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Research Studies on the Role of African Languages for Curriculum Transformation and Decolonisation in Higher Education

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Abstract

Universities around the world are recognised for knowledge discovery, knowledge production, knowledge dissemination, and transformation. Research shows that English and Afrikaans are still the dominant languages for knowledge discovery, production, and dissemination in South Africa. Student movements during 2015 and 2016 raised issues about South African universities as centres that promote Eurocentric ideologies and, as a result, calls for curriculum transformation and decolonisation were launched. Many universities seem to be struggling to effectively respond by implementing the demands for curriculum transformation and decolonisation. This article reviews existing research to explore the role of African languages in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. Findings revealed that many studies about curriculum transformation and decolonisation do not address the issue of language as an instrumental tool in decolonisation and transforming the curriculum. However, it is evident that language is the strongest pillar of the colonial legacy in the curriculum and other university spaces. Therefore, the article concludes that for the curriculum transformation and decolonisation agenda to succeed, the role of African languages should be clearly defined and put at the centre for coexistence with other dominant languages in higher education.

Keywords: curriculum transformation, decolonisation, African languages, African epistemologies, African identity

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Introduction

In 2011, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande, made an announcement and launched a special ministerial project to enforce the development of new language policies at South African universities to accommodate African indigenous languages that were previously sidelined. Nzimande (2011) proposed that South African institutions of higher education had to introduce compulsory African language courses for non-African language-speaking students in order to promote the country's heritage, history, and diversity and to acquire conversational competence. This also aligned with the need to address injustices of the previous apartheid education system by giving equal status to all official languages in higher education. Previously, students could graduate from a South African university without enrolling in any African language course. Therefore, South African universities needed to revise their language policies to accommodate African languages suitable for their contexts (Turner (2012), which resulted in the Ministerial project (Nzimande, 2011). However, despite the progress in the implementation of the compulsory language rule in many universities in South Africa, and existing research on the role of African languages in higher education as courses/modules, it is still not clear how these courses contribute to the decolonisation and transformation agenda in higher education (Mmapane & Omidire, 2018; Turner, 2012).

This systematic review explores studies on curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses/modules as a compulsory rule in higher education. The focus of this article is on exploring existing literature on the progress made since the student movements in 2015 and the subsequent calls for curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. The call for curriculum transformation and decolonisation has been debated for over a decade, and the question about its implementation has become rhetorical in South Africa (Masenya, 2021). Among other issues raised during the student movements of 2015/2016 were claims that the curriculum promotes Eurocentric ideologies and neglects African identity and values in many universities in South Africa (Mabofua, 2020). Many universities are struggling to effectively respond by implementing the demands for curriculum transformation and decolonisation (Hlatshwayo, 2023). On the other hand, some universities have introduced African languages as compulsory courses for all students (Rudwick, 2017). This article argues that compulsory African language courses should be treated as a tool for curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education, not just for basic conversation or communication purposes. We review existing research to explore the role of African languages in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education, and aim to address the following questions:

1. What are research studies saying about curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education?
2. How do researchers understand the role of African language courses as compulsory in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education?

Rationale

The motivation to conduct a systematic review of literature on the role of African languages in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in South African higher education stems from our classroom experiences as lecturers. We are lecturers in isiZulu conversational, communication, and home language courses at a university in Johannesburg. Before we joined our current institution, we lectured on similar courses at different universities in South Africa. IsiZulu conversational and communication are compulsory African language courses that students must register for and pass to graduate in their undergraduate degrees and postgraduate certificates in education. In school-wide staff meetings, the need for curriculum transformation and decolonisation is always mentioned. This may be because our institution has a long history and colonial legacy. We have decided to pay more attention to this call, drawing on our experiences teaching isiZulu courses and on existing literature to understand the role of African language courses and their impact on curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education.

This research article is arranged in the following sections: context of the topic, an explanation of the conceptual framework used to foreground the study, research methodology, presentation of results,

discussion of the results, conclusion, and limitations. The next section provides context on curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and African languages in South African higher education.

Context

This section provides context, and the connection between curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African languages in South African higher education. This article does not intend to suggest and generalise that this is the case for all South African higher education institutions. However, we draw from existing studies about curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and African languages in South African higher education. Many studies (e.g. Hlatshwayo, 2023; Mabofua, 2020; Masenya, 2021) have shown that South African higher education institutions (SAHEIs) face challenges in implementing curriculum transformation and decolonisation. This call results from student movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall, which took place during 2015/2016 (Ntombana et al., 2023). These student movements exposed the long-standing curriculum influenced by colonial and Western ideologies, racial and linguistic inequalities, socioeconomic and many other issues (Ntombana et al., 2023).

Many studies have attempted to unpack the concept of curriculum transformation in South Africa, highlighting the apartheid history and its legacy in SAHEIs' curricula (Muswede, 2017). Studies show that post-apartheid, universities continued with structures and curricula that favoured mostly Afrikaans and White populations (Mzangwa, 2019; Roberts, 2021). According to Kandiko and Kingsbury (2023), many South African universities still use English as the only language of learning, teaching, and assessment, irrespective of their demographic population. According to Mzangwa (2019), universities in South Africa continue to offer Westernised and global knowledge that neglects the learning needs and ideologies of most African students in classrooms. This was also supported by Ntombana et al. (2023), who argued that university curricula were instrumental in engendering Western principles, knowledge, and the colonial agenda.

Studies by Mukaddam (2024) and Roberts (2021) indicated that more than 30 years into democracy, the nature of SAHEIs is characterised by White colonial regimes, which is the reason why the political movements were initiated to raise consciousness about the injustices of the regimes of the institutions (Reddy, 2015). Govender and Naidoo (2023) viewed decolonisation in the South African context as a process of transformation with an intention to centre African realities. According to Mashilo and Govender (2023), the ideological underpinning of decolonisation in SAHEIs is about, but not limited to, recognising African ideologies and ways of knowing.

Mashilo and Govender (2023) argued that because of colonial ideologies embedded in languages used in the curriculum, such as English and Afrikaans, African identity and ideologies were distorted in SAHEIs. Furthermore, these authors explained that African languages have a crucial role in higher education to bring African identity and ideologies into the curriculum and into the centre of university scholarship. Drawing from Mashilo and Govender's point of view, African languages should be afforded similar status to English and Afrikaans as instrumental tools to develop African perspectives. Therefore, students should be exposed to African ideologies in the transformed and decolonised South African university context, not just credits for isiZulu conversation or communication skills. This article proposes the need to explore the role of African languages in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in SAHEIs. At present, African languages are learnt only for conversational and communicative skills. The problem at hand is to what extent these courses promote African ideologies and identities in a transformed and decolonised context.

Conceptual Framework

The study adopted two concepts: Pham et al.'s (2023) concept of curriculum transformation and implementation. According to those authors, curriculum transformation is crucial for improving educational standards. In South Africa, the need for curriculum transformation was spurred by the student movements in 2015/2016, which sought to raise consciousness about curriculum injustices (Vandeyar, 2020). Pham et al. further argued that curriculum transformation and implementation should achieve three things: transformation for access, reparational transformation, and redefining the future beyond transformation.

According to Zembylas (2018), transformation for access in higher education means considering the previously marginalised groups for equal opportunities and access to higher education. Manomano and Nyanhoto (2020) argued that transformation for access also means welcoming the ideologies, values, and voices of previously marginalised groups, for example, some universities had racial and ethnic segregation in the past, so such ideologies require transformation to open access for equal and quality education. On the other hand, Mashwama and Madubela (2024) argued that socioeconomic imbalances are prevalent; as a result, many black students face financial and academic exclusions in many institutions of higher education, therefore, arrangements for students who qualify should be made to increase access to higher education. This type of transformation focuses on inclusion and bringing other perspectives into higher education spaces (Dei, 2016).

Nyoni (2019) suggested that curriculum transformation should be about identifying colonisers' values and ideologies within the curriculum, to bridge the existing gaps. He further suggested that curriculum transformation should empower previously marginalised groups and their voices through active participation in institutional structures and decision-making. It is crucial to note that curriculum transformation in this sense means the need for inclusion of African scholarship, and redistribution of funding and grants to support projects that promote African ideologies to bring change in the higher education landscape. To extend Pham et al.'s (2023) argument, effective implementation of curriculum transformations is crucial for decolonisation and the academic landscape that invites different worldviews and ideologies.

Institutional structures and strategic plans should be aligned with curriculum transformation for a better decolonised university environment; the broad objective for curriculum transformation is to achieve a decolonised university ecosystem (Padayachee et al., 2018). In other words, implementing the changes in curricula should provide impactful outcomes and emancipation (le Grange, 2014). Maringe and Ojo (2017) and Morriera et al. (2020) argued that while preparing for curriculum transformation and decolonised higher education spaces, we should also redefine the future of higher education beyond transformation and its sustainability. This study builds on how African languages can be instrumental in curriculum transformation and decolonisation of education in South African universities.

Methodology

The study used a systematic review as a research instrument to explore how researchers understand curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses as a compulsory rule in South African higher education. Snyder (2019) explained that a systematic review can be used as a research instrument to investigate the existing literature. This systematic review aimed to develop a conceptual understanding from published scholarly work on the notion of curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses as a compulsory rule in South African higher education.

Identification of Scholarly Sources

This study identified 15 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2024. The 15-year period allowed us to explore the scholars' understanding of transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses in higher education before, during, and post students' movements. Literature reviewed clarifies that transformation and decolonisation arguments existed long before the student movements in 2015 and 2016. In fact, some universities had already introduced African languages as a compulsory requirement for students before the student movements started. Our criteria for identifying journal articles included the focus of the journal article, accreditation by the Department of Higher Education and Training, and the context in which the study was conducted, focusing on South Africa. We used research databases such as EBSCOHOST, Google Scholar, and AJOL to search for published research articles on the topic. We used keywords like "transformation in higher education," "decolonisation in higher education," and "the role of African languages in higher education" to search for relevant research articles. To ensure trustworthiness, only PDFs with full citations were downloaded to be analysed for this research.

For data management, we created a spreadsheet to record each journal article's information, namely, title, year of publication, focus (higher education), and the context in which the study was conducted. This process is like profiling participants in qualitative research (Dahal et al., 2024).

Data Analysis

We adopted a qualitative analysis approach. The first step was to read each article and evaluate its relevance in terms of focus and year of publication. The second step was to create a list of the relevant research articles according to this study's key research concepts: curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African languages compulsory courses in higher education. The final step was summarising the findings and creating categories thematically.

Results

The following sections summarise relevant literature on the themes of curriculum transformation, decolonisation, and the role of African language courses as a compulsory rule in higher education.

Scholarly Literature on Curriculum Transformation in Higher Education

A study by Ramrathan (2016) on shifting higher education transformation into curriculum spaces revealed that this activity is a significant move aiming to redress social injustice that exists in the current curriculum. According to that author, demographic changes in higher education classrooms, revealing an increase in African students, require profound transformation and curriculum intellectualism. Drawing from Ramrathan's argument, the next wave of curriculum transformation in higher education would be instrumental if it included debates on the intellectualisation of African languages as fundamental tools in curriculum transformation.

Hall and Smyth (2016) wrote about dismantling the curriculum in higher education, arguing that understanding the relationship between the university and society is crucial in curriculum transformation. Among the findings, their study revealed the importance of inclusion and representation of all the societal voices in the university curriculum. These authors suggested that curriculum principles should be rooted in the newly defined culture that represents everyone. Therefore, in this article, we argue that if language forms part of culture, and a way of defining speakers of that language, African languages should be recognised as part of the curriculum where African students have been granted physical access.

A study by Shay (2016) revealed that SAHEIs follow academic curricula that do not respond to students' real-life experiences in their contexts. According to that author, #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, violent clashes, and protests were clear indications of the students' desire for education that is rooted in African discourse and considers their historical backgrounds. Shay suggested that curriculum transformation would lead to social transformation in higher learning institutions, ultimately resulting in the decolonisation of the students' minds. That author's study found a need for curriculum transformation that accommodates African epistemologies within university curricula. It is thus unclear how SAHEIs plan to include African epistemologies and voices in institutional strategic goals, and their sustainability. However, research shows that there is still a gap in terms of including African languages and defining their role in all universities' prominent activities.

In an article entitled "Being Black in South African Higher Education," Hlatshwayo (2023) argued that South African higher education seems to grapple to interpret the 2015/2016 student movements that called for curriculum transformation and decolonisation. According to that author, SAHEIs continue to offer epistemic violence in the academy through their curriculum, alienating and marginalising students and, even today, South African universities continue to struggle to manage the issue of curriculum transformation and decolonisation. We are asking ourselves, is it because the role of African languages has been neglected in all these debates? Is it because English and Afrikaans have been at the centre of these debates as the primary tools that were used to colonise and marginalise African minds.

A study by Athiemoalam and Vermaak (2021) in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, revealed that even though higher education classrooms are multilingual, English and Afrikaans are still dominant in university curricula. According to those authors, university curricula continue to subject African students to either English or Afrikaans as the language of teaching, learning, and assessment, and lecturers continue to implement the same curricula and strategies even though classroom demographics have changed. They further noted that the current situation in many universities in South Africa is that although there is access

to higher education for all, many African students are still disadvantaged in the education system and curricula that are taught in English and Afrikaans.

Another study by Pham et al. (2023) indicated that university curricula and learning spaces are used as tools to colonise students' minds intentionally and indirectly, therefore, curriculum transformation should also be intentional about addressing the existing gaps. According to those authors, the success of curriculum transformation depends on the lecturers' preparedness and professional development to plan and implement a new curriculum that addresses the existing damages of the mind, imbalances, and injustices. Their study further suggests that university lecturers may need to change how they think, and their beliefs about complex issues enacted in the curriculum including teaching methods, language, and assessment.

Scholarly Literature on Decolonisation in Higher Education

Stein and Andreotti (2016) conducted a study on decolonisation in higher education and found that the central role of universities is social reproduction and knowledge generation. Those authors also found that many universities have marginalised African voices, philosophies, theories, and epistemologies in social reproduction and knowledge generation. Their study argued that many universities suppressed African voices and produced colonised professionals and practitioners who are holding important positions today across the globe. The big question is, how can universities be instrumental in decolonising the minds of society? Is it through introducing African language compulsory courses that merely focus on conversation and communication skills?

A study conducted by Fomunyam (2017) on decolonising the future in the untransformed present in South African higher education revealed that decolonisation should go beyond institutional policies stored in the university's shelves as a tick box activity. According to that author, decolonisation activities should be seen in the classrooms and university environments for practice. This argument has brought us to the most important question: "Is the introduction of African languages as compulsory courses in South African universities just a tick box?" There is a need for a study that explores the impact of these courses on curriculum transformation and the decolonisation agenda. While English and Afrikaans hegemony still prevails as languages of learning, teaching, and assessment across the disciplines, African languages are only offered the opportunity to be studied as conversational or communication modules.

Another article by Chikoko (2021) revealed that research studies dwell on decolonising university programmes, qualifications, and curricula in isolation. According to that author, the system of decolonising university sections individually and in isolation will not lead to the effective transformation and reform needed. There will be no effective change, and colonial pillars will remain intact. The debates around curriculum transformation and decolonisation in South African higher education has caught the attention of many scholars; we ask ourselves if the colonial pillars that remain intact include English and Afrikaans as the dominant languages of teaching, learning, and assessment in many universities even today. If English and Afrikaans are not home languages for many higher education students, then many universities have not transformed and decolonised to societal expectations.

On the other hand, Chikoko (2016) argued that there is a need to Africanise the higher education curricula and to establish the role of African scholarship in the university curricula. According to that author, key components in Africanising the curricula are physical and epistemological access, globalisation, and internationalisation. Many scholars, including Chikoko have been part of the heated debate on Africanisation of curriculum, transformation, and decolonisation. However, the role of African languages in an Africanised, transformed, and decolonised curriculum is not acknowledged. Therefore, the question: "If English and Afrikaans are colonial languages, how do we empower African languages to decolonise the universities and dethrone these colonial languages?" Some will think dethroning means to do away with English and Afrikaans, but no—it means establishing the coexistence of all the languages in higher education for equal epistemological access.

Govender and Naidoo (2023) explored decolonial insights for transforming the higher education curriculum in South Africa. Their study found that changing attitudes and ownership by staff is a key challenge in implementing a decolonised curriculum. This study also revealed that many university staff are unprepared to embrace African students through a decolonised curriculum and inclusive epistemologies. Drawing on these findings, it is still unclear how students are expected to change their

attitudes and embrace one another when university staff themselves do not have this deep conversation of including African epistemologies through curricula and courses. Does this mean the decoloniality agenda is left in the hands of African languages lecturers through the compulsory courses?

Scholarly Literature on the Role of African Language Courses as a Compulsory Rule in Higher Education

Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014) explored African Languages, Indigenous knowledge systems, and the transformation of the humanities and social sciences in higher education. Their study reported that universities need to develop language policies to support Indigenous languages for scientific and scholarly discourse, and that universities need to equip and harness Indigenous languages and local knowledge systems. Drawing from Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa's argument, the role of African languages in higher education should go beyond being taught as a compulsory course for conversation and communication; it should be used as a language of teaching, learning, and research. If African languages' role is clarified and implemented like other colonial languages, that would be instrumental in the curriculum transformation and decolonisation agenda.

A study by Lumadi (2021) on linguistic transformation in higher education revealed that several linguistic injustices need to be addressed in higher education curricula. According to that author, universities are implicated in the historical injustices and marginalisation of African students through curricula that continue to promote Eurocentric ideologies. That study further showed that previous and current university language policy implementation created racial segregation and promotes Eurocentric epistemologies and that linguistic transformation and practical implementation are required for decolonisation to happen. In another study, Mkhize (2020) argued that while there have been known English- and Afrikaans-speaking universities in South Africa, there has never been a university that uses an African Indigenous language as a language of teaching and learning, even though the universities that were previously known for only black African students.

Additionally, Makokotlela and Gumbo (2025) conducted a study exploring the integration of Indigenous knowledge (IK) in the Environmental Education module at the University of South Africa. The study revealed that IK is a powerful tool through which the curriculum in higher education can be decolonised to ensure its relevance to indigenous students and expose non-Indigenous students to other forms of knowledge and perspectives. However, results showed that IK was almost absent during lectures and was later introduced in one of the tutorials through the glossary of terms translated into African languages. According to those authors, lecturers seem to understand that translating key terms into African languages during some of the tutorials was part of decolonising the curriculum.

Another study by de Vos and Riedel (2023) revealed that African languages have a significant role in decolonising and transforming the curriculum. According to those authors, introducing African languages as the language of learning, teaching, and assessment would bring epistemological access and balance multiple voices in the curriculum. They further stated that there is a lively academic debate in South Africa about the role of African languages and linguistic issues in decolonisation. Among other issues is undermining African languages and questioning their legitimacy to knowledge access and quality knowledge production compared to English as a glorified global language. In contrast, many developed countries invest in Indigenous languages as instruments for knowledge discovery and production. We argue that there is a need to expedite the implementation of African languages as languages of learning, teaching, and assessment in higher education to avoid another delay that causes alienation of African students and their voices in the curriculum and university spaces.

Mashilo and Govender (2023) investigated African identity and curriculum transformation at universities in South Africa. Their study revealed that African languages contain African identity, therefore, they should be placed at the centre of the decolonisation project. According to those authors, defining African identity in university curricula and in decolonisation does not mean a total negation of Western ideas and epistemologies, but foregrounding African identity, culture, and epistemologies embedded in African languages as part of a global economy and scholarship. Drawing on the above arguments, it is crucial to involve university stakeholders in the decolonisation agenda, not just students through

compulsory African language courses that do not promote African identity and ideologies in the global scholarship.

Discussion

The previous studies show that curriculum transformation and decolonisation are not new subjects in South African higher education. It is crucial to note that since 2015, when these student movements began, many scholars have been debating and calling for curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. Many studies have revealed that South African university curricula promote Eurocentric ideologies and epistemologies.

These studies have revealed that university curricula and spaces created racial, cultural, and epistemological segregations using colonial languages that marginalised Black students (Lumadi, 2021). Given that colonial languages created so much segregation and marginalisation for Black people, why do universities shy away from acknowledging the role of African languages in addressing the injustices of the past? If colonial languages were used to promote Western ideologies, would putting African languages in coexistence with other languages in the university curriculum not achieve decolonisation? The goal is not to dethrone English and Afrikaans, but to empower African languages and students to have equal linguistic opportunities. In that sense, students would choose the languages of learning, teaching, assessment, and research, based on their linguistic proficiency.

Additionally, Mkhize (2020) argued that while there have been English- and Afrikaans-speaking universities in South Africa, Indigenous African languages continue to struggle as languages of teaching and learning—even in the universities previously for only Black African students. This was supported by Makokotlela and Gumbo (2025), whose study highlighted that African Indigenous knowledge was almost absent during lectures and only later introduced in a tutorial through the glossary of terms translated into African languages.

Other studies revealed that the Eurocentric curriculum alienated African identity (Mashilo & Govender, 2023). This is about the university curriculum not representing the identities and ideologies of African societies. Black students have to forget who they are and adopt a Western identity to fit in and be accepted. On the other hand, White students enjoy the privilege of studying in their native language in a curriculum that totally makes sense to them. Drawing on Mashilo and Govender's (2023) argument, for curriculum transformation and decolonisation to take place, African identity and epistemologies should be brought in to coexist alongside Eurocentrism. Our argument is that identity and language are intertwined; therefore, African languages have an important role in curriculum transformation and decolonisation. Furthermore, as part of decolonisation, universities should invest in the intellectualisation of African languages given that they were previously marginalised. Our stance is that without positioning African languages for learning, teaching, assessment, and research across the disciplines on curriculum transformation and decolonisation debates, the debate is fruitless.

Drawing from the study conducted by Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014), the delay in policy implementation and using African languages as languages of learning, teaching, assessment, and research is delaying curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. It has been more than 10 years since some universities developed language policies. However, those policies have only delivered the introduction of African language conversational and communication courses that do not directly dismantle the colonial pillars in these universities. We believe that the conversation we should be having is how we intellectualise African languages as instrumental tools to dismantle Eurocentric ideologies in the curriculum and decolonise the colonial university system. Research shows that there is a lack of empirical evidence on how African language conversational and communication courses decolonise the Eurocentric ideologies at universities.

Conclusion

Research studies conducted on curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education show that much still needs to be done to dismantle the colonial legacy and to bring transformation to the higher education landscape. Studies revealed that colonial languages were at the centre of Westernising the curriculum, and remain the core pillar promoting Western epistemologies. Therefore, centring African languages would promote Africanisation of the curricula. Although curriculum transformation and decolonisation have been debated over decades, and student movements such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall have applied more pressure, there is slow progress in terms of using African languages for learning, teaching, assessment, and research across the disciplines in higher education.

While studies have highlighted the role and importance of African languages as a tool to transform and decolonise higher education, African languages continue to be taught as separate, compulsory conversation and communication courses. In contrast, the language in the curriculum reflects Eurocentric ideologies. Research shows that African languages are minimally integrated in content courses, where only glossary terms are used in selected tutorials. This study recommends that empirical research should be done to explore the role of compulsory African Indigenous language courses on decolonisation and curriculum transformation in higher education. Also, the implementation of university language policies and curricula needs to be monitored and evaluated for progress in curriculum transformation and decolonisation.

Limitations

This study was limited to the research studies on African Indigenous languages' role in curriculum transformation and decolonisation in higher education. Empirical research should be conducted to further explore the use of African Indigenous languages for the transformation and decolonisation of curricula in different universities.

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