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# Maithil Women's Song: Distinctive and Endangered Species

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The women of Mithilā in northeastern India still sing many songs on different ritual occasions, and among them are some melodic and po-etic gems. At first glance their musical culture would seem to be much like that of eastern Uttar Pradesh, the site of much of my previous fieldwork in India (Henry 1988), or other parts of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan such as explored in the work of Ann Gold and Gloria Raheja (1994), Laxmi Tewari (1974), Bonnie Wade (1972), Winnifred Bryce (1961), and others. Indeed there are many similarities: the monodic singing, some of it in free rhythm; the importance of singing at life-cycle and calendric rituals, especially wed-dings; the dissimilarity of men's and women's song repertoires; the impor-tance of the Rām and Krishna lore; and the presence of lore of other dei-ties including the Hindu goddesses and Śiv. (This spelling better indicates the pronunciation of the word used in everyday discourse that is usually spelled "Śiva" in English.)

Looking a little deeper one finds some interesting differences: it is an-other case of the unity-diversity aspect of Indian culture. For example, some culture—such as the Krishna cult—is nearly universal in the nation, but some culture—such as a particular goddess cult—is unique to a language region in India, and some culture is unique to an even smaller territory. In Mithilā the women's songs provide a concrete expression of tendencies that distinguish Maithil culture from that of other parts of India. This article demonstrates the distinctiveness with an examination of predominant tune types, their texts, the tune-text relationships, and ritual contexts. It provides historical elements that may explain some stylistic traits, and concludes with a brief discussion of the deteriorating condition of women's singing tradi-tions in north India.[1]

George Grierson, the great British linguist and author of *Linguistic Survey of India* (in eleven volumes), sometimes referred to the language

spoken in Bihar (a state in north-eastern India) as Bihārī, and the languages spoken there as dialects of Bihārī (1968:148). He also put them in his category of Outer Sub-Branch of Hindi languages. As well as infuriating linguistic nationalists of several stripes, these unfortunate classificatory appellations contradicted his own work on Bihar, in particular his disparate grammars of the three distinct main languages spoken there (Bhojpurī, Magahī or Magadhī, and Maithilī) and his explicit recognition that Maithilī was closer to Bengali than to Hindi (ibid).

Maithilī is the language of Mithilā, a cultural region of two historical dynasties but no longer a distinct political entity. According to Grierson, it lies to the north of the Ganges, to the east of the Gandak river, to the west of the Kosi river, and to the south of the Himalayas (thus falling primarily in the Indian state of Bihar but including some territory in Nepal). These boundaries have in the past acted as barriers to restrict access and were responsible for the delayed invasion of Muslim culture. Mithilā is wetter and greener than areas to the west (eastern Uttar Pradesh) and south (Magadh). Bamboo structures, the ubiquitous tanks (man-made ponds) and paddy fields, and the love of fish and rice in the diet remind one of Bengal, which is adjacent to the east. The religion is also like that of Bengal in that Śiv and the goddesses such as Kālī and Durgā figure prominently in the worship rites of the masses.

A strong intellectual tradition in Mithilā goes back at least fifteen hundred years. Mishra and Thakur both claim that four of the six orthodox systems of Hindu philosophy—Nyāya, Vaiśesika, Mīmāmsā and Sānkhya—originated in Mithilā (Mishra 1949:16 and Thakur 1956:4). (A. L. Basham referred to these as the "Six Doctrines" or "Six Systems of Salvation" and estimates the oldest of these, Sānkhya, to be "perhaps of the fourth century AD [1954:323-4].) At the southern fringe of Mithilā lies Vaiśālī, the birthplace of Mahāvīr, founder of Jainism, as well as one of the great centers of Buddhist learning. In the sixth century AD and onwards Brahmanic scholarship, at odds with the Buddhist and Jain philosophies, again rose to prominence in Mithilā.

Several kings and queens of the region have been scholars. The most pertinent of these was Nānyadeva, alleged to have written a commentary on the *Nātya Śāstra,* the oldest text on Indian music. (This work "has been dated variously from the 3rd century B.C. to the 5th century A.D." [Jairazbhoy 1971:16]. This is further discussed below.) Mithilā produced important Sanskrit scholars right up into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Ganganatha Jha, first Indian chancellor of Allahabad University (Jha 1992). Grierson wrote that the Brahman influence pervaded Maithilī culture: "the Maithils are guided by the mint, anise, and cummin [sic] of the [Brahmanic] Law in their everyday life" (1968:4); however, the sub-altern view (that of the lower classes) from Mithilā has yet to be reported.

Maithilī is the only language spoken in Bihar with a literary history older than the twentieth century: its literature can be traced back to the fourteenth century AD. According to one authority on the subject, Maithilī literature achieves the pinnacle of its powers in lyric poetry, poetry originally intended to be sung (Mishra 1949:130). Names of the principal genres of this poetry are the same as some of the "folksong" genres still sung by unlettered and untrained singers today, such as *sammara, batagamanī*, and *samdaunī* (Mishra 1949:76–78). It is very difficult to separate the poetry of the "folk" from that of the court.

The social contexts of women's singing in Mithilā are much the same as those of eastern Uttar Pradesh reported in Henry 1988: rituals related to birth, first hair-cutting (*muṇḍan*), the awarding of the twice-born string to boys of castes in the top three *varṇas,* the wedding, festivals such as Śivrātra, and goddess worship. The groups in which women sing are likewise informally constituted. Women of the family in which a ritual is being staged or a festival celebrated invite neighborhood friends and relatives, who attend according to their interest and ability and, these days, available time. The women are not formally trained in music. Unlike their Bhopuri counterparts, they do not accompany their songs with any musical instrument, including the drum (Fig. 1.)

**Figure 1. Women singers of the Kewat (also spelled Keot or Kiot) and Hajam castes of Rāntī, District Madhubani, Bihar, India. The singers in the front row, from left to right, are: Adheera Devi, Janaki Devi, and Arhula Devi; in the second row: Phool Devi, Jayashree Devi, and Laksmi Devi.**

## The Melismatic Surge Style

This type of melody, with its free rhythm and a unique style of melisma, is probably the oldest. This observation is based on intuition, but it receives inferential support from two facts: most modern songs heard on cassette, radio or television have been metrically regularized (rubato styles are not currently popular), and when girls learn songs these days, they are much less often those of the rubato, more melismatic type.

The first example is of a genre called *aṭhoṅgar* (Ex. 1). (Women most often classify wedding songs according to the name of the ritual or ritual stage in which they will be sung, but sometimes according to the ritual alluded or referred to by the song text. Classification is thus not watertight, and singers occasionally disagree about the genre to which a certain song belongs, or create hyphenated categories on an ad hoc basis.) The aṭhoṅgar rite is a part of the *vivāh* or actual wedding rites taking place at night that is not found in the wedding rites to the west of Mithilā. In this stage of the ritual the groom stands with seven other men (*āṭh* means eight in Maithilī) in a circle around the rice-husking mortar. A string is passed around the outside of the group at waist height and the ends tied together. All of the men then simultaneously hold the rice-husking pestle and, while reciting a particular mantra, pound it several times on a bit of unhusked rice in a kind of cylindrical mortar. None of the people I asked, including Brahmans, happened to be able to explain what the ritual might mean. It would seem to suggest that the groom has joined the male work force, inasmuch as they are jointly holding the pestle and encircled by a string. However, grain-husking with the pestle is women's work, and they surely would have chosen a man's chore or implement if it were men's work they were emphasizing. The pounding of the pestle into the cavity of the mortar suggests

## Example 1. Aṭhṅogar



Parlando Rubato

He    su - niy a  -  ni    ha r a    ba  -  ra

su  -  nda'_____ ra    mā - ī he    dek-hiy a  -  ni

vi  bhu - tī    bhu  -  ya_____ ṅk - a_____ r  he...

sexual intercourse, so perhaps they are recognizing the groom's joining the male procreative force of the family.

Given the parlando rubato (free, without a steady beat) rhythm and melisma, this song and the next two were very difficult to notate, and the attributed durations cannot adequately convey the timing or the intermittant surge resulting from the melismatic singing. The notation does serve to demonstrate the scalar features and melismatic nature of the melody. Notice the melismatic pattern, often a convex arc with usually four but sometimes as many as seven tones, which occurs nearly whenever a vowel is sustained. The first instance is on the first word of this example, *he,* and other instances occur on the *a* of *suniyanī,* and the *a* of *sundara.* While melisma is not uncommon in women's songs in other parts of India, this style of melisma, with the convex arc and surging effect, is distinctive.

A related problem in analyzing songs of this type was the absence in many places of a normative melody: unison was sufficiently lacking to leave the listener in doubt as to what melody was intended. This is not a new phenomenon; I first noticed it when I recorded music in this area in 1978. The three songs selected in this category were among the few in which there was a sufficient melodic consensus to allow transcription with any degree of certainty. I believe the poor unison results from the demanding nature of the elaborate melodic line and the devotion of less time to singing than in the past when the songs and their singing were more important. In evolutionary terms, the songs are maladapted by over-specialization.

The perception that unison is lacking in some of the singing is not unique to me, as evidenced by a conversation I had with Smti. Sarojini Pathak, a Maithil Brahman woman and singer now living in Patna. When I mentioned to her that some of the groups I had recorded did not sing together very well, she suggested that I say to them before recording, "*kanik sur me gāyal jāo; milāyaka gāyal jāo.*" ("If you could sing just a bit in tune; sing together.")

This first song opens a window into the local culture of the deity Śiv, presenting some of the characteristics of the deity that are emphasized in Maithil culture (this song and the following six have a single-strain melody rather than the two-strain type [AB] that is also common).[2]

> Hey *sunaini,* Śiv was to come on a chariot today.
>> But we see him on an old bullock.
> We heard that Śiv is handsome.
>> But we see him, ash-smeared and terrible.
> We heard that he had a necklace of pearls.
>> But we see a necklace of *rudrakṣa* beads.
> Hey, eight men perform the *aṭhoṅgar*
>> But not a single grain of rice is husked

> Hey, Vidyāpati sings,
>> Hey, Gaurī got a matching groom.

*Sunainī* in the first line means "lady with the beautiful eyes." It refers here to the mother of the bride, Gaurī, who is also called Pārvatī. That eight men should pound rice and not a grain be husked is no more surprising than the spectacle, for the bride's mother, of the great god Śiv—the groom arranged for her tender and beautiful daughter.

Only the line about the aṭhoṅgar distinguishes this from the two genres (now seeming indistinguishable) of folksong and literary poetry called *nacārī* and *Maheśbānī* which are defined by their concern with Śiv and his wedding to Pārvatī. Śiv must symbolize how every bride's mother, or even every bride, occasionally perceives the stranger who is to be her son-in-law or husband. He is a notable amalgam. His most common icon is the *liṅgam,* a phallic symbol. In popular depictions such as the calendars sold in the bazaars he is a holy man (*sādhu*) meditating in a cremation ground, a cobra twined around his neck, and the Ganges river spouting from the top-knot in his hair. His outstanding animal companion is an ox. In the mythology he smokes marijuana; compatible with this is his epithet Bholā Nāth—which some take to mean "the forgetful one"—and the ritual invocation of his name before smoking marijuana. Only a few of these traits figure importantly into the depiction of Śiv in the Maithil women's songs.

Maithils are attracted to Śiv in part because he puts his ascetic practices—his religion—before appearances. His power comes not from wealth and what it can buy, but from his devout asceticism. These songs make a great deal of his penury and rough appearance in the wedding, where the norm is exorbitant spending on grand impressions. Śiv comes in on the back of the plodding ox, every inch the typical sādhu—adorned with the holy man's necklace and not much more, skin smeared with ashes from the sacrificial fire, locks unshorn and matted. Compare this with the image of the resplendent Rām in his wedding to Sītā in the Ramayana—the most glorious wedding that ever was.

At the end of the song comes the conventional *bhanitā.* "The insertion of the poet's name (or any name he chooses, whether a nom de plume of himself or the name of the guru) appears to have been practiced in the old and medieval periods throughout the length and breadth of upper India" (Sen, cited in Mishra 1949:77). Here the name inserted is Vidyāpati. He is considered the greatest Maithil poet, and his era is considered the golden age of Maithil culture. According to Jayakanta Mishra, he lived from 1360 to 1448 AD (ibid.:139, 145). He was a revered figure in the court of Raja Sivasingh of the second great historical dynasty of Mithilā, the Oinavaras. He is reknowned not only for his lyrical poetry, but also for his philosophical writings. Many Maithil folksongs carry the name Vidyāpati, which,

if it does not indicate that the song was actually written by him, does tell that the song was intended to be in his style. He inspired a long line of emulators. Many of them even styled their pseudonyms after his: Umapati, Nandipati, Krsnapati, and so on (ibid.:166). He is acclaimed as *their* poet by both Maithils and Bengalis, and even by champions of Hindi (ibid.:183). In Bengal poets were so enamored of his style that there emerged a new hybrid language, Brajābulī, in which Bengalis poets wrote songs like Vidyā pati's that "gradually became more popular amongst the Bangálí [sic] people than the real songs of Vidyapati" (Grierson 1882:35). But Vidyāpati is a historical figure whose contributions to, and the appearance of whose name in Maithil music distinguish it from the music of other cultural regions in India.

The second example of this type of melody is also a type of song sung in the wedding (Ex. 2). Melisma occurs in the first line and throughout the song. The *jog* songs are sung when the groom, not having eaten salt in his food since his first meal at the bride's home where the wedding takes place, is once again allowed to eat salted food on the fourth and last day of the traditional wedding. Mishra characterizes the jog songs as being sung to the groom to bind him to the bride "by incantations" (1949:79). Two of the four jogs I recorded fit that description; the other two, including this one, do not. However, this song is clearly intended to be sung at the departure

**Example 2. Jog**

of the groom on the last day of the four-day wedding. It is classified as a jog apparently because it is sung in the jog setting. It communicates the affection of the bride's mother (and family) to the groom.

> From where did the parrot come who has aroused this love in me?
> Where did he take shelter and divine food?
> The parrot who has aroused this love in me came from Sarisab
> He took shelter and ate divine food in Rāntī
> Do not shelter such a parrot and get attached to it
> It will learn to fly and go to its own home
> Such a parrot did the mother-in-law nurture and get attached to
> If he becomes wise he will return

The aṭhoṅgar and jog presented here were both sung in specially convened recording sessions by groups of Śrotriya Brahman women, the aṭhoṅgar in Madhubanī and the jog in very similar versions by Śrotriya women in both Madhubani and Sarisab-Pāhī. The Śrotriya *jātī*, endogamous social category, is the highest ranking Brahman category in Mithilā (Saraswati 1977:54) with the most conservative and rigorously upheld practices.

The third example is of a type of song called *lagan* or *laganī* (Ex. 3). The word *lagan* refers to a period reckoned by an astrologer as suitable for some special event such as a wedding. Women sing these songs while grinding wheat on the handmill in the days before a wedding in their family. The texts of the lagans usually pertain to weddings and their difficulties, as seen by the mother or close relative of the bride or groom. Here a woman of the gardener caste (*mālin*), who is responsible for flowers and other decorations for the wedding, is awakened by the priest who exhorts her with high praise to make the decorations, as the lagan is at hand.

> The mālin is immersed in dreams in her room and her husband is asleep in the garden.
> Get up, Mālin, the priest is waiting at the door [to start the wedding rites]
> What harm have I done, sir, to deserve this abrupt awakening?
> Mālin, the lagan is upon us and you are deep asleep!

**Example 3. Lagan**



Parlando Rubato

ham - a - ro ke ghar - a      mā - li  -  n  la- gan?      u————

tā  -  hul - a mā  -  lin      sū- ta - l - a ni - ści - nt  he

Oh Mālin, you construct such a fabulous flower crown [for the groom]; it
will stun the populace of Janakpur
You set figurines of little dancing girls around the circumference and in the
center of the crown and provide a favorable omen for Sītā's marriage
Our female kin and the groom's family will witness your excellence
[To the groom:] The wedding is done, the vermilion is applied [signifying
the transference of the bride to the groom and his family]; take Sītā's finger
and lead her away.

"Sītā" in these songs has a dual meaning. Sītā is the girl who becomes
the wife of Rām (also called Raghubar, Ragunandan, and Rāmcandra) in the
Ramayana, but Sītā also stands for daughter. Janakpur here likewise refers
to the community in which Sītā lived before marriage to Rām (the home
of King Janak) or to the home village of the bride.

This song came from the Kāyasth caste women of Rāntī. Kāyasth males
were traditionally scribes and accountants, and they and their families were
thus involved closely with the life of the court, hence their women were
likely to share musical culture with the other high castes including the
Brahmans. This was the only lagan I recorded to this tune. It is included
here to make the point that the free rhythm/melisma style is not confined
to Śrotriya Brahmans, although it was certainly more common among them
in the songs I have recorded. The typical convex pattern is seen initially in
the transcription on the second syllable of *mālin* and then again on the
mysterious vowel after *lagan,* on the *ta* of *utabula,* again on the *lin* of
*malin,* and on the final *he.*

These more melismatic songs, unsynchronized by a regular beat, are
more difficult to sing and more difficult to sing in unison than any of the
other types. Now that fewer singers know and can sing them there is less
opportunity to sing them (women will only "lift" or begin a song if they
are fairly confident others will join in), adding momentum to the downward
spiral which will end in their disappearance. Smt. Shail Thakur, a Maithil
singer now living in Los Angeles, told me that these melodies will become
extinct with the passing of the older generation of singers.

The melismatic style of songs like these three, distinguished from the
melisma of songs from eastern Uttar Pradesh by its surging quality, presents
a problem: why should only some songs in the repertoire have this trait?
The absence of music notations or data on performance practices from early
times prevents a conclusive answer, but we can explore several lines of
speculation. Of the melismatic surge style songs I collected in 1995, the
great majority were sung by Śrotriya Brahman women, and a few by Kāy-
asth women. It is possible that the Śrotriya predominance in this case is
an artifact of my limited sample size. Another possibility is that the style
was once common throughout the castes, and the Śrotriyas, who are some-

what more conservative than other Brahman castes, retained this style more than the other castes have. It is also possible that the style was influenced by Vedic chanting, which can also be highly melismatic. Vedic chanting is the province of the Brahman castes, so the Brahman women, including the Śrotriyas, would be more likely to be influenced by it.)

A second line of speculation is that the melismatic songs may have come from an era in which the singing style was that of an elaborate court tradition. It is possible that this tradition in part or whole came from South India with Nānyadeva, the founder of what is known in Maithil history as the Kārnāta Dynasty, who reigned in Mithilā from 1098 to about 1147 (Thakur 1956:254). The idea that Nānyadeva imported some aspect of musical style to Mithilā is suggested by Radhakrishna Chaudhary (1976:363).

The Maithil historian Upendra Thakur makes the case for Nānyadeva being a *kṣatriya* (a man of a caste ranked in the warrior *varṇa* or echelon of castes) from Kārnātaka with three points, the last of which is relevant here. First is a putative parallel between the Sena kings of Bengal, also of the Kṣatriya varṇa, who came from Kārnātaka during the same period and settled in Rādhā in West Bengal (ibid.:228). Second is a document found in Nepal called *Vamśāvalis* (chronicle) which refers to Nānyadev and his dynasty, but Thakur does not specify how this confirms Nānyadev's provenience. The third point is most interesting to historians of Indian music: Thakur argues that Nānyadev is the writer called Abhinavagupta who authored the commentary on the *Nātya Śāstra*. This is indicated, according to Thakur, by the different names by which the author refers to himself in the text, including Nanyapati, Nanya, (the relevance of these two is merely in the name Nanya); Dharmadharabhupati Mithilesa (this one links the panegyric first word with Mithilā); and Karnatakulabhusana (panegyric + Karnatika) (ibid.:228; the parenthic glosses are mine). Whether or not this is sufficient evidence for claiming the identity of Nanyadeva and Abhinavagupta, it does show the thinking of Maithil writers. If Nanyadeva were in fact the author of the commentary and thus a music theoretician, it makes it more likely that he would have influenced the musical practices in his kingdom. Whatever their origins, the melismatic surges heard in these songs distinguish them and others like them from other women's song in North India.

## The "Out of Phase" Tune-Text Relationship

In the second major class of tunes, the distinctive feature is the delayed sense of the melody's beginning at the beginning of the verse (further explained below), coupled with a steady beat and less (but still some) melis-

ma. Three principal genres exemplify these features: the *samdaun, udā-sī,* and *kumār.* The samdaun has the most pronounced tune-text differential, and the udāsī frequently has the same melody as the samdaun.

The samdaun corresponds to the *vidāī* or *gaunā ke gīt* of Bhojpurī-speaking India. That it is called by another name in Mithilā exemplifies one general finding of the field research there: most of the occasions for women's song are the same as in the Bhojpurī territory, but many of the genres have different names and sometimes sub-types not seen in the Bhojpurī region. It is also worth noting that the tunes of the songs were all different from those of songs in the Bhojpurī-speaking region.

The texts of samdaun concern the plight of the bride. A new bride's female friends and relatives sing samdaun and perform certain rituals as she is leaving home with her new groom to go live in his village. Patrilocality, the traditional residence pattern in North India, requires the bride and groom to live with or near the groom's parents, which location is almost always in another village. This results in the bride having to leave her home, family, and friends to live in her husband's village in or very near his natal home. Although especially in the first few years of marriage a bride will be fetched by her father or brother for extended visits to her natal home, the separation at which these songs are sung marks not only the beginning of her roles as daughter-in-law and wife, but the end of her role as a daughter, the end of her life in her natal village, and the beginning of the end of many relationships with village friends and relatives. (A long-established part of Indian social life, and a long-recognized trauma, the departure of the married daughter is dramatized in the fourth act of Kalidas's play *Shakuntala,* which dates to the fifth century AD [Ryder 1959, mentioned in Jha 1996].)

North Indians recognize this as a moment of great pathos, and Maithils have elaborated on this theme. I have observed that on the night when the bride leaves, attending girls and women cry sincerely, and some spontaneously. Devotees also sing samdaun at the end of Durgā Pūjā. (*Pūjā* means worship rite; Durga is one of the important mother goddesses of Hinduism.) Her autumnal festival is the most important of the year's calendric rituals in Mithilā. At the end of the festival young men carry the clay image of the goddess to a river or pond for terminal immersion.

The fact that the samdauns seem to bulk a little larger in the repertoire than all of the other women's songs (I recorded more samdauns than any other type, and they were not especially solicited) indicates the importance of this moment in the wedding to the Maithil people. The first samdaun, from Śrotriya women in Madhubanī, shows clearly the grief felt at the departure of the bride (Ex. 4). (Kalindi in the bhanitā is the poetess.)

**Example 4. Samdaun**



Bā - bā  ke    ha  - ve - lĭ - yā    chan - an - a    gāṛ

e    gach - i  -  yā    tā - hi    me    ta——

Second stanza

hi - lo  - ra    la - ga———  ye    Ta - hi    cha - rhĭ

jhu - la - tĭ    ba - ra    si - tā    dā ĭ    sakhĭ

Third stanza

das a———  sa    la  - gā———ye    se - ho    si - tā

> In the sandalwood grove in my father's courtyard
>     there hangs a swing
> In it the graceful Sītā is swinging
> Ten friends are pushing
> Oh that Sītā is being taken way by Raghubar as she weeps
> Seeing the swing the mother cries
> The courtyard is not pleasing to her
> Nowhere does she hear the sweet voice of Sītā
> Without my daughter I will go crazy
> Kalindi makes this request of Raghunandan:
> Hold her as dear as your life.

A majority of the samdauns refer to the wedding of Sītā, the archetyp-
al pitiful bride. The next samdaun, from women of the Kewat/Hajām neigh-
borhood in Rāntī, focuses on the feelings of the departing bride, although
the first line expresses the mother's view (Ex. 5).

> If I had thought about my daughter going to her husband's village
>     I would have planted a clove tree
> Who will arrange things in the little and big containers?
>     Who will walk the milk cow?
> Oh my mother will arrange things in little and big containers
>     and my papa will walk the cows
> Whose tears will make the Jamuna river flow,
>     whose tears would soak a sheet?

**Example 5. Samdaun**



I know my mother's tears would create a Jamuna river
  but my brother's wife's heart will be like a stone
I know my father's tears will soak a pair of *dhotīs*
  and my brother's tears will soak a sheet
The palanquin is of red and green
  its bearers are thirty-two in number
One mile is gone; two are gone; three are gone
  Oh bearers, I will prostrate myself at your feet if you will stop this palanquin
  for even a moment
She sees the pond and asks:
  Is this the pond in whose limpid water I used to play with my friends?
  The water in my father-in-law's pond will not be pleasant.

The significance of the clove tree was not clear to me or my main translator; perhaps its yellow blossoms would be cheering. The bride knows her mother, father, and brother will grieve her departure, and her brother's wife will not (they are often depicted in song as rivals). The significance of the number of bearers is not clear, but the colors red and green may refer to the death shroud—the removal of the bride is a metaphor for death in many songs, the *nirguṇ bhajans* in particular (Henry 1988:174-75). The bride feels the steady passage of her palanquin away from her home, the passing of her her life with her girlfriends, the dread of her new home. (Before condemning the society that would systematically cause such trauma, readers should consult Gold and Raheja 1994, which reveals something of the spirit that allows North Indian women to thrive in spite of such difficulties.)

A single melody predominates in the samdaun genre: thirteen out of the fifteen samdauns I recorded were sung to it. The tune and the text in this melody are intentionally out of phase. The relationship of the tune to the text can be understood through the following device. Imagine two discs that revolve on the same axle, the top one being transparent. Each disc is

marked like a standard clock face. The top disc represents the melody, the bottom the text. Now mentally revolve the top disc so that the twelve marker on the transparent disc is directly over the one marker of the bottom disc; it is as though the second stanza of text begins before the melody has come to an end.

One can discern in the samdaun a kind of full cadence consisting of the same (or nearly the same) conjunct descending phrase occurring thrice in succession. (The correspondence is rather broad, but one is reminded of the *tihāī* of Hindustani classical music—although here the element occurring three times in succession to create a cadence is a melodic phrase, not a rhythmic one.) The phrase begins on the tonic and descends to the fifth. In the first example the first of these three phrases begins with the syllable *-rā* of the word *hilorā*. The second phrase in the first example has a crook in it. It begins with the syllable *-ye* of the word *lagāye*. The third of the three successive descents begins after the beginning of the second stanza of poetry on the vowel *a* of the word *carhi*. The first of the three successive descents in the second example below begins on the syllable *na* of the word *daunak*.

Repetition of the descending pattern creates an expectation of closure which is defied by the beginning of the textual verse. This compositional feature is found in no other women's songs in North India.

Naomi Owens, an American scholar and applied anthropology consultant, collected women's songs in this region in the 1970s. One type she recorded is called *udāsī*. (*Udās* mens sad in Maithilī [Davis 1984:228].) The udāsī is sung when the groom leaves the bride's house after the wedding, generally without the bride. I suspect that because this stage of the wedding is now often omitted, the udāsī is less commonly sung, hence its absence from my collection. Owens reported that it is sung to the same tune as samdaun and thereby induces the same sadness. In an essay she wrote on Maithil wedding songs, she included a transcription of an udāsī melody which is similar to the samdauns presented here. Owens' description of the udāsī fits the samdaun and helps to convey the experience of the novel tune-text relationship: "The way in which the beginning of the song is smoothly slipped into the ending phrase is truly remarkable. The words to each new verse begin just *before* the melody concludes its downward movement towards the tonic; i.e., the new verse begins at the point of greatest expectation of an *ending*. By the time the tonic is heard we are already launched on a new verse. Thus there is never a feeling of melodic closure at the ends of any of the verses, no real cadence" (n.d.:11).

The number of beats per melody line ranges from fourteen to sixteen, which suggests the songs were once sung to a regular metrical cycle such as found in *dhrupad*. The sumdaun and kumār (below) exhibit a clever-

ness of composition that one does not usually find in women's song. This suggests a specialist's expertise; however, whether that specialist was a court musician, a drama troupe musician or some other kind of expert may never be discovered.

The second genre of the delayed melodic-beginning type is the kumār (Ex. 6). There are two text types: *betā,* sung at the groom's home and presumably more relevant to the family of a groom, and *betī,* sung at the bride's home. Most kumārs describe different scenes occurring before the actual wedding or *vivāh*. A kind of general wedding song in function, it can be sung at any stage before the bride is given away along with other songs specifically designated for that stage. Women also get together informally to sing it in the weeks before the wedding. This is the analog of the *sagun* sung in the Bhojpurī-speaking region (see Henry 1988:29).

Various tunes are used for kumār texts. The tune presented here is the one used most frequently; in this collection it was sung to eleven different texts. It is a tune also used for other genres of wedding song including *kanyadān* (the stage of the wedding when the bride is bestowed upon the groom) and *samar*. (The samar songs, sung after the kanyadān, describe heroic feats such as the bow-stringing contest at which Rām won Sītā in the epic *Ramayana*.)

Here the melody tone when the text begins is the second degree of the scale; arrival of the tonic is suspended for a few beats but brings with it a distinct sense of return to solid ground. The text-tune disjuncture is not as prominent as that of the samdaun but does seem similar to it. Once the melody begins in both the samdaun and kumār the songs move forward at

**Example 6. Kumar**

a grand, steady processional pace. This melody is also used for other genres, including *kanyadān* (when, in the wedding, the bride is given to the groom), *ubtan lagāye* (a preliminary wedding rite when turmeric is ritually rubbed on the bride or the groom), and *lagan* (songs sung while grinding grain).

The first kumār text below, from the Kewat/Hajām women of Rāntī, describes the scene that initiates the marriage process: a man realizes that the physical maturity of his daughter requires her prompt marriage. (Men have told me that it is dangerous to keep a physically mature daughter in the home. She is a temptation to the young men of the neighborhood, and if her reputation is sullied that of the entire family is affected and it will be impossible to get her married.) He is obligated to find a suitable groom with suitable prospects, in a suitable family. It is a dreaded and generally difficult job. This text combines elements from the stories of Śiv and Rām along with novel material. It initially seems that the father found Śiv (the "asectic") for a groom, making the use of the name Janak mean generic father rather than the father of Sītā in the Ramayana, in the same way that Sītā sometimes means generic daughter. The last four lines of this seem to use material from the Ramayana in an imaginative way—Janak did not go to Ayodhyā seeking a groom for his daughter, but he would have, had affairs in the Ramayana been conducted in accord with local custom. The *pāg* is a flat-topped cap that is a part of formal Brahman wear. The *tilak* is the dot of color applied to the center of the forehead in blessing. This song was sung by women of the Dhanuk caste, a mid-range caste, in Sarisab-Pāhī.

> Janak looks at Sītā's body and worries that it is time for her to be wed
> She tells her neighbors to wake her father
> How could a father sleep so deeply when there is an unmarried girl in the house?
> As soon as he hears these words he awakes with a start
> He ties his *pāg,* takes the golden staff in his hand, and goes to Magadh and Munger
> The father searches south and west to Magadh and Munger
> I could not find a groom suitable for you; what I found is an ascetic beggar
> Don't worry, he may be an ascetic beggar to you but he is like a god to me
> Go to Ayodhyā, to the door of Rājā Dasarath
> Raja Dasarath has four sons, some dark and some fair
> Put the *tilak* on the dark one, he will be the groom
> Do not be concerned that he is young since he is the Lord and brave

The second example of kumār, from women of the Dhanuk caste in Sarisab-Pāhī, is more concerned with Śiv and seems an attempt to come to terms with his shocking behavior. The song suggests that Śiv's roughness will have to be accepted along with his munificence—he will take care of even the bride's mother, to whom the last line is addressed (Ex. 7).

**Example 7. Kumar**



kin - a - kar a - lā     rī  gau - rī  kin  a - kar - a  du - lā - rī

kin - a - kar     bha - ro - se  gau - rī     ra - ha - lī  ku - mā - rī - ĩ

> Whose daughter is Gaurī, so innocent and beloved?
> How has she remained unwedded?
> She is the beloved of her mother
> She will wait for Śiv to wed her
> She goes to pick flowers from her father's garden
> Riding his ox Śiv knocks the flowers from her hand
> Gaurī goes to her mother, who is upset
> Who hit Gaurī and knocked down the flowers?
> Who is that man to hit and insult my daughter?
> Gaurī bashfully replies, "I can't tell you."
> Ask my friends, they can explain.
> She calls the friends
> Who hit Gaurī Dāī?
> That man was riding a bullock, had gray hair and beard
> Riding the ox he knocked the flowers down
> Don't cry; try to understand. It is he who will even take care of you.

Song texts presented above show the aspects of Śiv's character that obtrude in the Maithil perception and support the importance of Śiv in women's song and Maithil culture. Of the 223 songs recorded in sessions, twenty-one concerned Śiv. This is a significantly higher proportion than I found in eastern Uttar Pradesh. The attitude toward the deity Rām is also distinctive in Mithilā, and the women's songs such as the *sohar* below reveal this.

Following K. D. Upadhya (1954:101) and the statements of village informants in eastern Uttar Pradesh, I previously described sohar as a kind of song performed when a son was born or in other "transitional" or birth-related calendric rites as auspicious music (Henry 1988:64–65). Dr. Hetukar Jha argued in his review of my book that the singing of sohar in Mithilā is not confined to the birth of sons: "one can easily observe the celebration of the birth of daughter, singing sessions of sohar songs and the rituals related to it" (Jha 1994:93). However, some Maithils I interviewed did define sohar as a kind of song sung when a son is born, and Mishra states, "Birth-

songs are not found to be sung on the occasion of the birth of a daughter, though in Mithilā it is not necessarily less welcomed" (1950:11). Perhaps this is a matter of culture change. It would be interesting to know in what percentages of families of which castes today daughters are welcomed with singing.

One distinctive aspect of Maithil women's songs is the particularization of their taxonomy. Smti. Indira Jha, wife of Dr. Hetukar Jha, is herself a knowledgable singer of Maithilī songs and gave me the following classification of sohars, which I believe is commonly held. Her general category of sohar includes three sub-types: *kilauna* ("toy"), which is "humorous and joyful, in a lighter vein"; *badhāva* (cf. Hindi *badhāī*), which is a song of congratulations; and sohar, which is itself divided into sub-types. One of these is sohar with A and B melodies called *chand* and *pad,* the chand being in a faster tempo and different metrical structure than the pad. The other type she called sohar without pad. It is songs of this type that were sung most commonly (seven out of thirteen sohars in my 1995 collection). The melody notated here is of this type. As seen in the notated example the first melodic phrase, of three to four beats, begins on the fifth below the tonic and takes a convex shape before grazing the tonic on its way to the third. The opening is thus somewhat similar to that of the samdaun. Like the kumār and samdaun, it procedes with a fairly steady rhythm, though a bit faster. Unlike them it has two melodic strains. The sohar tune presented here, from a group of Kāyasth women in Rāntī, was the third most recorded tune in my collection, after the samdaun and kumār tunes presented above (Ex. 8).

The vignette presented in this sohar requires some background to be understood. In Valmiki's *Ramāyana* Rām's wife Sītā is kidnapped and held prisoner of Rāvan in Lanka (the present-day Sri Lanka). Rām eventually

**Example 8. Sohar**

manages to regain her and bring her back to the kingdom of Ayodhyā. But there was talk in the kingdom of Sītā's having been untrue to Rām while a captive of Rāvan. Rām acquiesced to these rumors and banned Sītā to the forest. One day Rām finds it necessary to mount a huge sacrifice ritual (*raj-suya yajna*).

> Soon after returning his elders gave their consent and Rām set out to stage a sacrifice
> Without Sītā on the right side it will be sad
> Ministers Viśvamitra and Vaśiṣth don their golden clogs
> They go to the far-flung place where Sītā is living a life of austerity
> Having just bathed, Sītā is sitting shaking water from her hair
> Seeing the gurus she casts her eyes down
> > wondering how to pay respect to them
> Oh brothers, sisters, citizens,
> My respected gurus are my guests today
> > how can I pay my respects to them?
> Golden platter . . . worship the gurus
> At least I will salute them respectfully and wash their feet
> Heed our advice and come to the kingdom of Ayodhyā
> Rāmcandra will perform a sacrifice, you must sit on the right
> Hearing this she says, "I will come to Ayodhyā."
> But as I set my eyes on Rām's face, Ayodhyā will be sad.

The line about the golden platter is an obscure detail, but the gist of the song is clear: after being kidnapped and held captive by the evil Rāvan, Sītā was rewarded, upon their return to Ayodhyā, by banishment to the forest at the hands of her own husband, when she was pregnant with his child. Sītā nonetheless remains respectful and without spite. She agrees to comply with the request to attend the sacrifice, even knowing that in doing so she faces public disapproval.

Another sohar, which was surprisingly sung by a group of Dusādh men, draws attention to Sītā's loneliness in childbirth and the deprivation of having no one to assist her in the delivery of the child except a woman of the forest:

> . . . Daughter Sītā feels low in spirit
> Who will be with me and cut the umbilical cord?
> Who will be in the delivery room with me?
> Who will make the lampblack? (applied to the newborn on the sixth day to protect the child's eyes and to avert the evil eye)

In Maithil eyes Sītā is a Maithil and Rām is an Āwadh (a man of Oudh, the region around Ayodhyā in Uttar Pradesh) and thus an outsider (and thus an inferior). Maithils feel sympathy for Sītā not only as the archetypal daughter and bride but also as the victim of Rām's mistreatment. They judge Rām's behavior toward the innocent Sītā as dishonorable. Thus in their attitude

toward Rām, who in regions to the west of Mithilā is often taken for the greatest deity of all, there is thus an element of resentment. Dr. Hetukar Jha gave me this aphorism, which also projects the focus on Sītā's banishment by Rām: *Rām vyhāhane kon phal bhel/sītā jivan banahī gel* (Jha 1995). The essential meaning is: So what if Sītā was married to Rām? Sītā's life was spent in the forest (in banishment).

Dr. Jha added that Rām is thought by some to have acted cowardly in the case of the monkey king Bālī. In the *Ramāyana* Bālī's brother, Sugriv, told him that Bālī had taken his kingdom and that only if shot from behind could he die. And Rām did shoot him from behind, which some Maithils consider a cowardly act (ibid.).

The attitude toward Rām is part of a larger syndrome which holds at arm's length Vaiṣnava *bhakti* or devotional religion. Jayakanta Mishra asserted that true Maithil devotionalism is best seen in the worship of Śiv and the goddesses (as opposed to Rām and other Vaiṣnava deities) (1949:30). A further expression of his allegiance to Śaivism is his statement that Brajbhāśa, the language of most Vaiṣnava devotional songs, corrupted the Maithilī language and prevented its full development (ibid.:463). Mishra does not specify just what it is about the practice of Śaivism/Śaktism in Mithilā that is supposed to make them the quintessential devotional religions there, and it is unclear whether his attitude represents all segments of the society.

### Songs of the goddesses

Relative to the Bhojpurī and other language regions to the west of Mithilā one hears more goddess songs, called *gosaunik git* or just *gosaun.* Nineteen of the 223 songs in my collection concerned goddesses. In Mithilā ideally every song session, indeed every auspicious religious ceremony, should begin with a gosaun. They are also sung in worship of the family's preferred goddess, whose image is kept in a special room in the home called *gosaunī ghar.* The songs describe the outstanding traits of the goddesses and sometimes traits of their worship.Women sing these to a variety of tunes. The ones I have chosen to illustrate the genre (from the Kewat/Hajām group of Rāntī) are characterized by regular meters and slightly faster tempos. The melodies are of the AB format common throughout North India. Each of the stanzas is sixteen beats long. They are catchy—attractive and repetitive enough to be more easily learned, which may have to do with their function, which is to attract followers. The tunes included here have a more modern feel, but there are many types of tunes to which gosaunik songs are sung.

Most of the goddess songs depict the traits of the goddess and prescribed acts of worship like this one. This text also shows that the goddess is one to be feared in the biblical sense (Ex. 9).

**Example 9. Goddess Song**



Jay jay kā - li he      a - hū-ke ma hi-mā - ya a-ga-ma - a    pār - a

ka hā-ma na-he - la - hu ka - lī    ka-hā la - ṭa jhā - ṛa-la-hū se kā - lī

he      ka - hā bai - si kay - e      la-hū sṛ - ṅg - ar - e

Hail, hail Kālī, Her powers are limitless—beyond measurement [repeat]
Where did you bathe? Where did you bathe? Where did you shake the water
    from your hair? Where did you sit down to adorn yourself?
Hail, hail Kālī, Her powers are limitless—beyond measurement
I took a dip in the river Ganges, my dear devotee, I took a dip in the river
Ganges, my dear devotee, lock by lock I wrung the water from my hair
Hail, hail Kālī, Her powers are limitless—beyond measurement
With which flower did you cover yourself, with which flower did you cover
    yourself, which flower did you wear, which flowers are best for your dec-
    oration?
Hail, hail Kālī, Her powers are limitless—beyond measurement
I like to cover myself with little jasmine flowers, servant; I like to cover my-
    self with little jasmine flowers, servant; I like to wear big jasmine flowers,
    I love to be adorned with red hibiscus blossoms
Hail, hail Kālī, Her powers are limitless—beyond measurement
All adorned as you stand in your temple, all adorned as you stand in your
    temple please bless your helpless devotee
Hail, hail Kālī, please bless your helpless devotee
      you have committed a grave offense

The second gosaunik git also prescribes ritual, but it presents motivation
for her worship as well. In this case the goddess is named (Ex. 10).

I saw Kālī in my dreams as she stood in my courtyard
Some are plastering in front of her, others behind her
      yet others are plastering her temple while she stands in the courtyard
That is what I saw in the dream as she stood in the courtyard
On whom did she bestow a healthy body?
Who did she grant good sight?
Who did she bless with a son while she stood in the courtyard?
I saw Kālī in my dreams
She bestowed a healthy body to a leper

**Example 10. Goddess Song**



Kā-lī ke  de - kha - la-hu sa- pa-na-wa      se thā - re an-ga-na - wā      wā

ke- o  ni- pe  a-gu- ā- ra mā ke      ke-yo ni- ke  pa chu wa ra ma  ke      ke

> She granted good sight to the blind
> She granted a son to the barren as she stood in the courtyard
> I saw Kālī in my dreams as she stood in my courtyard

These two texts together remind us that the goddess is a dualistic figure who both rewards and punishes. As I have pointed out elsewhere, one of the reasons for the popularity of the goddess is her ability to provide sons; another is fear of being afflicted by diseases associated with her (Henry 1988:80–96).

In summary, Maithil women's song differs from that of other language regions in important ways. First of all, their melodies are different. The presence of a distinctive, elaborate, and apparently archaic melodic style as well as a unique text-tune device suggests that some of their songs are in a form generated by specialists, possibly of a dramatic troupe or temple complex, but certainly of the court, as shown by the presence of Vidyā pati's name in the bhanitās. The luxuriance of the song taxonomy shows influence from the Brahman sector that others have seen as central to Maithil culture. Finally, the song texts reflect a distancing from Rām and a heightened interest in Śiv and the goddesses. These religious attitudes are more like Bengal and less like Uttar Pradesh, as we would expect from the location of Mithilā.

## The Condition of Women's Singing Traditions in Mithilā

Apparently nowadays many fewer songs are sung for weddings than before. Ideally women sing a special song for each of the many ritual stages of the wedding. Thus in Anima Singh's collection of Maithilī wedding songs there are forty-seven different types of wedding songs. But the weddings of today are much condensed, the events that once filled four days now being squeezed into one. Expenses are undoubtedly a factor; fortunate men have jobs they must attend to; and for many young people there is school. Secondly, even when I first recorded music in this region in 1978

I noticed that unison was lacking in many of the songs, and that was un-fortunately more true in 1995. That is, they were often not beginning and ending the words of the monodic tunes together, nor were they always singing the same syllables on the same pitches. Many factors share respon-sibility for the apparent decline, but primarily, women's singing has been smothered by other music—of late, amplified music.

Culture is a many-layered thing. Women's singing was probably the first layer of music in weddings and other public rites. It is mentioned in Tulsi Das' *Ramāyana, Rāmcaritmānas.* Even then it may have co-existed with instrumental music, for example, a single drum or a small ensemble of drums, which served first to signal neighbors or passers-by of the event and also to enhance the festivity of the event. (The use of both single and en-semble drummers at ceremonial events was still extant in 1971 in eastern Uttar Pradesh.)

Probably the next item to overlay women's singing was the *śahnāī* or other horns. In Mithilā the double reed horn heard most frequently is the *pipahī,* essentially a crude śahnāī. Unlike the śahnāī, it has a cylindrical rather than a conical bore, and it is shorter—only nine inches long. Men of the Camar caste play it, and accompany it with drums they call *digarī* and *khurdag.* It often plays at the same time women sing, but not the melodies being sung by the women.

Then came the brass band. (See Henry 1988:218-23 and Booth 1990:245-62.) The brass band is used in the same way as the reed horn groups, and like them, it obscures the women's songs. Since the late nine-teen seventies the brass band has been "enhanced" by the generator *cum* flatbed wagon. The leading instrument/s of the band ride on and play from a large decorated flatbed wagon, pushed by bearers. Behind follows the gen-erator, on wheels, whose electrical current powers the amplification system and the many clusters of florescent light tubes which bearers carry on their heads. The rest of the band, in uniform, follows or leads along with the car or van carrying the groom and closest members of his party. The sound can be heard from a great distance. Bands I heard in Patna, Muzaffurpur, and Madhubanī in 1995 all featured highly reverberated trumpet playing and male falsetto singing of popular songs, most of them from films.

When it arrives at the home of the bride the band's music nowadays often competes with amplified recorded music. In 1978 disc jockeys were already being hired for weddings in Madhubanī to broadcast film music or disc recordings. With the advent of cassettes the amount of amplified re-corded music increased. In addition to the use of professional disc jockeys, people now have their own tape players, which are used to provide what we might call background music for weddings. But whether the machine is their own or someone else's, at the volume at which the music is played

it is not "background," but "in your face." In Mithilā I even saw oxcarts toting blaring amplified tape players which had replaced the band in the groom's party.

When I first recorded wedding music in eastern Uttar Pradesh in 1971 I noticed that the women singing their welcoming songs to the arriving groom's party had to compete with the brass band or the śahnāī party. As layer after layer of music is added women must now compete both with an amplified band and amplified music in their home.

If one assumes that there is a need for music in the wedding, that need is now being met largely by recorded music and that of professional bandsmen, and there is simply less need for the women to sing. Singing used to be an important part of a woman's role. Now, whether because they are spending more time with books (more women are attending school than before) or television and radio, or they are responding to a diminished need for song, the girls aren't learning songs as they used to. In Mithilā and other regions where the vernacular is not Hindi there is an additional problem—the presence of the Hindi songs on the radio and on cassettes. For some younger singers the Hindi songs have a kind of urbane cachet. They don't want to be thought of as country bumpkins, so they sing the fashionable songs at the expense of songs in the local language.

Electronic amplification is polluting India's sonic environment. Singing in the home now must compete, in town and city, with amplified music and noise which is a part of sales promotions, political campaigns, and religious observances. This may be seen as a facet of the modern problem: Will we manage technology to improve the quality of human life, or will we allow it to degrade the environment and ultimately lower the quality of human existence?

Women's group singing has numerous apparent benefits. Like all singing, it can be a unique source of personal gratification. Current songs give life meaning. Older songs allow the present to be better understood by looking at the past. As I have elaborated elsewhere, group singing unifies a group of people through shared meaning and joint behavior (1988:116-18).

Joseph Kuckertz and the late B. Chaitanya Deva pointed out that today in India when folk music dies, no new creative act replaces it (Deva and Kuckertz 1981:13.) In just a few decades centuries-old songs and singing institutions that unify social life and give it meaning and scope for creativity can be lost forever. So be it?

## Notes

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During this fieldwork, carried out over over a period of four months in 1995, I recorded
Maithil women's songs during four weddings as well as a dozen specially-convened record-
ing sessions in five locations. The first of these was the city of Patna, capital of Bihar, which
lies in the Magahi-speaking region but which is home to many Maithils. The other four loca-
tions were all in the district of Madhubani in the heart of Mithilā: the city of Madhubani, the
nearby village of Rāntī, the town of Sarisab-Pahi (east of Sakri), and the village of Raiyam (east
of Sarisab-Pahi). The singers were from a broad spectrum of castes including Pasi, Dusadh,
Dhanuk, Kewat, Hajam, Kayasth, and several different Brahman castes including the Śrotri-
yas. I also recorded women's songs in Bhojpurī- and Vajikā-speaking regions of Bihar. (Vajikā
or Bajikā is a dialect between Maithilī and Bhojpurī spoken in Muzaffurpur District, at the
southwest corner of Mithilā; the Bhojpurī-speaking area lies in western Bihar and eastern Uttar
Pradesh.) The collection of songs from which the ten in this article were drawn are songs in
Maithilī recorded in the specially-convened sessions—they were the most intelligible. (Songs
recorded in weddings are commonly obscured by ambient noise.) I also spent two weeks in
1978 in and around Madhubani, recording twice-born string (*yogyapavitra*) and wedding
ceremonies during fieldwork supported by a grant from the Indo-American Subcommission
on Education and Culture.

2. Transliterations of this and the following song texts are available from the author.

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