

# Naga Narratives as Acts of Assertion of Identity and Resistance Against Colonial Narratives and Contemporary Marginalisation

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**Abstract**— *This paper aims to explore narratives in Nagas' literary writings as acts of identity assertion and cultural resistance against colonial histories and contemporary marginalisation. This paper will examine some of the region's rich yet often overlooked literary output. It will shed light on the interplay between memory, identity, and cultural heritage, and on how the writers reclaim and articulate their worldview and ethos through documentation and creation, challenging entrenched stereotypes while redefining their roles in the contemporary world. This paper also aims to interrogate the power of storytelling as both a tool for preserving history and for asserting existence. By situating the selected literature within broader discourses of Indigenous literature, this study will also highlight how local experiences of the Naga people resonate with global Indigenous movements for recognition, rights, and cultural affirmation, challenging stereotypes and redefining their place in a rapidly globalising world, ultimately questioning whose stories are heard and whose voices are silenced.*



**Keywords**— *Identity, Naga Narratives, North East, English literature.*

The emergence of North East literature has challenged long-held colonial narratives and created space for asserting voices, histories, and cultural identities, opening a vital platform for marginalised and often overlooked communities. Despite its rich oral and cultural traditions, North East literature has remained largely on the periphery and has been historically excluded from literary canons. Writers from the North East face systemic marginalisation and the invisibilisation of Indigenous experiences, compounded by cultural erasure and the dominance of mainstream and urban narratives. However, in recent years, the burgeoning literature from the North East acknowledges the importance of these.

The Naga communities are among the largest Indigenous groups in India, spanning Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and Myanmar. Writers from these regions, especially women who write in English, have produced brilliant books that warrant inclusion in any literary canon that purports to serve India, whether in the discourses of Post-Colonialism,

Diaspora, Contemporary literature, Trauma literature, or Historical fiction. Some stories, rooted in folklore and oral traditions, reflect the life experiences and struggles of various Naga communities, serving as both mirrors and shapers of their identities; some delve into their difficult, traumatic socio-political experiences, while others explore their position in the world from their perspectives. Insiders' narratives are crucial not only for shaping the region's literature and identity but also for shaping the Nation's literature.

Northeast India exemplifies the remarkable resilience of its Indigenous communities. As they navigate modernity and globalisation, these communities maintain a deep connection to their heritage. The narratives they uphold affirm their existence by weaving traditional motifs into contemporary realities and merging personal experiences with broader contextual frameworks, thereby opening up fresh possibilities for meaningful 'inter-ethnic proximities'

and interactions through narrative 'intimacies and expositions.'

Despite its ancient literary legacies, North East English literature has gained significant visibility only recently. This visibility may be attributed to less gatekeeping by major publishing houses and to increased English translations from other Indian languages. While "The earliest folk literature of Assam dates back to 600 AD."<sup>1</sup> (Koganti) and "Written Manipuri literature began around the 10th century AD."<sup>2</sup> (culturopedia.com), the history of written English literature in the region is relatively recent, largely developed in the 20th century following the introduction of the Roman script.

English has evolved into "...one of the common languages in day-to-day life in the region, and which is not a language of the elite but of the ordinary masses, it has been provincialised as an effective vehicle to carry the orature and lore of the communities, their mythic universe, agonies and anger, and, in the process, the language enters a terrain defined by unique spatial and experiential realities."<sup>3</sup> (Prodhani) Consequently, English has automatically become the "de facto language whenever different people groups from the region gather together."<sup>4</sup>(Pou 9)

From a postcolonial viewpoint, colonial writings constructed the Nagas as "savage" and, in official writings, portrayed the Naga Hills as spaces of conflict and as territories of inaccessibility and remoteness, a construction carried into the popular mainstream imagination. Scholars have examined how European epistemologies forged notions of "primitive" and ideas of "difference" in colonised societies, and how such knowledge fundamentally shaped the nature of rule in Imperial governance in the colonies. <sup>5</sup> (Said, 2003/1978; Saleminck, 2003).

John Butler's account further stereotypes this perception of the Nagas as an uncivilised race. The idea of the "savage" was imprinted by linking it to the physical profile and appearance of the "tribes." "The south-eastern hills of Assam are the abode of many tribes of Nagas. They are a very uncivilised race, with dark complexions, athletic sinewy frames, hideously wild and ugly visages: their faces and bodies being tattooed in a most frightful manner by pricking the juice of the bela nut into the skin in a variety of fantastic figures." <sup>6</sup> (Butler, 1847)

For a long time, the Nagas, the 'Savages' or the 'Noble Savages,' have fascinated the Western mind and were exoticised when 'discovered' by anthropologists in the 19th Century, as they had 'discovered' several other communities and nations. Thus, they became exotic specimens to 'study.' Writings on Nagas by colonial administrators were varied and imaginative, covering their languages, rituals and religion, taboos and omens, political and village structures,

their 'propensity to raid,' dress and ornaments, funeral customs, head-hunting, monolithic cultures, and so on.

This paper aims to critique and demonstrate how such reductive imaginations of the Naga have been contested through Nagas' own writing about themselves. I intend to amplify the narratives of North East writers, especially Naga writers, who have challenged their homogenisation, objectification, and marginalisation within both colonial and national discourses.

#### Early writings in English

By the 1960s, writings in English had been published. Jyotsna Bhattacharjee's *Shadows in Sunshine* (1965) was followed much later by Ngangom's "Words and the Silence" (1987). Writing in English took off rather slowly, but by the 2000s, Esterine Kire's "The sky is My Father," originally published as "A Naga Village Remembered," was the first novel by a Naga writer, published in 2003. It is a compelling work of historical fiction that chronicles the final battle between the British Imperial forces and the Khonoma tribes. Historical novels such as this one, which weave Angami Naga words and phrases into English, emerged as a key form for decolonising narratives, portraying Naga societal structures, ethical systems, and their bravery. This novel has proven itself to be a work of scholarship suitable for academic disciplines. The University of Delhi has prescribed it for the literature course "South East Asian Literature." Then there are recent publications like "His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima that Shaped World History" by Mmhonlumo Kikon, which "challenges dominant historical narratives by centring the agency of the Naga people in both resisting British imperialism and playing a decisive role in the Battle of Kohima"<sup>7</sup> (Lucy Yhome), "The Collector's Wife" (2005), a novel by Mitra Phukan that offers vivid depictions of social and political violence in Assam and the Northeast, is another pioneering work. From Arunachal Pradesh, Lummer Dai's debut novel "Pharor Xile Xile" (1961) could perhaps be considered the first novel of Arunachal Pradesh, written by an Arunachali. Then Yumlam Tana's "The Man and the Tiger" (1999) and Mamang Dai's "The Legend of Pensam" (2006) truly marked their presence in the literary canon. Mamang Dai re-created the prehistoric past of Arunachal Pradesh in "The Legends of Pensam" and "Black Hills."<sup>8</sup> (Yater, 2021)

#### Writing Orality

The oral, written, and digitised literature are living, breathing reflections of the socio-cultural world that defines the North East region. They have profoundly shaped identity, instilling a sense of pride and belonging within communities. The importance of narrative voice in shaping identity posits that individuals construct and negotiate their selfhood through storytelling. Paul Ricoeur's concept of

"The Self and Narrative Identity" suggests that it allows individuals to engage with their past, present and future, ultimately redefining who they are.<sup>9</sup> (Ricoeur) Elaborating on this point, Stuart postulates that discourse generates identity, which is reinvented in changing social and political contexts.<sup>10</sup> (Hall) Oral literature is a significant part of most early English narratives by Naga writers. They combine orality with fiction and intertwine the genres of novel and lore. Commenting on the relationship between orality and writing, Walter J. Ong writes:

"Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing."<sup>11</sup> (Ong 14)

When a people begin to write about themselves, the ubiquity of colonial writings contrasts with the emergence of insider writings. Works such as "On Being a Naga" (2018) by Temsula Ao; "Walking the Roadless Road, exploring the tribes of Nagaland" (2019) by Easterine Kire; and "The Trail from Makuilongdi: The Continuing Saga of the Zeliangrong People" (2001) by Namthiubuiyang Pamei are among the forerunners in insider narratives of self and the ontogenesis of a people. Then there are autobiographies such as "A Naga Odyssey: Visier's Long Way Home" by Visier Sanyu and Richard Broome (2017), and "Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir" by Temsula Ao (2014), which demonstrate that Naga lives and histories are worth telling and documenting. Visier's autobiography is not only about the self but also a rich documentation of his community.

Temsula Ao wrote on the importance of remembering and writing in her poem, "The Old Story Teller", "Grandfather constantly warned/That forgetting the stories/Would be catastrophic:/We would lose our history,/Territory, and most certainly/Our intrinsic identity./So I told stories..."<sup>12</sup> (Ao)

Esterine's take on telling one's own story. "Every man is a story. Every nation is a bristling galaxy of stories. To be able to share one's story—shouldn't that be a basic human right? Where there is denial of the freedom to tell our stories, invisible prisons are created....The denial of the right to tell our stories violates our humanity. I believe that every story has its space in History."<sup>13</sup> (Iralu)

#### Exploring Identity and Resistance

Some writings that address identity and resistance include "The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India's Northeast," edited by Preeti Gill (2010). It contains 26 essays, a mosaic of the region, and each essay questions issues of nation and

identity, asking what makes the people of the Northeast so alienated from the 'mainstream' (dust jacket, front). The title itself subtly questions who is in the 'periphery' and who is in the centre, asserting identity, culture, and social reality to protest the literary hegemony of the mainstream: "The distant north-eastern part of the subcontinent too was entirely dominated by tribes – the Nagas..."<sup>14</sup> (NCERT p 93) In 2012, Sanjoy Hazarika and Preeti Gill, with 'Insider' researchers from Nagaland and Assam, brought out "Bearing Witness," which documents the impact of conflict on women through interviews.<sup>15</sup> (Gill) Though difficult, this documentation has, to some extent, recorded victims' statements, which is important for preserving historical truth, if not for pursuing justice. Nongkynrih and Ngangom (2003) point out that the writers from the Northeast "living with the menace of the gun" cannot be equated with their counterparts in the mainland, as they "cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness"<sup>16</sup> (Nongkynrih p. ix).

A compelling collection that addresses the complex interplay of politics of belonging and identity in the region is the anthology "Insider Outsider-Belonging and Unbelonging in the North-East," edited by Preeti Gill and Samrat Choudhury. It seeks to illuminate identity politics and belonging in an emerging area of interest and investigation across multiple disciplines. Then there is Temsula Ao, whose several works document Naga identity and culture.

#### Gender Assertion by women poets

More women have taken up writing, reversing the gender power dynamic by populating their work with principal female characters. Essays, short stories, poems, novels, and reflections by women in anthologies and books reflect the evolving landscape of Naga literature, addressing gender issues head-on. Language is power. Yuimi Vashum's poems in "Love, Lust and Loyalty" cut straight to the core. They are sharp, clinical feminist works that question the unjust treatment of women and patriarchy. She addresses sexual violence in this book by speaking openly about it. In an interview, she said, "...there was a point of time where I began to feel so strongly about sexual violence....In this book particularly, I chose to largely dwell on empowering victims of sexual violence."<sup>17</sup> (Shanmi) In her poem 'Breaking the Shame,' she empowers women, "...my daughter shall fight against silence/So shall my daughters' daughter.../Untill there is no shame in the truth."<sup>18</sup> (Vashum p 32, 33)

T. Kreditsu's "Sopfuno" (2018), a poetry book, spoke up, through the power of her poetry, about the realities of Naga society. The poet gave voice to the interiority of a Naga woman in a patriarchal society. Monalisa Changkija, in her

testimonial for the poetry book, said, "...this volume is an uncomfortable head-on collision with the reality of Naga Society of invalidating women's personhood."<sup>19</sup> (Sopfuno 2018, back cover). The poem titled "Tea" in the collection offers an illuminating, critical, and nuanced account of how, through 'tradition', women were edited out of social participation in a humiliating way. "Girls should learn how to make tea/A girl who cannot, will find it difficult to get a husband/...You will know when to rise and set yourself apart from the company of men/As they sit and wait for you to proffer them a cup/...You will learn that you are not a voice but a body indentured to serve tea."<sup>20</sup> (Keditsu) These two poetry books I have picked are, in no way, the only poetry books written by women; they are only for the purpose of highlighting a small but powerful sample of the diverse voices and experiences that Naga women poets bring to the Indian literary landscape.

#### Narrative device as assertion

A narrative and stylistic device used by recent poets and writers is the use of native words and phrases to challenge colonial hangovers and contemporary narratives, as experimented with and made hugely successful by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. "Things Fall Apart" (1958) by Achebe serves as an explanatory voice for colonially oppressed societies across Africa. Likewise, Easterine Kire, inspired by Achebe, wrote several of her novels to claim a rightful space in the Indian majoritarian scene. Her two novels, "When the River Sleeps" (2014) and "Son of the Thundercloud" (2016), considered her masterpieces, are littered with gold nuggets of indigenous wisdom, deeply rooted in Naga folklore, and use several Angami phrases and words to depict the cultural world. "Boats on Land: A collection of short stories" (2012) by Janice Pariat also serves as a historical and cultural record of the communities in Meghalaya, introducing readers to tribal folklore, the supernatural, and traditional beliefs, with extensive use of the Khasi language.<sup>21</sup> Lalhlanpuui)

A poem, "Jngai na la ling" (Far from Home), by Longam Kharपुरi in the anthology "We come from the Mist" (2023), speaks of the physical connection to the land and underscores the significance of ritual in the Khasi community. "Pray ritual sacrifice to God almighty of the earth the sky the All./ sacrifice the fruit of the earth to the Mother Mei Ramew."<sup>22</sup> (Kharपुरi)

Recent works by Naga writers that discuss the significance of Indigenous storytelling or critique colonial literary frameworks include "The Last Free Naga" (2025) by Jim Wungramyao Kasom, "Tales from the Enchanted Village" (2024), "Where the Light Finds Us" (2025) by Rita Krocha, and "Food Journeys: Stories From The Heart" (2024) by Joel Rodrigues and Dolly Kikon. This is in no way a

comprehensive list. The story 'The Last Yodel' in "Tales from the Enchanted Village" by Rita depicts a repentant, remorseful father who abandoned his young son in the forest. Several Naga tales depict mothers-in-law mistreating their stepchildren, but stories of such fathers are rare. This folk tale reflects themes of abandonment and parental betrayal, bringing to the fore the complexities of familial relationships and misguided actions. The abandoned boy's diligence led to his adoption by a rich farmer. This emphasises the values of hard work and resilience in Naga society.

#### Emergence and Significance of English Literature in Northeast India

In what language do most contemporary North East writers write? As in the 1980s, when African literature in English emerged as a new canon, North East English literature likewise emerged as a new canon, a repository of major social and literary capital in English. In the Northeast, writing in English was promoted as more convenient and empowering for communication than the spoken word, in order "to bring the region with its bewildering heterogeneity of tongues within a manageable system of government" and "to stream roll the differences between the varieties of tongues spoken in the region"<sup>23</sup> (Misra18)

Temsula Ao observed that the use of English as a literary medium is of "great significance"<sup>24</sup> (Ao p136). She argued that this has made the region's works accessible not only within the country but also internationally. She referred to Salman Rushdie's view of English as "the most powerful medium of communication in the world; should we not then rejoice at these artists' mastery of it and their growing influence?"<sup>25</sup> (Benjamin Graves) Writing in the non-native language of English, which began as a colonial imposition in Nagaland, develops as a strategy to combat the socio-political image of Nagaland portrayed by the colonists."<sup>26</sup> (Chaterji, P. (2025). Even though writers write in English, they can bring cultural flavour into the language. By writing in English, as Ao has pointed out, writers can make their work accessible to international readers. It has become a tool of empowerment, rather than a hindrance. Themes of social commentary; anxieties and precarities of existence under the shadow of AFSPA; and the connection or disconnection with mainland India and its proximity to Southeast Asia are among the areas addressed by the writers that resonate with the world. The works have opened up spaces and become an interface for broader marginalised and indigenous groups worldwide. Thus building bridges and inspiring change. Writing in English has showcased a new literary canon, opening up possibilities even in Universities abroad. One of the most gainful engagements is in the post-colonial discourse. Authors are able to assert

their identities by using a globally recognised language. Tamsula Ao's "These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone" (2006) shatters the biased notion of mainstream preoccupation with the ideas of violence, terror, bloodshed, and homogeneity in the North East. The book details how village folk, women, and families cope with decades of militarisation, violence, and terror. 'How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency' edited by Aruni Kashyap is a collection of translated short stories that addresses the realities of political agitation and ethnic conflict in Assam since colonial times. Hannah Lalhlani's "When the Blackbirds Fly", her debut novel for young readers, presents young characters growing up amidst conflict, witnessing major social upheaval. The novel records an actual picture of amalgamated Mizoram realistically, set in the context of the insurgency in Mizoram in the 1960s, and specifically the bombing of the town of Aizawl in March 1966 by the Indian Air Force—a horrific event about which not many people in the rest of India are even aware.

#### Memory and Cultural heritage

Writers reclaim and articulate their worldview and ethos through orality and memory, challenging entrenched stereotypes while redefining their roles in the contemporary world. The Eurocentric view equates the written word with modernity and progress, and associates the 'oral' with a primitive, traditional, magical world, a Western one. "It is generally identified with the illiterate and even the uncivilised" <sup>27</sup>(Ao 104). Memory often takes the form of stories, both oral and written, to narrate oneself and a people. Janice Pariat also strongly privileges oral memory and imagination, not only in her characters but also in her readers. Ao has not always accorded memory the same degree of reliability as a point of reference for offering security. "Memory is a tricky thing: it picks and chooses what to preserve and what to discard. Sometimes it is the trivial that triggers the process of remembering a great loss." <sup>28</sup> (Ao, p ix)

Janice Pariat writes, "For I mean not what's bound by paper. Once printed, the word is feeble and carries little power. It wrestles with ink and typography and margins, struggling to be what it was originally. Spoken. Unwritten, unrecorded. Old, they say, as the first fire. Free to roam the mountains, circle the heath, and fall as rain." <sup>29</sup> (Pariat p 3)

One of the key features of writings from the North East is the deliberate emphasis placed on orality and community memory. "Orality and memory are not only defining elements of the region's literature but also crucial to shaping its historical narratives. The sense of self and its ancient origins are not solely derived from written texts; they can also be inherited through oral memory and lore." <sup>30</sup> (Prodhani)

Several authors have used this tool to assert their positionality, evident in the poetry of the region by Kynpham Nongkynrih, Esther Syiem, Monalisa Changkija, Tamsula Ao, Robin S. Ngangom, Mamang Dai, and Yumlan Tana, who explore the oral traditions of their respective communities. In "The Old Story-teller," Ao asserts storytelling as a "proud legacy" and "primary treasure." She skilfully intertwines elements of folklore in her work. "Lungterok", the stone associated with the myth of origin of the Ao Nagas, underlines how the oral history and cultural heritage are integral to the imagination of the self despite the seemingly 'modern' orientation of the language she has adopted: Lungterok The six Stones Where the progenitors And forebears Of the stone-people Were Born Out of the womb Of the earth ("Stone-people from Lungterok", <sup>31</sup> (Ao109) "Recollection, inclusion, inversion and re-interpretation of the past are also a way of ensuring the cultural survival of a people," she says. <sup>32</sup> (Ao p 135)

Easterine Kire also drew folklore and myths, as well as the traditional practices and customs of the Naga community, especially from her Angami tribe, to weave her narratives. Her novels, such as "When the River Sleeps" (2014), "Son of the Thundercloud" (2016), and "Spirit Nights" (2022), use orality and memory. By centring on cultural heritage, she contributes to the broader Indian landscape while simultaneously asserting the significance of this identity and history within the global discourse on Indigenous cultures.

Other contemporary writers include Avinuo Kire, Inakali Asumi, Zangmomi Jasmin Patton, Sentilong Ozukum, and Nzan Kikon, among others not mentioned earlier. These writers have channelled their creative energy in rewriting the histories of their communities and recreating their lived experiences. Their fictions, short stories, poetry, and retellings of folk stories capture the ethnocentric imaginary. With equal elan, they address themes of resilience and cultural heritage and challenge prevailing narratives that cast negative light on their communities. The oldest literary tradition is oral storytelling. A central concept in the work of Naga authors is oral memory, highly valued in an oral culture but ignored and devalued in a highly literate one.

The treatment of memory also addresses the collective experience of communities. Again, in the memoir by Visier Meyasetsu Sanyü and Richard Broome, "A Naga Odyssey: My Long Way Home" (2018), the author's recounting of his ancestry highlights memory's vital role in cultural identity. By uncovering and recording his past, he has documented an important period of his community's history. "In this fascinating book, his kaleidoscopic sixty-year-long odyssey to find peace, tranquillity, and forgiveness for others is vividly told against the rich tapestry of the Naga quest to be

free.”<sup>33</sup> "Literary Cultures of India's Northeast: Naga Writings in English" (2015) by Dr K. B. Veio Pou is a seminal work that offers insight into Naga Writings as an insider. A. J. Sebastian's "Critical Essays on Naga Poets and Fiction Writers in English" (2016) adds to the pioneering works on Naga Writers.

#### Challenging Marginalization

The marginalisation of the North Eastern region, or of its literature, is evident in history and in mainstream literature. Well-known theorists such as France Fanon, Bill Ashcroft, Edward Said, and Michel Foucault have questioned established historical biases. This is true of the North East region too. Academia and publishing houses have ignored writers from the region until very recently. There has been a consistent exclusion of the North Eastern region and its people from school textbooks, history, stories, film, music, and the media. The limited representation in literature and media creates stereotypes, further alienating the communities. Expanding the discourse to include digital platforms could reveal how contemporary Naga writers utilise online spaces to assert their identities and challenge hegemonic narratives. The heroes, and even the freedom fighters, do not have a place in the broader national discourse or history. Their struggles and dreams remain on the periphery or are still 'exoticised.' Even when their literary output is studied or analysed, it is mostly approached through ecocriticism, environmental themes, and tribal literature.

Recent years have seen insider ethnographic writing address some of the gaps. Arkotong Longkumer's "Reform, Identity and Narratives of Belonging: The Heraka Movement in Northeast India" (2010) explores the Heraka reform movement and its significance in shaping identity by combining ethnographic research with theoretical insights. He demonstrates how the movement challenges hegemonic narratives and fosters a sense of solidarity. Dolly Kikon's "Food Journeys: Stories from the Heart", edited with Joel Rodrigues, brings together twenty-two essays by twenty-five contributors, including authors, academics, independent researchers, practitioners, photographers, and artists, mostly from the eight states of North East India, and has claimed academic and intellectual space for North East.<sup>34</sup> (Kikon) The contributors are not all from the Naga community, but since the stories and essays are not just about food and recipes, but are embedded within them, there are topics such as community, racism, militarised geographies, AFSPA, trans-border solidarity, migration, and precarity.

"The Funeral Nights" (2021), by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, a Khasi author and poet, is a literary masterpiece, a cultural archive, and a treasure house of a

people. This book, 1024 pages long, is as voluminous as Vikram Seth's "A Suitable Boy," seeming to announce that North East English literature has also come of age.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the emergence and significance of English Literature in Northeast India, including the reclaiming of orality and folk wisdom as a post-colonial strategy, the intersection of memory and cultural heritage, and the voices of gender resistance by Naga women in literature. These contributions significantly enrich the landscape of Indian literature and reinforce the importance of Indigenous voices in the global context. The growing visibility of English literature from the North East underscores the resilience and creative energy of the writers. These narratives reclaim agency and pave the way for future generations to embrace their identities with pride and authenticity. The exploration of North East literature opens the door to further scholarly investigation into its diverse narratives and emerging voices. More in-depth research is needed on new literature, identity, language, and representation, as well as greater engagement with colonial archives and Indigenous knowledge practices, using new methods and analytical frames. While Temsula has written that earlier authors have introspected in their writings, recent writers are also confronting and challenging dominant narratives. Research scholars can expand this exploration to include more nuanced analysis, thereby enhancing the richness of the narratives.

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