RELIGIOUS CRISES IN NIGERIA: MANIFESTATION, EFFECT AND THE WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is a great predicament in any human society, and most times, it is predictable. In fact, history indicates that conflict is an on-going process in human relations and may occur within and among groups and communities at anytime. In the case of Nigeria, the frequency of religious conflicts in the northern part between 1987 and 2011 has left adverse effects on the socio-economic polity of the people. In the course of these conflicts, Christians have at certain times, taken up weapons to counter the attacks from the Muslims, claiming to do so in self-defence. This study therefore gave an overview of the general concept and causes of religious conflicts in Nigeria and, advocated for ethical principles such as the common solidarity of humanity by origin, forgiveness and tolerance that could engender cordiality and understanding rather than sustained hostility and suspicion in Christian-Muslim relation in Nigeria.
Keywords: *Religion, politics, conflict, crisis, resolution, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Violent conflict is a great predicament in any human society, and most times, it is predictable. While history shows that conflict is ubiquitous and often useful element in human relations and may occur within and among individuals and groups, violent conflict is rarely productive. In the case of Nigeria, one of the several types of violent conflicts that constantly plague the socio-political history of the nation is the sort of conflict that is based on, or centrally involves, religious differences. Such 'religious conflicts' are quite frequent and occur mostly between the Christian and Muslim population in the Northern part of the country.

These conflicts have resulted in the loss of lives and property and have tremendously fractured the Christian-Muslim relationship in the country. Furthermore conflicts and crises as Onabanjo (2011) observes, have also hindered genuine national integration more than fifty years after Nigeria's independence thus raising serious concerns on the unity of the nation. In this vein, several debates and attempts have been made towards resolving the many crises facing Nigeria. This study seeks to contribute in this direction.

The notion of a conflict can be understood in several ways. In the view of Barker et.al (1987) the potential for conflict subsists whenever and wherever people have contact. As people are organized into groups to seek a common goal, the probability of conflict greatly increases. Conflicts may occur at several levels and include families, friends and colleagues at work place. Conflict has also been regarded as a strategy and an attempt to coerce power when and where understanding and reason fall short. There are individuals

and groups who use conflict as a strategy to achieve their goals and change existing conditions. They may instigate conflict to gain recognition and call attention to their message. The ultimate goal is, however, not recognition as such but to motivate people higher in the power structure to address a certain problem (Robinson and Clifford, 1974). Otite and Albert, (1999) suggest:

> *Conflicts have their objective bases in the society. The concept is validated daily over access to a variety of limited resources which are created and distributed within defined establishment and location: Conflicts are real, and serve in the above circumstances in the achievement of goal or the maintenance of claims* (p.4).

Commenting further on the concept of conflict, Magagula (2002) claims:

> *conflict is a serious disagreement, struggle, and fight arising out of differences of opinions, wishes, needs, values, and interests between and among individuals or groups.* This seems to agree with the view of Coser as cited by Okai (2007) thus:

> *A struggle between and among individuals or groups over values and claims to scarce resources, status symbols, and power bases. The objective of the individuals or groups engaged in conflict is to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals so that they can enjoy the scarce resources, the status symbols, and power bases* (p. 22).

It is, therefore, not startling to discover that conflict is envisioned as an intentional struggle among collective players who employ social power to conquer or eliminate real or imagined adversaries in order to achieve status or resources, or to impose their values on other social groups (Himes, 1980). Thus, conflict is rife within and between social relations such as ethnic groups, social institutions and organizations, religious groups, political parties and States. Furthermore, it is prevalent in situations where the goals, aspirations, interests, and needs of the social groups cannot be achieved simultaneously and the value systems of such groups are at variance. Invariably, the social parties purposely employ their power bases to fight for their position with a view to defeat, neutralize or eliminate one another (Anstey, 1991).

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

In religious conflicts, it is not clear which aims are to be achieved. Gofwen (2004) regards political aims as primary; in his view, religious conflicts form a specific form of conflict between groups which differ ideologically along religious lines within a pluralistic setting with each striving for political relevance. In a similar vein, Takaya (1992) emphasizes the political import of religions:

i.   *Religions are parochial and emotional socializers. They specialize in building one-faith exclusive brotherhood communities;*

ii.   *Religion, at some point, is politics and is the most potent and long lasting political association. Moreover, religious creeds excite and extract the deepest possible emotional and physical loyalties from their adherents when in political competition with people of other faiths (p.10).*

One significant element driving conflicts of this type is the attitude of superiority that religious persuasions as a sociological fact often adopt in their dealings or assessment of others. This attitude tends to exclude others, classifies them as ignorant and doomed and invariably, creates an atmosphere of hostility. This atmosphere of hostility tends to intensify where opposing religious persuasions see their numerical strengths as political advantage. In such a situation, the leaders think that new religions are threats to the hegemonies enjoyed. Further, where the political, social or economic factors are unfavorable, messianic rhetoric can exacerbate the tensions.

Thus, Nwaomah (2010) observes conversion campaigns, as in Nigeria, "by opposing religion(s) and fanaticism arising from indoctrination of the adherents, mostly due to parochial education, can also reinforce religious hostilities and thus create a conflict". In other words, what makes religious conflicts special are the unique effects of religious doctrines on the perception of the adversaries, the formation of values, and the central role of feelings and emotions for group identification.

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS IN NIGERIA

Before delving into the discussion of religious conflict in Nigeria, it will be useful to devote some space to introduce the country's religious communities that form the conflict parties. Nigeria has three major religions. These are African Religions (Afrel), Christianity and Islam. With a population of about 170 million, Muslims are estimated to be 50%, Christians 40% and practitioners of African Religions are put at 10%.. This estimation excludes practitioners of alternative religious ideologies from the eastern world. The current population estimate is being disputed by the Christians and African Religions, who argue that the long (1966-1979;1983-1999) domination of the nation's polity by military dictators, who are mostly moslem from the Northern part of the country, placed them into the best positions to manipulate the figures in favour of Muslims.

Christianity was introduced into Nigeria via the southern part of the country, obviously due to its coastal nature. There were, however, three stages of its introduction. In this vein, Aderibigbe, (1988) suggests:

> *Christianity found its way into Nigeria in different stages. The first contact came probably through Christian Berbers or Tuaregs. The second came through the Portuguese in 1488 in the neighbourhood of Benin and Warri but failed to make lasting impact. Finally, Christianity began to take permanent root in Nigeria as from 1842 with the coming of the English speaking Christian mission in Badagry* (p.137).

The quick spread of this faith in this region, especially Badagry and Abeokuta, was facilitated by some freed slaves who had been converted to Christianity and decided to contribute in its propagation. Following the establishment of Christianity in the southern part of Nigeria, it was introduced to the Northern part of the country. The introduction and spread of Islam in Nigeria is somewhat more difficult to describe. According to Olurode (1989), as summarized herein, it appears that Islam first came into Nigeria through Bornu in about the 13th century but was confined to the cities along the Trans-Sahara trade route. Islam

spread beyond the cities following the conquest of the Hausa States by the Fulanis. A dominant presence of Islam was noticeable after the Fulani conquest in 1802, which left the conquered Hausa States to be governed as Islamic States. The Fulanis also spearheaded the gradual spread of Islam to the South via the Ilorin axis. Olurode further suggests the Fulanis were initially invited by their Yoruba friends who desired their (Fulani) Chief Priest, Alimi, to exert some control on the rule of Afonja, a Yoruba warrior. Subsequently, the Fulanis imposed civil leadership on the Yorubas of Ilorin and eventually Islam took root in the interiors of Yoruba, the southern community where it currently has a large number of followers.

PRE-INDEPENDENCE ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Conflict studies in Nigeria situate the distant root of religious conflict in Northern Nigeria to the pattern of colonial system of governance (Gofwen, 2004). This, it is assumed, is traceable to the pluralistic nature of the different colonial administrative arrangements which later became the Nigerian state-a stage set up following the Berlin Conference of 1884. Islam had taken a firm hold in the Northern part and Christianity was the flourishing faith in the Southern part. These circumstances left the emerging nation divided into two parts with deep ideological differences in politics and economic organization, as these are advocated by the two religions. Further, the Islamic feudal oligarchic structure appealed to the colonial government as a veritable system to entrench political stability in the emerging Nigeria. As Gofwen (2004) notes:

> *To convince the Northern emirs and the sultan of the commitment of the colonial government towards maintaining the socio-political status quo, it became a matter of colonial policy not to interfere with the functioning of the existing institutions, rather, they were strengthened on the condition that they were accountable and made subservient to the colonial government* (p.59).

In these circumstances, and depending on the degree of threat that the colonial government thought each religion posed to the colonial system in a locality, the colonial authorities evolved administrative patterns that served their purpose of strengthening the colonial system. However, it seems, by its policies, that the colonial system developed a system of non-interference on Islamic affairs and seemed to have inadvertently limited the spread of Christianity in Northern Nigeria. Certain policies seemed to point in this direction. Some of them are summed below.

A SIGNIFICANT LEVEL OF SOCIO-POLITICAL AUTONOMY

Upon conquering the North, Lugard, the then British Governor General of Nigeria, established a kind of political structure that might have enhanced religious and economic control by the emirs over their subjects. This structured feudal system was in consonance with prevalent interpretations of Islam, which seemed not to draw any distinction between religion and politics. In this vein, E. I. Metuh (1994) observes:

> *The one fact which above others influenced the status of Islam and its relationships with other religious groups in Northern Nigeria during*

the colonial period and into the post-independent Nigeria, was the promise made by Lord Lugard, the first British colonial governor of Nigeria, to the sultan of Sokoto, Waziri in 1903 after the fall of the town, to the effect that even though the sultan and the Emirs were to be appointed by the Chief Commissioner (Provincial administrator) the Emirs who are appointed will rule over the people as of old time and take such taxes as approved by the High Commissioner; the Alkalis and Emirs will hold the law courts as of old... government will in no way interfere with the Mohammedan religion (p.73).

Thus from the outset, Lugard seemed to have given the emirs the impression that government was not to interfere in the political affairs of the people and that Islam was, perhaps, may not thrive alongside other religion.

PROHIBITION OF CHRISTIAN MISSION ACTIVITIES

Another way Lugard's administration was reluctant to interfere with the Muslim religion was in the restriction of Christian Mission activities to certain places. In defence of this policy, Lugard explained, according to Crampton and Gaiya (2004):

I hold that it would be a misuse of power and authority of the Government if that power were used to compel natives of the country to accept a mission which they resented and which they would not accept unless compelled by superior force (p.46)

Further, Lugard as reported by Olurode (1989) argues:

It is unwise and unjust to force missions upon the Mohammedan population, for it must be remembered that without the moral support of the government the people have some cause to disbelieve the emphatic pledges I have given that their religion shall in no way be interfered with (pp.361-362).

Consequently, Christian activities were generally restricted to new towns called Sabon Gari in Huasa. Many of such settlements were developed in Northern Nigeria for inhabitants who are from southern Nigeria who had migrated to the North for employment or as entrepreneurs. Towards realizing this policy of Christian restriction, specific policies were developed. Gofwen (2004) identifies four of these policies. Three of these policies are succinctly discussed below.

First, it became illegal for Christians to teach their beliefs to children under the age of eighteen (18) years. An objection to this by the missionaries was met with the explanation that it was un-Islamic for parents to make such vital decision for their wards. Second, a policy of unsettled areas was introduced in other to restrict the missions. This policy assumed that security was in the hands of the government officials and movement within the territory must be by their approval. Thus the government, in line with its policy of restricting mission, could give or withhold permissions sought by Christian missions.

Thirdly, the 440-yard rule, which prohibited Europeans from living within 440-yard from the nearest Nigerian community was employed, perhaps to restrict Christian missions. Supposedly, this rule was to protect the Europeans from being infected with the malaria virus carried by mosquitoes which might have bitten Nigerians, supposed hosts of

the virus. However, the duplicity of this policy was unmasked as according Boer (1988):

> *In 1919, Governor Clifford visited Ibi, the SUM's headquarters.... The Resident asserted that for reasons of sanitation the Ibi station should be removed to some twenty yards outside the town wall. Three colonial firms also had their facilities inside the town, but they had not received instructions to move* (p.13, emphasis mine).

From the discussion above, one may conclude that the colonial pattern of administrative policies, which Christians claim were pro-Islamic and seemed to have restricted the rapid spread of Christianity in Northern Nigeria, predisposed the various religious conflicts that have occurred in this part of the country since its independence.

RELIGION AND CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Between 1987 and 2011, numerous religious conflicts, resulting in the death of tens of thousands of persons, destruction of Churches and Mosques and property worth millions of dollars, have been documented in Nigeria (Gofwen, 2004, Minchakpu, 2006, Nwaomah, 2010:). The most recent of these conflicts are the post-elections conflicts and terrorist attacks that have been traced to the Boko Haram, an Islamic group with possible links with other terrorist groups outside Nigeria. These conflicts and attacks have largely occurred in northern Nigeria and they have been attributed to many causes. Though these conflicts are religious in nature, other factors, which are non- religion have also been identified as contributory or even fundamental to the crisis. The myriad of causes-remote and immediate-could be summed into (i) religious, (ii) socio-political, and (iii) economic.

Religion is a poignant issue in Nigeria, possibly because of the fundamental quest for dominance between the Northern and Southern parts that for contingent historical reasons are dominated by Islam and Christianity, respectively. There is also the incessant protest of marginalization by the Northern minorities who profess Christianity in contrast to the Hausa/Fulanis who are largely Muslims and hold political dominance. The Boko Haram crises, though seen by some as a reaction to the failure of political leadership, nonetheless, has deep religious overtone (Nwaomah, 2010). Acknowledging the significance of religion in the Nigerian conflicts, Ndukwe, according to Boer (2004b) stresses that one cannot talk about the political situation in Nigeria without relating it to religion. Every political programme or event always has a religious overtone. Passion for religion also affects the economic climate of Nigeria. However, while to analyst the significance of religion in Nigerian politics is unquestionable, the political leaders prefer to deny the religious connotations of these crises.

For instance, reacting to the riots of 1987, Kukah (1993) observes that President Ibrahim B. Babangida denied the religious basis of the riots, arguing that the trails of destructions of lives and property in Kaduna, Zaria, Katsina and Funtua and other places in Kaduna State were politically motivated. Further, Babaginda as cited in Kukah (1993) note was quoted to have said the riots were … carefully planned and masterminded by evil men who saw the incident in Kafanchan as an opportunity to subvert the Federal Military Government and the Nigerian nation. Similarly, Binta Faruk Jalingo, a Muslim women leader argued "I want the common man to know that their leaders want to use

them for their selfish interests in the cover of religion. A lot of these leaders are only using religion to make money and to enrich themselves…." (cited in Boer, 2004a:72). Further, in the 2000 Kaduna riots that followed the introduction of the Sharia law in the Northern States of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara authorities insisted that the Kaduna crisis was beyond religion. It is not religion. It is politics (Awowede, 2000 citing Boer 2004a:92).

But Kenny argues that religion in the politics of 1970 onwards was basically a tool which the politicians used for secular interests (citing Muslim Christian Relations in Nigeria 2008). This, might be because of the regional dominance of the two major religions in Nigeria - Islamic North and Christian South and the gullibility of the masses when greedy political leaders appeal to threat on their religion as an easy excuse to protect political status. Gofwen (2004) identifies four reasons that inflame the religious bigotry prevalent in Nigeria. These are:

> *(i) The differing political philosophy of the major religions in Nigeria, Islam and Christianity. (ii) The mutual suspicions and fear of domination between the two religions. (iii) Mutual ignorance of the beliefs and teachings of each other's religion and sometimes even of one's own faith. (iv) Provocative acts of pronouncements which hurt the religious sensibilities of people of other faiths, whether they are intended or inadvertent"* (p.74).

These circumstances could lead to misinterpretation of national events and issues. For example, when President Shehu Shagari openly received Pope John Paul 11 in 1982, Muslims such as Kukah (1993)sees such 'fraternization' as a reason to question the "Muslimness" of President Shagari, claiming that Islam was losing out to Christianity and the President was losing grip of asserting himself as a Muslim leader. On the background of mutual ignorance and misinterpretation, adherents of either religious group have tended to assert themselves or even to react violently when they felt their religion was threatened or its heritage was being ridiculed. Thus, violent conflicts in which lives were lost and property was destroyed were caused by acts like the misquotation/interpretation of the Quran or the Bible, the construction of a church or mosque, religious assemblies, inciting statements and/or publications and even the protest against alleged prosecutions of religious fellow members in other countries.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS AND CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

Another factor at the root of most religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria is what could be classified as socio/political-economic issues that have continuously provoked conflicts between the northern minorities and their Hausa/Fulani neighbours. Government and religious leaders frequently appeal to this factor as the principal cause of the many religious crises that have plagued this part of Nigeria. An aspect of the socio-political factor in the Christian-Muslim conflicts in Nigeria, in the view of Boer (2004a), is "internal colonialism and indigenousness". This refers to the dominance of indigenous minority tribes, who are mostly Christians by the majority Hausa/Fulani, majority of whom are Muslims. However, Nwaomah (2010) observes that the resurgence of the cultural identity of the minority and

indigenous ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria - who now resent… economic and political domination of the Hausa/Fulani, have also contributed to the crises.

Offering an explanation on the Zango-Kataf riot, an indigene, Yohanna Madaki, argues that the cause of the riot was socio-political. In his words: "The main issue in this whole crisis is that of oppression. Boer (2004a) quoting Madaki alleges that the issue is that of internal colonialism which is being rejected… the outcry against domination is age-long and successive governments in the State have done nothing". His voice echoes that of many others who share the same view and the same reason is given as a primary cause for the 1991 Tafawa Balewa riots in Bauchi State and the Plateau riots of 2001, 2002-2004, 2009-2011. The "indigene and "non-indigene" notion, where a Nigerian is not considered a citizen/indigene of his place of birth but of the tribe of his paternal ancestry and thus denied certain rights in the community of his birth, has played a considerable role in the multi-crises in Northern Nigeria. Commenting on this predicament, the Human Rights Watch (2005) reports:

> *Throughout Nigeria, groups considered "indigenes", or the original inhabitants of an area, are granted certain privileges, including access to government employment, scholarships for State schools, lower school fees, and political positions. To secure access to these privileges, they have to produce an "indigene certificate" which is granted by the local authorities. "Non-indigenes" or "settlers" are denied these certificates and the accompanying privileges. The definition of the term "indigene" is commonly understood to be based on person's place of origin, but many people born and brought up in a particular area are not accorded the status, even though they may never have lived in any other part of Nigeria.… The concept of "indigeneship" has been exploited by various groups to further their own interests (Human Rights Watch The Conflict in Plateau State).*

Nwaomah (2010) argues that this predicament of "indigeneship" is used to rationalize agitations such as access to land, "animal grazing rights, quest for or sustenance of political position or local rulership, commonly referred to as chiefdom in the Northern part of Nigeria and even the location of social amenities and industries by the governing authorities". Consequently, religion in Nigeria is a mobilization and manipulative tool for socio-political and/or economic disagreements.

THE EFFECTS OF THE CONFLICTS/CRISES

The resultant effects of religious conflicts in Nigeria are enormous. It pervades all the sectors of the economy. Generally, conflicts breed insecurity, discrimination, mutual distrust and slow economic and educational development. This is the case in Nigeria where in addition to the gratuitous killings and maiming of thousands of persons, properties worth billions of naira have been destroyed. Certainly, these huge losses have deprived the nation of needed manpower and services for the growth of its wobbling economy.

Religious conflicts in Nigeria have also left its effect on investment options in the crises ridden areas. The political instability, arising from the insecurity and uncertainty that pervades the region, does not inspire the confidence of foreign investors and thereby

deprives the nation of the economic gains. In some instances, the enterprising Southerners who had established thriving businesses in the troubled areas in the North have relocated to other and safer places. Further, religious conflicts in Nigeria have left in its trail a broken society: communities that hitherto co-existed peacefully now treat each other with mistrust and latent or open aggression. Consequently, settlement patterns begin to follow the boundaries of religion in these areas so that adherents can be swiftly mobilized in the event of future riots. The disrupted social harmony is sometimes felt in places far from the crisis scene and thus account for the reprisal riots in other parts of Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, consideration was given to causes and consequences of Christian-Muslim religious conflicts in Nigeria, it highlighted the tension between the reactions of the Christian community towards these conflicts and the content of Christian faith. The study indicates that the remote causes of these conflicts could be traced to the pattern of colonial administration adopted by the British in order to sustain its presence. However, the contemporary causes of these conflicts could be traced to political manipulations, quest for economic power and mutual ignorance of the deep religious virtues of Christianity and Islam by those who claim to advance the cause of their various religions. Christians and Muslims in Nigeria are, however, called to show understanding in their reaction a virtue taught by Christ.

The numerous religious conflicts in Nigeria have left adverse effects on the social, political and economic life of the nation. It is this regard that we seek to make recommendations in the quest to diminish religious conflicts/crises and enhance a peaceful co-existence between Christian and Muslims in Nigeria. The recommendations are made with the understanding of the psychological demands they might impose. However, it is necessary to note that it takes two parties to resolve conflicts; thus we hold that harmony amongst the adherents of the two religions is very essential for the development of Nigeria.

The government must have the political will to make public the reports of the various panels that were established to investigate past religion-related crises. Some of these include the Babalakin Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Bauchi Civil Disturbances, Karibi Whyte Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Kafanchan Disturbances, Niki Tobi Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Plateau State Disturbances, Sankey Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Wasw and Langtang Disturbances and Justice Disu Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Plateau State Disturbances and lately the Ahmed Lemu Investigation Panel on the 2011 Election Violence (Onuorah, 2011). Furthermore, where people are indicted, such persons need to be prosecuted if such steps are taken by the Nigerian authority, it might deter some perpetrators of these unpleasant situations that have caused huge loss of human lives and property, thereby making the Nation unsafe.

The Christian and Muslim leaders in Nigeria must continue to reach out and sustain the dialogue processes, spearhead inter-religious education and seek every opportunity to educate its followers and others on the ills of violence and the Christian alternatives to the

culture of retaliation. It also behooves the Christian and Muslim communities to reject the manipulative acts of some political leaders, who constantly seek ways to flame the nation with violence under the guise of religious patriotism, for their selfish political interests. It is only sustained efforts in these directions that will build the Nigerian nation despite the different religious ideologies espoused by its people.

Christian and Muslim leaders should endeavour to impress on their followers the teaching on the solidarity of humankind. This solidarity is couched in the common teachings of the two religions that all humanity, our religious and political ideologies notwithstanding, have one source of existence-the creative act of God. This common existence ascribes to all humanity a common divine source, as Nwaomah (2004) opines "is founded on the essential image of God in every person". A recognition and active cultivation of this solidarity will enhance regard for fellow human life, promote, tolerance and forgiveness. Speaking on the importance of forgiveness, Martin Luther King Jr., as cited by Kunhiyop (2004), opines:

> *We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love... It is also necessary to realize that the forgiving act must always be initiated by the person who has been wronged, the victim of some great hurt, the recipient of some tortuous injustice, the absorber of some terrible act of oppression (p.165).*

This culture of forgiveness must transcend words but reflected in social relationships and even influence government policies which may require putting in place social and physical structures that symbolize such forgiveness and unity of decision to emphasize forgiveness rather than retaliation. Thus, sermons at Christian services and other gatherings and kutbas at mosques and other Muslims gatherings should be devoid of incitement against other religious adherents. These occasions for religious admonitions should be reconciliatory in nature and engender peace and cordiality amongst Nigerians towards national development. The Nigerian government should also begin a process of the inclusion of subjects and/or courses on civic responsibilities and patriotism in the educational curriculum at all levels. These courses should be made compulsory for all students irrespective of religious and cultural affiliations. The contents of these subjects/courses should include but not limited to the common heritage we share as Nigerians, principles of nation building and the impact of violence on national development. The orientations given to fresh Nigerian graduates who serve the nation for a year should also include an aspect of this.

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