

Carolyn Morrow Long

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**Voodoo-Influenced Rituals in New Orleans Cemeteries
and
The Tomb of Marie Laveau**

New Orleans Voodoo

Louisiana was a French and Spanish Catholic colony with a relatively high ratio of Africans and people of African descent to Europeans. Voodoo evolved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an organized religion with a pantheon of deities, a structured theology, and an initiated priesthood and congregation of believers--a confluence of African traditional beliefs with Roman Catholicism. The practice was centered in New Orleans and the surrounding countryside. Although Voodoo was suppressed during much of the twentieth century, elements of the belief system survived in various altered and submerged forms, and there has been a recent upsurge of interest in Voodoo as a legitimate religion.

The name Voodoo, like Vodou in Haiti, comes from *vodu*, meaning "spiritual forces" in the language of the Fon people of Dahomey, many of whom were enslaved in the French colonies. Until the early twentieth century the name was spelled "Voudou" by most Louisiana writers. "Voodoo" is an Americanized spelling that began to appear during the occupation of Haiti by American Marines, and was applied to the practice in both Haiti and Louisiana. The word has acquired the negative connotation of black magic. I do not use it here in this derogatory and racist context, but to distinguish the New Orleans tradition from Haitian Vodou.

Some form of Afro-Catholic religion had been practiced in New Orleans since the arrival of the first slaves. Voodoo as we know it probably emerged in the first decade of the nineteenth century, when French planters and free people of color, with their slaves, fled the Haitian Revolution and settled in New Orleans. Some migrated directly to Louisiana and others came by way of Cuba, the largest influx of ten thousand arriving in 1809. Over two-thirds of the new residents were Africans or people of African descent. These Haitians, both slave and free, brought their magical and religious beliefs with them.¹

New Orleans Voodoo is concerned with the relationship of human beings to the African deities, the Roman Catholic saints, and the ancestors. In this latter capacity, New Orleans cemeteries have been used for the making of charms and the performance of rituals intended to solicit the power of the dead. These practices were documented in the late 1920s through the early 1940s by Zora Neale Hurston, the WPA Louisiana Writers' Project, and by Harry Middleton Hyatt, an eccentric Episcopal priest who traveled the South interviewing practitioners of African-based magic. Local newspapers also carried occasional reports of charms "planted" in the cemeteries, and the placing of offerings and drawing of cross marks on the tombs. I know from my own observation that some of these customs continue today.

Cemetery Rituals

While most of the examples from the literature emphasize harmful charms, the dead could also be used for benign magic. Graveyard dirt, called "goofer dust," was a frequently used charm ingredient. Some practitioners specified that the grave of a person who had lived an evil life or died from unnatural causes should be used to do "bad work," and a particularly righteous person or an innocent child should be used for good purposes.

The African American anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston made several research trips to New Orleans between 1928 and 1930. There she sought out practitioners and asked to be taken as an apprentice. Her findings were published in the October-December 1931 *Journal of American Folklore* as "Hoodoo in America" and a shorter version appeared in her 1935 book *Mules and Men*. Hurston described a charm devised by her mentor, a man she called "Doctor Duke," for a client charged with attempted murder. At the cemetery, Doctor Duke took dirt from the graves of nine children, mixed it with sugar and sulfur, prayed over it on his altar, and sprinkled it over a new set of socks and underclothes. The client was to wear these, turned inside-out, when he appeared in court. The practitioner used dirt from the children's graves to solicit their innocent spirits to influence the court to find the client innocent. The sugar was meant to "sweeten" the judge and jury, and the sulfur, considered to be a "strong" ingredient, was to activate the charm. The client's socks and underwear were worn inside-out in order to reverse the situation in which he found himself.²

New Orleans charms often used beef hearts and tongues, or a whole calf's head (all easily obtained at the butcher's) as a receptacle for symbolic ingredients. These formulae usually called for sharp nails, pins and needles to "pin down" the target of the charm, black thread to "tie him up," and hot or strong substances to accelerate the action.

In 1938 and again in 1940, the Reverend Harry Middleton Hyatt collected folklore in New Orleans and across the Mississippi River in Algiers. One practitioner gave Hyatt this formula to separate a man from his wife:

Go to the graveyard on a new moon at the sixth hour in the evening. Take some dirt from an evil grave--that's a person that's been murdered or drowned or something like that, or died a sinful death. Go down about two inches and you get...the dirt. Take a beef heart and split it. You draw the form [image] of this person...and you write his name sixteen times...and put that in the heart with the graveyard dirt, some cayenne pepper, Tabasco sauce...and take nine needles and nine pins...and you cross them in this heart. Get a spool of black thread and wrap that heart...and bury it.³

Offerings had to be left to induce the spirit of the dead to “work,” or to pay for favors already granted. Another woman instructed Hyatt that a charm was to be buried on the grave of a wicked person and activated by pouring whiskey into the hole: “You give that whiskey to the spirit--pour it in the ground in that hole...when that spirit...go there huntin’ that alcohol...they gonna work.”⁴

At the same time that Hyatt was conducting his New Orleans fieldwork, cemetery charms were also being documented by members of the WPA Louisiana Writers’ Project. They spoke with the caretakers at various New Orleans cemeteries, collected newspaper articles, and interviewed approximately seventy elderly black New Orleanians, born between 1855 and 1865, who remembered events of the 1870s-90s as well as contemporary practices.

The sexton of St. Roch’s Cemetery told Louisiana Writers’ Project workers that “we’ve found plenty of stuff in this place.... I’ve found `em burying tongues all stuck up with needles and pins and wrapped around with black thread.” This charm was used to silence witnesses in a court case by figuratively tying their tongues.⁵

A practitioner named Madame Ducoyelle took Louisiana Writers’ Project fieldworker Robert McKinney to St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 for a ritual intended to eliminate enemies who stood in his way: “Get a calf’s head, stick it with pins, needles, and tacks. Cross the names of those who are against you in the head. Place the head in an open tomb, deposit fifteen cents in the tomb with it [to pay the spirits] and burn a black candle. The people who are doing you evil will vanish and leave the road clear for you.”⁶

In 1931, a New Orleans newspaper reported that two women discovered a black candle and a mound of fresh earth on their mother's grave in St. Roch's cemetery. Digging with their fingers, they found a tin can containing the photograph of a man, a pack of needles, and tobacco. It was conjectured that the charm was placed there by a person seeking the destruction of the man in the picture.⁷ In this case, the charm maker probably picked this grave at random, not because of the characteristics of the woman buried there.

Cross Marks, Offerings, and the Tomb of Marie Laveau

One of the most common cemetery rituals is the drawing of cross marks (sometimes a cross within a circle) on the tombs of persons believed to possess extraordinary spiritual power. This is done to establish contact with the deceased, and a small offering, such as coins, food, flowers, whiskey, or a votive candle is left at the gravesite as payment for services rendered.

Documentation of this custom is found in a number of the Louisiana Writers' Project interviews. Informants interviewed in 1938-40, recalling events of the late nineteenth century, said that people made cross marks and left offerings at a wall vault in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, where the Iberville Street wall meets the Robertson Street wall--officially designated in cemetery records as Square Three, St. James Aisle, row 25, range 3 (middle vault). This place was commonly known as the "wishing vault."⁸

Some declared this to be the burial place of an early Voodoo queen named Marie Comtesse, also known as La Beau Comtesse (the beautiful countess): "People used to put money on Marie Comtesse's tomb an' ask for favors...they would take red brick and make cross marks, and knock on her tomb...they even made holes...where they would put candles...and leave them there to burn."⁹ I did, in fact, find records for a woman named Labeau or Zabeau Comtesse, a native of Africa, who died in 1834 and was interred in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, although we have no way of knowing if she was a Voodoo priestess.

The vault in St. Louis No. 2 might also hold the remains of another early queen, Marie Sallopé. A Louisiana Writers' Project interviewee reported: "So great was the faith of some in Marie Saloppé, that after her death many went to her grave to pray for certain graces. Some hid coins under a little mound of earth and on top of this placed a candle."¹⁰

Others contend that it is the burial place of the most famous of the nineteenth-century Voodoo queens, Marie Laveau, or of her daughter Marie Heloïse Glapion, sometimes said to have succeeded her as queen. According to one document, Heloïse died in 1862, but I have been unable to corroborate this date with a death certificate or a funeral/burial record.¹¹

A Louisiana Writers' Project worker interviewed John Slater, described as "an old Creole Negro who has hung around the cemetery the greater part of his life," as they were standing in front of "Marie Laveau's" vault in St. Louis No. 2. According to the report, "there is no identifying slab, but it is marked with numerous crosses."

We still has folks puttin' things on her grave, like a Porta Rican woman that comes here every first Monday an' Friday of the month an' puts paper flowers on the grave. They buries money, always three 'nocks [nickels] for the hoodoo "risen." We sometimes finds three black candles, an' notes, an' other stuff. We keeps the money, an' throws the other away.¹²

When I made inquiries at the office of the director of the Archdiocesan Cemeteries, I learned that there are no records of ownership for the "wishing vault." The entry simply states, "This vault is full." The superintendent suggested that it might have been rented out for temporary burials, of which no record was kept. Sometimes, she told me, people rented the vaults and then never removed the remains.¹³ Therefore the body of Marie Comtesse, Marie Sallopé, or Marie Heloïse Glapion could conceivably be interred there.

In 1980, a committee headed by the late Dr. Joseph Logsdon of the University of New Orleans conducted research for a Black History Tour of St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, Square 3, sponsored by the New Orleans NAACP. Regarding the notion that the "wishing vault" holds the remains of the second Marie Laveau, the tour brochure states that "research into church records...has shown that the legend is close to the truth. On October 6, 1890, a Madame Marie Laveau was buried in this wall of crypts...in row 19, second from the top." While the tour brochure does not claim that this lady was the second Marie Laveau, a February 12, 1980 article in the *New Orleans States-Item* flagrantly declares that "the real voodoo queen...has been buried all this time in a heretofore unknown, unmarked spot," and quotes the research committee as saying that the person interred in this wall vault "must be Marie number two."¹⁴ When I did my own checking into civil and ecclesiastical records, I found a death certificate for seventy-five-year-old Widow Charles Laveau, a woman of color who died at 334 North Rampart Street on October 6, 1890, and an entry for Charles Laveau on the same date in the burial records of the Archdiocesan Archives. Although one of these documents is obviously in error regarding the gender of the deceased, the person interred in this vault is assuredly not Marie Laveau's daughter.¹⁵

The practice of drawing cross marks and leaving offerings on the vault in St. Louis No. 2 was mentioned in several newspaper articles during the 1920s and 1930s. It is also pointed out in the *New Orleans City Guide*, published in 1938 by the Louisiana Writers' Project.¹⁶

At present, tourists and locals are warned away from St. Louis No. 2, which is adjacent to the Iberville Housing Projects, because visitors to the cemetery have been robbed and even killed there. I only go on All Saints' Day, when the cemetery is crowded and the police are present, or when escorted by several stalwart male companions. Nevertheless, someone is definitely using this vault as a ritual site. When I visited on All Saints' Day, 1998, I found it covered with red cross marks and offerings: a vase of gladioli, holy cards, a rosary, a man's cap, and notes inserted into envelopes marked "Tim Sunday" and "Tim Thursday." On an ordinary week day in April, 2000, the vault was less elaborately decorated. There were some crosses drawn on the wall, a red candle, two strands of Mardi Gras beads, a white cross bearing the message "God is Love," and most significantly, two crossed hair pins. This, to me, appears to be the work of a person familiar with Voodoo tradition.

While everything about the vault in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2 remains an enigma, the tomb of the original Marie Laveau in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 is no mystery at all if one does a little research. Marie Laveau, a free woman of color born around 1801, was married in 1819 to Jacques Paris, a free quadroon from Haiti. After Paris died or disappeared a few years later, she formed a permanent relationship and had children with a white man, Christophe Glapion. She sometimes went by the name Marie Laveau, sometimes "the Widow Paris," and sometimes Marie Glapion. Her death certificate states that she died on June 15, 1881. According to cemetery records, "Dame Christophe Glapion, age seventy-eight," was interred on June 16, 1881, in the middle vault of her family burial place in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, designated as "tomb 7, alley 2 left facing St. Louis Street."¹⁷ The marble tablet reads (in French) "Family of the Widow Paris, born Laveau," followed by a long dedication to Marie Philomé Glapion (1836-1897). Philomé (usually spelled Philomene) was Marie Laveau's younger daughter, often confused with Marie Heloïse (1827-1862), the daughter said by some to have been the "second Marie Laveau."¹⁸ Assuming that Heloïse indeed died in 1862, she could not have been the woman who assumed leadership of the Voodoo community in the 1880s and 1890s.

The Widow Paris tomb is covered with cross marks, and a variety of offerings are always seen on the surrounding pavement. This practice probably started shortly after Marie Laveau's death in 1881. An elderly woman interviewed in 1940 by the Louisiana Writers' Project remembered that, after Marie Laveau's funeral, suddenly "people commenced a-flocking to her tomb."¹⁹

Louisiana Writers' Project fieldworkers learned from Mr. Cruz, caretaker of St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, that "Negroes and whites come almost daily to make offerings to Marie's spirit.... They bring flowers, kneel down and pray. Some leave cooked foods, cakes, bread, apples, oranges, bananas, even pineapples.... Occasionally money is left. They make crosses with red brick, charcoal, and sharp rocks, which [the caretaker], acting under the orders of the priests of St. Louis Cathedral, immediately removes." The descendants of Marie Laveau also tried to discourage these rituals and offerings. After the death of Philomene, by all accounts a very proper and pious lady, the family of Philomene's son Blair Legendre cared for the tomb, keeping it neatly whitewashed. According to Mr. Cruz, "The reason the tomb is so white, they come and clean it."²⁰

Harry Middleton Hyatt also heard stories about Marie Laveau's tomb from his informants: "Marie Laveau...she's dead now--but I know where she's buried at. [People go to her grave] to make wishes, ask her to help them do different works. [They] go there to her grave an' they kneel, an' they pray, an' they knock [to call her spirit].... Whatever you want done, ask her to help you."²¹ This informant did not mention the cross marks.

These cemetery rituals, particularly the drawing of crosses, are rooted in African tradition. In the religion of the Kongo people, life is represented as a sacred cosmogram, a cross within a circle. The right-hand arm of the cross is the birth of the individual; the summit connotes the peak of that person's strength on earth; the left-hand arm is physical death; the bottom symbolizes the power of the dead. The spirit is believed to make this journey in an everlasting cycle. The intersection of the two crossed lines symbolizes the point of concentrated power where the realm of the living intersects with the realm of the spirits and the ancestors. The African cosmogram became conflated with the Christian cross in the Afro-Catholic religions of the New World, and this symbol, sometimes an X, sometimes an upright cross, is incorporated into charms throughout the Americas.²²

The New Orleans custom of drawing cross marks on the grave markers of persons believed to possess great spiritual authority is also related to Haitian Vodou. It may have been introduced into New Orleans by the Haitian immigrants who arrived in the early nineteenth century. According to Vodou priest Max Beauvoir, "the practice is called *kwasiyen*, meaning to sign with a cross, and is used to establish contact with the *lwa* [Vodou deities], and on tombs when one wishes to be remembered by the dead. It is an X sign, although some people transform it into a Christian cross."²³

People still visit Marie Laveau's tomb to carry out a simple ritual--rap three times on the wall, place your hand on the marble slab and ask Marie to grant your wish, draw a cross mark

with a bit of soft red brick, and leave a small offering. Unfortunately, this practice has been trivialized by the same entrepreneurs who have turned the Voodoo religion into a tourist attraction, and the ritual at Marie Laveau's tomb has become one of the mandatory "things to do" when visiting New Orleans.

Some cemetery historians and preservationists argue that the ritual at the Widow Paris tomb is a recent introduction unrelated to genuine Voodoo tradition.²⁴ A morning spent in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 watching the ludicrous antics of tour guides and their charges is almost enough to convince one of this point of view. Robert Florence, who has worked tirelessly to protect New Orleans Cemeteries, fumed in a recent e-mail, "I never see anybody marking that tomb who I would consider a sincere Voodoo devotee. The only people I see, and I see hundreds, are tourists with Pat O'Brien Hurricane go-cups and piles of Mardi Gras beads. Right now there are big names with enormous Xs written in indelible black ink right on the marble tablet." Preservationists particularly condemn the practice of making cross marks on the tomb because it damages the inscriptions and because the soft red brick with which the marks are drawn is chipped from adjoining tombs. The Archdiocese of New Orleans, owners of the St. Louis cemeteries, is also incensed by this practice, referring to it as vandalism.²⁵ Vodou priest Max Beauvoir suggested that, rather than fulminate over the cross marks, "The municipality should offer daily some sticks of chalk. This may prove to be less expensive than having to repair and whitewash the tombs periodically."

I would argue that, in addition to the busloads of tourists who daily visit St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 and perform rituals of which they have no understanding, there are serious believers who wish to venerate the memory of Marie Laveau, obtain power, or ask a favor. I once observed a young woman of color, obviously not a tourist, draw two crossed lines and stand with her open palm on the tomb, seemingly deep in prayer. On All Saints' Day, 1993, I documented the offerings left at Marie Laveau's tomb: fresh and artificial flowers, candles for the Virgin Mary, a tiny plastic skull, a black felt hat, cigarettes, match books, sticks of gum, coins, peppermint candies, Mardi Gras beads, white seashells, a pumpkin, the photograph of a black woman, two bottles of rum and a bottle of whiskey, three apples, and a jar of honey. Drawn on the pavement was a star made of dried red beans within a circle of green peas on a background of white rice. On St. Joseph's Day, 1998, the sidewalk in front of the tomb was covered with a beautiful display of fresh fruit, flowers, and greenery. Offerings of this sort are not normally left by tourists.

I was amused to find that, at the beginning of the new millennium, the ritual associated with the tomb of Marie Laveau has entered cyberspace. On the World Wide Web at

“spellmaker.com/marie” I discovered an alternative to the destructive practice of drawing cross marks on Marie Laveau’s tomb. To make a love wish:

Download the photograph of the tomb to your hard drive. Open the picture in your paint program. Draw three red Xs. Knock on the picture three times. Ask Marie Laveau out loud to grant your love wish. Exit without saving the picture. Make an offering of fruit, flowers, or candy to Marie Laveau by leaving them in your local cemetery.

Notes

1. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “The Formation of Afro-Creole Culture,” in Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 85-87.

2. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935, reprint New York: Harper Perennial Library, 1990), 223-224. Hurston called her mentors by different pseudonyms in the *JAF* article and *Mules and Men*.

3. Nahnee, The Boss of Algiers, interview by Harry Middleton Hyatt, 1940, *Hoodoo-Conjure-Witchcraft-Rootwork* (Hannibal, Missouri: Western Publishing Company, 1970), vol. 2, 1352-1353.

4. Madam Murray, *ibid.*, 1286.

5. Louie Haley, caretaker of St. Roch’s Cemetery, interview by Cecile Wright, Louisiana Writers’ Project (LWP) folder 44, Northwestern State University of Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center.

6. Madame Ducoyielle, interview by Robert McKinney and Hazel Breaux, 1936, LWP folder 44.

7. *New Orleans Item-Tribune*, March 9, 1931, p. 10, col. 8-9.

8. The drawing of crosses or Xs is mentioned in interviews with Alexander Augustin, Marie Dédé, Aileen Eugene, Oscar Felix, Anita Fonvergne, Theresa Kavanaugh, and Sophie Rey, LWP folder 25.

9. Marie Dédé, interview by Robert McKinney, n.d., LWP folder 25; Laura Hopkins, interview by Robert McKinney, n.d., LWP folder 43. Death certificate, Zabeau (also Labeau) Contesse, Oct. 8, 1834, Recorder of Births and Deaths, vol. 4, p. 171, microfilm City Archives/New Orleans Public Library; St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, record for Elizabeth, alias Zabethe, Contesse, *negresse libre*, interred Oct. 9, 1834, age 59 years, cemetery file compiled by the LWP, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center (Old U.S. Mint Building, New Orleans). The death certificate states that Contesse was born in Africa, but the cemetery file has her as a native of Jeremie, Saint-Domingue.

10. Alexander Augustin, interview by Henriette Michinard May 18, 1940, LWP folder 25.

11. Judgement #4597, Civil District Court, typed copy LWP folder 499.

12. John Slater, interview by Cecile Wright, n.d., LWP folder 25.

13. Alana Mendoza, Superintendent of St. Louis Cemeteries, telephone interview February 17, 2000. According to Ms. Mendoza, the wall was originally four vaults high, but the bottom one has sunk. The top vault is in range 4, the middle one is range 3, the bottom is range 2, and range 1 is now below ground. Range 4, the top vault, belonged to the Desdunes family.

14. New Orleans Black History Tour of St. Louis II Cemetery Square 3, compiled by Raphael Cassimere, Jr., Danny Barker, Florence Borders, D. Clive Hardy, Joseph Logsdon, and Charles Roussève (1980); Marjorie Roehl, "The Voodoo Queen Sleeps...There!" *New Orleans States-Item*, February 12, 1980, section A, p. 1 and 4.

15. Death certificate, Widow Charles Laveau, Oct. 6, 1890, Recorder of Births and Deaths, vol. 97, p. 1202, microfilm City Archives/New Orleans Public Library; burial record for Charles Laveau, vault 19, 3rd tier, Douane Allee (Iberville Street), St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, 1888-1893, p. 131. Charles Laveaux, a prosperous free man of color, was the father of the first Marie Laveau; he died in 1835. The Charles Laveau who died in 1890 may have been Marie's half-brother, Laurent Charles Laveau. His widow would therefore have been Marie Laveau's sister-in-law.

16. "Tribute of Flowers and Prayers for City's Unforgotten Dead, *New Orleans Morning Tribune*, November 2, 1928, p. 1, col. 4-5; "Voodoo Faithful Put Magic Marks on Great Queen's Grave," *New Orleans Item*, June 22, 1936, p. 14; "Voodoo Queen's Grave," *New Orleans States*, September 2, 1937, flysheet p. 2; Louisiana Writers' Project, *New Orleans City Guide* (1938), 193.

17. Death certificate, Marie Glapion born Laveau, June 15, 1881, Recorder of Births and Deaths, vol. 78, p. 1113, microfilm City Archives/New Orleans Public Library; burial record, New Orleans Archdiocesan Cemeteries, book 1, p. 13.
 18. Lyle Saxon, *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928, reprint Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co, 1988), 243; G. William Nott, *Vieux Carré Guide* (1928), 21; Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *Journal of American Folklore* 44, no. 174 (1931), 315; Robert Tallant, *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946, reprint Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co, 1983), 73-76, 127.
 19. Theresa Kavanaugh, interview by Zoe Posey, n.d., LWP folder 25.
 20. Cruz, caretaker of St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, interview by Hazel Breaux and Maude Wallace, 1940, LWP folder 25; Rose Legendre, widow of Blair Legendre, interview by Maude Wallace, March 15 and 20, 1940, LWP folder 25.
 21. Algiers Atmosphere (informant #1588), interview 1940, Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjure-Witchcraft-Rootwork* 3, 1908-1909.
 22. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 108-115.
 23. Max Beauvoir, e-mail, Sept. 13, 1997.
 24. University of New Orleans history professor Jerah Johnson is quoted in the newsletter of the preservation organization Save Our Cemeteries (August, 1997) as saying that "there is absolutely no historic precedent for the practice [of drawing cross marks]; it was never a part of Voodoo ritual."
 25. Robert Florence, founder of the preservation organization Friends of New Orleans Cemeteries, e-mail, March 2, 2000; Elena Mendoza, Superintendent of St. Louis Cemeteries, telephone interview February 17, 2000.
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