Theravada Buddhism

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2 authors:

Frank Usarski
Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP)
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Rafael Shoji
Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP)
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Buddhism in Brazil

Frank Usarski and Rafael Shoji
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciência da Religião, Pontifical University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

Keywords

Buddhism; Brazil; Immigration; Conversion; Adaptation

Introduction

Although Buddhism represents only a small minority in Brazil, it is an integral part of the religious landscape. Today, virtually every Buddhist school has established itself in the country. One finds Theravada circles; Mahayana temples with a Chinese, Japanese, or Korean background; and Vajrayana groups following the teachings of Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, or Gelugpa masters. Besides "classical"-orientated institutions, there are centers representing more recent developments such as the New Kadampa Tradition, followers of Thich Nhat Hanh, neo-Buddhist movements within the Nichiren branch, as well as institutions whose frequenters study and practice Buddhism in an "ecumenical" sense. This highly diverse configuration is the result of a complex history summarized below.

Key Information

Evolution of the Buddhist Field

The first period of Buddhism in Brazil covers the time between the first half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. It was mainly characterized by an informal Buddhist practice of Asian immigrants. Little is known about the religious situation of the Chinese workers who had come to Brazil in the first half of the nineteenth century. Approximately 300 of them worked as tea planters in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Another 1000 were contracted as miners in the Federal State of Minas Gerais. More decisive for the history of Buddhism in Brazil were the continuous immigration of almost 190,000 registered Japanese from 1908 onwards. 98.8 % of the prewar immigrants were born in rural areas where Shin Buddhism is traditionally strong. 94.5 % were adults who entered Brazil together with at least three more adult members of their families (Smith 1979, p. 56). Due to the absence of a clergy, religious activities, for example, when an immigrant family was confronted with the death of one of its members, were improvised and generally realized within small circles (Handa 1987, pp. 483–484). Efforts of Japanese Buddhist institutions to support the spiritual life of certain immigrant colonies were the exception. One case is that of Reverend Tomojiro Ibaragi, who was among the first Japanese immigrants to Brazil and founded the *Taisseji* temple in Lins in 1936 on behalf of Honmon Butsuryū-shū, and the

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other one is of Reverend Shinba, who stated in 1934 the activities of Shingon-shū in São Paulo (Shoji 2006, p.43). In 1940 and 1941, respectively, the Honmon Butsuryū-shū temples *Nissenji* in Presidente Prudente and *Ryushoji* in Mogi das Cruzes (1941) were inaugurated. Simultaneously, the first Shin Buddhist institution was founded in the city of Cafelândia (Gonçalves 2004).

During the 1950s, Buddhism in Brazil went to significant changes. Although maintaining its ethnic character, it began to develop institutional structures, which overcame the unregulated spontaneous religiousness of the first period through. These developments were related to Japan's defeat in World War II and a mentality shift of the Japanese immigrants toward the decision to make Brazil their permanent homeland. In addition, another 58,000 Japanese immigrated between 1952 and 1967 to Brazil, mostly to the states of São Paulo (70 %) and Paraná (12 %). Consequently, the Japanese colony in Brazil witnessed a wave of the foundation of Buddhist institutions. In 1949 and in 1950, Honmon Butsuryū-shū expanded its institutional network by inaugurating three new temples in the state of São Paulo. In the early 1950s, Tendai-shū, the Otani school of Jōdo Shin-shū and the Jōdo-school inaugurated their first temples. Simultaneously, the Honpa school of Jōdo Shin-shū established its national headquarters. In 1955, the Soto Zen-shū and the Nichiren-shū officially started their mission in Brazil. Finally, in 1958, the *Federação das Seitas Budistas no Brasil* was established as a Japanese Buddhist umbrella organization. The Japanese family system of *ie* (household) was revived. A recreated genealogical tree having the immigrant as living ancestors gave new meaning to the funeral ceremonies, which were the foundation of the Buddhist family.

Four new tendencies became apparent between the 1960s and the first half of the 1980s.

The first tendency had to do with the arrival of a significant number of Chinese people. In the respective decades circa 100,000, immigrants entered Brazil. The result of these dynamics was the foundation of the Chinese Buddhist Mo Ti temple in the city of São Paulo in 1962 (Yang 1995). Promoted by the Buddhist lay organization Associacão de Budismo da China, the construction was supported by Chi Ming, a Buddhist master, who finally assumed the leadership of the temple. The second tendency consisted in the increasing interest of nonimmigrant Brazilians in Buddhism. In this context, Zen played the major role. One of the reasons for this attraction was a greater familiarity of the Brazilian public with Zen due to a series of newspaper articles and books including the Portuguese translation of D.T. Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen* published in 1961. In the same year, a small circle of Brazilian intellectuals began to practice zazen under the guidance of Rosen Takashina Roshi from the Soto Zen temple *Busshinji* in Sao Paulo (Albuquerque 2002). In 1967, the Buddhist Society of Brazil was founded in Rio de Janeiro as the first Brazilian Theravada Buddhist institution. At least as far as the name is concerned, the Buddhist Society of Brazil was a revival of a short-lived and not very influential entity founded in 1923 by the Theosophist Lourenço Borges as an association of non-Japanese descendants generally interested in Buddhism. In this sense, the society set a counterpoint in two different moments of the history of Buddhism: firstly, against the almost exclusive Japanese-ethnic Buddhist landscape of the 1920s and secondly, against the predominant interest of potential converts in Zen Buddhism in the 1960s. For the popularization of the latter, Ryotan Tokuda was another decisive figure. Tokuda had started his work in Brazil at *Busshinji*, dissociated from the temple in 1974, and established together with a group of Brazilian converts the retreat center *Morro da Vargem* in Ibiraçu, in the Federal State of Espirito Santo. In 1984, Tokuda also founded the retreat center *Pico dos Raios* in Ouro Preto (Federal State of Minas Gerais). One of Tokuda's disciples was the Buddhist convert Cristiano Bitti who, after a monastic Soto training in Japan, substituted Tokuda as the head of the retreat center *Morro da Vargem* (Rocha 2008). A third element constitutive for the third period of Buddhism in Brazil was the intensified work of the Nichiren lay movement Soka Gakkai after the second visit of Soka

Gakkai's third president, Ikeda Daisaku, to Brazil in 1966, which gave rise to a new wave of proselytism. The latter was no longer restricted to the community of Japanese immigrants but targeted the Brazilian population in general (Pereira 2001). The fourth tendency had to do with a modest flexibilization of the rigid ethnic boundaries characteristic for the hierarchies of traditional Japanese temples. Although the decision makers in the respective entities continued to show efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of their Buddhist institutions, a small number of Brazilian converts overcame the resistance of the tradition-minded protagonists and assumed an active role in the religious life of the temple community. The most outstanding representatives of this tendency were Murillo Nunes de Azevedo and Ricardo Mario Goncalves. Both came in touch with Buddhism through the practice of zazen. From there, an interest in other forms of Buddhism, including Shin Buddhism emerged. Finally, both Azevedo and Gonçalves officially joined the religious staff of two Jōdo Shin-shū temples. In 1981, in Kyoto, Goncalves was ordained as a minister of the Otani branch of Jōdo Shin-shū, which qualified him to become a part of the leadership of the Higashi Honganji Temple in Sao Paulo. In 1982, also in Japan, Azevedo was ordained according to the rules of the Nishi school of Jōdo Shin-shū. Back in Brazil, he became active in the Amida Buddhist community in Brasilia.

From the second half of the 1980s onwards, Brazil witnessed a continuing diversification of Buddhism. The three main indicators for the ongoing pluralization were the foundation of East Asian Buddhist institutions, the emergence of Tibetan Buddhism, and the multiplication of Western orientated Zen circles. As for East Asian Buddhism, the Guang Ying in São Paulo was established in 1987 as the second Chinese Buddhist temple in Brazil. In 1988, the Korean Buddhist Chogye Order inaugurated the Jin Kak temple in São Paulo. In 1992, the Taiwanese Buddhist order Fo Guang Shan founded the Zu Lai temple in Cotia. In the beginning, the temple was only composed of a modest building. In the following years, the place was transformed into an architectonically complex and esthetically impressing location and is today the biggest Buddhist temple in South America. Simultaneously, the Fo Guang Shan opened institutions in Rio de Janeiro, Recife, and Foz de Iguaçu. At the end of the 1980s, Tibetan Buddhists began to attract Brazilian practitioners. In 1988, disciples of Tarthang Tulku (Nyingma school) founded in Sao Paulo the first Brazilian Tibetan Buddhist institution of the country. Only a few months later, also in Sao Paulo, followers of Lama Gangchen (Gelugpa school) opened a center. In 1993, again in São Paulo, adherents of the New Kadampa Tradition founded the *Centro Budista Mahabodhi*, and disciples of the Nyingma master Chagdud Tulku inaugurated the *Ödsal Ling*. The latter was the starting point for the creation of a network of institutions supervised by Chagdud Tulku, among others is the national headquarters *Khadro Ling* in Três Coroas (Federal State of Rio Grande do Sul), inaugurated in 1995. Furthermore, followers of Sakya Trizin founded the *Sakya Kun Khiab Cho Ling* in Rio de Janeiro, and disciples of Kalu Rinpoche opened centers in Brasília and in Cotia (Federal State of Sao Paulo). Simultaneously, Brazil witnessed the further expansion and differentiation of the subfield of Zen Buddhism. Ryotan Tokuda added three institutions to his already existing network. In 1993, the *Zen Center of Planalto* opened its door in Brasilia. One year later, the *Zen Centre of Rio de Janeiro* war inaugurated. In 1998, the *Serra do Trovão* monastery in the Federal State of Minas began to offer trainings of Brazilian Zen teachers and long-term retreats. Another Zen protagonist decisive for this period was Roshi Moriyama, who had gathered experience with North American Zen practitioners at the end of the 1960s. In 1992, he moved to Brazil where he joined the hierarchy of the Busshinji temple in Sao Paulo. Due to tensions with conservative members of the temple's leadership, he left Busshinji in 1994 and focused his religious work on a circle of Brazilian converts in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, called "Via Zen." Besides the urban headquarters in

Porto Alegre, the group runs a retreat center in the rural area of Vimão.

Current Brazilian Buddhism in Numbers

Currently, there are approximately 400 Buddhist institutions in Brazil. More than half of them are associated with Mahayana Buddhism. The strongest group within this segment is Soka Gakkai, which over the years has expanded his nationwide network of local groups to 91 institutions. Next comes the Honpa Hongwanji lineage with 57 temples in Brazil, followed by Zen Buddhist centers (43). One hundred and fifteen institutions represent Tibetan Buddhism. Only 15 groups are dedicated to the teachings and practices of Theravada Buddhism. Eight institutions declare themselves "nonsectarian."

It is worth noting that the aforementioned temples, centers, and groups are lacking an efficient umbrella organization, which could speak for Brazilian Buddhism in general. The *Federação das Seitas Budistas no Brasil* already founded at the end of the 1950s only represents the major Japanese Buddhists lineages. The *Colegiado Buddhista Brasileiro* was founded in 2005 which is composed of about a dozen dharma teachers. The *Colegiado* is not meant as a Buddhist umbrella organization but as an assembly of individual Buddhists. Since it depends on the personal engagement of its members, the group's activities are rare and are limited to open letters on certain occasions, for instance, regarding acts of violence of Islamic extremists against Buddhists in Bangladesh or violations of Human Rights in Tibet. Besides these statements, the *Colegiado Buddhista Brasileiro* launched the periodical Triranta. However, until 2015, only two volumes of the latter (December 2009 and July 2011) have been published, which is symptomatic for the affiliation's insignificant role.

While the number of Buddhist institutions might suggest that Brazilian Buddhism is numerically on the rise, the last national censuses indicate the opposite. According to the results of the last three censuses conducted by the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE) Brazilian, Buddhism is stagnating. In 1991, 236,404 Brazilians had identified themselves as Buddhists. In 2000, the number had dropped to 214,873 Buddhists (−21,531). The last census in 2010 counted 245,871 Brazilian Buddhists, that is a value slightly higher (+9463) than that of 1991. This means in terms of percentages that in 1991, Brazilian Buddhism was still represented by 0.16 % of the Brazilian people. In 2000, the percentage had dropped to 0.13 % and – according to the last census – has remained on this level ever since. Correlations between "religion" and "skin color" according to a fivefold scale used by the IBGE indicate that the negative statistical tendency of Brazilian Buddhism over the last decades affects particularly the segment of Asian Immigrant Buddhism. While in 1991, the IBGE had counted approximately 90,000 ethnic Buddhist in Brazil, the last national census indicated that in 2010 due to decline of 13,000 individuals, some 77,000 "ethnic Buddhists" lived in the country. This means that the percentage of ethnic Buddhists compared to the Buddhist field in general had dropped from 38 % in 1991 to 31.5 % in 2010.

Another tendency deduced from the 2010 census is atypical age distribution of Buddhists compared to the population pyramid. While only a quarter of the Brazilian population is 50 years or older, more than one third of Brazilian Buddhists fit into this category. The discrepancy is even more striking for the age group from 70 years onwards which is related to 4.84 % of the Brazilian people but almost 20 % of the Brazilian Buddhists. The concentration of Buddhists in the older age groups is confirmed by the disproportion on the bottom of the pyramid. Almost a quarter of the Brazilian population is between 0 and 14 years old, but only 14.22 % of the Brazilian Buddhists belong to this age group. At the same time, Buddhism in Brazil is irregularly distributed in geographical terms. This irregularity manifests itself in multifold ways. One of these manifestations is the concentration of Buddhism in the southeast of Brazil, that is, one of the five regions in which the country is composed of in a geopolitical sense. The Southeast, composed by the states of Espírito Santo, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo, is demographically the densest area of the country. It is the home of

42.13 % of Brazil's population. The percentage of Buddhists living in the Southeast, however, clearly surpasses this value. More than three quarter of Brazilians who follow this religion are concentrated in this region particularly due to the concentration of Buddhists in the Federal States of São Paulo (21.65 % of the country's population versus 62.95 % of Brazilian Buddhists) and Rio de Janeiro (8.4 % versus 11.94 %). In the four other regions, the percentage of Buddhists is below the population average. This is especially true for the Northeast, that is, Brazil's second dense region with 27.83 % of the national population but only 4 % of self-declared Buddhists.

On the level of Federal States, there is yet another indicator for the irregular geographical distribution of Buddhism in Brazil, that is, the fact that followers of this religion are concentrated in the capitals. In 11 from 27 state units, the amount of Buddhists living in the capital exceeds 50 %, for example, in Manaus 89.3 %, Boa Vista (Roraima) 86.8 %, Maceió (Alagoas) 82.1 %, Aracaju (Sergipe) 76.03 %, and Porto Velho (Rondônia) 75.42 %. In another ten states, the percentage is between 40 % and 50 %, such as in São Paulo (48.9 %), Recife (48.82 %), Belém (48.7 %), or Rio Branco ([Acre] 47.4 %). On the other hand, Buddhism is only present in 21.16 % of the 5561 municipalities of Brazil. In most cases, the amount of Buddhists estimated does not exceed a three-digit number. In the State of Minas Gerais, composed of 853 municipalities, i.e., the highest number of municipalities per Federal State, in not more than 158 municipalities, at least one Buddhist was estimated by the last census. The highest concentration of Buddhists estimated was registered in the capital's municipality Belo Horizonte (2581 Buddhists) followed by Uberlândia (1008 Buddhists). Furthermore, there were 14 municipalities estimated with a three-digit number of Buddhist, including in Juiz de Fora, which with its 319 Buddhists was the leader in this category. Ten to 20 Buddhists were estimated in 36 municipalities, and in 52 municipalities, the estimated number was below 10.

A second tendency suggested by the IBGE statistics consists of a successive emancipation of both Buddhism and the more successful groups among the New Japanese Religions from the ethnic milieu. This is a conclusion drawn from correlations between "religion" and "skin color" according to a scale of five categories incorporated into the national census questionnaires. One of the categories is the color "yellow." Buddhism's gradual emancipation of ethnic roots is caused by a twofold dynamics. Firstly, over the decades, an increasing number of *nippo*-Brazilians deconverted from Buddhism or, at least, became indifferent to their family religion. On the other hand, as Buddhism reached out to Japanese Brazilians, the segment of converts grew gradually, until in the 1980s "non-yellow Buddhists" got the upper hand over "yellow Buddhists." According to a postwar study on conversion rates among the immigrants, until 1941 not less than 98.5 % of all Japanese immigrants had associated themselves with Buddhism (Fuji and Smyth, 14). The same study indicated that in 1958, only 44.5 % of Japanese living in Brazil were still predisposed to call Buddhism their religion. This trend was even more dramatic in urban surroundings, where 50.3 % informed the researchers that they had converted to Catholicism. Even more striking were the differences between the generations. 70.6 % of immigrants born in Japan still declared to be Buddhists. The percentage had dropped to 29.9 % among the following generation, born in Brazil, and to only 19.0 % in the third generation (Maeyama 1973, p. 248). The last three national censuses confirmed this trend. Between 1991 (almost 90,000 Buddhist with "yellow skin color") and 2010 (about 77,000 Buddhists), ethnic Buddhism has suffered from a decline of about 13,000 individuals. In relation to the Buddhist field in general, the percentage dropped from 38 % "yellow Buddhists" in 1991 to 31.5 % in 2010. In relation to Brazil's total population, ethnic Buddhism was represented by 0.06 % in 1991 and 0.04 % in 2010. Inversely, the segment of converted Buddhists achieved a relative increase. According to the penultimate National Census (2000), 62.15 %

of all Buddhist did not identify themselves as Asian descendants. Ten years later, due to an increase of 6.34 %, the value was 68.49 %.

Comments

A series of reasons is responsible for the modest statistical situation of Buddhism in Brazil. To begin with, one has to take into account the overall cultural conditions under which Buddhism operates as a religious minority in Brazil. Even the Brazilian population is known for its eclectic tendencies, and despite the accelerated institutional differentiation of Brazil's religious field in the last decades, Christianity has not lost its role as frame of reference in the sense of a tacit common denominator enrooted in the collective consciousness. The success of Pentecostal churches, which in the last decades has appeared as one of the main alternatives for Brazilians born and raised as Catholics, can be interpreted in this light. While in terms of basic religious concepts, there is only a minor step from Catholicism to Protestantism, the shift from Christianity to a religion based on significantly different philosophical, soteriological, and practical axioms such as Buddhism would be obviously more dramatic for the majority of the Brazilian people. Even in cases in which the Christian repertoire is considered dogmatically insufficient in comparison with an "Eastern" worldview, not Buddhism but Kardecism (3.8 million followers in 2010) appears as the most plausible religious alternative. In accordance with Brazil's dominant religious cultural capital, Kardecism incorporates Christian cosmology, monotheistic theology, and Christian ethics. At the same time, it draws on concepts such as Karma and Reincarnation. Hence, due to his consistency with Brazil's religious mainstream, Kardecism serves like a "filter" capable of "absorbing" spiritual seekers who in other cultural contexts would tend to convert to Buddhism.

Besides "cultural" restrictions for the evolution of Buddhism in Brazil, there are limitations due to certain internal constellations of Buddhist institutions. One aspect consists of the so-called Buddhist handicap which refers to the general attitude of Buddhists toward the public propagation of their religion. This shortcoming manifests itself as a missing "sense of urgency about converting people." This hesitation is a consequence of the tendency of Buddhists to attribute the interest in the teachings of the Buddha and the desire to join the "sangha" to auspicious karmic predispositions of the potential adherent (Tamney 2007, p. 182). This "handicap" is particularly problematic for ethnic Buddhist institution and their tendency to focus their services on long-standing adherents enrooted in the ethnic milieu. For the majority of the community, a Buddhist temple is more than a facility that allows worship. Rather, it is also a place which fulfills social purposes and promotes collective identity. In many cases, the temple assumes the role of a cultural center, with a varied program that ranges from karaoke for the younger generation to folkdance groups for the elders. As far as religious practices in a stricter sense are concerned, ancestor worship, devotion, and recitation are integral parts of the spiritual agenda. The services are directed to families and are frequently held in the Asian language of the forefathers of the community members. However, not every institution is adequately equipped to respond fully to the adherents' demands. Many temples, particularly those located in smaller cities, suffer from a lack of religious staff. One example is the situation Honpa Hongwanji, which runs over 50 institutions in Brazil. However, more than 20 of these temples have to share a handful of Shin ministers who visit the city occasionally in order to attend the respective community on special occasions. At the same time, ethnic Buddhism is confronted with the problem of transmitting the religious family heritage to the next generations. This difficulty became already apparent in the 1950s when a considerable number of Japanese Buddhist institutions were founded in Brazil. According to a study conducted by the University of Tokyo, not more than 1.5 % of all Japanese immigrants who had come to Brazil before World War II were Christians (Fuji and Smyth 1959). After the war, the situation had changed dramatically: only 44.5 % of Japanese living in Brazil still felt committed to Buddhism. This change was more

obvious in urban surroundings, where 50.3 % already had converted to Catholicism. The corresponding percentage in rural areas was 36.5 %. Even more crucial were the differences between the generations. In 1958, 70.6 % of the immigrants born in Japan still declared themselves Buddhists. The percentage had dropped to 29.9 % among the next generation, born in Brazil, and to only 19 % in the third generation (Maeyama 1973). The growing incidence of deconversion of younger members of families with an immigration background represents one of the major problems ethnic temples are confronted with during the last decades. The diminished engagement of recent generations of families with an immigration background in the life of a temple is not only ambiguous in a religious sense. There are important political implications too. In order to survive in a complex society and to maintain competiveness within an antagonistic religious field, traditional Buddhist temples depend on committed and individuals who, due to their education, linguistic competence, and social status, could assume the role of mediators between the ethnic milieu and the wider Brazilian audience. One of only a few examples for younger Buddhists committed to this goal is Eko Ishimoto, a third-generation Japanese descendant and minister of the Comunidade Budista Nichirenshu in the city of São Paulo who is conscious of the challenges traditional ethnic Buddhism are confronted with in a non-Buddhist country. According to Ishimoto, a religious campaign performed by representatives of Japan Buddhist currents in Brazil has to take the different cultural conditions of the Brazilian people into consideration. "This is a land of Samba, of beaches, of Carnival. This is not Japan. The philosophy might come from there, but we have to adapt it to the local conditions" (Transcrição do Simpósio, in "Federação das Seitas Budistas do Brasil," 1995, p. 42). However, similar to ethnic Buddhist groups in other Western countries, even those traditional temples in Brazil, which have overcome basic cultural barriers through the translation of its written material and the use of Portuguese as the principal language for their religious services, have not been very successful in attracting adherents from outside the ethnic milieu. One important reason for this failure lies in the predominant Western image of Buddhism as an individualistic, introspective, and "rational" spiritual approach, which is incompatible with a family based, devotional, and ritualistic ethnic Buddhism. In this respect, "modernist" Buddhism is better off than "traditional" Buddhism. On the other hand, the aspiration of the former to reach out to a wider audience committed to a Buddhist institution is challenged by a growing market of goods and services borrowed from or at least symbolically alluding to Buddhism. The commercialization of "Buddhist articles" is a consequence of the gradual emancipation of religious concepts and practices formerly often fully accessible only for those who became a member of a religious community (Usarski 2012). The "production" and "distribution" of "Buddhist commodities" is not restricted by the principle of religious authenticity, and the acquisition of the goods and services does not require membership of a religious community. Market activities do not depend on the identification with a Buddhist temple or center, a prescribed religious routine, or the authority of a dharma teacher. Rather, they rely on the anonymous relationship between suppliers and consumers which are interested in the immediate satisfaction of individually specific, often ephemeral, spiritual needs. It is by no means guaranteed that on the long run, the "consumption" of allegedly Buddhist goods and services inspires the consumers to evolve a more profound and durable relationship with an institutionalized Buddhist community in order to benefit from the spiritual heritage of the latter.

Cross-References

- ▶ Chinese Buddhism
- ▶ Japanese Buddhism
- ▶ Soka Gakkai
- ▶ Tibetan Buddhism
- ▶ Zen

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