

African Cultural Influence in Argentina

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Abstract: Argentine cultural identity has been significantly enriched by the influence of African culture. African customs have left a deep mark, especially in areas such as the coast and Buenos Aires, through dance, cuisine, religious beliefs, and music. Although its influence was ignored for a long time, today its contributions to the country's cultural diversity, festivities, and artistic expressions are valued. It is important to appreciate and recover this heritage, as African culture helped build fundamental elements of Argentine culture.

Keywords: *Influence – culture – Africa – Argentina.*

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Introduction

Although it has often not been given the importance it deserves, African culture has left a notable mark on Argentine history and identity. Since the colonial period, African communities have contributed their dances, traditions, beliefs, music, and cultural expressions, which have gradually blended with the indigenous and European cultures of the nation. Argentine culture has a heritage that is reflected in various facets of life in the country, particularly in music, folk customs, and cuisine. To understand the diversity and richness of Argentina's cultural heritage, as well as to appreciate the contributions that its African communities and their descendants have made to the formation of national identity, it is essential to recognize the role that African culture plays in this country.

Methodology

This study required a theoretical foundation, which, as noted, draws on theoretical research from various authors and their contributions across different academic fields. Additionally, the analysis of books and newspaper articles forms part of the research to address the central issue of the topic.

Formulation of Working Hypotheses

The approach to this issue is based on the assumption that people of African descent, from the moment of their arrival in Argentina, have brought certain cultural elements with them. These have had a positive impact on the development of the country's social fabric and cultural identity. Our second hypothesis is that, prior to making this contribution; people of African descent faced numerous challenges before gaining recognition. Ultimately, Afro-Argentine organizations have established a fundamental pillar of their demands: the call for the implementation of inclusive public policies that ensure their right to exercise and safeguard their identity.

Since this research focuses on Latin American civilization, it will rely on the heuristic method for locating and classifying documents; the hermeneutic method for examining sources and generating knowledge; and the deductive-inductive method for synthesizing and reconstructing historical events. Sub-methods, such as the ethnographic and chronological methods, among others, will also be employed. This research is qualitative in nature and will be based on the collection of numerical data. It will focus on specific cases and take people of African descent as its starting point. Bibliographic research is the data collection method employed, which will enable the analysis and detailed examination of the reality of Afro-descendant identity in Argentina. Among these secondary sources, the study considers authors who highlight the significance of the African people. Additionally, journal

articles that clearly and persuasively present the contributions of Africans to Argentine culture will be examined. This will make it possible to describe, reflect on, and analyze the information contained in the bibliographic records to obtain categorized, coherent data relevant to the actual objective of this research. The argument that will guide this study is based on three points. The first revolves around Afro-Argentine cultural contributions. The second point focuses on the influences the country has had on its identity. And finally, we'll focus on the challenges these people face and the recognition they receive.

Historical Context

It is common to hear and read that slavery did not play as significant a role in River Plate society as it did in other countries in the Americas, or that the flow of enslaved Africans to the Río de la Plata was not as substantial as in those nations. The slave trade was crucial to the establishment of the colonial system in the Río de la Plata in the 16th and 17th centuries, since during that period the Atlantic economy of Buenos Aires was sustained almost entirely by the slave trade; furthermore, it remained so during the viceregal period (1776–1812), when merchants from the Río de la Plata region were able to establish direct trade with Africa, although this did not last long.

According to Alex Borucki, the first enslaved Africans arrived in the Río de la Plata following the failed first founding of Buenos Aires (1536–1541). In 1536, Queen Joanna I granted a license to the Sevillian merchants Juan Núñez and Fernando de Xerez to transport two hundred slaves from the African coast or from the Cape Verde Islands to the province of the Río de la Plata (Borucki, 2021). Within the broad and complex body of research on the presence of Africans and their descendants in Argentina, the analysis of cultural legacies has been emphasized, albeit with varying degrees of rigor. According to Diego Luis Molinari, the arrival of the first Africans in what is now Argentine territory occurred during the colonization and conquest of the American continent in the 15th century (Molinari, 1944, p. 55). Lipski goes on to say that this population of African origin grew from that point on, eventually accounting for approximately 40% of the inhabitants of the Río de la Plata region between the late 17th and early 19th centuries (Lipski, 2005, p. 100).

Another way in which Africans arrived in Argentina was through Cape Verdean immigration. To support this argument, Maffia noted that although the collective imagination held that there were “no Black people” in Argentina, Cape Verdeans stood out among the various immigrant groups that made up the population of Ensenada, Dock Sud, and La Boca (Avellaneda) in the province of Buenos Aires. In the early decades of the 20th century, associations were established in two of these coastal towns: in 1927 in Ensenada and in 1932 in Dock Sud, bringing together families from Cape Verde (Maffia, 1986: pp. 191–207). Zubrzycki and others added that in the 1990s, a new African presence became notably evident in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and the Greater Buenos Aires area: immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, especially from countries such as Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Mali, Ivory Coast, and Ghana, among others (Zubrzycki et al., 2010a and b).

During the process of colonial expansion, populations of African descent were brutally subjugated as a subordinate group to the impositions of the dominant power. Worsley (1969) characterizes this as the configuration of the world as “unique”—a singular

social system under the hegemony of the interests that fostered colonial expansion (Worsley, 1969); a phenomenon that, according to Chomsky, would subsequently evolve in an uninterrupted manner toward the “new world order” established in what we now recognize as the Washington Consensus (Chomsky, 1993). Argentina seemed to be a nation untouched by these issues, since it conceived of itself as a “country that came from the ships,” and therefore “more European” or “almost European”—an image it projected internationally. Thus, it regarded populations of African origin as nonexistent or invisible.

The Afro-descendant community began to gain visibility thanks to the mobilization of local groups, which were strengthened by their connection to the demands for the recognition of the rights of Afro-descendants and Africans expressed in both regional and international political contexts. The need to address these dimensions jointly was not only unavoidable but also enriching for our lines of research, without causing them to lose their specificity or relevance; this perspective led us to submit a project in 2007 that brought together issues related to people of African descent and indigenous¹ peoples (Tamagno and Marta, 2001).

This is how many cultural elements began to develop, gradually becoming incorporated into Argentine culture. These elements include religion, literature, music, language, cuisine, etc.

African Cultural Contributions

In recent decades, studies on Africa and the Afro-Argentine population have experienced a notable boom in the country. This research has highlighted the importance of regional contrasts in the experiences of this community, as well as the richness and diversity of its representation. This approach has led us to be cautious about generalizations and encourages us to explore more specific historical periods. The view of slaves as individuals who, despite their condition of servitude, managed to resist both physically and psychologically and respond creatively to adversity has facilitated substantial progress in recent years in understanding the African experience in Argentina. This approach has also made it possible to highlight the slave as a central actor in processes of social change, as well as an active generator of culture and forms of cultural resistance².

In Argentina, enslaved Africans provided essential labor in the arts, warfare, and domestic service, as well as in literature, agriculture, livestock farming, crafts, and domestic service, while also leaving a rich cultural legacy, including gastronomy and culinary techniques. They also played a fundamental role in the War of Independence and the building of the nation.

First, Afro-Argentine culture was characterized primarily by its musical and dance expressions. Through dance and various rhythmic expressions, this community developed significant artistic creations such as the Candombe, a notable cultural and musical expression associated with the African groups who arrived as slaves in the Río de la Plata region and their descendants. According to Ocoró Loanga, these dances maintained undeniable links to African ceremonies (Ocoró Loanga, 2010, pp. 45–63). According to Ortiz Oderugo, the Afro-descendant community

¹ Project “New Perspectives on Diversity: Indigenous Peoples, People of African Descent, and Africans in the Province of Buenos Aires,” funded by the Agency for the Promotion of Science and Technology for the 2009–2011 period.

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played a significant role in the Carnival festivities. Although these celebrations did not originally belong to that community, its contributions proved essential to enhancing the festivities (Ortiz Oderugo, 1974). The African cultural legacy in Argentina has been expressed through a combination of dance and sounds associated with percussion. The presence of drums in music of African descent constituted both the sound and the historical legacy. In this regard, María Lucía Troitiño and María Paula Cannova have stated the following: “While in the European tradition, with its emphasis on simple beats arranged in a metrical regularity, drums were gradually relegated to the role of ‘accompanists,’ in the African tradition they were considered fundamental to the creation of musicality” (Troitiño and Cannova, 2016, p. 5). There are many other musical rhythms and artistic expressions, such as candombe, carnival, tango, milonga, malambo, gato, and chacarera.

In addition to dance and music, people of African descent played a very important role in the wars of independence. Black Argentines, as citizens of Argentina, participated in the struggles and wars for independence. Marta Goldberg has highlighted several factors that, combined, led to the decline of the Black population, such as the mobilization of Afro-Argentine men during the wars of independence (Goldberg, 2000c, p. 28). As for women, they worked as homemakers, helping to care for children, wash clothes, and iron them.

The contributions of people of African descent to Argentine literature were aimed at fostering a “love of literature.” While the elites proclaimed the extinction of people of African descent and advocated for the Europeanization of the country as a path to civilization, the Afro-descendant community in Buenos Aires displayed remarkable cultural vitality, evident in its newspaper publications. According to George Reid Andrews, after 1858 no fewer than 15 newspapers of African descent were in circulation, published weekly and biweekly (Andrews 1989: 212). According to Hilda Sabato, one newspaper copy was produced for every four urban residents. As literacy rates rose, the press became a fundamental element of political activity, serving also as a mechanism for expressing opinions and participating in public debate (Sabato, Hilda, 2010: 99–101).

Influences on Argentine Identity

The African influence on the construction of Argentine identity is essential, despite its historical omission from the national narrative, which emphasized an exclusively European origin. Despite this historiographical marginalization, the African and Afro-descendant legacy has persisted uninterrupted since colonial times, significantly enriching cultural expressions such as music, dance, language, and cuisine, with candombe and tango serving as irrefutable manifestations of this shared cultural heritage.

The Afro-descendant influence is notably evident in everyday Argentine speech. Lunfardo, a dialect characteristic of Buenos Aires, has incorporated various words of African or Afro-Argentine origin, such as “mucama,” “quilombo,” “mandinga,” “catinga,” “marote,” and “bochinche” (ACUA Program, 2019)³. This linguistic legacy serves as evidence of the significant cultural interconnection that has existed. Black people have consistently made their influence felt. African words have taken root in Argentine society and are so deeply ingrained that they still endure

today. Black slaves must have played an important role in introducing these African words, since numerous researchers have explained the meaning of African words; however, these definitions and comments are too few in number to constitute a vocabulary. Although the subject is far from exhausted, it should be noted that the vocabulary of the Argentine Afro-Negritos was that of Ildefonso Pereda Valdés. In this work, the direct influence of African languages on the Argentine language is evident. These words were:

Bombo, Batuque, Bujía, Bunda, Bundo, Cabinda, Cachimbo, Cachumba, Cachimba, Congo, Conga, Catanga, Cacunda, Carcunda, Carimba, Catinga, Cafre, Catonga, Cafua, Calunga, Candombe, Candombero, Candonga, Canga, Capiango, Malambo, Mandinga, Marimba, Matungo, Milonga, Mozambique, Mucama, Muleque, Papagayo, Quibebe, Quilombo, Quitanda, Sengue, Tarimba, Zebra, Zambomba” (Ildefonso, 1937: pp. 72-78).

To this list, Jean Arsene YAO added the following words: “Bochinche, Bambula, Chingar, Chimango, Maní, Tongo, Zamba, Zambo” (Yao, 2009: p. 124).

While politicians promoted the idea of the disappearance of African culture and advocated for civilizing the country through Western migration, Argentina’s Black community demonstrated remarkable vitality, reflected in its periodicals. According to George Reid Andrews, beginning in 1858, there were at least 15 newspapers run by people of African descent, published weekly or biweekly. Although several of these newspapers were short-lived, by the late 1870s there was a boom in journalism by people of African descent, marked by the emergence of longer-lasting and more established publications (Andrews, 1989: p. 212).

People of African descent were also present in poetry. The poetry of authors of African descent constitutes a valuable testimony to their process of adapting to the predominant literary canons of the time, while also reflecting their responses to the hegemonic representations promoted by the cultural elites. Through poetic language, it was possible to articulate critiques of power without openly confronting it or straying from values considered civilized; rather, this was achieved from a stance that appropriated those norms to establish a dialogue with authority in its own language. This approach offered a candor that might have been more difficult to achieve through prose. As Marvin Lewis points out, Afro-Argentine poets also incorporated themes characteristic of Romanticism, such as love, freedom, and social justice. However, they wrote from the perspective of “outcasts,” questioning the dominant structures of mainstream culture and, in turn, expressing a sort of “internal exile” (Marvin, 1996: 24–25, 50). Ethnicity was a central element in the work of Afro-Buenos Aires poets, according to the same writer. One of the newspapers that faced the most resistance was *La Broma*.

Music of African descent has played a key role in shaping Argentina’s musical identity. Despite historical processes of erasure, candombe, payada, and tango have become its main pillars. Enslaved Africans, beginning in the colonial period, brought with them instruments, rhythms, and forms of expression that were incorporated into the culture of the Río de la Plata. Candombe, a form of music and dance of African origin that

³ ACUA Program. (2019). *People of African Descent and Popular Culture in Argentina*. Ministry of Culture of Argentina.

emerged in Buenos Aires and other areas, is one of the most obvious examples.

Challenges and Recognition

To understand Argentina's cultural diversity and the historical processes of invisibilization and revaluation of communities of African descent, it is essential to address the challenges and recognition of Afro-Argentine identity in the country. The following is an academic analysis that can be used in theses or research papers.

Statistical Invisibility

This section addresses the issue of racism in Argentina, focusing on the invisibility of the Afro-descendant population today. According to Reid Andrews, the arrival of African inhabitants was continuous and uninterrupted in what is now Argentine territory. For example, Between 1,606 and 8,900 entered illegally via the Río de la Plata in 1625. The number rose to 10,000 between 1715 and 1752, three-quarters of whom were sent inland (REID ANDREWS, 1989). This population was essential to the colonial order, especially in economic terms, as a labor force, which was the foundation of the proto-capitalist system⁴ established in the Americas. According to Picotti, most Africans made a significant contribution to the creation of a colonial order, particularly as workers, performing almost all types of labor and being practically excluded from none—a situation that occurred throughout colonial America due to white disdain for manual labor (PICOTTI, 1998).

In Argentina, the phrase “There are no Black people” (REID ANDREWS, 1989) is commonly used, or it is claimed that if there were ever people of African descent in the past, they have disappeared (SOLOMIANSKI, 2003). Argentina is considered the whitest and most European country, in contrast to most other countries in the region. In this way, common sense has constructed a historical explanation for why there are no people of African descent in the country. Conversely, if an African is seen today, it is said that he must be a foreigner. Similarly, the Afro-Argentine presence is linked to the colonial period preceding the nation's founding. Afro-Argentines were portrayed as a vanished people, and a myth of their disappearance was created, which came to be accepted as an indisputable truth. Even former President Carlos Menem, in 1994, when asked about the Afro-Argentine presence, replied: “There is no discrimination in Argentina because there are no people of color. Brazil does have that problem” (CIRIO, 2003).

The debate over the causes of the disappearance of people of African descent in the country intensified during the 1970s. According to Reid Andrews (1989), there are many reasons: deaths in the wars of independence, miscegenation, high mortality and low birth rates, the decline in the slave trade, and the arrival of Europeans in the country.

Structural Racism and Discrimination

In Argentina, the ideological construction of racism has its roots in Spanish colonization. The identification, classification, and stratification of races were the fundamental pillars of social organization at that time; these placed people of European descent and Europeans above people of African descent and Indigenous peoples. The port of Buenos Aires was the main point of entry for

people brought from Africa as enslaved labor during the era of the transatlantic slave trade.

The establishment of the national state was also based on the racist concepts of the elites, which were linked to social Darwinism and the scientific racism of that time. Thus, the idea that modernity and civilization would only be possible through the “whitening” of the population spread rapidly. To achieve this goal, it was necessary to change the racial composition of the population of the Argentine Confederation. Segato, referring to Africans and their descendants, argues that “the disappearance of Black people in Argentina was ideological, cultural, and literally constructed rather than demographic” (2007: 255). Furthermore, the population of African descent was rendered invisible. To justify this, immigration from Europe was systematically encouraged, the racial component was removed from statistics, and historiographical denialism⁵ prevailed. This is how the myth of Argentina as a white, European country was created.

The other official narrative—which sought to conceal their presence by attributing it solely to epidemics and wars—was what perpetuated the myth of the disappearance of the Afro-descendant population. However, these explanations mask a structural process of invisibilization and “whitening,” which is reinforced by Europe-centered immigration policies and intellectual discourses (Frigerio & Guzmán, 2017; INADI, 2010). Despite this, the Afro-descendant community persists, preserving its identity and challenging the narrative that Argentina is a white and homogeneous country.

In the case of education, they were not allowed to attend the same schools as white children, which led to the creation of schools exclusively for students of African descent (Amnis, 2010; ACUA Program, 2019). Only two of the fourteen schools in Buenos Aires admitted students of African descent in 1857 (ACUA Program, 2019).

Recognition and Movements

The public emergence of an “Afro” movement in Argentina dates back to the mid-1990s, when several activists of African descent began to receive international support, which enabled them to consolidate their efforts and establish a series of connections among themselves and with foreign organizations (both those representing people of African descent and those supporting the group's demands). Today, at least six different organizations carry out activities in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and nearby areas of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area⁶, such as Avellaneda, La Matanza, Merlo, and Morón.

According to Tamayo Sáez, it can be defined as “the totality of objectives, actions, and decisions that a government takes to resolve the problems that citizens and the government itself consider priorities at a given moment” (1997: 281). Although we prefer to use the term “State” rather than “government,”⁷ a public

⁵ It is the ideological stance that systematically rejects scientific evidence or solid historical facts.

⁶ According to the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, the Buenos Aires metropolitan area is the area that extends seamlessly around the Federal Capital and is made up of 24 localities, including those mentioned in the body of this work

⁷ The government refers us to the political-party coalition that currently holds hegemony over the state apparatus, while the state, following Max Weber's now-classic

⁴ Define the societies, economic systems, or modes of production that existed before the rise and establishment of capitalism.

policy is thus any action by the State that is decisive in nature, which addresses and simultaneously impacts a problem previously identified as such by state agents (officials or bureaucrats) and by groups or individuals in civil society. And these actions are expressed in the public sphere. This action becomes a state policy to the extent that it transcends specific governments.

People of African descent in Argentina have been assuming increasingly prominent roles in society. At that time, a movement of political, social, and cultural initiatives began with the goal of promoting the visibility of Afro-Argentine culture at the local level. We will review these organizations and describe their efforts to promote the culture of Afro-Argentine groups.

First, we will address the topic of the Africa Vive group. María Lamadrid, who has Argentine slave ancestors, founded this association in July 1997 after participating in a meeting in Washington, which took place following the gathering with IDB delegates in Buenos Aires. This nongovernmental organization aimed to combat the invisibility of Black people in Argentina, contribute to the social advancement of these communities, and reclaim the role that Black people have played in Argentine history and culture. Thus, “África Vive” carried out activities in the political, cultural, and social spheres. The organization was funded by the founder’s own resources, with help from her family, as well as external funds from the AfroAmerica XXI⁸ network of organizations. According to Frigerio, one of its most significant achievements was the successful organization of a dance party in 2000, which took place at the Casa Suiza, a venue that had been the Shimmy Club until the 1970s. In August and April of that same year, a census of the Black population living in Buenos Aires was conducted; the result was 200 individuals, and it provided data on Black people in the city. However, the most significant aspect of this census was its symbolic value as an act of vindication, as it was carried out in collaboration with the government (Frigerio: 2008).

Next, we have the Casa de África in Argentina, founded in Buenos Aires on August 17, 1995. It was established with the goal of promoting interfaith coexistence, spreading the fundamental values of Islam, and fostering cultural exchange between Latin America and Africa. Coexistence, peace, brotherhood.

One of the avenues through which Afro-Argentines could achieve freedom is the cultural organization. According to Geler Lea, one of the most common forms of resistance among African communities during the era of slavery was to organize themselves culturally and socially into what were known as “nations.” These were societies that brought together enslaved people of the same territorial and linguistic origin; the Angola and Congo “nations” were the ones that held the most celebrations in Buenos Aires. In Buenos Aires, the feast day of the Black King Balthazar was celebrated on January 6. It was the occasion on which funds were raised to purchase the freedom of the societies’ members. These organizations published materials throughout the 19th century

definition, is the political, economic, and social formation that, transcending specific governments, exercises control over resources of various kinds within a given territory, particularly the legitimate and legal control of force.

⁸ The same IDB promoters who were in Buenos Aires in 1996 formed this network. Its purpose was to continue bringing in the African American groups they were reaching out to.

aimed at members of the community; for example, the newspapers *La Perla*, *La Broma*, *El Aspirante*, *La Igualdad*, and *La Juventud* are just a few of the many (Geler, 2010).

Dance in the Black community between 1750 and 1850 naturally had African roots with few Argentine elements. Andrews asserted that people of African descent managed to preserve one aspect of their lives outside the total control of a slave-owning society, thanks to the practice of *candombes*. It was a small act of resistance, but these were also cultural events for the community, which gathered regularly to strengthen bonds of friendship and identity. They did so because they were a population denied this right. Later, it took on political significance, as evidenced by the dispute between the government and the community over permits to hold dances (1989).

In addition, there were religious groups. The first organization established in Argentina for people of African descent was the lay religious brotherhood known as “la hermandad.” A common feature of religious life in Latin America has been the lay brotherhood—a group dedicated to promoting the well-being not only of the church to which it belonged but also to combating all forms of discrimination.

Members collected donations to cover the costs of Masses and performed various tasks for the benefit of the church and its priest, with the aim of maintaining the church and fulfilling their responsibility to preserve the altar of their patron saint. During the colonial period, membership in a brotherhood typically followed very strict guidelines opposing racial segregation. While in some cases people of mixed race were accepted into white brotherhoods, people of African descent were traditionally required to form independent groups. This is what occurred in Argentina (Cohen and Greene, 1972, p. 123). Brotherhoods among Black people provided a means to foster group consciousness, a sense of pride, and social identity that descendants of Africans in Argentina could not attain through any other means. This also fostered a spirit of resistance among these people.

Argentina is one of the countries with significant anti-discrimination legislation. The Argentine government has signed and ratified specific international agreements addressing ethnic and racial issues, several of which have been enshrined in the Constitution since the 1994 Constitution. The ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination is one such agreement. In addition, it signed the Durban Declaration (2001), which provides an important international legal framework for protecting the rights of people of African descent.

On December 17, 2007, Argentina enacted Law 26305, which aims to safeguard and foster the diversity of cultural expressions, as well as to promote interculturalism, in order to develop cultural interaction among peoples. This law is the result of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which was ratified on October 20, 2005, at the UNESCO summit. Since the late 2000s, Argentina has included people of African descent in certain government agendas with the aim of implementing rights and policies of recognition. However,

*... la incipiente institucionalización de un conjunto de
Iniciativas orientadas hacia la población de origen africano
No irrumpió sino hasta entrado el siglo xxi, precisamente en
Una época en que el paradigma multicultural ya comenzaba*

a ser criticado incluso por sus propios simpatizantes. (Fernández Bravo, 2013, p. 242).

It is increasingly clear that people of African descent began to be included on the government's agenda starting in 2010.

Conclusion

Although it has historically been rendered invisible, the African cultural imprint in Argentina is a fundamental element of national identity. Although migration, cultural mixing, and official narratives have prioritized a European image of the nation, African influences remain evident in countless cultural expressions. These are particularly evident in dance, language, music, cuisine, and social customs, demonstrating the depth of this legacy.

Africa's presence in the formation of Argentina's musical heritage is evident in rhythms such as candombe, certain styles of tango, and various forms of folk music. Similarly, oral traditions, beliefs, and social customs demonstrate a cultural continuity that has endured over time and despite historical marginalization.

In recent decades, there has been a rise in the academic and social acceptance of Afro-descendant communities in Argentina, as well as of their contributions to the country's culture and history. This increased visibility not only fosters a more inclusive interpretation of Argentine identity but also promotes respect for cultural diversity and historical memory.

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