

Building an indigenous museum in the Vatican : some Papuan directions for indigenising museums

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BUILDING AN INDIGENOUS MUSEUM IN THE VATICAN

Some Papuan Directions for Indigenising Museums

Roberto Costa

Abstract

Debates around the significance, function and social value of museums are still challenging museum practices and models. In particular, the demands of “source communities” for self-representation and self-emancipation in the global community continue to call into question the role of the museum as a catalyst for promoting social change across cultures. In this paper, I push this question further by drawing some ponderings of a group of Roman Catholic woodcarvers in central Asmat (West Papua, Indonesia) to build a museum for exhibiting their carvings in the Vatican. To them, the Vatican is not only the sacred centre of Catholicism but also an integral part of their mythical world of ancestors. After a brief examination of their considerations, I attempt to put their ambitious museum idea into dialogue with current debates on “the postcolonial museum” to highlight how it can dictate new directions for indigenising museums.

Keywords: *transcultural indigenous museums, social change, museum indigenisation, Asmat woodcarvers, West Papua, Indonesia*

Towards the end of the last century, Soroï Marepo Eoe, a Papuan trained anthropologist and the former director of the Papua New Guinea National Museum,¹ warned about the imminent death of the museum in the Pacific if a radical process of indigenisation did not take place (Eoe 1990). Despite the increase in indigenous museum experimentation that has taken place in the Pacific since the 1970s (Stanley 2004, Bolton 2019), he observed that it was necessary to adhere more strictly to local *customary ways* and adopt a holistic approach to museology: one that was more people-centred and socially engaged than scientifically oriented. In other words, he wished the museum to be increasingly de-Westernised, just as the “call for indigenization” was urging for the social sciences (Atal 1981), and to function as a “catalyst” for socio-cultural development.²

This novel indigenous awareness has been intertwined with the structural and ethical reformulation of Western museums. Thanks to the abundant postcolonial critique of muse-

¹ Eoe has recently been appointed as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade of Papua New Guinea.

² “Museums should also serve as development catalysts by assisting governments to forge their development projects in ways that better serve the people of both today and tomorrow” (Eoe 1990: 30). See also Eoe and Swadling (1991).

ums,³ new museum theories and practices have increasingly tried to distance themselves from the taxonomic and sensationalistic museum paradigm of the 19th century, despite the persistence of the latter's attractiveness. Close collaboration with source communities, repatriation and restitution of parts of collections and cultural knowledge (to former colonies,⁴ but also to ethnic communities within the same nation-state⁵), adoption of "traditional care" methods in museological protocols and new approaches to display (such as multisensory approaches) (Edwards et al. 2006) are examples of the diverse practices that have been progressively implemented to pluralise the conventional concept of the museum. This reformed and "appropriate museology" (Kreps 2008, 2015) aims at giving voice to indigenous ethical concerns and socio-economic and political demands while challenging hegemonic structures of power that operate through the institution of the museum in increasingly subtle ways (Curtis 2006, Lynch and Alberti 2010, Boast 2011).

In this paper I will focus on the demands of "source communities" for self-representation and self-emancipation in the global community through the museum medium. Given that many societies share the idea of the museum as a repository for displaying tangible and intangible heritage and as a sacred space for acquiring knowledge and worshipping deities (as the original meaning of the word "museum" indicates),⁶ the museum has the potential to serve as a socio-cultural medium to foster inclusivity and mutual comprehension between different peoples. As such, the museum can be considered not just as a "contact zone" (Clifford 1997), but, as per Eoe, a "catalyst" for promoting socio-economic needs and redressing political and historical inequalities. In short, it can be a catalyst for social change across cultures.

To substantiate this assertion, this paper discusses the case of a group of Roman Catholic woodcarvers in an Asmat village (West Papua, Indonesia), who are pondering over the idea of building a museum in the Vatican that presents and comments on their cultural traditions. To them, the Vatican is the centre of Catholicism, which they have practised since the mid-1960s, but also an integral part of their mythical world of ancestors: it is from across the sea – from the West – that the reborn souls of ancestors return to the world of the living (Van der Schoot 1969: 72–73, Voorhoeve 1992: 2–3).

This paper sets out to describe their ambitious museum idea and provide a first and general assessment of it, which will be as comprehensive as the restricted length of the paper allow. The leading questions of my examination will be: what does it mean for this group of woodcarvers to build a museum in the land that Catholic missionary activity has made "theirs" by virtue of their adherence to the Catholic faith, and how can their ideas contribute to current debates about "the postcolonial museum"? To do so, I will direct my attention to the main points of convergence and incongruence between the ponderings of this group of

³ For a quite detailed but concise review of the literature on the postcolonial museum, see Kreps (2011: 82), see note 8.

⁴ See Tythacott and Arvanitis (2014).

⁵ I am referring to cases of national/regional repatriation as, for instance, recently discussed in Løkka (2017).

⁶ Here I refer to the *primaeval* understanding of the word "museum" (Gr. *mouseion*), dating back to the third century BC. At that time, museums, such as the one established in Alexandria by Pharaohs Ptolemy Soter and Ptolemy Philadelphus, were places dedicated to the cult of the Muses and the acquisition of scientific knowledge (see for instance Bazin 1967: 15–16).

Asmat artists and the main issues raised in the current museum literature. Thus, a number of compelling concerns, such as the ritual role of museums, the impermanence of museum collections and new collaborative paradigms, will be invoked to further the discussion on museum indigenisation.

The Asmat and their ideal museum in the Vatican

The Asmat are a Papuan society widely known in the West as talented woodcarvers and former headhunters. They live in a swampy area in the southwest Indonesian province of West Papua. Because of their hostility towards outsiders and the limited strategic relevance of their region, Asmat experienced Western colonisation relatively late. It was only after the Second World War that the Dutch began to administer the region and Catholic and other Christian missionaries commenced their evangelical mission. However, the fame of their material culture had already spread by the beginning of the 20th century: Western explorers, anthropologists and art enthusiasts (such as the Dutch Antony Jan Gooszen, the Swiss Paul Wirz or the British Walter Guinness) collected Asmat artefacts for European ethnographic museums, making Asmat “primitive” material culture popular even before the term “Asmat” was formally acknowledged.⁷ Beyond the paradigms of “primitive” art and “savage” ethnography, the first institution to see the potential of their material culture fully and regard it as a lever for socio-cultural and economic development was the local Catholic mission. From the beginning of their presence on Asmat land, Catholic priests promoted forms of aesthetic and iconographical dialogue with vernacular material culture (and its makers). In 1973, this association culminated in the establishment of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress in the region’s capital, Agats (Stanley 2012: 121–142). The initiative to establish this museum originated from the then-bishop Alphonse Sowada. It was designed to be the museum of all Asmat people, which would help them preserve their material cultural traditions. It is therefore not surprising that the relationship between the local Catholic clergy and Asmat woodcarvers has been particularly strong and privileged ever since.

I first learned about the idea of building an Asmat museum in the Vatican during my second trip to Asmat in 2017.⁸ At the time, I was mainly enquiring into the interrelation between local theology and artistic practices among the woodcarving communities of several villages of central Asmat (in particular, Atsj and Amanamkai). My return to Asmat with a collection of chisels hand-made in Italy – which had been previously requested of me by the head of the woodcarving workshop of Atsj, Paskalis Osakat – encouraged my woodcarver interlocutors to share with me their ponderings to build their own museum in what they term the “Holy Land” (in Indonesian, *Tanah Suci*; in Asmat, *ceser cepimbi*), which identifies the biblical Holy Land as well as Rome, the Vatican, and, more generally, Italy. Interestingly, to them, the Vatican is holy not just for being the See of Saint Peter’s successor, but also for being

⁷ The term “Asmat”, the vernacular word that the Asmat use to identify themselves (lit., “we the people”) started to be employed from the late 1940s. Before then, the Asmat were referred to by the neighbouring Kamoro as *wé mana wé* (“people who eat people”).

⁸ My four visits in the village of Atsj occurred between 2016 to 2018.

located in the West, across the sea (*ceser bu*, “sacred sea”), from where, according to their life-cycle system, the reincarnated souls come back from the upper world.

In the village of Atsj, the sacredness of this land is reinforced by the accounts of two senior woodcarvers, the already mentioned Paskalis Osakat and Fidelis Fusuku, who both visited Rome – and the Vatican – during a promotional tour of Indonesian artistic traditions in Europe organised by the then-Indonesian First Lady Siti Hartinah in 1987. Although Fusuku had passed away before my arrival to Asmat, I managed to talk with Osakat – who would die soon after – about their pioneering trip to Rome (which he described as the first and only trip of any Asmat to Rome). As soon as Osakat noticed my Italian origins, he began to share with me his wonder for the “Holy Land” and its artistic wealth. His amazement was so great that, once he came back to Asmat, he christened his youngest child, a boy, Roma. His hope, in fact, was that this baby would become the first Asmat Catholic priest and would be able to reach Rome again. Years later, however, he found out that his boy was too rebellious (Ind. *jahat*). Roma eventually followed in his father’s footsteps and is today an accomplished woodcarver. In the village, nonetheless, speculations about the Western *Tanah Suci* have continued to circulate, as have plans to travel to Rome again.

During my fieldwork, I have had several talks with Matias Jakmenem, who took on the leadership of the woodcarving workshop after Osakat’s demise and described their museum project to me. To him, “Asmat have strong faith, we have God, Jesus”, and are thus worthy to access the Holy Land. He suggests that a museum would serve as a medium to connect with Rome, because “we are looking for solutions to set about new routes from there [the Vatican] to here”. He adds:

It just shouldn't be like [the typical setting] wherein we give artefacts away. No, not at all. People also must be involved; we must have to mutually acknowledge each other so that we can learn about the situation there.

He expands on this idea by referring to the museum as a means to provide their children with equal opportunities and redress disparities between them and their Western counterparts:

Special education should be envisioned for us so that we can learn English, Greek, Italian; in other words, the possibility of sharing ideas and exchanging knowledge. [...] Whereas for children there [Italy, Europe, the West] it is easy to move, for our children it is not, and we don't gain knowledge... However, thanks to this museum, our children will be able to strengthen the [value of the] museum there while attending the local school and learning the Italian language.

This passage also highlights a widespread desire to gain knowledge from, and exchange it with, the broader world. In fact, lack of knowledge is for many of my Asmat interlocutors the primary manifestation of the lack of reciprocity with the West in general, and with Rome and the Catholic Church in particular. As Jakmenem reveals to me, Asmat people donated their land to the Catholic missionaries to build churches and spread Christianity among them. Moreover, one of the Asmat, who prefers to remain anonymous, tells me that they have

been loyal to the Roman Church despite the increasing religious diversity in the Asmat region. But the Asmat have not received anything in exchange and are not represented in the *Tanah Suci* (“There must be signs of our work over there!”).

Jakmenem, as the spokesperson of his group, describes the design of their museum in the Vatican and defines it as a “taboo house” (Asm. *karo cem*), therefore, a very sacred place. This sacredness, as he explains, derives from the “authenticity” of the place and its “nature”. These two terms identify the museum’s situation within the local set of customs and Asmat cosmology. Adhering to the customary practices (Ind. *adat*) is the *sine qua non* to propitiate the ancestral power that, in turn, propels the woodcarvers’ artistic creativity. Thus, to Asmat, ancestors are the source and co-creators of their artefacts, which are, in turn, filled with ancestral energy.⁹ The pilgrimage of people of knowledge bringing family heirlooms and new artefacts from Asmat to the Vatican will further spiritually empower the place, thus adapting the museum’s atmosphere to artistic creation (“our mind will be much freer”).

In short, according to Jakmenem, their museum will be unique: “Dutch, German, English, French [museums] will be distant from ours. Nothing like this. Too ordinary... If [our museum] was like other museums, there would be no spiritual energy, yes, no spiritual power.” Therefore, spiritual and ancestral power will feature in this museum, which will be devoted at once to their *adat* and their global aspirations. As Jakmenem states, “That world [Europe] will notice us and, consequently, people will open their eyes on the Asmat people.” For this reason, sales are envisioned as an essential element of their museum (“sales and visits will be continuous”), not just to sustain their project financially but also to concretise new connections with Europe.

Their ideal museum is also envisioned as having a ritual role. Traditionally, sculptures were brought to a sago¹⁰ grove as part of Asmat life-cycle rituals: after the ceremonial feasts in the customary house (*jeuw*), ritual objects were laid to rot in the forest to release their ancestral power, which would be later absorbed by the land and sago trees and eventually sourced again in the ongoing cycle of life. Now, however, as assumed by senior woodcarver Frans Firmak referring to the local museum in Agats, the museum substitutes the sago groves:

Previously [...] we used to render [sculptures] back to the forest, to the sago groves... Nowadays, when a sculpture is ready [both materially completed and “ready” in the ceremonial progression], we put it in the museum instead.

Thus, the museum, like the sago grove, becomes an integral part of the customary ritual chain that conserves and returns life force by preserving, displaying and selling away ritual objects. In this way, their museum will be fully Asmat and will play an important role in modernising ancestral rituals.

⁹ On the concept of “authenticity” in Asmat art and ancestral power in making artefacts, see Costa (2019).

¹⁰ Sago, a starch obtained from the interior of a specific palm (*Metroxylon sagu*), is a major staple food of the Asmat diet.

The proposed museum and current museum debates

A review of the salient traits of this proposed museum reveals its emphasis on intangible cultural heritage and knowledge rather than artefacts themselves. The Asmat museum in the Holy Land would be a typical example of the so-called “indigenous museum”: in Hirini Sidney Moko Mead’s words, “a multifunction tribal culture centre that includes a variety of functions and purposes according to the needs of the particular groups” (Mead 2008: ix). This kind of museum also shares certain features with other recent Western museum models that are holistic in their approaches (such as the “ecomuseum”; De Varine 2006) and community-based (such as the “wild museum” or the “vernacular museum”; Jannelli 2012, Mikula 2015).

Of course, like any other museum, the Asmat museum in the Vatican would be modelled on a specific cultural and socio-political centre; in this case, the *jeuw* (customary house), which is the Asmat “pantheon, reliquary and living museum; in one word, the sanctuary of the Asmat culture”¹¹ (Simpelaere 1983: 121). Like the *jeuw*, the Asmat museum is meant to nurture and secure the perpetuation of their ritual and cultural systems by helping youth communicate with the elderly, the living with the dead and the Asmat people with other people and ontologies. Their museum can, therefore, be seen as a kind of a cross-cultural medium or a “contact zone”. This zone defines not only the precinct through which, in its simplest and most “optimistic” form (Boast 2011), diverse cultural values, visions and meanings are brokered but also an area in which confrontation and contestation take place (Pratt 1992: 1–11, Clifford 1997: 188–219).

This point relates to the museum’s pivotal function of redressing and reworking relational unevenness between the Asmat, Western societies and the Church. The Asmat vision of history, like that of most Melanesian cultural traditions, deviates from the Western view, as it tends towards reciprocity rather than linear progress (Timmer 2019). Thus, to the Asmat, it is difficult to envision a future without equal compensation, since it underpins their ritual systems of life-power circulation and their idea of balance (*ja asamanem apcamar*).¹² It is in the context of this understanding that the proposed museum manifests an increasing desire for rebalancing non-Asmat relationships. In this sense, it is interesting to note resonances with literature that highlights the political valence of museums and their staff members, and that promotes ethical change and social justice by way of redressing injustices through curatorship and curatorial activism or community collaboration (Kreps 2011, Golding and Modest 2013, Message 2013, Sandell and Nightingale 2013, Janes and Sandell 2019).

The lack of reciprocity is also closely related to the educational function of the proposed Asmat museum in the Vatican. Their museum is regarded as a medium both for exhibiting Asmat cultural traditions and for gaining knowledge. Asmat desire for knowledge derives from the lack of reciprocity, as Jakmenem stresses in his explanation of the museum idea. The issue here is that young Asmat must obtain the same opportunities to access knowledge as

¹¹ Orig. « *le panthéon, le reliquaire, leur musée vivant, en un mot, c’est le sanctuaire de la culture Asmat.* »

¹² My tentative translation would be “balance while walking”. This expression is increasingly employed in newspapers articles and official speeches, as it is considered to be in tune with public moral and developmental strategies that the government wants to promote and implement in the region.

young Westerners. Thus the museum is a vehicle for redressing this basic asymmetry and working towards inclusion. It should be an educational site, a kind of *jeuw* in which to acquire ancestral knowledge (and power), but also to learn about others' cultural traditions. In other words, it should be a place in which to develop an inter-generational transmission of knowledge (from the elderly to the youth and vice versa) and multicultural exchange. This idea of the museum as an educational place (Hein 1998, 2016) and multicultural forum resonates in some ways with the prerogatives of postcolonial museums. Civic integration, diversity awareness and conscience formation are the goals of an approach that aims to be less monovocal and authoritarian (or top-down) and more transcultural and community-based (or bottom-up; Kreps 2008). This also applies to a critical approach towards those narratives traditionally dictated by museums; such an approach can create "fresh, surprising, and challenging" learning journeys for non-indigenous people as well (Johnson 2016: 139).

Another aspect of the museum proposal is the idea of authenticity. The Asmat woodcarvers assert that their proposed museum will be unique in the West for it will be fully authentic. This authenticity lies in what they term "nature"; that is, the genuine environment reproduced in the museum through visible objects (woodcarvings) and invisible entities and energy (ancestors' souls and power). The respect for the authentic nature of tangible and intangible cultural heritage has been among the main curatorial and ethical concerns of museological practices in recent times (Alivizatou 2012, Clavir and Moses 2015, Schorch and McCarthy 2019).¹³ The general trend in current international museology, as confirmed by international bodies such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM),¹⁴ shows increasing attention to the tangible and intangible factors that determine the original context. Importantly, this shift towards a more anthropological and ethical approach in museology and curatorship, or ethnomuseology (Simpson 2007, 2014), has implied the acknowledgement of indigenous cultural rights, such as First Nations and Aborigines' rights in Canada and Australia¹⁵ and biculturalism in New Zealand (McCarthy 2016). Therefore, authenticity relates to cultural rights as well as to ownership of cultural property, which is currently one of the major ethical and contested issues among museum professionals and indigenous communities (Hauser-Schäublin and Protz 2017).

New potential directions

Despite showing similarities around a number of themes, the positions of Asmat and Western museology diverge markedly with respect to the cosmological value of the museum. The envisioned museum will be, like a *jeuw*, the centre for Asmat ancestral beliefs and rituals,

¹³ In his critique of the "museum out of the time", James Clifford stressed the urgency of contextualising museum collections. In this respect, he mentions that the Musée Ethnographique de Neuchâtel was among the first Western institutions to be concerned with this museological practice (Clifford 1988: 231).

¹⁴ For example, the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003).

¹⁵ I am referring to the "Canadian Joint Task Force Report on Museums and First Peoples" (1994) and the Australian "Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities" protocol (2005).

and, thus, a connector between the Asmat and the Catholic Church. Most of the Asmat woodcarvers, who profess themselves Catholics, aspire, by means of the museum, to reach the epicentre of their Church, the Vatican. Moreover, they want to further cement the association between art and religion that has been a recurrent theme in the history of Asmat evangelisation and, quite interestingly, Asmat pioneering accounts (for instance, of their contemplation of the Holy Land's artistic richness). If the secularisation of the museum has played an essential role in democratising this cultural institution in European contexts, an Asmat museum in the Vatican would, in contrast, be predicated on the non-secularisation of museums. This chasm is not new in the history of museum studies. In fact, it was brought to the fore by Mead (1983) in his seminal article on indigenous museums, wherein he wonders about the need for those cultural traditions that are closely tied to religious systems to line up with the Western secular model. This non-secularisation also reconnects to the original meaning of the Greek *museion* (although in that case no cult objects were stored).¹⁶ In recent years, there have been experiences in museological practices in Western museums that confirm a renewed sensitivity and respect towards the spirituality of the museum objects, even if within the limits of administrative museum norms (Peers 2017). However, there is no doubt that the sacredness and spirituality of the place stretch the idea of secularisation to the utmost.

This sacredness also relates to other issues concerning the ritual function of the museum. The museum is not merely a site for performing rituals (Macdonald 2005), but also an integral part of their ritual cycles, as the analogy with the sago groves demonstrates. This analogy is further strengthened by the envisioned transient nature of the objects that will be displayed in the museum. Indeed, comings and goings of people and objects between the Asmat and the Vatican, like continuous sales of artworks, perfectly depict a state of persistent mutation. This clearly draws on the ritual exchange and cyclical logic of the Asmat but also, by keeping a broader Melanesian perspective, on what Anna-Karina Hermkens (2019: 427) defines as the “social and spiritual significance of the material obsolescence and the intentionally short life expectancy”.

There is no doubt that the impermanence that features in the conceptualisation of an ideal Asmat museum in the Vatican seems to radically contradict the museum's primary mission: the preservation and perpetuation of cultural and artistic traditions. However, a more attentive reading of this contraposition suggests that the core of this conundrum lies not in the idea of the museum itself, but in the vernacular understanding of culture that is nuanced by complementary dichotomies such as tangible/intangible or permanent/impermanent. This opens a discussion that, as mentioned above, is present in the agenda of current museological debates but is still very contentious.

A further puzzle that this project poses is the reversion of the collaborative paradigm. Collaborative museum practices have so far entailed the involvement of indigenous people to enrich and properly contextualise displays (Mead, 1984; Golding and Modest 2013). Moreover, there have also been cases of collaboration between Western and indigenous people to establish indigenous museums in their land of origin (as in the case of most indigenous muse-

¹⁶ See note 6.

ums or cultural centres).¹⁷ However, this proposed museum advances a new modality of collaboration that implies that Westerners will help indigenous people to build their own museum not in their original land, but in the land that has become theirs through the phenomenon of colonisation and their vernacular cosmology. Thus, proposed Asmat museum in the Vatican inverts the paradigm of collaboration that discourses around “postcolonial museums” usually advocate in an attempt to redress previous imbalances.

Building an indigenous museum in the Vatican would also entail a further complex and fascinating conceptual scenario. Despite the fact that the Vatican is far from the Asmat traditional setting, the artists’ idea does not refute the idea that an indigenous museum should be located in the geographical and cultural context of its own community to foster and preserve socio-cultural ties and customary ways (Smidt 2002: 10). On the contrary, it reinforces this notion, as it will be built in a land that is regarded as belonging to their current local cosmology and will be dedicated to nurturing their *adat*. Thus this ambitious plan strengthens the key idea of an indigenous museum while reflecting the increasingly urgent needs and attempts of indigenous people to construct transcultural identities, albeit in accordance with their *adat*.

Conclusions

This paper has conducted a preliminary analysis of the ponderings over an ideal indigenous museum in the Vatican of a group of Asmat woodcarvers through two main questions: how do the ideas of a Papuan group of woodcarvers to build their museum in the Vatican relate to current debates on museums, and what can they contribute to pushing such debates further. To cast light on these points, I have briefly presented the Asmat proposal, bringing out its salient characteristics. At the same time, I have tried to draw parallels between the principal conceptual features of their museum and current museum discourses, highlighting theoretical gaps and potential contributions that their proposal can generate.

What has primarily emerged from this analysis is that their proposed museum would serve multiple purposes, including repairing uneven relations with the Vatican and expanding Asmat prestige in the West (epitomised by the constant references to their children); acquiring knowledge; and revitalising their ritualism and *adat*. Moreover, it is seen as a potential catalyst to facilitate the inclusion of the Asmat people in the Catholic community as well as the broader world. In brief, if, in Christina Kreps’ words (2011: 75), the “post-colonial museum is fundamentally about inverting power relations and the voice of authority”, their envisioned museum primarily aims to invert the voice of authority to rebalance power relations.

A further point that my analysis has tried to clarify is related to the concept of “museum” advanced in their proposal. I have shown that despite its apparent disconnection from their cultural and geographical context, an Asmat museum in the Vatican could nonetheless be

¹⁷ Interesting cases in this regard include, among others, the Papua New Guinean Gogodala Cultural Centre (Dundon 2008) and the Enga Take Anda House of Traditional Knowledge of the Enga, Wabag (Wiessner and Tumu 2013).

framed as an indigenous museum, as the land of the Vatican is included in their cosmological map. This idea speaks volumes for the great potential of this ideal museum in responding to peoples socio-cultural and economic needs and integrating different realities that, at first glance, seem to be quite separate.

Ultimately, as emphasised by Beatrice Voirol (2019), new directions in museum theory and practices cannot neglect closer work in indigenous communities. Unearthing people's needs and clarifying their demands is an appropriate way to develop fresh conceptualisations of museums and to further challenge museum theories and practices.

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