GROUP CONFLICT IN NIGERIA: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF SURVIVORS' EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT: *Background: This qualitative study explored the experiences of survivors of group conflicts in Nigeria. The persistent conflicts in Nigeria not only create a sense of social distance but also hamper political and socioeconomic development of the country. This current study, therefore, serves as a guide to politicians and policy makers on how to effectively manage ethno-religious conflicts and practise peace building more safely. Method: Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews conducted on fifteen individuals and analysed using thematic analysis. Participants were the survivors of numerous conflicts perpetrated by the Boko Haram Islamists and the Niger Delta Avengers in the northern and southern parts of Nigeria respectively. Findings and Conclusion: Two major themes emerged from the interviews, which capture the experiences of the participants who were the survivors of the numerous conflicts. Among these themes were also their suggestions on how to stop the conflicts and prevent any future conflicts. These themes include triggers of the conflict and coping with conflicts. Under these main themes were also subthemes where the numerous experiences were presented descriptively. These findings were placed alongside previous studies in this area and discussed with the existing theories in this field. Recommendations were made on how to prevent any future conflicts in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: Conflicts, Group conflicts, Conflict resolution, Coping strategies, Ethno-religious conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts have become prevalent in many parts of Nigeria in recent times (Irobi, 2005; Dorff, Gallop & Minhas, 2020) creating anxiety in the minds of many citizens who live in the areas where these conflicts are witnessed. Nigeria has been identified as one of the developing countries where conflicts are so powerful and continually disrupt day-to-day activities (Fatima, 2014; George et al., 2021). The conflicts in the country are of ethno-religious nature (Ugorji, 2016; Okoye, 2014; Okpanachi, 2012; Fatima, 2014). The term 'ethno-religious' conflict as used in this current report is understood as a situation whereby the relationship between different groups in a society characterised by different religions and ethnicities live in fear and suspicion which may give rise to violence (Salawu, 2010). Ugorji (2016), for instance, illustrates the threat of peace caused by colonisation in Africa with Nigeria as an example, noting that since the amalgamation of separate regions in 1914 to create what is presently known as Nigeria, there have been disputes and discussions on the matters affecting cohabitation of the numerous tribal groups, and religious groups in Nigeria.

The Nigerian conflict and violence to be discussed here are perpetrated by two major groups, namely: the Boko Haram Islamists; and the Niger Delta Avengers. Both groups engage in similar types of violence, but some of their activities differ due to beliefs and locations. Boko Haram Islamists particularly engage in the destruction of properties and lives in the form of stabbing, shooting, and bombing (Perouse de Montclos, 2014). They also engage in kidnapping of both citizens and foreigners. The Niger Delta Avengers, on the other hand, engage in kidnapping of oil workers and the destruction of infrastructures, such as the explosion of oil pipelines or reservoirs. Both the Boko Haram Islamists and the Niger Delta Avengers engage in politically motivated violence. It is worth noting here that these two groups are not the only sources of ethno-religious conflicts in the country.

The consequences of conflicts are huge (Hook, 2013). This is the case with the Nigerian conflicts. These ethno-religious conflicts are so serious and frequent, and lead to destruction of properties and loss of lives in the affected regions on a regular basis (Ugorji, 2016). The consequences of such conflicts go beyond the destruction of properties and lives to include economic consequences, such as discouraging investors from investing in the country as well as prompting those already in the country to leave. Three important terms are worth mentioning while explaining the current political situation in Nigeria and these are crisis, conflict, and violence. Crisis in the conflict stems from the frequent conflict and violence. Violence is described by Idowu (1999) as the manifestation of conflict at its extreme levels. He also argues that such conflict is the consistent type. Such conflicts are witnessed when a problematic interaction occurs between at least two persons or a group of persons whose views and/or aims clash. The conflict exerts a variety of harms on people – from restricting their movements to torturing them, destroying their properties, and causing death.

In the case of Nigeria, among the numerous types of conflicts, which affect the sociopolitical history and stability of the nation are those based on religious differences. The religiously motivated conflicts tend to be frequent and commonly occur between Muslims and Christians in the northern part of the country. The nature of conflicts frequently witnessed in Nigeria not only causes destruction of properties and loss of lives as previously discussed, rather they have destabilised the Christian-Muslim relationship, especially in parts of the country's northern region where religiously motivated conflicts are endemic. Furthermore, the frequent conflicts and crises witnessed in the country, according to Onabanjo (2011), have been a source of

disintegration, hindering national integration for more than 50 years after the country gained independence from its colonial imperialists.

The African continent has been witnessing numerous conflicts in contemporary times and according to several scholars (e.g., Jackson, 2002; Okoth & Ogot, 2000; Adedeji, 1999; Khadiagala, 2006; Taiser & Mathews, 1999), the continent is both the most conflict-prone and the least developed economically. The nature and patterns of conflicts in Africa differ, from those between states to those within states, intra-state conflicts and civil wars (Kaldor, 1999). However, Irobi (2005) found that the conflicts in the continent exist frequently among ethnic groups and not among states. He argues that conflicts among ethnic groups if left unchecked can be contagious and quickly spread like a wildfire. Marshall and Gurr (2003), as cited in (Irobi 2005), explain that weak states, weak institutions and poverty are the causes of conflicts in the continent. This may explain why these conflicts last long or even escalate since the aforementioned problems are commonplace in most of the African regions experiencing conflicts.

Among the factors, which bring about conflict are differing interests, values, norms, beliefs, aspirations and objectives. Other factors identified by Halebsky (1976) are racial, ethnic, linguistic and other cultural traits, which differ among people who coexist within a specified geopolitical region. Although the above factors identified by Halebsky (1976) are credible in understanding conflicts, it also appears that self-interest is one of the root factors to conflicts, which might have been missed by Halebsky. African countries had never been faced with the level of challenges to peace and stability that they presently face (Irobi, 2005). The inter-tribal conflicts may well have their roots from colonisation considering the forced amalgamation of groups with differing religious and cultural values/norms. Ugorji (2016), for instance, illustrates the threat of peace caused by colonisation in Africa with Nigeria as case example, noting that since the amalgamation of separate regions in 1914 to create what is presently known as Nigeria, debates have been ongoing concerning the cohabitation of all the tribes and religious groups.

Thus, the nature of conflicts witnessed in the African continent qualifies for what Kamrava (1993) describes as stemming from discontinuities and a lack of coherence inherent in the political culture of most of the countries involved. Beliefs and political orientations found differ markedly even within the same political structure and parochial loyalties are often prioritised over the national ones, making it difficult for the policies of the federal governments to gain widespread legitimacy. In addition to the aforementioned problems, civil procedures for conflict resolution are lacking, further increasing the chances that many conflicts would remain unresolved and political activities repressed (Kamrava, 1993).

Different parts of Africa experience different types of conflicts (Annan, 2014). In Nigeria, for instance, the Islamist, Boko Haram engage in terrorism in the northern part of the country while the Niger Delta militants engage in militancy, kidnapping and hostage-taking in the Niger Delta region. These activities have contributed to the country remaining a failed state despite several efforts to revive it. Using Nigeria as a case study, the current study seeks to explore the psychological processes at work in respect of managing group conflict in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Thematic analysis was used to present the themes, which emerged from the research data. Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method that enables the facilitation and identification of data, which emerged from a study. They also note that this method facilitates the reporting of the data in a form of patterns. Social science researchers use this method in presenting the results of their research findings (Roulston, 2001). This method, according to Attride-Stirling (2001), offers researchers effective and practical procedures for their analysis and allows them to richly explore their transcripts. It is also hailed for its flexibility (Langdridge, 2004). The above advantages of thematic analysis were the reasons why it was adopted.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was adopted as the suitable sampling method. In purposive sampling, participants are intentionally chosen based on the belief that the particular participants are knowledgeable in the topic under investigation (Lewis & Sheppard, 2006). This study was based on a semi-structured interview conducted on individuals who have personally experienced ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. These participants were purposively selected due to the belief that they possessed the information needed to complete this study. Such knowledge and experiences could not be demonstrated by average persons on the streets of Nigeria who have not witnessed this sort of violence. This justifies the adoption of purposive sampling in this current study. Although purposive sampling is claimed to focus on individuals with actual experiences or knowledge, Tongco (2007) has warned of the dangers of presuming that participants may possess the knowledge when this might not be the case. Tongco's position here is understood considering that not everybody can produce knowledge based on their experiences despite the researcher's conviction that they might possess such knowledge. Nevertheless, the level of knowledge demonstrated by the participants in this current study suggests that they do possess the actual knowledge.

Participants

The interview was conducted on fifteen participants of whom five were female and ten were male. Their names were replaced with numbers in the transcripts to ensure confidentiality. All the participants were students of the University of Lagos. Nine of these participants represented Katsina State (which is one of the states where religious violence is dominant) while six of them represented Delta State (which is known for the Niger Delta avengers). The interview was conducted in English. The participants' ages were 18-26 years.

Data Collection

This study was based on a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interview involves a verbal exchange where one person, who is the interviewer, tries to get information from another person by questioning (Longhurst, 2016). Semi-structured interviewing, according to Longhurst, involves the interviewer preparing a list of predetermined questions before the interview. He, however, acknowledges that the interviewer may also ask more questions based on the participant's responses if the researcher identifies something important from such responses.

The nature of semi-structured interviewing, which requires that the interviewer prepares a list of questions based on the topic, as well as its conversational nature which allows the interviewer to ask follow-up questions justifies its adoption in this current study. The questions were structured to tap into issues relating to ethno-religious violence, of which the participants had knowledge. The interviews were conducted via WhatsApp calls made to each of the participants. The participants' narratives throughout the calls were recorded to enable the researcher to transcribe them accurately thereafter.

Ethical Considerations

The Psychology Departmental Research Ethics Panel (DREP) reviewed and approved this research. Approval was also given by the presidents of National Association of Katsina State Students' Association and National Association of Delta State Students of the University of Lagos Nigeria. The approval was to enable the researcher to interview their members. The leaders distributed the researcher's phone number and email address to their members during their meetings. Consent form was also given to participants. Interested participants contacted the researcher via phone call and suitable time was arranged for the WhatsApp interviews. Ethical consideration requires that participants' feelings and rights be considered, such as ensuring that no harm is done to them and that they are not deceived (Randall & Rouncefield, 2010). It also requires that confidentiality is offered to them (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2003) and their anonymity guaranteed (Ciambrone, 2004). Efforts were made to uphold these rules during the research process. For example, the participants were guaranteed that they must remain anonymous in this report and their real names be replaced with numbers. Any other identifying information about them was not included in the study in order to maintain confidentiality guaranteed to them. The study did not involve deception or harm of any kind.

The participants were properly briefed about the purpose of this study as well as the reasons why they were selected for the interview. Having a conversation about these issues is quite normal. It is a widespread discussion in the media and among family members. Therefore, there were no risks to the interviews beyond ordinary life in Nigeria. They were told that their voices would be audio recorded for the sole purpose of enabling the interviewer to transcribe them accurately. They were guaranteed that their recorded voices would not be used for any other purposes and would be destroyed after the study.

Data Analysis

Familiarisation of data was the first step (Howitt, 2010). Recorded interviews were repeatedly played before they were transcribed. The researcher read through and through after transcribing the data, giving attention to important points made by the participant. During the initial coding, interesting parts of the data were labelled. This, the researcher did by taking notes of comments, words or phrases that are relevant. Some of these words were either repeated or stressed for emphasis by the participants. The set of codes were categorised by grouping codes that were related into themes. The researcher structured the data around the themes thereby assigning them a descriptive labelling. The same steps were repeated on all the interview transcripts, where relevant themes emerged, and were given descriptive labels.

FINDINGS

Two themes emerged from the thematic analysis: triggers of conflict and coping with conflict. Each of these main themes also produced several sub themes beneath them. The relevance of each of these themes to the research topic will be described under the themes respectively. The sub themes will throw more light on the processes involved.

Triggers of Conflict

This theme is concerned with the starting point of the conflict, that is, the factors which contributed to the development of the conflict in the first place. These include competition for office/university, fighting for resources/marginalisation and religious intolerance/misunderstanding.

Competition for office/university: Competition for office is one of the factors that contributed to the conflict discussed in this report. Three participants commented on this based on their real experiences in their respective regions. This is evident from the words of Participant 1 whose mum is from Urhobo ethnic group. The conflict was between Urhobo and Isoko ethnic groups. The Isoko ethnic group expected the next official in the state's ministry to come from their ethnic group.

My mum was made the head of a government parastatal. The very day she was resumed at the office, the whole staff boycotted the premises. They felt the next person to take that position ought to be from their ethnic group. That incident led to conflict in the whole community.

Participant 1 also stated that the crisis started because somebody 'felt he was next in line, not my mum', hence could not tolerate another person to take the office. Participant 2 also stated how competition for university and selective admission, which later followed also, contributed:

If you give one person admission or something, the other person will give it a different meaning. … The Christian person will see it because he is a Christian. If the victim is a Muslim, he will see it the same way too. …

Participant 10 also described how perceived selective employment also contributed to conflicts:

One tribe felt that the other tribe gets more employment slots. … The grieving tribe felt that my tribe was gaining more from the government. …

Participant 2 eventually concludes that 'everything is now based on religion or where you come from'. This comment points towards the direction that conflict arises due to overrepresentation of one group and underrepresentation of another group in offices and academic institutions. There will be more on representation under the 'marginalisation' subtheme below.

Religious intolerance/misunderstanding: Religious intolerance is another factor contributing to the crisis because of a lack of understanding between two religious groups. Three of the participants were able to describe how intolerance or misunderstanding resulting from religious affiliation contributed to conflicts:

Both Christians and Muslims are always in conflict because they do not understand themselves (Participant 2).

Religious intolerance led to misunderstanding and as detailed by Participant 5, extremists were often ready to exploit such misunderstanding:

Lack of understanding triggered it [i.e., violence by Boko Haram]. Islam preaches peace but there are extremists and fanatics who misrepresent the religion. They teach contrary stuff. … They go about causing havoc. … followers of other religions don't know the difference between those adhering to the doctrine and those causing problems. They see all of us as the same. That's the cause of conflict.

However, other invisible factors, such as envy/jealousy escalated religious intolerance thereby triggering conflicts as described by one of the participants below:

Sometimes small arguments in the marketplace can start a religious fight. It could be out of envy. If the other person feels that, you are selling more than he is selling. He can formulate lies based on religion. He might say you insult his belief or so (Participant 13).

Participant 15's words show how religious intolerance mixed up with ethnic bigotry to trigger conflicts:

They said a Muslim man is the president and Muslims are killing their people in the north. They see all of us as Boko Haram.

The case of religious intolerance, which led to burning of religious houses, was described by Participant 3 as follows:

It happened when I was in a boarding school. A Christian student excreted on a piece of paper, which the Muslims claimed to be a page from their holy book. The person that did it did not know it was their holy book. It resulted in crises, with Christians burning mosques and Muslims burning churches.

As one can see from the above quote by Participant 3, retaliation is also another source of the conflict, such as 'Christians burning mosques' in response to the Muslims' burning of churches following the supposed desecration of the latter's holy book.

Fighting for resources/marginalisation: The fight for scarce resources between the competing groups or the marginalisation of one group contributed to the unrest. As the interviews below suggest, southerners feel that northerners exercise control over them by ruling them and controlling their resources (crude oil) which are produced by southerners. As though not enough, Boko Haram from the north also exacerbates the problem by killing the same southerners. Participant 7 was able to explain the link between the two factors below:

Northerners are the ones enjoying the government. We produce the crude oil but

They enjoy the proceeds. Northerners also hate us. They kill our people and force

them to convert to their religion.

Participant 11 was also of similar opinion that northerners (which refers to a geo-political area with a different ethnic group) contributed to conflicts by seizing power and engaging in marginalisation:

Northerners want to control everything. Many things are happening. You cannot live free in their land. … All they do is to control Nigeria's resources. That is why the Niger Delta is fighting back.

Participant 12 also stated that the neglect of their community (south) contributed to the conflict:

What started the conflict was because of neglect. Our community is neglected. Our people are sidelined.

However, Participant 14 claimed that more scholarships went to the southerners:

The southerners get most of the scholarships.

Coping with Conflict

Coping with conflict is another important theme that emerged from the interviews. It has several sub themes that better describe how participants coped with the conflict, and these include minding their own business, praying/making peace and living with hope. These are described below.

*Minding own business***:** Minding own business provided an avenue to easily cope with the destruction and traumatic experiences which came with the conflicts. Participant 6 described this briefly:

I try not to discuss religious conflict with people.

For Participant 9:

I don't discuss it.

Similarly, for Participant 8:

We don't discuss it. … I keep quiet about such issues. It is sensitive.

Participant 14 first described how his family coped:

They don't talk about it.

Then about himself:

I'm silent about it too.

Participant 9 described his friends' coping strategy:

They keep their feelings to themselves.

Then about himself:

I don't discuss it.

Participant 3 described how her family coped:

My family maintains their boundaries. They do not delve into other people's matters, especially regarding religion. … I do not talk against other people's faith. I face my life. … I grieve silently. I have to keep my cool for the sake of peace.

Praying/making peace: Praying for peace stands as another effective coping strategy described by the victims. Participant 6 described his family's method as follows:

My family tries to make peace with everyone.

Participant 8 described how he and his family deal with this:

We are praying for peace. We only pray.

For Participant 15:

We pray for peace… I know everybody wants peace. … I preach peace. It helps

Living with hope: Living with hope is one of the several ways in which the victims coped with their experiences and traumas. Participant 12 described this method of coping below:

Just stayed indoors and hoped for a better solution.

For Participant 8:

I tell myself it will get better.

Participant 11 first described his family's hope before himself:

They think it will be better someday. It will be better.

Discussion

Triggers of Conflict

The participants' comments as analysed above can be explained by the existing theories as well as previous studies and events in this field. Competition for available resources, marginalisation of certain groups and religious intolerance has remained the sources of conflicts across many histories and cultures. The literature reviewed in this current report (Irobi, 2005; Ugorji, 2016) have been able to identify the competition for money, land and power as contributing to the African conflicts. Albert's (2010) findings equally showed how competition for resources and marginalisation lead to conflicts. Albert explains this properly by noting how competition arises, such as when resources are scanty and available but unevenly distributed (i.e., marginalisation). The participants' responses, such as 'Northerners want to control everything … All they do is to control Nigeria's resources', 'What started the conflict was because of neglect' and 'The grieving tribe felt that my tribe was gaining more from the government' all support Albert (2010) and Irobi (2005) previous reports. The violence in this context can be explained by the instrumental theory of violence discussed in the theoretical framework, which holds that violence is strategic and can occur in response to a threat (Betts, 1982).

The participants' comments also demonstrate that the 'realistic threats' emanating from physical, political and economic issues as explained by the integrated threat theory (Stephan et

al., 2009) and 'realistic conflict theories' (Sheriff et al., 1961) are contributors to the conflicts. However, it is important to understand that these conflicts are because of differences in religion and culture which the concerned groups contest. DeCenzo (1997) links conflicts to the inability to resolve differences. In respect of the Nigerian conflicts talked about by the participants in this study, a report by Ugorji (2016) is relevant. Ugorji (2016) links these conflicts to the amalgamation of separate regions in 1914 by colonialists, leading to each group contesting their co-existence with others. These constitute the political issues described by Stephan et al. (2009) under the integrated threat theory.

In terms of religious intolerance, the current study also supports previous reports on how religious intolerance has caused numerous conflicts in the world (e.g., Horton, 2011). As observed by one of the participants, 'Christians and Muslims are always in conflict because they do not understand themselves'. This has been the trend in many parts of the world. The problematic Muslim-Christian relationships in Nigeria as described by the participants in this study are similar to those of Jews and Muslims in Gaza (Freeman, 2011). Similar misunderstanding described by the participants in this current study also led to hundreds of Armenian Christians being slaughtered by the Muslim Azerbaijanis (Kaufman, 1998).

It is, however, worth noting here that religious intolerance is a by-product of the differences explained by Ugorji (2016). If the amalgamation of 1914 did not take place or perhaps if the amalgamation affected only groups with same culture and religion, then it was possible there would be no conflict, or if there was, it could have been less. Therefore, the Nigerian experience suggests that although religion can be a source of conflict and violence, differences in religious affiliations could be a trigger to such problems considering the fact that Boko Haram, in most of the cases, targets Christians in the northern part of Nigeria.

Coping with Conflict

Minding one's business, such as being silent about conflicts or keeping one's feelings to themselves stands as one of the numerous ways in which the survivors of conflicts discussed in this report tried to cope with them. These methods of coping have been previously discovered by Berry, Carbaugh, Innreiter-Moser, Nurmikari-Berry and Oetsch (2009) in their investigation of how Austrians, particularly the new generation cope with traumas related to the Second World War events more than 60 years after the war. They found that conversations related to the war and the use of certain terms (e.g., Anschluss) trigger intercultural discomfort and as a result, some Austrians avoid such terms due to the negative views and trauma, which often accompany them. Similarly, study of the conflict in Uganda in the 1980s and that of Sierra Leone in the 1990s found that victims remained silent not only for being afraid of recalling past experiences but for fear of people misjudging, stigmatising and prosecuting them (Baumeister, 2013). The above reports offer credible explanations to why the participants in this current study chose silence as a way to cope with the conflicts. Although the participants themselves did not specifically mention trauma, it is possible that their silence was to avoid trauma and/or to avoid provoking their out-groups.

Praying for peace stands as another way of coping with the effects of conflicts by the participants in this current study. Nigeria, according to Agazue (2013), is a deeply religious country with prayer constituting the popular culture. Agazue's study found that the hope for God's intervention in the form of miracles could be seen on almost every busy street both in the northern part where Islam dominates and in the southern part where Christianity dominates.

Agazue's work offers some insights as to why the survivors of the Nigerian conflicts choose prayer as their coping strategy. Prayer, as Worthington Jr et al. (2015) noted, can bring religious persons to their knees when they feel vulnerable, particularly in times of crisis.

Another way of coping with conflicts by the participants in this current study was living with hope. Hoping 'for a better solution' and telling oneself that 'it will get better' as done by the survivors of the Nigerian conflict, are the phrases used by the participants to describe this. Hope, according to Averill, Catlin and Chon (2012), is about an aspiration to achieve a concrete goal. Lazarus (1991) has explained that hope arises in the mind of those experiencing adversities due to their yearning for a relief from their negative conditions. This can explain why the participants in this study lived with hope. The participants were young people who aspired to meet their life goals and despite the consequences of the conflicts on them, they refused to believe that would be the end of their goals in life.

Although those experiencing adversities have been found to cope by living with hope, which this current study also supports, this is not always the case. Bar-Tal (2001) with a case study of Israeli society, for instance, found that fear often overrides hope for those experiencing conflicts. This means that since hope is based on thinking while fear is based on automatic emotion, fear overrides hope because fear is spontaneous. The process is exacerbated by the survivors' memory of their past, which again is often automatic (Bar-Tal, 2001).

CONCLUSION

This report set out to explore triggers and processes of managing group conflicts in Nigeria. The report gathered the experiences of the survivors of the numerous conflicts perpetrated by the Boko Haram Islamists and the Niger Delta Avengers. Some intriguing findings were made following the interviews of these participants. The conflicts were triggered by a variety of factors, such as grievances caused by competition for resources. From the participants' accounts, the Nigerian resources were unevenly distributed which led to some groups protesting their marginalisation through violence. The conflicts were also triggered by religious intolerance mostly on the part of Muslims in the northern part of the country from where Boko Haram emerged. Despite these unpleasant experiences, the participants tried to cope with their experiences in several ways. Keeping silent about the conflicts was one of the ways in which they successfully coped with the traumas. They prayed for peace to return and lived with the hope that things would get better at some points.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having narrated their experiences of the conflicts perpetrated by the Boko Haram Islamists and the Niger Delta Avengers, this current study made important suggestions on how to resolve the conflicts as well as how to prevent any future conflicts. The Nigerian government should reconcile the aggrieved parties. The Nigerian Government and the community elders should do their best to bring these aggrieved parties to a discussion table in order to find out their problems and ways of solving them.

The Nigerian Government and the community elders should also engage in a serious peace-making campaign. They should find better ways of doing this, such as making provisions in the school curriculum on the importance of making peace and tolerating people from other ethnic groups and religions. It is arguable that if schoolchildren start too early to learn the importance of peace and tolerance, it will have an enduring effect on them.

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