

**THREADBARE: THE USED CLOTHING TRADE AND ITS  
EFFECTS ON THE TEXTILE INDUSTRIES IN NIGERIA AND  
OTHER SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN NATIONS**

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## **Section I: The Growing Global Trade of Used Clothing**

The used clothing trade binds together the world's richest and poorest people through the twisted strands of consumerism, charity, and commerce. Wealthy westerners who can afford to discard last year's fashion for this year's new trend soften their consciences by donating their castoffs to charity. Many are now finding out that the destination of these contributions is not always what was intended by the donor. Very few charitable organizations give the clothing away. The majority of donated used clothes is sold to poverty-stricken people in developing countries around the world. While proponents believe that the used clothing trade benefits the poor, critics maintain it is sabotaging the development of struggling nations. The used clothing trade, which offers short-term help and long-term harm to developing countries, is a growing multi-million dollar global industry fueled by wealth, humanitarianism, environmental concerns, tax incentives, lack of information, trade deregulation, and corruption.

For those in the western world, clothing has become more than a necessity; it is social expression and a fashion statement. Due to lower production costs brought on by globalization, clothing costs have decreased over the years. High disposable incomes allow Americans and those in other developed countries to purchase throwaway fashions and discard clothing because it is no longer in style, no longer fits perfectly, or shows the slightest sign of wear. Prior to World War I, Americans did not discard their clothing. Apparel was mended and altered to become hand-me-downs to other family members or recycled as quilt material or rags. As the American economy improved over the years, consumerism increased (Strasser 22). Today the United States is the world's largest exporter of used clothes; 385,000 tons were exported in 2003, which was close to 40 percent of the market (Rivoli 176). Other major exporters include Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Japan (Veseth 179).

The used clothing trade begins in private homes of the world's affluent people. When Americans and western Europeans clean out their closets to make room for more stuff, they assuage their consciences by donating their castoffs to charity. America alone donates more than 2.5 billion pounds of clothing per year (Packer 54) with Goodwill Industries reporting a 67 percent increase in donations since 2001 (Claudio A452). Since the supply of donated clothing exceeds the domestic demand, only about 20 percent is directly used by the collecting charity (Claudio A452). Larger charities first sort through donations to stock their thrift stores and then sell the rest to secondhand clothing dealers to help fund assistance programs (Rawe 83). Charities report up to 80 percent of donations is sent on to used clothing traders (Packer 54).

The used clothing trade represents the "grassroots side of globalization," according to Michael Veseth in his book Globaloney: Unraveling the Myths of Globalization. Economist Pietra Rivoli calls it "a global industry for the little guy" (Rivoli 179). Most of the companies are small family businesses like Trans-America Trading Company in Brooklyn, New York (Rivoli 179). Like Trans-America Trading, many older companies in the trade started out as textile recyclers, and easy profit attracted them into the growing secondhand clothing trade (Rivoli 187). Without lobbyists or governmental interference, it is an industry controlled solely by economics (Rivoli 178). Most clothing is purchased from charities for approximately 5 to 7 cents per pound (Rivoli 180). After purchase, the majority of used clothing dealers sort and categorize the clothing. After sorting by condition, clothing is categorized into more than 400 groups. Clothing is then bundled into 500- or 1,000-pound bales for shipping (Rivoli 185).

Used clothing markets exist in over 100 countries (Rivoli 176). The prime markets are Sub-Saharan Africa, Central and South America, South and Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe (Veseth 179). The heart of the trade is Africa with Tanzania receiving the most clothing.

Summer clothing is sent to the African countries (Rivoli 184-185). The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 opened up the Eastern European market, which became an outlet for the winter clothes collected (Rivoli 183).

Americans and Europeans donate their old clothing for many reasons. In addition to those who contribute clothing due to genuine charitable inclinations, many displace guilty feelings of being wasteful by donating their castoffs to help the local poor while others are recyclers trying to prevent the growth of landfills. In the United States, tax incentives for charitable donations encourage this humanitarianism (Packer 54). However, what many do not realize is that not all donations are helping the domestic poor. In addition, the vast majority are not aware that all clothing collection boxes dotting city streets and parking lots in the United States and Western Europe do not belong to bona-fide charities (Veseth 181).

Corruption is rampant in the very competitive used clothing trade. For the last several years, many for-profit secondhand clothing dealers and unscrupulous non-profit aid organizations have been placing collection boxes in Europe and the U.S. to secure free raw materials for their enterprises. The boxes sometimes allude to helping the poor or protecting the earth; and they are being filled by unknowing or careless donors primarily concerned with convenience and getting unwanted clothing out of their homes. U'SAGain (pronounced use-again), Planet Aid, Gaia, and UFF are examples of companies collecting clothes in Europe and the United States under the guise of humanitarianism. All of these companies have ties to a group called the Humana People to People Movement, a Danish organization with global outreach that collects and sells used clothes and runs social volunteer programs. Humana People to People is really part of a huge organization called the TVind Empire masterminded by Mogens Amdi Peterson (Sullivan 2) who will face retrial in Denmark on fraud and tax evasion

charges if he can be found (Durham and Jakobsen). European journalists Michael Durham and Frede Jakobsen revealed that by selling clothes to its own companies, most of Humana's revenue was being classified as costs. Due to money laundering and offshore tax haven subsidiaries, very little real aid actually goes to poor countries. The journalists created the Humana Alert website to warn people throughout the world about the immoral and illegal dealings of this enterprise (Durham and Jakobsen). Corruption in the secondhand clothing trade, however, is not limited to fraudulent organizations; some legitimate businesses participate in dishonest practices such as stealing clothes from other firms' collection boxes (Hansen 124), mismarking shipping containers to circumvent used-clothing tariffs, stuffing the inside of bales with junk clothing, and bribing import laborers and customs officials (Packer 54).

Supporters of the used clothing trade say it improves the quality of life for the poor. It provides the consumers of developing countries with a means to purchase clothing; without used clothing, many would have no clothes at all. In addition, the trade helps the global economy by providing jobs as wholesalers, importers, traders, and vendors (Veseth 180).

Critics, including many humanitarian organizations, believe that secondhand clothing is detrimental to struggling nations. Although good intentions are acknowledged, they say short-term benefits often worsen the plight of the poor. They compare used clothing to food aid. Although the food filled stomachs, it damaged the agricultural economies. The developing countries need help that will empower them to become self-sufficient not dependent. The used clothing trade does not empower (Rousso 2). The governments of many developing countries believe that the used clothing prevents industrialization. Over 30 countries, including South Africa and Boliva, have banned the import of used clothing ("Morales to Ban Used Clothing in Bolivia"). Some assert that the global trade of used clothes has turned Africa into a dumping

ground for used clothing (Jeter A01). Some countries have placed high tariffs on used-clothing imports to prevent the clothing from entering as duty-free aid while others require health certificates to prevent the spread of disease (Rivoli 198). Others feel that used clothing trade is immoral because it turns charity into a business (Hansen 11).

As anthropologist Karen T. Hansen notes “The secondhand clothing trade is an unusual industry. Few other industries obtain their raw materials for free, as do charitable organizations, or have suppliers, the clothing-donating public, who do not know the important role they play at the start of a long commodity chain” (Hansen 122). Used clothing has gone from a survival mechanism to a growing global industry powered by affluence, altruism, dishonesty, environmentalism, globalization, secrecy, and tax benefits. Although some justify it by saying it helps the poor cope with poverty, used clothing fails to empower and perpetuates poverty in the long run.

## **Section II: The Effect of the Used Clothing Trade on the Nigerian Textile Industry**

Despite its geographic size and large numbers of human and organic resources, Nigeria is one of the least industrialized countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Plagued over the years by poor governmental decisions, corruption, and poverty, Nigeria is an economy in decline. Beautiful traditional clothing made of indigenous textiles has now been abandoned for cast-off clothing of the western world. Many altruists view the secondhand clothing (SHC) trade as a benefit to the poor. In reality, used clothing imports damage the Nigerian textile industry, and ultimately perpetuate poverty. Although it is not fully responsible for the decline in textile production, used clothing imports have undermined both hand and mechanized textile production in Nigeria, which endangers the self-sufficiency of the Nigerian people.

Nigeria has a rich textile history. For hundreds of years, textile manufacturing was a cottage industry for the production of beautiful hand-woven and printed fabrics such as aso-oke and adire. Aso-oke, which literally means ‘top cloth,’ is hand-woven cotton strip cloth made by the Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria (Ojo 31). Adire is the indigo and white fabric, which many Americans refer to as batik. Wax or cassava starch is used to apply the design to white fabric, which is then dipped into indigo dye. The design, often cultural or social symbols, remains white (“Modern Nigerian Textiles”). Even when modern textile technology was introduced into Nigeria, the cultural heritage of textile production was preserved (Raw Materials Research and Development Council 3).

While hand fabric design and creation dates back hundreds of years, the Nigerian mechanized textile industry is just over 50 years old. Kaduna Textile Mills, Nigeria’s first textile mill, was founded in 1956. Over the next 25 years, more and more textile firms opened to meet the local demand for plain and printed fabric. By the early 1980’s, almost 200 textile mills employed over 1,000,000 workers (Babadoko 1). At its peak, Nigeria’s textile industry was the third largest in Africa behind Egypt and South Africa (“Resuscitating the Textile Industry” 2).

Problems with the industry began with the introduction of globalization and deregulation of trade through the free-market reforms recommended by the World Bank in the mid-1980s. In order to receive debt relief, trade liberalization was required. In 1995, Nigeria joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the floodgates opened to second-hand clothing imported from the United States and Europe (Gorelick 1). Each year more and more used clothing came into Nigeria and more and more textile jobs were lost. According to Oxfam International’s report on the impact of the secondhand clothing trade, the steep decline in Nigeria’s textile sector of the

late 1990s coincides with “trade liberalism in 1998 that took place later than in many other countries in the region” (Baden and Barber 17).

Today, the Nigerian textile industry is on the brink of extinction. Between 1992 and 2006, 543,000 textile workers have lost their jobs (Adeloye 2). More than 150 textile companies have shut down in the past 20 years (“Save the Textiles Industry” 1). On October 8 of this year, United Nigeria Textile Limited, which had been in business for 38 years, closed its doors and left 4,000 workers unemployed. It is estimated that less than 25 companies and 20,000 workers remain in the textile sector (Babadoko 1). At the end of October, all the textile companies in the Lagos area forced their workers to take compulsory leave. All of these employees will lose their jobs if the firms do not re-open (Adeloye 2). The decline in textile production is also evident in the cottage industry. Southwest Nigeria is the only region to still have local textile producers in business (Nzewi 2).

Discarded western garments now grace the backs of Nigerians who once draped their bodies with the beautiful colors and patterns of local fabric. Nigerians shop for their clothing by sifting through heaps of discarded western garments at marketplace “bend-down boutiques,” the name Nigerians have given to the piles of used clothes spread out on the ground at marketplaces (Maharaj 1). According to Petrus Afolabi, a Nigerian economist, “The purchasing power of most citizens is now directed to secondhand goods and this erodes the productive capacity of the Nigerian textile industry” (Olori 1).

The Nigerian government and textile industry blame the used-clothing trade for much of the textile industry’s current state. The government banned the import of used clothes in an effort to protect the textile sector; however, large quantities of second-hand garments still make their way into the country. Wholesalers circumvent the ban by shipping used clothing to

neighboring Benin Republic and smuggling it over the border. Bribing a customs officer at the border is all that is needed to get the bales of used clothing into Nigeria (Maharaj 2). The textile manufacturers believe that these SHC imports threaten to put them out of business. According to Issa Aremu, General Secretary of the Textile, Tailoring, and Garment Union, the low demand for Nigerian fabric is due to the cheap used clothing readily available throughout the country (Olori 1). He says that a 2004 trade agreement between the Benin Republic and Nigeria has only made the used-clothes smuggling a bigger problem. He identifies Benin as “purely a smuggling economy” (Olori 2). It is not only the Nigerian government and textile industry which point a finger of blame at second-hand clothing (SHC). Even Oxfam International, a confederation of 13 global organizations dedicated to fighting poverty around the world, believes that “SHC imports are likely to have played a role in undermining industrial textile/clothing production and employment in West Africa” (Baden and Barber 4).

Throughout history, textile industries have traditionally been the starting point for economic autonomy. The industrial revolutions of England and the United States both began with textiles. China, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong are all success stories; each has expanded its manufacturing capabilities after beginning with textiles (Frazer 2). The textile industry is a good economic development starting point because it can employ unskilled workers (Chapman 3). Nigeria has a huge supply of unskilled workers due to pervasive poverty and illiteracy. In spite of its current condition, Nigeria’s textile industry is still the largest in Sub-Saharan Africa and the greatest hope for economic revival. In addition to a large labor pool, Nigeria also has a large supply of cotton (Frazer 2). If Nigeria has any hopes of improving its economy, the government needs to focus its attention on reviving the textile sector.

Near the end of President Olusegun's term in May 2007, a 70 billion Naira Textile Development Fund was announced as an effort to breathe some life into Nigeria's dying textile industry. Nigerian hopes were high that this loan fund would protect the remaining textile jobs, save the livelihood of the 750,000 people involved in cotton farming and production, and create 200,000 new jobs in the cotton and textile sectors ("Resuscitating the Textile Industry" 1). However, the country is still waiting for its new President, Umaru Yar'Adua, to follow through with the financial relief. The Nigerian media is reporting that the textile manufacturers are having problems getting the loans. In September, the leaders of the Nigerian Textiles Manufacturers Association (NTMA) implored the government to make the loans accessible. At the same time, they urged the government to put an end to the smuggling problem at the Benin-Nigeria border. Many are skeptical that the anticipated relief package will materialize ("Save the Textiles Industry" 2).

Independence without self-reliance is meaningless. The economic situation in Nigeria will never improve if the people cannot find sustainable employment. The first step towards industrialization is revitalizing the ailing textile industry. The secondhand clothing trade must be stopped because it undercuts both the organized and local textile production in Nigeria, which in turn robs the country of its rich textile traditions and sustains poverty.

### **Section III: The Used Clothing Trade and Its Effect on Other Sub-Saharan Textile Industries, particularly those of Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia**

The countries of Sub-Saharan Africa are infant nations compared to the developed countries of the world. Most of these African countries gained their independence from 1960 through 1975. Equipped with good cotton crops and large numbers of potential workers, many of these new countries pinned their hopes for economic self-sufficiency on the textile industry.

While some textile industries, like those in Nigeria, appeared to be headed for economic stability, the textile industries of other countries such as Uganda did not thrive much past infancy. Once the Sub-Saharan countries opened to foreign trade in the early 1990s, the countries were flooded with a surge of used clothing, which had a devastating effect on the textile sectors. The textile industries of the Sub-Saharan African countries of Zambia, Uganda, and Kenya, as well as others, have been decimated or restricted by the import of used clothing.

When Zambia gained its independence from Britain in 1964, there were no textile manufacturers in the country. Through a humanistic governmental approach, there were 85 Zambian textile mills employing approximately 10,000 workers by 1970. Tough times due to falling copper prices caused Zambia's economy to falter. In 1991, when the voters elected a new president, there were more than 140 textile mills. Shortly after election, President Chiluba opened Zambia to foreign trade and repealed tariffs. Custom officials valued used clothing at \$0, which allowed wholesalers to import massive amounts of secondhand clothes for the price of transportation. Zambia's fledgling textile industry could not compete with the invasion of used clothing. According to Mark O'Donel, chairman of the Zambia Association of Manufacturers, 30,000 out of a total of 34,000 textile jobs were lost. He explained, "Our industry didn't have a chance. We would have preferred for the changes to be phased in to allow our textile industry a chance to catch up to the rest of the world and really compete" (Bahahdur 20). In 2000, the Zambian government instituted duties on second-hand clothing, which increased its retail cost. There was a public outcry to repeal the tariffs, and the President Chiluba caved into the pressure to keep the cost of used clothing low. The Deputy Commissioner of Customs at the Zambian Revenue Authority said that it was "his opinion that the textile industry has collapsed due to the 'social phenomenon created by second hand clothing' and has contributed to the overall decline

of the economy. At the end of President Chiluba's second term in 2002, there were only eight textile firms remaining (Jeter A01). In 2004 speech to the Zambian parliament, Commerce and Trade Minister Mr. Namuyamba justified a proposed tax on used clothing called *salaula* saying, "When we encourage *salaula*, we are only enriching a few individuals who are shipping in those commodities. In fact most of them are not even our own people but foreigners who even take away our money" (Bahahdur 20). Unlike those in Nigeria, the Zambian textile trade unions did not take an active role in the secondhand clothing issue. They seemed to sit back and let their industry die (Hansen 240). Although Zambia did not have as many textile companies as Nigeria, the demise of its textile industry was an expedited version of what took place in Nigeria.

Unlike Nigeria and Zambia, Uganda's textile industry collapsed long before the influx of used clothing. In the country's early years of independence, cotton was part of the renowned 3C's of the Uganda's economy—coffee, copper, and cotton. In its prime, the textile industry had more than 500,000 employees, and the country earned more than \$US100 million per year from lint cotton exports alone. During the military coup and regime of Idi Amin, which began in 1971, and the subsequent mismanagement of the economy, the growth of cotton plummeted and the Ugandan textile industry collapsed as a result (Kisambira 1). *Mivumba*, as used clothing is known in Uganda, arrived in the late 1980s (Dougherty 1). Uganda is currently attempting to revive its cotton and textile sectors. Cotton is on the upswing, but growth is only at 50 percent of what was produced in the early 1970s (Austin 1). Like their counterparts in Nigeria, textile manufacturers and unions are urging the government to take action on the importation of used clothing, which they say is hindering the restoration of the textile sector. Southern Range Nyanza (SRN), a textile mill located on the banks of the Nile River in Uganda, uses local cotton to produce 13 million yards of cotton fabric per year. Viven Thakkar, managing director of

SRN, complains that western countries dump their clothes in Uganda and makes it impossible for him to break into the local market (Packer 54). Although the Ugandan government supports the revival of local textile production, it has not imposed a ban or quota system on used clothing imports or raised tariffs. Although a ban was recently implemented on the import of used underwear, socks, and pajamas, it was established to protect the health of Ugandan citizens rather than help the textile industry (Dougherty 2)

Kenya's experience with the used clothing trade is somewhat different from that of Nigeria, Zambia, and Uganda. Refugees from Zaire, Rwanda, Somalia, and Burundi fled to Kenya to escape their war-torn countries. Charitable aid, including used clothing, followed the refugees into Kenya in the late 1970s/early 1980s. In addition to providing clothes to the refugees, the aid organizations also gave the used clothing to poor Kenyans. During the mid-1980s, however, the charities revised their policies and began selling the clothes. The commercialization of used clothing in Kenya had begun. With trade liberalization in 1990, imports of second-hand clothing drastically increased. The collapse of the Kenyan textile industry soon followed in the early 1990s (Fields 1). According to University of North Carolina researcher Tina Mangieri, most of the study on the decline of African textile industries ignores the link between the increase of used clothing imports and the decline in textile production. Mangieri believes that a definite connection exists between the two (Mangieri 3-4). In her 2004 research, Mangieri asserts that the collapse of Kenya's textile production was a major hit to both the economy and culture of Kenya. Since Kenya's independence from Britain in 1963, the textile sector and its production of *khanga* and *kitenge* had been the focus of the country's economic development policy as well as its cultural strategy to develop a symbol of Kenyan identity. *Khanga* and *kitenge*, relatively inexpensive colorful printed cotton fabrics, communicate

feelings, traditions and cultures through various colors, patterns, and design symbols. Kenyan textile manufacturing seemed to be developing; the number of weaving mills increased from 6 in 1963 to 52 in 1983 (Mangieri 5-7). However, the development was short-lived. From 1998 through 2002, Kenyan imports of used clothing increased by 32 percent. By 2001, the domestic production of traditional African print textiles ended (Mangieri 7). The lack of *khanga* and *kitenge* production damages the cultural identity of Kenya just as the Nigerian culture suffers from the shortage of *aso-oke* and *adire*. The Kenyan textile firms still in operation are run by foreign investors producing fabric for export rather than local purchase. As in Nigeria, local textile designers and manufacturing associations are working with the government to revive the local textile sector. They are trying to raise awareness of East African identity in a “wear Kenya, buy Kenya” campaign (Mangieri 12).

In addition to Zambia, Uganda, and Kenya, many other Sub-Saharan African countries have had their textile industries destroyed or their revival hindered by the used clothing trade. South Africa banned the import of used clothing in 1999 after pressure was exerted on the government by local textile manufacturers and textile unions. The influx of used clothing precipitated the closing of textile mills causing thousands to lose jobs (Doughtery 1). Zimbabwe also restricted importation of used clothing. Although its textile sector still suffered, it is better off than the industry in neighboring Zambia (Bahahdur 27). In Malawi, the suspect organization TVind operating under the name DAPP has monopolized the used clothing trade. This bogus charitable organization convinced the Malawi government to classify their operation as development aid, which means they pay less than half the import tax. The onslaught of used clothes destroyed Malawi’s fledgling textile industry. According to Mr. Desai, Chairman of the Textile and Garment Employers Association, it has “not only been the formal sector that has

suffered as a result of the trade in second hand clothing, the informal sector has also taken a knock. The textile mill closed down as well as 30 to 40 small local producers resulting in about 6,000 jobs being lost.” Mr. Desai claims that used clothing has “affected Malawi’s capacity to produce for its people, especially for the small businesses” (Bahahdur 21-22). In Tanzania, the used clothing markets are concentrated in urban areas and are not as prevalent in rural areas as they are in neighboring Malawi. Although second-hand clothing is popular with the men, rural Tanzanian women continue to wear the traditional garments. This may explain why domestic production of textiles has continued to some extent despite a large volume of used clothing imports (Bahahdur 27).

The G8 Summit and Live 8 concerts in 2005 brought Africa’s problems to the forefront of the world’s consciousness. While British Prime Minister Tony Blair advocated the increase of development aid to Africa, many Africans spoke out against the relief money. As Africans voiced their opinions on their continent’s difficulties and possible solutions, the used clothing trade was cited as a problem. Kenyan economic expert James Khiwati criticized the used clothing trade in a 2005 interview with the German news agency Spiegel. Khiwati blamed the second-hand clothing for harming Africa’s textile market (Langenau 2). In addition, Ousmane Sembene, a well-known Senegalese filmmaker, shocked the public when he spoke out against the G-8 Summit and Live 8 concerts. Sembene is against western aid for Africa. He said, “The only way for us to come out of poverty is to work hard.” He accused the United States and other western countries of subsidizing their own cotton farmers which results in pricing African cotton growers out of the market. Sembene argued that these same countries made matters worse by “dumping used clothing on the African markets, crippling Africa’s domestic clothing industries” (Wax A01).

Africans are not the only ones speaking out against the used clothing trade. The International Textile, Garment, and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF), made up of 250 affiliated unions in 130 countries across the world with a combined membership of more than 10 million workers, has made the used clothing trade a priority. The group refers to the used clothing trade as "the disease of the century in the textiles, clothing, and footwear industries" and blames it for creating problems and unemployment in textile industries around the world but most noticeable in the African textile industries. According to ITGLWF General Secretary Neil Kearney, "There is no charity when it comes to the trade in used clothing. This is a lucrative business. On the market stalls of most African countries, cast-offs donated to charity command prices about 2,000% over what the wholesalers pay for it. Unable to compete, local industries are collapsing, leaving hundreds of thousands of workers jobless." The group is campaigning for free distribution of used clothing donated for the poor so that damage to the industries of developing countries around the world can be avoided. As Kearney bluntly puts it, "Charities must stop exporting poverty" (ITGLWF "Second-Hand Clothing Impoverishing Poor Communities" 1).

The growing trend of the global used clothing trade poses a threat to domestic textile production in Sub-Saharan Africa. In order to protect domestic textile sectors, some countries have banned the imports while other nations have imposed high tariffs to reduce the volume. However, these approaches have not been successful in eliminating used clothing's presence. In addition to suffocating local textile industries, used clothing also robs the African nations of their cultural identity as expressed through textiles and clothing. For all intents and purposes, the Sub-Saharan textile industries have been destroyed. Most countries produce little, if any, fabric for local use. Focus must now be put on restoration of the textile industries. The industries

cannot be left to solve this problem themselves. Intervention by governments, aid and trade organizations, and global textile organizations is needed. Part of this intervention must involve the used clothing trade, which has greatly contributed to the decimation of the Sub-Saharan African textile industry and hinders its revival.

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