

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Robin Hanbury-Tenison

Veteran explorer Robin Hanbury-Tenison has been pushing back the frontiers of far-flung travel for six decades. Early in his career he took hundreds of black & white photographs that he thought had become lost. Now they have resurfaced in an important exhibition and accompanying book

Interview by Nick Smith

It's a strange confession coming from a man whose photographic exhibition is currently hanging in the National Theatre on the South Bank, but Robin Hanbury-Tenison doesn't carry a camera with him these days. 'I try not to. Maybe it's my age, but for the past few decades I've felt that it is more important to look and listen, think and understand, than it is to snap away and record.'

It's lucky for us that he didn't think this way 50 years ago, but for one of the 20th century's greatest explorers, times have changed. As we walk around the exhibition space named after the actor Laurence Olivier, Hanbury-Tenison guides me through the 45 black & white prints that make up 'Echoes of a Vanished World: A Traveller's Lifetime in Pictures.' What immediately springs to mind is that this is a journey back in time and place, to a golden era when explorers slung 35mm film cameras around their necks and brought home their film to be processed months after the exposures had been taken. It was a time when the value of photography in remote places didn't go far beyond that of showing people the wonders of the world. Expedition photography, if it had a style at all, was direct and to the point, a characteristic Hanbury-Tenison's photographs share with the man himself. 'People these days always want to ask me what make my camera was, or what aperture or speed settings I used and things like that. But to be honest, some of these shots are so ancient I can hardly remember taking them.'

What Hanbury-Tenison does at least remember is how he came by his trusty expedition camera during his first overland expedition from London to Ceylon in 1957. It was

a fact revealed to him after riffling through his old diaries while preparing for the exhibition. He found an entry that read simply 'stopped in Germany and bought good camera.' He's included the manuscript in a parallel exhibition of artefacts that he's gathered from the corners of the world: weaponry, headdresses and utensils, among others. 'I think it's rather funny. But it also shows that the emphasis placed on travel photography was different in those days.'

The camera in question was probably a Pentax, as there are several photographs from that era of a young Hanbury-Tenison with one slung around his neck. He doesn't disagree. It's just that it's not very important to him. What matters, he says, is that the images taken at the start of his career, as he ventured into the unknown wildernesses of Amazonia, Indonesia and the Sahara, are a window into the past. These are vital snapshots of a world changed beyond recognition or lost forever. 'I never thought they would be this valuable.'

Hanbury-Tenison is one of the undisputed giants of 20th century British exploration. This was confirmed back in 1982 when the *Sunday Times* described him as 'the greatest explorer of the past 20 years'. Such is his affinity with tribal people that in 1969 he was one of the founders of the human rights organisation Survival International, which he is still involved with to this day. 'Well, it started life in my flat, and it was my booze, so I naturally became president.'

Now in his mid-seventies, he tends to concentrate more on his career as a writer than active exploration, although his travel commitments are still 'ludicrously wide-ranging'. He's produced more than a dozen books about his expeditions, as well as having edited several influential anthologies of exploration-themed literature, including *The Oxford Book of Exploration* and his recent *The Great Explorers*. 'For some reason, until now I've never really thought of myself as a photographer, although there is a strong tradition of explorers bringing back imagery from far afield that dates back to the days way before photography was invented. In those days explorers took artists with them.'

Scanning around the exhibition, taking in the ethnic portraiture and landscapes that make up the bulk of the Hanbury-Tenison's imagery, I'm reminded of the school of expeditionary photography made famous by one of his mentor figures, Wilfred Thesiger. Famous for his black



& white shots taken in the Empty Quarter of Arabia on an old Leica, Thesiger was a talented amateur who brought postcards of an exotic world to a general public that was yet to gain access to overseas travel. While of no great artistic importance, Thesiger's was the photography of opportunity and anthropological insight, where the true value of the imagery was the subject matter rather than any subjective excellence. Hanbury-Tenison accepts the comparison, but only to a point: 'I might have said that before preparing this exhibition. I'm modest about my abilities as a photographer. But recent events have changed my mind slightly.'

By recent events, Hanbury-Tenison means the rediscovery of his 'lost' photography, some of which he'd not seen for half a century. 'Of course, I knew that I'd taken the photos. Many of them have been used in books over the years. But what I didn't know was that some of the negatives still existed tucked away in envelopes in old box files. And

I certainly didn't know how important they might be.' He tells me that by the time an expedition returned to the UK there would be 'so much stuff, that inevitably a lot of it would get chucked away.' To discover that the makings of a coherent portfolio had survived was 'fortunate.'

After much 'digging about', Hanbury-Tenison took what negatives he could gather together to his friend and neighbour Graham Ovenden, a fine art photographer and an expert on Victorian black & white photography. Ovenden, seeing the potential in 'these very old and battered images', did some basic restoration and editing, in 'what he assures me are legitimate tidying up processes. He's very scrupulous in what can and can't be done and also very skilled. I genuinely believe he turned my photographs into something rather beautiful in a way that allowed them to tell a story again. And if only for that reason, I think that this set of pictures goes somewhat beyond being just an anthropological record of a way of life that has vanished.'

Hanbury-Tenison's early travel photographs have an old-fashioned atmosphere to them that goes beyond the pleasure of looking at well-executed work shot on film. And while Ovenden says that he has a knack of capturing 'form and the moment,' Hanbury-Tenison also seems to

have caught the pre-modern world with quite effortless nostalgia. It's a collection that could be straight out of the basement of the Royal Geographical Society, and has a real ring of anthropological authority to it.

Hanbury-Tenison attributes this to luck again. 'You see, when I met many of these tribal people, quite often it was the first time they'd ever met people like me. I just tried to get to know them and after a few days I hoped that they'd let me take photographs. I didn't have to pay them or anything like that. I think some of that empathy and willingness comes through. But it's awfully unfair on the people who came along later, because before long the tribal people had become fed up with being photographed. Later on, photographers encouraged the idea that tribal people could make a few dollars from the process, or created a general sense of hostility towards photography. I think these people got fed up with having lenses thrust in their faces. I got my shots because I was there first.'

He tells me that there were moments on his expeditions when he wished he had been more of a professional photographer. He vividly recalls being taken prisoner by Afghan horsemen who were 'simply delightful people'. For Hanbury-Tenison the problem was that during the incident he only managed to take one shot of an Afghan boy 'and it's not of good enough quality to be in the book or the expedition.' And yet, despite photography playing second fiddle to other objectives on his expeditions, he makes clear that he took the issue seriously in those days. 'I felt a responsibility to come back with imagery. But the problem, as ever, is you need to balance that with sensitivity to the people you meet. Very often they don't want a camera in their face, which means that very often you come away without the shot you wanted.' ■

Robin Hanbury-Tenison's exhibition 'Echoes of a Vanished World: A Traveller's Lifetime in Pictures' is showing at the Olivier Exhibition Foyer at the National Theatre in London until 10 March 2013





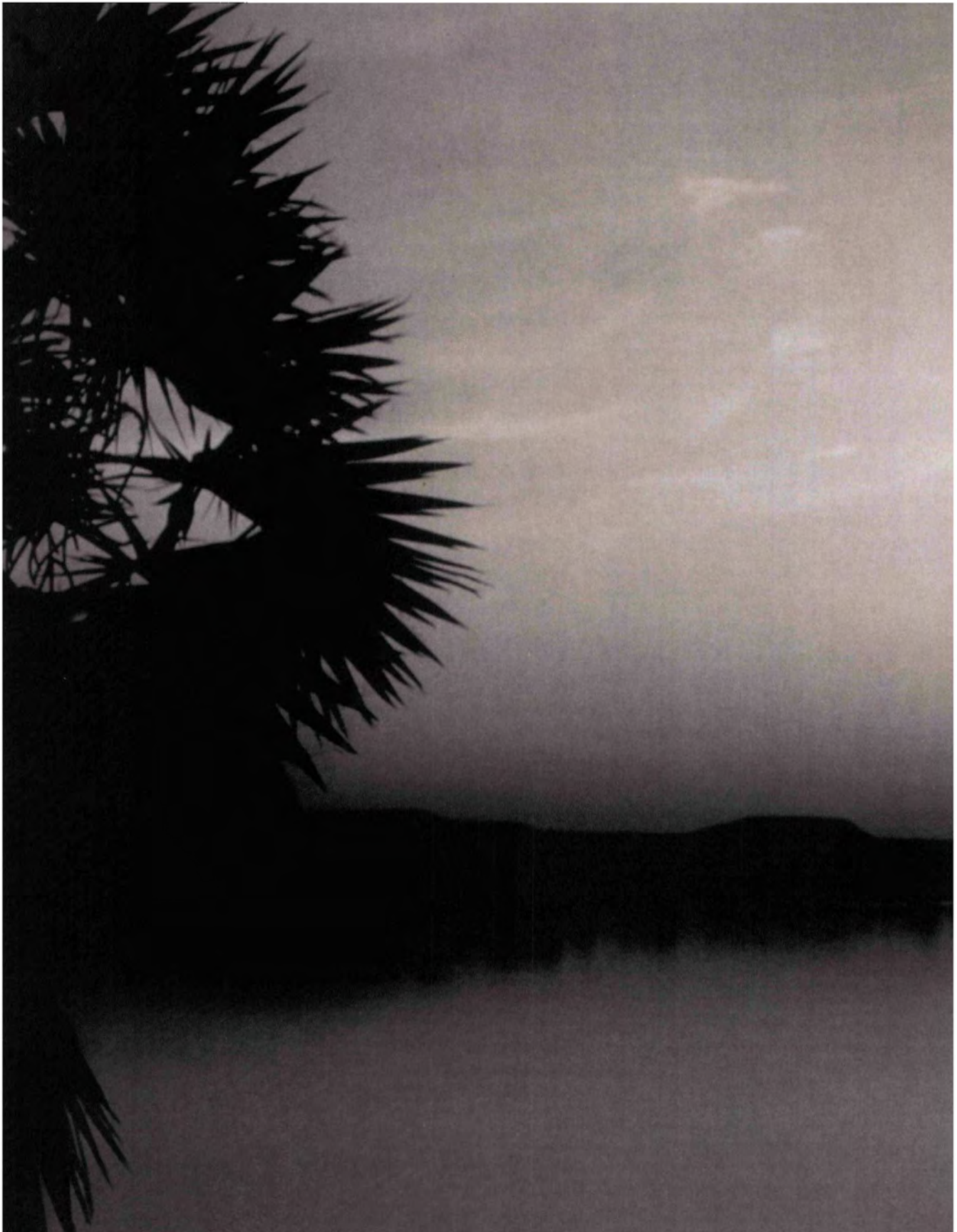
opposite top Karaja men with
omarura tattoos – Brazil, 1958

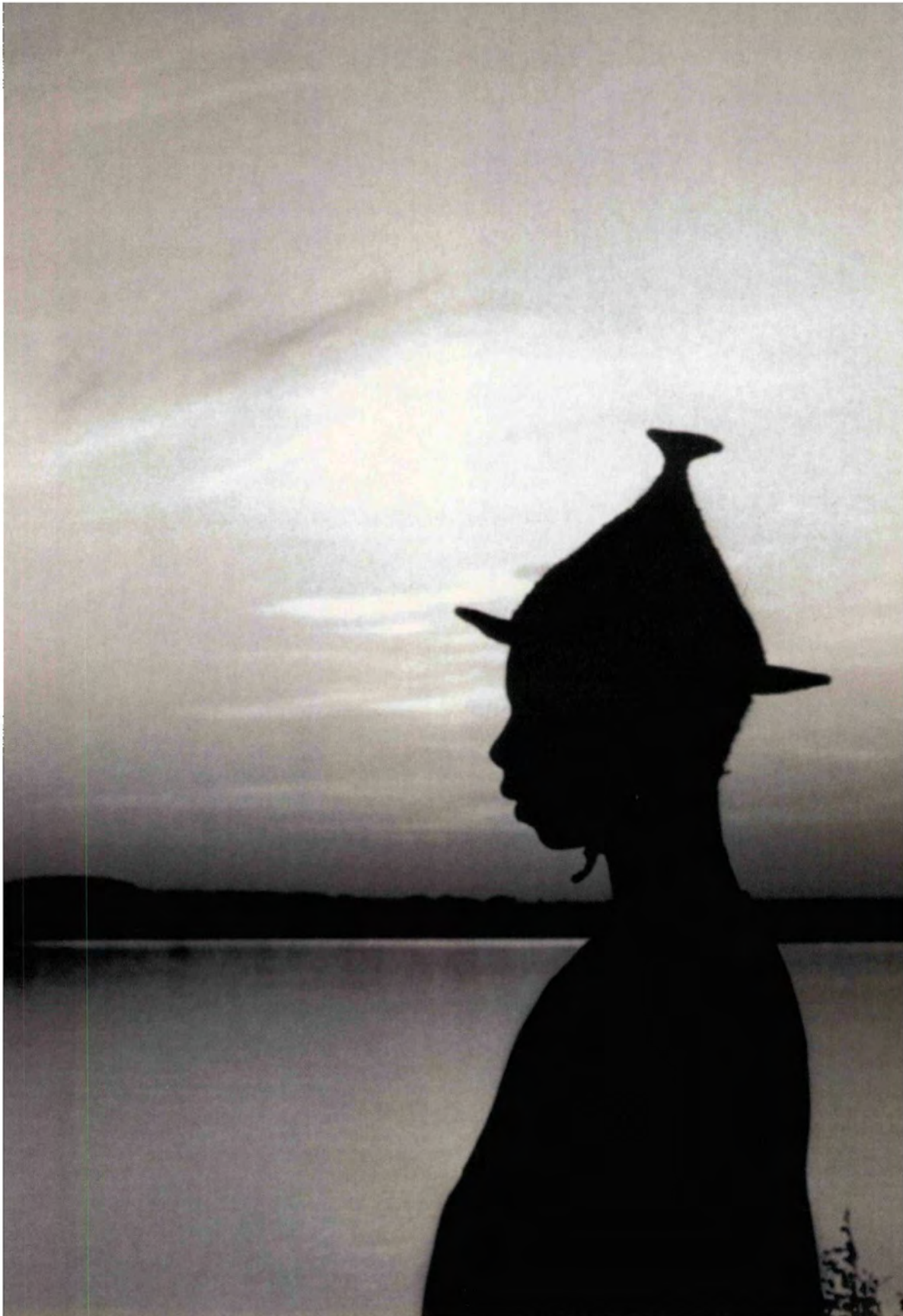
opposite bottom Robin
Hanbury-Tenison (photo
by Nick Smith)

below left. This colossal
sandstone Thandawgya was
destroyed by an earthquake
in 1975 – Burma, 1958

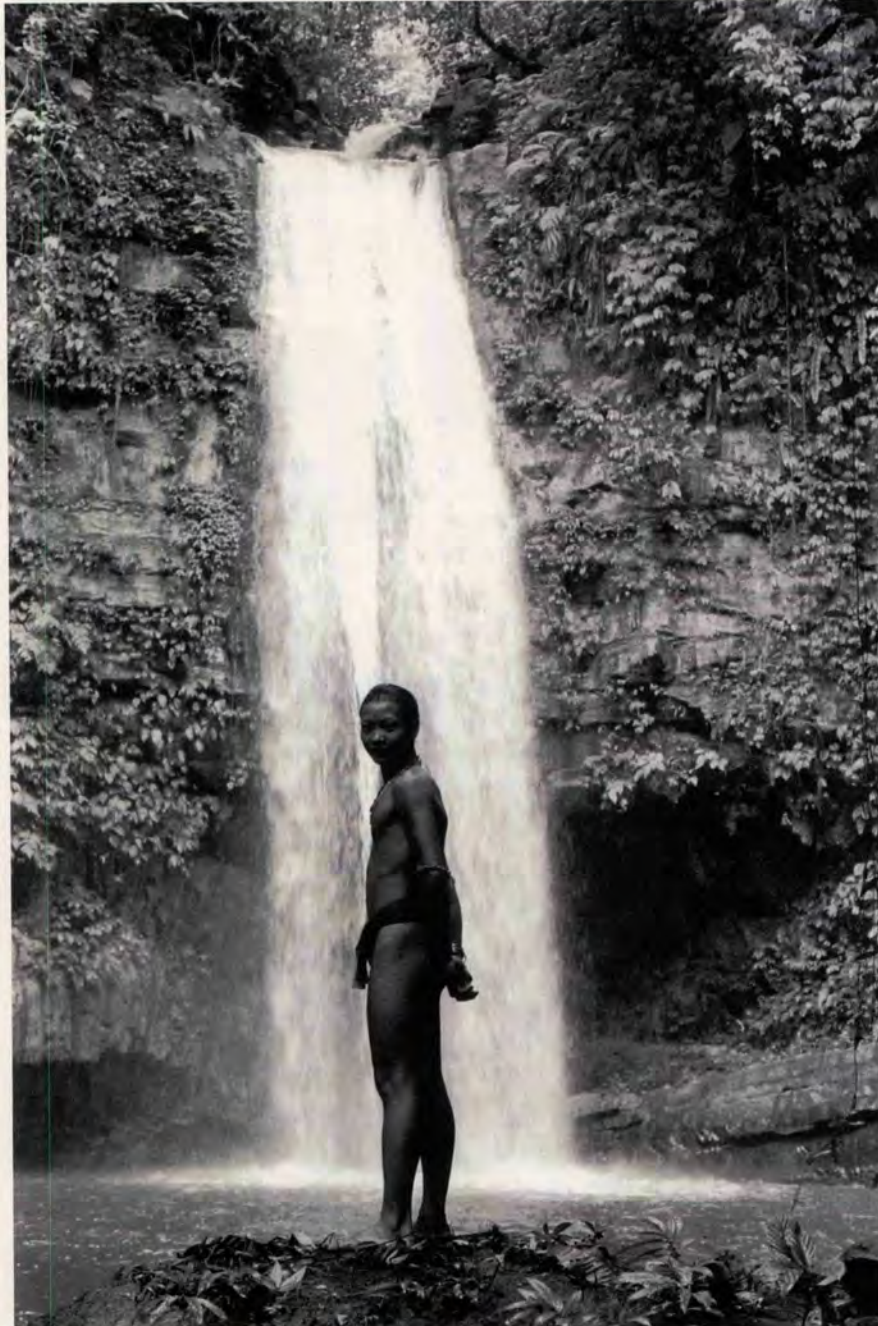
below right Temples at
Pagan. 'Not a tourist in sight.'
– Burma, 1958

overleaf Hausa boy on the
River Niger. 'I was thrown in
prison on this trip for taking
photographs.' – Mali, 1966









above Mentawi man on
the island of Siberut, off
the coast of Sumatra –
Indonesia, 1973

opposite Nambiquara
man with macaw feather –
Brazil, 1971

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