

Nigeria: Breeding Future Terrorists. A Study of Almajiri of Northern Nigeria and Islamist Militia

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Abstract. *Terrorism has become a catchword in humanities and social sciences and a global social problem that has led to loss of lives and property worth millions of dollars. In the past, specifically in the pre-colonial Nigeria, there was adequate provision for the welfare of the almajiri, which was later truncated by colonialism. The paper examines the relationship between almajiri and Islamist terrorist organizations which includes Maitatsine, Yandaba and Boko Haram. The paper found that the aforementioned terrorist groups use almajiri to perpetuate violence in Northern Nigeria. From this background, the designated Islamist militias have constituted themselves into a breeding ground for future terrorism. Other factors responsible for almajiri interaction with the terrorist groups include parental neglect and poverty. The paper recommended the criminalization of street-begging and parental neglect while poverty alleviation program be put in place in order to reduce juvenile delinquency in the study area.*

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Keywords: *Terrorist, Almajiri, Militia, Maitatsine, Yandaba, Boko Haram.*

Introduction

The Almajiri system is as old as Islam in Northern Nigeria. Among the areas of West Africa into which Islam was early introduced is Kanem-Borno, some territory of which forms part of present day-Nigeria. Complex communication systems on land and water connected several areas which later came to be known as Nigeria (Balogun, 1980). It has been a medium of early child-

Conflict Studies Quarterly
Issue 18, January 2017, pp. 80-92

hood Islamic education in Northern Nigeria since the 11th century (Bolujoko, 2008). As far back as 1921, there were 30,411 Islamic schools in Northern Nigeria (Reichmuth, 1989). The Almajiri system, as an age-long tradition of Muslims across the globe, developed as a result of the instruction given by Prophet Muhammed that knowledge is a cherished value and that all Muslims should be encouraged to go in search of Islamic knowledge and scholarship irrespective of the distance (Khalid, 2000).

The term *Almajiri* is a Hausa word for pupil or student. The word is derived from the Arabic term *al-muhajir*, meaning the migrant. Historically, the term has its origin in the famous migration of the Prophet Muhammed and his compatriots from Makkah to Madinah in the early days of Islam (Khalid, 2006). In its Nigerian usage, the word *almajiri* means those who left their villages or town, parents, relations, and friends in search of Islamic religious knowledge and scholarship.

The Almajiri system was established as an organized and comprehensive system of education for learning Islamic principles, values, jurisprudence and theology. It was a replica of Islamic learning centers in many Muslim countries, such as the madrasah in Pakistan, Malaysia, Egypt and Indonesia (Danbuzu, 2012). During the pre-colonial period in Northern Nigeria, the system was funded from the state treasury and 'zakkat' funds under the control of the emirs. Apart from this, the community supported these almajiri, most of whom came from faraway places to enroll in these schools. The students were at liberty to acquire vocational and occupation skills in between lessons and so were involved in farming, fishing, well construction, masonry, tailoring, etc. (Danbuzu, 2012). This is well captured by Bala (2014), who posited that the Almajiri schools, as practiced during the pre-colonial days, were maintained by the state, communities, parents, *zakkah* (almsgiving), *wagf* (endowment) and supplemented by the teachers and students through farming. Begging was completely unheard of.

With this background, the almajiri had no reason to beg for sustenance, as adequate support was given from the communal economic system, their parents, the extended family system, host community, the Qur'anic schools, as well as *Zakat* (alms) from wealthy citizens. The support was in the areas of feeding, clothing, shelter and other forms of welfare to both almajir and mallams. During this period, the almajiri found learning conducive and convenient in the performance of their functions which include transmission of the Islamic culture, entertaining people with the lyrics from recitation of the Holy Qur'an, offering prayers for people, running errands for women in *kunle* (purdah) and coordinating prayer sessions in Islamic functions, among others. Many of these almajir in the pre-colonial era later became farmers of the Northern Nigeria cotton and groundnut pyramids. They were the leather tanners and leather shoe and bag makers in the old Sokoto Empire, as well as cap weavers and tailors in Zaria city (Danbuzu, 2012).

In 1904, the British invaded and colonized the Northern Nigeria territories and took control of the treasury and abolished state funding of almajiri school system, which to them were mere religious schools. *Boko*, meaning western education, was introduced and funded instead. This development rendered Islamic scholars unqualified for employment and participation in politics. This created poverty situation, as mallam's lost their jobs because of lack of western education (the only criteria for white-collar jobs) which was only available for educated individuals.

With the loss of support from the government and the helpless Emirs and increasing number of pupils to take care of, as well as increasing level of poverty in the country, the care of the almajiri became overwhelmingly burdensome for mallams who were left with no choice but to send these little boys out to beg for alms. The level of poverty escalated with the oil boom in the 1970s which led to a decline in rural economy and was worsened in 1986, with the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which brought about hardship to both parents and their children. This corroborates the World Bank Poverty Assessment which observed that the Structural Adjustment Programme in Nigeria has slowed down the economic growth, income and welfare declined and poverty increased. Real wages in agricultural and non agricultural sectors also declined. By 1995, the World Bank report posited welfare became lower and poverty far higher than before (Obene, 2012).

The foregoing is not at variance with the findings from a fieldwork conducted by Sule-Kano (2010), which concluded that the rapid degeneration of socio-cultural and economic support from the communities, coupled with the impact of structural adjustment programme, which brought with it the general withdrawal of government subsidies from the services sector, compounded the problems of the Qur'anic schools. Demographic issues, such as family care, health care, reproductive health, primary education and traditional processes of human development, were grappled with difficulties. Hoechner (2013) expressed the same trend, when he observed that the decline of the rural economy due to oil boom has contributed to perpetuate poverty in the almajiri system. In 1985, Lubeck wrote that by the end of the 1970s, the new wealthy class brought forth by the oil boom had already redefined the migrant quranic students as an embarrassing, dangerous and immoral set of people (Lubeck, 1985).

Begging is the most distracting aspect of almajiri system as it takes them out of the control of mallams and exposes them to negative habits as they come in contact with people of low virtue like prostitutes, cultists, drug addicts, traffickers, terrorists, arsonists, etc. These are some of the features of the almajiri of nowadays who are victims of neglect and exploitation. They are seen everywhere singing and begging for food and money, being vulnerable to abuse, drugs, trafficking and various forms of exploitation. Their conditions of living is less than average as reflected in their torn, dirty looking cloth, hungry stomach, and unkept body. These almajir are outside their place of domi-

ciliation in search of Islamic knowledge, which means they are not staying with their biological parents, who for religious permissiveness, marry as many wives as possible and produce scores of children. These children are dumped in Almajiri schools because Islamic education is free; some of the parents will not show up again, let alone caring for their children.

As demonstrated by Aluaigba (2009), an Almajiri, conventionally, is expected to be educationally oriented in the basics of Islam in his early childhood to prepare him for a chaste Muslim adulthood. But the common practice in Northern Nigeria today has deviated from this norm, giving way to a mass of bowl-carrying children roaming the streets in search of one thing or the other.

Almajiri Involvement in Terrorist Juvenile Delinquency

Juvenile delinquency has been one of the social problems in Nigeria, in general, and Kano State, in particular. For instance, the governor of Kano State, Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau, referring to the role the almajiri played during the Maitatsine crisis in Kano in 1980, urged parents to give their young ones good education which would move them away from juvenile delinquency that, he admitted, was a problem in the state (AbdulQuadir, 2003). The Maitatsine disturbance in Kano alone resulted in the death of 4.177 people between December 18 and 29, 1980. The main adherents of Maitatsine were almajiri (OnWar, n.d.).

In the same direction, between 1980 and 1985, Northern Nigeria witnessed four main religious crises and, according to Winters (1987), the participants in these riots were the almajiri. In the 2004 religious crisis in Kano city, the violence unleashed on innocent residents was successful because the participants comprised mainly almajiri (Human Rights Watch, 2005). On July 13, 2010, an attempt by a 19 year old almajiri, Usman Musa, to kill the Emir of Kano at the instance of a cleric, mallam Hamidu (who according to the culprit had been his spiritual advisers) was truncated by a smart palace guard. The almajiri equally admitted that he just came back from Abuja where he robbed an Igbo man of three million naira at Jabi garage. Malam Hamidu denied his involvement but both of them were detained.

Unlike the almajiri of the pre-colonial era, these new set of almajiri depend only on charity from caregivers while the older almajiri do some menial jobs for survival and the younger ones relying solely on begging. It is important to note that most of these children are as young as age three when they hardly know their parents. The need to examine the almajiri system and its delinquency-breeding capacity as exemplified in their participation in the Maitatsine riots of 1980 and their alleged contacts and social networking with Boko Haram and Yandaba subcultures, has necessitated this present study.

The Influence of Islamist Militia on Terrorist Juvenile Delinquency of Almajiri

The social networks and contacts of the almajiri and the criminogenic influences from such contacts in the course of engaging in a plethora of activities to secure their livelihoods has attracted the attention of scholars, traditional rulers and governments. For the purpose of this study, three major criminal groups were examined. These include the relationship between almajiri and Maitatsine, almajiri and Yandaba and almajiri and Boko Haram. These groups (Maitatsine, Yandaba and Boko Haram) are known for violent crimes. The interaction of almajiri with these groups is a breeding ground for juvenile delinquency among almajiri and future terrorism, as manifested in an almajiri's attempt to kill the Emir of Kano, Alhaji Ado Bayero (News24, 2013).

The contemporary Nigerian society is characterized by violent conflicts over ethnicity and religion, most especially in the Northern states of the country. Widespread violence and simultaneous sporadic and reprisal attacks have culminated into high level of insecurity and uncertainty to the continued existence of Nigeria as a federal state (Shehu, 2012). The alleged involvement of almajiri in the perpetuation of violence is not negligible as that has led to loss of lives and properties worth billions of Naira. The cost of managing insecurity in the north eastern Nigeria is enough to generate millions of jobs to employable individuals in the country. The recurring violent attacks have become a major phenomenon in day to day socio-political discourse in Nigeria.

Many scholars opined that the major causes of the upheaval stem from government neglect to address key issues at the point of incubation and as well as lack of good governance (Shehu, 2012). This is particularly true regarding the recent postponement of general elections in Nigeria, as the federal government promised to deal decisively with the Boko Haram in the North-East, what it had failed to do in many years. It is pertinent to note that the military has recorded a huge success in that regard. The question is why now and not before? How do we recover lost lives and properties? And to a larger extent, some scholars are already predicting civil war and the eventual disintegration of Nigerian society. The nature and composition of Nigerian state is both vital and central to the nature of various relationships that exist within it (Shehu, 2012).

Almajiri and Maitatsine

The Maitatsine disturbance in Kano broke out in 1980 with the main recruits drawn from the almajiri. In a research conducted by Shehu (2012), it was discovered that the main adherents of Maitatsine are almajiri who the leader of Maitatsine easily indoctrinated through his teachings and fake promises. Lacking the basic necessities of life was enough to make almajiri fall easy prey to any promise that is connected to bettering their lots, so as to have a face lift. Many lives and properties were lost including the members of the Police and the Army. This shows a direct influence of social network on juvenile delinquency among almajiri in Kano State.

Apart from Kano State, the study area, the Maitatsine equally took place in other parts of the North like Gombe, Kaduna and Yola, which were brought under control by the military forces. These uprisings have claimed so many lives and properties worth millions of Naira. The zeal expressed by these almajiri shows their level of involvement in outlawed behaviour, which by virtue of their age, can be regarded as juvenile delinquency. Shehu (2012) found that the main disturbances started in Kano on the 18th December 1980. It broke out in Shahuchi playground and later spread to Yan Awaki, Fagge, Koki, Kofar Wambai and, later, to the entire city of Kano. With the devastating nature of the crisis, there is the need to check the activities of these children as Nigeria cannot afford to experience such ugly incidence again.

Almajiri and Yandaba

Yandaba gangs are political thugs in Kano State. It has been alleged that the today's almajiri are tomorrow's Yandaba. For instance, Zakari Yau (2000) discovered, from his study of Yandabas, that almajiri, from mere street beggars, do transform to street gangs known as Yandabas in Kano. This is demonstrated adequately by the Panel of Investigation on Kano October 1991 riot, which found that closely related to the issue of youth unemployment is the existence of notorious groups in almost every ward of the Metropolis of Kano, known as Yandaba. The activities of this group of thugs have led to the death of many in the past. Politicians have allegedly used this group to attack political opponents and to promote electoral fraud in their quest for power.

A study conducted by Salam (2011) is summarized to buttress this assertion. Seventy-one members of the Yandaba gang between the ages of 13 and 27 years (mean=18.7 years) were recruited for the study from the variety of the gang's locations and hideouts in Kano, using the snowballing technique. Adopting quantitative analysis, the outcome suggests that the majority of the gang members were school dropouts or had become involved through the process of almajiri. More than half the gang members also had a history of arrest and conviction. This shows the level of intimacy between almajiri and Yandaba. Furthermore, it shows that the difference between Yandaba and almajiri is age because the Yandaba are graduates of Almajiri schools. One should not be perturbed to hear that almajiri go to Yandaba hideouts to look for food and accommodation. Of course, it is a transition from childhood to adulthood as they are socialized from juvenile delinquents to adult criminals. The criminogenic influences from almajiri interacting with Yandaba gang cannot be ignored, as it could breed future terrorism in the society. It is like the madrassahs in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia producing the Talibans in Afghanistan and other terrorist groups in the Middle Eastern Asia.

In one of his studies, Zakari Yau (2000) discovered that the entry of almajiri into the Yandaba gangs has more to do with the issue of food and accommodation than with the failure to secure employment. Many ex-Yandaba gangs interviewed said that they

were attracted to the Yandaba hideouts because of food they could otherwise not get. He equally identified housing accommodation as one of the gains of staying in Yandaba hideouts. This speaks volume of the vulnerability of almajiri to social vices as they go to this group of criminals to seek for solace.

Almajiri and Boko Haram

The origin of Boko Haram, otherwise known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Ladda', is not certain. Two likely assertions traced the sect back to 1995, when it was called sahaba which was led by one Abubakar Lawan, who later proceeded to University of Medina for studies, paving way for Yusuf's take over. The second source traced the sect to Maitatsine of the 1980s (Ahizih, 2014). The relationship between the almajiri and Boko Haram is not farfetched, as demonstrated by Nigerians. The belief of most Nigerians is that Boko Haram is an Islamic terrorist group who proclaimed that Western education is a sin. This background is justified by the fact that the almajiri do not attend formal school.

According to Shehu (2012), there is basically nothing new in saying Boko is Haram. The perception that Boko is Haram has been with us since Boko (Western education) came to the North through Christian missionaries. Northern Muslims then, and some even now, feared the Christianization of their children if they enrolled them in Boko schools, hence the predominance of Almajiri schools. The products of these schools have often preached that Boko is Haram and in spite of this, decade after decade, the northern elites have allowed this system to flourish.

Onochie (2011) found that almajiri and Boko Haram are now like primary pupils graduating into secondary school. The two are inseparable and Boko Haram cannot exist without almajiri. If there is any difference between almajiri and Boko Haram, it should be a matter of semantics. Thurston (2013) found that the violent Northern Nigerian sect Boko Haram draw some of its recruits from the almajiri. Other scholars note that the almajiri system in the Northern part of Nigeria made the intensive membership mobilization of Boko Haram easy (Odoemelam, Kidafa, Onyebuchi, & Agu, 2014).

Linking the almajiri to Boko Haram should worry every well-meaning Nigerian because this Islamic sect has been adjudged the latest and deadliest of its kind as observed by Odoma (2014), who equally acknowledged that the activities of the sect has greatly affected the economy of Northern Nigeria. The sect has claimed responsibility for numerous deadly attacks on police formations, communities, churches, banks, markets, military, media, United Nation Building in Abuja, beer palours, etc. Car bombs have been a relatively recent addition in their operational strategy. Two Nyanya motor park bombs in Abuja and a Kano motor park bomb in late 2013 are still fresh in our memories (Ahizih, 2014). The postponement of the 2015 general elections from February 14 and 28 to March 28 and April 11 on the ground of insecurity in the North Eastern Nigeria shows the gravity of the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria. The shift in the general

elections has attracted heated controversies from members of the opposition political parties, Civil Society Organisations and International Organisations and community. Efforts at rescuing Chibok girls who were abducted from their school in Borno State are yet to yield positive result despite international concern.

Abuh (2015) found that the rising insecurity in Northern Nigeria creates threat to economic and political stability. The spate of violence in the region, which has of late come under attack by the members of Boko Haram Islamists group, has worsened in spite of the opportunities offered by the return to democracy. Onwumere (2013) found that those who are not from the North are worried that while the almajiri wander the streets in search of support from people, they pose a threat to national security as they could be vulnerable to the indoctrinations of the Boko Haram terrorist group. This shows a strong nexus between almajiri and Boko Haram. Abdulrafiu (2009) observed that the problem with the current Boko Haram menace is unarguably traceable to the uncared for almajiri beggars who lost parental and governmental welfare. Another pre-disposing factor to the growing number of almajiri pupils in the North is the people antagonism towards family planning and child spacing citing the hadith of Prophet Mohammed which says, "Go forth my congregation, get married and multiply so that I will be proud of you". But Adamu Sani, a veterinary doctor, says this aspect of the Hadith has been grossly misrepresented. He says that under Sharia, some of the basic rights of a child are food, shelter, clothing and education and so any parent who fails in this direction has an explanation to give before Allah (Abdulrafiu, 2009).

To establish the above assertions, the Northern Traditional Rulers' Council (NTRC) recommended that the only solution to the festering wounds inflicted on the North and its people by the activities of the dreaded Boko Haram sect is to ban the current almajiri system. The council also recommended that begging should be made an offence, as part of measures aimed at securing the Northern region from what it termed "sustainable socio-economic developments" just as it called on the federal government to apprehend, prosecute and punish those behind what it described heinous crime.

It is important to note that the three terrorist groups, Maitatsine, Yandaba and Boko Haram, have left so many Nigerians dead from their violent criminal activities. Almajiri interaction with these violent criminals can breed future terrorists drawn from almajiri which is capable of perpetuating endless terrorism in Nigeria.

The social network and contacts of the almajiris and the criminogenic influences from contacts cover a whole gamut of criminal groups which include but are not necessarily limited to the aforementioned. For instance, Aluaigba (2009) found that begging exposes the almajiri to all sorts of vile and deviant behaviors and immoral acts because they interact freely with people of low virtue like prostitutes, drug addicts and gamblers. This study shows that almajiri are equally exposed to some victimless criminals which can also affect their mind set adversely.

Since the 1980s, both ethnic and religious crises have bedeviled Nigerian society, most especially the Northern part. Of the 19 states that constitute Northern Nigeria, there is virtually no state that has not witnessed one form of crisis or another. Since the middle of 1980s, the deluge of violence has continued to increase, and consequently has led to many losses of lives and properties (Shehu, 2012). This violence has continued to illustrate ethnic and religious colorations and delineate clear manifestation of criminality and frustration. This results from poor governance, resultant lack of hope and sociological and economical alienation, linked to wide spread poverty and unemployment. However, there are also others factors whose identity and character are somehow difficult to define (Shehu, 2012).

This factor has resulted in loss of lives and properties, some people sustained injuries of various degrees, some lost all they had and properties worth millions of Naira¹ were either destroyed or looted; others were permanently displaced and psychologically depressed. These crises have created enormous tension and a general threat to security among citizens and as well resulted to violation of the rights of citizens. Many people feel disgruntled or unjustly treated as a result of lack of justice or failure of the state to prosecute perpetrators and agitators of these crises (Shehu, 2012).

Efforts at Improving the Condition of Almajiri

Despite the efforts made by government, traditional rulers, NGOs, individuals, as well as other agencies, the problems of almajiri persist partly because of lack of commitments from the stakeholders in Almajiri education. In 1984, the Kano State Government banned the migration of itinerant scholars from rural areas to cities, the pilot feeding scheme in three priority local government areas of Kano State in 2003, initiated by the governor, Ibrahim Shekarau, and the effort of the governor of Jigawa State, Sule Lamido, to modernize Qur'anic education were all in a bid to address the problem of child street beggars (Bolujoko, 2008; Aluaigba, 2009; Kurfi, 2010). As observed by Khalid (2000), despite attempts by some state governments, like Sokoto in 1986 and Kano in 1988, to eradicate, or at least regulate the *almajiri* phenomenon, the system continued to increase. Worthy of mention is the effort of the governor of Borno State, Ali Modu Sheriff, to integrate the *Tsangaya* (almajiri) system into western education.

Another recent efforts made by the federal government to build Almajiri primary schools for possible enrolment of thousands of almajiri wandering the streets of Kano is yet to significantly change the tide. A source at the Kano State Universal Basic Education Board, SUBEB, presented a document that where seven out of the ten federal government almajiri schools are completed. The other three are the Model 2 intervention schools that are about to be completed (Leadership, 2014).

In another development, a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – Malama Adama Usman Foundation, Tanmiyya Foundation, Rochas Foundation, Jammatul Nasrul

Islam Foundation, NASFAT – and other well-meaning individuals help to take care of these children (Bala, 2014). The wife of the Katsina State governor, Hajiya Fatima Shema, distributed 5.000 sets of clothes to almajiri to enable them celebrate Eid-el-fitr happily in 2014. They were selected from the three senatorial districts of the state among who were orphans and other less privileged that deserve assistance from the general public (Elazeh, 2014). People like the late Malam Aminu Kano have, as early as the 1950s, advocated the establishment of *Islamiyyah* schools in place of *makarantar allo* (almajiri schools) so as to reflect the socio-economic dynamics of modern world. In this kind of arrangement, children can attend schools within their immediate vicinity under the watchful eyes of their parents and guardians (Khalid, 2000).

At another level, an advocacy campaign aimed at stemming the increasing abuse of almajiri has commenced work in Kano State. Sponsored by the Embassy of the United State of America, the program is specifically designed to combat labour exploitation of street child-beggars and de-escalate the state of insecurity in Kano and the North-West geo-political zone of the country (Abuh, 2015).

The project which seeks to complement the efforts of the Governor Rabiu Kwankwaso led administration and the people of Kano to solve the problems of child beggars is designed to reduce the exposure of almajiri to violence and anti-social behaviors, which would positively impact on the sustenance of peace and harmonious relationship among people of different socio-cultural back ground residing in Kano State. The program is being jointly implemented by two Kano based Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO), the Justice Development and Peace/Caritas Advocates (JDPCA) Kano and Resource Centre for Human Rights and Civic Education (CHRICED). Already, the initiative which aims at having four thousand families in complete charge of the welfare and well-being of their children have been endorsed by both Kano State, Kano State Hisba Board, selected members of House of Assembly, Civil Society Organisation and Religious leaders, among others (Abuh, 2015).

Prior to the above initiative, Kano State initiated a prohibition against almajiri by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development (MOWASD) in order to reduce prevalence of child labor in Nigeria by 2015. This initiative which was meant to take almajiri off the streets of Kano has only succeeded in taking them off the major streets but the story is still the same in the interior and slum areas of the city as demonstrated by respondents in the interview conducted in Kano metropolis.

In another development, Kano State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, as well as United States Agency for International Development, equally supported Almajiri/Tsangaya schools centre for large numbers of these almajiri children originating from outside. This will complement the efforts of the federal government through Universal Basic Education (UBE) and Educational Trust Fund (ETF) intervention aimed at building one hundred and fifty (150) Tsangaya/ Almajiri schools across the country, in

which Kano State was one of the beneficiaries. This joint gesture is to reduce the problems of child street-beggars in Nigeria. It has been established by Onwumere (2013) that 30 percent of Northern youths were almajiri.

Of the contracts awarded by UBEC/ETF for the construction of ten (10) Almajiri/Tsangaya Model Schools spread to 10 LGA in Kano State, seven (7) currently were 100% completed, while the remaining three (3) were at advanced stages of progress.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the paper has succeeded in exposing the relationship between almajiri and select terrorist organization and how the almajiri are used as instruments of destruction in times of ethno-religious and political upheavals by these terrorist groups, which, in return, is likely to make them future terrorists in Nigeria. Street-begging, parental neglect and poverty were identified as factors responsible for almajiri interaction with these terrorist groups. Against this backdrop, the paper recommended that both street-begging and parental neglect should be criminalized while poverty reduction programme be put place in order to reduce juvenile of almajiri in Northern Nigeria.

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