

# Dimensions of West-African immigration to France: Malian immigrant women in Paris

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## Abstract

The article deals with patterns of migration of West-African immigrants in France. It looks at their changing migration strategies, developed in the context of the settlement process in France, and which are in turn closely linked to family reunification and the increasing immigration of women.

Special attention is given to Malian women living in Paris, the various dimensions of the organisation of their lives in France, their distinctive position as migrant women, and their adoption of diverse social, economic and communitarian strategies, both related to the receiving country as well as their country of origin. This is particularly important as since the mid 1980ies, Sub-Saharan African migrants increasingly stand at the centre of public and political debates on immigration in general and undocumented immigrants in particular ("Sans Papiers").

Seeking employment opportunities and organizing social life are important parameters in the daily life of Malian women in Paris. More than their male counterparts, women built very close relations to the host society – above all in the neighbourhood and within women's associations - and their activities play an important role in the creation of a new "chez soi" in the diaspora.

## Development of West-African Immigration to France

Until the mid 1980ies four fifth of Sub-Saharan immigrants in France were originating from Senegal, Mauritania and Mali predominantly from the Senegal River valley, which passes through all these three countries. In regard to migratory movements the Senegal River valley is in fact a historically important region. Emigration and forced labour migration to the cash crop producing areas in Senegal, Gambia or the Côte d'Ivoire dates back to the colonial period. Facilitated by the strong economic, social and structural relations between France and its former colonies and by the foundation of the *Communauté Franco-Africaine* massive emigration towards France started with the formal independence of Mali in 1960. Between 1955

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a research for the Master Thesis (Trauner 2001) among Malian immigrant women in Paris between 1995-1997.

and 1965 for citizens of the former French colonies neither residence nor work permit was required by France. This period not only marks the beginning of an important migration flow but also the formation of strong transnational networks which had an important impact on the region of origin: "Migration has expanded to the point where it is virtually a structural component of economic and social life in the river valley" (Quiminal 1994, 293). Until the 1970ies migration from Mali consisted mainly of young rural males aiming to work temporarily in order to contribute to the economic survival of the village community. In the second half of the 1980s more than 90% of Malian immigrants in France originate from the rural areas of the Kayes Region in the western part of Mali (Condé/Diagne 1986).

In the 1990ies the traditional pattern of emigration from the Sahelian region to France has changed rapidly. There is an overall shift from the typical rural migrant engaged in wage labour, towards the emigration of commercial self-employed migrants, especially of those engaged in the informal sectors in African urban regions (Adepoju 2004, 1). Furthermore, due to restrictions in immigration policy, Sahelian migrants also move to more "unconventional" destinations where no major linguistic, cultural or colonial ties existed like Zambia or South Africa but also to Italy, Spain, Belgium, Germany and Portugal (Adepoju 2004, 2).

### **The "African migrant women"**

The 1970ies have shown an important change in the configuration of migration from West-African countries to France which until then was characterized by a rotation system of unmarried male immigrants. With the formal restriction of labour migration in 1974, the arrival of women by the way of family reunification led to a process of feminization of migration from West-African countries and the appearance of a Second Generation of West-Africans born in France.

According to statistics of the French national Statistical Office INSEE (cf. Quiminal et al. 1995) the number of women from Sub-Saharan Africa increased from 4.712 in 1968 to 16.470 in the year 1975, and to 42.400 in 1982. For the time between 1982 and 1990 statistics report an increase of more than 70% which equals in number 42.400 in 1982 to about 73.000 in 1990.

As their male counterparts generally most female migrants come from the Senegal River valley (Mali, Mauritania, Senegal) as well as from the Gulf of Guinea and from Equatorial Africa. However, between 1982 and 1990 women arrived predominantly from Senegal and Mali. The increase of female Malian immigrants made up 140% in the respective period.

Since 1974 7.696 Malians entered the French territory through family reunification. The number of Malian women residing in France in 1982 was 3.808 and 12.536 in 1999 (CFSI 2003, 23).

In France the arrival of most women through family reunification fed the creation of a strong public image of the dependant female spouse, thereby locking immigrant women into traditional female roles. The development of such perceptions was strongly supported by the fact that from the 1990ies onwards Sub-Saharan immigrants shifted to the centre of racist and xenophobic public and political discourses, such as the image of the "invasion from the South" as the Franco-Algerian musicians ZEBDA expressed in one of their songs: in 1991 the current French president Jacques Chirac drew an image of the African family, where the father moves to an HLM (habitation à loyer modéré – public social housing) with his "trois ou quatre épouses et une vingtaine des gosses et qui gagne 50.000 FF de prestation sociale sans naturellement travailler. Si vous ajoutez à cela le bruit et l'odeur... et bien... le travailleur français sur le palier devient fou."<sup>2</sup>

Especially Malians receive attention in this regard (vgl. Daum 1998, 239), representing one immigrant group stigmatized as refusing assimilation into French society and therefore acting contrary to the more "integrateable" communities such as for example European immigrants. Herein, the main reason is thought to be found in their traditional practises portrayed as being culturally distant to the values of French republican society. Within the context of Islam, this discourse is dominated by focusing on practises like polygamy and female genital mutilation, which again set the picture of women either as victims or as rebels of tradition (Raissiguier 2003, 3). Such short-sighted images, as transmitted by media or political discourse ignore the complexity of actual migration processes and do not recognise the fact that the migration patterns of the 1990ies actually show an increase in independent female migration from Africa, and that women move

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<sup>2</sup> ZEBDA: "Le bruit et l'odeur".

autonomously to fulfil their own economic needs not simply joining a husband or a family member (Adepoju 2004, 1).

### **The “foyers des travailleurs immigrés africains”**

In France the 1960s were characterized by a high demand for immigrant labour while at the same time the living and working conditions for immigrant labour were considerably below that of the native population: “Les conditions d’accueil ne sont pas plus favorables que les conditions de travail. Rien n’est prévu en ce qui concerne notamment le logement. C’est l’époque des marchands de sommeil, où les hommes s’entassaient dans des caves, des vieilles usines désaffectées ou des hangars. Puis vient le temps des foyers pour hommes célibataires, espace précisément conçu afin que le migrant n’ait pas la prétention de s’installer de manière durable en France.” (Quiminal 1997, 21).

Only when the dramatic living conditions of the immigrant workers led to a scandal in the 1960ies, the government was forced to take action in this regard. By the means of the state owned SONACOTRA (Société Nationale de Construction de Logement pour les travailleurs Africains) additional workers hostels called *foyers des travailleurs africains en France* were constructed. The hostels were specifically dedicated to accommodate immigrant workers from the Sahelian region. In the effort to arrange with the enormous lack of space and accommodation facilities the hostels’ inhabitants established the practice of the “marchands de sommeil” (sleep-merchants) as described by a Malian immigrant from Kayes in the following words: “I have a bed and wake up at 6 o’clock in the morning. You are coming home but you do not find a place. I rent out my bed to you until in the evening; you pay something for it (...) and in the corridor - no space, not even for praying.” (cf. Trauner 2001, 19).

Initially constructed as temporary residences for single migrant workers in the beginning of the 1960ies still 30 years later the *foyers des travailleurs africains en France* remained the major place of accommodation. In the early 1990ies 71% of all Malian immigrants in France lived in such *foyers* (Quiminal 1990, 19)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Around 150.000 *travailleurs immigrés* are living today in 700 foyers, 250 of them are situated in the Île-de-France. The majority of those migrant workers come from African

Over the years the migrant workers started to organize their lives in and around these foyers. They initiated a number of formal and informal associative structures, like associations of solidarity (*caisses de solidarités ou d'entraide*), village associations (*les associations villageoises*) or associations of foyers residents (*comités de residents*).

The foyer as “expression construite de l'exclusion” (Quiminal 1990, 19) became a symbol of state control and surveillance of particular immigrant groups. Nevertheless, residents started to politically question the status and position which was assigned to them by the host societies' institutions. In the course of the years they started to contest their poor living conditions by going on strike and by building up alliances with a variety of actors of the French civil society, such as the local population, trade unions, political parties, advocates, social workers, NGOs, intellectuals, etc. It was these activities that witness the desire and attempt to political integration into French society.

Today the *foyers* constitute places where various aspects of West-African life is being re-organized e.g. by serving African food or selling African products. One finds tailors' and blacksmiths' „bon marché“, concerts, music, videos of projects in the home country etc. The *foyers* also provide space for celebrations such as marriages or child baptisms and are important meeting places for migrant associations. West-African migrants who do not (or no more) live in the *foyers* can find an African „imagined community” (Anderson 1983), where compatriots meet, communicate in their mother tongue and have access to an important infrastructure (e.g. to mosques, Islamic schools, markets etc.).

To the French authorities however, the *foyers des travailleurs africains* represent more than ever places of “non-droit”, where accommodation or shelter is provided to illegalized immigrants (compatriots) and where an informal sector or “économie parallèle” is developed. In 1996 the parliament declared 20 *foyers* to be “en situation critique” which were therefore to be destroyed or transformed into public social housing “habitation à loyer modéré” (HLM) and “résidences sociales”.

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countries south of the Sahara, a smaller part from the Maghreb. (Le Monde 11 April 1996, p.8)

### **Malian women entering a male dominated sphere**

A *foyer* of migrant workers is in the first place a male domain. Since women are not allowed to live there a Malian woman would only go there in order to visit relatives and friends, to join together for a meeting or to follow various social events. Marriages (*furusiri*) and child baptisms (*denkundi*) for instance are such important events, where the Malian community joins together and celebrates in rented rooms in the *foyers*.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the official parts of such ceremonies are held out by men mostly in the mornings, the women occupy the venue thereafter and are responsible for organizing the day, often bringing together some 200, 300 women to celebrate the bride or child and their families. During these social events, women show their economic power by publicly presenting - commented by a group of Griots and Griottes and documented by video-cameras - the large number of gifts and the huge amount of money the women spend on their female counterparts. The men, who observe the spectacle from aside, sometimes cannot hide their impression: "it is the women today, who have the money!" (cf. Trauner 2001, 218).

Women not only enter this male dominated sphere temporarily but – due to their specific employment situation - have also found opportunities to earn money in the *foyers* in the long-run.

There are few studies on the employment situation of West-African Women in France. Most of the jobs they can access more easily are found in the services sector like cleaning, child care, elderly care or the work in restaurants and hotels. However, in 1990 the general unemployment rate for African women in France was around 45%: 50% for Senegalese women, 46% for Malian women, 46,7% for women from Côte d'Ivoire and 36% for Camerounese women (Quiminal 1997, 22).

Therefore many women arrange in the informal economy within their own community networks. One of such opportunities open to African migrant women is to run small businesses or cooking in the "*foyers*".

Malian women have adopted strategies based on family ties and Malian immigrant community networks. One example is Mariam, a Malian woman, who had built up an *équipe* in the kitchen of a *foyer* located in the suburbs (banlieues) of Paris. The *foyer* was inhabited by men all originating from a village in the Kayes region in Mali. Mariam's *équipe* mainly relied on her

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed description of such events see Trauner 2001, 167ff.

family ties as she was assisted by two of her younger sisters in preparing the daily meals for all 80 *foyer* residents. In addition, two young *foyer* residents were employed to help with the hard manual work, such as cleaning the big casseroles or carrying heavy food sacs. Mariam prepared typical African dishes and sold them to the *foyer* residents for 2 -3 € per plate. In order to set up her *équipe*, meaning working every second week throughout 7 days, she first had to get the authorisation from the *foyer delegate*<sup>5</sup>. As head of the *équipe* she then was the responsible business woman and the employer for all others assisting her. Her income simply depended on the food sales. Through her personal networking with the merchants of the largest food delivering market in Paris (Rungis), where she had worked for several years before, Mariam received a big quantity of food (chicken, rice, onions, potatoes etc.) at a cost price.

Although the *foyer* is a place of various modest economic activities taken up by men, with the introduction of the “cuisinière”, women seem to have conquered a steady place in this male dominated world which enabled women to make a living, such as Mariam, who started her business after divorce. From her own business she could afford a car, send remittances and provide for the higher education of her daughter. However, her work as cuisinière was characterized by precarious working conditions and exemplifies the barriers faced by African women to get access to regular income and to participate in the formal labour market in France.

This reality is also expressed by the two terms for different types of work *baara* and *toubaboubaara* in the Malian language *bamanankan* (Bambara): whereas the latter means “the work of the *toubabous*<sup>6</sup>” associated with employment including social security and regular income, *baara* refers to the occupations mostly available only in the informal labour market.

In the course of my own research (Trauner 2001) I found out that Malian women usually enter the labour market with *baara* and later, as an avenue to participation in the regular labour market and to social advancement, try to qualify through vocational training e.g. in the health or care sector. For instance, one of Mariam’s sisters, who assisted her in the kitchen, went

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<sup>5</sup> Head of the *foyer*

<sup>6</sup> The term *toubab* or *toubabou* is used in the former French colonies in West- Africa for “French” or “white people”.

through a vocational training in elderly care. She finally succeeded in finding a better job and to give up the exhausting work in the *foyer*.

It is observed that the participation of African women in the French formal labour market is considerably increasing. Raissiguier (2003, 4) states that in 1995 the labour force rates of African women (originating from countries other than the Maghreb region) was 67,4%, compared to 66,2% of immigrant women from the European Union (aged 30 to 59). Given the fact, that the participation of African women in the labour market is higher than that of female EU citizens, she concludes: "what is clear is that they [the African women] debunk the racist/sexist notion that African women are simply consumers of a French welfare state and do not contribute to the national economy" (Raissiguier 2003, 4).

### **Women's organisational life: a new "chez soi"**

The continues immigration of Sub-Saharan women since the 1970ies has led to the emergence of numerous women associations. Their activities generally concentrate on resolving a set of problems faced by immigrant women in every day life. Such difficulties concerns the interrelation with French society and institutions (e.g. housing, school, access to civil rights, etc.) but also maintaining relations with their origin society.

In the 1980ies various kinds of informal groups and formal women's associations were formed. Some are characterized by their close cooperation with international human rights organisations and the global feminist movement combating all forms of discrimination and suppression of women. Among them, two well known organisations are the « Mouvement pour la défense des droits de la femme noire » (MODEFEN) and the « Groupe femmes pour l'abolition des mutilations sexuelles » (GAMS).

Other organisations focus their activities more on the institutional exclusion and discrimination of African women in French society. Such associations support women in institutional interactions and access to the health and legal system, to schools and public institutions. They also mediate in case of problems within their communities and between society of origin and French society (Quiminal et al. 1995, 7f.).

Besides such formal and by the 1901 Law of association legally recognized migrant women's associations a wide range of informally active groups and networks exist which are strongly linked to their migrant community.



However, the number and the activities of these social networks is less known and less visible in public.

### ***Tontines: women's solidarity organisations***

One very popular form of informal associative structures among Malian immigrant women is the "*tontine*", which is a rotating saving and credit association (Ardener 1964, 1995). In France the *tontines* can mainly be characterized as "caisse d'entraide", providing access to a large amount of money also for women without regular income. Besides, the *tontines* is also an occasion to speak in the mother tongue, exchange important information and recreate a certain "ambiance Africaine", as it was described by one of my interviewees (Trauner 2001, 210). A group of women normally meets once in a month. The money they collect from their group members in urgent cases is spent as for example in case of a death/funeral, a birth, a marriage or a child baptism, or it is saved for a long-term project for example when a member wishes to buy e.g. a TV or Video, wants to send money home to her relatives, needs money to start a small business or plans a travel home. Although Malian women usually join together for a *tontine* on the basis of same regional origin (same village or city of origin) they may also join from various (African) countries of origin.

By organising themselves women also use institutional structures provided by local district authorities in France. One such example, I explored among Malian women in Paris (Trauner 2001), is an African women's association in a *cit *<sup>7</sup> in an Eastern suburb of Paris. Its basis is a monthly financial contribution to a *tontine* of women originating from Mali and Senegal. In addition, the association receives funding from the district authorities to organise alphabetisation and sewing courses and to organise feasts in the district in order to enhance exchange and contacts between the residents in the *cit * as well as with the district mayor.

Madam Assetou, one of my interviewees, was a member in a *tontine* founded in 1988 and uniting about 50 women all originating from the city of S gou in Mali. The group had originally been founded by a woman from S gou, who had emigrated to France already in 1958. She still heads the association as *pr sidente* and is highly respected by its members.

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<sup>7</sup> Housing estate

## **The role of African migrants associations for development and integration**

The contributions Malian immigrants in France make to the economic development in their home country have received considerable attention (Daum 1998). However, only few researches have focused on women's contributions so far. The activities of women within their associations are diverse. Besides exchange of information and discussions also projects oriented towards their home country are designed. Generally, the initiatives of "big developing projects", like constructing schools, hospitals or health stations are primarily organised by male immigrants. In his study about Malian migrant associations, representing 39 villages from the Kayes Region in France, Daum points out, that women's representation in these associations only lies at 5,8% (Daum 1998, 28). One reason may be that women's associations became formalized only in recent years (Daum 1998, 28).

Nevertheless, female informal networks often exist along formal associational structures, and their impact in regard to economic development in their home country cannot be denied. Compared to those of male emigrants the female initiatives mostly concentrate on projects on a micro level, with a concrete impact. The already mentioned Malian women, Mariam, joint an association of individuals originating from Ségou and counting 85 male and female members. Fundraising by organising parties was one of the main activities of the association in order to help building up hospitals and buy medication in their region of origin. However, when Mariam received a gift of 200 school books, she could come back to the association in order to get help in financing the transport.

Migrant associations not only play an increasing role in relations to the development of the country of origin. In the last years they became important actors with regard to the integration of immigrants into French society, and concerning issues of citizenship. In this context, migrant associations function as mediators between villages in the home country and different sectors of the host country:

As one important example for such cooperation, the joint project of the Malian association *Guidimakha djikké*<sup>8</sup> and the municipality of Saint-Denis

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<sup>8</sup> „Hope of Guidimakha“: The association was founded in 1987 and comprises 24 villages in one district in the Kayes region in Mali, including about 40 000 inhabitants. It has

may be mentioned. In 1996 they signed a partnership convention under which Saint-Denis pledged to fund various activities as for example the collection of school material for Malian schools. A second convention in 1998 focused on health and provided funds for the construction of three health centres in Mali. Although most actions of the association are oriented towards Mali<sup>9</sup>, the integration of Malians in France is also an important field of activity of the association (Le Guay 2002, 35).

In so doing, *Guidimakha djikké* has established a rather exceptional relationship with the municipality of Saint-Denis, as a result of which the association enjoys a privileged role in Saint-Denis. The association holds a consultative role for various cooperative matters within the region. The power to propose common projects, for example, represents a recognition of the association as an important actor in regard to the development of their home villages. In turn, the municipality actively advocates a political change in regard to the unequal relations between North and South and thus seeks to play a role in a field which traditionally is considered the prerogative of central governments. Conversely, the municipality promotes the equal participation of immigrants in French society, calling for an improvement of their legal status and their rights. In this respect, the mayor of Saint-Denis supported claims for introducing the right to vote for immigrants at local level, for the regularisation of the "Sans Papiers" and for free movement (Le Guay 2002, 36).

### **Women within the movement of the "Sans Papiers"**

In March 1996 300 undocumented immigrants occupied the church of Saint-Ambroise in order to raise awareness on their precarious living conditions in which most of them had been pushed by "the legal impasse the French law has created for all of them" (Raissiguier 2003, 6) and the restrictive and contradictory French immigration regulations. Especially the 1993 "Loi Pasqua" had pushed many of the established immigrants, which had entered France legally already many years before, into an undocumented situation. The undocumented individuals however, resisted against their

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around 3000 members in France, all originating from the same district in the region (Le Guay 2002, 34).

<sup>9</sup> The main activities of *Guidimakha djikké* are relate to issues of water treatment, health, agriculture and education (Le Guay 2002, 34).

public image and stigmatisation by defining themselves as *Sans Papiers* claiming for their re-regularisation. The inhuman evacuation by special police forces in August 1996 of those persons who had found shelter in the church of Saint Bernard caused hunger strikes and demonstrations by the affected persons. Strongly supported by French civil society, this incident opened the way for a public debate about the restrictive French immigration legislation, and, in addition, about the unfair international relations between the industrialized countries and the “developing countries” (Küblböck and Trauner 1999, 29).

The majority of the protagonists of the *Sans Papiers* movement – extensively discussed by the media – were immigrants from former French colonies in West Africa like Mali and Senegal. What stands out is the strong presence of women and families within the movement and mobilisations, resisting police forces, holding sit-ins and strikes or occupying public spaces.<sup>10</sup> Though not taken into account by the media, Raissiguier (2003, 6) points to the numerical importance of women in the most representative collective of the *Sans Papiers* movement, the Saint Bernard collective with more than 30% women of all participating adults. Besides, the press counted the participation of about 100 children and 12 polygamous families (cf. Raissiguier 2003, 6). From a legal and political point of view the huge participation of female *Sans Papières* is not surprising, since women suffered much more from the precarious living conditions on the one hand, and from restrictive immigration laws on the other hand. According to the regulations of family reunification migrant women’s stay was directly tied to the status of a male family member as a principle permit holder (Raissiguier 2003, 5). With the 1993 Loi Pasqua the conditions for family reunification were again tightened, by linking it to higher income and adequate housing, which made it more difficult for immigrant workers to bring their spouses to France.

In order to point at their specific vulnerable situation and discrimination the female *Sans Papières* had organised a protest march of *the Women of Saint Ambroise* in Mai 1996, and had mobilized for the right to free movement, an

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<sup>10</sup> Already in 1992 some 300 families from Mali rallied for better living conditions (Küblböck/Trauner 1999, 30).

autonomous (residence) status, the right to asylum on gender related grounds and the right to work. They challenged their popular image as “depending mothers”, by struggling to be acknowledged and become visible as citizens with equal rights (Küblböck/Trauner 1999, 30).

Another very important concern was to become visible as equal partners in the struggle for regularization. Indeed, the female *Sans Papiers* took a leading role within the protest movement and during the occupations of churches, public spaces and offices: while men had to return to their working place during daytime, the women stayed present and thus maintained the organising of resistance and the occupations.

### Summary

Although there is a long-standing history of African migration to France, compared to other immigrant groups like North Africans or Europeans, Malians still constitute a rather small immigrant community. The 1999 census counted some 36.000 Malians in France, of whom 9.000 had been naturalized (cf. Le Guay 2002, 33). However, according to French government’s estimates for 2003 120.000 Malians live in the country, of which 60% are assumed to have entered France illegally (Findley 2004, 5). These figures correspond with the public image of Malian immigrants that has emerged since the 1990ies and which in turn was closely tied to the emergence of the *Sans Papiers* movement in 1996 and the high profile Malians achieved in this movement. Their vulnerable status also made them an object of racist and xenophobic discourse.

Although racism and discrimination against African/Malian women as well as their precarious legal status still challenge their equal participation on the French labour market, women have made various efforts to earn their living and send money to their relatives in Mali. In a sense, therefore, also women increasingly participate in migrations as a household strategy (Adepoju 2004, 1). Migrant women send remittances and indirectly contribute to the development of their home country through their engagement in *tontines* and *associations du quartier* and other, formal (usually male dominated) migrant associations.

The strong involvement in associative structures and their capacity to build ties with the host society has often highlighted migrant women as “vectors for integration” (Raissiguiet 2003, 2) of a marginalized immigrant community within France. However, this picture also relies on the imaginary construction of the “African mother or daughter”.

Women enter the spheres of their male counterparts in France and by doing so they also challenge the accepted gender roles of the origin society. With their emergence as visible actors in the French public sphere these women also challenge their public image. At least since the mobilisation of the *Sans Papier movement* African migrant women have to be recognized as important and independent political actors within a broader immigrant movement, which expanded all over Europe.

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