CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG EBIRATAO ETHNIC GROUP OF NORTH- CENTRAL NIGERIA IN PRE-COLONIAL TIMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper focussed on traditional conflict management and resolution among Ebira Tao ethnic group prior to British occupation of Nigeria. Traditionally, Ebira Tao society evolves cultural norms for resolving conflict through oath - taking; invocation of the ancestor's spirit, oracle consultation, and mutual consultation, elder's deliberation, and unwritten coded law that serve as pinnacle for societal regulation. The main objective of the paper is to highlight some of these traditional institutions that served as instruments for conflict resolution, and some of which are still helpful in recent time in resolving disputes among the people of Ebira nation. Using primary sources – mainly oral and archival materials – with secondary sources: previous research publications by scholars in the field; the paper approach the topic within the context of modern day conflict and resolution. The research findings suggests that some of the existing traditional institutions and associations established by the Ebira nation in recent time were an offshoot of the ancient traditional practices even though most of these institutions have been modified and realigned based on existing modern laws since the beginning of colonial administration.

Key words: Ebira Tao, Conflict, Violence, Traditional Institutions, Age-grade

INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, conflict had been part and parcel of man and had been responsible for phenomenal development as well as destruction of the spatial environment where man has been thriving. The world had witnessed two World Wars that resulted in the balkanization of peoples into regions and countries, where ties were created on the basis of interest and security. Internally within these countries of the world, people that are separated by historical antecedents or racial backgrounds and ethnicity found themselves in conflicting circumstances that often leads to violent confrontations. And even within the same society, people who share common ancestry and ethnic affiliation find themselves in conflict arising from personal interest and individual differences. Human history from early times to present had been inundated with the challenge of trying to resolve and avoid conflict. The idea of conflict resolution transcends beyond international borders because from the communities at the grassroots, conflict resolution is vital as with inter or intra national ones.

Within the Nigeria context, prior to colonialism many ethnic nationalities had evolved ways through which conflicts are resolved amicably and where necessary offenders or the guilty party were adequately punished. Rising conflicts in our societies in modern day Nigeria calls for a reflection of some of these pre-colonial methods of resolving and avoiding conflicts. This paper attempt to reflect on some traditional institutions that once served as instruments for conflict resolution in Ebira Tao ethnic nationality found in north central Nigeria. Some aspects of these traditional institutions still survive, though modified according to the times, and are still relevant in resolving conflicts within the Ebira people presently. In the case of Ebira Tao, communal conflicts occurred at the level of social relationship between the various clans and lineages (Ibrahim, 2000:7).These sometimes resulted to war skirmishes usually brought to an end by the intervention of the elders (Shehu, 1991:23).

Other sources of conflicts are: wife snatching, inability to pay debt, murder, adultery, witchcraft and land disputes were

some of the reasons that can cause conflicts in the past (Ibrahim, 2000:7). Economically, Ebira Tao are predominantly farmers; as the population of Ebira expanded pressure on land acquisition heightened within the clan as complaints over interference with farm crops and domestic animals could lead to dispute. (Ibrahim, 2000:7). Settlement of such disputes usually resulted to avoidance war skirmishes. The Ebira Tao society was fragmental, with the resultant effect that each clan was autonomous of the other. Each clan was, by tradition, related to another which was one of the reasons why war and skirmishes did not record heavy loss of lives before the elder's intervention (Shehu, 1991: 25). The British intervention and imposition of central leadership brought in new policies that were alien to their social interaction especially native court, native police and imposition of taxes (Lokoprof, 1904). Therefore, the British idea of central chief changed the nomenclature of the Ebira traditional system of governance to that of British imperialism. (Adoke, 2012).

Brief History of Ebira Tao

Ohiare (1985: 60-61) observed that the history of the Ebira, from the context of the various struggles which are preserved in their tradition can be divided into four periods. The first period started in the Gongola basin and ended with their migration to the Lower Benue valley. According to tradition, the Ebira in this period were found in Wukari (in the present Taraba State) and had formed part and parcel of the Apa group who founded the Kwararafa Confederacy consisting of Pindiga, Kona and Kwararafa. This was the time they were located in (E)bira a name they came to be known and identified by this period. No historical, social and political materials could be reconstructed, some have even called it a pre-history of the Ebira. A date between 12th and 14th centuries had been suggested (Ohiare, 1985: 60-61).

The second period was the Lower-Benue Valley when the Ebira took their name by describing themselves as people from (E bira) i.e., Anebira. The exact place of settlement here is still obscure. But some guesses had been made from the tradition

collected among Idoma which claim that the Ebira had been living in the area of Ahinse down to the area of modern Agatu district where Idoma ancestors met them(Erim, 1981: 109).A date of between 15th and 16th centuries has been suggested for the earliest Idoma migration into the area. This means that the Ebira might be present in the lower Benue around 14th century (Mohammed, 2014: 17, Ohiare, 1985: 64). Ohiare (1985: 63) saw the migration of the Ebira across the right bank of the Niger around the present location of Ajaokuta often known as Ebira-Opete (i.e., old Ebira) as marking the third period in the Ebira historical developments. The time of this migration is said to be during the reign of the second Atta of Igala. Here, settlements like Ukpake, Ohuruku, Egodo, Ochiobayin and Obangede were founded (Ibrahim, 1968: 16-18).The fourth stage according to the division of Ohiare was when the Ebira were forced on a gradual movement to inland and north-west, from Ebira-Opete in families, lineage and even clans to their present location probably at about the late 17th Century (Ohiare, 1985: 64).

Mohammed (2014: 17) suggested that since it was a series of migration, the movements might have spanned the late 17th century A. D. and mid-18th century as suggested by Ibrahim (1968: 16-17).While some families, groups, lineages and even hunting parties moved to Ebira Okene area, others moved at the same period to form the Ebira Etuno within the Akoko-Edo ethnic clusters. However, the mainstream of Ebira Etuno was said to have been formed by those who migrated from the Okene area in the second wave to the hilly Akoko-Edo neighbourhood. This latter group consisted of Ehimozoko, Akuta, Avaka, Ogu, Agada and Idelle clans (Ahmed, 1995:44).

However, Ahmadu posited that the Ebira movement from Igalla Kingdom was during the reign of the fourth Atta, Ayeba – Om- Idoko about the late 17th century (2010: 2). From this period, the children of Ita'azi the ancestral father of Ebira Tao people founded six settlements like Adaviruku and Ohizi who founded Adavi, Ododo and Obaji founded Okehi and Eyika, Uga founded Okengwe, Ochuga and Onotu founded Ihima and Ohunene

founded Eganyi respectively (Ahmadu, 2010: 2-3).These are the groups that sum up the present Ebira Tao people of Kogi State.

Concept of Conflict

Conflict is a basic contingency of social life whose potentials are felt everywhere. It is a violent expression of irreconcilability and incompatibility (World Bank, 1989:1).Conflict exists in three components; they are actions, incompatibility and actors. It is a very fluid and ambiguous concept usually with negative connotations. It is usually perceived as the opposite of cooperative harmony and peace (Training, 2003:3-4).

Wilmot,(2011: 2-3) defines conflict as a felt struggle between two or more independent individuals over perceived incompatible difference in beliefs, values and goals, or differences in desire for esteem and control over their desired needs. He further, conceptualises conflict as a state where people are nested by some sort of social cords. And that, it does not occur in isolation, people must be relating or be depending on one another.

Hoelscher, (2002: 526) describes conflict in terms of good or bad outcome. When the outcome of a conflict scenario is positive, it is defined as a functional or constructive conflict. Conflicts that end up in negative outcomes are regarded as dysfunctional conflict. Alimba describes communal conflicts as social conflicts that involve one or more groups in the society. When it occurs within a group it is known as intra-communal conflicts (Alimba, 2014: 183). Dudley, (1988: 9) observes that conflict is an inescapable part of our daily lives, an inevitable result of our highly complex, competitive and often litigious society. Nnoli opines that conflict refers to contradictions arising from perceived behaviors, phenomena and tendencies. From these analyses, it is obvious that conflict is a behavioral pattern involving two or more individual closely related groups, which can be inter-personalities, inter-groups or intra-groups (Nnoli, 2003:1).

Conflict is further defined as a situation in which people; groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or

argument (Hornsby, 2000:239). Conflict may also occur in a situation in which there are opposing ideas, opinion, feeling or wishes; a situation in which it is difficult to choose (Hornsby, 2000:239).Conflict can also be a process which begins when one party perceived that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate something that concern his wellbeing (Thomas, 1976:889-935). Nuikin (1993:17) had argued that conflict is nothing new to humanity. It manifestation always reveals threat to the harmony of world civilization. Conflict can disrupts the social order of a community and the more it does such society will be perverted by violence. The community will eventually be weakened and its capacity to integrate becomes difficult. In this respect, recourse to conflicts is an attack on the social order-rather than a justification of it. It always reveals the weak point of the system.

In reference to Ebira Tao, Ibrahim (2005:11) contends that conflict in Ebiraland was for 'a just cause'. Conflicts manifestation in the past was in defence of the collective security and interest of the people against external threats. From the various views of conflict as discussed above, it is clear that as long as humans are far from perfection and being nurtured under different environment, culture and family discipline, there is bound to be conflict. In essence, conflict in any society is bound to happen due to differences. Conflict manifestation in Ebiraland can be classified into social problems; land dispute; offence against masquerade; witchcraft; children waywardness and so on. Therefore, conflicts in Ebira Tao may not necessarily be manifested in bloody confrontation but rather occurred on mere deference of opinion or struggle to achieve a particular goal. In most cases the conflicts can be violent or non-violent in nature. Conflicts within the context of this paper in Ebira Tao will be discussed as mere dispute, or confrontation arising from differences in opinion or ideas.

Sources of Conflict Resolution in Pre-Colonial Ebiratao
The Iresu, Priest-Chief and the age-grade system

One of the vehicles of settling dispute among Ebira Tao prior to the conquest of the area by the British was through leadership by elders. The system strengthened not only kinship but design to sanitise and resolve conflicts or disputes. For instance, there existed socio-political organisations that started from the family unit to the clan-group known as *Iresu* at a remarkable wider and larger level. The eldest male of the clan was the leader who in conjunction with the council of elders took charge of the clan. Also at the clan-group level, there was a clan chief whose duties among others were to look after the welfare of the group socially and politically (Mohammed, 2014: 34). Any sacred or serious matter affecting the people was addressed by the elders and the clan chief whose verdict had to be respected by the community (Mohammed, 2014: 34-35).In this traditional policy conflicts rarely occurred and when it did, the elders quickly intervened for settlement (Onukoko, 2014).

Invariably, the authority structures that existed among the Ebira communities in the 18th century were predominantly descent based. Other features of the structures were territorial, age-grade and occupational loyalty and a belief system. The structures were operated at two levels: the village and land. The village was an administrative unit territorially defined. It consisted of a number of sub-clan *Ovovu* who owed some allegiance to a clan whose head or chief might not be resident in the same village (Ohiare,1988: 137).The members of the various households that constituted the village were at the same time forced into other forms of loyalty because of associations they had to enter into on the basis of age-group, occupational pursuit and the fact of residency in the same area. For instance, the members of a village, irrespective of clan affiliations, regarded themselves as a community distinct from the surrounding communities and with a recognised common name (Ohiare, 1988: 137-138).

Another basis for conflict management and social interactions was the age-grade system often formed for the

execution of community projects and for the defence of the village against external threats. This organisation incorporated all the village population organised in a hierarchy of age-grades of *Ozoku* (elders), *Omuha* (adult), *Ezuei-Omuha* (youths) and *Ezuei* (children). The adults and youths constituted the major defence and work force of the village (Ohiare,1988: 137-138).The age-groups were mobilised for the maintenance of roads, markets and other community projects. The youth of the various quarters of the village often came together for games, harvest and religious festivities sometimes competing among themselves. The elders of the village consisting of the heads of various households and sub-clans formed the ruling class of the village. The headman of the oldest sub-clan was often appointed the head of the council and thus the village chief (Ohiare,1988:139).

The council functioned more as overseer and director of the village life. It could order the execution of communal projects and intervened in inter group quarrels. It was the duty of the council to ensure peaceful relation among members of the village community. The success of the council depended very much on the cooperation of the heads of households. The head of the household had the last say in the day-to-day administration of his household (Onukoko, 2014). Following their settlement patterns based on family lineage, a clan group conducted its affairs as a semi-autonomous entity. In each clan group, lineages often acted independently. The leaders of these clan groups never failed to strengthen their political authority through religious sanctions ordained by the ancestors. The institution of *Eku* cults gave political potency to their religious sanctions (Audu, 2010:240). Through this form of establishment, any external threat to the domain of Ebiraland usually brings forth *Ozukata*' specialist in archer' from the existence clans head to ward off such invasion. (Audu, 2010:240).

The Ebira Tao are said to have resented the central administrative authority of the Junkuns in the Wukari area of the Kwararafa kingdom. Thus, the Ebira, like other disparate ethnic groups, migrated frequently and at different times from one

unsuitable spot to another as an expression of their resentment against tyrannical rule, among other reasons (Sani, 1993:6)In the case of the former reasons, they did so in order to free themselves from the resented bondage and clutches of the Jukuns and headed southwards before the end of the sixteenth century (Sani, 1993:6).However, when they settled at their present location each and every clan groups were only loyal to their heads of the family without a centralised authority until the advent of colonial rule which brought them together under a central leadership. If there was any form of centralization in Ebiraland, it was in the sphere of religion rites. Politically, the different groups and settlements had independent clan heads with different nomenclatures. Hence, the Ebira people did not evolve a centralised political leadership and had no paramount chief before the British occupation of the area in 1902 (Apata,1978:1). Pre-Colonial Ebira community consisted of five principal clan groups among several others, namely, Okengwe, Eika, Okehi, Adavi, and Ihima. The respective priests (heads) of these clan groups were known as Ohindase, Adeika, Ohiomahi, Asema and Obobanyi respectively (Osaro, 2016:14).Each clan was self-governing and did not regard any other as superior to it. Significantly, the clan was the main unit of political organisation. The clan head performs religious duties and his disciplinary powers were, however, limited to his own family. His political influence was quite small and although he presided over the meetings of his clan, his judgment was determined largely by the consensus of opinion of the elders (Osaro, 2016:14-15).

The Eku Cult
There existed among the Ebira Tao the institution of *Eku* masquerade (ancestral reincarnation) as enacted to maintain law and order against defaulters of the taboos and norms of the society. The masquerade served as an institution of discipline for wayward children, if any matter be so serious to defy solution, appeal or reference could be made to the ancestral temple covering the group. Any decisions taken there through divination and experience of elders as officiating priests would be regarded as

final when conveyed by *Eku-Oba* – conveyance of Masquerade order (Ibrahim, 2000:18).In their tradition and customs, offenders were usually presented to this Masquerade to pronounce verdict based on the nature of the crime committed (Ojia, 2007).

The judiciary system to manage and resolve conflicts therefore, depend on the High Priest, elders deliberation and finally the *Eku* (Masquerade, the ancestral spiritual messenger and executioner of justice)after the authentication of findings from the seers i.e. divination of oracle. Though there was no clear distinction between the judiciary, legislative and executive aspect of pre-colonial Ebira society, decisions were arrived at by the collective resolutions of the heads of each clan. Such actions were in most cases sanctioned and executed by the *Eku* (Ojia, 2007).

The belief in *Eku* institution as an agent for discipline, punishment, execution and deterrence was highly upheld by the Ebira society. The *iregba* (ancestral temple) served as a place for the *Eku* to carry out any injunction as might be directed by the chief priest of the ancestral temple, *Ohireba* (Ibrahim, 1968:56).Any vices like witchcraft practices and murder of innocent person would attract the judgement of the Masquerade. For example, a Masquerade called *Adiyaya* owned by *Esusu* clan usually came out by the order of *Ohindase* (High Priest) to avert any serious allegation of witchcraft affliction. He did this by first detecting who was wrong before taking any action known as *Oyi-jote*, a process of visiting a house confirmed for the crime. Such visit sometime led to total destruction of family's compound in the past, or the confirmed witches could be banished to a nearby hill or forest. In the procession which was usually accompanied with blowing of *Okokoro* (a curved hollow stick) or even a horn to warn everyone on their way to stay clear or beat of *opo* drum to depict sorrow and sadness for the departing witch (Abedo, 2011:19). If the offence committed was of great consequence, a highly consultative council of elders converged for consultation and deliberated on the issue before ordering for the execution of the witch if guilty. The masquerade acting on the order of the gods went ahead with a sharp edge knife to narrate the victim's

offence(s) in accordance to the confirmation made through _Eva_ (seer) divination. Thereafter, the masquerade beheaded the witch to appease the god at _Iregba_. This act was popularly known in the local dialect as _Ekuaguza_ which implies a process of beheading offenders, staking them at the cross road (T-junction). After burial, a special tree called _Okumaba_ would be hoisted on their grave as an insignia for a passerby to notice. This phenomenon was described in Ebira oral tradition as _Oyi-ja'aba_ - heap as tomb (Shuaib, 2009). The power of masquerade as agent of traditional law enforcement (dispenser of justice) was reduced by the British, as they made it an offence for any masquerade to kill or punish an offender. Any act of killing by a masquerade was charged as an act of murder (Oziede, 2014).

In all their societal lives the Ebira upheld various masquerades displayed either for guidance or to instill discipline on youth who disobeyed their elders. For example, a disobedient child was normally taken by a masquerade to the gate of _Iregba_ to be disciplined. He would be blindfolded and tortured while strange noises were made into his ears, these being said to come from super human powers that hate children who were disobedient to the elders. He was then warned by the strange voices that any further serious offence from him would mean death (Ibrahim, 2000: 18).An afternoon masquerade called _Akatapa_ sometimes appeared during night masquerade festival to admonish women for their transgression against the ancestors. They usually prescribed sacrifice where necessary to appease the ancestors (Ibrahim, 2000:18). _Akatapa_ is both masquerade and _facekuerade_. It is known as famine ancestral spirit said to be the female slaves of the domain of the dead and terrible liars. It creates fun through jests and satirical abuses such as prostitution, adultery, vanity, greed, quarrels, theft and soothsaying (Ododo,2015:195).

In the pre-colonial Ebira society _Eku'echi_ festival (unmask masquerade or facekurade) was used to maintain peace and to warn the women folks from indulging in witchcraft and to admonish children to be obedient to their families. The night

festivity was usually celebrated with pomp and pageantry, with a dynamic integration of poetry, chants, mimicry, mime, dance 'mask' and significantly cultural symbols (Ododo, 2015: 76-261).The period also served as a thanksgiving feast for the bountiful co-existence and honors of the deities where people seized the occasions to solicit blessings from God or the departed soul. It thus brings people together as a group or individual, strengthening their unity and cohesions and the link between human beings and spirits is renewed though the two worlds operate in separate realms (Seriya, 2012:27).

Masquerades seek to settle quarrels, or meting out punishment to offenders especially during the *Ekue'echi* festivals. The *Eku'oba* masquerade who carried out this function, delivered the verdicts to the hearing of women confined to their rooms. They were regarded as beyond question. At individual compound levels throughout *Eku'echi* night, the *Akatapa* (masquerades personating the spirits of deceased women who thereby referred to one another as 'co-wife' *ohini*) were normally virulent against erring women who were called to order and made to pay fines. The *Eku'echi* was the occasion to sing against misfits in the society as deterrent and every masquerade ensured through all means possible that a prima-facie was established before singing against the accused. This was because ancestors were credited with the knowledge of secrets of people on earth and masquerades were regarded as above 'slip of tongue'. In this way masquerade served as 'infallible press' that enjoyed absolute immunity since whoever challenged anyone in any way over a masquerade song was automatically guilty of a grave offence against the ancestral cult. He concluded that the era of British colonialism degenerated the masquerade press into a state that enable some to sing out malice or at mere prompting by some politician using them against opponent (Ibrahim, 1968:56).

The Ebira Tao conflicts management was structured in such a way that if any family members breaches the traditional laws they were punished by *Ohi- Ohuoje* (the compound head) along with his male relation, at the *Ete-Ohuoje* (sacred land in the

compound), with the belief that the presence of the ancestor would guide them to arrive at the correct decision to be implemented (Ibrahim, 1968:16).If a decision could not be reached, the case would be forwarded to the chief priest of the clan who in his capacity possesses spiritual power to relate with the ancestors for final judgement (Ibrahim, 1968: 16-17).In a nutshell this was the basic pattern of life in the history of Ebira people where they were able to hold the society together despite few intra-war skirmishes until the British conquest compounded their system of governance.For example, an accused murderer or criminal might be handed over by his clan to another party to die a compensatory death _Opo'onu_ to avert war (Onogo, 2007).A good instance was when Onipe, one of the children of Attah Omadivi, claimed to be spiritually endowed with power committed murder and yet attempted to kill his own father with a poisonous arrow that was averted through the prompt intervention of other children like; Pa Onuja, Animoku and Eyitere who jointly fought Onipe and disarmed him. In the end, he was presented for public execution by his father Omadivi (Onogo, 2007).Similarly, compensation might also be accepted to avert war in case of adultery. Offenders who indulged in such abomination were usually discovered when a woman find it difficult to deliver her baby. With due consultation among the elders, she would be questioned to confess if she had indulged in any adulterous acts with any of her husband's immediate family members. If she confessed her sin, the perpetrator was to be presented to a masquerade for execution as deterrence (Onogo, 2007, Abdussalam, 2011:20).

The opinion of Y.A. Ibrahim in the evolution of masquerade was that Ododo and Obaji (ancestral fathers for Ebira people) only reformed the _Eku_ institution that seems to be degenerating. They entrenched the ideas of reform and implement it. The two established ancestral temple _Iregba_ both in Eika and Okehi for governance, checking witchcraft, homicide and immorality (Ibrahim, 2000:9-14).

Wife snatching was another issue that caused armed conflicts among the Ebira people (Aliu, 2017).Snatching of wives

was forbidden within a particular clan or lineage, so it was not uncommon for a person snatching a woman to be of a different clan from the person whose wife was being taken. At this stage, elders and respectable individuals from one group could invite the other group for a peaceful settlement. If that did not solve the problem, the common practice before any armed conflicts was for the real husband of the woman in question to hide somewhere with a short knife and stabbed his opponent in surprise. When the clan or village of the victim of the surprise attack got to know of the incident, they get prepared for war (Sule, 1991:23-24).

Similarly, compensation might also be accepted to avert war in case of adultery. Later the penalty for adultery was reduced to offering of black goat and a hen to the ancestors to restore the dignity of the woman's husband which had been discredited (Shuaib, 2009). In case of indebtedness, the debtor was expected to work on the farm of the creditor as a compensation for the debt owed. Generally, Ebira customs abhor and discourage begging (Ibrahim, 1968:58). In essence, the Ebira Tao instinctively conceptualised masquerade as an ancestral incarnate that served as the source and guardians of the people's ideals and values, which were guided by a set of law and order to be kept very strictly by the members of the community. Violation by any member was considered a threat to the harmony between the living society and the ancestors.

CONCLUSION

Apparently, Ebira Tao community before colonialism utilises the wisdom of elders in governance within their nuclei families. Even though each clan were autonomous on their own but the individual head household pay allegiance to the 'Chief Priest' of the land on religious rites and grievous offences. The institution of masquerade was created to enforce law and orders upon those convicted of offences. They have also strongly resisted any attempt to subjugate their land as display during the Nupe Jihadist invasion. However, the absence of central leadership and absence of acceptable ruling houses has up to the recent times derail the

progress of the Ebira Tao as much time is spend on this trivialities. In a recent time conflicts in Ebiraland is managed through the institution of community leaders called *Onoba*. The function of *Onoba* is to curtail the activities of miscreants or deviants individual or groups through the local security guard *Olode,* vigilante. If the criminal element is beyond their power they naturally involve the help of the police to restrain the delinquent youths. The issue of land dispute still prevailed but the clan chief still hold the power to intervene in land dispute of their clan groups. Other conflicts like political conflicts, ward to ward confrontation during masquerade outing, conflicts over chieftaincy title; especially the Obobanyi of Emani and Ohongwa clan group melee and the internal dispute of Ezi-ede clan over Ananyuwa chieftaincy were adequately resolved through the effort of the acceptable mediating elders and Nigeria law enforcement agency. The most effective measure for conflict management however, lies with the Ebira People's Front (EPF), Ebira Peoples Association (EPA) and Ebira Peace Project (EPP). These associations and others contributed enormously in settling dispute and conflicts especially during the political crisis in 2005 that was clannish in nature. The composition of elder's statesmen, civil servants, businessmen, and Ebira Traditional Council within these associations has also ameliorated the conflicts in Ebiraland.

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