"THE SPIRITUAL TURN" Ibn Atha`Illah and The Modern Sufism

Ahmad Sidqi

Uludağ University, Turkey a_sidqi@mail.ugm.ac.id

Abstract

This article discusses the philosophical dimension of post-modern societies. It examines the champion of rationalities of modern human beings and contends its contemporary limits. It argues that the modern rational philosophies that over-simplify the meaning "being" in metaphysical form has led to the civilizational crisis. In religious dimension, modern human has been sacrificing their inner spiritual dimension of humanity. As a response to this crisis, modernity has initiated the birth of "spiritual turn" that modern human tries to reinvent their spirituality, mainly through Islamic Sufism. This article further examines the significance of Sufi concepts of the 14th century Sufi master Ibn Atha`illah (1259-1310). Examining his Sufi concepts from the lights of post-modern philosophy as panacea for modern diseases, this article found that the concept of spiritual knowledge (ma'rifat) is an essential concept as transcending the limits of rationality and materiality of modern philosophy.

[Artikel ini mendiskusikan dimensi filsafat pada masyarakat pasca-moderen dengan mengevaluasi kembali dominasi rasionalitas dan batas rasionalitas pada masyarakat modern. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa filsafat rasional modern, yang pada dasarnya menolak segala bentuk "ada" dalam bentuknya yang metafisik, telah menyebabkan krisis peradaban. Pada aspek keagamaan, manusia modern telah mengorbankan sisi spiritualitas pada dimensi kemanusian mereka. Sebagai respon atas krisis inilah, modernitas akhirnya menemui arus baliknya dengan "spiritual turn"; upaya menemukan kembali

spiritualitas, utamanya melalui Sufisme. Artikel ini kemudian akan dengan saksama menjelaskan konsep penting dalam Sufisme yang dilahirkan oleh seorang mursyid abad ke-14, Ibn Atha`illah (1259-1310). Dengan mengkaji konsep sufinya—melalui pendekatan filsafat pasca-modern—sebagai solusi atas persoalan modernitas, artikel ini menemukan bahwa konsep ma'rifat adalah kunci dalam sufisme. Ma'rifat menjadi bentuk diskursus sufi yang mampu melampaui batas rasionalitas dan materialitas pada filsafat modern]

Keywords: Modernism, Sufism, Ibn Atha`illah

Introduction

Human being is a unique God's creation. Their rational abilities are amazing, but at the same time destructive. Modern human being with the champion of rationality has enjoyed an accelerated achievement throughout the history of mankind, but contemporary also facing the destruction of modern selves. Modern human tend to absolutely rely on their rationality whereas sacrificing their inner and spiritual dimension of selves. As its expense, modern human fall into -what I call as- the nihilism that tends to negate "the ultimate reality."

A contemporary scholar and theologian, J. Donald Walter argues that the twentieth-century sciences had blessed modern human with an abundant of rashness material and expanded the horizons of their rational capacities. At the same time, modernity has sacrificed the anxiety to the human soul and gradually removed the inner dimension of humanity; spiritualities and ethics. The modernity champion gradually began to erode the values of truth, honor and ethical subjects which serve as important pillars of civilization. The modern crises of humanity, he further argues, particularly emerge because of ideological battle and the

¹ Abdillah Muhammad Marzuqi, "Konsep Pembebasan dalam Kitab al-Hikam karya Ibnu Atha'illah: Tinjauan Filsafat Mistik," *thesis*, Yogyakarta: Faculty of Philosophy UGM, 2011, p. 16.

massive invasion of modern science that led to civilizational confusion.²

Rationalism is the foundation of modernity. It particularly believes in unlimited human capacity to think rationally and the erosion of "irrationality" which is clearly reflected through the famous dictum of a famous philosopher Rene Descartes Cogito Ergo Sum. Rational truth is the foundation of modern civilisation with which logic and reason could exchange the belief and truth. Rationalism is convinced that anthropocentrism could lead to civility, in contrast to irrationality of pre-modern world.³ Religion and spirituality were particularly conceived as the characteristics of pre-modern society and should be abandoned.⁴ As consequences of modernity, modern human has to face multidimensional crises. As Emmanual Wora argues, the rationalism has plunged human into a complex and global crisis of social live, mainly environmental crisis.⁵ Another scholar, Seyyed Hosein Nasr further argues that modernity has led human to the crisis of spirituality. Modernity demands a secular person that is detached from their basic spiritual being. Thus, it is not exaggeration to say that modernity has incited "the plight of modern men"6

The aforementioned crises contemporarily find its turned-wave, mainly when modern human reinvent their losing inner dimension. They particularly find spirituality as the key answer to the modern civilization crises. In Indonesian Islam-scape, the wave of "spiritual turn" is prevalent among the middle-class and urban Muslims. According to Julia Day Howell, amid the impact and crises of modernity, they turn

² J. Donald Walters, *Crises in Modern Thought: Menyelami Kemajuan Ilmu Pengetahuan dalam Lingkup Filsafat dan Hukum Kodrat*, trans. B. Widhi Nugraha (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2003), p. 1.

³ Peter A Bertocci, *Introduction to Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. I (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1951), p. 54.

⁴ Ahmad Sidqi, Filsafat Ada Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Jakarta: LAWAN, 2013), p. 1.

 $^{^{5}}$ Emanuel Wora, Perennialisme: Kritik atas Modernisme dan Posmodrnisme (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2006), p. xi.

⁶ Seyyed Hosein Nasr, *Islam dan Nestapa Manusia Modern*, trans. Anas Mahyudin (Bandung: Pustaka, 1983).

to "urban Sufism" that assemble modernity and spirituality at the same time. Through the sufi congregation of majelis zikir, majelis ta'lim, and more professionalized sufi institutes, urban masses perform Sufi chanting (zikir) and commemoration (wirid) in five-stars hotels. They particularly aim to demise the impacts of modernity through the practice of tazkiyat al-nafs (purification of selves). The wave of "spiritual turn" further extends also to the lower middle-class, particularly among lay Muslims, in sub-urban and rural areas across Indonesia. Regardless their organizational background, be they members of the reformist Muhammadiyah or the traditionalist NU, Indonesian Muslim witnessed the proliferation of "spiritual turn".⁷

This article uses the "spiritual-turn" as a key concept explaining the proliferation of *sufi* practices among modern subjects. It particularly examines the Ibn Atha`illah's philosophical *Sufism* which, I argue, forms as the most acceptable interpretation of *sufism* among modern society. Unlike escapist *sufi* teaching, such as *shadiliyya* sufi,⁸ that encourage its

⁷ Sufims developed by the Muhammadiyah is different from the NU. The Sufism of Muhammadiyah includes: first, the teachings of Muhammadiyah Sufism are based on the pure monotheism. Second, Sufism of Muhammadiyah is practiced in a sharia framework, based on the Qur'an and Hadith. Third, the substance of Sufism in the perspective of Muhammadiyah is the noble character and must be realized in daily life. Fourth, the orientation of Muhammadiyah's Sufism emphasizes the dimensions of charity, social praxis, and displace from the theory and solve by practicing. Fifth, Muhammadiyah Sufism presented teachings that were adapted to the spirit of modernity so that it deserved to be called as modern Sufism. Sixth, Sufism of Muhammadiyah was expressed more active and dynamic style. A Sufi might not drape but must be actively worked and interacted with the community. Seventh, Muhammadiyah Sufism away from philosophical Sufism discourse which was had the potential to invite debate. Finally, Muhammadiyah was of the view that did not have to be members of a tarekat which in practice had a centric teacher. See, Rubaidi, "Reorientasi Ideologi Urban Sufism di Indonesia terhadap Relasi Guru dan Murid dalam Tradisi Generik Sufisme pada Majelis Shalawat Muhammad di Surabaya," Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam, Vol. 5, No. 2, December 2015, pp. 296-296; Biyanto, "The Typology of Muhammadiyah Sufism: Tracing its Figures' Thoughts and Exemplary Lives," Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies," Vol. 7, No. 2, 2017, pp. 221-222.

⁸ Sheikh Abu al-Hasan ash-Shadhili established his shadiliyya sufi order and called his followers to refrain from the world and exercise an isolated contemplative life. It

practitioners to refrain from modern lives, Ibn Atha`illah invite Muslim participation in public lives. His *sufi* concept of *ma'rifat* is a key answer to the modern problems without being excluded from modernity itself.

Ibn Atha'illah: Sufism, Modernism and Post-Modernism Critics

The Egyptian Sufi master (*murshid*) Ibn Atha`illah (709H/1309M) is an important sufi who reformed shadilliya Sufi order. He is known as the third Sufi-sheikh (master) within the shadiliyya Sufi order (tarekat), 9 naming after the founder of the order Abu al-Hasan ash-Shadhili (1196-1258), and his Andalusian successor, Abu Abbas Al Mursi (1219-1281). Ibn Atha`illah was the first shadiliyya murshid who successfully compiled main teachings, messages, prayers (dkhir) of shadiliyya sufi order. 10 Ibn Atha`illah was a key figure in the shadiliyya Sufi order, but his influences go beyond the limit of the order and Sufism in general. He was also known a scholar of Maliki school of Islamic law (madhab) and a theologian who called for "returning to the way of the pious forebears (salaf)." To do so, he tried to reconcile the tension between Islamic theology and Sufism, a heavily-debated issue which often led to excommunication (takfir) between Muslim theologians and Sufi scholars. He criticized Muslim theologians because of their particular emphases on rational deliberation, excessive formalism and literalism as well as exoteric dimension while neglecting the spiritual dimension the religion. On the hand, he contends

was better for them to lead a contemplative life in their worldly professions. According to him, clothing reflects social status, was the caused as well as a sign of "rejection of beings." Seyyed Hossein Nasr [ed.], *Ensiklopedi Tematis Spiritualitas Islam* (Bandung: Mizan, 2003), p. 40-41.

⁹ Established by a Moroccan *sufi* Abu al-Hasan ash-Shadhili in the 13th century, the *shadiliyya* Sufi order developed and became popular particularly among middle-class families, businessmen, officials, intellectuals and civil servants. The order is known for its loose membership and less-burdened rituals. Contemporarily, the order has attracted many famous individuals, both in the Muslim and western world, such as the 20th Muslim reformer Muhammad Abduh and the western perennial philosopher Fritjof Schuon. Budi Santoso," Dimensi Sosial dalam *Tarekat Shadiliyah*," *Thesis* (Yogyakarta: Fakultas Filsafat UGM, 2005), p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

the *sufi* that tends to teach asceticism and spiritual wandering, while leaving exoteric aspects of the religion.¹¹

Particularly important to the project of spiritual reform is Ibn Atha`illah's *al-Hikam*. It is a book on reformed *Sufism* and is a collection of aphorisms. ¹² The book of *Al-Hikam* is currently widely read in many settings, crossing the boundaries of *tarekat* groups and becomes a mustread book in many traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Java. For Martin Ling, *al-Hikam* is indeed one of important sources for the study of reformed Sufism. ¹³ *Al-Hikam* compromises of 262 aphorisms, divided into 25 chapters, 4 treatises and 34 invocations (*munajat*). The book partly discusses the issue of theology and *Sufism* and provides its readers a practical guidance for Sufi practitioners. ¹⁴

According to Victor Danner, the book of *al-Hikam* partly contains Ibn Atha`illah's defense against the excommunication of Sufism, particularly the doctrine the unity of beings (*wihdah al-wujūd*) by the famous speculative Sufi Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) through his *Futuhāt al-Makkiyah* and *Fushūsh al-Hakām*. He was in favor of Ibn Arabi's thoughts while jurist scholars and a theologian Ibn Taimiyah (1263-1328) pointed Ibn Arabis as a deviant. Thus, as Peter Nwyia argues, *al-Hikam* is indeed "the last miracle of *Sufism*" worked on the shores of the Nile, and this miracle belonged to the *Shadiliyya* Sufi order. Danner further argues that *al-Hikam* contains of simple aphorism which in turn makes readers easier to understand the text and invokes popularity of the book. 17

¹¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr [ed.], Ensiklopedi Tematis..., p. 43.

¹² Victor Danner, *Sufisme Ibnu Athaliah, Kajian Kitab Al-Hakam*, trans. Roudlon (Yogyakarta: Risalah Gusti, 2003), p. 33.

¹³ Martin Ling, *Ada Apa dengan Sufi?* trans. Achmad Maimun (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Sufi, 2004), p. 155.

¹⁴ Victor Danner, Sufisme Ibnu Athaliah..., p. 36-42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (USA: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 251.

¹⁷ Victor Danner, Sufisme Ibnu Atha`illah..., p. 34-25.

Sufism and "Disenchantment of the World"

Derived from the term *modernus*, scholars often locate the word modernism as synonymous to the word modernity. Despite the close association between the two words, the term modern particularly refers to a historical self-awareness of a particular person or era, and marked the existence of different knowledge between present conditions and past conditions, whereas the word modernity is the practicality and concrete elements of modernism itself.¹⁸ Modernism and/or modernity is particularly characterized by rationality, naturalism, and empiricism, in contrast to the speculative realm of religion.¹⁹ Likewise, modern humans were 'creatures' who were jolted from their fascination with nature so that the mentality of participation immersing humans in the processes of the cosmos became an attitude of distortion. The "animate nature" disappeared through the process of desacralization and continued to the breakdown of social institutions of religious symbols through the process of secularization. So that humans were no longer inhabit socio-mystical sphere, but it rather the transcends society and its traditional wheels.²⁰ In other words, modernity stands on the extreme belief in rationalism and materialism which tend to locate religion and spirituality at the very margin of civilization. Modernity has detached human from his basic humanity as spiritual persons.

For Ibn Atha'illah doctrine, humans cannot be ruled out the "Being" from their life and must at the same time submit to human nature as a human (*nas*) and servant (*abd*). This means that humans as servants have to obey and submit to the Creator: God. Ibn Atha'illah had given warnings to humans through the expression of wisdom that

¹⁸ Emanuel Wora, *Perennialisme:...*, p. 37.

David Ray Griffin, Tuhan & Agama dalam Dunia Postmodern, trans. Admiranto, A. Gunawan (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2005), p. 11.

 $^{^{20}\,}$ F. Budi Hardiman, Melampaui Positivisme dan Modernitas (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2003) p. 73

humans wanted to eradicate human qualities could be hinder servitude.²¹ What was happening in the context of modern humans was precisely strengthening human traits which can be further obscure the vision of servitude to God: the ego. This is what then becomes the root of the humanitarian crisis when people think that ego is the main, which in the next process even expanded, became the concept of mastery over the others. Ibn Atha`illah had also repeatedly warned through his *al-Hikam* on the prohibition to be too obsessed with the future, because this was a form of human mixing of God's affairs and preventing humans from doing their best at this time. Ibn Atha`illah also forbade humans not to overdo in dealing with what God had guaranteed to him, namely the problem of life. Because, it was closely related to economic action and was considered to be able to make humans being obsessed with the worldly affairs.

Griffin explained that the erosion of faith in God among modern human was partially because of two: *first*, it was caused by a modern view that had a formal commitment to be free and required all the rejection of beliefs could limit the human freedom. *Second*, the assumption of basically unit of nature was mechanically understood, which then lead to the thought that the perception of the world outside of human self was limited to the sensory perception²² Griffin further believes that the human's essence had been forgotten by modern humans, at the same time was also forgetting the essence of God who had been brought people fallen into the material categories. At this level humans had been fallen into the deepest abyss, no longer a very special and high-ranking creature of God. The assumption that humans occupied a special place only applied if humans were able to carry out servitude tasks to the God, becoming the Caliph (*khalifa*) on earth who brought peace and well-beings.

²¹ Abdillah Muhammad Marzuqi," Mistik Pembebasan Ibnu Athaliah," *Thesis* (Yogyakarta: Fakultas Filsafat UGM, 2011), p. 33.

²² David Ray Griffin, Tuhan & Agama..., p. 78-84.

The Postmodernism Critics

Postmodernism was generally understood as a phenomenon of criticism against modernism. An Indonesian philosopher Frans Magnis Suseno explained that postmodernism had literally meaning "postmodernism." An "ism" which was echoed to replace modernism. However, according to Suseno, this assumption was nothing but a fraud of their spreaders was the cause of postmodernism that actually a typical symptom of modernity. The obsession with "postmodernism" with "little stories" could be used as the legitimacy of strong oppression against the weak. Not only the removal of big stories, but also the deconstruction of all ideological claims could be the task and serviced of a post-modernistic approach.²³

The prefix "post" in the term of postmodernism, was still being much debatable; does "post" have meaning the termination of total thought relations from all modern patterns (Lyotard)?; Or is it just a correction of certain aspects of modernity (Griffin)?; Is everything modern has ideological view and immoral view, that postmodern is actually a radical form of modernity has suicide committed (Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault)? Or precisely modernity has become self-conscious (Giddens)? Or is it even a stage supply for the unfinished modernism project (Habermas)?²⁴ The preceding views demonstrate that one of the most dominant basic characteristics of postmodernism is diversity or plurality, even though in a very extreme level. In addition to this plurality, postmodernism also believes in relativism of truth.

Perry Anderson argues that postmodernism as the term and idea was born at the periphery rather than at the center of the cultural system. Both did not come from Europe or America, but in the Latin world in the 1930s, a generation before their appearance in Britain or America. It

²³ Frans Magnis Suseno, *Pijar-Pijar Filsafat: Dari Gatholoco ke Filsafat Perempuan, dari Adam Müller ke Postmodernisme* (Yogyakarta: Kanisisus, 2005), p. 218.

²⁴ Bambang Sugiharto, *Postmodernisme: Tantangan bagi Filsafat* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1996), p. 16.

was Federico de Onis from Unamuno and Ortega who put forward the term *postmodernismo* to describe the conservative return to modernism.²⁵ However, postmodernism is not fully defined because it is too diverse and paradoxical, because it grows from a seed containing various diseases: modernism. Even postmodernism is a symptom of modernity, because modernistic thought always gives birth to postmodernistic thinking and therefore, postmodernism is clearly not postmodern. Between modernism and postmodernism parallel relations occur; modernism without postmodernism is flawed, likewise postmodernism will be flawed without modernism. In conclusion, the origin of modernism criticism is stayed on modernistic and criticism of the permanent postmodernisms to the postmodernistic, both modernism or postmodernism are indeed modern.²⁶

Furthermore, while comparing elements of modernism and postmodernism, Griffin recalls the proliferation of mysticism. Modern human start to seek for protection through truth-finding and perennialism occupied the position as a critique of individualist modernism. As postmodern element, perennialism seek to return to pre-modern thoughts.²⁷ This truth-finding is particularly a response to, as Fritjof Capra identifies, the socio-cultural transformation of contemporary society, the collapse of the age of fossil fuels and the paradigmatic shift, namely from materialistic, scientific and mechanical paradigm towards holistic and organic paradigm.²⁸ Modern human turs to mysticism through metaphysical construction of "Being"; i.e. God.

Mysticism basically defends the central place of metaphysics in human life without ignoring other more specific and empirical views. The mysticism believes that there is a "Being" on which the entire universe is

²⁵ Perry Anderson, *Asal-Usul postmodernitas* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2008), p.

²⁶ Frans Magnis Suseno, *Pijar-Pijar Filsafat...*, p. 218.

²⁷ David Ray Griffin, *Tuhan & Agama...*, p. 38-39.

²⁸ Fitjrof Capra, *Titik Balik Peradaban,* trans. M. Thoyibi (Yogyakarta: Bentang Budaya, 1997), p. 15-17.

supported—reality cannot be understood rationally, especially through the empirical evidence—thus metaphysics is still believed to be a matrix of thought which can be a container or the basis for other thoughts. If the whole is in a part and this part in it, means that metaphysics is very specific knowledge appeared, and so all the knowledge is in the metaphysics. On the extreme side, modernity has led human of falling into the radical individualistic humanism, with the glorification of reason or reason ability as its main characteristic. The Modern humans believe that there is nothing which cannot be overcome and understood by their intellect. Thus, that everything is *de facto* not revealed the mystery reasonably, it is nonsense or never exists. Yet the awareness of the "Being", which is the basis and support of all things is a central mystical doctrine.

There has been the rise of mysticism amid the transition towards postmodern world. Mysticism offers a depth meaning to the human life. The promise of holistic and cyclical vision of postmodernity find its way through mysticism that also offers relativity and plurality. Nevertheless, unlike the plurality of postmodernism, mystical plurality is integrated to the plurality. Mysticism always believes that there must be a fundamental reality ensuring the interrelation between form a plurality in various aspects. Each part in itself is a whole guaranteed to the integrity by a certain basis, and these parts in these forms is a larger whole integrated through another basis. Mysticism believes that there must be a basis from everything that exists. The basis is the divine reality or the Divine, which is the source of all existence. And because relying on the principle of unity, universality is indeed the principle to understand the "Being."

Secularization is another challenge to spirituality, thus Islamic spiritual doctrines should be defined as the answer to strengthen human identity amid the modern confusion. Secularization accelerated the disenchantment of the world and destroyed the esoteric principle of religion. Thus, this leads to imbalance expression of two important dimensions of religion; the exoteric and the esoteric. In the secularization

thesis, secularization sacrificed the esoteric aspect of religion.²⁹ Furthermore, modern human has to face also the challenge of social crises because of rapid transformation of social lives. As Levi Strauss argues, human being must give an account to the absolute humanistic attitude, which ruled since the Renaissance, and apparently originated from the major religions in the West which had very catastrophic consequences. For several centuries, warfare, extermination, concentration camps, the eradication of various types of living things, and the impoverishment of nature were caused by humanism. The excessive attitude continuously became a threat to humans, namely trust in the power of themselves and controlled everything.³⁰ Other modern threats also include war, the over-population, and environmental crisis. Experts usually put population growth as the first threat which then triggers environmental pollution and war.³¹ It cannot be denied that the current human population is, or even has, caused serious problems. Increasing human population brings the consequences the more resources required by humans to meet their needs. This means that humans are increasingly entering into fierce competition for survival which often leads to injustice and discrimination.

Spirituality on the other hand offers the opposite to the modernity. Islamic spiritualism or *sufism* offers an immanent and inner truth that secure human condition. Thus, it is reasonably true that amid modern crises, impacted subjects of modernity seek for protection through spirituality. As Annemarie Schimmel told while teaching at Harvard University, one of her students put forward a question of her religion to which she responded that "*sufism* is her religion." What do you know about *Sufism*?" Schimmel replied. "I have read Rumi and done dance his performed," said the student while explaining that he had read Jalaludin

²⁹ Ahmad Sidqi, Filsafat Ada..., p. 101-106.

 $^{^{30}}$ Levi Strauss, $\it Mitos, \, Dukun, \, dan \, Sihir, \, trans. Agus Cremers (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1997), p. 59.$

³¹ Jacob Teuku (ed.), *Peran Cendekiawan dalam Menggalang Perdamaian Dunia* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan, 1994), p. 11.

Rumi's work through his English translation. But when Schimmel asked if he knew about Islam, he answered "no." Likewise, when alluded to about the Prophet Muhammad, the student also did not know. In the next, Schimmel stated that people in the West better knew about Rumi than Islam, whereas the Qur'an is often perceived as a Western problem.³²

Conclusion

The doctrines of reformed *Sufism* by Ibn Atha`illah through his al-Hikam finds the contextualization of the phenomenon of "spiritual turn" in post-modern. The dominance of rationality which tends to ignore spirituality and cause a crisis of civilization has led to awareness to return the esoteric dimension. In this case, Ibn Atha'illah argues that the central of spirituality concept are understanding of absolute love for all God's creations, both human and nature, and the belief in God's will at its best. These resort as a holistic solution amid the major transformation of modern world. To do so, human should return to the inner self and find the ultimate reality (God). Accordingly, a Sufi should be aware to his/her self and express his/her spirituality to liberate human from the multi-dimensional crises of contemporary world.

³² Ahmad Najib Burhani (ed.) *Manusia Modern Mendamba Allah*, *Renungan Tasanuf Positif* (Jakarta: Penerbit IIMan & Penerbit Hikmah, 2002), p. v.

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