

# **NIGERIAN ART: A SHORT HISTORY**

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*<http://www.ajol.info/index.php/cajtnms> vl.13.2.6*

## ***Abstract***

*This short review takes a historical journey into the traditional arts of Nigeria and the cultures that birthed them. It gives a nutshell description of the traditional artscape of Nigeria prior to colonialism and after. The study established that art is a universal language and mark of civilization which indicates that traditional Nigerian societies were already civilized before the Europeans came. It located nine art traditions in Nigeria that thrived in pre-colonial era and which serves as the archetypes for subsequent art developments in the country. It also observed that the growth of formal art training in post colonial Nigeria brought about the increase in art schools and the outcrop of a new breed of modern Nigerian artists who in turn were the precursors to contemporary Nigerian art of today. The study highlighted also the growth of an important aspect of art; art writing and criticism, as well as art collection in Nigeria. In conclusion, the study, notes that Nigerian traditional art, from history has always astonished the outside world and by virtue of the exploits made by it's contemporary artists has come to a position of reckon globally.*

## **Introduction**

A discourse on Nigerian Art history, reveals practices, activities and skills similar to what obtained in various parts of the inhabited world. The story of art could be simply put as the story of civilization and evolution of man. (Solso R. 2003) Most of the

materials and clues employed by ethnographers and anthropologists in reconstructing the story of the early man are largely based on the artistic objects and instruments left behind by the early man. Therefore to study the art of the political entity known as Nigeria today, one must seek first to keep abreast of the peoples that make up Nigeria and their cultural origins prior to the coming of British colonialism which signaled the beginning of the formal historic recording of the heterogeneous people that will later be brought under one umbrella called Nigeria which was done mostly for the purpose of effective governance by the British imperialists. Consequently, since Nigeria today is more of a political sovereign entity rather than a singular culturally uniform group of people, it is important to study the arts of the different people that were brought together to answer Nigeria. Since the country is made up of over 250 ethnic groups and languages. (Mustapha A. 2006)

### **Art in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

Almost all the ethnic people that make up Nigeria practice one form of art or the other. Like in most African societies, to the early Nigerians, art is inseparable from their religion. Art is seen as the agency through which their religion is given expression; it carries the essence of their religion. To buttress this, Ikwuegbu N. and Ngumah C. (2015), noted that "Igbo wood sculptures have shown that both materialistic and naturalistic frameworks are collapsed into spiritual aspect of art for life", Therefore prior to the coming of the colonial masters Nigeria was a melting pot of artistic explorations, since they practiced their traditional religion to the fullest and without hindrance. The early Nigerians used their art to interpret their world as they see it, as well as using it to concretize their cosmological views on life and esoteric ideas. They employed art in the various cultural celebrations and ceremonies and special commemorations. (Okoye O, 2014)

Because of the Pantheist nature of the traditional religion, the early Nigerian society produced a large collection of ancestral images and

gods and spirit entities, also, natural forces and elements such as wind, fire, water and land were given recognition as possessing spiritual authority and required reverence, they therefore made art objects to represent the essence and attributes of these supposed forces, (Cole M, Aniakor C. 1984, Akpomuvie O. 2013). This they did with hope of subduing or at least appeasing them and in some cases harness this power and by so doing be able to bring them under some sort of control or form some kind of pact with them. This practice is not far different from the magical meanings adduced to the cave paintings discovered in Lascaux France.

Due to the heterogeneous nature of the cultural map of Nigeria, it will take quite a handful amount of research and field study to encapsulate the numerous forms of art practiced by the various ethnic groups scattered all over Nigeria. Therefore for the purpose of this article, it will be best to stick to a selected number of artistic media generally used by the major artistic flashpoints in the country, fortunately' these flashpoints also represents in no particular order, the major cultural groups with the most extant collection of traditional works of art. A close study of the traditional art in Nigeria, shows that most of the artifacts and cultural pieces produced by the different cultural groups are largely grouped within the boundaries of these mediums: Stones, Terracotta, Woods, Bronze, Paintings and Crafts

### **Esie and Ikom Stone Sculptures:**

These two stone carving traditions represents the two major cultural centers in Nigeria known for large collection of stone carvings and stone carving tradition. Esie is a small community found in the town of Igbomina situated some 53km from Ilorin capital of Kwara state Nigeria. Though Esie is a predominantly, Yoruba community, the origin and identity of the makers of the stone sculptures have remained in obscurity crystallizing into different mythological stories by the community. (Oladumiye B, Bolakojo A. and Tolulope O. 2013). Therefore in a bid to unravel the mystery behind their

identity, ethnographers, anthropologists and archeologists have made concerted efforts in different directions in order to explain the works. The findings of many researchers have however established the following facts; the Esie stone sculpture is a composition of about a thousand soap stone sculptures depicting both human and zoomorphic features. The human figures represents people engaged in various human daily activities. Ranging from about ten centimeter to a meter, no single one of the figures look alike. The stone sculptures represents a cosmopolitan collection of different cultures with features such as sophisticated hair styles, dresses, tribal marks, necklaces and bracelets with multiple cultural traits that connects them with different ethnic groups surrounding the area (Nupe, Igala and Bariba). These features have been found to cut across other early civilizations outside Nigeria. Recorded to have flourished between 20<sup>th</sup> and 15 century AD, the Esie soap stone figures are said to depict advanced complex civilization showing early human interaction. The Esie stone works are also recognized as the largest collection of stone carving in Africa. (Ezenagu N, Olatunji T. and Iwuagwu C. 2014).

Ikom monoliths of Cross River state, represents the second yet known largest collection of a handful stone sculptures. The stone works are found in an area inhabited by the Ekoi people along the bank of Cross River. Numbering over 300, the Ikom monoliths are unique with the fact that unlike the Esie people, the Ekoi people who produced them have had a long history of being known for stone carving. (Ezenagu N. *etal* 2014) The Ikom figures are generally that of humans and are highly geometricized. Measuring between 2 to 6 ft, the appearance of beards in all the figures clearly shows that most of them are males. Scientific researches on this works dates them to around 200AD.

### **Terracotta Culture**

In Nigeria almost every cultural group possesses one form of terracotta art or the other, in fact, most parts of Nigeria have one

form of sculptural tradition or another especially around the southern part of the country. Nevertheless, the picture starts changing as one gradually moves towards the Northern part of the country. The sudden disappearance of three dimensional arts as one approaches the Northern part of Nigeria has been widely ascribed to the influence of the Islamic religion which vehemently opposes any form of three- dimension art form. In the mist of this scarcity of traditional art appears an ancient terracotta tradition surprisingly located at the heart of the Southern part of the Plateau of Northern Nigeria. The Nok culture is dated to have flourished between the years 2000BC and 300AD, a making it the oldest form of traditional art not just in Nigeria but West Africa. A cultural map of Northern Nigeria indicates that the Nok culture must have permeated, greater part of Northern Nigeria, and its spread was probably curtailed by the suppressive power of Islamic religion. It could be therefore argued that the adherents of the religion which was not originally the people's main culture, destroyed many of the cultural images and objects of the iron age civilization such as Nok.

The following are the stylistic characters of Nok Art: Complicated Coiffure, high geometricism with cylindrical heads, Perforated eyes, nose, mouth and ears, semi – circular and triangular eyes and lids and so on. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000). Besides from the Nok culture, the Ife- Terracotta works are another notable ancient traditional art emanating from South Western Nigeria. Dating as far back as 12-15 century A.D. Ife art is located at the heart of Yoruba ancestry.

### **Wood Carvings**

Scholars have for long established that Nigeria possesses the largest collection of sculptural works in sub-Saharan Africa. (Oyinloye M. 2017, Fagg W. 1971). Most of these art works are done in wood and are applied to different uses. Also this was possible due to the diversity in cultural abundance and most importantly as a result of the surplus abundance of timber made

possible by the country's location within the tropical rainforest region of Africa. Therefore almost all cultural groups in Nigeria possess one form of wood carving tradition with notable styles and characteristics particular to them; It is therefore wise to note a few of them here.

### **Ancestral figures**

Most ethnic groups in Nigeria have a tradition of carving ancestral figures. In Yoruba land, they have Ibeji figures. These figures are done to celebrate the birth or death of twins in Yoruba tradition. It is backed by the people's believe that twins are powerful spirits who are capable of bringing wealth to their families or misfortune to those who do not honor them. To the Igbos of the South Eastern Nigeria, one of the most popular and significant ancestral figures come in the form of Ikenga wood carvings. Ikenga is usually used to denote the power of a man's right hand and his accomplishments. It is represented usually by a figure holding different things such as horns, and swords. This practice of Ikenga carving has penetrated other cultures around the Igbos, such as the Edo who call it Ikengaobo and the Igala who call it Okega.

### **Masks**

Most of the cultures in Nigeria engage in masquerading and carvings of masks of different styles and forms abound. Some of the popular masks include; the Ekpo mask of Ekpo secret society of the Ibibios, and the Mgbadike mask of the Igbos.

### **Doors & Wooden-Posts**

The Yorubas have a rich tradition of carved wooden posts and carved chip doors. This style of carving was so highly developed that guild of carvers and artists was developed around it. It was through this informal system of traditional art society education that gave birth to 20<sup>th</sup> century artists like the famous Olowo of Ise who many scholars have acclaimed as the most

important Yoruba artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of his virtuosity and dexterity in the niche of carved wooden doors and house posts. Similarly, the Igbos also have a developed system of wood carving of doors and house posts. In the past, the houses of highly placed individuals and the affluent were embellished with these works. In fact, it was used to identify the extent of wealth and social importance of individuals, (Cole M. etal, 1984). The Awka guide of carvers found in Anambra State is an example of groups dedicated to such highly skilled profession. Njoku M. (2019) while quoting Nwanna (2011) noted that the Awka Carvers' gain has gone beyond the carving of chip doors and title stools but also their metal working dexterity preceeds them wherever they go.

### **Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin Bronze Traditions**

The Igbo-Ukwu bronze tradition is unarguably one of the most celebrated contributions of the Igbo race to African artistic and technological heritage. The origins of the technology and knowledge of metal working as displayed by the complicated and intricate designs employed in Igbo-Ukwu bronze findings still baffles scholars till date, Nwanna C. (2014). The Igbo-Ukwu art heritage is reputed to be the oldest bronze sculpture tradition in Sub-Saharan Africa, dated to about 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Discovered in two different compounds of two brothers, Isaiah Anozie and Isaac Anozie, it took the archeological mastery of The archeologist Thurstan Shaw to bring the rest of the artefacts buried several meters below the ground to the view of the world.

The Ancient city of Ife is widely acclaimed by the Yorubas as the birth place or the ancestral home of the Yoruba people. Many of the ancient Ife artefacts today have been traced to the dynasty of the Ife King Oba Obalufon II who is highly regarded as patron of the arts. Because of the highly monarchical system of government in most Yoruba societies, as well as their Benin neighbors especially in the early days, it was quite easy to get historical information on the arts and life of the ancient kingdoms. This is made possible probably

due to the presence of court clerks and historians that record the daily activities of the king and the kingdom. Therefore, court art was predominant in Ife kingdom with most of the themes addressed to the majesty. One notable characteristic of the Ife art is the emphasis on the size of the head as being the center of knowledge, symbol of ego and destiny and so on. The Ife artists therefore do not observe the rules of proportion in producing their figures but rather the heads usually are made a little larger than the rest of the body; sometimes in the ratio of 1:4. Another notable characteristic of the Ife art is in the use of small holes to indicate beards and hairlines of the masks and faces, and the presence of prominent scarification lines running vertically across the whole face.

The Ifes were also adept in their mastery of copper and its alloys and they produced a handful of works using the material. They also produced terracotta works. Because the Ifes strived to produce art works that pleases the Obas, great effort was put into their production to achieve striking naturalism. This naturalism is one of the most notable attributes of the Ife copper heads which have their facial features well articulated to true representation of the individuals depicted. Okoye O. (2015) notes that Ife art has been acknowledged as the most notable appearance of naturalistic art in Africa.

Of all the bronze casting traditions found in Nigeria, Benin ranks as the most popular, known world over. They are most famous for the great attention to details, masterly craftsmanship and dexterity with which they were executed. The inventiveness of the Benin civilization and art was first brought to Western public view following the infamous Punitive British inversion of the kingdom in the year 1897, which saw a great number of Benin artefacts carted away by the British soldiers as war booties. Several writers have advocated for restitution and the return of these artefacts back to the original owners, they include; Wilson S.(2013), Layiwola P.(2014), Marshal A. (2020) and an array of others. The ancient Benin people, like their Yoruba counterparts placed great importance on



the head as a chief part of the body; they therefore believe that the head is imbued with spiritual energy (ehi) deposited by the creator; Osanobua and his eldest son, Olokun. This is probably the reason why the Benins have a massive repertoire of bronze heads of their Obas dunning their royal regalia.

Just like the Ife art, the art of the Benin people was developed around the Oba and his court. The Oba was regarded as the most aesthetically aware citizen and every work of art is tailored towards his taste. He therefore, introduced aesthetic parameters and was the chief critic of styles, ensuring strict adherence to laid down technical approaches. Consequently, being the number one proponent of the Benin culture and tradition, the Oba ensures faithful representation of the people's cultural values and social idiosyncrasies in the artistic productions. Therefore, the Obas as a result of a rule enacted by the fifteenth century Oba Ewuare 1, saw to the production of portrait heads usually in bronze as a commemorative head signifying the ushering in of a new king into the "Pantheon of ancestor kings" this new head is often placed with the others at the royal ancestral altar in the Oba's palace.

Scholars have attributed the reign of Oba Ewuare 1 as being the precursor to the advancement in techniques and beginning of the production of large scale metal sculptures and commemorative heads in the Benin art corpus. Oral history holds it that the Oba commissioned the royal guild of casters and carvers to create his portrait. At the end, the casters produced an idealized portrait of the king at the prime of his life, while the carvers painstakingly captured his old age, representing the period at which the commission was made. Favouring the portrait of his younger self while showing displeasure at the faithful production by the carvers, the Oba elevated the caster's guild above the carver's guild.

The art of the Benin people, like most Nigerian cultures is not without the influence of neighbouring tribes, consequently, the Benins trace their bronze casting origin to the great Yoruba town of Ife, from where a man came and taught them different bronze

casting techniques. Also the Benin art was influenced by the naturalistic style of the Ifes.

### **Contemporary Nigerian Arts**

Following the dawn of independence in Nigeria, artistic foraging has continued to flourish, leading to the flowering of a multiplicity of contemporary styles in art production. Through the acquisition of formal Western art education, and drawing inspirations from the rich cultural motifs, Nigerian art scene has become more individualized, detribalized and universal with little common traditional traits still noticeable in the corpus of works addressed today as contemporary Nigerian Art. Bardi A. (2014) corroborates this fact when he wrote that "By late 1950s, the new African artists has made the African culture the citadel of excellence in the arts". Further down the line, the writer agreed that by 20th century, important innovations were already manifest in Nigerian art forms and the manner by which they were produced. Globalization influences and current socio-cultural and political issues have contributed to a proliferation of styles and techniques. Nevertheless, the state of contemporary art in Nigeria is in a continuous flux and remains ever vibrant, opening up more vistas for artistic expressions in a world resplendent with multiplicity of media and styles, which make many artists in Nigeria, to find it really difficult to situate the stylistic direction of their artistic creations. Hence, the struggle to achieve an enduring and more lasting identity.

Amongst them are artists who believe that African traditional art forms should be retained in order to create a continuity of African cultural heritage, of which the likes of Kunle Filani belongs; others however, have been working on a compromise; trying to evolve a synthesis that will retain the essence of traditional African art and absorb the qualities of modernity of which the Late Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko and Bruce Onabrakpeya fall into. Some others like Dele Jegede, Kolade

Oshinowo, Abiodun Olaku amongst others feel they should produce works reflecting current trends within the classical concepts and styles of modern art after its pioneer, Lt. Chief Aina Onabolu. Meanwhile, numerous artists are already bored with the traditional techniques and are metamorphosing and breaking all the rules and thinking out of the box while still proffering serious solutions in the post-modern world. This group is where the likes of El Anatsu, Bright Ugochukwu Eke, Humphrey Umezulike, Olu Amoda, Uche Onyishi, Sokari Douglas-camp, Yinka Shonibare, and Uchay Joel Chima amongst others, belong to.

The history of contemporary Nigerian art can never begin nor ever be completed without the acknowledgement of Lt. Chief Aina Onabolu (1822-1963), a self-taught artist from Ijebu- Ode, who in his quest to change the narratives, furthered his studies in Europe (St. John's Wood School of Art in the UK), because of the Eurocentric beliefs and worldviews of that era that true artists must study in Europe to show themselves approved. Nwafor O. (2019) further buttressed this point by adding that the colonialists had the notion that "...modern Nigerian and African, the art of the mid-twentieth century were weak copies of the work of European beliefs and that Africans are incapable of naturalistic representation". On his return, he "...pursued painting as the highest form of art", became popular for his naturalistic portraits of many Lagos elites and successfully spearheaded the inclusion of Art in the Nigerian curriculum in 1923 by starting on a part-time basis in some secondary schools in Lagos state. His school of thought was centered primarily on challenging the status-quo of Nigerians to being able to paint like the westerners (English academic painting). His curriculum embraced all aspects of academic art from perspective, anatomy, drawing, painting, his verisimilitude approach and all except African traditional art of which the missionaries frowned at, all in the belief that it aided heathen worship "and the ideas emanating from it were idolatrous and inspired by the devil" (Nwafor, 2019). However, Onabolu was

becoming overwhelmed with his progressive and onerous workload, so he asked the Colonial government for aide from Europe. In 1952, Kenneth C. Murray (1903-1972), a British artist and instructor, came to the rescue; this time, he encouraged “indigenous work without importation of design or technique from Europe” Okeke-Agulu (2015). This is the direct opposite of Onabolu's philosophy, as he believed that it would help them “... function effectively in their contemporary society” (Onuchukwu, 2003).

Based on educationalists like Fafunwa (1970), who opined that the root of any curriculum is based on cultural values, we would agree that Onabolu's philosophy was less effective than Murray's, who incorporated the cultural values of art for functionality and utilitarianism, other than aesthetics. Unfortunately, Murray's efforts did not last either, because the colonialists were anti-traditional towards creativity. Okeke-Agulu (2015) contends that, while Murray's style was “profoundly sympathetic to the ideology of indirect rule”, Onabolu's style was in line with the “future independent nation” and also delivered the “visual language for articulating the autonomous subjectivity of Nigerians confronted with the challenge of building a new, modern culture and nation”.

Ironically, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, our artworks which were carted away to the European museums started influencing European artists like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse in their paintings. Albeit, as the nation staggered between independence and democracy, the art struggle continued as the talented students of both Onabolu and Murray, like Akinola Lasekan, Ben Enwonwu, Justus Akeredolu, Etsu Ngbodaga and others continued their fights and successfully hinged a landmark of stronger schools of Art that has gone diaspora. Dele Jegede attributes the development of modern Nigerian art to “two distinct schools: the formal school, by which is meant art colleges that are modelled on western art institutions; and informal schools, implying art workshops of varying scope and duration, that aim at producing artists with

minimum fuss and exposure”. Both schools were influenced by these expatriates who were bent on countering the European narratives and views. Worthy of mention are these schools;

**Zaria Art School (Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Formerly, the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology, Zaria)**

The radical evolution of art in visual arts started in the late 1950s and 1960s with the Zaria rebels- Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Emmanuel odita, Jimoh Akolo, Solomon Wangboje and others. ‘The Zaria rebels’ based their philosophy on the theory of ‘Natural Synthesis’. Nwafor, 2019 opined that “*Natural synthesis embodied the creative freedom that combined African modernity, nationalist consciousness, and formalistic eclecticism*” which reflects both ‘Modernism’ and ‘African Style’ in art as popularized by its master, Lt. Ben Enwonwu, Odinigwe Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu (1917-1994) was a premier igbo Nigerian modernist painter, sculptor and pioneer. He was taught by Kenneth C. Murray. He is internationally renowned as the father of Modern Nigerian Art. His accolade precedes him.

This is the first institution in Nigeria to offer art at the degree level. It started in 1953 in Ibadan. Okeke- Agulu (2015) views this Art Society as “the first attempt to assert the relevance of contemporary art and artists in the life of the decolonizing nation”.

**Yaba Art School (Yaba College of Education, Lagos)**

They are masters of photographic realism. Photorealism is the exact representation of objects and figures with what is perceived as its natural colours. The pioneers were Agbo Folarin, Isiaka Osunde and Abayomi Barber. The later artists of the school taught by the graduates of the Zaria rebels are; Biodun Olaku, Edosa Oguigo, Lara Ige and others.

### **Nsukka School**

They are the progenitors of Igbo 'Ulism'. It involved the use of the Igbo calligraphy symbols, locally called 'Uli' in creating artworks. It screams the Igbo heritage. Ulism was popularized by the late Uche Okeke. Christopher Uchefuna Okeke (9-2016), a native of Nimo in the Anambra state of Nigeria was a contemporary Nigerian artist who with others, inaugurated the Zaria Art Society. He also introduced many courses into the Uli Art tradition in the University of Nigeria Nsukka, where he taught and also headed the department. The likes of Chika Okeke, Prof. Krydz Ikwuemesi, Ozioma Onuzulike, Ndidi Dike amongst others, are products of this school.

### **Ife School**

They are good with intellectualization of their works and they incorporate the locales' symbols, materials and motifs. The produced artists like Kunle Filani, Idowu Otun, SA Akran and the rest.

### **Auchi School**

These artists are popularly known for their expressionistic naturalism. They use sweet and vibrant colours in the painting. Their products include; Sam Ovrati, Alex Nwokolo, Olu Ajayi and others.

Other informal schools are; Mbari-Mbayo in Osogbo, Ori-Olokun in Ife, Abayomi Barber School, Aka group in Enugu, the Eye society in Zaria, Universal Studios of Art in Orile-Iganmu, Lagos, Pan-African Circle of Artists (PACA), Cultural and Creative Art Forum (CCAF) and many more. These schools somehow influence the artistic movement in a particular city, region or the country as a whole.

### **Art Writing and Criticism**

Art writing and criticism is as important as the artwork itself. Lt Prof. Adepegebe (1941-2002), a first-class degree holder in

Sculpture, delved into art writing and criticism and distinguished himself as the foremost African Art historian and critic the continent had ever produced during the early post-independence era. Prior to that, there were fewer writers in the era of the Nigerian traditional art unlike in our era where documentation has become no big deal. Visual artists, art writers, historians, critics and artist academic intellectuals like the multiple award-winning Chika Okeke-Agulu, Kunle Filani, Krydz Ikwuemesi, Clifford Nwanna, Okechukwu Nwafor, Osa-Egonwa and numerous others, have contributed a lot of reviews on artists and their artworks in exhibition catalogues, blogs, and other hard texts.

### **Art Collections**

Presently, there are private and public art collectors all over Nigeria, both online and off-line. But, the major institution charged with the collection of contemporary art in Nigeria is the National Gallery of Art (NGA). It had its first collection in 1981 in a publication titled "The Nucleus". Other private collectors are Signature gallery, Mydrim Gallery, Quintessence and many emerging others. And it is also worth to note that Yemisi Shyllon, state abstractions collector, has the largest Nigerian contemporary art collections to his credit. Then, the society that encompasses all Nigerian artists is called the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), formally created in the year 1964. Other associations are the Lagos Center of the American Society of African Culture, the Nigerian Art Council, and the Federal Society of Arts, amongst numerous emerging others.

In conclusion, Art is part of life and life in itself. Trends, times, and tides changes with it. There were times when the Westerners condemned African art as being heathen so we started copying Western art. At some point again, the Westerners like Picasso saw African art as interesting, hence, they were heavily influenced by it. Again, much contemporary art is now borrowing heavily from their traditional predecessors who were initially

condemned. These works now majorly characterized by abstractions seen by the Westerners as copies of Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani and many others who borrowed our ideas too. All in all, African Art is now globally accepted as they are seen in many museums and galleries all over the world, with notable international artists like Yinka Shonibare, El-Anatsui, and Henry Tayali making us proud. Furthermore, art festivals are now held internationally and locally to celebrate African Art like the Art biennials held in Dakar Senegal and Johannesburg in South Africa. We hope to remain steady, as generations to come would meet it as it has come to stay.

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