

Transforming Matrilineal Land Inheritance Practice: Remarks on Intermarriage and Women's Rights in Morogoro Rural District, Tanzania

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Abstract

The study examines the transformation of matrilineal land inheritance practice and women's land rights in the context of intermarriage among the Luguru ethnic group. Data were collected through document review, interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The result identified several cases of intermarriage between matrilineal and patrilineal groups. Women married to men from other ethnic groups lose their rights to inherit land from their natal families. Marriages are increasingly becoming patriarchal, and men have changed their practices of moving to their wives' households and passing land to their sisters' children. However, the study also noted other barriers to women's rights, such as increased land sales. Addressing women's access to land requires policy frameworks that promote cultural practices of both matrilineal and patrilineal groups to reduce the impact of intermarriages on women's rights. Policies should monitor and regulate land sales, which disadvantage weaker groups, especially women.

Keywords: transforming matrilineal, land inheritance, intermarriage, women's rights, Morogoro rural, Tanzania

Introduction

The matrilineal system traces relationships through the maternal line. It also refers to matriliney, in which individuals belong to their mother's descent group, and land rights are passed down through the female line (Marck, 2023; Fortunato, 2019; Hantrianto, 2017; Mair, 2013). Tene (2020) argues that although matrilineal systems exist in many parts of the world, they are much less common than patrilineal ones. In studying matriliney and daughter-biased investment, Holden & Mace (2003) found that globally, 31 of 186 societies (17%) are matrilineal. The connections within the maternal clan were observed by the English adventurer John Lederer (1672) during his travels in Eastern North America, where he referred to the Tutelo, an eastern Siouan tribe, as a clan (Knight, 2008).

From four women, namely Pash, Sopoy, Askarin, and Maraskarin, they derive the race of Mankinde, which they, therefore, divide into four tribes distinguished by those several names. For now, for two of the same tribe to match is abhorred as incest and punished with great severity (Tax, 1955:445).

The matrilineal relationship is rooted in the bond between an infant and its mother, which is maintained throughout a child's overall development into adulthood (Knight 2008; De Baca et al., 2014). The Anthropologist Kapadia (1966) has mentioned that all children of a woman take the family name of their mother. The adoption of matrilineal lineage has been associated with various factors, including women's participation in agriculture (Aberle, 1961), low paternal certainty (Fortunato, 2019), and communal breeding (He et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2013).

The matrilineal descent system has been documented as being older in African countries than in any other areas where it has existed (Nkwi, 2015; Aidoo, 2022). Africa has well-known societies organised in matrilineal systems, particularly southern, western, and central parts of the continent such as Ghana among the Asante and other Akan people McGee (2015), Guinea Schneider (2018) and along the matrilineal belt extending from Zaire, Angola, and Tanzania to Mozambique, Lamba, and Bemba of Zambia, Malawi, and Botswana (Arnfred, 2021, Berge, et al., 2014).

In some matrilineal clans, males share power equally with females (Brule & Gaikward, 2021). Equal power relations have been noted among the matrilineal Mosuo of China (Feng & Xiao, 2020). It has been argued that while the matrilineal system offers women social and material protection, senior men are the decision-makers (Clack, 2010). In the Marshall Islands, Huffer et al (2008) identified four types of authority in land management: (i) Paramount chief, (ii) Lesser chief, (iii) Commoner lineage head (iv) Commoner worker/lineage member. A woman may hold any of these titles. It has been argued in the literature that since the colonial period, matrilineal cultural practices have weakened, and social relations that determine land inheritance have changed as a result of emerging issues, such as intermarriage and land scarcity (Cotula, 2007).

The matrilineal system exists in some societies in Tanzania, such as among ethnic groups in the Matrilineal Belt Dondeyne et al (2003), the Coast region Kongela (2020), and in the eastern part, such as the Luguru and Kaguru (Ngohengo, 2022; Metta et al., 2025). According to Kuzara (2014), land inheritance practices in matrilineal societies are changing. The shift from matrilineal to patrilineal inheritance practices may undermine

women's rights, as inheritance increasingly favors men. When women from a matrilineal group marry into patrilineal societies, husbands may claim control over land, reducing women's bargaining power within households. This study aims to examine the dynamics of matrilineal land inheritance practices and women's land rights within the Luguru ethnic group in Morogoro Rural District, especially in the context of intermarriages.

Matrilineal Land Rights Of Women

Women are connected with their maternal family; they are entitled to access land from it. In the matrilineal clans, there are no male heirs (Aidoo, 2022). In Malawi, Peters (2010) observed that land was inherited matrilineally, with only daughters receiving their mother's land, while husbands cultivated fields belonging to their wives. It has been argued that divorce is uncommon in matrilineal families since it is difficult to tell wives to go "home" to their own matrilineal land (Peters, 2010). Sons do not receive land from their fathers because they belong to different lineages (Berge et al., 2014). However, the land of the maternal uncle is inherited by the sister's children, who are members of the same clan (Starkweather & Keith 2019). Land inheritance practices are flexible, and daughters may inherit their mothers' land (Quisumbing & Otsuka, 2001). The aim is to maintain social ties and ancestral relationships where mother and daughter belong to the same lineage/clan.

"The women here are so sure of themselves...maybe it's that we know for sure that we have land...Even if I do not get land from my husband, I still have it from my mother, and nothing can change that..." (Huffer et al., 2008: vii). — (Palauan woman [no name was given], cited in Margold and Bellorado, 197).

Allowing men to pass land to their sons means transferring it to another clan. A significant social norm is the husband's shift to the wife's home; hence, the post-marital residence can take either a matrilocal or uxorilocal form (Peters, 2010; Mair, 2013). Mattison (2011) defines matrilocal post-marital residence as the situation where a married/cohabiting couple resides with the wife's natal group, and uxorilocal as the situation where a man resides in his wife's residence in the absence of a large kin group. Beyond patrilineal-matrilineal intermarriages, it is questionable whether daughters in matrilineal families get land from their mothers.

Some experiences in Africa involve matrilineal wives moving to their husbands' land, such as among the Yombe of the lower Congo, southwest of Brazzaville, and the Congo in the Cataract region (Mair, 2013). Scholars such as Peters (2013) and Cotula (2007) present conflicting views, arguing that the present matrilineal system does not give women the direct right to inherit and control land ownership.

Evolution Studies of Transition

It has been argued that early human kinship was matrilineal (Knight, 2008). Early Anthropologists, such as Fox (1967), Divale & Harris (1976), have demonstrated that most societies have eventually evolved from matriarchy to patriarchy. Literature has discussed the transition of the matrilineal social relations. The emergence of family

property weakened matrilineal social organisations (Engels, 1884). A study by Holden & Mace (2003) found that in Bantu societies with patrilineal or mixed descent, the domestication of animals led daughters to move to the marital clans and, hence, lose their land inheritance rights in the maternal clan. Moravec et al (2018) examine post-marital patterns globally and observe that rates of transition to patriliney were higher than those of transition to matrilocality. Among the Himba in Namibia, the growing significance of cattle and land transactions has led to changes in matrilineal practices (Scelza et al., 2019).

Changes in subsistence farming and the integration into the market have led to a transition away from the matrilineal kinship (Shenk et al., 2019). Globalisation, marked by a shift from traditional productive patterns to market-driven systems, poses significant challenges to the matrilineal structure (Colleran, 2020; Mattison et al., 2023). In studying social transition and the status of women, Das & Bezbaruah (2011) found that the original matrilineal system among the Khasis tribe of Meghalaya has been largely distorted in the era of globalisation. Among the Mosuo of southwest China, Mattison (2010) observed a transition away from matriliney due to market transactions. In African societies, the increased land value is associated with competition and land transactions (Cotula, 2007). In Malawi, Peters (2010) observed the migration to the north and competition over the matrilineal land. In pre-colonial African societies, land access was based on the non-transaction principle, and lineages were traced through extended families (Brian, 1996; Bengtson, 2001). Land sales undermine matrilineal social relations, particularly the shift in power from women to men. The Asante maternal family, known as “Absna,” has lost tenure power to husbands who decide on land sales without involving their wives (Quansah, 2012).

Tiplut (2000) examines women and matriliney transition in gender relations and notes the erosion of matriliney in the face of modernisation, urbanisation, and colonialism. The Modernisation of the economy puts women’s autonomy at risk because industrialisation can perpetuate gender inequalities (Harpending & Pennington, 1990). In the Solomon Islands, Huffer et al (2008) found that the patriarchal theology promoted by Christianity was associated with the patriarchal power structure of the colonial government, forming a powerful ideological foundation that reinforced women's subordination and exclusion from public decision-making. Customary land tenure in Africa is shaped by traditional inheritance systems that may follow either patrilineal or matrilineal lines, depending on the community (Keeni et al., 2018). Despite their dominance in African societies, customary land tenure practices have been influenced by external forces such as colonial legacy (Nghohengo, 2022; Rodrigues, 2015).

It is said that women in matrilineal communities have more tenure rights than their counterparts in patrilineal groups (Doss, 2013). Existing literature highlights that cultural norms often restrict women’s rights to inherit land within both their natal and marital families (Agarwal, 2002). This has led to land reforms aimed at addressing discriminatory practices against women. Policies and laws in Tanzania, for example, the National Land Policy (1995), grant women legal rights to inherit land. Although some literature on land issues, such as Peters (2013), blames traditions for oppressing women, this may not hold in the matrilineal system. However, the matrilineal system is evolving, and the social

norms that govern women's land rights are weakening (Takyi, 2007). In some matrilineal societies, such as among the Akan in Ghana, men have shifted their attitudes from bequeathing land to their sisters' children to assigning property to their sons (Amanor, 2001). Richardson (2004) has described similar situations in matrilineal societies in Botswana, Ghana, Zambia, and cocoa-producing regions in West Africa, where men are seen as rulers holding power over land for their male heirs.

Patrilineal-matrilineal marriages lead to violations of women's land rights within the matrilineal system (Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2021). Marriages tend to assume a patriarchal form, making it difficult for widows to access land through maternal clans. In Niassa Province, Mozambique, Lidstrom (2014) reports that after a husband's death, his relatives often take control of both the land and children from the widow, with the parents-in-law assuming authority over the land. Similar situations have been observed in Zambia, where many ethnic groups, including the matrilineal Bemba of the Northern Province, the Tonga of the Southern Province, and the Lozi of the Western Province, favor male land control (Kajoba, 2002).

The literature in Tanzania advocates that changes have occurred in matrilineal ethnic groups, including the Luguru, Mwera, and Makonde, in response to Islamic culture, the patrilineal Ngoni invasion, and the Ujamaa policies (Babere & Mbeya, 2022; Dondeyne et al., 2003). Among the Makua, Yao, and Makonde, Ujamaa policies changed matrilineal social relations by allowing land inheritance to non-clan/lineage groups (Wemba-Rashid, 1995). In southeast Tanzania, matrilineal rules of land transfer have shifted from maternal to paternal lines, resulting from intermarriages with the patrilineal Ngoni since the 19th century (Dondeyne et al., 2003).

The matrilineal Luguru

The Luguru is the dominant ethnic group in the Morogoro Rural District. Traditionally, the matrilineal system among the Luguru is based on the relationships of ancestors, who are always female (Backer et al., 2021). Anthropologists have discussed the origin of the Luguru ethnic group in Morogoro Rural District. It is documented that the Luguru and other surrounding matrilineal groups are not the original people of eastern Tanzania but migrants from Western Tanzania, Ruanda, and Burundi who arrived in the area approximately 300 years ago or earlier (Brain, 1975b). The arrival of Luguru in the area is associated with the theory of Bantu expansion (Greenberg, 1950; Oliver, 1966.)

There are different oral traditions about the origin of the Luguru ethnic group. One of the oral traditions is a migration from the southwest to the Luguru area known as Bena. The area was settled by indigenous people who were driven out (Brain, 1971). Some traditions say that the Uluguru area had about 50 exogamous, non-political clans, which were divided into approximately 800 lineages and organized in a clan system (Pels, 1996). The Luguru noted that the clans had descended from their sisters, who were among the first migrants, and they established settlements, and a common language evolved (Brain, 1971). Traditionally, women represent the clan, and their children carry their mother's family name.

Land Holding

In most African societies, inheritance is the main mechanism of obtaining land (Urassa, 2023). Men feel superior to women. Traditionally, Luguru men did not hold this attitude (Beidelman, 2017). The daughter based on Luguru tribe; her mother gave her the first piece of land termed as “Lukolo” when she reached menarche where her husband exercised no any right on it; the second piece of land was gifted to a daughter upon marriage known as “Lima” which could be used mutually with her husband; her uncle gave her a third piece of land called “Gani” where she had right to control but no right to transfer (Ngohengo, 2022). Given the increased land value, it is questionable whether Luguru daughters can obtain the three pieces of land and exercise control over them. The Anthropologist Fosbrooke (1984) explains that non-clan members rented the Luguru’s land, and traditional tribute(ngoto) was given to the lineage head. However, land was not sold (Beidelman, 2017).

Location of the study area

Morogoro Rural is one of the eight districts in the Morogoro region in eastern Tanzania. Others include Gairo, Kilombero, Kilosa, Mvomero, Morogoro Municipality, Malinyi, and Ulanga (figure 1). The inhabitants of this area are Bantu-speaking ethnic groups, including Luguru, Kutu, Zigua, Nguu, and Kwere, who follow a matrilineal system. Several patrilineal groups, including the Chagga, Sukuma, and Maasai, migrated to the area in search of farmland and pastureland (Morogoro District Profile, 2016). Morogoro Rural is one of the districts where the villagization program was implemented, resulting in cultural mixing and intermarriages, which have led to instability in the source of women’s land rights within the matrilineal system (Morogoro District Profile, 2016).

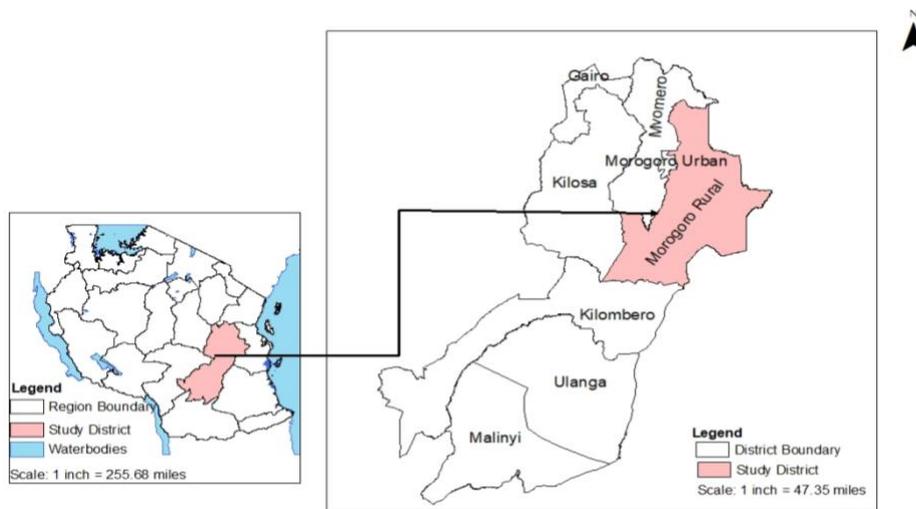


Figure 1: The Location of Morogoro Rural District

Material and methods

This study adopted the mixed-method approach. According to Creswell (2014), the use of mixed methods is not merely about collecting quantitative (descriptive) and qualitative data, but rather about exploring the broader context of a phenomenon. This approach helped in understanding the dynamics of the matrilineal land inheritance practices and the complexities surrounding women's rights. The study was conducted at Mikese Mjini, Muhungamkola, and Mkono wa Mara villages in Mkambarani Ward. Mkono wa Mara and Muhungamkola were established as Ujamaa villages in 1974. The increased population in these villages has led to cultural mix and patrilineal-matrilineal intermarriages. The specific questions were: (i) How is matrilineal land inheritance practice changing? (ii) How do intermarriages undermine women's land inheritance rights? Data collection involved document review including books, reports of previous studies, structured interviews with community members (95), key informant interviews with clan leaders and community members (6), In-depth interviews with land officials including District Land Officer (1) Village Executive officers (3) and Village Land Council members (2) and 4 Focus Group Discussions with men and women separately. The size of FGDs ranged from 7 to 10 members. In the studied villages, the sample size was distributed according to household proportions (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of sample size in each village

Village	The number of households	Number of households studied
Mikese mjini	695	37
Mkono wa Mara	673	36
Muhungamkola	405	22
Total	1,773	95

Purposive sampling was used to select the respondents and participants for FGDs. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were generated. Content analysis was also performed.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of Respondents

The study included more females (50) than males (45). Most respondents (90) had received primary education or below, while a few (5) had attained secondary education or higher. Out of 95 participants, 89 were married, with a few (6) being single. Ages ranged from 18 to 78, with a mean age of 47. More respondents (90) were aged 46 years or younger, and 5 were aged 47 years or older.

Sources of land

The study found that some community members obtained land through inheritance.

Others acquire land through alternative mechanisms such as purchasing, renting, receiving gifts from relatives, or allocation by the Village Land Council (Table 2).

Table 2: Sources of land

Source	N=95	Male (No.)	Female (No.)
Inheriting	50	32	18
Renting	20	2	18
Purchasing	18	9	9
Gifted by a close relative	5	0	5
Allocated by the village land council	2	2	0

Findings show that despite cultural support for women’s land inheritance among the Luguru, men now predominantly benefit. This shift reflects a broader transition from traditional matrilineal land inheritance passed through the female line to a more male-centered system. This aligns with Takyi (2007), who found that in matrilineal societies, inheriting property rights through the maternal line is uncommon. Kuzara (2014) has concluded that land inheritance practices in matrilineal societies are shifting. Among the Luguru, changes in land inheritance patterns weaken the rights of matrilineal heirs to inherit land, with land often passing to non-clan people. In matrilineal villages in southeastern Tanzania, Dondeyne et al. (2003) observed that gift-giving, borrowing, inheritance, and purchasing are common methods of acquiring land. In the Luguru tribe, the study found that gender relations are evolving, giving men the opportunity to purchase land and exert control, indicating that patriarchal practices are embedded within the matrilineal system.

Intermarriages and land rights of women

Different opinions emerged, where 77 respondents mentioned that intermarriages had eroded women’s rights to inherit land, and 18 had the opinion that intermarriages lead to women's oppression in case of divorce or widowhood. Marriages lacked stability, as men were unwilling to shift to the wives’ homes. The study found that men used their power to convince their wives to purchase land or move to the marital clan. This aligns with the findings of Bandyopadhyay & Green (2021) and Dondeyne et al (2003), who concluded that intermarriages between the Patrilineal and matrilineal groups often result in the erosion of women’s land rights within the matrilineal system.

Male participants in the studied area perceived that shifting to wives’ places is an outdated practice, and husbands who do so were stigmatized by other men who consider them as slaves of in-laws. This aligns with Backer et al (2021), who observed a shift in residence patterns among the Luguru couples from traditionally settling in the wives’ homes to now residing in the husbands’ homes. This situation was critical in the context of intermarriage because it is difficult to persuade a patrilineal man to move into the wife’s home. Findings from this study revealed that the practice of bequeathing land to sisters’ children was uncommon; instead, sons inherit their parents' land. It was noted that some daughters were inheriting land through the maternal line. However, they lost their

right to inherit land when they married a husband in the patrilineal system. One daughter, namely Martha (false name), at Mikese Mjini village, narrated her story,

“When I reached 23 years, a Sukuma man decided to marry me, and I presented that proposal to my uncle. It appeared difficult for him and my mother to accept that proposal because they feared I would be drawn into a clan with different traditions and customs. I forced the marriage, and finally, I married him, then I was regarded as a non-family member in the maternal clan, and I could not inherit the land”.

This finding implies that, according to the matrilineal norms, when daughters marry husbands from the patrilineal clan, it leads to the breakdown of social ties/bonds with their ancestors, who allowed them to inherit the land. This is similar to the claim made by Babere & Mbeya (2022), who concluded that Patrilineal-matrilineal marriages lead to violations of daughters’ land rights within the matrilineal system. The same conclusion has been reached by Bandyopadhyay & Green (2021). Fourteen intermarriages were identified among the studied population, leading to changes in Luguru traditions of land inheritance (Table 3).

Table 3: Number of intermarriages

Village	Number	Percent
Mikese Mjini	8	57.0
Mkono wa Mara	4	29.0
Muhungamkola	2	14.0

The intermarriages involved husbands from patrilineal groups and wives from the matrilineal Luguru. Traditionally, women who acquired land through matrilineal inheritance retained and expanded their property rights after marriage. A key informant, Magreth, a 77-year-old Luguru woman from Muhungamkola, shared her experience of acquiring and maintaining three parcels of land:

“I hold three parcels of land: One parcel at Mgeta area, which I received from my maternal uncle, and have since given to my daughter. An additional parcel of land originally owned by my mother was subsequently transferred to me. The third parcel, located behind my house, was given to me by my uncle. Since 1961, I have lived with my husband, a Luguru man, until we divorced in 1983. After the divorce, I have since lost contact with him. Due to patrilineal-matrilineal intermarriages, daughters cannot acquire land as it had traditionally happened”.

This finding reveals that the combined effect of intermarriage and rising land values has led to the erosion of land inheritance rights among Luguru women. This finding is similar to that of Cotula (2007), who found that in Africa, intermarriage led to erosion of women’s land inheritance in matrilineal communities. Another issue that was observed is land sales, which is contrary to the Luguru culture, where land was used communally by the family members within the maternal clan.

Land sales

In the Luguru community, out of 95 people studied in the case study area, 19 said they had sold land. The practice of selling land has distorted matrilineal customs, which historically prohibited land sales. Matson (2010) and Cotula (2007) similarly observed that the expansion of land markets has undermined traditional matrilineal practices. The findings imply that land that would be inherited shifted to non-lineage people. The sale of land may influence different gender groups; however, women are more affected as they may not enjoy the benefit of part of the land sold due to the weakening of the wider family and lineages. The Ward Tribunal Secretary in Mkambarani explained,

In the past, Mkambarani ward was a forest, and the Luguru owned large pieces of land, but they feared living there, and so they sold the land to people from other areas and moved to the hills. On realizing that the area was potentially farming land, they desired to return, but it was impossible.”

Decision-making on the distribution of family land

The findings indicate that decision-making was predominantly controlled by men, especially husbands or fathers. Of the 95 respondents, 70 (74 percent) reported that husbands made the decision on land distribution, 11 (12 percent) mentioned fathers, 10 (10 percent) said jointly (by husband and wife), and 4 (4 percent) reported that wives made the decisions. The findings revealed infringements on women’s rights regarding land distribution decisions. This finding implies that cultural change has created gender disparities in land distribution decision-making, granting men greater authority over land. Babere & Mbeya (2020) concluded that the dynamics of the matrilineal lineage have completely lowered women's position, which is being replaced by that of men. The current matrilineal kinship system does not significantly influence decision-making for resource allocation (Metta et al, 2025). Among the Luguru, variations across villages were observed (Table 4).

Table 4: Decision makers on land distribution in families

Village	N = 95							
	Husband		Father		Husband and wife		Wife	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Mkono wa Mara	27	29.0	5	6.0	2	2	2	2
Mikese Mjini	24	25.0	3	3.0	8	8	2	2
Muhungamkola	19	20.0	3	3.0	0	0	0	0
Total	70	74	11	12	10	10	4	4

Conclusion

Shifting gender relations and intensifying patrilineal pressures are progressively undermining traditional matrilineal land inheritance practices. Intergenerational bonds, once central to the transmission of property, have been reconfigured: land that was historically passed to daughters is now increasingly allocated to sons. This transition reflects a profound transformation in kinship and property relations, as patriarchal norms are embedded in matrilineal customs. Although women continue to inherit land, the widening gender disparity signals a growing imbalance in access and authority. Through the patrilineal-matrilineal intermarriage, the position of women in the lineage system is undermined. By moving daughters from their maternal clans into paternal ones, these marriages disrupt the continuity of matrilineal inheritance and weaken women's traditional rights to land. The sale of land has consequences across gender groups. Women often experience exclusion due to the weakening of the lineage support system.

The findings of this study imply policies. Policy-makers should create legal frameworks that protect women's access to land regardless of lineage. Promoting cultural practices that respect both matrilineal and patrilineal traditions may reduce the disruptive impact of intermarriages on women's rights to land. Policies should monitor and regulate land sales to prevent exploitative practices that disadvantage weaker groups, particularly women.***

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