

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. LEOPOLDO PARDILLA, RUDY MANZANO AND REYNALDO PARDILLA, ACCUSED-APPELLANTS.

G.R. No. L-45266. November 24, 1988

Ponente: BIDIN, J.

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BIDIN, J.:

This is an appeal from the decision of the Court of First Instance of Iloilo, Branch II, in Criminal Case No. 4079[*] dated August 20, 1976, finding all the accused. Leopoldo Pardilla, Rudy Manzano and Reynaldo Pardilla guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of murder although the information filed charged them with the crime of homicide, and sentencing Rudy Manzano and Reynaldo Pardilla to death while imposing life imprisonment on Leopoldo Pardilla in view of his old age. This decision includes the case of Leopoldo Pardilla, not as appellant, but as one of the petitioners in G.R. No. L-48450, a petition for Habeas Corpus filed by all the above-mentioned accused which by resolution of the Court dated March 22, 1984 was consolidated together with this case (L-45266).

The dispositive portion of the appealed decision reads as follows:

"WHEREFORE, premises considered, all accused, namely: Rudy Manzano, Reynaldo Pardilla and Leopoldo Pardilla are hereby found GUILTY beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of Murder which was erroneously denominated as homicide. Rudy Manzano and Reynaldo Pardilla are hereby sentenced to death while Leopoldo Pardilla is hereby sentenced to life imprisonment in view of his old age. We are imposing this maximum penalty in view of the presence of three aggravating circumstances, namely: conspiracy which we concluded as equal or synonymous with evident premeditation and therefore, qualified the killing as murder and the aggravating circumstances of superior strength and means to weaken the defense.

"On account of the penalty imposed, the Indeterminate Sentence Law does not apply.

"All accused are jointly and severally condemned to indemnify the heirs of the late Alfredo Solinap, Sr. the sum of Twelve Thousand (P12,000.00) Pesos by way of death compensation plus funeral and burial expenses of Five Thousand (P5,000.00) Pesos, and to pay the costs.

"The effects of crime are confiscated in favor of the State.

"The convicts shall suffer no subsidiary imprisonment in case of insolvency in view of the penalty imposed.

"The bail bonds for the provisional liberty of all the accused are hereby cancelled and all convicts are ordered committed to jail. No bail bond is fixed in case they should appeal.

"SO ORDERED." (Rollo, p. 22)

The accused were charged with homicide in an information dated May 12, 1975 which alleges:

"The undersigned Provincial Fiscal accuses LEOPOLDO PARDILLA, RUDY MANZANO and REYNALDO

PARDILLA of the crime of HOMICIDE, committed as follows:

"That on or about February 28, 1975, in the Municipality of Pototan, Province of Iloilo, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Court, the above-named accused conspiring, confederating together and mutually helping each other, armed with a sharp-pointed knife known as pinote and canes, with intent to kill, did then and there willfully, unlawfully and feloniously attack, beat and stab ALFREDO SOLINAP, SR. with the weapons they were then provided, inflicting upon him stab wound at the breast and a lacerated wound on the head which caused the death of said ALFREDO SOLINAP, SR.

'CONTRARY TO LAW.' (Rollo, p. 2)

The evidence of the prosecution consisted principally of the testimonies of two alleged eyewitnesses: Cesar Polistico, a tricycle driver and Norberto Barrios, a 16-year-old student; Blas Provided, the police officer to whom Leopoldo Pardilla surrendered the butcher's knife and its scabbard and Dr. Gracia Buenvenida who examined the deceased.

The testimony of Cesar Polistico who narrated the incident from its initial stage up to its conclusion is summarized by the trial court as follows:

"According to prosecution witness Polistico, in the afternoon of February 28, 1975, he was in the store of Sgt. Pepito Pari-an at Barrio Lumbo, Pototan, Iloilo, to buy cigarettes, when the incident took place. There were some people thereat, among whom was the deceased, Alfredo Solinap, Sr. Shortly upon Polistico's arrival, the accused Reynaldo Pardilla and Rudy Manzano arrived. Reynaldo Pardilla stood by the roadside while Rudy Manzano sat on a bench. When Alfredo Solinap, Sr. noticed their presence, he stood up. At this point, Reynaldo Pardilla shouted 'Bert.' Hearing what Reynaldo uttered, Solinap approached Reynaldo and asked him, 'What do you intend to do? Are you going to surround me?' When Reynaldo made no reply, Solinap confronted Rudy Manzano who was seated on the bench, and asked him the same questions he asked Reynaldo. Rudy answered, 'Brother, I have nothing to do with it.' Not contented with Rudy Manzano's reply, Solinap approached Reynaldo again. This time their bad blood was intensifying and Polistico had to separate them, telling Reynaldo to go home. Reynaldo agreed to go home but he shouted to Solinap, 'Wait for me there.' He (Polistico), also asked Solinap to go home, but his house was far and before he could go home, the three accused arrived and the fight that caused Solinap's death began.

"Rudy Manzano returned running with a butcher's knife and a chako (two short pieces of wooden batons joined together loosely by a chain and used in Chinese martial art), and upon reaching Solinap, he gave Solinap a kick in the back and the deceased fell. As soon as Solinap stood up, the other two accused, Leopoldo Pardilla and his son Reynaldo Pardilla arrived, coming from behind Solinap. Leopoldo was armed with a knife and a cane, while his son Reynaldo has a bayonet. As Leopoldo and Reynaldo were coming from behind, upon catching up with Solinap, Leopoldo hit his head (Solinap) with his cane and again Solinap fell for the second time. Upon falling, all three accused ganged upon him. In the melee that ensued after Solinap fell, the latter was never able to rise for, he was wounded on his left chest. He died right where he fell." (Rollo, pp. 7-9).

The testimony of Norberto Barrios is as follows:

"Norberto Barrios, 16 years of age, single, and a student testified that at about 6:00 P.M. of February 28, 1975 he was walking on the road in Brgy. Lumbo, Pototan, Iloilo, in front of the store of Sgt. Pepito Pari-an. (Tsn, Nov. 28, 1975, p. 5); that he met Rudy Manzano going towards the store of Sgt. Pari-an holding a butcher's knife and a chaco (Ibid, p. 6); that Rudy was running towards Alfredo Solinap whom he kicked upon meeting the latter and Solinap fell with his face on the ground (Ibid, p. 7); that after Solinap fell, Rudy stabbed with a butcher's knife 3 times but he was not hit as Alfredo moved backward (Ibid, p. 8), that Rudy followed Alfredo who bumped against the wall of a store (Ibid, p. 9); that Leopoldo and Reynaldo at that time were running towards Alfredo, Reynaldo carrying a butcher's knife and Leopoldo also carrying a butcher's knife (Ibid, 10);

that Alfredo was able to stand up when Reynaldo stabbed him once on the chest (Ibid, pp. 10-11); that after Reynaldo stabbed Alfredo, Leopoldo hit Alfredo with his cane on the head more than 5 times (Ibid, pp. 11-12); that Cesar Polistico was about 10 meters away when Alfredo was stabbed by Reynaldo and beaten by Leopoldo (Ibid, p. 13). (Rollo, p. 179; Appellants' Brief, p. 179).

Police officer Blas Provido testified that accused Leopoldo Pardilla surrendered to him a butcher's knife and the scabbard, after which he brought the latter to the town hall where Leopoldo was detained. He reported the matter to his immediate superior and it was entered in the police blotter (ibid, p. 180).

Dr. Gracia Buenvenida testified that when she examined the deceased Alfredo Solinap, she found that he has one stab wound on the chest and a lacerated wound on the head and that she issued a medical certificate, Exhibit "B". (Ibid).

On the other hand, the evidence for the defense consisted of the testimonies of Patrolman Elias Piamonte, and of the accused themselves.

Finding the testimony of Piamonte of no substantial evidentiary value, the trial court limited the discussion to the testimonies of the three accused.

As presented by the defense, the testimonies are as follows:

"According to Rudy Manzano, at about 5:30 to 6:30 of February 28, 1975, he was strolling near the dike when he met Reynaldo Pardilla at the side of a road, 20 to 30 meters from the store of Sgt. Pepito Parian (tsn, June 15, 1976, p. 62); that while walking with Reynaldo, the latter called for his nephew 'Bert' in their house (Ibid, pp. 67-68); that suddenly Alfredo came out of the store of Parian and asked them saying: 'Are you plotting against me?' and Reynaldo answered: 'I cannot understand what you are talking about Tay Pidong' (Ibid, p. 70); that he (Rudy) sat on a bench on the store while Reynaldo and Alfredo were talking (Ibid, pp. 70-71); that he noticed that Alfredo tried to box Reynaldo who ran away towards his house (Ibid, p. 71); that when Reynaldo left, Alfredo went towards him and said: 'You also?' (Ibid, p. 72); that he answered 'I have nothing to do', and Alfredo slapped him on the left cheek and he (Alfredo) stepped back and pulled out a butcher's knife (Ibid, p. 73); that since he has nowhere to run he raised his body and with both legs kicked Alfredo who fell, and immediately he jumped out of the place and ran away (Ibid, pp. 75-76); that upon reaching the house he stayed there the whole evening (Ibid, p. 77).

"Reynaldo Pardilla testified that on February 28, 1975 at about 5:30 to 6:00 P.M. he and Rudy Manzano were at the end of the dike where they used to pass in Brgy. Lombo (sic) about to go to his (Rudy) house (Tsn, June 15, 1976, p. 5); that while they were approaching the store of Pari-an he looked back and shouted 'Bert' 3 times, referring to his nephew Gilbert Pardilla for the purpose of telling the latter to take the carabao out of the sugar plantation (Ibid, p. 6); that after shouting 'Bert' for the second time, Alfredo came out from the store of Pari-an and said: 'Are you plotting against me?', and he (Reynaldo) answered: 'Tay Pidong I don't understand you'; that Alfredo continued to approach him, so he moved backward and then Alfredo boxed him, but he was not hit, and so he moved backward and ran away (Ibid, p. 8); that he went home, which is about 100 meters away and did not return to the store anymore, and learned that Alfredo died when his father arrived that evening (Ibid, p. 9); that his father told him that he killed Alfredo because if he did not kill him, he would have been killed by Alfredo (Ibid, p. 10); that he told them that he is going to the municipal building to surrender (Ibid, p. 11).

"Leopoldo Pardilla testified that on February 28, 1975, at about 6:00 P.M. while going home, he dropped at the store of Pari-an (Tsn, June 16, 1976, pp. 46-47); that he saw Alfredo Solinap standing at the side of the road (Ibid, p. 47); that upon seeing him, Alfredo approached him and said: 'You filed a case' and at the same time he thrust his butcher's knife towards him (Leopoldo), but the latter parried the blow and returned the thrust, hitting him (Alfredo) on the left chest (Ibid, pp. 49-50); that Alfredo reeled towards the back part of the store of

Pari-an on bamboo stump (pusog) and fell to the ground while he (Leopoldo) continued on his way home (Ibid, p. 51); that Norberto Barrios and Cesar Polistico were not there at that time (Ibid, pp. 51-52); that when he arrived home he told his wife, his son and his grandson that he killed Alfredo because had he not done so, Alfredo would have killed him (Ibid, p. 52); x x x ." (Rollo, pp. 180-182; Appellants' Brief).

To recapitulate the theory of the defense is to the effect that Leopoldo Pardilla killed Alfredo Solinap, Sr. in self defense. Rudy Manzano and Reynaldo Pardilla did not have any participation in the killing because at the time of the encounter, both of them were already at home.

Finding the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses more credible, the trial court, as above-stated, convicted the accused of Murder and sentenced them to death with the exception of Leopoldo Pardilla who because of old age was sentenced to life imprisonment.

On September 1, 1976, the accused filed their notice of appeal from the decision of the trial court. However, on September 10, 1976, the said accused filed a motion to withdraw their notice of appeal and on September 12, 1976, filed instead a motion for the reconsideration of said decision, contending that since they were charged with homicide, they cannot be convicted of murder; that while the decision finds that there was superior strength or means employed to weaken the defense, the same was not alleged in the information and can only be considered, if ever, as an aggravating circumstance in the crime of homicide, but not a circumstance that would qualify the offense as murder; that the allegation of conspiracy is not equivalent to an allegation that the offense was committed with evident premeditation; and that since the information charges homicide, and conviction cannot be more than the penalty prescribed for said crime, the accused should be released on their bail bonds, pending appeal, at the discretion of the court. The trial court, however, denied the motion on November 11, 1976.

On December 3, 1976, the accused filed with this Court a petition for certiorari and mandamus with pre-liminary injunction, G.R. No. L-45149 (Pardilla v. Adil), to annul and set aside the same decision, upon the ground that conspiracy, which the trial court found to be synonymous with evident premeditation, could not qualify the crime as Murder, but may be appreciated only, if ever, as an aggravating circumstance of Homicide.

The records of Criminal Case No. 4079 were elevated to the Court on December 21, 1976 for the automatic review of the decision, docketed as G.R. No. L-45266. On February 9, 1977, this Court gave notice to the counsel of appellant to file the Brief of Appellants within thirty (30) days from receipt of notice, but on February 16, 1977, the appellants filed a motion to suspend the proceeding in L-45266 until this Court shall have resolved G.R. No. 45149 (Rollo, p. 36). Consequently, this Court dismissed G.R. No. L-45149 in its Resolution of March 30, 1978 for the reason that the issue raised therein is involved in the decision under automatic review (Resolution of this Court En Banc, August 6, 1979, Rollo, p. 50).

On June 28, 1978, the accused filed their petition for Habeas Corpus, G.R. No. L-48450, praying for the issuance of a writ of habeas corpus, ordering the Bureau of Prisons, respondent therein, to produce the bodies of petitioners before the Court, to show cause of their imprisonment and after hearing, that judgment be rendered setting aside the decision of the Court of First Instance in Criminal Case No. 4079 and ordering petitioners to be released on their original bonds in said case, pending resolution of a new decision by the said court for the offense of homicide. The Court issued the Writ of Habeas Corpus on July 12, 1978 returnable to this Court on July 19, 1978. On July 19, 1978, the Solicitor General submitted a return of the writ and answer to petition praying for the dismissal of the petition on the ground that petitioners therein are lawfully detained in the National Penitentiary by virtue of a decision rendered by a court of competent jurisdiction, finding them guilty of the crime of murder.

Taking note of the fact that the gravest offense by which accused-petitioner therein may be found guilty is only homicide, this Court considered the petition for Habeas Corpus as a petition for bail and an incident in Case G.R.

No. L-45266, and ruled in its Resolution dated August 6, 1979 that it is consistent with equity and justice that they should be released on bail pending determination of the criminal case against them on the merits. The Court ordered the release from custody of accused Rudy Manzano and Reynaldo Pardilla upon their filing of bond in the amount of P20,000.00 each, but declared the judgment of the lower court insofar as accused Leopoldo Pardilla is concerned to have already become final and executory since the latter did not file a notice of his intention to appeal the decision (Rollo, L-45266, p. 57). The Court approved the bailbond of Reynaldo Pardilla and ordered his release on September 18, 1981 (Rollo, p. 157). Rudy Manzano was similarly released on September 20, 1983. (Rollo, p. 117).

On October 12, 1979, the accused filed a motion for reconsideration of the Resolution of the Court dated August 6, 1979 on the ground that it would be unjust to grant bail to Reynaldo Pardilla and Rudy Manzano who were sentenced to death, while denying the same right to Leopoldo Pardilla whose sentence is life imprisonment and praying that the petition in L-48450 be treated as it is intended to be, a petition for habeas corpus, and not a mere motion for bail in L-45266, and thereafter, said petition be granted. On October 31, 1979, they filed a motion to suspend filing of appellants' brief in L-45266 until their motion for reconsideration shall have been resolved, which motion was granted by the Court in its Resolution dated November 20, 1979.

On January 1, 1980, the Solicitor General filed for the People of the Philippines (G.R. No. L-45266) and the Director of Prisons (G.R. No. L-48450) a comment on the accused's motion for reconsideration of the Resolution dated August 6, 1979 with the proposition that in order for accused-petitioner's objection to the Resolution in question be obviated, the Resolution be modified by allowing Leopoldo Pardilla to proceed with the petition for habeas corpus while maintaining the Resolution with respect to Rudy Manzano and Reynaldo Pardilla by treating the same petition as a motion for bail and as an incident in case G.R. No. L-45266.

In their reply to comment filed on February 2, 1980, the accused objected to the recommendation of the Solicitor General, contending that if Leopoldo Pardilla is entitled to a decision on his petition for habeas corpus on the ground that the decision below is not merely erroneous but void, then, there is no basis for a different treatment to Rudy Manzano and Reynaldo Pardilla who are questioning the lower court's decision on the same ground.

On March 22, 1984, the Court resolved: (1) to hold in abeyance the resolution of the accused-petitioner's motion for reconsideration of the resolution of August 6, 1979, praying that the petition in L-48450 be treated as it is intended to be, a petition for habeas corpus, and not a mere motion for bail in L-45266; (2) to set aside the resolution of November 20, 1979 which granted the accused-appellants' motion praying that the period for the filing of the appellants' brief in G.R. No. L-45266 be suspended pending the resolution of their motion for reconsideration in G.R. No. L-48450; and (3) to require the accused-appellants to file the appellant's brief which should also discuss the case of Leopoldo Pardilla who did not appeal, within thirty (30) days from notice of the resolution.

After several extensions granted by the Court, the brief for the accused-appellants was filed with the Court on July 23, 1984 and the brief for the plaintiff-appellee, on November 15, 1984. Appellant's reply brief was filed on April 2, 1985.

Accused-appellants assign the following errors:

I

THE LOWER COURT ERRED IN CONVICTING THE ACCUSED OF MURDER WHEN THEY WERE ONLY CHARGED OF HOMICIDE.

II

THE LOWER COURT ERRED IN FINDING ALL THE ACCUSED GUILTY OF MURDER BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT." (Appellants Brief pp. 182-183)

In the petition for Habeas Corpus filed by the accused in L-48450, this Court had the occasion to rule on the question of whether or not the lower court erred in convicting the accused of murder when they were only charged with homicide. In the Resolution of August 6, 1979, the Court stated:

"We take note of the fact that the information filed against the accused does not allege any qualifying circumstance. The gravest offense therefore, for which they may be found guilty is only homicide. For this reason, the instant petition shall be considered as a petition for bail and an incident in Case G.R. No. L-45266. It is consistent with equity and justice that the accused should be released on bail pending determination of the criminal case against them on the merits . . ." (Rollo, p. 56)

By and large, the above ruling of this Court is but a reiteration of a well-settled doctrine that where the charge is homicide, the accused cannot be convicted of murder (*People v. Simon*, 10 SCRA 280 /1964/; *People v. Bautista*, 28 SCRA 184 /1969/; and *People v. San Miguel*, 124 SCRA 733 /1983/). More importantly, it was established that the words "conspiring together, confederating with and mutually helping one another" contained in the information, simply convey the allegation of conspiracy, and does not necessary result in a charge of murder. (*People v. San Miguel*, supra).

There is no dispute that the deceased sustained only one stab wound on the chest and a lacerated wound on the head. Leopoldo Pardilla admitted having stabbed the deceased although in self-defense. The trial court did not give credence to his plea and convicted all three accused of murder. Leopoldo Pardilla did not appeal so that the decision of the trial court has become final and executory insofar as he is concerned. And when a sentence has already become final because the accused has al-ready begun serving the same, the case can no longer be reopened with a view to its modification (*De Leon vs. Hon. Rodriguez, et al.*, 107 Phil. 759; *Bustamante vs. Maceren*, 48 SCRA 155; Sec. 7, Rule 120).

However, as regards the two other accused in order to implicate and/or hold them liable for the crime committed by Leopoldo Pardilla, conspiracy must be proven.

It is a well settled rule that conspiracy must be established by positive and conclusive evidence. It cannot be based on mere conjectures but must be established as a fact. The same degree of proof required to establish the crime is necessary to support a finding of the presence of conspiracy; that is, it must be shown to exist as clearly and convincingly as the commission of the offense itself (*People v. Palon*, 127 SCRA 529, 537 /1984/ citing: *People v. Custodio*, 47 SCRA 289 /1972/ *People v. Drilon, Jr.*, 123 SCRA 79 /1983/).

It is likewise settled that conspiracy while inferrable from the circumstances must still be proved clearly and convincingly, according to jurisprudence as the commission of the crime itself (*People v. Benavides*, 127 SCRA 189 /1984/ citing: *People v. Cerdana*, 51 Phil. 393 /1928/; *People v. Dorico*, 54 SCRA 172 /1973/).

Equally beyond dispute is the rule that Appellate Courts will not generally disturb the factual findings of the trial court, considering that it is in a better position to decide the question, having heard the witnesses themselves and observed their deportment and manner of testifying during the trial but this does not apply where the lower court overlooked certain facts of substance and value that if considered, would affect the result of the case (*People v. Royeras*, 130 SCRA 265 /1984/).

A careful review of the records shows that the trial court did not only fail to consider certain circumstances which negate the presence of conspiracy but also overlooked certain contradictions and inconsistencies in the testimonies of the prosecution witnesses which do not refer to minor and collateral matters but on the contrary, render their

version highly improbable and contrary to human experience.

As shown by the testimony of prosecution eyewitness Cesar Polistico, there was no sign of aggression on the part of the two accused Reynaldo Pardilla and Rudy Manzano, when they arrived at the scene of the incident on that fatal day. In fact, it was the deceased who belligerently taunted and confronted them with the query as to what they intend to do. Reynaldo did not reply while Rudy answered in a gentle manner: "Brother, I have nothing to do with it." Not contented with Rudy's answer, the deceased again approached Reynaldo. It was then that Polistico tried to separate them and told Reynaldo to go home and the latter did. (Decision, Crim. Case No. 4079, p. 6). Clearly, therefore, aggression originated from the deceased Alfredo Solinap, Sr. and the existence of conspiracy is belied by the surrounding circumstances.

The trial court then assumed that when the three accused returned and went after the deceased, they have already planned for about 30 minutes in the house of Reynaldo on how they would attack the deceased (Ibid, p. 13).

Apart from the fact that the time estimated to have elapsed was pure calculation, such speed in planning and conspiracy is indeed beyond belief. More than that, the testimonies of both prosecution witnesses show that they did not even arrive together and that although all three accused were allegedly armed with knives, chaco, canes or batons, which they repeatedly used in hitting the accused, the latter sustained only one stab wound on the chest which Leopoldo admitted to have inflicted on the accused in self-defense while the lacerated wound on the head was caused by the fall of the deceased on the ground (Rollo, L-45266, p. 191).

In fact there is no longer any reason or purpose for the accused to plot and conspire against the deceased. The records show that earlier, Leopoldo, President of the Samahang Nasyon in Barangay Lumbo was maltreated by the deceased who was reputedly troublesome by nature, in a jeepney before the incident. But far from resorting to violence, Leopoldo opted to avail of legal remedies by filing a complaint of less serious physical injuries (Ibid.).

It is therefore evident, that it was the deceased who had an axe to grind against accused Leopoldo, and coupled with the fact that the deceased was drunk at the time, the theory of the defense that it was the deceased who accosted Leopoldo and stated "You filed a case" and at the same time thrusting a butcher's knife toward Leopoldo who parried it and returned the thrust against him with his own butcher's knife, appears to be more credible and more in accord with the physical evidence. Thus, the absence of multiple injuries that should have resulted from the alleged simultaneous attack on the deceased by three (3) alleged assailants, one of whom is an arnis enthusiast while the other two were young and agile opponents who were supposed to have given the deceased flying kicks, not to mention wrestling and stabbing, is an indication that such violence and attack as described by the prosecution witnesses were not used on the deceased. Implied conspiracy was based on non-existent factual premises. As ruled by this Court, physical evidence is of the highest order and speaks more eloquently than all witnesses put together (People v. Bardaje, 99 SCRA 388 /1980/).

In resume, the totality of the foregoing circumstances, shows without question the improbability and reasonable doubt of the allegations of the prosecution witnesses. The prosecution has not discharged its burden of proving its accusation beyond reasonable doubt.

WHEREFORE, the decision appealed from is Reversed insofar as appellants are concerned and accused Reynaldo Pardilla and Rudy Manzano are Acquitted, but as ruled by this Court in the resolution of August 6, 1979, the sentence of life imprisonment imposed on Leopoldo Pardilla has already become final and executory insofar as he is concerned because he did not file a notice of his intention to appeal.

SO ORDERED.

Fernan, C.J., (Chairman), Gutierrez, Jr., Feliciano, and Cortes, JJ., concur.

[*] Penned by Judge Midpantao L. Adil.

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