

## From festival to social communion: a Nigerian experience

Emmanuel Orok Duke

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies

University of Calabar

Calabar

Cross River State, Nigeria

[e\\_duke2001@yahoo.com](mailto:e_duke2001@yahoo.com)

Stella E. Osim

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies

University of Calabar

Calabar

Cross River State, Nigeria

[stellaeosim@gmail.com](mailto:stellaeosim@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Festival is a performative dimension of cultural praxis that strengthens bonds of cohesion in society. Festivals are also an integral part of religious praxis. They have the potentiality of bringing its adherents and non-adherents together thus creating and sustaining social communion among them. This reality of sustaining social communion confirms an important function of religion in society with particular reference to its social integrative effects. Therefore, this article assesses how religious festival, Christmas, fosters social integration among Igbos in Nigeria. On a related note, many Igbos, see Christmas festival as unique occasion for them to visit their communities; attend meetings of their associations and/or town unions and consolidate family ties. These are opportunities for building social integrations, otherwise denoted as social communion in this research. This work makes use of critical analysis of relevant texts and questionnaire survey methods as means of gathering materials and data for this research. In view of understanding how Christmas festival aids social communion among the Igbo ethnic group, the theories of structural functionalism, social capital and social integration are being utilised as theoretical frameworks for this study. Finally, this study avers that religious festival cements social communion between the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis and their ancestral communities.

**Key words:** religious festival, Christmas, social communion, familial ties, the Igbos.

## 1. Introduction

Festivals are commemorative celebrations that strengthen the identity of peoples in every cultural setting. Some of them are religious, secular or mixture of both; others are urban or rural or both. Be that as it may, festivals are part and parcel of human society. Festivals have the ability to recreate and enliven the community in varied dimensions, socially, spiritually, culturally, economically, etc. In their very nature, they mirror human engagements with the spiritual and the physical climes by sustaining memories that bind human beings to the divine realm and beings as well as strengthening bond that hold together various facets of the community. In its multiple forms and through series of coordinated events, festivals bring together members of the community who are united by common historical identity, culture, language, world views and aspirations. Concerning this reality, the Igbos are not an exception. Thus, W. Hammit et al. (2006) maintains that returning to a particular place or environment because of festivals strengthens the sense of belongingness, consolidate connectivity, and affiliations that can develop social bonds with the people associated with these celebrations. It is this collective experience of the people that makes Christmas a festival that creates and sustains social communion especially in societies where family ties and ethnic bonds still matter as it is the case with the Igbos. Sixty-four years ago, F. Pilkington (1956) claimed that diversity of language, social and religious traditions constitute a three-fold problem that impede the national integration among Nigerians. This position can no longer hold because religious, social, political and cultural changes in the country have shown that religious-cultural festivals could be vehicles for social communion in contemporary Nigeria when properly harnessed. However, this article is concerned with how Christmas festival remains a means through which the Igbos living in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State (Nigeria) strengthens social communion with those in their ancestral communities.

The Igbos constitute one of the major ethnic groups in Africa. According to D. Ohadike (1966), the Igbos occupy the areas that spans from Niger River in the

west and Cross River in the east of Nigeria, stretching to swampland of the Delta region in the south and the open grassland in the north; with the population of over 15 mln as at 1996. In contemporary Nigeria, the Igbo speaking states are, Anambra, Imo, Abia, Ebonyi and Enugu. In addition, they make up about 24% of the population of Rivers and Delta States, respectively. Corroborating the claims of D. Ohadike (1966) on the location of the Igbos, M. Ojiaku (2015: 47) argues as follows, “Nowadays, the name (Igbo) belongs to the Igbo of Igboland, the Igbo of the southeast as well as those west of the River Niger”. In addition, D. Ohadike (1966) observes that the Igbo language has many dialectical inflections that distinguish one sub-Igbo ethnic group from another. On another note, M. Ojiaku (2015: 47) infers that owing to the influence of colonisation and evangelising work of Christian missionaries, the Igbo area is mainly Christian. This accounts for why the Igbos, who are predominantly Christians, take advantage of the Christmas period to reunite themselves with their places of origin. Furthermore, owing to their entrepreneurial spirit, Igbos are found in significant numbers across all the states in Nigeria. In Cross River State, where this research is carried out, they constitute a significant percentage of its inhabitant.

Social communion is a compound concept that is rooted in the sense of the community. S. Rifkin et al. (1988) state that it connotes common belongingness of persons to a community by the very fact that they share basic values and organisational interests. This belongingness presupposes participation in common identity that binds these people together. The fact of common identity is what defines ethnicity. Thus, E. Osaghae (1995:12) sees an ethnic group as “a group whose members share a common identity and affinity based on common language and culture, myth of common origin and a territorial homeland, which become the basis for differentiating ‘us’ from ‘them’, and upon which people act”. So, it is this affinity that draws the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis to their ancestral homes and Christmas period provides better opportunity for them.

Though communion is equally a sociological term, its religious sense stands out. From its Greek etymology, P. Saldanha (2014: 104) indicates that *koinonia*, communion “is adapted to designate the new relationship between God and humanity and between the whole of humanity themselves”. Therefore, the concept of commun-

ion has both vertical and horizontal dimensions, the vertical aspect deals with all that connects human beings with the deity or God, while the horizontal part of this conviviality binds together persons with common interests as human beings. From the foregoing, social communion can be described as a bond that binds together people with common shared interests – familial, ethnic, religious or cultural – for the purpose of sustaining inter-relationships and interactions that favour lasting integration of society or a religious community and at this instance, the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis and their ancestral homes.

In this article, festivals are considered as means of social communion since they generate and maintain convivial consciousness that contributes to integration of Igbo ethnic groups in Calabar Metropolis and those in their places of origin. From the foregoing, one can say that to an extent the concept of social communion is functionally similar to what social sciences render as social integration. That being said, it is pertinent to note that in assessing how Christmas festival influences social communion among the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis and those in their ancestral homes, 1200 persons from Igbo extractions, who are living in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, were administered with questionnaire. The return rate of the questionnaire was 630 (52.5%). Thus, this work focuses on how annual celebration of Christmas festival foster social integration between Igbos living in Calabar Metropolis in Cross River State and those in their ancestral lands.

## 2. Multidisciplinary understanding of festivals

The etymology of the concept *festival* is from the Latin root – *festum* and *feria*. It shows that festival connotes public merriment and concomitant freedom from laborious activities in honour of the deity because of particular benefice received by the people or something of great importance that had happen in the community. According to A. Falassi (1987), in their origins, festivals were instituted in honour of deified persons with the welfare of the human beings as direct or indirect referents. From this etymological foundation, it is evident that social interactions are at the root of festivals. Consequently, B. Quinn and L. Wilks (2013: 15) are right to aver that “festivals are premised on social interactions”. These social interactions define the con-

texts, contents and temporality of all festivals, sacred and secular alike. For this very reason, S. Waterman (1988) sees festivals as socially constructed celebration, controlled by anchor persons, with symbolic contents where meanings are promoted and experiences are shared for the social integration of the community.

Furthermore, concerning temporality, S. Waterman (1988) argues that festivals are generally ephemeral yet intense in depth and meaning. The intensity of their symbolism imbues them with the capacity of leaving an almost permanent mark on the persons and places where they are celebrated. This mark pertains to religious and secular festivals; it justifies the yearly or periodical re-enactment of the reasons for such merriments. Like other festivals, Christmas is ephemeral in character. Nevertheless, it has left a mark that conditions the mood and conviviality of the peoples all over the world owing to the globalisation of this festival that originated from the Christian West. In A. Ekman's (2002) view, the intensity of social communion created and reproduced by festivals shapes the currency of interactions, namely normative values, that influence the lives of those who take part in them. This normativity is constantly in creative tension with reversal of behaviour and relaxation of normality that are integral to festive moods; as A. Falassi (1987) puts it "normal" lives of a culture are inverted by the spirit of festivals.

Festivals are commemorative in nature as they celebrate events, deity, common identity of the people in a spectacular manner that brings together those who are directly and indirectly connected with them. In like manner, the Christian consciousness of the Igbos make them to be passionate about celebrating Christmas with their families (in ancestral lands). It is this vital force in festival that creates and nurture the bond of social communion among peoples. Reminiscing the commemorative character of festivals, J. Allen et al. (2010) indicate that events do not take place in a vacuum since they are done because of unique occurrences in the lives of the people and the impacts left their memory.

### **3. The meanings of Christmas festival**

Christmas festival narrates the communion that God creates between Himself and humankind as well as the resultant effects of this bond made possible through

the life and mission of the God-man incarnation in Jesus Christ. The historicity of this festival is recorded in the infancy narratives of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Christian sacred text, the Bible, particularly in the synoptic gospels: Matthew 1, 18-25 and Luke 2, 17; 3, 21-38. It is originally and basically a religious celebration that is annually commemorated by the Church so that the Christian faith and the mystery of God-man might be perpetuated. This mystery holds that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born into the world through a virgin-birth – by the Virgin Mary – for the purpose of reconciling humanity with God through His life, death and resurrection. Therefore, D. Heinz (2010: 4) describes the Church as “the first great festival house of the Incarnation”. This is the case, for indeed, without the Church and western civilisation, there would have been no Christmas festival. Even though Christmas festival brings out the materiality of religious faith, namely, that the invisible God has in time become visible, the deep spiritual significance of this festival cannot be completely obfuscated by the consumerist culture of the time. However, D. Heinz (2010) Heinz truly observes that this festival is fast becoming the celebration of consumer capitalism that strongly overshadows the religious importance of this feast. Nonetheless, Igbo Christians are very passionate about Christmas celebrations and many of them like to visit their homelands during this period.

In the work of M. Batinga et al. (2017) the social content of this Christian festival is traced to ancient ritualistically pagan celebration around the end of the calendar year when Emperor Constantine encouraged the spread of Christianity during the fourth century (common era). From that time, this Christian festival has become a universal event marked with holiday that brings people together for celebrations and merriments. Unfortunately, in the developed and Christian West and other countries in the northern hemisphere, the secularisation of religious feast has affected this festival in such a wise that original faith related sentiments associated with it is fast eroding away. In the same vein, D. Miller (1999) avers that the forces of commodification propelled by commercialisation and mercerisation of events are suffocating the true spirit of this celebration. This suffocation has caused the “contamination” of the reason for the season. M. Schwartzentruber and K. Sinclair (1997: 15) give a sociological context of this “contamination” of Christmas as follows: “Commercial-

ization of Christmas did not occur in a social vacuum. It is part of our society in which consumption for its own sake – regardless of need – is legitimized and encouraged”. In addition, M. Crespi-Vallbona and G. Richards (2007) observe that this phenomenon is gradually transforming the spiritual tradition of Christmas, like any modern festival, from ritual to “show” whereby people pay more attention to consumption and socialisation rather than the significance of the celebration. The above experience is not peculiar to Western societies. In African countries, the social aspects of Christmas festival are slowly stifling the reason for the season wherein communal and familial celebrations seems to overshadow the true significance of this ritual event. Despite the above observation, the social dimension of Christmas festival for the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis is glaring, they go to their places of origin to reunite with their families, hold communal events, meetings, etc. The Igbos equally fix celebrations during this period because members of their local communities are expected to spend the holidays of Christmas festival in their native homes. It is the effects of social communion that comes with Christmas festivals that connect the Igbos to their ancestral homes.

#### **4. Theoretical frameworks and Christmas festival**

Theoretical frameworks are aid towards better understanding of social realities. They give simplified interpretations to complex entities like human beings and interactive entities in society from particular perspectives. Together, these frameworks complement one another in view of improving the epistemological contents of social realities like festivals. According to N. Mouzelis (1995), theoretical frameworks are set of substantive interrelated statements gleaned from human experiences through which the social world can be understood. Consequently, the knowledge gathered from these interpretations enables a better organisation of society.

For this work, structural functionalism, social capital and social integration theories are hermeneutical framework for understanding how Christmas festival serves as an instrument of social communion. Firstly, the theory of structural functionalism sees human society as relationships among its various components which are shaped by social variables such as institutions, norms, traditions and customs.



Thus, when all the social variables function properly, human beings in society could enjoy high level of well-being. However, anytime these variables do not work well, dysfunctionality remains the order of the day. Thus, for H. Wirawan et al. (2018), religious customs and traditions are set of cultural variables that contribute to the stability of society. Functional theory is the brainchild of structural functionalism which holds that religion aids in the proper ordering of the society. Furthermore, V. Lidz (2020: 76) explains that functional theory,

*“has particularly emphasized long term effects of religion on other institutions, including strata formation and legal, political, economic, educational, and cultural institutions. In the cases of world religions, such as Christianity, or Buddhism, functional theory has focused on religion’s part in shaping trends of development for entire civilizations”.*

The Igbos treasure Christmas festival and they use it as window for social connection with their places of origin. It is equally correct to say that, the misuse of religion can equally disorganise the social fabrics of any society at the micro (individual) and macro (community) levels. Hence, the celebration of Christmas festival in its true spirit of care and concern for others, reconciliation, and charity can increase the intensity of social communion among members of society. In R. Baumeister and M. Leary’s (1995) work, the true spirit of this festival leads one to develop an extended self, namely, social identities that make every member of society to strive for the common good rather than individual benefits. This constitutes part of the reason why some of the Igbos who live in Calabar Metropolis travel to their homeland or ancestral homes during Christmas holidays so that bond and social interactions among kindred and families could be strengthened. When this praxis is properly harnessed, its social capital can produce the fruits of social communion, e.g. peaceful coexistence, progress and development.

Secondly, social capital theory shows how social interactions sustains or destroys social communion. Social capital is the product of relationships in society and equally guarantees social communion derived from social relations among human beings H. Ali-Hassam (2009) writes that theory of social capital was popularised by J. Nahapiet and S. Ghoshal (2008) who investigated the effect of social capital on the generation of intellectual capital which are drawn from the resources made available



by network of relationships, weak links within human interactions and social status of individual members that make up society. As a theory, J. Nahapiet and S. Ghoshal (2008) explain that social capital embodies the significance of relationships as a veritable resource to every social action. Furthermore, as a multidimensional concept whereby common interests and relational resources shape social interactions, it facilitates the creation of knowledge that aids the organisation of society. Since Christmas festival promotes certain values held dear by the Igbo Christians, it has the social capital that can promote belongingness, strengthening of common identity and well-being of the Igbo ancestral communities.

Thirdly, according to V. Beresnevièiûtë (2003), social integration theory sees society as an organisation sustained by reciprocal interactions of the social structures that comprise it. This reciprocity is akin to social resources – goodwill, mentioned above. Even though mere goodwill may not be enough to change society positively, when strengthened by the normative institutions of the community, certain level of integration is expected. The stability of this social organisation is guaranteed through connection of diverse elements of society as well as managing its creative tensions. This means that as a functional theory, social integration theory promotes harmonious interactions in the community. Since the Igbos are predominantly Christian, Christmas festival places a demand on them to remember its true significance. It calls them to reciprocate Divine graciousness celebrated at Christmas by, caring for the less privileged and championing social development in their ancestral communities. It is possible for them to do this if the spirit of the season remains non-asphyxiated by the consumerist culture of contemporary society. Since Christmas festival has the social resources to create and sustain social communion among the Igbos, the next section pays attention it.

### **5. Social communion among the Igbos through Christmas festival**

Despite the fact that the holiday that comes with Christmas is ephemeral, activities within organised private sector controlled by various tribes, like the Igbos, in Nigeria remains low-keyed because some of them return to their places of origin to celebrate the festival. This return to their homelands sustains various dimensions of

social communion made possible by this end of the year festival. The following are some aspects of social integration that Christmas festival brings to the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis and those in their ancestral homes, (1) social participation in the community's life, (2) cultural construction and re-construction of the community, (3) introduction of new members of various families to ancestral community (4) enlivening of social actions via town unions and associations, (5) regulation of social relations through reconciliation, (6) nurturing peaceful co-existence at intra and extra communal levels (7) social exclusion of non-conforming persons from the communal life.

Firstly, being a festival celebrated during the end of civic calendar year, many of the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis take advantage of its holiday as an opportunity to partake in the social life of their ancestral communities. Often, this participation in the community's social life takes place in a rural setting. This takes the form of renewing their membership in various social bodies like age-grade organisations, etc. According to S. Basse and J. Mendie (2019), in most traditional African societies, age-grade organization is an important body that engineers social communion in the community, *ipso facto*, its leaders are *ceteris paribus*, members of the enlarged town or village governing council as a link to various age-groups. In Igboland, most of these associations, like age-grade hold their meetings at the end of the year because many people return to the village for Christmas festival.

Secondly, Y. Owusu-Frempong (2005) asserts that in traditional African settings, festivals serve as media of cultural education and intergenerational communication via various age-grade organisations and social groupings. Thus, Christmas festival is an opportunity to construct and reconstruct cultural heritage of various communities. The Igbo elders use this opportunity to reconstruct their cultural heritage of their ancestral communities and build social communion among various sub-ethnic groupings. The strength of this social re-engineering fosters co-operation across the clans in the community with regard to developmental plans that repositions the people to face other contemporary challenges.

Thirdly, the social interactions which encourage intergenerational education of younger members of the community make city-dwellers (like those from Calabar

Metropolis) who go for the celebration of Christmas festival in their ancestral lands to introduce their adult-children into social groups that they belong. Many Igbos take this very seriously; hence they like going with their children to their place of origin every Christmas. For C. Winkle and K. Woosnam (2014), this is inspired by the sense of the community and the social consciousness of the elders given that they equally want their children to be integrated into life in ancestral homes and there is no gain-saying that the mass participation at Christmas festival makes this possible. Undoubtedly, this generational education enriches the young members of Igbo communities concerning their traditions and the history of social interactions among various neighbouring communities that remains social resources for peaceful co-existence.

Fourthly, the knowledge of the community's traditions and customs as well as its social needs has the potentiality of enlivening social actions via town unions and associations that are situated in diaspora or outside the ancestral home. Thus, some to the Igbos have really used this means to develop their rural communities. Those who build their identity via the celebration of festivals like Christmas in ancestral villages are most likely to cooperate with others in carrying out developmental projects there. This claim is corroborated in the work of M. Whitford and L. Ruhanen (2013: 50) as follows, "festivals like this are being viewed as vehicles for facilitating social capital and community development". This might not be automatic since it takes some time for peoples' social imagination to be orientated towards harnessing the community's goodwill into concrete developmental projects. When these developmental plans are carried out, they increase the community's level of social communion thereby making them to identify themselves with their ancestral homes.

Fifthly, as the sense of belonging to the community grows, the population of those taking part in Christmas festival in ancestral home will increase. For the Igbos, this gives room for more and diverse interests in relation to social interactions with their ancestral communities. When this situation is not properly managed, conflicts of interests can jeopardize the dividends of social communion enjoyed as a result of social integration that Christmas festival fosters. Hence, the need to regulate and remedy weak social relations through social reconciliation. The cultural resources available for this peace-building lie in the customs and traditions of the community

that are handed on via transgenerational knowledge during the celebration of festivals like Christmas. Therefore, M. Oyitso et al. (2013) declare that after serving justice to those involved in the infractions (interpersonal, communal or intercommunal), oath taking influenced by Christian principles can go a long way to restoring social communion. The reason for Christmas festival is savouring the reconciliation that God accomplished through the incarnation of His Son, *ipso facto*, peace initiatives resonate with this celebration.

Sixthly, when the complexification of social interactions and its resultant conflicts are controlled through peace-building initiatives carried out at the level of the community, peaceful co-existence is nurtured. For the Igbos, Christmas festival is gradually becoming a culture of visiting their ancestral homes. This is a social capital that sustains peaceful co-existence. This position resonates with the thoughts of G. Richards and D. Hall (2000) who contend that harmonious relationship between local communities and their environment is important for integral political, economic and cultural developments which can be truly considered as sustainable.

Lastly, to sustain this social communion that Christmas festival generates in local communities, exclusion of non-conforming persons from the communal life of the people might be necessary. This strategy is taken as the last resort when all efforts at correcting, reconciling and reintegrating non-conforming persons into the community fails. Thus, in most Igbo rural communities, recalcitrant members of the land are ostracised from their people as a means of sanitising the community. This decision is normally taken in view of preserving the community's social communion. Consequently, H. Brunkhorst (2006) states succinctly that this serves as deterrent measure for others so that the common good of society may be enhanced.

## **6. Research findings on Christmas festival and social communion**

Kinship is a strong category in understanding the complex web of social integration. This is because it strengthens individual and social identity of persons within the community. It is in kinship that belongingness is rooted. For this reason, B. Quinn and L. Wilks (2013) observe that festivals reproduce and sustain connections that are given through kinship. Concerning kinship respondents were asked to

respond to this affirmation: “My parents and siblings are the main reason for visiting home during Christmas”. Eighty-seven per cent of the respondents said that they celebrate Christmas festival at their ancestral homes for the primary reason of reuniting themselves with their parents and family members. Nine per cent confessed that lack of where to stay in ancestral land discourages them from going “home”. While 4% did not respond to this question.

Furthermore, with regard to “what makes the Christmas Festival interesting”, 12% pointed that there is nothing interesting about Christmas owing to hardship in Nigeria, collapse of infrastructure and insecurity in the country. Nonetheless, 57% indicated that the spiritual significance of the festival is paramount to them; while 31% were more interested in the social dimension of the celebration. These data revealed that the scale of significance attached to this end of the year festival is gradually being de-traditionalised. Some factors including, globalisation and contemporary cultures, are responsible for this.

Apart from affinity to kinship, there are other important reasons for celebrating this festival at home of origin. According to the respondents, participation in church bazaar in their homelands ranked 28%; age-grade and town hall meeting took 40%, those who go “home” just for important anniversary 18% and only 14% spend Christmas at ancestral homes for change of environment. The respondents showed that being at their ancestral home during Christmas festival was important for various reasons.

It was interesting to discover how the respondents assess how Christmas festival strengthens social communion in relation between Igbos in Calabar Metropolis and those in their ancestral homes. Twelve per cent of the people felt that regular visitation of their homelands, especially during Christmas season, connects them *very strongly* to their ancestral identity. But 68% of the respondent indicated that the yuletide season makes the sense of social integration to their community of origin *strong*. Twenty per cent of the respondents stated that their holiday at home during the Christmas feast *fairly* strengthens their connection to their ancestral home. These responses show that Christmas festival gives the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis to socio-culturally connect with their homelands.

The relationship between social capital and community development was equally assessed in terms of Christmas celebration in their place of origin. Forty-five percent of the people responded that developmental projects from those in diaspora constitute the mainstay of sustaining rural infrastructures. However, 55% of the respondents averred that their ancestral lands have not benefited enough from their people who are in diaspora and only visit during Christmas period.

V. Beresnevièiûtë (2003) contends that there is a relationship between social communion and progress of society. As an aspect of functional theory, social communion or social integration is premised on reciprocal interactions among powerful actors and various segments of society. This means that influential actors from the community (there or in diaspora, e.g. Calabar Metropolis) can contribute to or mar social harmony of the Igbos in their homelands. With regard to this concern, 28% of the respondents testified that the instability in the South-East Nigeria, where Igbos come from, are sometimes engineered by the influential persons in the community who seem to be above the law of the community. However, 65% of the people opined that very devastating conflicts have been averted in past at town-hall meetings during Christmas periods. Seven per cent of the respondents did not give their opinion on this matter. From the foregoing, the claim that yuletide or end of the year meetings can contribute to or mar peaceful co-existence among the Igbos is tenable.

## 7. Conclusion

The social capital of festival and its effects on social integration between the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State and their ancestral communities remain the kernel of this paper. Every festival has the potentiality of creating and nurturing social communion among the members of the community. Similarly, the reverse can be the case when festival is separated from the reason for the celebration; it does not matter if the festival is rural or cosmopolitan, profane or sacred, secular or religious. The findings of this paper evince that the effects of social communion or social integration between the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis and their people at home (place of origin) is significant. Many factors could be responsible for this, strong spiritual significance of Christmas, slow effects of secularisation process on the Igbos, etc.

Hence, social capital or goodwill is needed for a greater multiplier effects of social communion that is directly linked to how the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis relate with their ancestral lands during Christmas festival. In view of cultivating this social capital, the Igbos in Calabar Metropolis who celebrate Christmas festival should not forget the spiritual significance of the festival; perhaps this social memory could inspire them to work for social, cultural and political stability of their ancestral communities.

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