

REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES, REPRESENTED BY THE REGIONAL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES (DENR) – REGION IV, MANILA, PETITIONER, VS. AMOR HAC...

G.R. No. 200973. May 30, 2016

Ponente: MENDOZA, J.

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MENDOZA, J.:

Subject of this petition for review on certiorari is the July 4, 2011 Decision[1] of the Court of Appeals (CA), in CA-G.R. CV No. 87267 and its March 6, 2012 Resolution,[2] affirming the March 29, 2006 Decision[3] of the Regional Trial Court, Branch 48, Puerto Princesa, Palawan (RTC), which denied the Petition for Cancellation of Free Patent, Original Certificate of Title and Reversion filed by the Republic of the Philippines (Republic).

The Antecedents

Sometime in 1996, Amor Hachero (Hachero) filed his Free Patent Application No. 045307-969 covering Lot No. 1514, CAD-1150-D (subject land) before the Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO) of Palawan. The subject land, with an area of 3.1308 hectares or 31,308 square meters (subject land), is located in Sagrada, Busuanga, Palawan.[4]

The said application for free patent was later approved by the Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Officer (PENRO) of Palawan based on the following findings:

- 1) That Hachero was a natural-born Filipino citizen of the Philippines and, therefore, qualified to acquire public land through free patent;
- 2) That the land applied for had been classified as alienable and disposable and, therefore, subject to disposition under the Public Land Law;
- 3) That an investigation conducted by the Land Investigator/Inspector/Deputy Public Land Inspector Sim A. Luto, found that the subject land had been occupied and cultivated by Hachero himself and/or through his predecessor- in-interest since June 12, 1945 or prior thereto;
- 4) That the notice for the acquisition of the land by Hachero was published in accordance with law and that no other person provided a better right to the land applied for;
- 5) That there was no adverse claim involving the land still pending determination before the CENRO; and
- 6) That the claim of Hachero was complete and there was no record in the CENRO of any obstacle to the issuance of the patent.[5]

On October 15, 1998, Free Patent No. 045307-98-9384 was issued to Hachero and the subject land was registered under Original Certificate of Title (OCT) No. E-18011 on May 7, 1999.

After an inspection and verification were conducted by the CENRO in 2000, it was discovered that the subject land, covered by OCT No. E-18011, was still classified as timberland and so not susceptible of private ownership under the Free Patent provision of the Public Land Act.[6]

Consequently, on November 26, 2002, the Republic, represented by the Regional Executive Director, Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)-Region IV, Manila, filed the Complaint for the Cancellation of Free Patent No. 045307-98-9384 and OCT No. E-18011 and for Reversion, which was docketed as Civil Case No. 3726.

Despite personal receipt of the summons and the complaint, however, Hachero did not file any responsive pleading within the period required by law. Upon the Republic's motion, the RTC declared Hachero in default. Thereafter, the Republic was allowed to present its evidence ex-parte.[7]

The Republic presented its lone witness, Diosdado Ocampo, former CENRO officer of Palawan, and formally offered the following documents as its exhibits: a) Application for Free Patent of Amor Hachero; b) Orders of Approval of the Application and Issuance of Free Patent; c) Free Patent No. 045307-98-9384; d) OCT No. E-18011 issued in the name of Amor Hachero; e) Inspection Report, dated July 24, 2000; and f) Verification, dated July 17, 2000, both issued by one Sim Luto.[8]

The Ruling of the RTC

On March 29, 2006, the RTC rendered its decision in favor of Hachero. The dispositive portion of the RTC decision reads:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the Court hereby resolves to deny the instant action for cancellation of Free Patent and Original Certificate of Title and Reversion for lack of merit. No pronouncement as to costs.

IT IS SO ORDERED.[9]

The RTC explained that the free patent and title had already been issued after Hachero was found to have complied with all the requirements; that it was the Republic itself thru the DENR-CENRO, Coron, which brought the subject land under the operation of the Torrens System; that it could not understand the complete turnabout made by the same office and its officials who certified before that the subject land was alienable and disposable and who approved Hachero's application; that the Republic failed to show the document which stated that the subject land was still timberland as indicated under Project No. 2A L.C. Map No. 839, released on December 9, 1929, despite the fact that said document was already available at the CENRO office at the time of the application for free patent; that the lands adjacent to the subject land were already alienable and disposable; that the free patent and the title itself were public documents entitled to the presumption of regularity; and that the verification and inspection report of one Sim Luto together with the other CENRO officials presented by the Republic were insufficient to defeat Hachero's patent and title.[10]

The Ruling of the CA

On July 4, 2011, the CA affirmed the RTC decision, stating that the verification presented by the Republic could not be given probative value because L.C. Map No. 839, dated December 9, 1929, which served as basis for the verification, was not presented before the RTC. According to the CA, the Inspection Report, standing alone, was not sufficient to overcome the burden imposed upon the Republic and could not serve as basis of the reversion of the subject land. The CA doubted the subsequent findings of the land investigator that the subject land was still timberland because he was the same land investigator who previously evaluated the subject land and certified that it was alienable and disposable.[11]

Not in conformity, the Republic filed the subject petition anchored on the following

GROUND

THE HONORABLE COURT OF APPEALS GRAVELY ERRED IN AFFIRMING THE DISMISSAL OF PETITIONER'S ACTION FOR CANCELLATION OF FREE PATENT NO. 045307-98-9384 AND ORIGINAL CERTIFICATE OF TITLE (OCT) NO. E-18011 AND REVERSION, CONSIDERING THAT:

I

THE DISCHARGE OF THE OFFICIAL FUNCTIONS BY THE INVESTIGATING PERSONNEL OF THE DENR IN THIS CASE HAS THE PRESUMPTION OF REGULARITY, WHICH PRIVATE RESPONDENT FAILED TO REBUT.

II

THE PREVIOUS FACTUAL MIS APPRECIATION COMMITTED BY THE DENR EMPLOYEES CANNOT AND SHOULD NOT BIND THE GOVERNMENT, ESPECIALLY WHEN, AS IN THIS CASE, THE MISTAKE OR ERROR REFERS TO IMMUTABLE MATTERS SUCH AS ALIENABILITY OF A PORTION OF PUBLIC DOMAIN.[12]

In advocacy of its cause, the Republic basically argues that per its investigation and verification conducted in July 2000, the free patent issued to Hachero was defective and erroneous considering that the land it covered fell within the timberland zone. It contends that the said factual findings carry great weight and should be accorded respect by the courts due to the special knowledge and expertise of DENR personnel over matters within their jurisdiction. Considering that the DENR personnel acted in the discharge of their official functions, the Republic asserted that they have in their favor the presumption of regularity in the performance of their official duties. Moreover, Hachero failed to rebut the DENR's investigation report and, for said reason, the presumption in favor of the investigating personnel and their report has become conclusive.

The Republic further contends that the title issued to Hachero, which had been issued based on an erroneous DENR finding that the land was alienable, can still be overturned by a later report stating otherwise. Thus, the Inspection Report,[13] dated July 24, 2000, and Verification Report,[14] dated July 17, 2000, superseded the previous finding that the subject land was alienable and disposable.

The Republic avers that the State is not estopped by the mistakes of its officers and employees and that the previous factual misappreciation committed by DENR employees cannot bind the government.[15]

Hachero's counter-position

Hachero counters that the petition should be dismissed on the ground that it has raised substantially factual matters. He points out that the findings of fact of the RTC and the CA are final and conclusive and cannot be reviewed on appeal if there is no showing of grave abuse of discretion. He calls the attention of the Court to the fact that the officials, who previously certified to the alienability and disposability of the subject land but made a complete turn around by declaring otherwise, could not have made a mistake or error. He asserts that the main document a vital piece of data denominated as Cadastral Map No. 839, which became the basis for the reinspection/reinvestigation and verification by CENRO, Coron, was released on December 9, 1929 and admittedly already in their records when the application was approved for titling, and yet was not presented in court as evidence. Finally, Hachero stresses that the government cannot be allowed to deal dishonorably or capriciously with its citizens and that titleholders may not be made to bear the unfavorable effect of the mistake or negligence of the State's agents, in the absence of his complicity in a fraud or manifest damage to third persons.[16]

The Court's Ruling

The Court finds merit in the petition.

General Rule and Exceptions when
factual findings of the trial court
are affirmed by the CA

It is generally settled in jurisprudence that the findings of fact of the trial court specially when affirmed by the CA are final, binding and conclusive and may not be re-examined by this Court. There are, however, several exceptions to this rule, to wit:

- 1] When the findings are grounded entirely on speculation, surmises or conjectures;
- 2] When the inference made is manifestly mistaken, absurd or impossible;
- 3] When there is grave abuse of discretion;
- 4] When the judgment is based on misapprehension of facts;
- 5] When the findings of facts are conflicting;
- 6] When in making its findings, the CA went beyond the issues of the case, or its findings are contrary to the admissions of both the appellant and the appellee;
- 7] When the findings of the CA are contrary to that of the trial court;
- 8] When the findings are conclusions without citation of specific evidence on which they are based;
- 9] When the facts set forth in the petition as well as in the main and reply briefs are not disputed;
- 10] When the findings of fact are premised on the supposed absence of evidence and contradicted by the evidence on record; and
- 11] When the CA manifestly overlooked certain relevant facts not disputed by the parties, which, if properly considered, would justify a different conclusion.[17]

After combing through the records, the Court is of the considered view that there is a need to review the findings of the courts below due to the presence of some of the enumerated exceptions mentioned above, which are 1) when the judgment is based on misapprehension of facts; and 2) when the findings of fact are contradicted by the evidence on record.

The Republic showed clear and
convincing proof that the subject
land was inalienable and
non-disposable

Records reveal that on October 15, 1998, upon the approval of Hachero's application by CENRO of Palawan, Free Patent No. 045307-98-9384 was issued and, on May 7, 1999, the property was subsequently registered under OCT No. E-18011.

Thereafter, in an effort to find out fake or illegal titles, the DENR created a task force to investigate and evaluate all issued patents and titles. An investigation conducted by a representative of the Regional Executive Director of the Regional Office No. IV revealed that the subject land covered by OCT No. E-18011 was still timberland and, therefore, could not be segregated from the public domain as timberlands were classified as inalienable and non-disposable public lands.

Accordingly, both Sim Luto, Land Management Officer III, and Diosdado L. Ocampo, Community Environment and Natural Resources Officer, prepared and signed the Inspection Report, dated July 24, 2000, and Verification, dated July 17, 2000, attesting to the fact the subject land fell within the timberland zone under Project No. 2A, L.C. Map No. 839, released on December 9, 1929. For said reason, both recommended the cancellation of OCT No. E-18011.

Aside from the Inspection Report and the Verification, the Republic also adduced maps[18] prepared by the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority (NAMRIA), which showed that the subject land was located within the periphery of the land area classified as unclassified public forest and beyond the alienable and disposable area. In other words, as the maps clearly reveal, every inch of the subject land is inside the unclassified public forest area. Evidently, these maps presented by the Republic, together with the Inspection Report and the Verification, all clearly demonstrate that the subject land is not yet subject to disposition.

Presumption of regularity in the
performance of official duties
applies favorably to Republic

The Court would have wanted to study Hachero's position on the matter, but he did not file an answer or responsive pleading to the complaint filed by the Republic before the RTC. It appears from the records, however, that he was duly served with the summons together with a copy of the complaint. He, apparently, opted to ignore it, in effect, waived his right to rebut the allegations thereof at the first opportunity.

There being a controversion, the presumption of regularity in the performance of official duties applies favorably to the Republic. This means that the DENR's inspection report and the verification stating that the subject land is still inalienable has become conclusive. The doctrine in *Bustillo vs. People*,[19]

xxx In sum, the petitioners have in their favor the presumption of regularity in the performance of official duties which the records failed to rebut. The presumption of regularity of official acts may be rebutted by affirmative evidence of irregularity or failure to perform a duty. The presumption, however, prevails until it is overcome by no less than clear and convincing evidence to the contrary. Thus, unless the presumption is rebutted, it becomes conclusive. Every reasonable intendment will be made in support of the presumption and in case of doubt as to an officer's act being lawful or unlawful, construction should be in favor of its lawfulness.

[Emphasis Supplied]

and in *Farolan v. Solmac Marketing Corp.*,[20]

In the same vein, the presumption, disputable though it may be, that an official duty has been regularly performed applies in favor of the petitioners. *Omnia praesumuntur rite et solemniter esse acta.* (All things are presumed to be correctly and solemnly done.) It was private respondent's burden to overcome this *juris tantum* presumption. We are not persuaded that it has been able to do so.

are both instructive.

Cancellation of title and reversion proper
where there exists a mistake or oversight in
granting free patent over inalienable land

The courts below ruled that the Inspection Report and the Verification had no probative value because the land classification map (L.C. Map No. 839) on which they were based was not presented in the trial court. Likewise, the courts below considered the subsequent findings of the land investigator - that the land still belonged to the public domain - as doubtful because the officials who previously evaluated and verified that the subject land was alienable were the same officials who now investigated and verified the same and found it inalienable.

The Court holds otherwise.

Reversion is an action where the ultimate relief sought is to revert the land back to the government under the

Regalian doctrine. Considering that the land subject of the action originated from a grant by the government, its cancellation therefore is a matter between the grantor and the grantee.[21] In *Republic v. Guerrero*,[22] the Court gave a more general statement that "this remedy of reversion can only be availed of in cases of fraudulent or unlawful inclusion of the land in patents or certificates of title." [23] Nonetheless, the Court recognized in *Republic v. Mangotara*,[24] that there were instances when it granted reversion for reasons other than fraud:

xxx. In *Estate of the Late Jesus S. Yujuico v. Republic* (Yujuico case), reversion was defined as an action which seeks to restore public land fraudulently awarded and disposed of to private individuals or corporations to the mass of public domain. It bears to point out, though, that the Court also allowed the resort by the Government to actions for reversion to cancel titles that were void for reasons other than fraud, i.e., violation by the grantee of a patent of the conditions imposed by law; and lack of jurisdiction of the Director of Lands to grant a patent covering inalienable forest land or portion of a river, even when such grant was made through mere oversight.[25]

[Emphasis Supplied]

In the case at bench, although the Republic's action for cancellation of patent and title and for reversion was not based on fraud or misrepresentation on the part of Hachero, his title could still be cancelled and the subject land reverted back to the State because the grant was made through mistake or oversight. This could probably be the reason why, shortly after one (1) year from the issuance of OCT No. E-18011 to Hachero, the DENR personnel conducted another investigation and verification on the subject land. It would appear that they suspected that a mistake was made in their issuance of the patent as the subject land had not been reclassified or released as alienable or disposable land. It remained plotted within the timberland classification zone. This time, they supported their findings with maps prepared by the NAMRIA. The Republic also followed the proper legal procedure for cancellation of patent and title and for reversion. They filed a complaint in court and notified Hachero through summons. They gave Hachero an opportunity to be heard in court. For unknown reasons, however, he disregarded the summons, allowed himself to be declared in default, and forfeited his right to adduce evidence in his defense.

Prescription and estoppel cannot
lie against the State

Contrary to the observation of the courts below, there is nothing incomprehensible or puzzling or suspicious about the complete turnaround made by the DENR after its re-investigation. The Court has carefully reviewed the records and found nothing anomalous.

At any rate, it is a time-honored principle that the statute of limitations or the lapse of time does not run against the State. Jurisprudence also recognizes the State's immunity from estoppel as a result of the mistakes or errors of its officials and agents. These well-established principles apply in the case at bench. The Court in *Republic v. Roxas* elucidated:

It is true that once a homestead patent granted in accordance with the Public Land Act is registered pursuant to Act 496, otherwise known as The Land Registration Act, or Presidential Decree No. 1529, otherwise known as The Property Registration Decree, the certificate of title issued by virtue of said patent has the force and effect of a Torrens title issued under said registration laws. We expounded in *Ybafiez v. Intermediate Appellate Court* that:

The certificate of title serves as evidence of an indefeasible title to the property in favor of the person whose name appears therein. After the expiration of the one (1) year period from the issuance of the decree of registration upon which it is based, it becomes incontrovertible. The settled rule is that a decree of registration and the certificate of title issued pursuant thereto may be attacked on the ground of actual fraud within one (1)

year from the date of its entry and such an attack must be direct and not by a collateral proceeding. The validity of the certificate of title in this regard can be threshed out only in an action expressly filed for the purpose.

It must be emphasized that a certificate of title issued under an administrative proceeding pursuant to a homestead patent, as in the instant case, is as indefeasible as a certificate of title issued under a judicial registration proceeding, provided the land covered by said certificate is a disposable public land within the contemplation of the Public Land Law.

There is no specific provision in the Public Land Law (C.A. No. 141, as amended) or the Land Registration Act (Act 496), now P.D. 1529, fixing the one (1) year period within which the public land patent is open to review on the ground of actual fraud as in Section 38 of the Land Registration Act, now Section 32 of P.D. 1529, and clothing a public land patent certificate of title with indefensibility. Nevertheless, the pertinent pronouncements in the aforecited cases clearly reveal that Section 38 of the Land Registration Act, now Section 32 of P.D. 1529 was applied by implication by this Court to the patent issued by the Director of Lands duly approved by the Secretary of Natural Resources, under the signature of the President of the Philippines in accordance with law. The date of issuance of the patent, therefore, corresponds to the date of the issuance of the decree in ordinary registration cases because the decree finally awards the land applied for registration to the party entitled to it, and the patent issued by the Director of Lands equally and finally grants, awards, and conveys the land applied for to the applicant. This, to our mind, is in consonance with the intent and spirit of the homestead laws, i.e., conservation of a family home, and to encourage the settlement, residence and cultivation and improvement of the lands of the public domain. If the title to the land grant in favor of the homesteader would be subjected to inquiry, contest and decision after it has been given by the Government thru the process of proceedings in accordance with the Public Land Law, there would arise uncertainty, confusion and suspicion on the government's system of distributing public agricultural lands pursuant to the "Land for the Landless" policy of the State. (Emphases ours, citations omitted.)

Yet, we emphasize that our statement in the aforequoted case that a certificate of title issued pursuant to a homestead patent becomes indefeasible after one year, is subject to the proviso that "the land covered by said certificate is a disposable public land within the contemplation of the Public Land Law." As we have ruled herein, the subject property is part of the Matchwood Forest Reserve and is inalienable and not subject to disposition. Being contrary to the Public Land Law, Homestead Patent No. 111598 and OCT No. P-5885 issued in respondent Roxas's name are void; and the right of petitioner Republic to seek cancellation of such void patent/title and reversion of the subject property to the State is imprescriptible.

We have addressed the same questions on indefensibility of title and prescription in *Mangotara*, thus:

It is evident from the foregoing jurisprudence that despite the lapse of one year from the entry of a decree of registration/certificate of title, the State, through the Solicitor General, may still institute an action for reversion when said decree/certificate was acquired by fraud or misrepresentation. Indefeasibility of a title does not attach to titles secured by fraud and misrepresentation. Well-settled is the doctrine that the registration of a patent under the Torrens system does not by itself vest title; it merely confirms the registrant's already existing one. Verily, registration under the Torrens system is not a mode of acquiring ownership.

But then again, the Court had several times in the past recognized the right of the State to avail itself of the remedy of reversion in other instances when the title to the land is void for reasons other than having been secured by fraud or misrepresentation. One such case is *Spouses Morandarte v. Court of Appeals*, where the Bureau of Lands (BOL), by mistake and oversight, granted a patent to the spouses Morandarte which included a portion of the Miputak River. The Republic instituted an action for reversion 10 years after the issuance of an OCT in the name of the spouses Morandarte. The Court ruled:

Be that as it may, the mistake or error of the officials or agents of the BOL in this regard cannot be invoked against the government with regard to property of the public domain. It has been said that the State cannot be estopped by the omission, mistake or error of its officials or agents.

It is well-recognized that if a person obtains a title under the Public Land Act which includes, by oversight, lands which cannot be registered under the Torrens system, or when the Director of Lands did not have jurisdiction over the same because it is a public domain, the grantee does not, by virtue of the said certificate of title alone, become the owner of the land or property illegally included. Otherwise stated, property of the public domain is incapable of registration and its inclusion in a title nullifies that title.

Another example is the case of *Republic of the Phils, v. CFI of Lanao del Norte, Br. IV*, in which the homestead patent issued by the State became null and void because of the grantee's violation of the conditions for the grant. The Court ordered the reversion even though the land subject of the patent was already covered by an OCT and the Republic availed itself of the said remedy more than 11 years after the cause of action accrued, because:

There is merit in this appeal considering that the statute of limitation does not lie against the State. Civil Case No. 1382 of the lower court for reversion is a suit brought by the petitioner Republic of the Philippines as a sovereign state and, by the express provision of Section 118 of Commonwealth Act No. 141, any transfer or alienation of a homestead grant within five (5) years from the issuance of the patent is null and void and constitute a cause for reversion of the homestead to the State. In *Republic vs. Ruiz*, 23 SCRA 348, We held that "the Court below committed no error in ordering the reversion to plaintiff of the land grant involved herein, notwithstanding the fact that the original certificate of title based on the patent had been cancelled and another certificate issued in the names of the grantee heirs. Thus, where a grantee is found not entitled to hold and possess in fee simple the land, by reason of his having violated Section 118 of the Public Land Law, the Court may properly order its reconveyance to the grantor, although the property has already been brought under the operation of the Torrens System. And, this right of the government to bring an appropriate action for reconveyance is not barred by the lapse of time: the Statute of Limitations does not run against the State." (Italics supplied). The above ruling was reiterated in *Republic vs. Mina*, 114 SCRA 945.

If the Republic is able to establish after trial and hearing of Civil Case No. 6686 that the decrees and OCTs in Dona Demetria's name are void for some reason, then the trial court can still order the reversion of the parcels of land covered by the same because indefeasibility cannot attach to a void decree or certificate of title, xxx (Citations omitted.)

Neither can respondent Roxas successfully invoke the doctrine of estoppel against petitioner Republic. While it is true that respondent Roxas was granted Homestead Patent No. 111598 and OCT No. P-5885 only after undergoing appropriate administrative proceedings, the Government is not now estopped from questioning the validity of said homestead patent and certificate of title. It is, after all, hornbook law that the principle of estoppel does not operate against the Government for the act of its agents. And while there may be circumstances when equitable estoppel was applied against public authorities, i.e., when the Government did not undertake any act to contest the title for an unreasonable length of time and the lot was already alienated to innocent buyers for value, such are not present in this case. More importantly, we cannot use the equitable principle of estoppel to defeat the law. Under the Public Land Act and Presidential Proclamation No. 678 dated February 5, 1941, the subject property is part of the Matchwood Forest Reserve which is inalienable and not subject to disposition.[26]

[Emphases Supplied; citations omitted]

WHEREFORE, the petition is GRANTED. The July 4, 2011 Decision of the Court of Appeals in CA-G.R. CV No. 87267 and its March 6, 2012 Resolution are REVERSED and SET ASIDE. Free Patent No. 045307-98-9384 and OCT No. E-18011 in the name of Amor Hachero are hereby declared NULL and VOID and CANCELLED.

The subject land is ordered reverted to the public domain as part of the inalienable timberland.

SO ORDERED.

Carpio, (Chairperson), Brion, Del Castillo, and Leonen, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 36-43. Penned by Associate Justice Samuel H. Gaerlan and concurred in by Associate Justices Rosemari D. Carandang and Ramon R. Garcia.

[2] Id. at 54.

[3] Not attached to the petition.

[4] Id. at 13.

[5] Id. at 37.

[6] Id. at 13-14.

[7] Id. at 14.

[8] Id. at 38.

[9] Id. at 40.

[10] Id. at 38-40. As quoted in the CA decision.

[11] Id. at 41-42.

[12] Id. at 17.

[13] Records, p. 93.

[14] Id. at 94.

[15] Rollo, pp. 147-148.

[16] Id. at 100-102.

[17] Republic-Bureau of Forest Development v. Roxas, G.R. No. 157988, 160640, December 11, 2013, 712 SCRA 177, 200.

[18] Rollo, pp. 156-158.

[19] 634 Phil. 547-556(2010).

[20] 272-APhil. 127-140 (1991).

[21] Republic-Bureau of Forest Development v. Roxas, supra note 17, at 210.

[22] 520 Phil. 296 (2006).

[23] Id. at 314.

[24] 635 Phil. 353(2010).

[25] Id. at 461.

[26] Republic-Bureau of Forest Development v. Roxas, supra note 17, at 211-216.

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