



# African essence: Towards Redefining African Potentials in the New Millennium

**Celestine Chukwuemeka Mbaegbu**

Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria  
 Email: ezeakilebuchi@gmail.com  
 Phone: 08033198321.

## Abstract

*It is argued that the African identity, essence or difference has left much to be desired. The African essence or difference has been hijacked by some marauders who have constantly plaguing the African continent. Africans in this contemporary time are in perpetual poverty and there is this loss of African essence. What Africa as a continent is experiencing today is clear cut post-colonial crises, political imbroglio and economic morass. It has been rightly observed that the struggle for African liberation, emancipation, and historization must continue as long as the belief in the essential pathology of Africanity can boast of. This paper adopts the method of analysis and the conclusion is that struggle continues and the nudging and prompting of African essence, culture, and authenticity must be revived by our intellectual response in order to unveil African potentials in this new millennium. The dangers of ignoring threats to the survival of African essence, identity, culture, language, difference, and historicity are clear. We must begin to brainstorm and define this African essence, identity, culture and language; we must begin to see the African community from a more conscious unity of the principle of complementarity. Difference is part and parcel of humanity. We must not take difference to the extreme. We must begin to strike a balance when it comes to the issue of African difference, essence, culture, historicity, language, liberation and emancipation.*

**Keywords** Morality; African Essence; Difference; Culture; Language

## 1 Introduction

African essence, identity or humanity is predicated on languages, cultures and African realities. Our Africanity has been traumatized by our ex-colonizers. Our Africanity has been questioned due to its socio-metaphysical problem. Accordingly, Dukor (2010:44) believes that African unfreedom is a socio-metaphysical issue; and Jacques Maquet cited by Dukor (2010:54) argues that:

Africanity is the essence of African culture. Africanity is made up of elements belonging to various dimensions of culture-economic organization, family structure, political institutions, philosophical concepts, religions and rituals, graphic and plastic arts, the art of movements, sound and speech and so on...Africanity is the totality of cultural features common to hundreds of societies of sub-Saharan Africa.

The point being made here by Dukor (2010 57) in his own words is that:

There is a cultural dislocation, socio-economic alienation, psycho-effective disequilibrium and black skins and white masks pseudo mentality. Today, African continent is at a brink of collapse politically, socially, economically, scientifically, technologically, linguistically, ideologically psychologically and culturally because of African leaders who have plagued the African continent into a socio-political malaise and economic woes. There is this dogged fight for African liberation, emancipation and historization from the African leaders who are now the marauders. The idea of social reconstruction, solidarity, Africanity, language, culture, and African identity must be resuscitated.



Nevertheless, unveiling African potentials in this new millennium has become a contemporary task by African scholars and intellectuals who preferred to give a multi-disciplinary approach to the problems facing Africa today. The African today requires continuous intellectual tasks because the crisis facing Africa today boils down to the crisis of relevance, identity crisis, cultural chauvinism, loss of African freedom and our African history. The African essence is not a discredited complex of values, traits, and practices. The pervasive state of anomie on the African continent reflects what we may call African debate. Africa's problems began with the departure of the colonial masters. Africa's problems are caused by the crop of corrupt and often murderous politicians, dictators and statesmen who piloted the affairs of the continent since the end of European rule. Africans have taken upon themselves to underdevelop the African continent due to their own selfish ends or reasons. The debate on Africanity is much of a greater import than a more intellectual exercise. The African continent or the African essence or humanity has become pervasive. As Owomoyela (1996: x) rightly observes that:

The Pervasive state of anomic on the continent has conferred credibility on the short view that African's problems began with the departure of the colonizers, and that one can legitimately ascribe the blame for them to the crop of corrupt and often murderous politicians and dictators who have plagued most of the continent since the end of European rule (1996: x). Moreover, our African essence, identity, and difference lies in language, culture, and African literature. Our African humanity requires structural and behavioral adjustment necessary for our contemporary times. The defense of Africanity is desirable pursuit of our pure African essence.

## 2 African Essence as a Paradigm Shift for Unveiling African Potentials in the New Millennium

African essence does not really kick against difference. Difference is part and parcel of our humanity. The observation of Owomoyela (1996: xi) was to the point when he reiterates that the:

Difference simply for its own sake may be perverse, but antipathy towards difference in any form (call it alterity) is a worse form of malady, for its end is the loss of self and of identity, in other words, self-annihilation. For us, fear of difference from Westernity or from Europeanity (to use a vulgar term) is patently illogical; European – interaction with non-Europeans, and especially with Africans, has been predicated on the fiction of the singularity of history, and the sole legitimacy of the European (or Western) way. That Fiction sanctioned and rationalized such projects as the “civilization” and Christianization of the natives. The decolonization process debunked it as arrogant, presumptions, and baseless, insisting instead on the plurality of histories, cultures, and civilizations. Africans cannot be party to any tendency that has the effect of restoring credence to that discredited notion.

The African essence is predicated on African cultures, historicity and language. For the American scholar H.E. Newsum cited by Owomoyela (1996:5) “language is a basic and necessary component of any culture... in this light a shared language appears to be a significant factor in social interrelations and a powerful instrument for establishing empathy among individuals and cohesiveness within a society”. The African essence must reside with African culture and the African identity or difference must reside with African languages. Little wonder Owomoyela (1996:9) posits that “the African difference must reside in African languages and what they connote which reflect the remembered linguistic resources from an African past.” The African past must be quoted jealously in order to open up the African potentials for the future. Africans nowadays are infatuated with other languages due to the crises



of African identity. Africans who are infatuated with other languages are like a child who likes to remain with his captors even when the captors seek for his liberation. Owomoyela (1996: 9) puts it quite succinctly that “to adopt Philip’s analogy, the African who is infatuated with any other language is like a child who voluntarily insists upon remaining with an abusive kidnapper, even when its loving parents pleads with it to come home”. The African essence has been a long time intellectual debate or philosophical discourse or response. Now the African enemies are not well known today unlike the colonizers. Owomoyela contends vehemently that:

The enemy was also easily identifiable: he was a foreigner and an oppressor. Now the issues are not so clear cut and the adversary – not so easily apparent. He/she is not necessarily a foreigner, and his/her rhetoric is often patriotic and bolstered with a concern, undoubtedly genuine, for “development”, or scientific and technological advancement. The African essence has been lost a long time ago and what is at stake now is a fight for African liberation, emancipation, and historization from the continuous demonization of Europeans and non-Europeans alike.

The problem emanating from the African essence reflects what Oladipo (2000:15) calls “the crisis of relevance”. The real problem with the African essence and the African continent is that of a crisis of relevance, it is that of technological advancement, natural and human development. The resilience of African cultures rest on redefining the essence of our Africanity and unveiling African potentials in this new millennium of the African personality whereby human society is established or founded on the principles of complementarity or what Asouzu (2003:155) calls “the principle of harmonious complementation”. The African essence vis a vis African culture is built on the natural necessity of reciprocal relation. For O’ Donohue (1994:144):

People associate because they are impelled to do so by natural necessity. The establishment of a world community is an ideal which is deeply rooted in the nature of human beings, although it also encounters obstacles in the individual bigger and better. It is society that impresses upon the individual a sense of perpetual dependence; it provides what he shall do and what he shall not do; and thus the individual receives the impression.

The African essence is deeply rooted in a conception of face to face community. African essence reflects on moral development; it is an instrument of social control, it can be quite effective as long as society remains a closed, tightly-knit, face to face community, where everyone knows everyone’s business and where moral offence can hardly be hidden. For African essence to be closely associated with the meaningful existence we need to consolidate the institutional framework that African languages need in African society. As Owomoyela (1996:14-15) rightly observes that:

Considering the institutional support that African languages need in order to regain their place in African society should be one of the fundamental considerations of the African essence. A concerted effort must be given to this orality of African languages. Accordingly, there must be a concerted effort to promote African languages and orality remains the most effective way of restoring African languages to primacy in all aspects of African life.

The loss of our Africanity or African essence explains the Africa’s backwardness in this our contemporary times. What defines our African essence is deeply rooted on the nature of our African metaphysics, essence, historization, freedom, culture, traditions and consciousness. Our African essence is deeply rooted in moral goodness and the tendency to abhor evil. Our contemporary African philosophy must begin to unravel the deceptive nature of our contemporary social world but the task is to define the African essence in terms of African



freedom, humanity and development. Our African humanity “must be given an incredible intensity in order to redefine a new course for the African continent. Odhiambo (1995:6) puts it quite succinctly “that humanity reaches an incredible degree of intensity when its essence is built on harmony”. Odhiambo (1995:15) also argues that:

Within the nature of metaphysics, the definition and explication of the concept of identity has been problematic... identity is really the harmony of one thing with itself. This harmony of one thing with itself defines the African essence. This harmony must exist both intrinsically and extrinsically in the being to be called real identity. The African essence is predicated on sacredness of our humanity and the sacredness of our African society.

According to O’ Donohue (1994:31) “society is sacred, the individual is profane; today, Africa is charting a new course of world community”.

Africans according to O’ Donohue have chosen to leave the old philosophy behind, to let the dead bury the dead, and to join hands with the rest of mankind in fashioning a world community. The African essence reflects on the fact that the society impresses upon the independence a sense of perpetual reliance. But for O’ Donohue, (1994:30) “society does not only constrain: it also confers strength and life, it provides moral support, making nature as ego-centered beings. The African essence presupposes a search for solutions to Africa’s problems. As O’ Donohue (1994:160-161) succinctly puts it that “from a primitive social laboratory Africa turned suddenly into something very like paradise lost. It was a step forward for the West to perceive in the people of Africa fellow participants in the human drama and collaborators in the search for solutions to the common problems of the race”. African essence is defined within the ambit of moral order or a religious – moral character. The African essence reminds us that all human beings are conscious of the same fundamental

moral principles, that there is one obligation laid upon all human beings, and that is, obedience to the society. Furthermore, the African essence reflects that we should not begin to always remind ourselves as Africans the past glories of Africa rather we should chart a new course for contemporary African society. As Odey (2005: 54 ) rightly observes that “the earlier we stopped basking in romantic assumptions about the past glories of Africa and face the bitter fact that we, as Africans, are lagging behind the entire world the better”. The African essence is emphatically built on what Asouzu (2004:273) calls “the basic principles of human actions, which uphold the transcendent complementary unity of being and consciousness”.

### 3 African Essence: A Philosophical Discourse on African Liberation in a Contemporary Perspective

First and foremost, the fight for African liberation, emancipation and historization is a fight against the European demonization of Africa and the socio-political imbroglio, decay and economic sabotage caused by African leaders who have plagued the African continent of its real essence. Our African essence is not only tied to African identity, difference, language, culture, literature, historicity, metaphysics, liberation and emancipation, but African’s quest for technological advancement, development of both natural and human resources and the defeat of Western capitalism by a viable alternative of an African ideology such as communalism and socialism. The gap between Europe and Africa in terms of technological and economic drive should be bridged by moral imperative, political will and people oriented programs. Rodney (1972:161-162) rightly observes that:

The growing technological and economic gap between Western Europe and Africa was part of the trend within capitalism to concentrate or polarize wealth and poverty at two opposite extremes. The African essence cannot be fully realized or tapped or harnessed in the harsh condition of abject poverty. Poverty





serves as an impediment to Africa's potentials for socio-political, economic and technological advancements.

Rodney (1975: 10) in his inaugural speech, at Queen's College, New York, in 1975, advised that "African people, like other Third World people, have virtually a vested interest in scientific socialism because it offers to them as a weapon of theory, it offers to them as that tool, at the level of ideas, which will be utilized for dismantling the capitalist imperialist structure. This is its concern". African communalism and African socialism reflect such a viable tool for African liberation or African development. African communalism reflects the fact that the African person feels the need to identify with a group of people in African society. Ruch and Anyanwu (1984:183) believe that every normal human being feels the need to identify with a group of people and in their argument they state categorically that:

The African essence is based on the need for identifying with a group of people. The heart of the whole problem of African identity lies therefore in slavery by consent, post colonialism, Western imperialism, and racialism. African essence as a paradigm shift for African development and potentials in this new millennium depends on Africans themselves. Africans must embrace modernization.

According to Kwasi Wiredu cited by Owomoyela (1996: 24) "the quest for development, then, should be viewed as a continuing world historical process in which all peoples, Western and non-Western alike, are engaged. He advises Africans not to view modernization as a foreign invasion but as a general march towards development that involves all humankind but has hitherto left them behind". Africans must achieve their full potentials by freeing themselves from what Owomoyela (1996:25) calls "the deceptive appearance of universal dialogue". The African essence de-emphasizes the cult of individualism as far as African societies are concerned. Owomoyela (1996:28) believes that "African

societies are conversant with many instances of the de-emphasis of the cult of the individual. The reason is not necessarily that Africans do not believe in individualism".

One of the problems of contemporary African societies is the need to resolve Africa's economic problems and political instability. The African essence does not necessarily lie in intuition. Owomoyela (1996:34) is of the view that:

Africans cannot be said to live by intuition alone. The African essence reflects the preservation of communal harmony. The African essence reflects the need for reconciling Africans to Africanness and the need to recognize the beauty of African blackness. Our African essence reflects our blackness as a beauty. Blackness is just an attitude; it has nothing to do with our quest for African development. It has nothing to do with our quest for scientific progression and assimilation and our quest for technological advancements. African potentials in this new millennium lie in our concerted effort to embrace change as a motivational force for African development. Our true African potentials have nothing to do with European cultural *mélange* or Eurocentric biases.

Indeed true African philosophy would aim at reconciling Africans to Africanness, not at advocating dissolution in a European cultural *mélange*. Our African essence reflects that a dispassionate understanding of the African past is indispensable for effectively confronting the future. The future of Africa should be our top most priority and contemporary challenges. The African essence strongly indicates their need for cultural rehabilitation. The African essence does not negate dialogue; such an attitude avoids the paradox of making philosophy a closed discipline, and opens the way for the possibility of an equal dialogue between African thought and Western thought.



Such a dialogue will undoubtedly be beneficial for both sides. The African essence must remain dynamic and not static. African philosophy and African development must toe the path of Western thought. For instance, technological development is possible without the wholesale abandonment of African tradition and cultures. African essence reflects the Lockean conception of real essence; the deep reflection on the personality of the African person. African metaphysics is deeply rooted in the uniqueness of being. The uniqueness of African metaphysics reflects an ontological and an existential/epistemological significance. The human person is defined by the knowledge of his environment. The African essence is steeped in unveiling African potentials in the new millennium. Understanding African potentials in the new millennium reflects the existing possibilities of the quest for development of natural and human resources in Africa. African development should be absolute or total and comprehensive. African potentials and African development in the new millennium should reflect the cross-cutting of the psychological, social, cultural, economic, political, religious-moral, scientific-technological development of the African person. African essence is deeply rooted in a context of shared morality and shared humanity in a world community.

The African essence is deeply rooted in universal brotherhood in an inter-subjectively shared life-world community. The African religion, African essence, African metaphysics is deeply rooted in the existing possibilities of world morality. The individual person is part and parcel of his world community. The African essence is deeply rooted in the context of sacredness of our African humanity. African humanity is characterized by the need for universal morality. African essence is deeply rooted in moral goodness. Our universe is governed by morals; what defines our universe are morals. African society is basically hinged or anchored in shared morality or by the principle of collective identity. African identity is steeped in his communal community. Collective identity, as far as African societies are concerned is basically characterized by the unifying force of the common good. The idea

of the common good reflects a moral code. The common good reflects the collective happiness of all individual members in society. The African essence is a contemporary reflection of some sort. It deals with redefining the African person in his current socio-political debacle, ethno-religious crises, economic woes, psychological upliftment and African unfreedom. Freedom is a very complex idea. Freedom has a metaphysical connotation and psychological significance. Freedom is the absence of constraints or impediments. Freedom has a definitional difficulty. Human freedom is characterized by social, political, psychological, economic, religious freedom. What defines an African society is tolerance, solidarity, communal harmony, sincerity, honesty of purpose, or purity of intention.

The African essence is defined by the principle of universal brotherhood or existential/harmonious complementation. The idea of universal brotherhood as far as African society is concerned reflects the notion of collective happiness (identity). Identity is what defines being. Being is that "thing in itself". Being is characterized by a manifold gradation. Being is defined by not only ethical immediacy but metaphysical relation. The African man is a human being defined by a cognitive faculty or calculative reasoning; he is a personality like every other human person in the world. The African man is equipped with intellection and the power of change. The African essence reflects the unity of consciousness or we-feeling consciousness. The conception of African essence and we-feeling consciousness reflect what we may call the principle of universal solidarity or what Asouzu (2003: 155) depicts as "the principle of harmonious complementation. Universal solidarity is characterized by the sense of togetherness or the sense of belongingness; the idea of collectivity reflects the sense of belongingness. Society is defined by the principle of collective identity or Durkheimian collective morality (consciousness) or collective conscience".

Society is characterized by the principle of common interest or collective binding; what defines any human society is common interest.



African society is anchored in social order and the principle of shared morality, African values, norms, rules, and regulations. African society is defined by culture and tradition. Tradition has its own positive side; it has to do with the maintenance of norms, values and maintaining a particular status quo.

The African cultural resources of a common human destiny will be consistent with African values. The spirit of the African essence is an African alternative that truly reflects our Africanity or African humanity. Our African discourse must be pursued with all sense of specificities. According to Owomoyela (1996:95) “we must pursue a better understanding of African phenomena in all their differences and specificities. The African essence concern acting towards others in a manner that acknowledges a shared morality and a shared humanity and man’s for empathy”. The African essence reflects what Owomoyela (1996:135) calls “an observation on a complementation arrangement the African essence is also anchored in diversity to some extent despite its complementation arrangement”. Africa is diverse, and so are its peoples and their cultures. It is also a dynamic continent that bears the marks of its passage through time. The African essence reflects the responsiveness to the best interests of Africa and Africans. Our African essence reflects the fact that our Africanity implies a certain way.

Africanity implies a certain way, a learned way, in which people relate to one another to the environment and to the universe. Our African values simply negate Owomoyela’s (1996:185) assertion that “African intellectuals unabashedly advocate abandoning Africanity to embrace the spirit of Europe”. We need to consciously embark on the business of African development and values. Our African potentials in this new millennium depend on our concerted effort to rescue Africa as a continent from the brink of socio-political and economic collapse. We must begin to embrace the task of reclaiming African humanity. Our quest for African humanity and African development should not be a means for an abandonment of our African habits and values. This is as against Owomoyela

(1996:208) view that “the concept of development has in our time come to mean the abandonment of all habits and institutions that vary from the Western paradigm and the radical assumption of Westernism.

## 4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The African essence should be built on a strong linguistic cultural communication. The African essence should be built on an ideal of world community. In today’s world community difference should not be taken to the extreme. An extreme difference would lead to social pathology and the world’s destruction. The African essence should be anchored in language, culture and human potentials, development, and Africa’s quest for technological advancements. The African essence should adopt the thesis of cultural diffusion and the hybridization of culture. The African essence should reflect what Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014:586) call “multi-civilization or multicultural character”. They also believe that a cultural hybrid would involve the combination of two or more elements from different cultures of the world. The idea of cultural hybridization brings about homogenization with heterogenization. Our African essence is based on the fact that no man is indispensable; and our African essence is anchored in the motivational connectedness of real life situation. Asuozu (2003:165) rightly observes that:

It is only under the acceptance of sacrifice and renunciation as integral part of life. The common good and goodness can be integrated into the motivational connectedness of real human life. The functions of high-class world immanent values in practical context of everyday life can have their legitimization therefore only if they are seen as expressions of the prolepsis supernatural love and in effect as moments of the integration of the self and the opposite other into the same universal love that is man’s destiny.

The African essence does not take difference seriously. The idea of self and the other



dichotomy is un-African. African person believes in the fact that man's destiny is deeply rooted in the integrative force of the self to the opposite other. Man's destiny therefore lies in the universal love of human destiny in a world community.

## 5 CONCLUSION

African political marauders have constantly plagued the African continent by keeping the African people in perpetual poverty and loss of their essence. The loss of the African essence is the loss of meaning and the loss of freedom. Our Africanity can be boosted by the nudging and the prompting of African essence, culture, humanity and authenticity. Our African essence, difference, identity or humanity is predicated on language, culture and African realities. Our African essence or Africanity has been distorted and bastardized. The Africa today requires a continuous intellectual task because the crises facing Africa today boils down to the crisis of relevance, cultural chauvinism, loss of African freedom, loss of African meaning and historicity. Our African essence reflects our African community from a more conscious unity of complementarity. The pervasive state of anomie on the African continent reflects what we may call African debacle. Africa's problems are plethora and need a sense of vigor or existential rigor in resolving these contemporary African problems. Our defense of our Africanity, of our African humanity is a desirable pursuit of our pure African essence. Africans cannot be party to any tendency that has to do with the discredited notion of African freedom and historicity. Africans must identify themselves in restoring credence to that discredited notion of the loss of African freedom, existence, culture, language (orality) and historicity. African essence which is closely associated with African culture and African identity must be closely associated with African morality or language. African essence has been a long time intellectual exercise or philosophical response or discourse. Africans are often patriotic and bolstered with a concern and undoubtedly concern for African development. African society impresses upon the individual a

sense of perpetual dependence. The loss of our Africanity or our African essence explains the Africa's backwardness in this our contemporary time.

Our African humanity must be given an incredible intensity in order to redefine a new course for the African continent. African scholars and proponents of African essence have rightly observed that Africa has chosen to leave the old philosophy behind, to let the dead bury the dead, and to join hands with the rest of mankind in fashioning a world community. We must begin to embrace the task of reclaiming our African humanity. The African essence presupposes a search for solutions to Africa's problems. Our African essence is redefined within the religious- moral character. Our African essence, identity or humanity concerns acting towards others in a manner that acknowledges a shared humanity or shared world community. Africa is a dynamic continent that bears the marks of its passage through time. African essence reflects the responsiveness to the best interests of Africa and Africans. Africans must achieve their full potentials by freeing themselves from the deceptiveness of our contemporary African societies. African essence rests on the principle of collectivity or collective identity or consciousness. According to Habermas (1979:111) "the collective identity regulates the membership of individuals in the society". In a typical African society the African person gives himself up to his community. Habermas (1979:185) therefore concludes that "every individual gives himself and all his quasi-natural rights over to the community sums up the conditions under which only those regulations count as legitimate which express a common interest, that is, the general will". African identity is strictly dependent on African culture and African realities. African essence has to do with the Kantian universal principle. Morality is an abstract term that is deeply rooted in the value commitments. Accordingly, Rosen (1998:129-130) concludes that:

First, morality is alleged to be abstract in the sense that it contains principles





expressed in universal form in Kant's case, the 'categorical imperative' to 'act only according to that maxim which you can, at the same time, will to be a universal law' (see Kantian Ethics). While such principles may function as a test upon proposed actions, they do not determine the content of the action to be performed. Thus, the claims of moral philosophy to the contrary, specific content is surreptitiously imported into ethics from the existing institutions or codes of behaviour of the society in question. Second, morality is abstract to the extent that it takes the form of a mere injunction: an imperative that is addressed to people's 'moral reason', telling them to act in a certain way because that is 'good in itself'. Moral action is detached thereby from other forms of human action and, as a result, moral theory has nothing to say about the conditions under which the forms of behaviour that it commends will be realized in practice. Finally, morality may be said to be abstract in that it contains an unhistorical understanding of its own status. It presents its principles as if they were the axioms of some timeless moral geometry. Yet, in fact, every system of morality is a way of seeing the world that arises in particular circumstances and responds to definite needs within those circumstances.

Africans do not believe in the cult of individualism but on the principle of harmonious complementation. Our African essence rests on the preservation of communal harmony or communal African society. Our African humanity requires cultural revival and dialogue; dialogue will undoubtedly be beneficial for Europe and Africa. Our African essence should be built on a strong linguistic cultural communication. The ideal of world community and the hybridization of culture best fit every human society. Multiculturalism or what we may refer to as cultural plurality is not alien to contemporary African society. The hybridization of culture requires the combination of two or more elements of different cultures in a pluralistic society. Our African essence characterizes the fact that our Africanity is anchored in the motivational force

of real life situation. Our African essence does not recognize difference; man's destiny is deeply rooted in the integrative force of the self to the opposite other. Our African essence is not only deeply rooted in African identity, difference, essence, language or orality, culture, literature, historicity, metaphysics, liberation, and emancipation but also on Africa's quest for scientific progression and assimilation, technological advancement, and the development and the harnessing of the natural and human resources in Africa. Contemporary African should key into a more viable alternative of an African ideology such as 'communalism' and socialism. The gap between Europe and Africa should be bridged in terms of scientific-technological and economic drive through a viable alternative of moral imperative and people-oriented socio-political and economic programs. The African essence reflects the need for identifying with a group of people.

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