

Serialization in Nigerian Video-Films: A Critique of *The Crazy King* and *Audio Money*

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Abstract

The Nigeria video-film industry is reputed to be one of the largest in the world. This recognition stems from the number of films produced yearly, which are mainly in feature type, that come in the genre of drama, comedy, indigenous, general and sponsored films. The Nigerian Film and Video Censors' Board (NFVCB) is the regulatory apparatus that classifies and censors films before release to the viewing public. This paper attempts a critique of serialization in Nigerian video-films, an apparent genre of distribution. It uses the appraisal methodology to accentuate and examine the genres of *The Crazy King* (dir. Kensteve Anuka, 2017) and *Audio Money* (dir. Ezeugo C. Ezeugo, 2020). Even though a film theorist challenged the existence, this paper focuses on genre theory that not only refers to the film type or its category, but audience expectations about a film, and institutional dialogue that form genre structures that play a very vital role. It assays the serialization of the films created not by the art of filmmaking but that of the distribution gimmick of image collection anchored on the ideology of marketing. That is, accumulation of profit at the expense of the unsuspecting audience. The article argues further that most of the genre classified films are altered as serialized for distribution without censorship by the NFVCB. Hence, it is concluded that film as a commercial business will continue to have the distributors as midwives of the produced works; their duty is not just to present art but to earn profit.

Keywords: Nigerian video-film, Genre, Classification, Distribution, Serialization, Feature film

Introduction

There is no denying the fact that filmmaking encompasses the trinity of art, industry and business. As a creative business controlled on the emotional reaction of its patrons, it must be conducted on monetary realities as it entertains and educates. The video-film technology gives opportunity for the production of a choosy type of narrative (feature) that serves the commercial interests of the producers and distributors, and the viewers whose appeal dwells on the reality that it offers scenes they can easily identify with. The precipitated increase in interest about the Nigerian film industry has changed the conversation. This burgeoning attention draws on the publication in May, 2009 that Nigeria is [then] the second largest film producing country. This was contained in the report of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS) international survey on feature films (pars. 1-5). This was based on the methodology of data collection adopted by UNESCO requesting each country's national film classification organ to complete a form predicated on its own survey. The Nigerian Video film industry has consistently maintained high volume of producing feature films annually.

Serialization in films surfaced to “exploit new technologies of narrative production and distribution” (Allen 1). In films or videos, the major production is the features type done for consumers. In *The Crazy King* the genre is drama (social drama) as *Audio Money* is also of the same ilk. Genre, which is a French word, means ‘kind’, ‘category’ or ‘type’ that consists of story, plot, character and setting. Genre is a term for categorization of any form of art or entertainment as *The Crazy King* and *Audio Money* indicate that both films are of the genre of drama of the feature type. *Audio Money* is serialized into eight seasons while *The Crazy King* is in four seasons. The term ‘serial’ refers to a format, within genre; that a story is chronological and has contiguous installments in sequential issues of single linear production. Similarly, a serial is a running narrative which the audience has watched in orderly manner to follow the plot. In a nutshell, film serial consists of short subjects exhibited in consecutive order at one place. Invariably, serials are episodic in form. The fact that serial consists of short subjects or sequential issues exhibited in linear order would be analyzed if it is so with *The Crazy King* and *Audio Money*.

Theoretical Framework

Filmmaking is not a matter of treating neither themes nor about issues but about people. An issue or theme crops up only when the idea for a film happens spontaneously in the event of creating it. Genre categorises film; genre theory is an important part of how we read, watch and create film (Omoera 147). It does not just refer to the type and category of film, audience expectation about a film and institutional conversation that form genre structure also play a cardinal role. Genres are not static, they change and evolve over time and some may largely disappear. There are three aspects that genres are focused on, which include atmosphere, character and story. Properties, costumes, location (setting/scenery) and visceral experience created for the viewer make up the atmosphere, while character includes archetypes, stock and the desires and motivation of the protagonist. The considerations for story as they relate to genre include tent pole, scenes, theme and how the rhythm of characters' perspectives shifts from scene to scene.

Robert Stam posits that the genre of a film can be viewed in four ways – 'idealist', 'empirical', 'apriori' and 'social convention' methods (par 18). The idealist method examines film by predetermined standards. Empirical methods tend to identify the genre of a film by comparing it to a list of films already seen to fall within a particular genre. The use of common generic factor which are noted ahead is the apriori method. And the social convention method pinpoints the genre of a film dependent on the approved cultural accord inside society. The notion whether genre really exists or merely critics' creation were brought up by Robert Stam. He asked whether genre analysis should pinpoint at being descriptive or prescriptive. These are based on several perspectives that include story content (film), performer based, budget based (low budget blockbuster film), location (indigenous, western, sponsored, general, drama, comedy), artist status (art film), racial and cultural identity (race or cultural films), adopted literature and other media. Toeing the same line, Hayward (185) and Omoera (150) agree that many films cross into several or multiple genres.

However, Stam argued if genre actually exists or if it is a creation of critics or analysts. The recognition of a film is based on its feature; the categorization of films as they differ in types and grounded in clear different presentation. *The Crazy King*, which is of the narrative or feature type, for instance, has the features of the 'social drama'

under drama category. Genre exists in its categorization of film in order that audience and critics see the difference so as to have a perspective of the film. Genre continues to evolve because filmmakers have never stopped using technology to create films. The genre of indigenous, comedy, drama, sponsored, dramas, general and western are not foreclosed of the features or narrative types. Same can be adduced for the documentary and educational types of film. Therefore, genres in principle are infinite rather than finite taxonomy. Even though genres evolve over time, some largely fade away. This makes them ephemeral or time bound integers. Also, this intone makes genre not to be culture bound but trans-cultural. Genre, known as a category of film as in other forms of entertainment, literary works or art is based on some set of stylistic criteria which can be rhetorical aesthetic, functional or communicative. It is any type or form of communication in any mode like film with socially streamlined conventions and protocols built over time. It suffices that genre theory is important in its use to the study of films insofar as to facilitate the categorization of films. It is dependent on four factors of storyline, plot, character and setting which the director films either by the critic or audience. Genre theorist of separation and difference Statue ideal is of the belief that genre should include features that are similar so that the audience knows the category as *Audio Money* which is social drama under drama category. He echo posited that genre should also include features that are different into four as to keep its audience interested.

Antecedents of Serial Features in Nigerian Video-Film Industry

Video-film has become the prevailing medium to broadcast or circulate social features in Nigeria. Serialization of features which is prevalent in the film industry is connected to peculiar characteristics of the technology of video. The features are produced straight for video which are circulated in digital versatile device (DVD) for both *Audio Money* and *The Crazy King*. The term, 'serial', which serialization is derived from, refers to the essential quality of order of installments in sequential issues of a single period in production. They are episodic in form and simplistic in plot. Serial is an ongoing narrative that the audience has to watch in a

chronological order so as to be abreast of the plot. James Bond is a titular character with some of his antagonists appearing in more than one story of which they can be picked up and watched in any order. But in these Nigerian video-film narratives, if one were to watch in no particular order one would likely be lost following the plot. What's more, it is expected that one watches them all in order to eagerly await the next serial to find out how the character and story will develop. Even though there are several parts, there is but only one story, one plot across them. Serial feature "has established character settings and an unfolding narrative whose plots and storyline continue from one episode to another" (Hobson qtd. in Adejunmobi 31). A trend of this serialization in Nigerian video-film that is also found in most West African video-film features as observed is that:

Successive installments of most West African video film narratives since the late 1990s are also not identical to sequel as seen, for example, in America or European commercial films. In particular, the first installment of West African serialized video film narrative often ends without a clear resolution of the conflicts at the heart of the narrative. Even when there are sequels in many American and European films, each film presents a self-contained narrative with at least a partial resolution of the plot, through some of the same major character's entire feature in successive narratives. By contrast, the second installment in many Ghanaian and Nigeria video film almost seem to start in medias res, so that making sense of the second installment without having watched the first installment becomes difficult in the less skillfully done films. (Adejunmobi 53)

Overall, serialization is attached to commercialization of fictional features. "For the audience they are entertainment, for the producers and distributors they are business. The two needs are inseparable and mutually compatible" (Hobson qtd. in Adejunmobi 31). The video technology has provided the opportunity of combining both entertainment and business for the distributor to earn huge profit from the marketing of the film to a prospective audience. Low budget film productions and expeditious turnover "using formulaic and serialized narratives" (Adejunmobi 64) is the major approach in Nigerian video-film since *Living in Bondage* (1992) produced by Kenneth Nnebue, a film distributor merchant. At first, marketers were selling films on video home system (VHS) to viewers and to the rental shops. It is apropos that we state the evolution of

home video distribution which actually opened the vista for the Nigerian video-film industry as postulated by Smart-Babalola. He claimed that the Nigerian video-film, though not originated by petty traders at the Idumota Market in Lagos, was popularised and organised as a business venture by the Upper Iweka “boys” and Idumota retailers of blank VHS tapes in the late 80s. They took the risk of putting recorded dramas and popular TV programmes on VHS tapes in order to quickly sell their old stock of VHS tapes. This was the accident that began a new movement and one which has finally given voice to the artistes and cine professionals and created distinct identity for post-colonial African culture (Smart-Babalola 210).

The VHS has since been discarded for the video compact disc (VCD) and which has now been replaced too with the digital versatile device (DVD) and the internet video streaming (IVS). Actually, the incursion of IVS and DVD technology is good and bad omen for the Nigerian video-film industry. DVD has more space from four gigabytes upwards to VCD’s eighty megabytes and still takes more footage of video-film at its highest quality. However, the distribution system that has developed is still labour-intensive and mostly primitive. The DVD can take a complete serialized film and more which has made the distribution ridiculous in terms of the jacket design with different titles.

The Regulator and the Challenge of Control

On Wednesday 13 August, 2020, the Nigerian Film and Video Censors’ Board (NFVCB) led by its Executive Secretary, Alhaji Adedayo Thomas accompanied by Keppy Ekpeyong, a member of the Board of Trustees and some staff of the Board converged on Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria. This was on the occasion of the official opening of the new secretariat and award ceremony of the Film and Video Producers and Marketers Association of Nigeria (FVPMAN). The site of the secretariat is significant because of Upper Iweka “Boys” in Onitsha who ventured into retailing blank VHS tapes as far back as the 1980s that has culminated into the rise of the Nigerian Video Film industry. It is important to state that NFVCB is the regulatory body set up by Act No. 85 of 1993 to check films and videos whether of the migrant or homestead. To distribute film in Nigeria, it is required to be classified with appropriate ratings by

the NFVCB. There is a laid down process for classification of films which is that a distributor or film company must submit a film or video in a stipulated format. There are necessary steps to follow for censorship and classification process. We highlight two of them for the purpose of this study:

1. Film Submission Desk: ...where the officer in-charge assesses the materials to ensure that they are correct. Such materials submitted must include copies of the film in DVD to be previewed, four posters and jacket design, six synopses of movie and application for censorship.
2. Submission of Market Copy: Producers/licensed Distributors are mandated to submit samples of market copies of approved work to the Board to ensure conformity with the previewed work before distribution.

Under the NFVCB regulations there are the different categories of license distributors - national, regional and community. There are terms and conditions all of them must comply with. We have identified six of them: 1. A Distributor shall before distributing a film, submit to the Board a market copy of the classified and approved film for verification. 2. A distributor shall distribute only films classified and registered by the Board. 3. A film or video work must be sold or distributed without any alteration. If there is any alteration, it must be submitted for censorship.... 9. The Distributor shall cause to be kept at the premises at which the film is delivered for distribution, a register containing among other things, the title and registered length of the film.... 12. ...trailers of the film with higher classification shall not be inserted in films with lower classification. 15. The distributors shall observe the restrictions imposed by classification in respect of films to be distributed.

The above stated regulations by the NFVCB for both censorship and classification, and producers or distributors in the Nigerian film and video chain are explicit on paper. But most of the members of the FVPMAN do not comply totally with the provision of the regulations. Besides there are more unregistered producers and distributors than there are registered members. The distributors, both licensed and the unlicensed, circumvent the regulations of the NFVCB. Lack of surveillance and sanctioning capacity is the bane of effective monitoring of the films that are distributed to the

purchasing audience that are censored. First, in the manner of surveillance the NFVCB lack access to the type of essential documentation to ascertain whether marketers or distributors are running legally or are licensed. They do not have the clout to duly administer the licensing requirements in a strict way. Second, in terms of enforcing the regulations, NFVCB will succeed in regulating enforcement if it provides clear communication; have tough surveillance capability and the ability to sanction. Indeed, the value chain has made the Nigerian film industry particularly hard for effective regulation due to its structural characteristics.

Serialization Based on an Ideology of Marketing

It has been proved that video technology in Nigeria is exceptionally good for low-budget film making requiring the lowest degree of expertise of serial and formulaic features or narratives. It is on this premise that Ezeugo C. Ezeugo and Kensteve Anuka thrive by “lowering production costs and achieving quick turnover using formulaic and serialized narratives” (Adejumobi 64). This is not to say that there are no directors whose works represent a modification of the pattern with blockbuster budget serial features. Directors such as Lancelot Imasuen (*Invasion 1897*), Kunle Afolayan (*October 1*), Tunde Kelani (*Thunderbolt*) are apparently interested in achieving a certain quality of production and are not following the pattern of only seeking the lowest production costs that has lifted its trace on the most widespread narrative style found in video-films from Nigeria (Adejumobi 64).

The likes of the Kensteve Anuka (*The Crazy King*, 2017) and Ezeugo C. Ezeugo (*Audio Money*, 2020) collaborate with financial backers who reward them in monetary terms in exchange for them to “consciously, treat their ‘artistic’ work as a commercial commodity designed to sell to the largest number of potential consumers” (Adejumobi 64). It is a fact that once the director is finished with the artistic work he or she hands over the product to the producer. Thereafter, whatever the producer decides to do with the film is left to him or her. Nonetheless as Adejumobi posited, there are directors whose stock in trade is lowering production costs - low budget film that invariably shows the quality of the work both artistically, aesthetically and technically. Yet such films find their audience. This is so because the audiences are being wired to an understanding

that no matter how long evil will be perpetuated, mysteriously and eventually evil will be defeated and good triumphs. And the audience finds this compelling, plausible, believable and meaningful. Perhaps even more importantly, their morally satisfying resolutions enable viewers to forget at least temporarily their own powerlessness and the real life consequences that flow from the ineffectiveness of institutions that are supposed to dispense justice in their own world. In this regard, the frequent recourse to incredible coincidences and the supernatural *deo ex machina*, especially in Nigerian films is to be interpreted not just as a convenient narrative device betraying lack of expertise on the part of the film director (Adejunmobi 63). Moving away from that which thrills the audience to behold Nigerian films is the distributors or marketers who explore this acceptability to their utmost advantage. The Film and Video Producers and Marketers Association of Nigeria (FYPMAN) is basically driven by 'images of accumulation' precipitated by an 'ideology of marketing' and not the art of filmmaking. They are into filmmaking to earn a profit, not for the sake of art as the primary concern. Most of the distributors have the root, identity and mindset tied to independent merchant mentality. They have a strong sense of independence and personal ownership of the film being marketed. That is why they circumvent the laid down regulations of the NFVCB. Having had a film censored and classified, they contravene the rule of engagement of Article 4, which states that "a film or video work must be sold or distributed without alteration. If there is any alteration, it must be submitted to the censorship" and Article 6 of Censorship and Classification Process Necessary Steps, "...Such materials submitted must include copies of the films in DVD to be previewed, four poster and jacket designs, six synopsis of movies".

The producers and distributors alter the DVD without resubmitting to the board for another issuance of censorship as the law stipulates. While most Nigerian video-films are submitted as feature-length films and subsequently classified and censored, some of the films get serialized without recourse to the regulator. *Audio Money* is serialized into eight seasons while *The Crazy King* is in four seasons. These serializations are done without any reconsideration by the NFVCB. For if they were, the board would not have censored the film for distribution. Since each film is independent of the other and cannot be censored together, each is previewed separately with different poster and jacket design. But

the distributor lumps both films in one DVD and in one jacket. The poster designs are clouded with the action shots of the actors on the jacket. Ordinarily, the films would have remained in their censored format since the DVD can contain its full length. The distributors prefer to earn a profit by serializing the films that will entice and encourage the audience to purchase all the seasons (serial, installments, episodes or parts) of a single feature film. This way, the distributors makes more profit as he or she sells each jacket for ₦ 300.00, which is boldly printed at the top right hand corner. If it were to be in its originally previewed copy as presented to NFVCB, it will be sold at far less an amount with equally less consumer patronage. Therefore, this adoption of the television serial narration format by members of the FYPMAN is strictly for profit than for the art considering the glaring aesthetics and technical flaws of the films.

The film, *The Crazy King* would have been aptly titled “The Vengeful King.” The storyline is about vengeance. Zanza is considered by the elders and chiefs of the community as a loafer who is involved in every vice carried out in the community. The piece of land left for him by his father is also forcefully collected and sold off by the elders. Zanza stays away from joining a gang of armed robbers led by Bonga. Chika, a maiden believes in his innocence and defends him when accused. She loves him, but her father who is one of the elders does not condone such a relationship and does everything to stop it. Zanza eventually leaves the community. Chief Nzekwe plots to be crowned the next Igwe and his daughter, Ije dreams and acts being a princess. Her brother Jango is a thief and a never-good doer. The gods declare that Zanza is the Igwe in-waiting to be crowned. He returns to the community with Bonga is his gun-conveying henchman and assumes the office of Igwe without coronation. Driving around in an open pick-up van, he terrorizes the land. He takes revenge on all those who had wronged and humiliated him.

The four episodes of serialization lack cliff hanger endings. Monaco defines serial as “a continuing story told in episode, each of which a specific place in the narrative has, a serial has a definite beginning, middle and an end” (452). For the fact that *The Crazy King* is a feature length film, the director treats his artistic product as a commercial commodity than resort to definite endings of the serial narratives by creating a cliff hanger of one ‘season’ to link to

the next 'season'. Each episode as season is loose that leaves the plot in a state of in coordination. Notwithstanding this technical and aesthetic flaw, the naïve audience falls prey "in the hands of the speculative and voracious producer/marketers whose main interest is 'money', 'profit' and exploitative business" (Adedokun 229). Fundamentally, the function of the film is to entertain, to be educated. It is a fact that films are made to be profitable and "if you enhance the entertainment value of a film, you bring more people to the box-office, and add to the net revenue earned by the movie" (Brian Grazer qtd. in Afolabi 8). Film is entertainment and audiences always buy a ticket or DVD to watch a film and be entertained but when the fundamental, the function of a film is to entertain to be educated. It's a fact that films are made to be profitable and "if you enhance the entertainment value of a film, you bring more people to the box-office, and add to the next revenue earned by the movie" (Brain Grazer qtd in Afolabi 8). Film is entertainment and audience always buys a ticket DVD to watch a film and be entertained. But when entertainment is manipulated by technology for commercial gain, it loses its potency of healing, comforting, edifying and directing the audience only offering escapism from all his problems. That is what the audience of *Audio Money* (2020) wants. He buys the film just to escape.

Nneka (Chacha Eke Faani), a stark illiterate, lives in the village with her sister Chidinma (Ruth Eze) as orphans doing odd jobs of clearing weeds from farms to earn a living. She goes to any length to get their wages from anybody who tries to shortchange them after a work done. Annabel (Mary Igwe) is their only friend whose mother's desire is to see her get married and settle down. Nneka and Chidinma will not condescend low to make money by being loose with men as Annabel wants all of them to do. Nneka by chance meets Mac Don (Zubby Michael) in an unusual circumstance. While Nneka is in awe of Mac Don, he in turn is fascinated with her and admires her courage. He gives her lots of money and invites her to join him for a drink at the village pub. Nneka takes Annabel and Chidinma along. Chidinma is not comfortable with Mac Don and his proposal that they come over to the city and he will make them rich. Nneka and Annabel go the whole hog of initiation to become members of the secret cult who must not allow a strand of hair grow on their head but only allowed to use wigs. They become very

rich beyond their dreams carrying out nefarious activities in clandestine manner.

No doubt, the distributor is the nurse-midwife of the producer's yield. It is the distributor who determines the mode which a film will be distributed. *Audio Money* (2020) an NFVCB censored and classified rated "18" feature length film released in February is distributed in eight seasons of 1 & 2, 3 & 4, 5 & 6 and 7 & 8. In season 1, the opening credit runs in 1 min. 15 sec. The dramatic action runs in 33 mins. 15sec. Season1 ends with the scene of Mac Don's visit to Chief Koja's mansion. We see them discussing a business deal and the scene fades out. Season 2 opens without credit running straight into dramatic action with two henchmen manning the door room from where Chief Koja and Mac Don come out and walk to the car driving away. The transition of the serial, i.e., season 1 to season 2 does not show a definite cliff hanger ending. No movement or distinct dialogue to indicate a cliff hanger ending in school. The scene fades out without a definite precision. The audience is only reconnected to the film with Henchmen at a door Mac Don and Chief Koja come out from. If this were to be a continuation of Season1 then it was loosely done. In the ending of season 2, Nneka and Mac Don meet by chance. When they had both introduced themselves to each other and Nneka is showing her excitement at meeting Mac Don, the scene ends abruptly. There is no cliff hanger ending. Season 3 opens at Annabel's house showing her mother lamenting over her daughter's nonchalant attitude towards marriage.

The audience is thrown into a state of confusion with the replay of the scene that ends season 2 as the succeeding scene following the opening scene of season 3. In the ending part of season 2 we see Nneka and Annabel walking on a road when a car driving on full speed passes them almost running them over. They throw curses at the driver. How both of them part ways the audience is not shown only to see Emeka coming the way of Nneka who ask him after his father. Emeka rudely replies her and as she turns to look behind her that is when the audience notices that Annabel is not following her. She slaps Emeka who insults her and turns running away. She is on his heels until they come upon Mac Don and his people looking over a land. She is restrained from catching Emeka who is hiding behind Mac Don. He eventually escapes leaving Nneka lashing out

at Mac Don for aiding Emeka's escape. Mac Don is fascinated by her display of guts. Nneka is over the board with respect for Mac Don as he introduces himself to her. He then invites her for a drink at the local pub and gives her a bundle of ₦ 1000 notes.

This repeat rather than help the flow of the storyline ends up confusing the viewer. Even if the scene was a trailer inserted in the DVD as it scrolls as an advertisement display of 'watch out for season 3 & 4, it never shows its distinction in season 2. Let us even assume that the scene was a trailer of serial 3 & 4, it contravenes the NFVCB regulation No.4. "A film or video work must be sold or distributed without alteration. If there is any alteration, it must be resubmitted for censorship." This is clearly an alteration as it was inserted as the continuation of the unfolding story than being the trailer it ought to be. A serial is an ongoing chronology which the audience watches in the precise setup so as to follow the plot. The use of formulaic and serialized narratives in *Audio Money* and *The Crazy King* is purely to achieve quick turnover for the distributor is only driven by the profit-making pile up base on the tenet of marketing than for the art of filmmaking. The genre theory emphasizes that a serial film is a movie consisting of a serial of short themes revealed in sequential order. A cliff hanger as a key part of serialization is not plausibly and convincingly used in most Nigerian video-films by the members of FVPMAN. Their duty is not to present art (entertainment) but to recoup their investments either as executive producers or distributors. Such serial video-films do not win awards at film festivals due to not meeting up the standard format for submission which is straight feature lengths film.

Conclusion

Serializations in Nigerian video-films mostly do not have close-ended storyline to make it easy for the audience to deduce the next serial using cliff hangers. These serializations do not have story arcs but loosely cut episodes. It is pertinent to know that the producers and distributors determine the marketing distribution of the films. They design and print the posters and jackets. Lumping of two or more films on one DVD and in one jacket and stipulating a fixed amount of ₦ 300 per copy multiply by at least 100,000 buyers' amounts to ₦ 30,000,000! We know that the films are all low budget production costs. The marketer-distributors make more profit than the director,

cast and crew after recouping this investment. It is this mindset of earning profit that drives the distributors than the art of filmmaking. And the video technology provides him or her enabling instrument to earn a profit. Unfortunately, these serialized films are drawbacks for making major awards events at both local and international levels. This is because of the demand of a submission of an atypical of a feature-length film in order to gain recognition. Neither can the films in their serialization format be previewed or screened in cinemas across the country. The cinema-going audience cannot afford returning to the cinema to follow the storyline to its conclusion. Even the satellite or cable television stations that air films do not touch such films. It is better that serialized films have found their audience who have DVD players at home and can only buy a copy to watch. These audiences are a breed of film viewers who keep the DVDs to watch over and over. They are the reason for the serialization of films because they are readily available market for distributors.

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