

# THE ROLE OF PITAMAHA IN BALINESE ARTISTIC TRANSFORMATION: A COMPARISON BETWEEN KAMASAN AND GUSTI NYOMAN LEMPAD ARTISTIC STYLE

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## ABSTRACT

*The Balinese artistic traditions of wayang style paintings that were known as Kamasan lasts for generations occurred some changes. Following the collapse of Balinese traditional court, the arrival of western artists and scholars, Pita Maha association was established to prevent the excess of commercialism to Balinese arts and crafts. A new generation of artists started to emerge, not only they adopted western painting techniques taught by their western 'gurus', but they also showed freedom of self-expressions in their works; one considered as a genius was Gusti Nyoman Lempad. The aim of this research was to compare the artistic transformation before Pita Maha and after Pita Maha. It was done by analyzing examples of Kamasan styled painting and works of Lempad through the qualitative method with a case study approach. The analyses show the differences between both styles regarding themes, iconographies, human figures proportions and composition, presentation of narrative stories, decorative elements and availability of artists' signature in the paintings. It shows the artistic transformation of Balinese art. Through Pita Maha, Balinese starts to adopt western painting techniques, while preserving the cultural inheritance and symbolic value of traditional art in addition to their economic value.*

**Keywords:** *balinese painting, artistic transformation, kamasan, Pita Maha, Gusti Nyoman Lempad*

## INTRODUCTION

The artistic traditions of Bali have been formed for hundreds of years give the impression of being a style without change; however, it is not entirely correct. Traditional Balinese *wayang* painting or widely known as Kamasan painting is handed down for generations by the group of specialist in the art of drawing and painting known as the *Sangging*. This painting style experienced its golden era in the 16th century. One piece of evidence of Kamasan painting golden era that is still standing today can be found inside the Semarapura Palace complex, on the ceiling of the Kerta Ghosa or the Hall of Justice (Figure 1), which once served as the place where the royal law was adjudicated and now become a museum. As a result of the fallen of Semarapura Palace by the Dutch, western influences started to flow in and take place in various aspects of Balinese life, including its art. In the late 1920s, the western artists and scholars started arriving, and several of them decided to reside in Ubud, two particular artists were Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet. To prevent the excesses of commercialism, Pita Maha association was established on 29 January 1936. Not only managed to open marketing outlets for Balinese painting and woodcarving, but this association is also succeeded in organizing the important exhibition in the East Indies, Japan, and Europe. In relation to painting style, this association introduces not only new techniques but also new ideas for form and themes which have become part of the legacy of Balinese art.

The research aims to evaluate how western artists and Pita Maha association have influenced the artistic transformation of Balinese painting styles in the 1920s-1930s by comparing Kamasan style painting and works of Pita Maha artists, in particular, those of Lempad's. These particular painting styles are chosen as a representation of each generation in order to clearly show the artistic differences before and after Pita Maha association as well as to show how the younger generation of artists began adopting western style paintings, while still preserving their indigenous artistic value. Figure 1 shows Kamasan painting at Kerta Ghosa Pavilion Ceiling.



Figure 1 Kamasan Painting at Kerta Ghosa Pavilion Ceiling  
(Source: Wulandari, 2009)

According to Adnyana (2016), cultural asset and traditional symbol issued by the kings are the basis of Balinese traditional art practice. Evidence are found in Batuan inscription dated Caka 944 (1022 AD) issued by an ancient Balinese ruler Marakata that mentioned a profession namely *citrakara* (a profession for masters with drawing-painting skills). The king developed the term *citrakara* as legal recognition for the continuity of masters drawing and painting professions. In addition to this, the profession also has the mythological background. It is believed that the artistic skills are taught by the Gods from heaven, as Ramseyer (2002) has mentioned that various Gods were sent to earth to teach and instruct men in the arts and crafts, one of them is the God Citra Kara who introduced the art of painting and drawing to man. The important mythological background, as well as a legal profession, acknowledge by the king made the artists obliged to complete the art practice seriously. With this legality and responsibility, the artist's profession is considered as one of the important and established profession in Balinese society. However the artists are important, Kamasan painting has always been a communal and largely a family activity. The leading artists draw an initial sketch in light ink lines (*ngereka*) that sketch lays down the figures and narratives, then to a group of apprentices and colourists will continue the work. When the colourists have finished their work, the final lines are done by the master artist and then the painting is finished.

As narrative art, Kamasan usually presents scenes performed in *wayang*. Therefore traditional painters are familiar with the great epic such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. Holt (2000) has added that mythological stories are also popular, for example, Calon Arang; a widow whose black magic power often damages other people, Malat; Balinese heroic stories as well as calendar system which includes astrological calendars (*Palelintangan*) that can be seen in Figure 2, and earthquake calendars (*Palindon*). These calendars were used to identify favorable and unfavorable days, tables of the constellation, and their influence on human beings. These paintings mainly used for the festival and religious ceremonies. They were hung for the duration of the ceremony, usually on walls of temple pavilions (*tabing*) as curtains either in temples or domestic buildings (*ider-ider*) or painted on the ceilings of pavilions in palaces and temples (*ulun-ulun, langit-langit*). Nilotama and Santosa (2012) have pointed out that Balinese *wayang* painting commonly places in the wall area or parallel with eye

view. But evidence show that since 17th century, these *wayang* paintings are not only located in the wall area but also in flags form (*lontek/umbul-umbul/penjor*), roof decoration (*ider-ider*), wall decoration (*parba*), curtain (*langse*), and as paintings located in the ceilings. Figure 2 shows the depiction of astrological calemders (*Palelintangan*).



Figure 2 I Nyoman Mandra, *Palelintangan*, 1997  
(Source: The Virtual Museum of Balinese Painting, [www.sydney.edu.au](http://www.sydney.edu.au), 2016)

Flow of western influences started to take place in Balinese society after the Dutch takeover Southern of Bali in 1906-1908 and destroyed the traditional courts. In the late 1920s, western artists and scholars started arriving then followed by tourists. This period is also regarded as the golden years of cruise tourism (Soemantri, 1998). Adnyana (2016) has explained further that these streams of western influences, particularly in art, caused younger generations of artists started to emerge in Peliatan, Batuan, and another Ubud area. They began to do art practices that provide opportunities for artists to demonstrate their personal expression. To preserve Balinese artistic tradition as well as to prevent the excess of commercialism, especially related to Balinese arts and crafts, Pita Maha was the association that established by Cokorda Gede Agung Sukawati together with western artists, Rudolf Bonnet, and Walter Spies. Pita Maha itself means 'great grandfather' in old Javanese (*kawi*) and is also one of the titles given to Brahma, the creator God of the Hindu Trinity. It, therefore, refers to the ideas of creation. Bonnet himself defined Pita Maha as 'society, a guild of Balinese plastic arts. The first aim of the society was to stimulate art, and the second was to be interested in the material welfare of the members' (in Soemantri, 1998). Bonnet and Spies, then considered as *gurus* or masters by their pupils who followed them around, not only took part in providing art materials such as canvases and papers, oil and watercolors, and tempera, but also taught them new painting techniques. It includes the introduction of human anatomy and perspective, detailing of the object, and *chiaroscuro* shading. New ideas of form, colors, and themes were established. From epic stories, world of the Gods and mythological heroes now they painted themes that closer to their daily life, such as scenes of planting and harvesting fields, fishing, and marketplace as well as scenes of various ritual ceremonies and dramatic performances and unlike the traditional *wayang* style, where paintings telling stories in uninterrupted scenes, these 1930s paintings limited to only one scene in a limited size of paper or canvas, completed with wooden frame and the artist's signature. This new way of presenting art was very new to the Balinese (Holt, 2000).

Pita Maha changes the art practice characteristics that once were controlled by the king into a more complex system, similar to the western art trade system which involves not only the artists and the patrons but also a curator, collectors, gallery owner, art critics and even art dealers. Pita Maha

plays an important role in promoting and opening marketing outlets for Balinese arts and crafts as well as organizing exhibition overseas. While for the young artists, Pita Maha significant in teaching new techniques, new ideas of form and themes which have become part of the legacy of Balinese art, as Soemantri (1998) has explained further that the artists, partially released from the 'code' system of tradition depicted reality more realistically. These young artists grew into mature artists aiming to show freedom of personal expression that competing to be the subject of art creation. From this period on art is no longer a communal or family activity, every artist has the freedom for self-expression. Because of World War II, followed by the death of Spies and Bonnet's departure to his native country, Pita Maha became inactive in the early 1940s. Even though only lasted for a few years, Pita Maha succeeded in preserving the cultural and symbolic value of Balinese art, in addition to their economic value. Numerous artists emerged from Batuan, such as I Nyoman Ngendon, Ida Bagus Made Togog, and Ida Bagus Jaturasura, while from Ubud a group of cousins Anak Agung Sobrat, Meregeg, and Raka Turas, including one significant artist Gusti Nyoman Lempad. By the time of his earliest dated work, 1931, he was either in his fifties or sixties. In the early stages of his career, Lempad had been most active as an architect and carver or what the Balinese call an *undagi*. However, when westerner came to live on the island, the sons of Ubud Lord encouraged their connections with local artists, and it was Lempad who most of all drew the attention of western visitors.

## METHODS

Sachari (2005) has pointed out three approaches commonly used in art and design studies includes qualitative approach, quantitative approach, and multimethod approach. To achieve the aim of the study which is to evaluate and compare different artistic style of Balinese art from two different period, the traditional artistic style dominated by traditions and the kings or Kamasan style painting and modern artistic style influenced by western techniques where Lempad's works will be explored as sample, qualitative method with study case approach will be used. By using this approach, an in-depth study about a case or phenomena will be done by collecting detailed information through various data collecting methods within a determined time frame (Stake in Creswell, 2009). Although this approach generally used in social researches to gain in-depth understanding related to human studies, whether individual or in groups, this approach can also be used for research in the field of art and design.

Based on the determined approach, data collecting will also be done qualitatively through collecting secondary data or desk research. In this stage, all relevant data from various sources, such as books, journal articles, websites, newspaper, reports and other previous studies that had been done about the subjects will be studied and analyse. The purpose of this stage includes giving general information about the topic, analyse previous studies that had been done as well as to know what other writers think and to have basic theory and understanding about this topic. The limitation of this desk research is the lack of articles, reports, and other sources of information published specifically related to Pitamaha and Lempad's work written by Indonesian author. Those secondary data will be analyzed using the qualitative method to gain a conclusion related to the artistic transformation from both periods mentioned above.

## RESULTS AND DISSCUSIONS

Vickers (2012) regarded Kamasan not just as the high point of tradition but also as the epitome of the classical form of Balinese painting that connects directly to the *wayang* or shadow puppet theater. Kamasan style painting has very distinct and rigid figures that presented in two-dimensional views, flat, and has no perspective. A Kamasan style painting, dated 1921 by Pan Ngales

titled 'Churning of the Ocean of Milk' as evidence that can be seen in Figure 3. This painting depicts the Gods standing on the left-hand side of the world mountain while their enemies, the demons stand on the opposite side and Indra, king of the gods, sits on top of the mountain. Both groups hold the world serpent, which is wrapped around the world mountain, to churn it in the ocean of milk. The churning produces three goddesses, the central one of whom holds the elixir of life (*amerta*) in a winged jar. Vickers (2012) has suggested that some aspects of this flattening come from the shadow puppet theater screen. However, there is a very different sense of perspective at work. This perspective is one inherited from ancient Javanese art, as presented on the temple reliefs of East Java. It is usually called a 'bird's eye view, although it is more accurately a 'gods-eye view,' a vision looking down on the world from multiple or potentially infinite points of view. Bearing in mind that these works were made as the medium of religious teachings as well as important media for communication between the Gods and humans world, this suggestion should be correct. Besides presented in a very rigid way, the proportion of human figures also seem way off compared to western techniques in depicting human body. In Kamasan paintings, the proportion refers to adherence to established conventions about the relative size of parts of figures. These measurements are set down in craft manuals. They are similar to medieval Western systems of measurement, although in the Balinese case, each measurement is seen as a human manifestation of elements that exist in the wider cosmos (Vickers, 2012). How the Balinese depicts their human figures, in relation to perspectives and proportions show strong the links between cosmology and art.



Figure 3 Pan Ngales, *Churning of the Ocean of Milk*, 1921  
(Source: Vickers, 2012)

The painting also shows how the Balinese depicted details of human figures; their faces are always drawn in three-quarter profile, both eyes being visible. Shoulder and chest face the spectator frontally; legs and feet are once again pictured from the side, one behind the other as if walking. Ramseyers (2002) has pointed out that the figures acting in the paintings are not individuals; they are distinctly contrasted types whose iconographic features enable quick and definite recognition, very much similar to the figures in *wayang* puppet performances. This can be seen from figures from the left-hand side and right-hand side of the painting. Figures in each group show different iconography; figures on the left-hand side are the noble type figures, elegant in posture, showing different skin colors completed with rays of light surrounding the figures, while on the opposite side are the fearsome and demonic figures. Noble types are characterized by their relaxed yet controlled noblesse with long, thin arms and legs, delicate hands with curved fingers, narrow, straight nose, and smiling mouths lend them grace. The colors of noble characters are white, pinkish-beige and light ocre, or they are determined by the color of the particular god incarnated in the figure. Thus Rama and Krishna as Vishnu incarnations appear in green or blue, such as the figure on the top left-hand side of the painting. The case is completely different for crude characters and demonic types on the right-hand

side, their eyes are round and staring, their bodies stout or corpulent, their skin red or dark brown and hairy. Demons and chronic deities can be recognized by their fangs. This also applies for servant and companion figures, such as the ones that located at the bottom of the painting; they are often portrayed in a rough and bizarre manner (Holt, 2000). The clothes, jewelry as well as head-coverings must also show the rank and function of the figures portrayed. Figures of Kings, Gods, and Goddesses in the middle and left-hand side wear various kinds of crowns and diadems, while the demons on the opposite side often have long hair but may also be bald. All of these figures are made in meticulous details with the complicated decorative pattern.

In addition to Kamasan's iconography, the composition also illustrates which groups are the figures belong to. It can be seen from the painting that the protagonists; kings, gods, goddesses and other noble characters located on the left-hand side, while the antagonists; demons and negative characters are on the opposite side. Compositions in Balinese painting similar to the shadow puppeteer's arrangement of figures against the screen, as Vickers (2012) has explained that in Kamasan art, the artist is imagined as the puppeteer on the other side of the painting to the viewer. In the shadow theater, the protagonists are arranged on the puppeteers' right and carried in his right hand, while the antagonists, demons, and negative characters the other way around. Thus in Kamasan paintings, the figures are not the viewers that determine the direction of vision. The noble types will appear on the viewer's left, while the coarse and demonic creatures located on the viewer's right, which can be seen in the painting. There are six noble figures on the left-hand side (good side) of the painting and other five fearsome figures on the right-hand side (evil side).

As a medium for religious teachings, as well as to inform the viewers about ethical and moral standards, Kamasan paintings illustrate episodes of epic or mythological stories consecutively on one and the same picture. To present scenes of a story, the painting is divided into sections, as with comic strips the episodes squares are created by which it can follow figures as they move in space and time. The single representations are separated from one another by conventional flame or brick motifs. An example of Kamasan painting dated late 19th or early 20th century, titled 'Smaradahana: The burning of Smara' (Figure 4), will demonstrate this concept. The painting depicts the god Siwa is meditating and ignoring his tasks to the world. The other gods are worried about this disturbance to the natural order and ask Smara to end the meditation by shooting Siwa with his love arrow. The top scene of the painting illustrated shows the meditating Siwa in the top right corner. Siwa is struck by the arrows fired by Smara, who stands towards the middle of the top scene with other gods behind him. In the larger bottom scene, separated by the row of bricks, Siwa turns into his angry form with many heads and arms and burns Smara to ash. According to the Balinese legends, Smara's ashes blow around the world, inspiring sexual desire in humanity (Vickers, 2012). This painting clearly shows not only a single or selected scene of a story, but rather episodes of a story. Thus the viewer will have more thorough understanding of the story as Ramseyers (2002) has pointed out that this manner or representation makes it possible for the painter to depict actions whose main purpose is to teach and not to entertain the viewer.

Another characteristic of Kamasan style painting can be seen in both paintings (Figure 3 and Figure 4), the artists always fill the main spaces with small motifs called *aun-aun* or 'haze' that representing dust particles in the air. This filling accords with Balinese ideas that there is no such things as empty space, but rather concepts of areas that are 'busy' and 'quiet' (*rame* and *sepi*), that operate on a spectrum of fullness and emptiness (Vickers, 2012). It is common for Balinese traditional artist to fill all the empty spaces in artwork with the decorative element. This concept is known as 'horror vacui' meaning fear of empty space that has been adopted in many traditional arts in the east as well as in the west.



Figure 4 Kamasan, *Smaradahana: The Burning of Smara*, late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century  
(Source: Vickers, 2012)

With the establishment of Pita Maha, western influences and painting techniques started to appear in Balinese younger artist. A rather senior artist of this period, Gusti Nyoman Lempad also made artistic changes and innovations that liberating artists from the Kamasan style painting system and domination. His distinct works will be analyzed further and compare with the Kamasan style painting. Unlike the conventional themes of Kamasan painting, Lempad has explored a range of variety of themes, such as traditional dances, everyday rituals, daily life, marketplace and even erotic scenes, while still exploring with much more traditional themes, which include epic stories, legends, mythologies and the famous stories of Brayut family. Lempad's works are still considered as narrative paintings, although no longer presenting scenes of stories, but only an episode of a story in a single frame. An example of Lempad's work from the latter themes shows an episode of the epic story, most probably of Ramayana story (Figure 5). The painting depicts the antagonists Rahwana in the middle of the painting that attacked by Hanuman, the king of monkey, while his army of monkeys was visible on the left-hand side of the painting. The opposite side illustrates noble type characters that can be seen from the posture and crowns, which more likely to be the protagonists; Rama and his brother Lesmana observed the attack. The painting is less decorated; very simple in black and white colors, as Vickers (2012) has suggested that Lempad's work is characterized by its pure line and many of his drawings are simple black-and-white works on paper although there are other works with sparse of color especially of Vermillion for flames of magic power. Their simplicity adds power to the works since it draws attention to his quick but unique individual characterizations of each figure. This suggestion can be clearly seen in the painting.

In illustrating the figures, Lempad is still used some of the conventional rules of *wayang* iconography, for example, the noblesse on the right-hand side. The postures, crowns, and attire still show the elegance of that protagonist characters, although ignoring the right evil and left good composition that used in traditional Kamasan paintings that mentioned in the previous section. Geertz (2015) has mentioned that Lempad's composition as flair which shows up most in the dynamic tangles of arms and legs of his narrative pictures. This can be clearly seen from the Hanuman and Rahwana figures in the middle of the painting, in which Hanuman fights Rahwana with the gestures of arms and legs as if the characters are played by dancers in a traditional dance performance. The figure's proportion also departs from the conventional iconography that is no longer rigid and flat, with body faces the viewers and faces drawn in profile, but more rounded and relaxed figures with appropriate anatomy and perspectives that adopted from the western techniques. However closely, Lempad follows the proportion and anatomy of western techniques that style remains distinct with his compositional integrity through distorted bodies and employing multiple perspectives. Thus make his line drawings in black ink, and his distinctive, energetic lines are never imitated.



Figure 5 I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, *Ramayana Story*  
(Source: [www.arcadja.com](http://www.arcadja.com))

Another example of Lempad's work from a more contemporary theme that produced in the late 1930s, titled 'The Children Disturb Mother Brayut' (Figure 6). The Brayut family presents peasant life of the impoverished and over-fertile *Pan* (father) and *Men* (mother) Brayut surrounded by their eighteenth children. The distinct story about Brayut family is the reversing gender roles; Pan Brayut does the cooking and other housework, looks after the eighteen children, while his wife lazes in bed. Although uncommon, the Brayut family themes had appeared in late 19th century Kamasan painting, but the themes were made famous when Lempad drew single episodes of Brayut family daily lives in black and white ink with humor and sometimes sarcasm. This painting depicts Men Brayut in the middle of the painting surrounded by her eighteen children, some of them are working diligently combing through Men Brayut's hair looking for hair lice, while some other are fighting and attacking each other and two of the youngest are breastfeeding. On the left-hand side of the painting, Pan Brayut is observing the scenes whilst holding the piece of clothes, which seems that he is on his way to finishing some house chores, while his wife is lazying and playing with their children. Similar to the previous painting, the figures in this painting are illustrated with appropriate anatomy and perspectives, although some parts of the body, such as the hand, backs, and legs seems slightly longer. How Lempad presented human figures in elongated style is similar to other Ubud painters, most likely influenced by Bonnet.

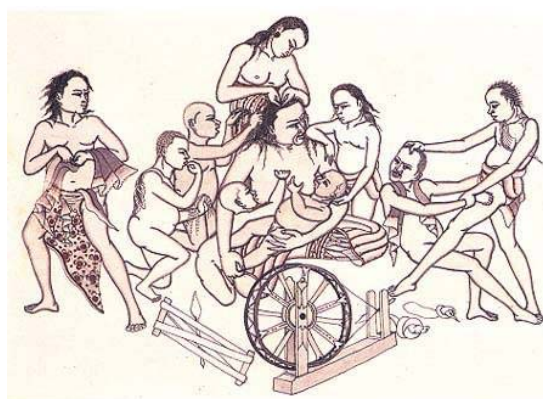


Figure 6 I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, *The Children Disturb Mother Brayut*, late 1930s  
(Source: Neka Art Museum, [nekartmuseum.com](http://nekartmuseum.com), 2016)



Besides its pure line in black and white ink, the simplicity of Lempad's work can be seen from the disappearance of decorative elements (*aun-aun*) that usually fills all the empty surfaces of a Kamasan painting. Lempad ignores 'horror vacui' concept, thus allowing empty spaces around his main characters, this is considered as a very bold way to paint since other Balinese paintings from the 1930s are very much influenced by the western techniques, but still strictly follow this concept and fill empty surfaces with decorative elements. Both paintings also show other western influences related to personal ideas and freedom of expression, in which artists' consider their work as a personal interpretation of stories and ideas and medium for self-expression. They start to sign their work that applied to Lempad's works. Even though it is said that Lempad could not actually write in the Latin alphabet. Thus he was only duplicating the form of his name in each of his painting.

## CONCLUSIONS

Following the collapsed of traditional court and the arrival of western artists and scholars to Bali, Pita Maha association was established by Cokorda Gede Agung Sukawati and western artists Rudolf Bonnet and Walter Spies and made various influences to the art and crafts industry in Bali. It included the opening of the art market, organizing exhibitions, distributing art materials, and introducing western painting techniques to Balinese artists. The painting style was filled with conventional rules strictly that controlled by traditions the kings and limited to epic and mythological story themes, started to transform into a more modern style however still rooted with conventional aspects of traditional paintings. From this period on, paintings also have commercial and economic value.

The artistic transformation can be clearly seen by comparing the visual characteristics of Kamasan style painting and those of Pita Maha, the Lempad's work in particular. Kamasan style painting follows strict rules of traditional *wayang* style. It is obvious in both examples of Kamasan paintings that discussed before. From the iconography, human figures proportion, compositions (left-good, right-evil), and narrative presentations are similar comic stripes as well as the decorative elements that fill the entire surface of paintings. Since traditional paintings were done communally by the masters Sangging and his apprentices or sometimes his other family members. There is no signature or name of the painter can be found in the painting, while the visual characteristics of Lempad's work show different artistic value and styles. The iconography is slightly similar with traditional rules; however with more appropriate human proportion based on western style anatomy, freedom of composition based solely on the artist's ideas, depicting various themes from epic, mythologies as well as daily life scenes which presented as single presentation of an episode, rather than narrative episodes of a story. The simplicity of Lempad's black and white works, the disappearance of decorative elements filling the empty space, and an addition of signature available can also be considered an aspect of transformation.

From the discussion can be clearly seen the role of Pita Maha and its founder in these changes. However, the western artists introduced western techniques, these western 'gurus' continued to suggest the Balinese not to loose their indigenous artistic value but combining them with the modern western techniques and the Balinese successful in performing this idea. Through Pita Maha, Balinese started to adopt western painting techniques, while preserving the cultural inheritance and symbolic value of traditional art in addition to their economic value. Furthermore, the transformation of Balinese artistic style was not only limited to Lempad's work; other young artists emerged during that period had their own distinct style which then categorized in groups, such as the Batuan school, Ubud school, and so on. Each school has different characteristics and similar with Lempad's works; their works also have some traditional artistic value preserved in their painting. Regarding their painting characteristics and how strong they preserve traditional artistic style are open for further study.

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