

The Sites of Tales' Births and Deaths: “Disorienting Deity”-type Bewitching Fox Stories¹

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Keywords: the extraordinary (*hi nichijō* 非日常), interpretive devices (*kaishaku sōchi* 解釈装置), spirit foxes (*yōko* 妖狐), tales (*monogatari* 物語)

Author's Statement

In Japan, there is folklore about animals bewitching people. However, an analysis of individual stories reveals that in many cases, an animal does not appear but is simply the speaker's interpretive device. This paper examines the dynamism of tales coming into existence (or dying) depending on the speaker's interpretation.

Introduction: Stories Born from Interpretations

When I was an undergraduate student, I learned the technique “when in trouble, bewitched by a fox (*kitsubaka* 狐化)” from a senior member of Kokugakuin University's Setsuwa Kenkyūkai 説話研究会 (Myths and old tales study group). In other words, if you are unable get someone to talk during fieldwork, try asking, “Is there anyone who has been bewitched by a fox?” The person will respond in some way, and you can use their response to broaden the conversation topic.

I often heard about people being bewitched by foxes, raccoon dogs, and badgers (which I'll collectively refer to as “bewitching fox stories” for convenience). One of the most common stories I heard—so many that it seemed there was no end to them—was of someone walking along a mountain road after dark, being bewitched by one of these animals, and losing their way.

Elsewhere, I have called such tales “disorienting deity” (*madowashigami* 迷ハシ神)-type bewitching fox stories.² The name comes from the words of the protagonist of “The Story of the *Sakan* of Sakyō ‘Kuni-no-toshinobu’ Encountering a Disorienting Deity”

¹ This article is a translation of Itō Ryōhei 伊東龍平, “Monogatari ga umareru ba, shinu ba: ‘Madowashigami-gata’ yōkotan o rei to shite” 物語が生まれる場、死ぬ場—「迷ハシ神型」妖狐譚を例として—, *Nihon bungaku ronkyū* 日本文学論究 81 (2022), pp. 5–14. Translated by Dylan Luers Toda.

² Itō, “‘Madowashigami’-gata kitsubaka-tan no kōsatsu.”

(Sakyō-no-sakan Kuni-no-toshinobu, madowashigami ni au koto 左京属邦利延、值迷神語), the 42nd episode of the twenty-seventh volume of *Konjaku monogatari-shū* 今昔物語集. When he lost his way in Kyoto, a city he was used to, he said, “I’m going round and round in the same place. This must be because a disorienting deity possessed me from around Kujō 九条 and made me walk in the wrong direction.” At the end, a few sentences reflect on the story content: “It is very rare to encounter a disorienting deity. [The deity] tricked³ him into going the wrong way. Was it a fox or something similar?”⁴

Neither a disorienting deity nor a fox appear in this story. As in many of today’s bewitching fox stories, the only fact is that the person has “lost their way,” and a fox appears only in interpretations. People’s brains—those of the person who wander astray, the people who were around that person, and the people who heard that person’s story—try to understand an inexplicable situation. In this process, they see “getting lost” as the result of something and point to a “fox” as the cause, thereby creating a causal relationship. In such cases, the “fox” functions as an interpretive device.⁵

Iijima Yoshiharu 飯島吉晴 states this “fox interpretive device” is used “used to express phenomena that cannot be explained by the logic of this world, or that escape the logic and order of everyday life and do not fit within the classification system of a culture.”⁶ By doing so, the extraordinary is transformed into the ordinary, or into the interpretable extraordinary.

With this point in mind, the sheer number of bewitching fox stories becomes understandable; if the same situation (the experience of wandering astray) is interpreted with the same interpretive device (fox/raccoon dog/badger), it is only natural that the stories will be similar. Even if the stories themselves have not been handed down over generations, similar stories will naturally arise if the interpretive device has been.

A story is born when a fox, raccoon dog, or badger is brought in as an interpretive device and causality arises. In this paper, I want to consider the relationship between interpretive devices and story generation.

³ *kokoro o mo* [missing character] *kashi* 心ヲモ□カシ. The missing character is probably “誑.”

⁴ Mori, *Konjaku monogatari-shū*, pp. 173–174.

⁵ Regarding the word “device” (*sōchi* 装置) in folklore studies, Komatsu Kazuhiko 小松和彦, in a discussion with Seki Kazutoshi 関一敏 and Satō Kenji 佐藤健二, says, “Necessarily, there is an assumed subject who activates this ‘device.’ When confronted with an event, this subject speaks using this device to process the incident, and we obtain a ‘text’ as a result of this speaking. We need to read between the lines to find the subject who is behind the speaking (the text).” Komatsu and Seki, *Atarashii minzokugaku e*, p. 21.

⁶ Iijima, “Kitsune no kyōkaisei,” p. 55. Regarding “disorienting deity”-type bewitching fox stories, see Iijima, “Kitsune no kyōkaisei” and Totsuka, “Seken banashi no ichikōsatsu.”

1. Ueda Akinari's Strange Experience

In the essay collection *Tandai shōshinroku* 胆大小心録 (Bunka 5 [1805]) by Ueda Akinari 上田秋成, we find the below passage. The “elder brother” in the text refers to Nakai Chikuzan 中井竹山, the biological older brother of Nakai Riken 中井履軒 (here and below, interpretations are underlined).

Riken is different from his elder brother and speaks like a person of great ability, but this is also fake. When I talked about an old man being a spirit, he greatly humiliated me: “You’re such an illiterate idiot. There is no such thing as a possession by a spirit fox. Everything said to be fox possession is pathological fastidiousness.”⁷

In the underlined portion, two interpretive devices are used for symptoms that today would be described as a certain type of mental illness. One is fox possession, and the other is *kanshōyami* かん症病み, translated above as “pathological fastidiousness.” Although the essay does not include the details, apparently Akinari adopted the former interpretation, Riken adopted the latter, and Akinari was ultimately defeated in this debate.

After this episode, Akinari wrote the below rebuttal to Riken’s logic. The character Hosoai Hansai 細合半齋 is a Confucianist, and the ill nun is Akinari’s adopted daughter.

Riken said, “A fox never approaches people. In the first place, [people] are not bewitched by them.”

By nature Hosoai Hansai is courteous, and he is polite. The people of the world, actually disdaining this, are the ones who are negligent. He was in Kyoto and was going to go to Nishi Honganji 西本願寺. The following day, he left Sanjō Abura no Kōji 三条油の小路, and had not arrived even after midday had passed. Eventually, the sun set, and he returned home, bewildered. A fox/raccoon dog made even the level-headed [Hosoai Hansai] lose his way.

Also, one day, this old man [i.e., I, Akinari] left my home on the embankment of the Kamo 鴨 [River], and, to go to Jōdoin 浄土院 in front of Ginkakuji 銀閣寺, [chose] a route that went north of the Yoshida 吉田 hill and then east again. The roads are not too narrow. How did I get [all the way] to Shirakawa 白川? I realized, thinking about things, that I had been confused, and I finally came to Jōdoji village in the southeast and spoke with the head priest Tonan 図南 about this matter. The Buddhist priest said, “You must be ill. Please be very careful.” On the way back, I tried again to go north of the Yoshida hill and then west along large roads. I managed to arrive in front of the

⁷ Nakamura, *Ueda Akinari shū*, p. 268.

Hyakumanben 百万べん temple [as I had intended]. Here, I found out: [earlier] a fox had made me lose the way. However, not frustrated, in the afternoon I returned home.

Also, one day I was going to visit the deity of Kitano 北野. The following day, I went to the shrine, and when I was going to head east [to return home], spring rain started coming down a little bit. This old man's legs were weak, and I was again troubled by darkness in my eyes. I mourned Ōga Iga 大賀伊賀 and ate lunch. The rain was coming down harder and faster, so I could not stick my head out. When I said, "I guess I'll stay here tonight, or, if not, call a palanquin," the rain stopped a bit. My home was about 1.3 or 1.4 kilometers away. I was so used to [the route] that I thought it would not be hard. "Let it rain," I said, and went out the gate and headed east. The rain grew intense as I reached Ichijō Horikawa 一条ほり川. [This old man thought:] going with [my] umbrella into the rain, if I stay on the main roads, I will not get lost. As the rain came down more, I arrived at Horikawa Sawaragichō さわら木丁. Here, I realized for the first time: tilting my umbrella, I might of mistaken the southeast direction. Figuring out where I was, I managed to clear my mind and ultimately just headed east on Marutamachi 丸太町, returning home. The sun was about to set. The sick nun was waiting impatiently on the side of the road. I only answered, "I was at Ōga's" and entered, but my legs were tired, my eyes were dark, and I felt more and more gloomy. I laid down on the floor under the light, and slept deeply until dawn. Is this also losing one's way due to fox possession?

The fact that both Hansai and I, being the same in nature and spirit, lost our way one day is a fox's artifices surpassing humans. A person who knows nothing of the real world and does not even sometimes get out declares that foxes do not bewitch people. It is quite laughable, quite laughable.⁸

Three typical "disorienting deity"-type bewitching fox stories are found above. The first is about Hosoai Hansai's experience, and the latter two are about Akinari's own experiences. Three interpretation devices are used in the underlined portions: fox/raccoon dog, illness, and tilted umbrella.

The Buddhist priest, who seems to have had a close friendship with Akinari, uses the illness interpretive device to calm him as he told the priest about his experiences wandering astray in the city. On the other hand, Akinari himself, who is wandering astray in the city, uses the titled umbrella interpretive device to calm his mind. Through interpretation, the mind tries to bring extraordinary experiences within the scope of the ordinary.

⁸ Nakamura, *Ueda Akinari shū*, pp. 270–272.

Ultimately, he adopts the fox interpretative device in place of illness and titled umbrella. Using a fox as an interpretive device does not return the extraordinary to the ordinary, but it does make the extraordinary interpretable. The most frightening is the uninterpretable extraordinary.

If Akinari had chosen the interpretative device of illness or tilted umbrella instead, he would not have presented this episode as a bewitching fox story. Not only that: the event itself would not have become an episode, but would have sunk to the bottom of memory and faded away into the distance of time. The choice of interpretive device is the difference between whether a story is born or not.

2. *When a Story is Born*

The experience of a story being born, failing to be born, or dying depending on the speaker's interpretation is not uncommon in fieldwork settings. The following is a story from the village of Miyakoji 都路 (now the city of Tamura 田村) in Fukushima Prefecture's Tamura 田村 district. I heard it from "Y" (male, born in 1923). Sekine Ayako 関根綾子 and I conducted the survey on 23 March 1994 (—: Sekine; ≡: me). I have withheld the main character's name.

Document 1

≡Have you heard of any stories around here where people have been bewitched by a fox?≡

Hmmm...these things happen. This is a really old story.

About the old man from down there. His name's ****. He went to pick mushrooms. Around December, I think. When he went to pick mushrooms and did not come back in the evening, the whole hamlet—unlike today, there were no police or fire brigade back then, so the whole hamlet mobilized to search the mountains for him. Walked the whole day and couldn't find him. Then, the next day, when everyone went to look, they found him alone in a charcoal shack . . . a shack for charcoal grilling. I heard there were two or three mushrooms in there. He said, "I gave all of them to a person in this house." Even though there was no one in the charcoal hut (laughs). Then, when asked, "Did you have dinner?" the old man said, "I was treated to some delicious *botamochi* ぼた餅."

That's impossible, so people wondered what happened, and thought, "Wasn't he bewitched by a fox?" as people say. The next day, they brought him out, and he hadn't forgotten: "I ate *botamochi* last night, and I gave them the mushrooms that I picked."

≡He gave mushrooms to the person who gave him the *botamochi*?≡

He said that he gave mushrooms to the person who gave him *botamochi*. But

there was no one.

—In the charcoal grilling shack?—

Yeah. But as I just stated, people said, “Wasn’t he bewitched by a fox?” I heard that kind of legend (laughs).

===When is this story from?===

This was when I was a child, so I guess it must have been in 1937 or 1938.⁹

This is another typical “disorienting deity”-type bewitching fox story. The villagers’ reactions in the story suggest that the interpretive device of the fox was well-known within the community.

It should also be noted that this story follows the story pattern of the old tale “Horse Dung Dumplings” (Uma no kuso dango 馬の糞団子). For reference, below, I have quoted the plot of this story from *Nihon mukashibanashi taisei* 日本昔話大成 (Taisei No. 271B).¹⁰

1. A man who says he is not tricked by foxes follows a fox as it disguises itself as a woman, holds a stone in place of a child, and puts horse manure in a tiered food box.
2. The fox entered a house, so the people in the house did not know that the child is a stone and that horse dung is in the tiered box.
3. They are treated to the dumplings [in the tiered box]. When they are warned, they find themselves nipping at horse dung.

The *botamochi* motif is often found in old stories. Examples include “Botamochi wa kaeru” 牡丹餅は蛙 (The *botamochi* is a frog), “Botamochi de sengan” 牡丹餅で洗顔 (Face-washing with *botamochi*) “Nageage manjū” 投げ上げ饅頭 (*Manjū* thrown upwards), “Nodo tsuki dango” 咽突き団子 (Choaking on a dumpling), “Shiri ni dango” 尻に団子 (Butt dumplings), “Mochi wa bakemono” 餅は化物 (Mochi is a monster), “Dango muko” 団子婿 (Dumpling son-in-law), and “Jūgoya no tsuki” 十五夜の月 (The full moon celebration’s moon).¹¹ Researchers were often told stories in the pattern of “Dango muko” in the district of Tamura. Some people who heard the story about the man may have been thinking of these old stories.

From the above, we can see how, by people using the fox interpretive device, a story was born from everyday life, clothed in motifs, and sublimated into a story pattern. On the other hand, however, this was fluid and could disappear at any moment.

After the story in Document 1, Y also said the following: “Now that I think about it,

⁹ Itō, *Fukushima-ken Tamura-gun Miyakoji-mura setsuwa-shū*, pp. 133–135.

¹⁰ Seki, Nomura, and Ōshima, *Nihon mukashibanashi taisei*, p. 59.

¹¹ All story pattern names are from *Nihon mukashi banashi taisei*.

what were we talking about, being fooled by a fox? We must have been be confused in the head. That kind of thing's unthinkable"; "From modern people's point of view, it's our judgment that he must have drank alcohol, gotten drunk, lost his way, walked this way and that, and then people said the likes of, he was fooled by a fox"; "In the first place streets are narrow, and of course there are no flashlights, so when your candle or lantern . . . [unclear]. . . goes out, you lose your way no? He got lost at that time, and since it would have been off to say he got because he was drunk, people said, 'He was bewitched by a fox,' or something like that (laughs). That's what we imagine now."¹²

With such interpretive devices (delusion, alcohol), a bewitching fox story does not come into existence. In fact, even then, some people who heard the story would probably not have taken it as a tale of a bewitching fox. However, that this was not the interpretation of Y at the time of the incident in 1937 or 1938. He himself declares, "Now that I think about it."

3. *When Stories Die*

After listening to the story in Document 1, Y introduced us to S (female, 1917), who is related to the person supposedly bewitched by a fox. As before, the survey date was 23 March 1994, and the surveyors were Sekine Ayako and me. Y was also present.

What follows is a story about the same incident as Document 1, but S consistently rejects the fox interpretive device, and it does not become a bewitching fox story.

Document 2

S: A spirit's never appeared to me, and I've never been bewitched by a fox.

. . . [omitted] . . .

Y: No, right, but they said they want to hear about here, about those of the hamlet, the village.

S: Not here. There are no tales of people being bewitched by a fox or anything like that.

Y: Earlier I was talking about the being bewitched by a fox. I said this kind of thing happened to old man ****.

S: He just went mushroom picking and got lost.

Y: [People] said he was bewitched by a fox. He said he was treated to *botamochi*.

S: He was 72 . . .

Y: 70, not 80? I heard he was 80 something.

S: He died at 72.

Y: 72? I was wrong, earlier. She says 72.

——I see.——

¹² Itō, *Fukushima-ken Tamura-gun Miyakoji-mura setsuwa-shū*, pp. 133–134.

S: He went mushroom picking at 72 and got lost, it got dark, and he couldn't go home. And everyone looked for him.

Y: But he said he was treated to *botamochi*, no?

S: No way (laughs). He said nothing like he'd eaten *botamochi*, but he did say he hadn't eaten anything and was hungry until the next morning. He put the basket with mushrooms by the road and thought, "If I put it by the road, someone will find [me]," and then it was too cold [to stay there]. Back in the day during the war, people sent hay to the war zone, to the horses. He was sleeping in that hay, and his son went to get him there.¹³

Although the same person, the impression of the protagonist differs between Document 1 and Document 2. In the latter he seems foolish, while in the former he seems wise. This point is related to whether a bewitching fox story comes into existence. This first is a difference that arises due to the position of the speaker vis-a-vis that of the story, and, second, a difference that arises due to the relationship between the speaker and the researchers.

For Y, ****'s story was a third party's experience, and therefore, he adapted it, making it amusing. This resulted in the tone found in Document 1. On the other hand, in Document 2, S rejected the fox as an interpretive device, probably because it is a matter of her family's honor. We received testimonials from other people about ****, and they were not glowing.

The fact that the interviewers (researchers) were university students from Tokyo (Sekine and I) may have led to bias in how S talked about the event. Fieldworker discourse, which tends to assume that old customs remain in areas outside of major urban centers, sometimes makes local residents uncomfortable.

Next, let us turn to a case in which the protagonist (a person bewitched by a fox) is a third party from the perspective of S. In this case, S also uses a "fox" (in this case a badger) as an interpretive device.

Document 3

S: [Someone] said that he was bewitched by a badger, in the past.

Y: [We] don't know if he was bewitched or not (laughs).

S: [We] don't know.

Y: He went crazy, right? The guy in question.

S: Being bewitched by a badger . . . That's going crazy.

Y: He got drunk and said all kinds of crazy things, so [others] said he "was bewitched by a fox" (laughs).

¹³ Itō, *Fukushima-ken Tamura-gun Miyakoji-mura setsuwa-shū*, pp. 175–176.

... [omitted] ...

S: [People] say, a badger changed form, into a young lady, into an old lady, came after becoming a middle-aged guy, came after becoming a young lady. A badger changed form and came, saying, "Good evening! Please let me spend the night." Then, gradually, people find out, and the neighbors get together, go in that house, with sticks. A long time ago, a badger came to the house of @@@ next door neighbor ###, and would come every night [as] old lady ^^^, from back in the day. People said that upon killing it, it was a badger.¹⁴

In this way, in a case that does not involve her family member's experience, S actively uses the fox/badger interpretive device.¹⁵

4. Levels of Interpretation and the Divided "Narrator"

Y and S's stories are recollections nearly 60 years after the incidents in Document 1 and Document 2. The person who relays an episode is always someone here in the present. During those sixty years, Japan was defeated in the war, engaged in postwar reconstruction, had rapid economic growth, and experienced the burst of its bubble economy. As society and people's values continued to change, the way they perceived these incidents must also have evolved. What would have been their interpretations at the time of these incidents?

The following is a story about S's experience of wandering lost in the mountains when she was young (probably in her twenties).

Document 4

S: I've walked a lot at night but never experienced such a thing. Did I tell you when I had a rough time in Kurosawa? In the evening, I'd been walking in the mountains for ages, and I kept ending up in the same place. What was that? That. This kind of thing, yeah?

Y: You lose your sense of direction.

S: It's happened to me—you start thinking, "Did I go here?" and come to the same place three times, so you think, "This is when they say, 'When a fox bewitches you, sit down and think,'" so you sit down and think, "What is over there?" "What is over there?" And then you realize—I'm stupid.

Y: That's being bewitched by a fox.

¹⁴ Itō, *Fukushima-ken Tamura-gun Miyakoji-mura setsuwa-shū*, pp. 180–188.

¹⁵ On this day, S also told a bewitching fox story in which a fox/badger appears as a character (not as an interpretive device). She also talked about foxes and badgers as animals that do not involve the mysterious. She spoke about the bewitching fox story that I presented in this paper in this context.

S: Because I've had that kind of thing happen to me twice. I went to pick chestnuts on Samarajima[?]-san, the mountain in front of Kurōshika 九郎鹿, and heading home, I always came back to the same place. Foxes don't do that kind of thing.

Y: But even now, that happens even to us, that . . .

S: Does that kind of thing happen to us?

Y: No, not in the mountains, but when driving, I lose my sense of direction and go the wrong way.¹⁶

As noted earlier, S uses the “fox” interpretive device for third-party (non-family) experiences, even when the stories are quite involved. Furthermore, even in the case of a story in which a badger appears as an actual entity (not something in the speaker's interpretation), and—similar to “Botan dōrō” 牡丹燈籠 (Peony lantern)—visits a young man in a charcoal grill shack at night disguised as a beautiful woman, she tells it as something that actually happened. On the other hand, S never used the “fox” interpretive device for the experience of her own family member. Similarly, she does not use the “fox” interpretive device for her own experiences.

For example, young S describes encountering something that looked like a monster in the mountains at night. Realizing it was a horse, “I said to the horse, ‘You bastard!’ and was relieved.” She continued, “I wonder if that's what [people're] talking about when they say they've met a monster.” Similarly, when the young S encountered something in the mountains at night that emitted strange noises and realized that it was just a tree (Sawara cypress “Squarrosa”) and a tree frog, “I thought to myself there were no such things as monsters in the world, and after that, I lost all fear.”¹⁷ It is a “rational interpretation” in today's sense of the phrase.

In the story in Document 4, S also says, “I'm stupid” (i.e., deluded) and seeks an interpretation within. However, this was decades after the incident, and the young S, amid her wandering lost in the mountains, avoided trouble by remembering the popular belief, “When a fox bewitches you, sit down and think.” At the time, she probably thought she was being bewitched by a fox.¹⁸ A bewitching fox story came into existence at this point.

Here, the levels of experience and interpretation can be modeled as follows: (1) the interpretation of the person themselves, (2) the interpretation of those who were around

¹⁶ Itō, *Fukushima-ken Tamura-gun Miyakoji-mura setsuwa-shū*, p. 194.

¹⁷ Itō, *Fukushima-ken Tamura-gun Miyakoji-mura setsuwa-shū*, p. 198.

¹⁸ It was a common folk belief that this method is a way to deal with being bewitched by foxes and raccoons. See the fifth entry for “Kitsune” 狐 (“Kitsune ni bakasarenu hō 狐に化かされぬ法”) in Suzuki, *Nihon zokushin jiten*, pp. 199–202.

the person, (3) the interpretation of those who heard from the person himself, (4) the interpretation of those who heard from those who were around the person, (5) the interpretation of those who heard from those who offered the third and fourth level interpretations, and so on. The actual situation is more complicated, though, because the interpretation's time and setting, as well as speaker's position, come into play. However, for each person, there is a pattern as to the stage of interpretation at which the fox interpretive device appears. This pattern also relates to the generation of stories.

Expanding on this point, we can relativize the modern image of the "author." In Document 4, Y does not use the fox interpretive device but another one: a bad sense of direction. Here, the same Y who told a bewitching fox story in Document 1 rejects such a story. Interpretation is always situational and driven by the atmosphere in which one is speaking. In some cases, if one tries to make interpretation A work, interpretation B will no longer hold. In the field, the narrator appears as a contradictory being. The listener accepts the contradiction (or does not even notice the contradiction) and weaves a story *along with* the narrator. There is no unified "narrator" to be found.

We can clearly see that the modern image of an author who weaves a single story with a unified ego from beginning to end is quite different.

Conclusion: Looking to Unrealized Stories

In this paper, I have examined the relationship between interpretation and the generation of stories, focusing on the fieldwork space and fox interpretive device. To clarify my argument, I held that when the fox interpretive device is used, a story is born, and when it is not used, the story fails to be born or dies. However, strictly speaking, this is not so. If the fox is not used as an interpretive device when a person has lost their way, a story based on a different interpretation may arise.

Let us now return to *Tandai shōshinroku*. Regarding the experience of wandering lost in the city, Akinari used the fox interpretive device, while Riken used the pathological fastidiousness interpretive device. The Buddhist priest similarly used the illness interpretive device. While Riken seems to feel that Akinari deserves ridicule to a degree, and the Buddhist priest appears to be caring, both interpretations seek the cause (disease) inside the person. This was not in accordance with Akinari's own wishes; therefore, a story connecting illness and wandering lost in the city with the law of cause and effect was not born.

However, when understood with a present-day sensibility, the illness interpretation, not that of the fox, would be chosen. Whatever the actual circumstances, a scrofulous old author of strange stories having a fantastical experience in Kyoto in the middle of the day or in a light drizzle fits the public image of Ueda Akinari.

When one story fails to be born or dies, a new story is (sometimes) born. In other words, in the shadow of the creation of one story, there was another story that could have been born. The imaginative power to think about stories that were not born is important in research on both literature and folklore.

(Translated by Dylan Luers Toda)

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