

RIVER COSMOLOGY, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND DIGITAL MEMORY: SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES OF THE RIPARIAN COMMUNITY IN URBANIZING PONTIANAK, WEST KALIMANTAN

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ABSTRACT:

Riparian communities frequently hold social development assets that are underacknowledged in official policy despite experiencing growing urbanization pressures. These assets are rooted in ecological knowledge, communal solidarity, and cultural practices shaped by long interaction with river environments. This article examines how the Orang Sungai (River People) as Riparian Community in Pontianak, West Kalimantan, Indonesia, sustain community resilience through river cosmology, water-based livelihoods, and digital mnemonic practices. Using a qualitative interpretive approach based on secondary narrative analysis, documentary reading, and contextual digital traces, the article analyzes how river-related meanings, livelihood ethics, and mediated memories support communal life in an urban setting. The analysis argues that river cosmology provides a moral basis for social norms and ecological responsibility. Water-based livelihood practices are converted into economic resilience and social capital within the urban informal economy. Digital mnemonic practices help dispersed community members transmit ecological knowledge and cultural identity across generations. Together, these mechanisms form a bottom-up social development system that operates without formal institutional support. The article also identifies how state empowerment programs may weaken existing community assets through time poverty, elite capture, and participation fatigue. This article contributes to wider debates on riverine communities, local knowledge, social welfare, and participatory development under urban change in the Global South.

Keywords: *Community Resilience, Digital Memory, Ecological Knowledge, Riparian Community, Social Capital, West Kalimantan*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Riparian communities in rapidly urbanizing cities of the Global South face a distinctive social development challenge (Wantzen et al., 2019). Their position differs from rural-to-urban migrants who leave one environment for another, because communities such as the Orang Sungai (River People) of Pontianak remain close to the rivers that have long shaped their livelihood, identity, and ecological knowledge. Yet this proximity does not protect them from urban development, spatial regulation, and economic change that gradually devalue the river as the foundation of community life. Studies of urban riverscapes show that river corridors can carry cultural ecosystem services, identity, memory, and wellbeing, but these values are easily displaced when planning treats rivers as infrastructure, risk zones, transport corridors, or aesthetic waterfront assets (Grzyb, 2024; Yuliza et al., 2025). This tension matters because it reveals a gap in social development thinking, where ecological and cultural assets are often overlooked by formal programs. It therefore raises a

central question for social development theory and practice. How do river-based communities sustain resilience when formal development systems fail to recognize the assets through which they live?

The Orang Sungai community of Pontianak in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, offers an instructive case for examining this question. As riverine migrants from the upstream Kapuas region, including Jongkong and Suhaid in Kapuas Hulu Regency, they carry a history of life shaped by long interaction with the river. This history has produced ecological knowledge, social organization, and cultural practices that remain meaningful in the city. Their river-based life includes a cosmology that defines moral relations between humans and water, a livelihood ethos shaped by uncertainty, solidarity networks based on shared ecological origins, and mnemonic practices that transmit identity across generations (Lestari, 2026b; Lestari et al., 2026). These existing assets make the Orang Sungai community case especially important for examining how community resilience is sustained, recognized, or weakened within formal social development programs.

Studies of community development increasingly show that empirical accounts of local communities can offer practical insights for social policy, empowerment, and welfare practice. In Kalimantan, island communities facing climate change demonstrate how local knowledge and adaptive cultural practices help people interpret environmental change and organize collective responses (Sariasih & Arifin, 2026). Similar lessons appear beyond West Kalimantan: Indonesian urban-river studies emphasize community engagement in ecosystem service management, while international cases from Warsaw, Hawai'i, Shenyang, regulated river areas in Korea, and the Yangtze River Economic Belt show that cultural ecosystem services, subsistence practices, and human-river activity patterns are often difficult to protect through technical planning alone (Bai et al., 2026; Grzyb, 2024; Hou & Zhu, 2025; Roh et al., 2025; Vave et al., 2024; Yuliza et al., 2025). In the Orang Sungai community case, river cosmology, social networks, and digital mnemonic practices form an asset base that supports community-led social development. The broader issue is how formal institutions can recognize these assets without weakening the community systems through which they are sustained.

Social development and community resilience studies increasingly argue that effective intervention should move beyond deficit-based views of communities as collections of needs and vulnerabilities. Asset-based approaches instead emphasize existing strengths, including local knowledge, social relations, and community capacities that can support collective wellbeing (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Recent comparative evidence strengthens this position in two ways. First, it shows that ecological and cultural assets are not merely symbolic; they shape wellbeing, subsistence security, collective identity, and everyday environmental behavior (Grzyb, 2024; Vave et al., 2024). Second, it shows that formal spatial planning and river management may overlook these assets when they prioritize measurable infrastructure, access efficiency, or regulated ecosystem functions over community meanings and relational practices (Bai et al., 2026; Hou & Zhu, 2025; Roh et al., 2025; Yuliza et al., 2025). Riparian communities in Southeast Asia and Borneo are especially underrepresented in this discussion. This study addresses that gap by examining three assets of the Orang Sungai community and showing how formal development programs may either strengthen or weaken the systems that sustain them.

This study is guided by three research questions. First, how does the river cosmology of the Orang Sungai community function as a social governance resource that sustains communal norms, ecological responsibility, and collective identity? Second, how is the community's water-based livelihood ethos converted into economic resilience and social capital within the urban informal economy? Third, how do digital mnemonic practices enable the transmission of ecological knowledge and cultural identity across generations amid spatial dispersal and urbanization? Taken together, these questions frame the Orang Sungai community case as an analysis of bottom-up social development. They show how community assets are sustained through everyday practice, while also revealing how formal development systems may weaken the very resources they claim to support.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with an interpretive secondary case-analysis approach. This design was selected because the study examines meanings, practices, and social relations through which Orang Sungai community assets are produced and sustained, while also recognizing that the available materials do not constitute a closed statistical corpus of social media posts. The primary analytical base consists of published ethnographic studies on Orang Sungai and all about their river-based identity, livelihood, ecological knowledge, and mnemonic practice. These materials were supplemented by local digital news, policy documents, and publicly visible digital traces from Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp-related community circulation to understand how river memory and community representation appear in mediated contexts. Digital materials were therefore used as contextual narrative evidence rather than as a platform-metric dataset; no claim is made that the study measures account-level engagement, channel performance, or a

complete archive of posts. The interpretive approach enables the study to connect everyday cultural expressions with broader questions of community resilience and social development (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Data collection was organized around three units of analysis that correspond to the study's research questions. The first unit focused on narrative representations of river cosmology in community discourse as documented in ethnographic accounts and public digital narratives. The second examined documentation of economic practices and social networks in Pontianak's informal market economy, including river-based culinary work, market exchange, and solidarity among migrants from Kapuas Hulu. The third focused on digital mnemonic practices across platform types, not on the measurement of individual accounts or engagement statistics. Materials were included when they explicitly addressed the Orang Sungai community or riparian life in Pontianak, contained substantive narrative or identity elements, and were produced or circulated within the last five years; platform names are reported as analytic contexts rather than as a fixed list of channels, accounts, or dated posts. Snowball searching was applied to trace related materials connected to the initial sources, allowing the dataset to develop through relevant community narratives, institutional references, and platform-based representations.

Data analysis proceeded through three stages. The first stage was restatement, in which key narrative expressions, platform functions, and documentary claims were organized close to their original form before being interpreted; this stage is reflected in the expression-based rows in Table 1 and the platform-based rows in Table 2. The second stage was description, which identified recurring patterns, dominant themes, and relationships across the three units of analysis. The third stage was interpretation, in which these patterns were connected to social capital, asset-based community development, and community resilience frameworks (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Norris et al., 2008). Interpretive validity was strengthened through source triangulation, cross-checking digital materials with published ethnographic accounts and policy documents, and reflexive attention to the researchers' assumptions throughout the analytical process.

3. RESULT DAN DISCUSSION

The analysis is organized around three community development assets of the Orang Sungai community and one structural risk framework concerning the formal programs that shape their survival. The first three sub-sections examine river cosmology as a social governance resource, the water-based livelihood ethos (*orang air livelihood ethos*) as economic and social capital, and digital mnemonic practices as a mechanism of intergenerational knowledge transmission. The final sub-section interprets how empowerment programs may weaken these assets through time poverty, elite capture, and participation fatigue. This integrated structure allows empirical synthesis and theoretical interpretation to be read together, showing how community resilience is produced from below while also being constrained by institutional practices.

3.1. River Cosmology as a Social Governance and Development Asset

The river cosmology of the Orang Sungai community functions as an active governance resource that regulates ecological behavior, sustains communal norms, and provides moral anchoring for community identity in urban contexts. In this community, river cosmology is not a passive cultural inheritance in decline. It is reproduced through narrative, practice, and digital circulation, and continues to shape how people understand responsibility toward the river, toward one another, and toward their place in the city.

Narrative analysis of community discourse shows how this cosmology operates through three key expressions that were first restated in close relation to their vernacular meanings before being interpreted as social development resources. The expression "anger" (*marah*) frames the river as a moral subject that responds to human behavior that damages the ecosystem, transforming ecological degradation into a violation of ethical and communal boundaries. The expression "sulking" (*merajuk*) presents the river as a relational entity whose bond with humans can be disrupted when exploitation exceeds sustainable limits. The phrase "clear flowing water" (*air mengalir jernih*) turns the physical quality of water into a metaphor for honesty, transparency, and social openness, which community members describe as defining the character of the Orang Sungai community in urban Pontianak (Lestari, 2026b). Table 1 systematizes these restated narrative expressions and their governance functions.

Table 1. River Cosmology Expressions as Social Governance Resources

Restated expression	Social development function
Anger (<i>marah</i>)	Marks ecological damage as a communal moral breach. It sustains collective norms against resource over-exploitation and works as an informal regulatory mechanism without formal enforcement.
Sulking (<i>merajuk</i>)	Expresses the fragility of the human-river relationship. It encourages awareness of ecological degradation and sustains collective responsibility toward the shared resource base.
Clear flowing water (<i>air mengalir jernih</i>)	Constructs a positive moral identity for the community in urban space. It offers a counter-narrative to urban stigmatization and strengthens social trust in informal economic relations.

Source: Synthesized from Lestari (2026b) and this article's interpretive secondary analysis.

From a social development perspective, river cosmology represents what Kretzmann & McKnight (1993) identify as a community's associational life capacity, namely the informal institutions and normative systems through which communities self-organize, regulate behavior, and produce collective goods without formal institutional support. The moral authority embedded in cosmological narratives also functions as what Norris et al. (2008) term a "community bonding capacity", because it enables communities to sustain solidarity and coordinate responses to adversity. In communities where formal social institutions are weak or unevenly present, culturally embedded governance resources often become a practical basis for collective action.

The social development significance of this finding becomes clearer when it is placed against the institutional context of formal empowerment programs. Such programs often approach the Orang Sungai community through externally designed rules, administrative procedures, and standardized development targets, while giving limited attention to the community's existing cosmological governance resource. This tendency risks reducing the community to a recipient of intervention, even though it already possesses functional self-governance institutions. Development programs that align with and reinforce existing cosmological governance frameworks, including river-based ecological norms and community authority over riparian resource governance, are more likely to strengthen resilience than programs that ignore or displace these frameworks.

3.2. *Orang Air Livelihood Ethos as Economic Capital and Social Resilience*

The *orang air* livelihood ethos (water-oriented livelihood ethos) among the Orang Sungai community can be understood as a community asset that connects river experience with economic resilience in urban life. This ethos refers to a set of dispositions, competencies, and values developed through long interaction with the dynamic and unpredictable river environment. It includes adaptive flexibility, calibrated risk tolerance, the ability to read environmental change, network intelligence, and a strong orientation toward communal reciprocity (Lestari, 2026a; Lestari et al., 2026). In the city, these dispositions do not disappear with spatial movement. They are reworked into practical capacities for navigating uncertain markets, unstable income, and informal economic relations.

In Pontianak's informal economy, particularly in market spaces such as Batara Market and along the Kapuas River waterfront, these river-shaped dispositions are converted into economic and relational resources. The capacity to adapt quickly to changing market conditions reflects the adaptive skills required for survival in a dynamic river ecosystem. Trust-based networks built through behavioral consistency and everyday hospitality generate social capital that supports access to credit, market information, and distribution networks without depending entirely on formal institutional intermediaries. Risk tolerance also enables entrepreneurial decisions in conditions where income, demand, and opportunity remain uncertain. The *orang air* livelihood ethos therefore works not simply as a cultural identity, but as a practical orientation for making a living in the urban informal economy.

This conversion is especially visible in women's river-based culinary enterprises. Women of the Orang Sungai community who develop products such as *ikan salai* (smoked river fish), *kerupuk basah* (fresh fish crackers), and other riparian foods generate livelihood income while also transmitting ecological knowledge. The knowledge of fish species, processing techniques, flavor combinations, and preservation methods embedded in these culinary practices constitutes what Bourdieu (2021) terms incorporated cultural capital. This form of knowledge is expressed through bodily competence, taste, and practical judgment, rather than through formal instruction alone. Yet this incorporated capital becomes vulnerable when empowerment programs add

productive responsibilities without redistributing domestic burdens, because the time needed for knowledge transmission and community participation is reduced.

Beyond household and culinary economies, the conversion of river-based dispositions also operates through solidarity networks organized around shared ecological origins. These networks connect community members from the same sub-districts of Kapuas Hulu through kinship, shared ecological memory, and mutual support obligations. They provide accommodation for newly arrived migrants, job market information, emergency credit through trust-based lending, and coordinated responses to economic shocks. Within a social development framework, these networks exemplify bonding social capital that enables communities to sustain collective wellbeing under adverse conditions (Putnam, 2000). The developmental challenge is to create conditions that strengthen these networks rather than erode them through program designs that privilege individual competition over communal reciprocity.

3.3. Digital Mnemonic Practices as Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission

Digital mnemonic practices have become an important mechanism through which the Orang Sungai community transmit ecological knowledge, cultural identity, and communal values across generations. In the context of spatial dispersal and urbanization, younger generations who are born and raised in Pontianak do not always have direct experiential access to the river ecosystem that shaped earlier forms of community life. Digital platforms therefore provide a mediated space where memories of river life, knowledge of ecological practice, and narratives of origin can continue to circulate. Rather than replacing embodied transmission, these practices extend the reach of river-based memory when direct experience, intergenerational proximity, and everyday contact with the river become less stable under urban conditions.

Digital narrative mapping indicates that different platform types contribute to different forms of mnemonic circulation. YouTube supports longer documentation of river-based skills and ecological knowledge. Facebook enables dialogic sharing of memories, ritual documentation, and village narratives. Instagram makes riparian aesthetics and food culture visible to wider audiences. WhatsApp sustains more practical and semi-private forms of coordination among dispersed community members. Table 2 presents these platform traces as contextual sources for understanding the community's digital knowledge transmission system, rather than as a quantified sample of posts, accounts, channels, dates, or engagement metrics.

Table 2. Digital Platform Traces as Contextual Sources for Knowledge Transmission

Platform trace	Contextual source and social development function
YouTube	Public long-form videos and community-facing documentation are read as contextual traces of fishing techniques, ikan salai processing, river ecology, and environmental change. They function as a community knowledge archive for geographically dispersed members and younger generations without direct river experience.
Facebook	Dialogic public posts and group-based memory circulation are read as contextual traces of community memories, Robo-Robo ritual documentation, village narratives, and ecological observations. They allow community members to respond to, contest, and extend shared memories collectively.
Instagram	Visual posts and short-form representations are read as contextual traces of riparian aesthetics, river-based food culture, and waterfront community life. They communicate cultural identity to audiences beyond the immediate community and build recognition and social legitimacy.
WhatsApp	Semi-private message circulation is read through its reported coordination function rather than extracted as a closed chat dataset. It sustains practical community solidarity through information about river conditions, family support, emergency response, and communal decision-making across geographic dispersal, without treating private chat content as a directly quoted corpus.

Source: Synthesized from public platform traces, Lestari (2026), and this article's interpretive secondary analysis.

Seen in this way, digital practices do more than preserve memory. They organize ecological knowledge into a shared community resource. Because the digital materials were treated as contextual narrative traces, the analysis focuses on platform affordances and recurring knowledge functions rather than on counting posts,

naming accounts, or ranking channels. These practices can be understood as community-managed digital knowledge commons because they form a collectively maintained repository of ecological knowledge, cultural practices, and community narratives that support continuity and resilience. YouTube documentation of riparian knowledge functions as a community memory repository, helping preserve knowledge held by older community members when direct transmission becomes less stable (Al Humam, 2025). WhatsApp-based coordination of river conditions also shows how digital communication can support community-based environmental surveillance and real-time ecological intelligence without relying entirely on formal infrastructure.

The significance of these digital practices extends beyond intergenerational knowledge transmission. They also support community advocacy and narrative reclamation. Formal development discourse often positions riparian communities through categories of risk, informality, relocation, or modernization (Shatkin & Soemarwi, 2021). Digital content produced by the Orang Sungai community offers another representation of riparian life as socially meaningful and ecologically grounded. This narrative reclamation matters for social development because it strengthens the community's capacity to participate in public discourse as an active knowledge-bearing subject, rather than as a passive object of developmental intervention.

3.4. Structural Barriers: How Formal Programs Undermine Community Assets

The analysis of river cosmology, the *orang air* livelihood ethos, and digital mnemonic practices need to be placed alongside the structural conditions that shape the survival of these community assets. These resources do not operate in an institutional vacuum. They encounter formal empowerment programs that may support community resilience, but may also weaken the social, temporal, and relational conditions on which that resilience depends. The following discussion therefore develops an analytical risk framework rather than a claim that one specific program has produced identical effects across the whole Orang Sungai community. Three risks are especially important in this process, namely time poverty, elite capture, and participation fatigue.

The first risk is time poverty, which emerges when empowerment programs add productive responsibilities to community members, particularly women, without redistributing domestic and reproductive burdens. Women who carry culinary knowledge, mnemonic practices, and community solidarity work may find that program participation reduces the time available for knowledge transmission, communal gathering, and digital community engagement. This is not merely an issue of efficiency. It is a form of asset erosion because the time required to sustain community knowledge and social relations is absorbed by program demands. This pattern of "empowerment" that depletes rather than develops has been widely discussed in the social development literature, particularly in relation to women's economic participation and unpaid labor burdens (Kabeer, 2012).

The second risk, elite capture, appears when program benefits become concentrated among community members who already possess stronger social, economic, or political advantages (Yamauchi, 2010). In the Orang Sungai community context, this is especially consequential because solidarity networks are grounded in communal reciprocity and shared access to collective resources. When equipment, market access, or training opportunities circulate through actors with existing authority, program design can introduce the logic of competitive individual accumulation into a relational governance culture. Elite capture is therefore not only an equity problem. It is also a governance problem, because it can weaken the social capital infrastructure on which community-led development depends.

The third risk is participation fatigue, which refers to the cumulative loss of confidence that emerges when repeated cycles of consultation, training, or capacity building do not lead to sustainable improvements in community wellbeing (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Training without market access, cooperative initiatives without institutional support, and development promises without durable follow-up can erode trust in formal development institutions. This erosion has consequences beyond individual programs. It reduces community willingness to engage with future initiatives and weakens the hopeful orientation that sustains resilience. Such responses should not be read as cultural passivity, but as rational adaptations to repeated experiences of institutional unreliability.

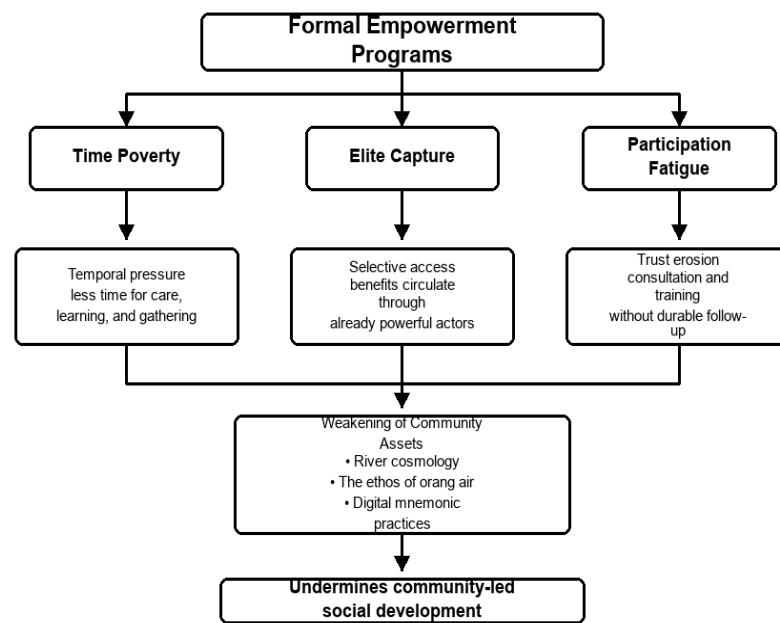


Figure 1. Asset-Erosion Pathways Linking Formal Program Logics and Community Assets.
Source: Processed by the authors, 2026.

Figure 1 brings these three risks into an integrated analytical frame, showing that the problem lies not simply in weak program implementation, but in the mismatch between formal development logic and the ways Orang Sungai community assets are sustained. Time poverty, elite capture, and participation fatigue weaken different dimensions of the same community system. The first reduces the everyday labor through which knowledge and social relations are reproduced. The second disrupts the reciprocity that underpins solidarity networks and relational governance culture. The third erodes the trust needed for future collaboration between communities and institutions. Formal programs may therefore undermine community-led social development not because they lack developmental intention, but because they fail to recognize the social, temporal, and relational conditions through which community assets remain alive.

4. CONCLUSION

The main argument of this study is that Orang Sungai (River People) resilience in urban Pontianak, West Kalimantan, Indonesia, is sustained through community assets that operate outside formal development structures, a pattern that speaks to broader debates on riparian communities, urbanization, and social development in the Global South. River cosmology functions as a social governance framework that sustains communal norms, ecological responsibility, and collective identity. The *orang air* livelihood ethos becomes a source of economic and social capital in the urban informal economy, while digital mnemonic practices extend intergenerational knowledge transmission across dispersed urban settings. These assets form a bottom-up social development system that works through informal institutions, cultural practices, and community networks. Yet these same assets can be weakened when formal empowerment programs generate time poverty, elite capture, and participation fatigue.

By placing these assets within the context of rapidly urbanizing Borneo, this article extends asset-based community development beyond its usual emphasis on general community strengths. The Orang Sungai community case demonstrates that ecological knowledge, cosmological frameworks, and digital mnemonic practices are not secondary cultural residues, but legitimate community development assets. More broadly, it shows that resilience among place-based and water-based communities is produced through the interaction of ecological memory, social solidarity networks, and adaptive cultural practices, rather than through any single factor. This perspective challenges development approaches that begin from vulnerability alone and calls attention to forms of community strength that formal planning often fails to recognize.

For social development policy and social work practice, the analysis points to the need for more asset-sensitive forms of intervention in communities shaped by ecological attachment, informal economies, and spatial displacement. Community needs assessments for riparian communities should begin with systematic documentation of existing assets, including ecological knowledge systems, informal governance frameworks,

solidarity networks, and digital memory practices. Empowerment programs should be evaluated by whether they strengthen or weaken these assets, especially when program activities increase the time burden of those who carry cultural knowledge and social networks. Benefit distribution mechanisms need to reinforce communal reciprocity rather than introduce competitive individual logics that erode social capital. Development policy should also recognize digital platforms as part of community knowledge infrastructure, not merely as informal communication tools, and provide institutional support comparable to other forms of community development infrastructure.

Future research can deepen this analysis by expanding the empirical scope of the present study. Longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork and primary interview data would help capture how Orang Sungai community assets are negotiated in everyday interactions, household economies, and institutional encounters over time. A clearly bounded digital corpus, including platform names, public account criteria, post dates, and coding procedures, would also strengthen future analysis of digital mnemonic practices. Comparative studies across riparian communities in Samarinda, Balikpapan, Banjarmasin, and other Kalimantan cities would help distinguish local dynamics from broader patterns of riparian urbanization in Borneo. Youth-centered research is particularly important for understanding how younger generations negotiate inherited ecological knowledge with urban life and digital participation under continuing pressure of urbanization.

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