

# WANI NGALAH: THE COURAGE TO SUBMIT IN JAVANESE CULTURE AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE MODERN ERA

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## ABSTRACT

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This study examines the philosophy of "Wani Ngalah" within Javanese tradition, which teaches the importance of the courage to submit as a form of moral strength and wisdom in creating social harmony. This philosophy emphasizes ego control, humility, and acceptance as the foundation for facing a competitive life. Employing a qualitative hermeneutic approach, the research analyzes the *Mijil* song as a medium for ethical and spiritual teaching related to the concept of "Wani Ngalah." Symbolism such as the earth and cultivation in this song reflects values of resilience and humility that can be applied in modern life. The findings reveal that these teachings remain relevant as a foundation for character education and interpersonal relationships in the era of globalization.

## ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji filosofi "Wani Ngalah" dalam tradisi Jawa yang mengajarkan pentingnya keberanian untuk mengalah sebagai bentuk kekuatan moral dan kebijaksanaan dalam menciptakan harmoni sosial. Filosofi ini menekankan pengendalian ego, kerendahan hati, dan sikap menerima sebagai landasan untuk menghadapi kehidupan yang penuh persaingan. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif hermeneutika, penelitian ini menganalisis tembang *Mijil* sebagai sarana pengajaran etis dan spiritual yang berkaitan dengan konsep "Wani Ngalah." Simbolisme seperti bumi dan tandur dalam tembang ini menunjukkan nilai-nilai ketangguhan dan kerendahan hati yang dapat diterapkan dalam kehidupan modern. Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa ajaran ini masih relevan sebagai fondasi dalam pendidikan karakter dan hubungan interpersonal di era globalisasi.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, society often finds itself trapped in a competitive culture that focuses on achieving victory and material success. This competition teaches individuals that success can only be attained through rivalry, positioning oneself at the top and obtaining all desires. This concept fosters the perception that yielding or surrendering is a sign of weakness. However, within Javanese culture, traditional values advocate the opposite through the philosophy of "Wani Ngalah." This teaching can be found in the Mijil song, which serves as a guiding principle for the Javanese way of life. The song contains significant teachings that advise how one can live nobly through the awareness of yielding (Koentjaraningrat, 1985).

The Mijil song emphasizes the importance of becoming a useful and knowledgeable individual, which in a modern context can be interpreted as possessing skills and wisdom. The principle "Dedalane guno lawan sekti kudu andap asor" implies that the path to being useful and of quality (sakti) must be accompanied by humility (andap asor), highlighting the importance of politeness, ethics, and moral virtues in the process of achieving success (Rahardjo, 2001). Furthermore, "Wani ngalah luhur wekasane" suggests that the courage to yield brings honor at the end of one's journey. This attitude represents a high degree of self-control, where one can subdue the ego and humble oneself in facing life's challenges and trials (Mulder, 2005). He teaches "tumungkulo yen dipun dukani" instructs individuals to bow or adopt a humble demeanor when receiving reprimands or criticism, while "bapang den simpangi" advises avoiding unnecessary matters that may lead to conflict. Additionally, "ana catur mungkur" provides guidance to avoid irrelevant or misunderstood discussions to prevent getting caught in futile debates, promoting humility in criticism and conflict (Magnis-Suseno, 1988).

The philosophy of "Wani Ngalah" views life not through the narrow lens of competition but within the framework of social and spiritual harmonization. This value not only teaches the importance of humility and acceptance but also illustrates that in yielding, there lies hidden strength—the ability to see and appreciate interests that transcend personal gain. In Javanese society, yielding does not equate to losing; rather, it is a wise strategy for creating harmony, balance, and social solidarity. Yielding is not performed out of inability but stems from a belief in a greater harmony and justice (Geertz, 1976).

To gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the philosophy of "Wani Ngalah," this study will examine several aspects related to this concept. It will address key questions, including: What is the philosophical foundation of "Wani Ngalah"? What symbolism underpins this concept? What is the essence of "Wani Ngalah"? What character traits are needed to reinforce the attitude of "Wani Ngalah"? And when should one act in the spirit of "Wani Ngalah"? The contribution of this study is expected to elevate the cultural values of "Wani Ngalah" as an orientation in character education in the modern era, where these traditional values can serve as a foundation for creating a harmonious and ethical personality (Mulder, 2005).

## 2. METODOLOGI

This study employs a qualitative approach with hermeneutics as the primary analytical framework. In this context, hermeneutics serves as an interpretative approach used to understand

and examine the symbolic meanings contained within the text of the Mijil song. The objective is to delve deeper into the philosophical and social messages present in the song, particularly those related to the concept of "Wani Ngalah."

Data collection was conducted through a literature review involving various textual sources, including the original text of the Mijil song and works that discuss Javanese culture and philosophy. The collected data was then analyzed by linking the natural symbolism, such as earth and cultivation, that appears in the Mijil song with social values and spirituality within Javanese culture. Earth and cultivation are not only viewed as physical representations but also as metaphors for humility, rebirth, and wisdom, which are at the core of the "Wani Ngalah" teachings.

The hermeneutic analysis stage is carried out by considering the context of modern life filled with competition and rivalry. Using this approach, traditional symbols found in the Mijil song will be reinterpreted to understand their relevance to contemporary realities. The analysis process also evaluates the philosophy of "Wani Ngalah" in relation to social changes and modern life's challenges, such as the pressure to compete, the need for social balance, and the importance of harmonization between individuals and society.

Thus, this research aims to demonstrate how traditional cultural values, particularly those encapsulated in the philosophy of "Wani Ngalah," can remain relevant and applicable in the context of modern life. Through in-depth symbolic and philosophical analysis, it is hoped that the relevance of these traditional teachings in facing new challenges in an increasingly competitive society can be uncovered.

### 3. RESULT

#### 3.1. Text Analysis

*Dedalane guno lawan sekti,  
kudu andhap asor,  
wani ngalah lubur wekasane,  
tumungkula yen dipun dukani,  
bapang den simpangi,  
ana catur mungkur.*

The above song belongs to the macapat genre, a form of traditional poetry in Javanese literature. More specifically, this song is classified as Mijil, which has a distinctive structure with six lines in each stanza. Each line in the Mijil song follows specific metrical rules, with the number of syllables per line sequentially being 10, 6, 10, 10, 6, and 6, ending with the vowels i, o, e, i, i, u. Etymologically, the word "Mijil" in Javanese means "to be born," which carries a philosophical meaning that this song is often used as a means to provide guidance or advice to individuals from their birth into the world (Sudikan, 2001).

In general, the *tembang Mijil* is often used as a medium for conveying life guidance, particularly to provide ethical and moral direction in living. The teachings contained within it aim to guide individuals in understanding the importance of *kebijaksanaan*, *kerendahan hati*, and *kesadaran sosial* from the outset of their lives. This demonstrates how *Mijil* serves as a means of moral education

within Javanese culture, rich with values of virtue (Mulder, 2005).

*Tembang Mijil* (which means "to be born") is one of the types of *Macapat* that contains teachings such as: *Dedalane guna lawan sekti, kudu andhap asor, wani ngalah lubur wekasane, tumungkula yen dipun dukani, bapang den simpangi, ana catur mungkur*. These verses represent a revered work from the tradition of Javanese literature. This song is believed to have been created by R. Ng. Ranggawarsita, a great poet from the Surakarta palace. Ranggawarsita (1802-1873) is recognized as one of the most influential poets in the history of Javanese literature, with works rich in moral advice, philosophy, and life teachings (Teeuw, 1967).

*Tembang Mijil* in Javanese culture carries profound philosophical meaning and serves as an ethical guide in life. This teaching emphasizes the importance of being "sakti" or knowledgeable and useful to society. In a modern context, the concept of "sakti" can be interpreted as the skills or competencies possessed by individuals. In Java, the level of knowledge and skills has a hierarchy that includes several stages: *kanoman*, referring to basic skills; *kanuragan*, symbolizing life skills; *kadonyan*, reflecting career skills and how one meets life's needs; and *kasepuhan* and *kasampurnan*, representing higher stages of knowledge associated with wisdom and perfection in life. These stages align with the concept of spirituality in Islam, which includes *syari'at* (rules), *thariqat* (path), *haqiqat* (truth), and *ma'rifat* (knowledge of God) (Mulder, 2005).

This song contains values that are metaphorically expressed as advice in the form of lyrics guiding an individual's life and learning process. The teaching of *Dedalane guno lawan sekti, kudu andhap asor* conveys the meaning that the path to becoming useful and of quality (*sakti*) must be undertaken with humility. This attitude reflects the importance of maintaining ethics, politeness, and good morals in every interaction and learning process. There is no room for arrogance or pride in the journey to becoming a beneficial person (Koentjaraningrat, 1985).

Furthermore, this song teaches the concept of *wani ngalah* or the courage to yield to achieve honor, as expressed in the teaching *Wani ngalah lubur wekasane*. This attitude emphasizes the importance of self-control, where one must subdue their ego and be open to criticism or advice. The advice *Tumungkulo yen dipun dukani* underscores the significance of humility when receiving reprimands or corrections from others. This song advises against hastily resisting when in disagreement; instead, it encourages bowing one's head and reflecting on the criticism received (Geertz, 1976).

Another piece of advice found in this song is *Bapang den simpangi*, which reminds us to avoid unnecessary or irrelevant matters in the learning process. This means that one should focus on important issues and not get caught up in experiments or actions that lack significant benefits. Additionally, *Ana catur mungkur* suggests avoiding conversations that are irrelevant or not fully understood. In the context of modern life, this can be interpreted as a recommendation not to engage in unproductive discussions or debates, especially in the digital age where information and comments are abundant, often lacking a clear foundation.

### 3.2. The Philosophical Foundation Of "Wani Ngalah"

The philosophy of *wani ngalah* or the courage to yield has deep roots in the culture and spirituality of the Javanese community. This attitude is not merely viewed as a form of submission but rather as a way of life that fosters harmony and peace in social interactions. The following are

some of the philosophical foundations underpinning this teaching:

#### 1. Memangku Hayuning Bawana

One of the fundamental principles in Javanese culture is *memangku hayuning bawana*, which means to maintain and beautify the harmony of the universe. This principle emphasizes the importance of everyone's existence in preserving the beauty and balance of the world. The philosophy of *wani ngalah* arises from the awareness of providing space for others, thereby creating greater harmony. In this context, yielding does not mean losing; rather, it reflects the attitude of prioritizing others to achieve collective harmony. The inner foundation of this attitude is the existence of mutual trust among individuals, where each person believes that their dreams can be realized without engaging in destructive competition. As stated by Geertz (1976), social harmony is the primary value guiding the lives of the Javanese people.

#### 2. Prioritizing Social Solidarity

The Javanese community highly values *keguyuban* or togetherness, where harmony and peace are the primary objectives. According to Koentjaraningrat (1985), in Javanese social life, disputes or quarrels should be avoided as much as possible, and if conflicts cannot be avoided, social solidarity and harmony must remain a priority. In this context, yielding becomes a means to maintain togetherness and prevent conflicts that could disrupt collective harmony.

#### 3. Belief in Individual Portions of Sustenance

The awareness that everyone has their own share of sustenance is another foundation of the philosophy of *wani ngalah*. From this perspective, there is no reason to compete or seize from one another because a person's sustenance will not be exchanged or lost if it is indeed meant for them. This belief is closely related to the concept of destiny and the faith that God has arranged everything. Therefore, the attitude of yielding becomes possible because there is no fear of losing the sustenance that has already been determined.

#### 4. Prioritizing Spiritual Values Over Material Ones

The view that there are more essential matters than world affairs also underlie the attitude of yielding. In worldly matters, the Javanese community tends to yield and allow others to take precedence because they recognize that material achievements are not as substantial as spiritual accomplishments. This attitude demonstrates that worldly matters are seen as temporary, and therefore, they do not need to be competed for excessively (Magnis-Suseno, 1988).

#### 5. Sense of Shame in Pursuing Worldly Matters

The philosophy of *wani ngalah* is also driven by a sense of shame regarding an excessive focus on worldly matters. The Javanese community believes that humans are always being watched by God, and therefore, they must maintain their attitudes and behaviors. This awareness is like the concept of the panopticon, a prison design proposed by Jeremy Bentham. In this system, inmates always feel they are being monitored, leading them to comply with rules without the need for direct oversight. This concept is elaborated by Michel Foucault, where

individuals feel they are continuously observed, prompting them to behave well in order to uphold morality (Foucault, 1979; Sargiacomo, 2009).

## 6. Tirakat as Spiritual Practice

*Wani ngalah* is also closely related to the concept of *tirakat*, which refers to spiritual practice aimed at achieving balance and inner strength. In Javanese tradition, *tirakat* is often interpreted as the ability to restrain oneself from worldly pleasures to attain higher wisdom and strength. For example, an individual may choose to observe fasting or avoid pleasurable activities as a form of *tirakat*. Through this process, individuals learn to become stronger in facing life's challenges. According to Mulder, *tirakat* is not merely an effort to weaken oneself through physical restraint but is more about strengthening self-control and preparing to face greater difficulties in the future (Mulder, 2005).

*Tarikat* also teaches the importance of "letting go" to achieve inner freedom. This includes relinquishing attachments to material possessions or ego, allowing individuals to feel lighter and freer. In line with this perspective, yielding is a form of ego release that provides relief in social life, as individuals are not trapped in conflict or the desire to always win (Mulder, 2005).

## 3.3. Symbolism of 'Wani Ngalah'

The symbolism in the philosophy of *wani ngalah* reflects two important aspects related to the personality and behavior expected of individuals within Javanese culture. The two prominent symbols in this context are *bumi* (earth) and *tandur* (planting). *Bumi*, as the first symbol, represents resilience and humility, while *tandur* depicts the process of self-development and hard work balanced with spiritual awareness. These two symbols complement each other by illustrating the value of *wani ngalah* as a way of life that focuses on togetherness, mutual trust, and devotion to others.

### 1. Symbolism of Earth

The earth in this context symbolizes resilience and acceptance. Semar, as a representation of the earth, embodies the qualities of the earth that remain steadfast even when stepped on or oppressed. The earth never complains and is always ready to embrace all living beings. By providing waste to the earth, we witness the process of purification and cleansing carried out by the earth, which in turn yields benefits and goodness. In this sense, "*wani ngalah*" is likened to the mentality of the earth, where individuals are expected not to easily complain, to show clarity in facing challenges, and to share and cultivate positive values around them. The earth is not arrogant; it only gives and receives sincerely.

### 2. Symbolism of Tandur

*Tandur*, which means "to walk backward," illustrates that in the process of planting rice, a farmer must take steps back to plant it effectively. This emphasizes that progress often requires sacrifices and hard work that may initially seem regressive. In this context, the act of planting or *tandur* is performed with humility; the farmer does not stand upright with pride but rather bows their head and bends their body as a sign of respect and sincerity. Furthermore, the

spiritual aspect of tandur indicates that although the farmer can prepare and tend to their crops, the outcome is in God's hands. This process teaches that life involves hard work, but also necessitates surrendering the results to a higher power, which reflects a form of acceptance and self-control. The symbolism of earth and tandur in "wani ngalah" underscores the importance of resilience, humility, and spirituality in achieving a meaningful and harmonious life.

### **3.4. Essence of 'Wani Ngalah'**

The essence of "Wani Ngalah" reflects a profound philosophy rooted in Javanese culture, serving as a guide to achieving a harmonious and meaningful life. This concept not only teaches about sacrifice and humility but also encompasses ego management, self-control, genuine love, and spiritual awareness. In this context, "Wani Ngalah" becomes a life strategy that leads to character development and improved social relationships, providing deeper meaning to human interactions.

#### **1. Essence 1: Overcoming Ego and Purifying the Ego**

"Wani Ngalah" invites individuals to learn how to control and overcome their ego. The ego often demands many things, and while it is natural to have the spirit to achieve goals, individuals need to manage those desires to prevent excess. Through "Wani Ngalah," one practices defeating the ego and does not use it as a strategy for self-indulgence. Controlling the ego is crucial for achieving balance in life; therefore, it is essential to recognize the boundaries of the ego.

#### **2. Essence 2: The Power of Self-Control**

"Wani Ngalah" is not a sign of weakness but rather a demonstration of strength. Only those with a strong spirit can yield. Those who understand the meaning of victory will choose to grant it to others. This illustrates that true strength lies in the ability to prioritize others and maintain one's integrity.

#### **3. Essence 3: Detachment from Worldly Attachments**

The inability to yield is often caused by attachment to worldly matters, such as the desire to dominate or win something. Javanese philosophy teaches individuals not to become trapped in these attachments. By remembering the proverb "sing wis lungo, lalekno," we are encouraged to let go of what has passed, to be grateful for what we have, and to await what has yet to come. This attitude fosters tranquility and reduces the sense of attachment that can hinder the ability to yield.

#### **4. Essence 4: Manifestation of Genuine Love**

Genuine love is a prerequisite for yielding. Without genuine love, the act of yielding can turn into a manipulative strategy that serves to indulge the ego. In interpersonal relationships, love encourages us to yield to one another and to give our best for others. The sincerity of love allows for sacrifices that come from the heart, creating deeper and more meaningful connections.

## 5. Essence 5: The Ability to Forgive

The ability to forgive is at the core of the philosophy of "Wani Ngalah." A person who dares to yield typically possesses a generous heart and is capable of understanding others. Forgiveness not only alleviates the burdens of distressing grudges but also helps to calm anger, paving the way for reconciliation and harmony in relationships.

## 6. Essence 6: Visionary and Strategic

"Wani Ngalah" also encompasses a visionary and strategic attitude. As the proverb "ngluruk tanpa bala" reminds us, we may lose the battle but can still win the war. In life, it is important to be competitive without belittling others or making them feel pressured. Creating a mutually supportive environment is more conducive to long-term success..

## 7. Essence 7: Spirituality of Life

"Wani Ngalah" is connected to spirituality. The concept of yielding comes from the word "ngalah," which means to connect worldly matters with the spiritual dimension. When someone gives alms or shares, they are not only performing a good deed but also embodying spiritual values in that action. Yielding becomes a means of drawing closer to God, making life experiences more meaningful and focusing on higher values.

The essence of "Wani Ngalah" invites us to reflect on the profound meanings of sacrifice, self-control, and love in our daily lives, enabling us to develop better character and build harmonious relationships with others.

### 3.5. Essence of 'Wani Ngalah'

In the practice of "Wani Ngalah," there are several supporting characteristics that are key to yielding sincerely and effectively. These characteristics help individuals understand and internalize the values associated with sacrifice and humility. Each of these traits complements one another and contributes to a person's ability to yield, both in social interactions and in facing personal challenges. Here are four main characteristics that play a role in supporting the practice of "Wani Ngalah":

#### 1. Empathy

Empathy is the ability to position oneself in another's situation and feel what they are feeling. Individuals with empathy are generally more inclined to yield because they can understand and appreciate others' perspectives. By sensing the feelings and needs of others, one can develop a more understanding and tolerant attitude, making it easier to put personal interests aside for the well-being of others.

#### 2. Belief in a Just World

This characteristic encompasses the belief that the world can still be just and that every good or bad action will receive an appropriate response. Having a positive attitude toward

justice allows individuals to yield more easily, as they believe that the good, they do will lead to positive outcomes. This mindset fosters the conviction that, although yielding may feel challenging, ultimately, it will result in beneficial effects for both oneself and others..

### 3. Self-Control

The ability to restrain and control oneself is an important characteristic in the practice of "Wani Ngalah." Self-control allows individuals to delay gratification and manage ego-driven desires. Training the ego not to always prioritize personal interests is a crucial step in learning to yield. With strong self-control, individuals can focus more on long-term goals and foster more harmonious relationships with others.

### 4. Low Self-Awareness

This characteristic refers to the awareness that everyone has flaws and makes mistakes, including oneself. Recognizing that we are also ordinary and fallible helps individuals avoid feeling superior to others. This awareness fosters humility, allowing one to be more open to others' perspectives and making it easier to yield in conflict situations.

Overall, these supporting characteristics play a crucial role in shaping the attitude of "Wani Ngalah." By developing empathy, belief in justice, self-control, and low self-awareness, individuals become better equipped to manage their ego and foster better relationships with others, ultimately creating a more harmonious environment.

## 3.6. When to Apply the Concept of "Wani Ngalah"

The practice of "Wani Ngalah" is not always relevant or necessary in every situation; there are specific times and conditions where yielding becomes more appropriate and beneficial. Taking the step to yield is often based on context, the level of importance, and the values held. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize when to apply this principle. Here are several situations where "Wani Ngalah" should be considered:

### 1. Yielding for Unimportant Matters:

When faced with issues that are not particularly significant, yielding is a wise choice. In such situations, prioritizing the interests of others or collective decisions is more beneficial than insisting on personal viewpoints. This action helps create a more harmonious atmosphere and reduces tension in social relationships.

### 2. Yielding When in Doubt

If someone feels uncertain or lacks confidence in their opinion or decision, yielding is a prudent choice. Self-awareness in this situation is crucial to avoid a stubborn attitude that could be detrimental. Acknowledging uncertainty and being willing to listen to others can provide new perspectives and assist in making better decisions.

### 3. Yielding to Good Offers:

In contexts where there are two or more equally good options, yielding to choose one of those options can strengthen cooperation and collaboration. For instance, if there are two excellent but differing ideas, yielding to support someone else's idea can create a respectful environment and contribute to a common goal.

### 4. Yielding to Uphold More Important Values:

When certain values, such as friendship or cooperation, outweigh personal opinions, yielding is a highly valuable action. In situations where differing opinions may threaten relationships or collaboration, choosing to yield to preserve those values is a wise step. Thus, "Wani Ngalah" serves as a tool to strengthen interpersonal relationships and create a more harmonious environment.

The application of the concept of "Wani Ngalah" should be considered wisely, considering the context and existing values. By recognizing the appropriate situations, individuals can more easily take steps to yield, maintain balance in relationships, and contribute to social harmony.

## 3.7. Expressions Related to the Concept of "Wani Ngalah"

In Javanese culture, there are several expressions that illustrate the principles of "Wani Ngalah" and situations related to yielding in social interactions. These expressions not only reflect the attitude of yielding but also imply deeper cultural values regarding interpersonal relationships. By understanding these expressions, we can better appreciate the social context behind them and how they influence behavior within the community.

### 1. "Sing Waras Ngalah"

This expression illustrates a situation where someone deemed irrational—whether mentally or in their stance—should be left alone rather than confronted. In this context, yielding becomes a wiser choice than getting caught up in unproductive debates or arguments. This attitude reflects an understanding that dealing with irrational individuals often exacerbates the situation and distracts from more important matters.

### 2. "Rebut Balung Tanpa Isi"

This saying depicts scenarios where individuals engage in disputes over trivial matters. Here, yielding can be interpreted as avoiding conflicts that are unproductive. It encourages individuals to be wiser in choosing their battles and emphasizes the importance of focusing on more substantial and valuable aspects of life.

### 3. "Ngalah, Ngalih, Ngamuk"

This expression outlines three behavioral stages encountered in social interactions. "Ngalah" means yielding with full awareness, "ngalih" refers to the act of diverting attention away from conflict when the situation is unfavorable, and "ngamuk" is the last resort when all efforts to yield and divert have failed. This saying reflects that the act of yielding in Javanese culture is not passive; rather, it is a series of behaviors demonstrating flexibility and adaptability to social situations.

However, when patience is exceeded, the act of "ngamuk" indicates that there are moments when self-defense becomes crucial.

These expressions provide insight into the complexities of social interactions within Javanese culture and emphasize the importance of wisdom in deciding when to yield or take action. Understanding these sayings helps individuals become more responsive to their surrounding situations and relationships.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In Javanese culture, the attitude of being brave enough to yield does not signify weakness; rather, it represents strength and wisdom in fostering social and spiritual harmony. This philosophy teaches the importance of ego control, humility, and awareness of a purpose greater than personal victory. By grounding themselves in principles such as maintaining solidarity, appreciating individual portions of sustenance, and placing spiritual values above worldly matters, individuals can lead more meaningful and peaceful lives.

Moreover, through symbolism such as the earth and *tandur*, "Wani Ngalah" illustrates how resilience, humility, and diligent hard work serve as foundations for achieving a fulfilling life, both socially and spiritually. Further research is recommended to explore the application of the "Wani Ngalah" philosophy in modern Javanese society and its role in character education and interpersonal relationships, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates anthropology, social psychology, and education.

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