

## TRADITIONAL IGBO SOCIETY IN WORLD LITERATURE THEMES: A STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN WATER SPIRITS AND THE HUMAN SOCIETY IN ELECHI AMADI'S NOVEL "THE CONCUBINE" (1966)

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### ABSTRACT

Creation, its purpose and progression remain man's greatest enigma, scriptural and scientific explanations notwithstanding. However, certain ideas of Elemental beings identified with the four elements of Fire, Water, Air and Earth, is one such idea. Of these beings, the water elements have received the greatest attention in the folklores and literatures of all people. In Igboland where this study focuses, tales about Ezenwanyi, Owummiri, or Mammy water are common currency. This universal theme of folklores handled by Amadi in this his complete Igbo novel, **The Concubine** (1966) is the focus of this work, studying its Igboness in perspective and ideas, showing how his holds its own in a globalized world, according respect, dignity and university to the Igbo, creating hence a sense of self knowledge and positive pride.

**KEYWORDS:** Literature, Water Spirits

### INTRODUCTION

Human nature is certainly universal. Environmental factors only go to give it the different colours it displays on the surface. Hence the basic needs of man are ever recurring issues in the modern world. One aspect of man's nature that portrays this universality is Literature. Every society has a literature, its own literature.

In its literature, every society is reflected in its joys and sorrows, its toils and expectations, its hopes, deceptions and aspirations.

Through certain literary themes, the whole nature and fabric of man or society is portrayed. One such theme is that of the unknown, invisible and presumed world, that compels great fear an uncertainty and seems to define man's fate on earth. Apart from the belief in God and gods, the belief in the existence of elemental beings that interfere in human affair is world wide and is expressed in the literature of every land.

These elemental beings are usually associated with the four elements of Air, Earth, Fire and Water; the sylphs of the air, the gnomes of earth the *salamanders* of fire and the *undines* of water. Of these, the water elementals or beings have received the greatest attention in literature as they seem to have the greatest influence and interaction on and Man. No wonder stories about the "Dwellers in the depths" are found in the literature, mythology and legend of every people.

### Water Spirits

Scientific and technological advances have in the Western World, played down the belief in any idea of things considered irrational, right from the time of European Enlightenment, age of reason and urbanization. However in the western world it was Paracelsus (1493-1541) who in his occult philosophy made popular the idea of water beings, which

he called undine, from Latin Unda-wave.

According to him these nymphs were female in form and lacking a soul, until married to a mortal and mother of his child.<sup>1</sup>

During German Romanticism, Frederik de la Motte Fouque (1777-1843) published in 1811 his title *Undine* which was reprinted many times, and translated into several world languages. His source was Paracelsus writing on *Elementargeitster*. He came across this through his teacher A. W. Von Schlegel who had introduced him to the German mystic and alchemist of the middle ages Jakob Bohme. (1575-1624).

Before that however European literature, right from Rome and Greece had present in it this theme of water beings. Enzler S. M.<sup>2</sup> in his article, “An Assemblage of myths legends on water and water creatures,” makes an almost encyclopedic presentation on water creatures as perceived by peoples of different parts of the world.

In China the Dragon Kings were water deities, The Kappas the intelligent water spirits in Japanese mythology dwelt in dragon palace castles.

Cato is the hideous sea monster being. The Grindylows of British folklore seem to belong to the same stem as the lady of the lake in the legend of King Arthur.

On the continent, the Lady on the Rhine River, the Loreley so beautifully presented in poetry by Heinrich Heine's *Book of songs*<sup>3</sup> is similar to the sekies of Scotland and the deadly Sirens of Greece. The *Jengu* of central, East and South African myths measure so very well with the *Ndem* with her male counterpart *Ekpenyong* of both Efik and Ibibio folklore as well as the *Ezenwanyi* in Igboland. *Mamiwater* perhaps is the most wide spread phenomenon in Africa and its diaspora in the America and the west Indies expressed most strongly in the belief in Yemaja, the afro-Brazilian sea goddess. The list is endless and their interaction with humans on land is an awesome diversity of the good the bad and the ugly.

The *Ogbuide* of the Oguta lake studied and written on by Sabine Jell Behlsen<sup>4</sup> is perhaps the most fascinating modern account of this ageless story here in Igboland and may be in the world.

Sir Victor Uwaifo<sup>5</sup> in his popular high life hit of the last century, titled, “Guitar Boy” does advocate love for these beings as he says in the lyrics, “If you see mammy water, never run away, sing her a song of love oh Victor Uwaifo”.

Thus it is easy to say that the “Kingdoms of the depths” and their citizens that appear manifest in different forms in the societies of man have, down through.

The ages an integral part of every human society and have played important roles and had striking influences on society. Amadi in this work portrays one such case. This is in the Igbo world.

### **Amadi, His Views and Works**

One may be too presumptuous if one calls Elechi Amadi an Igbo. From his perspective he probably would prefer

<sup>1</sup> Manfred Kluge and Rudolf Radler, *Haupt werke der deutschen Literactur* (Muenchen: Kindler Verlag, 1974), 264-265.

<sup>2</sup> S. M. Enzler, *An assemblage of myths and legends on water creatures on the article*, <[www.linntech.com/water-mythology.htm](http://www.linntech.com/water-mythology.htm)> (23 January 2004-3.30pm).

<sup>3</sup> Henrich, Heine, *Buch der Lieder. Nachless zu den Gedichten 1812-1827* eutscher (Muenchen: Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH&Co KG, 1975), 107.

<sup>4</sup> Sabine Jell Bahlsen, *Ogbuide of Oguta. The Water Goddess in Igbo cosmology* (Africa World Press), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Uwaifo, *Top 12 Hits*. Track no. 1 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EM7mNjw\\_k8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EM7mNjw_k8) January, 23<sup>rd</sup> 9.00am.

to be Ekwerre and not Igbo, for if according to him Ikwerre is a "language linguistically close to Igbo" and not a dialect of Igbo<sup>6</sup>, the Ikwerre would certainly not be Igbo, but Ikwerre, despite so much overwhelming evidence of cultural sameness. No matter the differences on either side, we consider Amadi Igbo, and so make bold to discuss him and his works within the context of Igbo culture and world view.

Amadi's views on African literature are quite clear. For him the theme of cultural conflict in African literature, though important, should be minimized. He sees "Negritude" as "an unnecessary ideology"<sup>7</sup> "...the depiction of African culture by itself without reference to any invading culture is .....important"<sup>8</sup>. This way our culture can come into its own and we can contemplate it with pride and relate to it naturally<sup>9</sup> it holds. This personal view is clearly seen in his works. In his writings he has discussed the African Village life in its natural if not primordial setting and his characters have also acted in that way, without foreign blemish.<sup>10</sup>

Still on African literature, he holds that the African writer has to write about the environment in three dimensions simultaneously, "its private life, the social life and ....the supernatural"<sup>11</sup>. This approach he also maintains in his works.

Amadi had five African novels to his credit in addition to poetic works and drama pieces. *The Concubine* (1966) was his first and ground breaking novel which became an instant classic. The other ones are *The Great Ponds* (1969); *The Slave* (1978); *Sunset in Biafra* (1973); *Estrangement* (1986); *Isiburu*, (1978); *Peppersoup* (1977); *The Road to Ibadan* (1977). *Dancer of Johannesburg* (1979) and, *The woman of Calabar* (2001) are his plays. Added to these are poems essays and short stories.

### **The Concubine the Story**

The story of this novel tallies well with Amadi's idea of African literature – no admittance of non African ideas and influences and portrayal of private, social and supernatural levels of the African society, simultaneously.

Emenike a highly admired and respected member of Omokachi village dies living behind his wife and three children following a fight with another villager over a piece of land, despite sacrificing to the God Amadioha in thanks giving for recovery from injuries sustained in the fight.

His widow Ihuoma is slowly settling to her life as widow but her mother is, considering Ihuoma's age and thinking of her marrying again but Ihuoma is reluctant.

While trying to fetch plantain from her late husband's piece of land which had been in dispute, she is accosted by Madume, Emenike's assailant, who has the effrontery to make love advances, and dares to touch her. The whole affair in the near by bush ends up in a cobra spitting into Madume's eyes. In the course of his treatment he goes insane and takes his own life.

<sup>6</sup> Elechi Amadi, in *Elective Affinities. Tributes and Eassy Edith Ihekweazu in memorian* (Bayreuth: Boomerand Press, 1993), 106.

<sup>7</sup> Amadi, 104.

<sup>8</sup> Amadi, 104.

<sup>9</sup> Amadi, 104.

<sup>10</sup> Amadi, 105.

<sup>11</sup> Helen Chukwuma, in *Studies of the African Novel* (Department of English University of Port-Harcourt: Unpublished lecture notes, 1987), 27.

Ekwueme now comes into the scene and most of the rest of the novel is indirectly centered around him as a person, and his social life. Around him are revealed aspects of the social and cultural life of the village of Omokachi and other villages.

His life as a young man in the village, in his father's house and his interaction with other young men in the village and the village as a whole, all revolving around his desire for Ihuoma. In his private life the love for his mother, the betrayal of tradition by abandoning the girl betrothed to him, and his fatal love for the widow Ihuoma bring together the private, the social and supernatural in the story. All this culminate in his wife running away following the failure of a love portion she administered on her husband. The way then becomes clear for the fatal love affair with Ihuoma; who he had desired.

They accept to get married, everybody approves except Anyika the *Dibia*, Ekwueme defies him, and seeks assistance in the domain of another *Dibia* with the dreadful name *Agwotorumbe* – the accomplisher of the impossible so to say. It was not to be as he is assassinated inadvertently by the “arrow” from the bow of Ihuoma's son, who was charged with the responsibility of getting a lizard for the mid-night ritual that would make the marriage possible. The natural consequence when one defies the gods in traditional Igbo and African setting.

#### **The Igbo World View: Traditional Society as Reflected in (Amadi's Omokachi Village and Community)**

The concubine is to our understanding a complete Igbo novel; really African for it depicts effectively the natural life of any African community before intrusion by capitalism and religions of the book, with their claims to power money and conquest for growth.

In the Concubine, life is not compartmentalized as in modern society and everybody is everybody's keeper, everybody knows everybody and everybody is everybody.

In the traditional Igbo society – the imaginary Omokachi for example, Religion is not a major aspect of life in the sense that it stands out for special consideration. Religious activities were part of every other activity and there were no professional Religionists, that is to say, a clergy class or priest craft. Priests there were – the priest of Amadioha for example – but he lived his life like any other human being and only performed his duties when duty called. He was all the same highly respected and conducted himself in a befitting way.

There is no Igbo word equivalent to Religion or translatable as “Religion”<sup>12</sup>. Religion permeated the whole society. Existence on earth was simply living from day to day until rejoining the ancestors, but ever conscious of invisible and directing influences which no one can safely oppose. You could appease these influences if you went against their ordinances, just as you could plead your case before a fellow mortal who you had wronged.

Law and Order. The people exhibited a high sense of understanding and compliance although there was no chief anywhere to order people about and to whom anybody paid homage. Every one seemed to know what to do in order not to trespass on the right of others. However there were disagreement like the case of the boundary adjustment between Emenike and Madume. This dispute was properly handled by elders although “greed” as is common in human nature escalated it to a fatal conclusion, for both parties.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *The Religious Traditions of Africa*.

The market days of *Afor*, *Nkwo*, *Eke* and *Orie* were equivalent to deities and, certain events took place on certain market days and not on others due to certain unwritten but traditional laws: for example, for fixing a suitable day for the next dance during which a new song which was a social critic in misconduct will be released. Mmam says to Ekwe, quite simply and understandably "Next Nkwo should be excellent then" (p86).

### **The Sea King**

Most of the stories about water spirits are usually about female water spirits. Paracelsus, who was mentioned before, states that these water beings are female; the Undines. However often and again the story of a female water spirit is tied to a sea king, and this makes the story in almost all cases more tragic for the humans concerned. It is always the human who pays the final blood prize.

In the novel *The Sea King* (13) from *Russian Folklore* by Yolen and Oppenheim, we read, "...the sea king lives deep under the sea in a crystal palace, he rarely lives his halls except to search out a human victim; .... The sea king does a favour for a king from the land above. In return however, he extracts a promise. And without realising it, the king of land has promised the sea king his new born son ..."<sup>13</sup>

In Amadi's story, it is the connection, Ihuoma's connection to the Sea-King, his revenge for infidelity and the consequences of his revenge which create the background situations that move the story ahead and give it, its final form. The unseen character, whose words we never hear, but whose actions have dire consequences for other characters in the novel.

Through a love dispute, deep in a world unknown to man, the novel relates the story of Omokachi and Igbo culture/society in its traditional setting.

### **Communal Life and Relationship with the Invisible**

The Omokachi society without written laws or any king progressed and lived peacefully. The only other power or powers it accepted, heeded, bowed down to and appeased as the need arose, was the power of the invisible, to which the society attributed all it could not explain or understand.

Emenike, Ihuoma's husband made sacrifices of thanksgiving to Amadioha, the god above for surviving the fight with Madume, before he died from the lock-chest. No doubt, that if he had known of the Sea-king, he would have sought to placate him as well.

Evidence of the level and respect the Omokachi people hold for the gods is seen in the presence amongst them of the priests of the different gods and their shrines, Amadioha, Ojukwu, Agwu, Ali and others. Nwokekoro for example was the priest if Amadioha.

Emenike's visit to the shrine of Amadioha, (p16-18) gives us a vivid picture of the rites and processes of worship and sacrifice among the people. It reveals the degree and sense of commitment to the entire process and to the person and personality of the priest of Amadioha, the God of the sky, and other gods. In all this, the beliefs and reverence are just like breathing, almost an unconscious act.

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<sup>13</sup> Jane Yolen and Shulamith Levey Oppenheim. *The Sea King* Crocodile Books Massachussets (2012)

Disputes and disagreements were duly resolved by elders and the priests of the gods, as they could not be partial, as is shown (p69) in the scuffle between Nnadi, Ekwueme's brother-in-law and Madume, "Don't fight, the elders and priests will decide this matter (p69) the neighbours, said. However unknown to them the Sea- king was already lying in wait to settle the matter.

Next to the awe in which God is held comes the family which was like a sacred order for the people. They just worshipped, and held it up as an institution that protected society. The wife or wives addressed the husband as my lord (p.95) in conversation and the wife as *Omasirim*; the wife or wives was what gave the man relevance in society. Wagbara addresses his wife as *Oyirim*. It was his duty not only to love and provide for them but to protect them. The husband was in a sacred relationship with his family-in-law and the wife was "wife" to every member of her husbands family.

Fathers married the first wife for their sons once they were of age and mature. The daughters were also married off about age 15 or 16 and even betrothed to future spouses.

The marriage ceremony was expensive for both parties, from the initial declaration of intention by the family and or relatives of a suitor to the final "going home" of the new bride to her husbands family. Neighbours had to assist (p123) even if the chief celebrant was rich. This is so because, marriage was a communal and inter family affair. If any one ever did everything on his own, then he lacked good will from the village; serious good will.

Like marriage ceremonies, child birth received great attention, especially from women, who strongly feel it is their exclusive domain: With special dancing, songs, gifts and assistance, the new mother was surrounded and even fed specially. The husband basically lavishes on her for the achievement. The case of Adaku, Ekwueme's mother (p61) who had a baby after a very long time gives such a baby and mother special treatment.

The women returned again and again to see and hold the baby and the mother would hardly hold the baby for long, except to feed it, as it was passed from one willing hand of comfort to another, with songs, praises, and admiration. The women, shared a common experience as far as children were concerned and even so for men.

Marriage came naturally even without formal courtship, except of course for betrothals, for a woman did not need to scheme to get a man, that was thought mean and immoral.

### **Interpersonal Relationship**

Apart from the love and cordiality that the family showed in Omokachi, typical of Igbo culture, there is the strong interpersonal relationship, which was friendship, and the discrete distance married people had from the opposite sex.

Due to respect of her marriage, a young married woman could not be found in the company of a male for more than an assumed and given length of time. Nnenda who had been commissioned by Ekwueme to carry a message to Ihuoma knew she could not remain for too long in the company of Ekwueme as she relayed the message she brought back (p66) and so left in a hurry even if Ekwueme needed further explanation.

On the other hand, Ekwueme, Wakiri, Mmam and other young men, were at ease with one another and were always deep in jokes.

They often worked together in each others farms or went as a group to help some one who needed the help they could give. The case of the repair of Ihuoma's leaking roof, just before the rains by Ekwueme, Wakiri and Nnadi (p45) and

arranging her yams in columns (p87) demonstrates this fact.

One could also retrieve the animal in some one's trap from the bush and bring back to the owner without fear. In any emergencies ones closest friend or friends were called in first before the larger community.

This, Wigwe, Ekwueme's father exemplified, when at the instance of his son Ekwueme running away, he quickly first of all fetched Ekwueme's friend Mman and later Wakiri and Nnadi (P168) to go in search for Ekwueme, before others would know.

### **Social Life**

There were two major aspects of social life and activities that drew out most of the village, apart from the usual festivals held at given intervals. These festivals were to sacrifice to the gods in thanksgiving, and to appeal for a better and greater future, rich harvest, long life, health, children and prosperity. The two aspects for ordinary socialization were regular dance sessions in the moonlight, and wrestling games. Only men wrestle, so dance was the only form of physical recreation for the women.

At times the singing and dancing were spontaneous in small groups with improvised instruments or formal when the xylophone was greatly in use. While at work and, there was a pause to regain strength or eat, a tune is raised by someone, and a hearty dance that just celebrates life takes the center stage as in when Ihuoma's barn was done by Ekwueme and his friends (p44-45).

Most of the songs were simply literature, oral literature, for they were social critics and helped to serve as deterrents and moral watch on conduct. Two examples stand out. The one about the man who was thrown down by his wife in a fight, (p 81) and the man who attempted to make love to a woman in the farm. (p.128) and had to undergo purification rites as he was thought to have been bewitched.

In this way also, morality was maintained, including the fear of the wrath of gods. There was traditional propriety in every situation.

Ihuoma had to, despite all her emotional conflict and fear, go early enough to greet Ahurole, Ekwueme's new wife, who came from her paternal village. Otherwise, her action could be misconstrued and given many undertones that could give birth to a social song. Relaxed during the visit, she conversed freely with the other women and even gave Ahurole pieces of advice. (p125) before she left sometime after the other women had all gone.

This sense of guilt that develops, when one fails to act in conformity with the social norms, and accepted decorum in the social life of the community, is also portrayed in the case of Nnenda, when she had not gone to see Adaku's wonder baby for up to eight days. She felt a strong sense of guilt and apologized profusely with acceptable reasons, which the guests accepted, even sympathizing with her. There was no room for deviations from acceptable conduct.

### **The Dibia**

Between the invisible world of the gods and the dangerous relationship that had to be maintained with the "dwellers in the seas, rivers and lakes" of the community, stood the priests and the Dibia, traditional, healer, medicine man, mystic and occultist who saw with more than two eyes. He spoke or could speak to nature and the gods. In the world of so many uncertainties, his role was indispensable, and so highly sought for.

The priests of the Deities sacrificed to their deities at regular times or in emergencies and were held sacred and revered. They did not have a day to day occupation. It was to the Dibia, healer and metaphysician that the protection of physical and spiritual health fell.

Anyika for example was constantly in demand for various reasons. Of note is the fact that he was not an indigene, but still respected his guest community so well, that he would do nothing there to tarnish his image, or mar the cordial relationship and acceptance he enjoyed in the Omokachi community (p 159).

Among the Dibia too were charlatans who would take money and try anything, even if were to fool their clients. The medicine man at Chiolu (p161) who agreed to concoct a love-portion that finally led to the failure of Ahurole's marriage with Ekwueme, comes to mind. There also was the fatal *Agwoturumbe*, who dared the Sea-king and whose arrival at Omokachi was greatly heralded by ever searching clients.

Notwithstanding, the whole reliability of such activities is not called to question in the culture. However there are also orthodox medical practitioners who refuse to try some dangerous operations and others who agree and may succeed or fail. The central point here is the role of the Dibia in our traditional society. Are they what some may call juju priest, or are they knowledgeable individuals, who are placed in positions to take life and death decisions. Since we are dealing with a traditional, cultural, situation, the question does not arise in context here.

#### **“The Unconscious Sea Goddess” and Her Male Human Contacts; Emenike, Madume and Ekwueme**

In reply to the story that Ekwueme told her, omitting the part of the death of her husband and Madume Ihuoma replies (p201) “These things are strange and almost funny. I certainly don't feel like a daughter of the sea”

Ihuoma claims she is unaware of what she is in essence. Of course people would not believe her and so following Anyika's findings and that of Agwoturumbe; Wigwe proceeded to perform severance rites out at sea, in order to preserve his son's life, if he married Ihuoma.

By Igbo cultural standard in mythology, Ihuoma's character and looks are easily identifiable with that of water beings. These include outstanding beauty, excellent conduct and good nature, not given to vulgarity, obedient and long suffering. When she says (p42) to Nnadi that she cannot stand untidy environments; it only goes to confirm the widely held belief that they are normally very clean people, as the kingdoms and palaces of the seas from which they come are impeccably clean. She was simply a fantastic character that drew attention, but alas that was a screen for her deadly mission among human kind. Anyika (p196) sums it all up.

Ihuoma attracted three men to her, and for them, strange accidental death was their portion. Strangely enough this beautiful woman had been always sorrowful. She broke with her husband in the sea, the Dibia tell us and on earth she trades death all because of her beauty, and for her (p214) beauty is a serious-problem, not just for her, but as the lives of her three male counterparts also show. And for her abandoned and sorrowing sea-king husband too.

For the three men, Ihuoma's was by omission or commission a mission of death and the Sea-king saw to it. Her victims, but for “big eyed” Madume were people, young men the Omokachi community was proud off. Emenike, a “ladies man” was adored by the female folk, respected by other young men, honored, and esteemed by the elders, he was trusted and reliable. A good wrestler too, until the tragic interference by the sea-king, “the kill joy” in the world of man; who caused him to trip in the fight and so gave Madume an undue advantage, later killing him with the “lock-chest”.

Madume, the "greedy"; who had negative traits, was not given the chance to come near Ihuoma and after just one warning with injury to his big toe, the next episode led to his humiliation and shameful death. His fate despite his portrayal as an unfriendly character is in essence not different from the other two.

Ekwueme, the third and final love for Ihuoma in the novel has his share of admiration, a good only son, singer, musician, dancer, socialite, skilled trapper and the toast of the village. A young man any girl in the village or elsewhere would have loved to marry.

He too, got entangled with the inevitable. His love for mother, his indifference to his betrothed, and first wife Ahurole, thereby offending tradition and as of consequence the gods; his ill-fated desire if not infatuation for Ihuoma, from which and about who he could see no reason. His challenging of the sea-king, by deliberately trying to dispossess him of Ihuoma; his false story to Ihuoma to make sure she married him. He, carefully, but by a sad and unconscious error prepared his own assassination, when he told Nwonna how to shoot the arrow along the wall, so as to get the lizard. (p213) "Don't shoot directly," "shoot along the wall and the wall will direct your arrows to the lizards" Alas he Ekwueme became the lizard the sea-king wanted dead. At the appointed time he emerged to receive the arrow shot along the wall and the wall directed it on him. He never said a word after that, until he died. Lizards don't talk.

### **Ihuoma, as the Siren, the Loreley and Other Sea Beauty Equivalents**

In the song and stories about the sirens in Greece or the loreley in Germany, these beautiful female sea beings, attract sea faring men with their beauty, and or music, so, much so that these men, entranced forget themselves, until their ship smashed into rocks or boulders and they perish.

Ihuoma played with her beauty and faultless nature, the same kind of music heard by all, but which enticed three men most. Their gaze on that form and their inner audition of the fatal music drew them inevitably to destruction. For the sea queens they just expressed their nature, the result unintended. It was the men's responsibility.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The stories referred to in Western thought to which we are now hooked, as mythology, if told to Africans with no western orientation, is held up as truth and living examples can be pointed to in the Igbo society today. In the age of so called Learning, Reason, technological development and advancement, man is still living in the middle of too many unknowns and uncertainties.

Can man through science ask spiritual questions that are pertinent, and possibly find answers that could change the way we see the world and relate to one another?

No "sane" person can make a plea for water spirits, without being sent to a psychiatrist.

If nothing else this story places the Igbo culture high on the pedestal of harmony and equality with all so called advanced cultures. We should be proud of it.

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