

# Pentecostalism, Kinship Networks and the Elderly in Akanran, South-Western Nigeria DOI: 10.36108/NJSA/4102/12(0101)

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## **Abstract**

*This article examined the nexus and trajectories of Pentecostalism, kinship and the elderly in Akanran, Ona-Ara Local government, Oyo State, Nigeria. The article is exploratory and heuristic to better understand a neglected area in gerontology particularly as interface of what we call The Sociology of social construction of evil within African contemporary religious systems. Data collection was undertaken through qualitative methods of non-participant observation, In-depth Interview (IDI), Key Informant Interview (KII) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Data were content analysed. The article discussed the effects of Pentecostalism on kinship and the implications for the elderly. Generally, it explored the views of community members on Pentecostalism, its manifestations, influence on kinship, the family and the elderly. We examined the Christianity climates in Nigeria and Africa, the contemporary Pentecostal Christianity, the on-going Pentecostal manifestations, kinship networks among Pentecostals and their implications for the elderly. It was found that as variants of Pentecostalism emerge, care and support for the elderly is threatened and kinship networks are stressed in a number of ways.*

**Keywords:** pentecostalism, kinship, elderly, Ona-ara, Nigeria

## **Introduction**

A new Pentecostal dimension has emerged in Africa with implications for the elderly and African traditional social systems. The increasing number of Pentecostal churches is having profound outcomes on kinship in many developing societies including Nigeria (Akanle, 2010; Yakubu, 2009; Armstrong, 2003). Southwestern Nigeria is the epicentre of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria (Akanle, 2010). While Pentecostalism is nascent and fragile in Northern Nigeria (Yakubu, 2009), it is emerging *more forcefully in dynamic forms* in the South-east (Smith, 2001 *emphasis ours*)<sup>1</sup>, but is relatively consolidated in Southwest, particularly in Lagos area (Akanle, 2010). It is thus important to explore the ramifications, trajectories and contours of Pentecostalism relative to important aspects of African traditional system. In

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<sup>1</sup> Some forms of Pentecostal groups existed after the Nigerian civil war beginning for many during the war (1967-1970).

addition, examining the intended and unintended consequences of this new movement is critical in understanding the contemporary social reality.

In the contemporary Nigeria, like in many sub-Saharan African societies, kinship networks<sup>2</sup>, supposedly, present veritable buffer zone for the vulnerable elderly who are usually poor and neglected especially in the rural areas. This is why among the Yoruba important oral traditions, it is believed that *b' o kete ba dagba omu omo e lo n mu* (when the bush rat is aged, too old to work and retires from fending for itself and siblings, it depends on its children for sustenance). This ethnographic orientation in many traditional African societies somewhat explains the age long pro-natalist character in those societies until recently when states begin to forcefully push anti-natalist policies and programmes. As many urban returnees migrate back to the rural areas, they operate within kinship networks that interconnect with both their rural kin and those in the urban areas. Those in the urban areas are usually expected to send remittances back home and/or pay regular visits or phone calls for socio-economic and psychological survival of the returned elders.

Ordinarily, the interface of kinship and religion is supposed to result in adequate care for senior citizens. But how will society be when Pentecostal preaching, and doctrines espoused in pamphlets, books, bulletins, tracts, prayers and so on, which urge members to cast off ancestral curses, kinship and familial relations, *ungodly* foundational associations and intergenerational linkages as signs of spirituality, religious adherence, deliverance possibilities, and pathways to breakthroughs, become popular and accepted? It is popular and often quoted and emphasized in Pentecostal *messages* and literature that: *old things have passed away and everything becomes new, the enemy of a man are the people of his father's house, and Abraham departed from his father's house to a land he does not know*. These and many other similar biblical quotations have become the hallmarks of Pentecostal practices and may not be without consequences for the care of the elderly and traditional kinship systems generally. Will these Pentecostal practices not further endanger the elderly if most Pentecostals see the rural areas where elderly retire to as places of witches and wizards and consequently neglect the elderly in the name of avoiding ancestral evil and intergenerational linkage risks?

How will these affect the elderly? Most existing literature on the elderly is in the urban contexts, medicine (geriatrics), economics of ageing, elderly

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<sup>2</sup> Networks here refer to the interlinkages existing among kin as they appropriate socio-economic, religious and even political capitals, among others, in social systems. Kinship networks are important mobilizable resources in many developing nations especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Kinship networks have been documented to be mobilized and mobilizable, yet mutable, in migration, politics and even economic, and other non-economic, appropriations in Nigeria for instance (see Akanle, 2012; Akanle and Olutayo, 2012; Akanle, 2011; Akanle and Olutayo, 2011; Omobowale, 2008).

support and care, and governance. This article, on the other hand, employs Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Development to further understand the elderly within subsisting national development discourse.

### **Pentecostalism and Kinship in Africa and Nigeria**

Forces of Pentecostal Christianity are traceable back to the colonial period when aggressive evangelism was undertaken to comb the Dark Continent to propagate the gospel and drive colonialism (Armstrong, 2003). According to Armstrong (2003), since the introduction of Christianity in Africa, however, the religion has transformed variously in forms. These transformations are largely demonstrated in nature of sermons; mode of preaching, socio-demographics and mode of worship (see also Taiwo, 2008; Cole, 2007; Ajayi, 2003; Smith, 2001; Cox, 1995; Paul, 1995). Pentecostal churches have something in common; their mode of worship, nature of messages and socio-demographics are identical (Akanle, 2010; Taiwo, 2008; Cole, 2007).

These are the elements that have distinguished them from the orthodox churches. Examples of Pentecostal churches within the remit of this article are The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) (Miller, 2009), Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), Deeper Life Bible Church, The Lord's Chosen Charismatic Renewal Church and Believers' Love World (Christ Embassy) and Christ Apostolic Church (CAC). These churches usually *speak in tongues*, have large youthful population, and are Euro-American in characterization. They also have large contents on breakthroughs, instant answered prayers, miracles and prosperity in their sermons, engagement/fight against evil and the devil, affinity for divine healing and ecstatic worship and aggressive mode of prayer (Pew Forum on Religion and Public life, 2009).

Pentecostalism is now an unmistakable religious force in Africa and according to Akanle (2010) it is actually a distinguishing element of many West African countries. Nigerian churches are now been exported to other African countries such as Ghana, Benin Republic, Kenya, Uganda, Togo, Cameroun, Senegal and South Africa. Aggressive incursion of Pentecostal churches from Nigeria transcends Africa to include all continents of the world especially through combined effects of frontline Pentecostal churches like RCCG, MFM, Deeper Life, Christ Embassy and The Lord's Chosen. Recent data support the fact that Africa is a Pentecostal continent with 12 percent or about 107 million of the continent's population being Pentecostals (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, 2014).

According to Ajayi (2003), Pentecostal adherents in Nigeria are now very many and still growing due to stressed economy. This is identical to the situation in Zimbabwe, and in Ghana the largest Christian church is Pentecostal. It is best to describe the ascendancy of Pentecostalism in sub-Saharan Africa and Nigeria as a boom with reverberating implications for the social structure. This is corroborated by Akanle (2010), who submitted that the ascendancy and *explosion* of Pentecostalism are having profound effects on the demographics, politics and public life of people (see also Gaiya, 2002; Nichol,

1996. See also Center for Development and Enterprise (CED), 2008; Cole, 2007).

The implication of ascendancy of Pentecostalism for kinship and the elderly is an important sociological issue. Pentecostal teachings and preaching may not be readily compatible with established and functional African kinship and extended primordial relations that protect the elderly. For instance, most Pentecostals are youth and middle aged engaged in ecstatic mode of worship that has huge possibility for elderly exclusions. Hence, the original African lifestyle and family life built on polygygy and extended filiation may be seen as pentecostally incompatible (ungodly) based on popular Pentecostal teachings consequently rupturing established extended relations, kinship networks and marriage system that resonate elderly values built intergenerational ties. Pentecostalism may thus affect the kinship socio-economic support mechanisms and systems of the elderly, exclude the elderly psychologically and threaten the very values the elderly hold dear. Pentecostalism builds nucleated relations, individualism and capitalistic tendencies. This is against the original kin-based networked actions which the elderlies are used to and relate within in Africa.

### **Methodology**

The research setting was Akanran, Ona Ara Local Government, Oyo state, South-western Nigeria. Akanran is a rural community with a largely homogenous community of people and appreciable presence of Christians. There are both orthodox and Pentecostal churches in Akanran. While the orthodox churches have long been in Akanran, the Pentecostal ones are relatively new. Akanran is central to other communities like Odeyale, Biokuladun and Olorunda-Ogunshola. The research design was non-experimental. The study was also exploratory and heuristic. Methods of data collection were; 6 months unobtrusive observation, 10 in-depth interviews (IDIs), 10 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 4 focus group discussions (FGDs).

Primary data were therefore qualitative; and secondary data were collected through literature and desk reviews, Church documents and internet sources. Community entry process was very systematic. This was necessary for a largely traditional and homogenous rural community like Akanran. First, a researcher was living in a contiguous community to Akanran even long before the research. This gave the needed background working knowledge of the environment. After that, the team built needed social networks and social capital to aid the data collection process for useful finding and reliable data gathering.

In-depth-interviews were carried out among traditional leaders, chiefs, experienced indigenes of the Pentecostal churches, Pastors and non-indigenes of the community. Key informant interviews were also segmented for other categories of active key players who really have the information needed like

the traditional leaders, chiefs, Religious leaders and indigenes who were members of the churches and the non-members. This was to counterbalance data and findings. Focus group discussions, comprising eight participants per session, were organized with attention to age, sex and religious affinity to enable free and conducive environment for the discussions. Observation was about six months. Because of the nature of research however, the six months was not at a stretch as the research was combined with other educational activities. Within the six months, detailed observations occasioned repeated concentrated stays were made to the community to observe religious activities, composition, inter-religious and kin relations relevant to the research questions.

Content analysis was adopted for data analysis. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Identity of interviewees and discussants were protected and the purpose of the research was explained to the subjects. Infrastructural deficits were noticed in the study setting. This was however not surprising as the deficits are common to rural areas<sup>3</sup> in Nigeria and in many parts of Africa. The challenges also present unique problems for the study especially during observation. These challenges were however professionally handled and surmounted to the extent that they did not affect the quality of the research. They are only mentioned to demonstrate the rural and community nature of Akanran because they may have implications for urban-rural relations and siblings-the elderly relations within Pentecostal frames of interaction.

#### **Data Presentation and Findings: Pentecostalism in Akaran**

This section of the article presents the data and findings from the fieldwork. Based on the respondents' socio-demographics, most of them were males (76.7%) while the rest (23.3%) were females. The high representation of males was due to the nature of inclusion criteria set for the research. For instance, community leaders, religious leaders and opinion leaders targeted were purposively included. These are positions usually reserved for men in traditional African societies based on patriarchy. Over 50 per cent of the people were the elderly. This was due to the nature of the research questions which target the elderly. This was to capture, sufficiently, the views of the older people even though we also captured the views of the younger people for data counter-balancing. The research captured the opinions of both Christians and non-Christians. While 56.7 per cent were Christians, 43.3 per cent were non-Christians. 33.3 per cent of the people were Christian religious leaders. This socio-demographic distribution set the background for the findings in this section as they further illuminate the context of the research and findings.

Akanran was one of the Yoruba communities to have had early contact with the missionaries which led to the establishment of the first church in the community - St. James Anglican Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This was followed by the Joseph Ayo Babalola's Christ Apostolic Church and the Methodist church. Current developments and aggressive church planting of

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<sup>3</sup> This is not however to suggest that urban centers are very better off

Pentecostal churches led to the incursion of Pentecostal churches in the community. Even though Akanran is an old and relatively homogenous community, according to our interviewees and discussants, *the quest to serve God and desire for progress through prayers led to the allowance of Pentecostal churches which is a way of serving God in the community.*

Aside churches, observable landmarks were a police station, filling station and local government secretariat. Akanran is generally a simple community with an appreciable presence of traditional landmarks. This can be observed in the socio-demographics above especially the preponderance of polygyny and farming. Although Pentecostalism is a recent development in Akanran, the characters conform with those already documented in the literature such as; Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project (2014), Akanle (2010), Pointer (2006), Murphy (2006) and Armstrong (2003). As already documented in the literature, adherents observed in Akanran believed in the Holy Spirit, sang, clapped their hands, danced, had ecstatic praise and worship, spoke in tongues and prophesied during church services. Prayers were also high-pitched. Most of the Pentecostals in Akanran are youths. This was corroborated and explained by a pastor in the community:

*Both youths and adult are members of Pentecostal churches even though the youths are usually more in number than the adults because their (Pentecostal Churches) mode of service attracts the youths.*

### **Pentecostalism, Kinship and the Elderly**

Although the Pentecostals also relate with non-Pentecostals in Akanran, they are highly conscious of their faith and doctrines and these determine the nature of relationship they keep out-group. They generally emphasize biblical expositions as determinants of relationships they keep. Some of the subjects believed in the Holy Spirit as their healer, and with God, they believe they can do all things, which reduces their reliance on kinship and primordial relations. Pentecostals claim to believe in God's principle and doctrine for their lives; they see themselves as God's children and are not expected to do things contrary to will of God; and they have bounds in intimate relations with their parents (the elderly) once they (the parents) are not *born-again*. This was vividly captured by an interviewee who experienced a ruptured kinship and consequently neglected elderly parents:

*I don't have cordial relationship with my parents because they are Muslims and now I am born again. I want to convert more people or win more soul for Christ and know more about the Lord. The relationship cannot work out because when I got converted to become a born again Christian, my father was an Imam, and due to this reason, the whole family turned back to me and neglected me and I broke away from the family.*

This *ruptured kinship and elderly relations* was common among strong and religious Pentecostal adherents especially those who converted from other religions. Their original kinship relations were traded off for Pentecostal adherence leading to familial and kinship deficits. This is bound to have implications for original African kinship systems and more particularly, youth/sibling care for the elderly especially the not so educated and poor elderly. Hence, some Pentecostals actually viewed the kinship disruption and separation from their extended family and even parents as God ordained. This portrays an enduring and deep-seated issue that is bound to have profound effect on societies without social care but kinship as support networks. In line with this, one of the discussants maintained<sup>4</sup>:

*I was born into a Christian family, I migrated down here when everything became difficult for me and my family and I couldn't cope. So I decided to move to Akanran. My wife, children I attend a Pentecostal church but my extended family does not because they attend an orthodox church and are satisfied with it. It is a normal event as a child of God and the bible made us to know that we should not neglect the gathering of the brethren, so everything is not about me alone or me and my family alone. Therefore, I need to associate myself with the members of my church to be in unity in Christ.*

This indicates strained/stressed kinship which is not only relative to inter-religion but also among Pentecostals and other denominations. This is not surprising because Pentecostals perceive other religions and even orthodox churches as not serving God the normal way. Once Pentecostals, the definitions of families and kin are reconstructed to include, or entirely, other Pentecostals who they now call; *brothers, sisters, daddy* (their pastors), *mummy* (Pastors' wives) and so on. Original/traditional brothers, sisters, daddies and mummies can in some instances even be disconnected for Pentecostal adherence especially if primordial kinships make Pentecostal adherence difficult, impossible or complicated.

Some of the ruptures observed in the community may however not be widely replicated in the community. At the macro level, community relations overtly remain cordial even though pockets of strained kinship and familial stress exist among Pentecostals and the elderly people who are either parent of Pentecostals or extended family members. Noteworthy however, is the point that Pentecostals still relate more in-depth and have more cordial relationships within group than without. This view was somewhat captured by a member of the community during KII:

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<sup>4</sup> For ethical reasons, we decided not to use socio-demographic characterization of interviewees and discussants beneath ethnographic summaries because Akanran is a small community and we assured our subjects of utmost anonymity.

*There is cordial relationship between members of this community, no matter their tribe or religion not to talk of relationship among the Pentecostals. Even the relationship among the members and the leaders is more or less like that of kinsmen.*

It was also observed that the society usually has strained relationship with many Pentecostals. They sometimes perceive them as difficult anti-social people as they regularly preach and live against community rites, traditional ways of life and traditional belief systems. Many non-Pentecostals also find it difficult to relate with religious Pentecostals whom they see as *holier than thou* (a derogatory reference to religious Pentecostals) and *gbaweremesin* (religious fanatics and bigots). Sometimes, people are skeptical of attending Pentecostals' gathering and/or events due to the belief that Pentecostal practices contradict a number of traditional cultural practices and established pattern of social festivities. This was put in perspective by a discussant (a non-Pentecostal):

*I am Muslim and our family religion is Islam. Though we are not against anybody who converts to Pentecostalism, we live around each other and we are not enemies, therefore we need to associate with each other. I see them (Pentecostals) as good people, as God fearing people. Some of them show us love and associate themselves with us, even if they have anything doing, we go with them. Because we see each other regularly and we cannot depart no matter what. Among them however, some are overzealous and relate with you only to win more souls<sup>5</sup> to Christ or their God. I generally listen to what they have to say and that's all.*

Another interviewee gave a more comprehensive and nuanced view. This view showed that the community accepted Pentecostals as good members of the society. Pentecostals are however seen as disrupting the social systems and destroying the valued kinship and extended family system unique to African culture and traditional support system for the vulnerable especially in neo-liberal democratic system and capitalist economy:

*I don't go to church. I never entered their church. Although we live in the same neighbourhood, I see them as good people, because they don't do bad things, and they relate with others irrespective of who you are. They are good people and I believe we serve the same thing. We practice the same religion; they do things together, even though we live apart. They want us to be*

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<sup>5</sup> We call this *conditional social relations*



*part of them and have the same religion with them. The family is very close knit, there is no connection like that but when they converted (to Pentecostalism) everything changed (from the usual traditional ways of life).*

Pentecostalism has had its own impact on the social landscapes of Akanran. Although Pentecostalism does not directly target the extended family system, it has some indirect yet profound implications for the extended family and kinship and the elderly who relate within this systems. Pentecostalism also affects relationships among members of the Pentecostal churches and people of other religious faith. Where these affected relations concern the elderly they lose their siblings and suffer socio-economic and psychological consequences.

Pentecostalism opposes churches that have relationships with traditional beliefs systems and primordial cultural practices. This sometimes pitches Pentecostals against some orthodox churches which are considered to sometimes practice syncretism. Even when Pentecostals keep close relationships with kin, primordial social networks and people of the other religions, it is with the orientation of *wining them to Christ* as it is a Pentecostal command to win ones household and outside. This often irritates many non-Pentecostals. Where the soul winning is not possible, Pentecostals' relationships cannot generally be cordial with the *unbeliever* be it the elderly, other kin and social networks.

Generally, keeping close contacts within and without Pentecostalism is still rampant among the Pentecostals. This is however largely for *soul wining* than positive objective kinship, social or familial relation. These contacts are thus conditional, premeditated and predetermined. The Yoruba people value kinship and family ties and filiate during ceremonies, occasions and events. Perhaps this account for the continuous relations sometimes observed among Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals. This may be responsible for existing relationship between the Pentecostals and the non-Pentecostals. It was however commonly expressed that Pentecostalism has had/is having profoundly stressful effect on the traditional kinship systems and primordial relationships in the context of study and this has implications for the elderly. According to a discussant, an elderly person:

*The nature of relationship between Pentecostals and their nuclear family is more cordial compared to the extended family. In nuclear family, it strengthens the family...*

A key informant interviewee explained:

*The relationship between families is usually cordial especially in nuclear families than in extended families because in nuclear families they tend to follow the same (religious) path unlike in extended families where some members can follow a different (religious) path.*

Pentecostalism, sometimes, is more in tune with individuality as it focuses more on the person (Pentecostal) than his/her significant others. Often, Pentecostals turn to Pentecostalism to deal with personal problems like health, fertility, work, poverty and deliverance. Consequently, Pentecostalism contains young people without their elderly ones or even spouses. Many of the young adherents often attribute challenges to generational curses, genealogical sins and spiritual liability of their elderly parents. Sometimes, severance of relationship from such sources is the first step to deliverance and breakthroughs. Interestingly, most Pentecostals are not conscious their religious practices and messages and ramifications in Pentecostalism exclude the elderly.

Many Pentecostals, unconscious of the deep-seated socio-economic and psychological implications of their views, opined it is not that the elders were alienated and excluded but because majority of the elderly do not support the belief in Pentecostalism and those who embrace it often have little or nothing to do in the church except to give advice to the younger ones; even when many of these pieces of advice are seen as *old school* or *unholy*. Among the non-Pentecostals, exclusion of the elderly by the Pentecostals is generally described as combining lunacy with Christianity *gbaweremesin*. This was somewhat expressed by a pastor, an elderly person:

*Youths, because they are civilized people and are much concerned about people in the church, always concerned about what happen whether good or bad to members of their church and also because of the issue of civilization. The church is attractive mainly to the youths because of their setting and other benefits attached to it. It is not that they excluded the old or cut relationship with the elderly kin but the strength of the young ones are much stronger than the old. However there are instances of maltreatment of parents and elderly. The old see those as gbaweremesin because most people believe in Holy Spirit, prophesy, or all things about which tend to put them against their family members. However most of the old don't have knowledge about the word of God.*

Another discussant during FGD opined:

*At times, some people who have Gbaweremesin, tend to misbehave towards their parents and talk ill of them. Those people are just ignorant because if their parent has interest in their death they would not have allowed them to become adults.*

This somewhat demonstrates the precarious situation of the elderly as some Pentecostals ill-conceive the react negatively to them depending on the

Pentecostal's personality, nature of church and delivery and interpretation of sermons, literature and church doctrines.

### **Conclusion**

We have examined the trajectories and ramifications of Pentecostalism in this article to tease out how it is has emerged, how it is still emerging and how it may affect some important features of the African social systems and the implications these may have for the elderly. This article objectively interrogated Pentecostalism for sustainable appropriation and mobilization for inclusive elderly care protection, participation, survival and development.

The article was within the Durkheimian theoretical tradition of *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* as a unifying force rather than exclusionary factor. Within the confine of Sociology of Religion, Sociology of Development, African Kinship and African Studies, a forcefully emerging and crystalizing social reality such as Pentecostalism requires scientific study and gathering of data *as things sui generis* so its existences may be understood for policy and practice with implications for the elderly. Nigerians are very religious people. Their religions and religiosity inform their orientations and actions. It is within religions that most Nigerians can be understood, accessed and appropriated. A systematic understanding of their religious orientations, practices, beliefs and attitudes are thus important especially when they reflect issues that may affect the elderly.

As Pentecostalism continues to emerge and consolidate, it is affecting social relations, kinship, culture and marriages and will impact the elderly in a number of ways. It is thus important for gerontologists to engage the ligaments of Pentecostalism, ageing processes and the elderly. The Nigerian formal socio-economic systems do not care for the elderly making many live in poverty and neglect. The family and kinship have hitherto been filling the gap. When an aspect of religion appears to have elements that affect family, kinship, marriage (Pentecostalism abhors polygyny) and traditional social systems instrument-talities relative to the elderly therefore, it is important for scientists to begin to interrogate those religious elements for proper understanding and possible appropriation.

It is against this background and scientific orientation that Max Weber made one of his greatest contributions to scholarly and practical societal development through his ground breaking *the Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The objective interface of Pentecostalism, kinship and sustainable care of the elderly is thus the remit of this article. This article also opens up research frontier of what we describe as *The Sociology of social construction of evil within African contemporary religious systems*. This is because it is the totality of adherents' construction of evil based on their socio-cultural perceived negative efficacies within existential milieu and economic realities that inform Pentecostal engagements and characters. Pentecostals may affect and alienate the elderly in these perceived negative efficacies and social construction of evil depending on, for instance, level of adherents' spirituality,

education, sect, economic status, kinship valuation and nature of evil characterization. This article jumpstarts and propels reflective and reflexive scholarly discussions and body of knowledge in respect of contemporary religions, African kinship systems and the elderly.

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