names are characterized by a number of structural features which are relevant here. Most importantly, every single German possesses a *full* personal name which comprises at least one given and one surname. It is important to keep in mind that the latter is higher-ranking not only from a formal linguistic point of view (cf. Nübling et al. 2012: 105) but also from a sociolinguistic one, since it is a marker of identity, and with regard to late 19th and early 20th century Germany it was an obligatory signal of respect in most interpersonal relationships, where it could be replaced only by academic and military titles. The given name, on the other hand, is generally gender-specific and "not likely to carry any intrinsic meaning; it is given by third parties […] with the intention to individualise" (Felecan/Felecan 2014b: x) and,

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[7]   Due to space limitations the concept of *unconventional anthroponyms* cannot be discussed here in any further detail. With respect to the opposition between *conventional* and *unconventional* naming, my paper is heavily based on Felecan and Felecan (2014a) in general, and D. Felecan (2014: 15–25) in particular.

apart from some particular cases, such as taking religious orders – remains unchanged. The analysis shows indeed that nearly all German characters, including most of the secondary ones, have at least a surname, but most of them possess a full personal name which is conventional in form and retained from the beginning to the end of the story.

The most striking difference with regard to conventional/unconventional naming is that African characters have only *one* name. At first glance this may not be surprising, since in a European context servants and children are also referred to exclusively by their given name. But there is a crucial difference: the target readership knew or rather took it for granted that European children and servants – even when called exclusively by their given names – possess surnames and that these surnames can therefore be used as a sign of identification or respect when required by the situational context. But if someone – as for instance the African characters in colonial novels – simply doesn't possess a surname s/he is doomed to remain forever in a subordinate position and will never be able to become the European's equal.

In the novels analyzed this difference is shoved under the reader's nose by a very explicit naming practice: for example, a German deck hand is consistently referred to by his full name *Hinnerk Bahlsen*[8], whereas an equally doltish Swahili is simply *Kaschwalla*[9]. White valets are named *Johann Rieger* (Mondberge) and *Peter Nüsel*[10], whereas Blacks in the very same position are simply *Malimau* or *Furu* (both: In DOA), the latter taking in fact the place of the presumed dead *Peter Nüsel*. But even the one name given is unconventional since it is structurally different from German given names. For instance names such as *Matschembe, Amahita*[11] or *Kaschwalla* are not only unusual in form and sound but they do not even reveal their owners' sex. On the contrary, they are misleading insofar as final vowels and, in particular, the final *-a* are typical of German female names, whereas the African names cited belong to male characters. Furthermore,

> African [given] names are typically distinguished from European ones on the basis of name meaningfulness, i. e., African names carry semantic import. Their meaning may be recoverable from simple rules of lexical and syntactic analysis […] (Herbert 1996: 1222).

The meaningfulness of the names entails two consequences. First, their prevailing

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[8] In: Otto Felsing (1902): *Der blaue Diamant* [The Blue Diamond], hereafter cited as "Diamant".

[9] The Swahili *Kaschwalla* is a returning character in Friedrich Mader's novels: *Nach den Mondbergen* [To the mountains of the moon] (1911), hereafter: "Mondberge"; *Am Kilimandjaro* [At the Kilimanjaro] (1927), hereafter: "Kili"; *Vom Pangani zum Rowuma* [From the river Pangani to the river Rovuma] (1928); and *Ins dunkle Afrika* [Into dark Africa] (1955). The latter is an (insignificantly) revised edition of *Nach den Mondbergen*.

[10] In: Rudolf Scipio (1893): *In Deutsch-Ostafrika* [In German East Africa], hereafter: In DOA.

[11] Both in: Josef Viera (1924): *Bana Sikukuu,* hereafter: "Bana Sikukuu".

function is not to identify but rather to characterize, as Sharifa M. Zawawi explains about Swahili given names:

> A name constructs a person. The name you carry may create an attitude in those who hear it even before they encounter you as a person. It also speaks to the dreams or expectations of those who named you. It will constantly remind you, in a symbolic way of who you are to your parents and what you mean to them (1993: 6).

Even if there are very few examples, the reader will encounter names like *Ndorobo* 'poor devil'[12] given to a baby because he was born during a severe famine. The second consequence is that the name can be changed according to the bearer's change of character. An example is a boy named *Kiboko* ('hippopotamus') who changes his name proudly to *Chui* ('leopard')[13] after having survived an encounter with that animal.

There are a few exceptions to the generalized naming practice by which White characters have full personal names while African ones have only one name. The first exception is the German character *Meister* ('Master') *Eberhard*, whose surname is never mentioned, but he also has an African name, i.e. *Bana Sikukuu* ('Mr Holiday'), which is also the title of the novel. The lack of a surname and the addition of a prominent African name does not contradict my thesis, because in the whole corpus this character is the only true crossover between the White centre and the African background.

On the other hand, there is a good number of names, such as *Juma bin Mohamadi* and *Achmed bin Ali*[14], which refer to characters who are explicitly indicated as being Swahili. It was seemingly known by colonial authors that the people known as Swahili "bestow two names on a child: the *jina la kuzaliwa* ("name of being born"), given by the father or father's sister, and the *jina la utani* ("name of familiarity" [...]) given by the father's or mother's mother" (Middleton 1992: 214; emphasis in original), resulting in composite names such as the ones cited above. Furthermore, the Swahili

> have stood apart from neighboring groups by virtue of having a literate and Muslim culture with [thousands of year-old] economic and political ties both within Africa and across the Indian Ocean. Their civilization has a long history of unusual cultural efflorescence and character; it has been and remains unique, with a documented history as long as any possessed by those who came to conquer it" (ibid.: vii).

Since colonial ideology cannot accept the idea that Africans were able to develop culturally, Swahili characters are consistently diminished by depicting them as brutal slave traders, snooty idlers and/or ridiculous and vain cultural impostors.[15]

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[12]   Josef Allerbeck (1930): *Negertreue* [The loyalty of the negro], p. 3. In cases where an intentionally meaningful name was chosen the meaning of the name is given by the author.

[13]   Else Morstatt (1931): *Kiboko*, p. 59, hereafter: "Kiboko".

[14]   Both in: Otto Pentzel (1941): *Buschkampf in Ostafrika* [Bush fighting in East Africa].

[15]   This point cannot be discussed here. On Swahili history and culture in general cf. e.g. Glassman 1995 and 2011, Horton and Middleton 2000, Loimeier 2012, Middleton 1992,

Nicknames

As far as nicknames are concerned, they are very rare and are used to any substantial extent only by two authors out of 12. These two authors, Otto Felsing (1854- ca. 1920) and Friedrich Wilhelm Mader (1866–1947), both worked as journalists, published their first colonial novels around 1900 and never visited the colonies. At the same time C. Falkenhorst (1853–1913), of the same age and profession, whose view of the world and colonial novels is confusingly similar to those of Felsing and Mader, did not use nicknames. Therefore, up to now I am unable to figure out *why* Felsing and Mader introduced nicknames and the other authors did not. Even so, it might be interesting to take a deeper look into the nicknaming practice displayed by the two authors in seven of their novels, which constitute the subcorpus for the following analysis.[16]

Nicknames here are understood as "substitutes for the formal given names" (Ashley 1996: 1750). If my interpretation is correct that African names are neither presented nor perceived as equivalents of European "formal given names", then African characters should not be nicknamed by Whites. Furthermore, nicknames have "a *marked affective, metaphorical character*" (N. Felecan 2014: 125; emphasis in original) and – still more importantly – "[t]he emotionally connotated attitude can be positive or negative, in any case it *establishes a close relationship*"[17]. Needless to say, close relationships between colonizers and colonized are simply unthinkable.

Indeed there are very few nicknames assigned to African characters by White ones, and only two out of five are *directly* appointed. The first of these two is *Wollkopp* ('wooly head') (Diamant: 143) for a servant named *Ali*, the second *Nux vomica* ('strychnine tree') for a Somali soldier named *Nux* (Kili: 221). The first nickname appears inconsistently only two or three times and probably was seen by contemporaries as a humorous reference to a perceived defining physical quality. Much more interesting is the second one because its absolutely denigrating meaning is completely out of place – even in the context of this colonial novel. First of all, the nickname is mentioned only once and without the slightest situational motivation. Secondly, part of the novel is dedicated to support the myth of the *treue Askari*, the loyal black soldier who helped the Germans defend their colonies during World War I.[18] Therefore, it is incomprehensible why such a denigrating nickname should suddenly be applied to a character who has otherwise been depicted as capable and useful, unless we try a Freudian interpretation: maybe in the very moment of writing the scene the author felt such an intense aversion to Africans that he had to vomit (at least virtually) on the page by inventing the name *Nux* as a pretext for *Nux vomica*. In any case, it is notewor-

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Sheriff 2002 and 2010; on German rule in Tanganyika in particular cf. e.g. Deutsch 2006, Iliffe 2008, Pesek 2005.

[16] The subcorpus is identical with the seven novels by these authors cited in the bibliography.

[17] "Diese mitkodierte emotionale Haltung kann positiv oder negativ sein, in jedem Fall stellt sie Nähe her." (Nübling et al.: 171; emphasis by author)

[18] On this myth cf. e.g. Bechhaus-Gerst 2007, Michels 2009.

thy that later on the same character is consistently named *Nur*, which is a much more plausible name for a Somali person.

A particular and rather underhanded form of denigratory nicknaming can also be found in Mader's novel *At the Kilimanjaro*, in which three African servants are not introduced at all by their original African names but by self-appointed nicknames derived from appellatives used by their masters. One servant takes over the name *Kiboko* ('hippopotamus') because his master likes to compare the servant's head to that of a hippopotamus. The second one takes on the name of *Saludu* by adopting a garbled form of the dialect word *Sauluder*, a rude name given to a sly person. The third one calls himself *Junige* because his master is accustomed to calling him not by his name but simply *Junge*, i.e. the German word for *boy* (all: Kili: 55). The fact that the three servants proudly adopt these nicknames, being completely unaware of their deprecatory connotation, will have amused the target readership, but above all it depicts these African characters as childishly stupid.

From what has been said so far, it should not be surprising that most nicknames found in the subcorpus are appointed by African characters and that they are different from the ones just mentioned. This second group of nicknames comprises three different types. To the first type belong nicknames appointed to White protagonists, which per se could simply be considered as dignifying sobriquets. However, this first-glance impression is destroyed as soon as the linguistic cotext is analyzed. *Bwana Angadir*, for example, is the honorary name given by African characters to a White protagonist known for his extremely keen eyesight. The readership is informed that the nickname "means 'Mr Vulture' and is the same as 'Eagle-Eye' for the American Indians"[19]. This explanation is doubly degrading. First, a laudable ability is compared to an animal that has a negative connotation in Western societies. Secondly, it suggests that even the American Indians possess a more suitable expression than Africans do, thus downgrading the latter to the lowest level of sociocultural development. Another White protagonist has the habit of collecting plants: "In this capacity the professor received the additional nickname 'Bwana Maua' or 'Mr Flower', i.e. 'the botanist'"[20], as we are informed by the author. Here it is suggested that Africans are incapable of understanding a European (scientific) profession and that their attempt to describe it is hopelessly naïve – not least by using a purely feminine concept such as *flower* as a name for an intrepid masculine hero.

These two examples also provide a clue to the function of a handful of characterizing derisive nicknames appointed by Africans to White secondary characters, nicknames such as *bana mnene* ('fat master') for a particularly stout man; *bana tumbo dani* ('master belly in!') for a lieutenant who tries insistently to correct bad posture habits; *bana paza sauti* ('the master who raises his voice') for a man who likes to shout out his commands; *Herr Glasauge* ('master glass eye') for a man with a monocle; *Herr*

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[19]   "was 'Herr Geier' bedeutet und so viel ist wie 'Falkenauge' bei den Indianern." (Kili: 86).

[20]   " 'Bwana Maua' oder 'Herr Blume', das heißt ,der Botaniker'." (Mondberge: 184).

Triffvorbei ('master miss the mark') for an officer who misses the mark while in the very act of teaching accuracy; *(bana) kofia mbaya* ('[master] bad hat') for another officer whose pith helmet is all dented; *(bana) sungura mardadi* ('[master] vain rabbit')[21] for an officer who is more interested in his uniform than his duties; or *Bwana fimbo* ('master stick') for a particularly thin man (Mondberge: 20).

In truth, it was precisely these nicknames that constituted my starting point for this paper and about which for a rather long time I could find no plausible explanation as to why African characters should be allowed to use derisive nicknames to size up White characters, a conduct which – at first glance – is completely out of line in a colonial context. Now I think there is a twofold motive. First, both authors declare in their prefaces that they do not only want to entertain their readers but also to teach them about the colonies. Thus, the texts are replete with Swahili expressions in order to prove the firsthand knowledge the authors – only seemingly (!) – possessed about German East Africa. And being acquainted with the Africans' habit of applying nicknames – as stated by the narrator – meant having not only firsthand but virtually intimate on-the-spot knowledge.[22] The second, and in my opinion prevailing, motive was to depict Africans in a condescending manner, since most of the nicknames cited so far sound more endearing than derisive in German, so that the intent of mockery reflects more on the name-givers than on the name-bearers.

In fact, the African characters pertaining to the contact zone are mostly depicted as irresponsible, carefree and doltish children who are constantly good humoured, even after a day of endless fatigue: "The porters bubbled over with humour. Amongst themselves they gave nicknames to their white masters, too, on the ground of some striking characteristic they noticed at first, as is customary among the negroes." (Mondberge: 20). The couple of nicknames appointed by Africans to other Africans can be seen in the same way: a Swahili character who likes to drink *pombe*, an African alcoholic beverage, is nicknamed *Abu Merissa* or, in Swahili *Baba Pombe*, both meaning 'father of the beer' (Mondberge: 16), whereas another African character is named *Kidulu*, translated as 'the trunk-man' after an unpleasant and frightening encounter with an elephant (Diamant: 417).

Summary

Naming is a cultural practice. Since the lack of civilization – which is part of the concept of culture – is a rationale for colonization, and since becoming civilized has always been synonymous with becoming *westernized*, then – the colonial mind will conclude – it is impossible that the naming practice of the colonized can meet the colonizers' standards. This colonial credo provides the content of the opening paragraph of Morstatt's novel *Kiboko*: "Once upon a time there was a small Negro boy. […] The boy

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[21]   All examples in: Otto Felsing (1909): *Gefahrvolle Fahrten*, 13–14.
[22]   Interestingly, linguistically demanding nicknames like *Herr Glasauge* 'master glass eye' or *Herr Triffvorbei* 'master miss the mark' are only given in German.

was called Kiboko. [...] Here in our country we certainly would not call a boy hippo-potamus but in Africa children often bear such odd names."[23]

In my paper I have shown that literary names in German colonial novels are consistently used to emphasize the colonial order, whose central belief is the unbridgeable divide existing between *Us* and *Them*. In particular, the opposition between *conventional* and *unconventional* names suggests to the readership that Africans are not only different but infinitely inferior, since most of them apparently lack full personal names, and their given names are rather "odd", i.e. unusual. Nicknames, on the other hand, fulfill their *Othering* function by depicting (adult!) Africans as childlike, naive and endlessly doltish, irrespective of the nicknames' connotations (kind, unkind), the giver and the bearer.

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[23] "Es war einmal ein kleiner Negerjunge. [...] Der Junge hieß Kiboko. [...] Hier bei uns würde man freilich einen kleinen Jungen nicht Flußpferd nennen, aber in Afrika haben die Kinder oft solch merkwürdige Namen." (Morstatt 1954: 5).

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