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Narrative structure of seven folktales about "Pemuda yang Menikahi Putri Kayangan": A Dundesian analysis

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Abstract: *This study aims to describe the typology, motifemes, and folktales about Pemuda yang Menikahi Putri Kayangan in a specific region that have been adapted and transformed into new stories in other regions. This study is a qualitative research using a descriptive analytical method. The research data consists of seven folktales in the fairy tale category from four countries. The data collection technique used is documentation. The data sample was selected based on several textual elements indicating that the data potentially represents the research needs adequately. The analytical model used in this study aligns with Alan Dundes' framework model. The results show that there are seven typologies and motifemes across the seven analyzed folktales. All seven stories were adapted and transformed into new stories in other regions. The findings are based on shared motifs found in seven stories from different origins. These seven folktales are grouped into three regions: Europe, East Asia (Japan and China), and Southeast Asia, specifically Indonesia (Central Java, Madura, South Kalimantan, and North Sumatra).*

Keywords: *folktales, narrative structure, putri kayangan, Alan Dundes*

INTRODUCTION

Folklore is one of the forms of oral literature that holds an important position in society because it serves as a medium for transmitting values, knowledge, norms, identity, and cultural experiences across generations. The existence of oral literature is therefore not merely associated with entertainment, but also with the continuity of the culture of the communities that preserve and transmit it. Studies of Indonesian folklore have shown that oral literature can represent social, religious, and cultural functions, as well as contribute to the preservation of local environmental knowledge and cultural heritage. Research on folklore in the Banjar Hulu community, for example, demonstrates that folklore functions as a means of reinforcing the cultural heritage of local communities, while also showing that social change and modernization may affect the continuity of local cultural traditions (Asnawi, 2020).

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This phenomenon is not limited to the Indonesian tradition but also has counterparts in international folklore traditions. Stith Thompson identifies the motif *Swan Maiden* as a folklore motif involving a supernatural female character who can assume human form and subsequently return to her original form. The motif occurs across various traditions, including those of Europe, Asia, and Indonesia. The distribution of the *Swan Maiden* motif demonstrates that narratives concerning relationships between humans and supernatural women constitute a recurring narrative pattern across cultures (Thompson, 1955–1958).

A comparison of stories based solely on thematic similarities, however, is insufficient to explain the relationship between one story and another. It is necessary to identify the narrative units that constitute each story and examine the function of each unit within the overall narrative structure. In structural folklore studies, Alan Dundes offers an analytical framework that enables folktales to be examined through the functional units that constitute their narrative structures. This approach is developed, among others, in *From Etic to Emic Units in the Structural Study of Folktales* (Dundes, 1962), *Structural Typology in North American Indian Folktales* (Dundes, 1963), and *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* (Dundes, 1964). In particular, *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* positions structural analysis as an approach for identifying and understanding the patterns underlying the formation of folktales.

The state of the art concerning *Jaka Tarub* stories also reveals an area that can be further developed. Previous research has identified the distribution of the *Jaka Tarub* motif across a number of Indonesian folktales and demonstrated similarities in plot, characters, and prohibitions or taboos, while other elements undergo local adaptation. Other studies of Indonesian folklore have primarily focused on social and cultural functions, values, identity, or the relationship between stories and their supporting communities (Asnawi, 2020; Sedyaningsih, 2023; Nuranisah, 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in its comparative mapping of the motifeme structures of seven folktales featuring the motif *Pemuda yang Menikahi Putri Kayangan* and its examination of the relationship between relatively stable structural patterns and local variations emerging in each narrative. Whereas previous studies have demonstrated the distribution of the *Jaka Tarub* motif and identified similarities in plot, characters, and prohibitions or taboos, the present study extends this discussion to the level of narrative structure by employing Alan Dundes's framework. The study therefore seeks to explain (1) the typology of folktales concerning *Pemuda yang Menikahi Putri Kayangan*, (2) the specific motifemes that constitute the structural patterns of the seven stories, and (3) the ways in which a particular narrative pattern is transformed, modified, and recreated as it develops within different cultural environments. Ultimately, this study is expected to contribute to the development of oral-literature research, particularly comparative-structural studies of folklore, by demonstrating that the continuity of a narrative motif does not necessarily entail the identical reproduction of a story, but may instead occur through processes of adaptation and transformation in accordance with the cultural contexts of the communities that preserve and transmit it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Alan Dundes is one of the prominent scholars in folklore studies, particularly in the development of structural approaches to folktales. Dundes's work focuses on the internal structure of narratives and the units that constitute an entire story. Earlier folklore studies tended to emphasize the origins, distribution, and historical development of stories. Dundes subsequently encouraged greater attention to synchronic structural analysis by examining the basic units through which different folktales could be compared. This perspective was developed, among others, in his article *From Etic to Emic Units in the Structural Study of Folktales* (Dundes, 1962). In this work, Dundes questioned the tendency of folklore studies to focus excessively on the genesis and historical development of folklore materials and proposed greater attention to their structural organization.

One of Dundes's important contributions is the concept of the **motifeme**, which refers to a functional unit within a narrative structure. This concept enables researchers to distinguish between the concrete elements appearing in a story and the functions performed by those elements within the narrative structure. Thus, a particular event may take different forms in different stories while performing the same structural function. Within Dundes's framework, this concept is closely related to the distinction between the **motifeme** as a functional unit and the **allomotif** as a particular realization or variation of that function. The shift from motif as a thematic element toward motifeme as a functional unit provides a more systematic basis for comparing different narratives. Dundes further developed this perspective in *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales*, which discusses *motifeme*, *allomotif*, *lack*, *lack liquidated*, *violation*, *consequence*, and other structural units (Dundes, 1962).

In Dundes's narrative structure, a basic story pattern may move from a state of **disequilibrium** toward **equilibrium**. The state of disequilibrium can be represented by *lack* (L), referring to a condition of deficiency, absence, or incompleteness that initiates the narrative, followed by *lack liquidated* (LL), referring to the condition in which the lack has been eliminated or resolved. Thus, a minimal narrative structure can be represented as **L → LL**. However, folktale structures do not necessarily consist of only these two motifemes. Dundes identified more complex structures in a number of North American Indian folktales through the addition of other motifemes, including *violation* (Viol) and *consequence* (Conseq). *Violation* refers to the transgression of a prohibition, rule, or established condition, whereas *consequence* refers to the result arising from such a violation (Dundes, 1962; Endraswara, 2009). These structural elements demonstrate that folktales may contain different sequences and combinations of motifemes, thereby allowing researchers to identify and compare different structural patterns.

More recent research further demonstrates the continuing relevance of Dundes's theory in the study of Indonesian folklore. Oktivisari et al. (2024), for instance, applied Alan Dundes's theory to identify motifeme sequences and their functions in *Dumadine Candi Sukuh* and *Pertapan Cokro Kembang*. Their findings demonstrate that motifeme analysis can reveal both the narrative structure and the function of individual narrative units. Another study examining *Momotaro* also employs Alan Dundes's narrative structure to identify the motifs and structural elements that construct the tale. More recent research on *Legenda Batu Menangis*, *Legenda Kebo Iwa*, *Asal-Usul Gunung Batur*, and *Si Kelingking* likewise demonstrates that Dundes's motifeme analysis can be used to identify narrative patterns across several Indonesian folktales.

Folktales as a Form of Folk Prose

Folktales constitute one form of folk prose and are part of the broader field of folklore. According to William R. Bascom, folk prose narratives can generally be classified into three major categories: **myths, legends, and folktales**. This classification has been widely adopted in Indonesian folklore studies, including in Danandjaja's foundational work on Indonesian folklore. Myths are narratives believed to have actually occurred and are regarded as sacred by their supporting communities; legends are narratives believed to have occurred in the past but are not regarded as sacred; whereas folktales are prose narratives that are not believed to have actually occurred and are not strictly bound by particular historical, spatial, or temporal contexts (Bascom, 1965; Danandjaja, 1984).

The concepts of the folktale and Alan Dundes's narrative structure complement each other in this study. The concept of the folktale provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the characteristics and position of the research objects as folk prose narratives, while Dundes's theory provides the analytical framework for examining their internal structures and the functions of their narrative units. The combination of these perspectives enables the study to move beyond describing the seven stories as narratives sharing similar themes and instead identify the motifeme patterns underlying them and explain the structural variations that emerge through the transmission and development of the stories in different cultural environments.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research data consist of narrative units, motifs, motifemes, and structural elements that require interpretation within their textual and cultural contexts. Qualitative research emphasizes the systematic organization, interpretation, and verification of textual data rather than numerical measurement (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018). The descriptive-analytical method is employed by first identifying and describing the narrative elements contained in the selected folktales and subsequently analyzing their relationships and functions based on Alan Dundes's narrative structure. This approach is consistent with previous studies applying Dundes's theory, which use descriptive qualitative procedures to identify, classify, and interpret motifemes in folktales (Fajrin, 2017; Sari, 2026).

Data were collected through a note-taking and documentation technique. The researcher read, examined, documented, and recorded relevant narrative elements from each selected story. Each text was read intensively to identify events, characters, conflicts, prohibitions, consequences, resolutions, and other narrative elements that potentially function as structural units. The identified units were then entered into a data inventory and classified according to their narrative functions. This procedure follows the general practice of qualitative textual analysis, in which researchers organize and code textual materials before interpreting patterns and relationships within the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018).

The validity of the data was maintained through source comparison, theoretical consistency, and repeated examination of the data. Theoretical consistency was maintained by applying the concepts of *motif*, *motifeme*, *allomotif*, *lack*, *lack liquidated*, *violation*, and *consequence* consistently throughout the analytical process. Triangulation in qualitative research can strengthen the comprehensiveness of interpretation by comparing information obtained from different sources or methods and examining patterns of convergence (Mays & Pope, 2000).

The reliability of the analysis was maintained through systematic documentation, consistent coding procedures, repeated classification of narrative units, and verification of motifeme assignments against the original narrative context. Such procedures are compatible with qualitative analytical practice, in which transparency of coding, systematic data organization, and verification of analytical conclusions are important for maintaining analytical rigor (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018). The analysis was considered sufficiently reliable when the identification and classification of the narrative units remained consistent after repeated comparison between the source texts, the narrative context, and Alan Dundes's theoretical framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The analysis of the seven folktales about young men who marry heavenly maidens reveals a relatively consistent narrative structure, although each story contains variations in the sequence of events, the form of the motifs, the objects that are hidden, and the resolution of the story. The seven folktales are *Jaka Tarub* (Central Java), *Swain Meiden/Si Gadis Burung Undan* (Europe), *Tanabata* (Japan), *Nhiu Lang dan Zhi Nu* (China), *Aryo Menak* (Madura), *Awang Sukma* (South Kalimantan), and *Si Raja Omas* (North Sumatra). Based on the data, seven recurring typological elements are identified: the young man is in or goes to the forest, sees a heavenly maiden, hides the maiden's scarf or clothing, marries the maiden and has a child, the maiden discovers the hidden object, the maiden becomes disappointed and returns to the celestial realm, and the young man is separated from the maiden and has difficulty meeting her again. To

illustrate the relationship between this recurring structure and each individual folktale, the distribution of the motifemes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Occurrence of Motifemes in the Seven Folktales

No	Motifeme	*Jaka Tarub*	*Swain Meiden*	*Tanabata*	*Nhiu Lang dan Zhi Nu*	*Aryo Menak*	*Awang Sukma*	*Si Raja Omas*
1	Young man as hunter/herder or young man in the forest	✓	✓	✓*	✓	✓	✓	✓*
2	Seeing heavenly maidens/girls bathing	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Hiding the maiden's scarf/clothing/robe	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Marriage and having a child	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	The maiden discovers the hidden object	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	The maiden becomes disappointed	✓	✓*	✓*	✓*	✓	✓	✓
7	Separation and difficulty meeting again	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

*Note: The asterisks indicate that the motifeme does not appear in exactly the same narrative form as the general formulation but performs a comparable narrative function in the data.

Overall, the source data state that the motifeme of the young man as hunter/herder occurs in all seven stories; seeing the maiden bathing occurs in six stories; hiding an object occurs in all seven stories; marriage occurs in all seven stories; discovering the hidden object occurs in all seven stories; disappointment occurs in six stories; and separation occurs in all seven stories.

In *Jaka Tarub*, the narrative begins with Jaka Tarub as a young man who frequently hunts on Mount Keramat. He sees girls bathing in a lake and takes one of the maidens' scarves, preventing her from returning to the celestial realm. Jaka Tarub then pretends to offer assistance. The two fall in love, marry, and have a daughter. Before their marriage, Nawangwulan establishes a condition concerning her secret method of cooking rice. Jaka Tarub violates the prohibition, causing Nawangwulan to lose her supernatural power. When the supply of grain becomes scarce, Nawangwulan discovers

the scarf hidden in the granary. She becomes angry and disappointed and eventually returns to the celestial realm, leaving Jaka Tarub behind.

In *Swain Meiden/Si Gadis Burung Undan*, a hunter sees seven swan maidens bathing in a river. He steals the clothing of the youngest maiden, preventing her from flying back to the celestial realm. The hunter later returns some of her clothing but hides her magical robe. They marry and have children. The robe is eventually discovered by one of their children and shown to the mother. After recovering her robe, the swan maiden returns to her original realm, leaving her husband and children. As a consequence, the husband must undertake a difficult journey or fulfill an almost impossible condition if he wishes to meet her again.

In *Tanabata*, the narrative displays a more distinctive variation. Mikeran discovers a heavenly maiden's clothing in his field rather than seeing the maiden bathing. Tanabata subsequently comes to Mikeran while searching for her clothing. Mikeran lies that he has not found it and offers to help her search for it. They eventually fall in love, marry, and have children. After some time, Tanabata discovers her clothing and realizes that Mikeran has deceived her. Mikeran begs her not to leave, but Tanabata imposes a difficult condition: he must weave one thousand pairs of straw shoes if he wants her to return. Because he is unable to fulfill the condition, Tanabata does not return, and the two can meet only once a year.

In *Nhiu Lang dan Zhi Nu*, Niu Lang, a cow herder, sees seven heavenly maidens. Encouraged by his cow, he takes one of their garments, choosing the red garment belonging to Zhi Nu. Zhi Nu subsequently marries Niu Lang but continues to long for her celestial home. She eventually discovers her clothing and returns to the celestial realm. The Jade Emperor then separates the earthly and celestial realms, preventing the couple from meeting freely. Their separation becomes an important part of the ending, although they are able to meet once a year with the help of birds that form a bridge. In *Aryo Menak*, Aryo Menak is a young man who enjoys traveling into the forest. He sees seven heavenly maidens bathing near a lake and takes one of their scarves. The youngest maiden is therefore unable to return to the celestial realm, and Aryo Menak pretends to offer her assistance. They eventually marry. Their married life includes a secret concerning the maiden's supernatural ability to cook rice using only a single grain. Aryo Menak violates the prohibition by opening the cooking pot while his wife is away, causing her supernatural power to disappear. As the rice supply in the granary gradually decreases, the maiden discovers her missing scarf and subsequently returns to the celestial realm.

In *Awang Sukma*, Awang Sukma is a young man living in the forest. He discovers a lake and sees seven beautiful girls bathing. He takes one of their scarves, causing the youngest maiden, Putri Bungsu, to be unable to return to the celestial realm. Awang Sukma then offers her assistance, and they marry and have a daughter. The hidden scarf is eventually discovered by Putri Bungsu. She feels disappointed with her husband and

decides to return to the celestial realm. This story therefore displays a structure closely related to *Jaka Tarub* and *Aryo Menak*, particularly through the sequence of seeing the maiden bathing, hiding the scarf, marriage, discovery of the scarf, disappointment, and return to the celestial realm.

Meanwhile, *Si Raja Omas* has a more complex opening structure. The story begins with the birth of Raja Omas as the child of a king's seventh wife, followed by his abandonment and upbringing by an old woman. As he grows older, Raja Omas goes to a lake in the forest and sees seven girls bathing. He takes and hides one of their garments, causing the youngest daughter of the gods to be unable to return to the celestial realm. Raja Omas subsequently marries her and they have a child. The hidden garment is eventually discovered. The heavenly maiden attempts to take their child with her but fails. She returns to the celestial realm but is not accepted because she has stayed in the earthly realm for too long and is eventually transformed into Saringgon. This story therefore follows the main narrative pattern while displaying distinctive variations in both its opening and ending.

The comparison of the seven stories shows that structural similarity does not mean that all of them follow an identical sequence of events. *Tanabata*, for instance, does not include the scene of the young man seeing the heavenly maiden bathing, while *Si Raja Omas* contains an extended opening involving birth, abandonment, and the discovery of the protagonist's identity before entering the narrative pattern of the young man and the heavenly maiden. Variations are also found in the form of the hidden object, the process through which it is rediscovered, and the consequences of separation. In six stories, the maiden returns to or is accepted into the celestial realm, whereas *Si Raja Omas* presents a distinctive ending in which the maiden is not accepted back into the celestial realm and is transformed into Saringgon.

DISCUSSION

Narrative Structure and Shared Motifemes in the Seven Folktales

The findings demonstrate that the seven folktales, namely *Jaka Tarub, Swain Meiden/Si Gadis Burung Undan, Tanabata, Nhiu Lang dan Zhi Nu, Aryo Menak, Awang Sukma,* and *Si Raja Omas*, share a relatively similar narrative structure despite originating from different geographical and cultural backgrounds. The seven stories contain seven major structural elements: a male character from the human world, an encounter with a celestial maiden, the concealment of the maiden's clothing or personal object, marriage and family life, the discovery of the hidden object, the emergence of conflict or disappointment, and the eventual separation between the human character and the celestial maiden.

These findings demonstrate the relevance of Alan Dundes's concept of the motifeme, which regards narrative structure in terms of the functions performed by individual events. From this perspective, similarities between stories do not necessarily

require identical characters, settings, or literal events. A single narrative function may be realized through different forms or *allomotifs* (Dundes, 1962). In the seven stories, clothing, for example, functions as an important structural element connecting the stages of encounter, marriage, conflict, and separation.

In *Jaka Tarub*, a scarf is hidden so that one of the celestial maidens cannot return to heaven. A comparable pattern occurs in *Swain Meiden/Si Gadis Burung Undan, Nhiu Lang dan Zhi Nu, Aryo Menak,* and *Awang Sukma*. Meanwhile, *Tanabata* presents a variation because Mikeran discovers Tanabata's clothing before directly encountering her. These variations do not eliminate the structural function of clothing as a connection between the human and celestial worlds. The recurrence of this structure indicates that the stories are organized through a sequence of changing narrative conditions rather than merely through a similar theme. This finding is consistent with Dundes's structural approach, in which the meaning of a narrative unit becomes clearer through its relationship with other units within the story (Dundes, 1962; Fajrin R., 2017).

The Pattern of Lack, Fulfillment, and Separation

This condition is subsequently followed by temporary fulfillment through marriage. Most of the stories continue the relationship through family life and, in several cases, the birth of a child. In *Jaka Tarub*, for example, the marriage between Jaka Tarub and Nawangwulan results in the birth of Nawangsih. Comparable family structures appear in *Swain Meiden/Si Gadis Burung Undan, Tanabata, Aryo Menak, Awang Sukma,* and *Si Raja Omas*.

This pattern can therefore be understood as a cycle of changing narrative conditions: a relationship between two worlds is established, reaches temporary stability, and subsequently leads to the reassertion of the boundary between the human and celestial worlds. Such a pattern supports the usefulness of Dundes's theory for examining the relationship between successive motifemes rather than treating each event as an isolated occurrence. Fajrin R. (2017), for example, demonstrates that Dundes's framework can identify sequential relationships among such functions as *lack, lack liquidated, deceit, task,* and *consequences* in folktales.

Clothing as a Structural Motifeme

One of the most consistent findings is the presence of clothing or another personal object that functions as the means through which the celestial maiden can return to her original world. The data show that six stories present the celestial maidens in a bathing context, whereas *Tanabata* provides a variation in which the clothing is discovered in a field. Thus, the function of the clothing remains relatively stable even though the circumstances of the encounter differ.

At the surface level, the clothing differs in form and context from one story to another. At the motifemic level, however, it performs a comparable function: connecting

the female character with her identity and celestial origin. When the clothing is hidden, access to the original world is interrupted; when it is recovered, that access is restored.

This finding demonstrates the analytical advantage of Dundes's approach. If analysis focuses only on the literal object, the clothing in each story appears to be a different narrative element. When its function is considered, however, the different objects can be understood as manifestations of a comparable motifemic function or *allomotif*. Putra and Andari (2024), in their analysis of *Momotaro*, likewise demonstrate the usefulness of Dundes's narrative structure for identifying the functional relationships among events in Japanese folklore.

Structural Variation as Cultural Adaptation

Although the seven stories share a basic structure, they differ in how individual motifemes are realized. *Tanabata*, for example, does not present the encounter through a bathing scene like most of the other stories. Mikeran discovers Tanabata's clothing in a field and subsequently lies when Tanabata asks about it. The difference demonstrates that the function of bringing the human and celestial worlds into contact can be realized through a different configuration of events.

Variation is also evident in the development of conflict. In *Jaka Tarub* and *Aryo Menak*, the celestial maiden's unusual cooking ability becomes part of the chain of events leading to the discovery of her hidden clothing. In *Nhiu Lang dan Zhi Nu*, the conflict develops into a cosmic separation between heaven and earth, whereas *Tanabata* incorporates an extremely difficult condition as part of the separation process. *Si Raja Omas* presents an even more distinctive resolution. After recovering her clothing, the celestial maiden does not receive the same kind of acceptance upon returning to heaven as in the other stories. Instead, she undergoes a transformation into Saringgon. Thus, the motifeme of returning to the celestial realm remains present, but its consequences are modified.

Polygenesis in Cross-Cultural Folktales

The recurrence of similar narrative patterns in stories from Central Java, Europe, Japan, China, Madura, South Kalimantan, and North Sumatra indicates that the structural pattern extends across geographical and cultural boundaries. The data group these stories into European, East Asian, and Southeast Asian contexts.

From a comparative folklore perspective, this finding is significant because it demonstrates that similar narrative structures may occur in different cultural environments. However, structural similarity alone cannot establish that one story is necessarily the direct source of another. Therefore, the finding is more appropriately understood as cross-cultural similarity in motifemic configuration, which may provide a basis for further investigation into diffusion, transformation, and independent development of similar narrative patterns.

Contribution to the Study of Folktale Narrative Structure

Overall, this study demonstrates that Alan Dundes's motifemic approach can be used not only to identify the structure of an individual folktale but also to compare narrative structures across culturally diverse texts. The principal finding is not merely the thematic similarity of stories concerning relationships between human beings and celestial maidens, but the existence of shared structural functions governing narrative development.

This finding reinforces the argument that cross-cultural similarities in folklore can be understood more productively through the functions of motifemes than through surface-level similarities. The study also extends the application of Dundes's theory by placing seven stories from different geographical and cultural regions within a single comparative framework. While previous studies, such as Fajrin R. (2017), Apriani (2021), Putra and Andari (2024), and Sari (2026), demonstrate the applicability of motifemic analysis to individual or multiple folktales, the present study emphasizes the cross-cultural recurrence, variation, and transformation of a shared narrative configuration. Thus, motifemic analysis can contribute not only to the description of narrative structure but also to a broader understanding of how folktale structures persist and transform across cultural boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the seven folktales share a flexible motifemic configuration in which relationships between the human and celestial worlds are temporarily established through concealment, marriage, and family life before being disrupted by the recovery of the hidden object. The variations in encounter, conflict, and resolution demonstrate that structural similarity does not require narrative uniformity. These findings imply that Dundes's motifemic approach is useful for revealing how cultural traditions preserve underlying narrative functions while adapting their forms to local contexts. Cross-cultural similarities therefore provide a basis for understanding both structural continuity and cultural transformation in folktale transmission.

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