

THE AESTHETIC CONSIDERATION OF PROVERBS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON DISCOURSE: A LITERARY AND PRAGMATIC ANALYSES OF SOME AKAN PROVERBS

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Abstract: Proverbs, in general, are employed not only for their functionality but also for their aesthetic or literary reasons which render them effective in discourse (Yankah, 1989; Dipio, 2019). This paper sought to explore the aesthetic nature of proverbs and their effects on discourse. It also aimed to find out the extent to which the characteristics of written literature could be found in proverbs which are the product of oral literature. The questions which underpin this research are: What are the aesthetic qualities embedded in Akan proverbs? To what extent do they impact on proverbial discourse? To be able to find answers to these questions, we adopted the traditional library research approach to select sixteen (16) Akan proverbs from books and journal articles for our literary and pragmatic analyses. The findings show that literary devices present in novels, poems, and other documentary forms of literature are equally seen in Akan proverbs. They also reveal that the rhetoric figures in proverbs aid the proverbial message to appeal to the human senses for a better understanding by the interlocutor. The aim of this paper is to examine some literary devices in Akan proverbs and what they add to the proverbial message.

Keywords: proverb, aesthetic, discourse, Akan, literary devices

UNE CONSIDÉRATION ESTHÉTIQUE DES PROVERBES AKAN ET LEUR IMPACT SUR LE DISCOURS: UNE ANALYSE LITTÉRAIRE ET PRAGMATIQUE DE QUELQUES PROVERBES AKAN

Résumé : Les proverbes, en général, sont employés non seulement pour leur fonctionnalité mais aussi pour leurs outils esthétiques ou littéraires qui les rendent efficaces (Yankah, 1989 ; Dipio, 2019). Cet article cherche donc à explorer la nature

esthétique des proverbes et leurs effets sur le discours. Il vise également à savoir dans quelle mesure les caractéristiques de la littérature écrite peuvent se retrouver dans les proverbes issus de la littérature orale. Les questions qui sous-tendent cette recherche sont : Quelles sont les qualités esthétiques inhérentes aux proverbes akan ? Dans quelle mesure impactent-elles le discours proverbial ? Pour pouvoir trouver des réponses à ces questions, nous avons adopté l'approche traditionnelle de recherche en bibliothèque pour sélectionner seize (16) proverbes akan de livres et d'articles de revues pour nos analyses littéraires et pragmatiques. Les résultats montrent que les figures de style présentes dans les romans, les poèmes et d'autres formes documentaires de la littérature se retrouvent également dans les proverbes akan. Ils révèlent également que les figures de rhétorique dans les proverbes aident le message proverbial à faire appel aux sens humains pour une meilleure compréhension par l'interlocuteur. Le but de cet article est d'examiner certaines figures de style dans les proverbes Akan et ce qu'ils ajoutent au message proverbial.

Mots-clés : proverbe, esthétique, discours, Akan, figures de style

Introduction

The use of proverbs in the African context as a tool for effective communication is undoubtedly inevitable (Owu-Ewie, 2019). The ability of a speaker to intersperse his/her speech with proverbs is a mark of wisdom, oratory as well as communicative competence. In fact, proverbs are seen, more or less, as the spice in a speech without which discourse is tasteless. This explains why the Igbo opine that 'Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten' (Achebe, 2008: 6). These 'spices of speech' are equally used to 'tie a knot around an argument' (Yankah, 1989:111) due to the belief that they are traditional wisdom transmitted from the ancestors to the present generation. Proverbial messages are, therefore, not supposed to be questioned since such an act would amount to questioning ancestral wisdom and legacy. Quite apart from the transmission of sagacity and philosophy of a people, proverbial expressions demonstrate some amount of beauty in respect of lexical and syntactic considerations. In other words, proverbial constructions are not done just like regular sentence formations and that proverb formation takes into cognizance aesthetic considerations which impact grossly on the proverbial message. This beauty could be seen in terms of the images used, their drummy nature as well as their use of rhetoric figures which is the focal point of this research. Proverbs are central to the very existence of the Akan and that it is impossible to understand their philosophy of life without a prior appreciation of their proverbs (Appiah, 2020). The present paper is, therefore, relevant to the extent that it seeks to point out the literaryism of Akan proverbs and their impact on proverbial discourse. It is hoped that this study would help readers appreciate the role of aesthetics in conveying proverbial messages. The essence of aesthetics in Akan proverbs and its role in conveying proverbial messages has not received the needed attention of proverb scholars. To be able to contribute in this regard, we are asking ourselves the following questions: What are the aesthetic elements embedded in Akan proverbs? What is the influence of those aesthetic qualities on the proverbial discourse? Do proverbs also possess the qualities of written literature? Our current work revolves around three hypotheses namely, That the aesthetic elements found in Akan proverbs include the

rhetoric figures, their drummy nature, among others. That the aesthetic features of the proverbs allow for the proverbial message to be better received and acted upon by the interlocutor. That proverbs which are a product of oral literature possess most of the characteristics of written literature.

0.1 Methodology

The present research adopts the qualitative research approach. That is to say that data for the study were gathered from documentary sources such as books, journal articles, master's and doctoral theses, among others which discuss the subject matter of proverbs. We deployed the purposive sampling technique to select sixteen Asante proverbs that, in our estimation, contain highly visible aesthetic features. These proverbs were analyzed from the literary and pragmatic point of view. In addition to this, we also spoke with five traditional leaders who are believed to be experts in proverbial discourse to have a better comprehension of some of the proverbs under discussion.

0.2 Theoretical framework

This work is anchored on the emic approach in respect of the interpretation of the proverbs selected as our corpus. Additionally, the meanings of these proverbs were sought from some traditional rulers from the Fiapre Traditional Authority in Sunyani, Ghana. The emic approach has been deployed to understand the conceptual system of Akan proverbs in order that our observations would be stated as best as we can within the conceptual system of the Akan and their proverbs.

1. A brief overview of the Akan of Ghana

The population of Ghana is made up of ninety (90) ethnic groups (Diaba & Amfo, 2014: 5) whose major ethnic groups are the Akan, the Dagbani, the Ewe, the Ga-Adangbe, the Gurma, the Guan, the Gurunsi, and the Bissa. The Akan are the most dominant ethnic group in terms of population and area (B. Agyemang, C. Asumeng & A. M. Amponsah, 2015; McGee, 2015). In fact, they constitute forty-seven point five percent (47.5%) of the Ghanaian population (2021 Population and Housing Census) occupying much of the southern part of the country. They are divided into thirteen ethnic subgroups (K. Agyekum, 2017) and they include Ashanti, Bono, Ahafo, Fanti, Denkyira, Akyem, Akwamu, Kwahu, Sefwi, Assin, Wassa, Nzema, Akuapem, Buem, Aowin, Banda and Twifo. The word "Akan" refers to the people and also to their language. With the creation of six other new regions in 2019, which brings the number of regions in Ghana to sixteen, the Akan occupy seven of these regions. They are found in the Bono East Region, Bono Region, Ahafo Region, the Western Region, the Eastern Region, the Central Region, and the Ashanti Region. Despite all these ethnic divisions, the Akan peoples are relatively homogeneous with regard to linguistic, social, and cultural traits (J. Brookman-Amisshah, 1971). On the linguistic front, they speak different dialects but these dialects are mutually intelligible having evolved from a common language. The two main variants of the Akan language are Twi and Fante which are neighbouring languages. Fante is a language spoken in the coastal part of Ghana especially in the central region of the country while Twi is spoken by the population in the hinterland whose main economic activity is agriculture

supported by hunting and animal husbandry. Buah (1998) describes the Akan language as the second main language of Ghana apart from English which is the official language. Even in Accra, the capital of Ghana and the most cosmopolitan city in the country where the natives are the Ga, the most used language is the Akan language (Guerini, 2008, Essegbey, 2009, Bibiehome, 2010). According to S. G Obeng (2005), Diaba & Amfo (2014:4), apart from the Akan who speak "Twi" as their mother tongue, half of the population of Ghana use Akan as their mother tongue and it is a lingua franca to two-thirds of this population.

2. Data analyses

The present research centers on sixteen Akan proverbs as presented in the table below. We have attempted a translation of the selected proverbs into the English language in order to allow for the non-Akan to comprehend the message transmitted by them.

2.1 Onomatopoeia

This is a figure of speech in which something is named based on the sound it produces. A number of Akan proverbs phonologically depict this rhetoric figure as shown in the table below:

Table 1 Some Akan proverbs containing onomatopoeia

S/N	Proverb in Akan	Translation into English	
		Superficial meaning	Deeper meaning
1.	Sɛ wote puupuu a, wɔ bi di na ebia a na ɛyɛ koobi nkwan.	If you hear 'puupuu', you too should prepare some fufu to eat because after all, the soup could have been prepared with dried fish.	Not all that glitters is gold.
2.	Obi nse twurodoo mma toa.	Nobody produces the sound 'twurodoo' for the bottle.	No one can serve you better than yourself.

With the first proverb in the table, we observe that the onomatopoeic word is 'puupuu' which is the sound produced by the mortar and pestle when pounding fufu, a staple food of the Akan of Ghana. In fact, the use of the word is carefully calculated for the proverb to have a deep impact on the interlocutor by appealing to his/her senses of hearing, sight and touch, and this allows for the message that follows 'wɔ bi di na ebia a na ɛyɛ koobi nkwan' to be well-received. Among the Akan, 'fufu' is the most important dish, and consequently the one did not eat 'fufu' did not actually eat. It is in a time of distress such as bereavement that the Akan do not eat that food. It is absolutely not unusual to see a family eat it each day, especially in the evenings. If you see that a family has not pounded "fufu" for even a day, you get the impression that something is wrong with them. It can mean poverty and it is shameful. So people go out of their way to pound fufu to create the impression that everything is fine with them. Pounding fufu gives an indication that everything is on the right track, but there are people who pound "fufu" with "koobi" (salted fish) which has no value among the Akan. The question is, "Who will know they made the sauce with koobi?" That is to say, not all that glitters is gold, a poignant message well-communicated. The second proverb also demonstrates some onomatopoeic characteristics when the word 'twurodoo' is employed to indicate the sound produced when liquid a substance such as water or palm-wine is being poured into a bottle. It

is the bottle that produces that sound and not the one pouring the liquid, and this communicates an important message of life which is that no one can act in your stead better than yourself. The use of onomatopoeia is deliberately calculated to give the proverb a high level of vivacity by appealing to our senses of hearing, sight and touch. A practical demonstration of self-reliance is equally shown through the use of this literary device by giving a clear picturesque representation of the message being transmitted.

2.2 Simile

This literary device is employed to establish a similarity between two things or situations by using comparative words or phrases such as ‘like’, ‘as.....as’, ‘more than’, among others in the case of direct comparison. We notice similar forms of comparison in Akan proverbs using such comparative expressions as ‘te sɛ’ (est comme); ‘yɛ sene’ (est mieux que) as in the following proverbs:

Table 2

S/N	Proverb in Akan	Translation into English	
		Superficial meaning	Deeper meaning
1.	Ɔbra te sɛ apaawa, sɛ wobɔ anim na sɛ anyɛ wo dɛ a, sane bɔ akyire.	Life is like a musical cassette, if you play the song on one side and you are not satisfied, play those on the other side.	If we try once and we do not succeed, we should not be discouraged..
2.	Kurotwiamansa ayare aƆn na ɛte sɛ kankane ahaasa.	The tiger which is emaciated is comparable to three hundred foxes.	No matter the fall of a great person, he/she will continue to be great.

Some Akan proverbs containing simile

In the table above, we observe a direct comparison in both proverbs 1 and 2. In proverb 1, for example, images being compared are: ‘*ɔbra*’ (life), and ‘*apaawa*’ (musical cassette) which are two heterogeneous elements. Before the advancement of technology leading to the production of compact discs and other state-of-the-art equipment for playing music, the cassette was often used for that purpose and it has a set of songs in front and at the back. It was possible to be pleased with either the songs in front of the cassette or at the back of it or both. Such is an image being likened to life to indicate that life presents several opportunities to individuals to take advantage of and that one can have a good beginning from the onset or at the end or enjoy a pleasant life throughout. The import of such a comparison could be seen from the fact that the message carried by the proverb is made practical and easy to understand and apply. The second proverb on the table also employs simile to compare two carnivorous animals: the tiger and the fox. The interest of the proverb resides in their sizes by saying that the tiger that has become thin as result of sickness can be compared to three hundred foxes. In spite of the exaggeration contained in the proverb, we reckon that a crucial message is being communicated that great personalities may fall but there will be something about them to admire.

2.3. Metaphor

Metaphor is an implicit form of similarity established between two phenomena without the use of comparative words such as ‘like’. This device is often employed when it is realized that the things being compared strongly possess the characteristics of each other so much so that one could possibly take the place of the other. Some Akan proverbs, such as those in the table below, show these metaphorical features:

Table 3

S/N	Akan proverb	Translation into English	
		Superficial meaning	Deeper meaning
1.	Ohia yɛ adamɔ.	Poverty is madness.	Poverty and insanity are similar.
2.	Sika yɛ mogya.	Money is blood.	Money is a lifeline to mankind.

Some Akan proverbs containing metaphor

Both proverbs in the table establish a direct comparison between two things but do not use ‘like’ in doing so and this shows how much the characteristics in one phenomenon are equally possessed by the other. The first proverb, for instance, compares ‘ohia’ (poverty) and ‘adammɔ’ by categorically asserting that poverty can be equated to insanity. Agyekum (2017) share this worldview when he postulates that ‘...poverty is associated with folly and non-intelligence’. It is assumed that the poor have nothing sensible to offer (p.32). That is to say that among the Akan, the poor is has the same value as the mad person in socio-economic terms as both of them are stigmatized and are not invited to important gatherings. The direct likening of poverty to madness allows for the conditions of the poor to be well appreciated by society since the plight of the mentally unstable can be appreciated by many people.

The second proverb also directly compares ‘sika’ (money) and ‘mogya’ (blood). These two images appear quite divergent superficially but share some key similarities when their semantic attributes are considered. For example, medically, it is impracticable for species belonging to the kingdom animalia group to survive without blood. Complete lack of blood would lead to an extinction of those species if blood is not transfused into them. Such is the image being compared to money in the context of proverb 2 in the table above. The equation of money to blood gives a clear picture of the premium attached to money in the Ghanaian society in general and the Akan society in particular. This form of comparison is significant to the extent that it helps everybody especially the outsider to appreciate the importance of money among the Akan of Ghana.

2.4 Personification

This figure of speech refers to the attribution of human qualities or characteristics to inanimate beings or an abstraction. In other words, those insensate beings are made to behave as though there were human beings. Some Akan proverbs such as those we see in the table below make use of this literary tool to transmit their messages:

Table 4 Some Akan proverbs containing personification

		Translation into English	
S/N	Akan proverb	Superficial meaning	Deeper meaning
1.	Se akokɔ boro nsa a, ne werɛ afiri akorɔma.	If the chicken becomes intoxicated, it forgets about the existence of the hawk.	One can act in an abnormal way in a state of drunkenness.
2.	Se wo tete aduane bɔne ma wo yefono di a, ɔɔ twene ma wo sa.	If you fill your stomach with unwholesome food, it will beat the drum for you to dance.	Every negative action will equally lead to an equally negative reaction.

The two Akan proverbs in the table above show some visible features of personification in several respects. In the first proverb, we are told of the chicken which has become drunk and has consequently lost sight of the presence of its worst foe, the hawk. The personification we find in this proverb is seen when the behavior of drinking alcohol is attributed to the chicken. It is without a doubt that it is only human beings who normally drink alcohol and get intoxicated as a result. The chicken is, therefore, accorded human attributes and that constitutes personification. The relevance of the rhetoric figure used resides in the fact that the message that the alcohol makes one irrational is succinctly made clear through the use of these images: the chicken, the alcohol and the hawk. It is common knowledge that the chicken is in perpetual conflict with the hawk which results in latter snatching the children of the former. In spite of this long-standing rancour between them, the alcohol succeeds in making the chicken forget the danger posed by the hawk. In fact, the proverb in question talks about those take in alcohol to forget about their problems overlooking the fact that drunkenness is a temporary escapist method. The second proverb is also a clear case of personification when it asserts that if you fill your stomach with an unwholesome food, it beats the drum for you to dance. Indeed, the beating of the drum is usually done by human beings and therefore, the stomach has been personified in this case. The use of this literary device in this context is quite significant in that the beating of the drum is part and parcel of the Akan culture and any person rooted in his/her culture or tradition is 'forced' to dance before a traditional music just like the one who eats just anything is forced to dance to the music of his/her stomach.

2.5 Hyperbole

This figure of speech is employed to exaggerate the expression of thought for an aesthetic and communicative effect. This tool can be used to either add to or subtract from the reality depending upon one's intentions for communicating. A number of Akan proverbs such as those we see in the table below make use of hyperbole or over-exaggeration for various communicative reasons.

Tableau 5

		Translation into English	
S/N	Akan proverb	Superficial meaning	Deeper meaning
1.	Nyɛ da a woato boɔ atware Firaw na mpafe si woɔ.	It is not the day that you have successfully thrown a stone across the Volta River you suffer from your shoulder.	The repercussions of an evil act may be long in coming but it will certainly come.
2.	Futukokɔnini yerenom mpensa ahaasa nanso ɔde mfuturo na ɛdware.	The little ground beetle has three thousand three hundred but bathes with the dust.	Polygamy does not resolve the man's problems.

Some Akan proverbs containing hyperbole

Proverbs 1 and 2 in the table above give a clear picture of over-exaggerated situations. When we take into account the first proverb, we observe that realistically speaking, it is impracticable to throw a stone around the Volta River within one day. That represents an impossibility or absurdity because the river under discussion covers a length of 1, 500 kilometres. We can therefore say that what has been said in the proverb is only an exaggeration to drum home a pertinent Akan moral thought that one would be liable for any infraction perpetuated against one's neighbor no matter the length of time it will take for that offense to come into limelight. The significance of the hyperbole in the proverb could be seen from the fact that through this device, the message relating to the length of time an offence would have been committed and the consequent punishment awaiting the offender is concisely conveyed and made practical to the interlocutor. Like the first proverb we just discussed, the second one in the table gives a picture that looks unreal in terms of its likelihood of happening but with the aid of such a literary tool, we get a better understanding of the message the Akan society is communicating using the medium of proverb. The proverb presents the ground beetle as a polygamist having three thousand three hundred wives but unable to find even water to bath. It is worth stating that among the Akan of Ghana, the number 'aduasa' (thirty) and 'apem' (thousand) have an infinite numerical value and are used in situations when reference is being made to an unlimited number of items. Consequently, we find a highly exaggerated situation in the proverb aimed at accentuate the uselessness of polygamy.

2.6 Alliteration and assonance

Alliteration and assonance are a generally intentional repetition of one or more related identical initial sounds. If the repetition of the same syllabic sounds occurs on vowels, that becomes assonance, and if the repetition occurs on consonant sounds, that is alliteration. Apart from making such proverbs easy to communicate with the drum, these figures of speech are, again, employed to underline some crucial pieces of information that need to be taken notice of.

Tableau 6

<i>Translation into French</i>			
S/N	<i>Akan proverb</i>	<i>Superficial meaning</i>	<i>Deeper meaning</i>
1.	Ɛnyɛ matɔ matɔ na wɔde ɔ adeɛ.	It is not the one who says ‘I have bought’, I have bought’ who actually ends up buying.	Action speaks louder than words.
2.	Kaka ne ka ne yɛfunu keka deɛ fanyinam owuo.	Tooth ache, indebtedness, and stomach are just the same as death.	It is sometimes better to die than to suffer too much.

Some Akan proverbs containing alliteration and assonance

We remark from proverb 1 in table 6 that there is a repetition of the consonant sound /t/ in the word ‘matɔ’ which is mentioned three times in the proverb. Another consonant sound /m/ is repeated twice in the same proverb under discussion. It could be seen that the repetition of those consonant sounds render the proverb alliterative. Apart from these, we observe that the vowel sounds /a/ and /ɔ/ appear four times each, and that is assonantic. The repetition of such sounds is carefully calculated to transmit the message that it is not by talking too much and repeating oneself that gets the job done. Alliteration and assonance could, again, be found in proverb 2 of the table above. For example, the sound /k/ is heard five times in the proverb and that is alliteration. Beyond that, we could again see that the sound /a/ is heard three times in the same proverb, and that makes it assonantic. The relevance of the literary devices in proverb 2 is that the proverb establishes the similarities between ‘kaka’ (tooth ache), ‘yɛfunu keka’ (stomach ache) and ‘owuo’ (death) not only in semantic terms but also from phonological perspective. The repetition also depicts the continuous pain a victim of either tooth ache, indebtedness or stomach ache goes through.

2.7 Metonymy

This figure of speech is the identification of a whole object, a concept, a phenomenon by a singular characteristic or a part of the object, the concept or the phenomenon. This literary device can be found in a number of Akan proverbs. Let us consider, for example, the proverbs in the table below:

Table 7

<i>Translation into English</i>			
S/N	<i>Akan proverb</i>	<i>Superficial meaning</i>	<i>Deeper meaning</i>
1.	Nkyene dɛ nti na mako reku yɛn yi.	It is due to the sweetness of salt that pepper is killing us.	The quest for a comfortable life pushes people to work extra hard.
2.	Sɛ etire nteeɛ a, yɛnyae kye soa.	One does not stop wearing the hat as long as the head has not been cut.	One does not stop forging ahead once there is life.

Some Akan proverbs containing metonymy

From the table above, we observe that both proverbs 1 and 2 are metonymic as seen from the images used. In proverb 1, for instance, ‘nkyene’ (salt) is used to represent ‘food’ or any other thing that gives pleasure or satisfaction whereas ‘mako’ (pepper) signifies ‘difficulties’ or ‘pain’. That is to say that the images being used in this proverb are parts representing a much bigger picture. This, in fact, helps to succinctly capture the spirit and letter of the proverbial message being communicated that there is dignity in labour. In proverb 2, ‘etire’ has been used metonymically to represent ‘life’ whereas ‘ɛkye’ in this context signifies ‘labour’ or ‘sweat’. The proverb highlights the need to work conscientiously once there is life. The device used in the two proverbs allows for the proverb to appeal to our senses of taste, sight and touch and also relate it to practical life situations.

2.8 Synecdoche

The rhetoric figure, metonymy, is used for part-for-a-whole substitution. In other words, a part of the object being talked about is used to represent the entirety of that object or phenomenon. A number of Akan proverbs such as the ones in the table below are synecdochical and this influences the comprehension of the messages they communicate.

Table 8

		Translation into English	
S/N	Akan proverb	Superficial meaning	Deeper meaning
1.	Tikorɔ nkɔ agyina.	Une seule tête ne tient pas conseil.	La sagesse ne se trouve pas dans
2.	Tɛkyerɛma nni ayɛ.	La langue est ingrate.	L’humanité est ingrate.

Some Akan proverbs containing synecdoche

In proverb number 1, the word ‘tikorɔ’ is made up of two morphemes: “ti” (the head) and “korɔ” (one). So the head is used to represent the entire human being. The literal translation of this proverb is as follows: “One head does not hold counsel”. In other words, a council is held by several "heads" which in this case represents several people. We have to say that the “head” symbolizes wisdom or intelligence given the scientific fact that the brain is located in the head. The importance of this proverb is that it is better to have consensus-building in making decisions. The relevance of the use of this device in the proverb is seen from the image used ‘the head’ is reflective of the action of thinking. The proverb is also made concise with the use of that part of the body to represent the entire human being. ‘Tɛkyerɛma’ (tongue) as used in proverb 2 represents humanity as the tongue is the part of the body that defines a human being’s nature. Consequently, when we say that the tongue is ungrateful in the context under discussion, we are saying, by inference, that it is humanity that is ungrateful, and that is synecdochical. The use of this literary device allows for an emphasis to be placed on the value of the tongue to humanity in the proverb under discussion.

Conclusion

This article sought to examine the aesthetic aspects of some selected Akan proverbs with the goal of interrogating their influence on the messages communicated by such proverbs. After a careful literary and pragmatic analysis of some selected Akan proverbs, it has come to light that apart from the messages that Akan proverbs communicate, their aesthetic aspect is very present. We have seen that the aesthetic features manifest themselves in the formation of the proverbs, the imagery used, as well as the message transmitted. At the level of their structure, the study shows that figures of speech such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, simile, metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, personification, hyperbole, among others are visible in Akan proverbs and they help proverbial interlocutors to easily visualize the message communicated in order to easily comprehend and keep it in mind for further reflection. We see, ultimately, that the written word is the "child" of the spoken word. It is therefore not surprising that all the qualities that written literature boasts of are found in oral literature as well.

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