

The Abstract Approach to the Turkish Aksak in the Piano Music of Ahmed Adnan Saygun and Ilhan Baran

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The *aksak* rhythm is a distinguishing feature of the Turkish and Balkan folk music traditions. Its essence lies in an asymmetrical progression of short and long beats within the bar, which conveys a certain sense of irregularity to the listener, often described as ‘limping’.¹ This phenomenon has been explored and investigated by numerous ethnomusicologists during the twentieth century, becoming a source of inspiration for generations of Turkish composers. Consequently, the *aksak* is considered a foundation of the Turkish national musical style. This article traces the translation of the *aksak* from the folk music tradition into contemporary piano repertoire. It focuses on the abstract approach taken by Ahmed Adnan Saygun (1907–1991) and Ilhan Baran (1934–2016) to the incorporation of the *aksak* rhythm in their solo piano music and illuminates the connection between both composers’ work.

Following Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s ideas of Westernisation of the Turkish Republic, Saygun contributed significantly to the establishment of a Turkish national musical style, combining folk elements with contemporary compositional techniques. His approach to *aksak* shows a development from direct quotation of this folk element towards an abstract representation of it, as exemplified by his late piano cycles. The idea of abstract reproduction of the *aksak* was developed by his student Baran, whose use of *aksak* was influenced by the abstract visual artworks of Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. Baran’s piano works demonstrate similar

¹ The term *aksak* comes from the Turkish language and in translation means limping. ‘Aksak,’ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/aksak> (accessed 6 Aug. 2018).

principles to these artists' modernist techniques, blending folk tradition and contemporary music. This study discusses Baran and Saygun's modern treatment of the *aksak*, comparing their approaches and outlining common features in their use of this element in their solo piano music.

This article uses the term 'abstract' to refer to the modern, innovative use of *aksak*, which demonstrates Saygun and Baran's intention of moving away from the folk source and assimilating it with modern techniques. Their experiments illustrate the innovative translation of this folk element as an adaptation of Western modernism, while the presence of *aksak* conveys the authenticity of the Turkish source. Saygun and Baran are prominent representatives of the contemporary Turkish compositional tradition and have been associated with establishing, sustaining, and developing the Turkish national musical style. A common feature of their individual compositional styles is the combination of folk elements with Western compositional techniques.

The *aksak* rhythm is a specific type of irregular metre, consisting of two beats of different length—a short beat and a long beat—where the long beat is exactly one and a half times the length of the short beat, creating a ratio of 2:3. This continuous progression of short and long beats within the bar conveys a sense of irregularity or 'limping' to the listener. *Aksak* is widespread in the folk music of the Balkans and Turkey, but it also exists in the traditional music of some Central Asian, Indian and regions of Sub-Saharan Africa.² The *aksak* rhythm was widely investigated during the twentieth century with both rhythm and metre remaining a major theoretical issue in describing the element. The Polish musicologist Mieczysław Kolinsky (1901–1981) provides the clearest distinction between these two terms: rhythm refers to the organization of musical duration, while metre refers to the organisation of the pulse.³ In this sense, *aksak* is not necessarily a rhythm, but its essence lies in metre, and the irregular organisation of its pulses.

The first scholarly exploration of *aksak* dates from 1913, with an article by the Bulgarian musicologist and composer Dobri Hristov (1875–1941), considering the rhythmic basis of Bulgarian folk music. Hristov used the Bulgarian term, *neravnodelni razmeri* (irregular metres) and described the existence of two types of beats in the bar: a 'short' and an 'extended' beat. Hristov also published examples of folk melodies, outlining their extremely fast tempo as their chief characteristic.⁴ This publication was not widely disseminated because it was published only in Bulgarian. However, in 1927, the Bulgarian scholar Vasil Stoin (1880–1939) wrote a pamphlet on the same topic, which was translated and published in a German magazine,⁵ thereby gaining international popularity. After reading this article, the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók (1881–1945) outlined the main features of this rhythm in an essay titled 'The So-called Bulgarian Rhythm.'⁶ The initial use of the Turkish term *aksak* was by the

² Borislav Petrov, 'Bulgarian Rhythms: Past, Present and Future,' *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* 17, no.3 (2012): 158.

³ Timothy Rice, 'Béla Bartók and Bulgarian Rhythm,' in *Bartok Perspectives: Man, Composer and Ethnomusicologist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 197.

⁴ Todor Todorov, *Razvitie na Bŭlgarskata Folkloristika do 09.09.1944* [Development of Bulgarian Folklore until 09.09.1944], (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Science, 1981), 38–9.

⁵ Barbara Krader, 'Vasil Stoin, Bulgarian Folk Song Collector,' *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council* 12 (1980): 35.

⁶ Béla Bartók, 'The So-called Bulgarian Rhythm,' in *Béla Bartók Essays*, ed. B. Suchoff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 48.

Romanian ethnomusicologist Constantin Brăiloiu (1893–1958) in 1952. Along with describing the characteristics of these metres, Brăiloiu pointed out the arithmetic relation between the durations of the beats, and the existence of an additional accent on the long beat in the bar.⁷ These metres have also been described as additive rhythms⁸ and non-isochronous metres.⁹

During the twentieth century, these asymmetrical metres became a source of inspiration for many composers. Their inclusion in original compositions often closely relates to national musical identity, by establishing and maintaining national musical styles. *Aksak* has appeared widely in the classical music of Eastern Europe due to its presence and great variety in the folk music traditions of this region. The ways in which different composers approached *aksak* was significantly influenced by the shifting political climate of the twentieth century. As musical nationalism in many Eastern European countries drew extensively upon folk elements, their application in composition was restricted by the imposed regulations of Socialist Realism. Consequently, many Eastern European composers all approached *aksak* in a similar way. In contrast, the political situation in Turkey allowed for more freedom of expression. Bartók was also a major influence in Turkey; his *Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm*¹⁰ were among the most popular Western examples of the application of *aksak* in solo piano repertoire.

Following extensive research into Eastern European folklore, Bartók became a pioneer of ethnomusicology and worked extensively on developing ways to incorporate folk elements into original compositions. His explorations influenced generations of composers and contributed to the formation of various national musical styles. In this sense, Bartók played a crucial role in the establishment of the Turkish national musical style. During Bartók's visit to Turkey in 1936, alongside ethnomusicological trips he made around Anatolia, he gave three public lectures on folk music research and on working with folk elements in professional compositions. These lectures—attended by many young Turkish composers—introduced the following methods of incorporating folk elements: quotation and harmonization of folk melodies; composition of an original melody in folk style; and creation of a folkloric atmosphere without explicit reference to folk material.¹¹

The beginning of the twentieth century was marked by dramatic changes in Turkey: upon the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, Atatürk established the democratic Republic of Turkey and commenced socio-political reforms known as *devrimler* or *inkılaplar* (revolutions).¹² The main aim of these reforms was to create a modern, secular and Western-oriented Turkish republic. In terms of musical development, the young country faced the problem of its national musical identity and respectively a lack of national musical style. Within the numerous reforms, Atatürk's government created a scholarship for talented Turkish musicians to support their education in Western Europe. Upon returning to Turkey, these composers committed to the idea of creating a Turkish national musical style, which was based on the folkloric tradition

⁷ Constantin Brăiloiu, 'Aksak Rhythm,' in *Problems of Ethnomusicology*, ed. L. Lyord (Cambridge: CUP, 1984), 136.

⁸ Curt Sachs, 'Rhythm and Tempo: An Introduction,' *Musical Quarterly* 38, no 3 (1952): 391–2.

⁹ Justin London, 'Rhythm. Fundamental Concepts and Terminology,' *Grove Music Online* (accessed 3 Aug. 2018).

¹⁰ Pieces no. 148–153 from Volume 6 of the piano cycle *Mikrokosmos*.

¹¹ Kathryn Woodard, 'Creating a National Music in Turkey: The Solo Piano Works of Ahmed Adnan Saygun' (PhD thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1999), 37–8.

¹² Orhan Tekelioglu, 'Modernizing Reforms and Turkish Music in the 1930s,' *Turkish Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001): 93.

and included modern Western European compositional techniques. The first composers who studied in Europe became known as the ‘Turkish Five’.¹³

Of this group, perhaps the most important member was Ahmed Adnan Saygun, who was a prolific composer, educator, and ethnomusicologist, whose name remains tied to the creation of the Turkish national musical style. Saygun was born in 1907 in Izmir where he began his musical education. As a recipient of the newly-established government scholarship, he studied composition with Nadia Boulanger at the École Normale de Musique de Paris, and Vincent d’Indy at the Schola Cantorum in France. Saygun’s compositional style had three main influences: Turkish folk music, French impressionism, and the music of Béla Bartók. During Bartók’s visit to Turkey in 1936, Saygun accompanied him on his field trips and this collaboration had a major influence on Saygun’s work with folk material.

Kathryn Woodard has considered the application of *aksak* rhythms as a folk element in Saygun’s solo piano works, identifying two different periods in his output: the first includes the cycle *Inci’s Book* op. 10 (1934), *Sonatina* op. 15 (1938) and the suite *From Anatolia* op. 25 (1945), while the second consists of four cycles of piano miniatures on *aksak* rhythms titled *Ten Etudes on Aksak Rhythms* op. 38 (1964), *Twelve Preludes on Aksak Rhythms* op. 45 (1967), *Fifteen Pieces on Aksak Rhythms* op. 47 (1967), and *Ten Sketches on Aksak Rhythms* op. 58 (1976).¹⁴ I will now demonstrate the development of the use of *aksak* between these two periods, which move from being closely related to the folk source to a more abstract representation of *aksak* in the later miniatures. The initial appearance of *aksak* was in the piece ‘Masal’ from the cycle *Inci’s Book*, where Saygun juxtaposes a regular 3/4 metre with an irregular 5/8. This transition is smooth and is made easier for the performer by a sustained texture: the leading melody is in right hand, and is accompanied by chords in the left hand. The single change here is the proportion between the short and the long chord, which moves from 2:4 to 2:3 in the ratio of the *aksak* (Example 1).¹⁵

Example 1. A.A. Saygun, ‘Masal,’ *Inci’s Book*, bb. 14–22.

The image shows a musical score for 'Masal' by A.A. Saygun. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is in 3/4 time and features a melody in the right hand with a triplet of eighth notes and a sixteenth-note triplet. The left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords. The second system transitions to 5/8 time, maintaining the same melodic and harmonic structure. The score is written in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of one sharp (F#).

During the first period, Saygun also worked extensively with rhythms from dance folklore in the piano suite *From Anatolia*, the third movement of the Piano *Sonatina* op. 15 (‘Horon’) and the above described ‘Masal’ from *Inci’s Book*. Saygun applies *aksak* in these works using

¹³ The group includes the composers Saygun, Ulvi Cemal Erkin (1906–1972), Cemal Reşit Rey (1900–1959), Hasan Ferit Alnar (1906–1978) and Necil Kazim Akses (1908–1999).

¹⁴ Woodard, ‘Creating a National Music in Turkey,’ 74.

¹⁵ Woodard, ‘Creating a National Music in Turkey,’ 58.

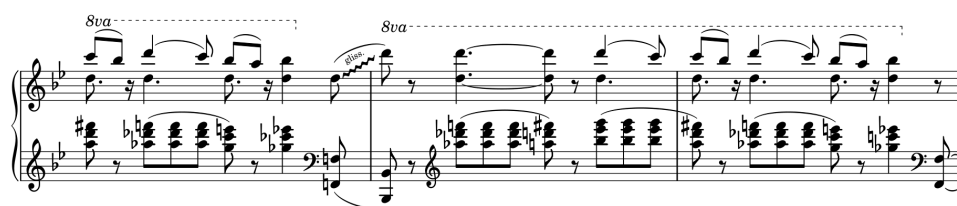
Bartók's second method of incorporating folk elements into original compositions. The limping pulse of the *aksak* remains obvious throughout these works, reinforced mainly by the piano texture, and the use of accents and pedals. Example 2 shows Saygun's extensive use of accents to underline the asymmetrical relationship between the beats and the specific ratio of 2:3.

Example 2. A.A. Saygun, 'Horon,' Sonatina op. 15, bb. 34–37.



In the first movement of the suite *From Anatolia*, this limping sense is reinforced by the use of pedal as each change follows the irregular bar structure. Furthermore, the leading melody is memorable, contains the augmented second interval common to much Turkish folk music, and the texture is simple. The title of the second movement, 'Zeybek,' refers to a Turkish folk dance in a nine-beat metre. Saygun uses unisons extensively and references the dance form through a melodic movement of three successive descending and ascending notes with a dotted rhythmic pattern at the beginning. In the last movement of the suite, 'Halay,' the *aksak* is still outlined with the pedals and many unisons. However, the folk source becomes less apparent due to the use of heavy textures, the use of a wide register, and virtuosic passages—features that are not characteristic of folk music (Example 3).

Example 3. A.A. Saygun, 'Halay,' *From Anatolia* op. 45, bb. 58–60.



In his second creative period, Saygun further developed this approach to the use of *aksak* and experimented with combining it with various compositional devices. Each of the above-mentioned cycles of piano miniatures featuring *aksak* rhythms, composed between 1964 and 1976, were written for pedagogical purposes and with different levels of difficulty. The most difficult of these are the *Ten Etudes on Aksak Rhythms*. This cycle emulates the piano etudes of Chopin and Debussy, where each piece aims to develop a certain piano technique (such as octaves, thirds or fourths). While based on the Western model, the focus of this cycle is the folkloric *aksak*. In comparison with Saygun's other cycles, it consists of complex textures with highly virtuosic passages. Saygun successfully experimented with various sound pictures, elusive rhythms and tempos, developing an abstract representation of the traditional *aksak*. His approach is characterised by an alternative representation of the time signature, where a single number indicates the number of the beats in the bar.¹⁶ Saygun frequently varies the placement of the short and long beats, clearly showing this with dotted lines. In terms of perception and performance,

¹⁶ Woodard, 'Creating a National Music in Turkey,' 75.

these details provide a clear awareness of the inner bar structure for the performer, and reinforce the asymmetrical pulsation for the listener. Example 4 shows these features.

Example 4. A.A. Saygun, Etude no. 2, *Ten Etudes on Aksak Rhythms*, bb. 1–3.

In changing the relationship between the durations of the beats, Saygun made a significant innovation in using *aksak* in his piano etudes. The composer pushed the limits of this musical element by changing the traditional ratio of 2:3 into 3:4. In this case, the short beat contains three units and the long beat, four. Example 5 illustrates this extended ratio between the length of the beats.

Example 5. A.A. Saygun, Etude no. 8, *Ten Etudes on Aksak Rhythms*, bb. 1–2.

Another example of Saygun's abstract approach to the use of *aksak* can be observed in the slow etudes. The idea of using *aksak* in extended time is already far removed from the traditional folk dance material. Saygun developed this by experimenting with timbre and sonority, using almost the entire keyboard and a wide range of registers. Example 6 illustrates this experimentation with register and, in particular, the use of dissonant intervals and cluster chords held with pedals. The use of these devices creates a modern sound world and reveals the influence of French Impressionism. Within this texture, the limping sense of the metre is not perceptible unless observing the score. Therefore, the application of the *aksak* is intended more as a folk reference, rendering it conceptual and abstract in its application. These factors demonstrate that the *aksak* is flexible. Its link to the folk source is not as specific as a folk melody or a specific folk rhythmic figure, allowing it to be more easily fused with modern techniques.

Example 6. A.A. Saygun, Etude no. 9, *Ten Etudes on Aksak Rhythms*, bb. 1–3.

Saygun's abstract approach to the *aksak* is further exemplified by the complex rhythmic division of the metre. The inner bar structure changes significantly and goes far beyond the ratio of 2:3. Example 7 illustrates a two-voice texture, with a great level of complexity in the leading voice. Within this texture, the sense of grouping disappears, and the focus moves to the rhythm rather than the metre. Despite the fact that the asymmetrical structure exists and is clearly indicated by the bar lines, its actual perception is nearly impossible and the limping metre becomes an abstraction.

Example 7. A.A. Saygun, Etude no. 7, *Ten Etudes on Aksak Rhythms*, bb. 6–9.

The above examples demonstrate Saygun's development in terms of including *aksak* in his piano works, and clearly shows a movement away from the folk source to an abstract representation of folk material. A period of nineteen years separates *From Anatolia* from the first modern cycle of *Ten Etudes on Aksak Rhythms*. Saygun was inspired to work with the *aksak* by the short cycle *Three Abstract Dances* (1956) of his student Ilhan Baran. Baran made a great contribution to developing and sustaining the Turkish national musical style and remains one of the most significant modern Turkish composers. Born in Trabzon, a city in North-East Turkey, Baran studied composition at the Ankara State Conservatory, where he was in Saygun's composition class. In 1959, he was awarded a government scholarship to continue his musical education in Paris under Henri Dutilleux (1916–2013). Upon his return to Turkey, Baran established the Departments of Musicology and Ethnomusicology at Ankara State Conservatory and became head of the Composition department there.¹⁷

Baran's earlier works were highly influenced by the style of Saygun, whose ideas of a national Turkish style he followed throughout his entire creative life. The combination of folk elements with Western techniques became the main driving force behind Baran's composition. The chief characteristic of his individual style is considered to be his modernistic, abstract use of folk material. Similar to Western composers such as György Ligeti and Olivier Messiaen, Baran was inspired by various non-musical sources: in particular, the abstract visual art of Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky.¹⁸ The composer himself stated that he borrowed the idea of abstraction from an artwork depicting the Eiffel Tower, in which there was no actual tower:

¹⁷ Sefik Kahramankapan, *Müzikte Derin Zirve: İlhan Baran* [Deep Peak in Music: İlhan Baran] (Ankara: Sevda Cenap and Müzik Vakfı, 2011), 110.

¹⁸ Kahramankaptan, *Müzikte Derin Zirve*, 252–3.

'I wanted to create the same with music—an abstractive representation of the folk music.'¹⁹ Baran composed six cycles of piano miniatures: *Little Suite* (1956), *Three Abstract Dances* (1958), *Blue Anatolia* (1999), *Black and White* (1975), *Three Bagatelles* (1974) and *Children's Pieces* (1984). As in Saygun's music, the major inspiration for these works was Anatolian dance folklore and many of the miniatures are named after specific traditional dances. The folk source, however, is maintained mainly by rhythmic structure rather than by melody. Baran's music is less virtuosic than Saygun's and is characterised by an interest in rhythmic variety and toccata-like textures. He frequently used harmonic fourths and fifths, which imitate the sound of folk instruments. In particular, the timbre of the folk instrument *kemençe* is imitated multiple times in different pieces. In my opinion, Baran has developed an individual approach to *aksak* in his piano works, one based on harmonic dissonance and cluster-chordal structures, which exists in almost every piece regardless of the level of difficulty, as illustrated in Examples 8 and 9.

Example 8. İlhan Baran, 'County Game,' *Children's Album*, bb. 5–7.

Example 9. Baran, 'Aksak,' *Three Abstract Dances*, bb. 39–41.

Baran's abstract presentation of the *aksak* is entirely based on the limping sense of the metre. That is, in most of his works the limping pulse and the ratio 2:3 is perceivable, and he rarely experimented with this ratio. Instead, he used rhythmic variety in the asymmetric cell of the bar (Examples 10 and 11). As a result, the listener perceives a steady limping pulsation of short and long beats and a figurative, unexpected rhythmic formula in the long beat.

Example 10. Baran, Piece no. 5, *Little Suite*, bb. 10–12.

The *Three Abstract Dances* comprises the miniatures 'Aksak,' 'Zeybek,' and 'Horon,' all dedicated to traditional Turkish folk dances. While based on dance folklore, the works contain both folk idioms and contemporary elements, which, in 1958, was very innovative for the

¹⁹ Kahramankaptan, *Müzikte Derin Zirve*, 254.

Example 11. Baran, 'Horon,' *Three Abstract Dances*, bb. 83–85.

time. Baran approached the folk material in a modern way. The first piece, 'Aksak,' is entirely based on clusters across the whole keyboard, and in the style of the minimalists, uses little thematic development throughout. This was an innovative Turkish piano work, being the first composition in the Turkish piano literature to use the piano more as a percussive instrument rather than in the conventional virtuosic way.²⁰

Considering both Saygun and Baran's abstract approaches to *aksak* in their solo piano works, a clear relationship is seen between their use of dissonance, which began with cluster chords in Saygun's etudes and developed into full clusters and even cluster-ostinato in Baran's 'Aksak.' Another parallel can be seen in common structures consisting of the juxtaposition of extremely short harmonic dissonances with long notes or rests. Within these structures, the limping sense of the metre is not perceivable to the listener and provokes in the pianist a special awareness of the inner bar structure. Furthermore, the presence of *aksak* becomes clear only when looking at the score. This textural configuration can be observed in Baran's cycle *Three Bagatelles* and in Saygun's *Twelve Preludes on Aksak Rhythms* (Example 12.1 and 12.2).

Example 12.1. A.A. Saygun, Prelude no. 1, *Twelve Preludes on Aksak Rhythms*, bb. 6–17.

A clear parallel can be seen between the structure of Saygun's *From Anatolia* and Baran's *Three Abstract Dances*. Both are inspired by dance folklore, based on *aksak* rhythms and include reference to the dances Horon and Zeybek. Furthermore, both cycles are composed in the form of fast–slow–fast: the slow movements both reference Zeybek and the last movements reference Horon. The first movements, 'Meseli' and 'Aksak' respectively, clearly illustrate the limping sense of the metre, and introduce the *aksak*. Baran's approach to the Zeybek dance is more

²⁰ Kahramankaptan, Müzikte *Derin Zirve*, 254.

Example 12.2. Baran, Bagatelle no. 1, *Three Bagatelles*, bb. 8–15.

modern than Saygun's. Even though both remain in a slow tempo, Saygun composed in the typical *agir aksak*, using a nine-beat irregular metre and including the typical melodic movement of the dance. On the other hand, Baran used a regular metre, but repeated the motif exactly nine times in a symbolic reference to the nine-beat folk dance. Moreover, Baran's 'Zeybek' includes a lot of space in the form of rests and interrupted phrasing, which differs significantly from Saygun's abstract approach to the dance. Although the two composers referred to Anatolia in the titles of their piano cycles—*From Anatolia* and *Blue Anatolia*—written more than fifty years apart, they differed significantly in their approach to Anatolian folklore and attitude to their musical heritage. Saygun, a passionate follower of Atatürk's ideas of establishing a Western-oriented Turkish republic, completely ignored Ottoman music, while Baran considered it as part of the musical heritage of the nation.

In conclusion, the *aksak* is an important part of both composers' creative works and both experimented with this folk element continuously throughout their careers. There is a strong connection between their use of *aksak*, not only through their connection as teacher and student, but also because the appearance of Baran's *Three Abstract Dances* inspired Saygun to return to this musical element and work with it in his four cycles. Considering the broader context of Turkish keyboard music during the twentieth century, these two composers demonstrated an innovative approach towards the use of this musical element. Although *aksak* appears in the piano cycles of some first-generation Turkish composers, these works are in a more Impressionist style and draw more directly from folk material, as seen in the piano cycle *Impressions* by the Turkish composer Ulvi Cemal Erkin. The next generation of Turkish composers worked extensively in including *aksak* in piano music, as exemplified by composer Muammer Sun's large cycle *Dorm Colors* [Yurt Renkleri]. Sun aimed to preserve Turkish folk music and materials, and was strongly opposed to Western and modernist influence.

In contrast, Saygun and Baran's abstract representation of *aksak* contributes significantly to moving the Turkish style to be more in line with Western and modernist practice. Although inspired by each other, the abstract treatment of *aksak* in both composers' piano works differs significantly: Saygun's approach is more virtuosic, while Baran's explores the full range and different timbres of the keyboard. Through their abstract approach, both composers move away from the dance-like character of *aksak* by using Western compositional techniques and

devices. As demonstrated in the examples presented in this article, *aksak* is one of the most flexible and adaptive folk-music elements, allowing for a great variety of combinations: although its presence is reminiscent of its folk origins, it does not provide an explicit link to these. Both Saygun and Baran developed original, abstract approaches to incorporating *aksak* into their solo piano music, which interrelate and operate as an ideological reference to Turkish folk traditions.

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