

A HISTORY OF KOLA NUT USAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF DIPLOMACY IN IGBOLAND, SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

Kola nut is an important tree crop in Igboland. Yam, which was regarded as the king of crops by Igbo people in the pre-colonial era, was the only crop arguably more esteemed than Kola nut in south-eastern Nigeria. The socio-cultural relevance of Kola nut in Igboland transcends the fact that the people used it for almost all activities such as marriage, burial, ritual, cleansing, widowhood rites and social reengineering. It featured prominently in pre-colonial Igbo diplomatic practice. Kola nut is central to peace-building and friendship building processes in Igboland. It is against this backdrop that this study examines the history of Kola nut usage in Igboland in the context of diplomacy. Using the historical research methodology, the study corroborates primary and secondary materials to achieve its objective. To this end, data gotten from observations, oral interviews, books, journal articles and the internet are analysed. The findings of the qualitative study showed that to a large extent whoever brought Kola nut in pre-colonial Igboland arguably brought life and peace. Thus, it justifies Igbo indigenous epistemologies on Kola nut usage that holds that “He who brings Kola brings life”; and “He who brings Kola brings peace”. Kola diplomacy in Igboland is an under-explored frontier of diplomatic history that needs to be incorporated into mainstream texts on global diplomacy. This study concludes that, the knowledge of how negotiation, bargaining, mediation, arbitration and conciliation as tools of diplomacy were facilitated by Kola nut usage in pre-colonial Igboland is significant in modern diplomatic conduct. Diplomacy is sterile without its aids then and now.

Keywords: Kola nut, Igboland, Diplomacy, Southeast, Nigeria

Introduction

Kola nut is a tree crop with high socio-cultural and diplomatic relevance in Igboland. Its worth to the people was only eclipsed by Yam (*Ji*), the traditionally acclaimed king of crops that only men were allowed to cultivate in pre-colonial southeast Nigeria. The high social premium kola nut enjoyed in Igboland is evident in the popular Igbo adage that holds that “*Onye wetalo oji weteli ndu*” meaning “He who brings Kola nut brings life”.

The proverbial saying demonstrates the diplomatic utility of Kola nut in the preservation of human life. In Igbo indigenous epistemology, the association and equation of Kola nut with human life in the psychology of the people attests to more than its medicinal and therapeutic value. Life in Igboland is held in high esteem as the greatest possession of humanoids. It makes it possible for the people to exist, build families, communities and the Igbo nation. It also makes it possible for the people to develop their own culture, traditions, and other social norms over time and space. Hence, in Igboland like in all societies, life is the pivot around which everything revolved. Therefore, the preservation of life in Igbo pre-colonial societies required the usage of highly revered items. Life in Igboland from earliest times was the most sacred items used in the preservation of life when it is lost in battle and offered through symbols as Kola nut. It is against this backdrop that this study interrogates Kola nut as an insignia of diplomacy and life sustenance in Igboland.

The Igbo world view of Kola nut as a symbolism for life is useful for expanding the frontiers of existing knowledge of modern diplomatic practice. It also attests to the diverse utility and central roles Kola nut plays in Igboland. The product features prominently in family gatherings, social events, ceremonies, healing process, and rituals, and in the display of hospitality among the Igbo. In fact, it is in the utility of Kola nut in the Igbo indigenous hospitality sector, inter-personal and inter-communal relations that the proverbs quoted earlier derived its existence. Consequently, in pre-colonial Igboland peace-building, settlement of inter-communal disputes, engendering of social justice and cohesion, appeasement of the elders, the deities, and the formation of marriage alliances and establishment of friendship rapprochement were essentially tied to this usage of Kola nut.

Visitors to and guests in Igbo homes are traditionally expected to present their host with Kola nuts. When this is done, it is a sign of goodwill, love and best wishes from the visitor to his host. The presentation of Kola implies that the visitor or guest is wishing the host long life and prosperity; and the places the host under obligation to reciprocate the gesture. The family head (*Umunna*) also presents Kola nuts to the visitor; which signifies that the visitor is welcome and safe in his home. In this wise, Kola nut is used as an assurance or a promise that while in the home of the host no evil will befall the visitor. Therefore, Kola nut usage in Igboland is connection to human life and security activates an informal, undeclared and unwritten covenant or agreement between householders and their guest in Igboland over time and space. This traditional Kola nut diplomacy means that the guest means to harm to his host; and that the host has no ulterior motives towards his guests. Hence, Kola nut in Igbo indigenous epistemology is used to establish good faith, trust and friendship. It is against this backdrop that this study

examines a history of Kola nut usage in Igboland. It interrogates some of the dimensions of the utility of Kola nut in Nigeria's southeast over time and space. To achieve this objective, the study would interrogate the land, origin and settlement pattern of Igbo people, as well as gerontocracy in Igboland in the context of Kola nut usage. The aim of this study is to spotlight Kola nut diplomacy in pre-colonial Igboland as part of the people's novel contribution to evolution of modern diplomacy.

Environment and Human Geography of Southeast Nigeria

Southeast Nigeria is geographically home to the Igbo peoples. Their population is approximately 4.5 million and this makes them approximately 3.5% of the Nigerian population and the third largest ethnic group. They are mainly found in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states that serve as are home to the ethnic group in Nigeria. Present day Igboland is bordered by Cross River to the east, the Niger River to the west, the Imo River to the south, and the Anambra River to the north. It has a total territorial span of about 25,000 square miles. The topography of the region is most hilly, but there are however a few low-lying areas along large rivers. The climatic condition of Igboland is tropical in nature. This makes the landscape unique a rainforest economic zone. Igboland enjoys regular seasonal rainfalls that are usually heavy. The environment and climate of the southeast from the pre-colonial times play important roles in shaping the settlement pattern of the people and their economic activity. The forest ecosystem of Igboland is made up of a wide range of plants, including tropical hardwoods, oil palms, rubber trees, and Kola nuts that are cultivatable in region due to its fertile nature. These forest resources over time and space have been partly serving as the catalyst and drivers of economic growth and development in the southeast.¹

On this environment, the Igbo people began their political development and state building efforts in pre-colonial Nigeria as anacephalous (that is, without a centralised government) and a fragmented society. And the highly disjointed nature of early Igbo societies and politics posed one of the foremost problems to the historical reconstruction of the past of the people as a collective. Consequently, the early historiography of Igbo people was plagued with irrational romanticism and sterile scepticism. These two factors were the bane of Igbo historiographical works until the last few decades when some people were inspired by the abundance of superficial cultural similarities between the Igbo people, ancient Egyptians, and the Hebrews began claiming that the Igbo speaking peoples of southern Nigeria descended from either Egypt or Israel. G.T. Baden was one of the major proponents of the view that the Igbo descended from Israel because of the overwhelming similarity between the Jewish culture and the Igbo culture. He claims that the Igbo's intense religiosity, practice of circumcision, and particular linguistic characteristics point

to a close resemblance between their culture and some of the principles and customs of the Levitical code.² As for M.D.W. Jeffreys, the dual organisational structure of Igbo social stratification which is similar to that of ancient informed his view that that the Igbo originated in Egypt.³ Subsequently, Igbo scholars have wholly or partly subscribed to either views or both in their explanation of Igbo historical origin.

Igbo origin in the historiography of Nigerian peoples is arguably one of the most problematic. Understandably, it has almost become normal practice for scholars, in their writing, to treat Igbo people as if they did not exist before the sixteenth century. Their history and origin is usually documented on the margins of that mega state in southern Nigeria such as the Benin Kingdom. A.E. Afigbo's the Benin mirage best explains this problem in Nigerian historiography. Afigbo observed that:

Small-scale societies adjoining ancient kingdoms or empires like Benin were considered, without much argument, as dependencies of those empires, or in any case the political systems of such small scale societies were regarded as political derivations from the systems of the said empires. For the same reasons the history of these empires, became also the history of the small scale Societies on their frontiers, or at least the major source for explaining every important aspect of the life of those societies – the origins and migrations of their people, their political stricture and dynamics, their economic systems, their art, dance and overall cultural heritage.⁴

It along this line that, it has been claimed that the term "Igbo" originally referred to slaves, indicating that the Igbo were unknown to or unnamed by their neighbors prior to their widespread enslavement after the 16th century. To this end, the Aro civilization that predated the sixteenth century has given the Hamitic hypothesis colouration. In some quarters, the Aro have been conceived as non-Igbo who descended from Jukun or Kwararafa. And this stereotypical treatment of the Igbo was extended to the *Nri* people of Igboland, that have described as the carriers of Hamitic culture.⁵ This presupposes that the Igbo people are not Igbo in the truest sense nor Africans because Igbo were not in existence in Nigeria during the period.

Gerontocracy and Kola nut Usage in Igboland

The settlement pattern and social organization of south-eastern communities in pre-colonial Nigeria was rural and this informed the practice of gerontocracy. This means that the people live in small communities known as hamlets presided over by the elders. And the family was the basic unit of this social structure preferably called the *Umunna*. Encyclopaedia Britannica observed that in the southeast the settlement of the people consist dispersed homestead called compound. And each compound was headed by the

oldest man in the family made up of people closely related by blood. The compound expanded to become a village over time.⁶ Headship in the village in Igboland flowed from the bottom, that is, the family. The family head, the *Okpara*, in conjunction with other family heads made up the Council of Elders that is the highest political authority in the village. They met periodically as the need arises to discuss issues of general importance to the village. Village administration in Igboland was by consent. This implies that whenever the Council of Elders meet, decisions are only arrived at through consensus of opinion. And after decisions have been reached on a matter, family heads (*Okpara*) have the duty to take the decision back home to their families and interpret them to family members and enforce compliance. Hence, in each of the *Umunna*, the *Okpara* in the respective compound played the role of the legislature, judiciary and executive. However, what is germane about the rule of elders in Igboland is that, it paved the way for the incorporation of Kolanut into almost all aspects of Igbo political and social life.

Be it at the family level, community level made up by groups of compounds, and village level, the elders are presented with and first break Kola nut before family meetings, community dialogue and village meeting can begin. The settlement pattern of the Igbo as sparsely populated hamlets informed the development of gerontocracy in the absence of a centralised monarch. It was gerontocracy that enshrined the use of Kola nuts into social psychology of the Igbo people. The elders use the Kola nut for prayer, communication with the ancestors, deities and for communal cleansing. The elders also use Kola nuts to summon plaintiffs to appear before the *Umunna* for trial and dispute resolution. Gerontocracy in Igboland further ensured that there was hierarchy in the breaking and eating of Kola nuts. Traditionally, the oldest person in gathering is empowered to break and pray over Kola nut for any ceremonial use. However, the eldest person in a gathering where Kola nut is served can decide to waive his traditional responsibility and delegate the breaking of Kola nut to a younger person. After the breaking of the Kola nut, the elders in Igboland were served first starting with the eldest. However, based on the “*Aka Oji*” tradition⁷ in Igboland, the person presenting the Kola nut to the elders is expected to be the first person to eat from it. This means that after the oldest elder is served, he in turn presents the Kola nut to man who has used the Kola to summon the elders. This is done to signify good faith and pure motive. Therefore, it is safe to contend that under the gerontocracy, Kola nuts had a high appeasement value to the elders and this increases its utility as an instrument of diplomacy in pre-colonial Igboland.

Kola Diplomacy in Igboland: Beyond Appeasement and Intercession

Diplomacy, in human and international relations, is the management of relations through the use of accredited representatives. It is the application of tact and intelligence in the

conduct of the affairs of a society; and the use of objects and tools that can enhance and pave the way for peace-building. In diplomatic study, the usage of diplomatic tools such as negotiation, bargaining, compromise, arbitration, mediation, conciliation, third party interventionism, and the avoidance strategy have been adequately explored. But the usage of objects and commodities such as Kola nut in pre-literate societies as aids to diplomacy human and inter-communal relations has been under-explored. Over time and space, the success of diplomacy is not hinged on the ability of mediators to broker agreements and peaceful resolutions based on compromise alone; it is fundamentally tied to pre-diplomatic activities and actions that pave the way for, and enhance the diplomatic meeting. Generally, while issues such as the venue and location of a diplomatic meeting, prevailing cultural settings and norms in the host environment, observance of etiquettes, sitting arrangements, and time and seasons were critical factors that either made or marred diplomacy; Kola nut was the oil with which the yam of diplomacy was eaten in Igboland. In pre-colonial Benin Kingdom, we find a suitable example of how time and season, as aid to diplomacy, hindered diplomacy. During the period, the British delegate led by Consul Phillips could not meet with Oba Ovonramwen of Benin to discuss the blockade on trade because the British diplomatic party was visiting Benin at the wrong time. They came at a time when the Kingdom was observing a traditional cleansing ceremony during which visitors are not allowed to see the King. The disregard of the role of time and season in shaping diplomatic outcomes led to Benin massacre of the British delegates and the Anglo-Benin war of 1897.

Hence, this study seeks to expand the frontiers of existing knowledge on aid to diplomacy in pre-colonial Nigeria by interrogating what it terms as Kola nut diplomacy in Igboland. It spotlights Kola nut as factor significantly determined the outcome of socio-cultural and diplomatic engagements in pre-colonial South-eastern Nigeria. When and where Kola nut is presented, there was seamless human interactions and engagements and vice versa. It is a truism that during the period, Kola nut was majorly cultivated in Nigeria's Western region that is Yoruba land; however, its consumption and usage was widespread. In Northern Nigeria (Hausa land), Kola nut was generally consumed as a snack; while in South-eastern Nigeria (Igboland) Kola nut meant more to the people than food. The sociology of the people and their traditional peace and security building systems were completely tied to Kola nut. The Igbo peoples of Southern Nigeria believed that the Kola nut tree was the first tree on earth which makes the fruit it produces to be the first on the planet. The Kola tree is one of the genus trees native to the tropical rainforests of Africa.⁸ Aloysius Dim observed that the Igbo people so much value Kola that they have started cultivating their own native Kola called "*Oji Igbo*".⁹ and although it uses varies from one African society to another, in Igbo land Kola nut is highly revered. "*Cola acuminata*" is

the scientific name of the fruit the Igbo call “*oji*”.¹⁰ In south-eastern Nigeria, in addition seeing Kola nut as life the Igbo people also see Kola nut as a symbolism for peace. Therefore, Igbo indigenous epistemology also holds that “*onye wetere oji, wetere udo*” which means “he who brings Kola brings peace”. This world view also engendered the diplomatic usage of Kola nut in Igboland. This implies that Kola was a pivotal aid to diplomacy that was central to its success or failure.

Kola diplomacy in pre-colonial Igboland, that is Kola nut as an aid to diplomacy, was beyond appeasement of humans and spirits, and the making of intercessions with the ancestors; it was essentially about restoration of friendship, peaceful relations and security of lives and properties. The intrinsic value of Kola beyond its edibility in Igboland was what informed its social status. Kola nut’s social status in Igboland is usually determined by the number of cotyledons it has. Kola nut with one cotyledon in Igbo land is called “*oji ogbu*” (dumb Kola). This type of Kola nut is rejected by Igbo elders who see it as “*oji mmuo*”, that is, “Kola nut of the spirits” that is not to be consumed by man. Kola nut with two cotyledons is equally regarded as a dumb Kola that is not to be eaten. Kola nut with three cotyledons is called “*oji ike*” or “*oji ikenga*”, that is, “Kola of the brave” which only warriors, brave men, consecrated or ordained persons can eat. However, in the context of diplomacy it is the Kola nut with four cotyledons called “*oji udo nangozi*” meaning “Kola nut of peace and blessing” that is useful to the elders.¹¹ Kola with five cotyledons is called “*oji ubara mmadu, omumuna ukwuoma*” meaning “Kola of procreation, protection and good luck”; while the Kola nut with six cotyledons is called “*oji ndi mmuo nan di mmadu jirigbaa ndu*” meaning “Kola of communion with the ancestors”.¹² The classifications of Kola in Igboland as Kola for the spirits and for peace speaks volume of the utility of Kola in the region for appeasement and intercession. Kola nut is used for ceremonial cleansing of the land to appease the spirits and seek their blessings and at the same time Kola nut is also used to engender peace inter-personal relations in Igbo land. Going forward, this study would now interrogate the usage of Kola nut in the southeast beyond appeasement and intercession. It would spotlight the usage of Kola nut in family bonding and peace management within the community and between communities and villages.

Kola nut and Peace-Building in Igboland

Kola diplomacy in Igboland was used for social bonding, peace-building, forming marriage ties, and conflict resolution. Peace is a state of calm and tranquility that is priceless in all society. It is not essentially the absence of conflict, because conflict is inherent in all human societies. It is configured into the DNA of societies by the very fact that the builders of these societies are imperfect human that are conflictual in nature. Furthermore, members of the Igbo society at any point in time have different interests and

preferences. This is in addition to the fact that resources such as farm lands, economic trees, and wealth are scarce, that is, they are not evenly distributed. Thus, there is natural tendency for people to struggle over the available limited resources which breeds conflict whenever interest clash. Consequently, in pre-colonial Igbo land clashes over farm land are one of the most common discords. Land dispute as the greatest threat to peace ensured that the doors of diplomacy in Igbo land were never closed. The *Umunna* and the Council of Elders always met to resolve one dispute or the other. At the inter-communal level, border disputes and ownership of lands at the borderland were also prominent discords that were met with diplomacy. It is against this backdrop that Kola nut played a key role in peace management in Igboland.

When interests clash over land among other properties, before the situation deteriorates in total breakdown of law and order, violence, Kola nut is used to summon the plaintiff. The defendant approaches the elders and present them with a Kola of summon and then states his case before the elders. After the activation of this diplomatic process, the elders act promptly to invite the plaintiff to appear before them. While responding to the invite of the elders the offender is not expected to come along or present Kola nut to the elders, as this would negate tradition and appear to be a bribe. However, Lazarus Ahamefuna observed that without Kola nut the conflict resolution process cannot officially begin.¹³ this therefore implies that, the defendant is the one who was traditionally required to provide the Kola nuts that will be used during the proceedings of the meeting. But after the position of the plaintiff has been heard and his interest in the case established; and proceedings concluded the plaintiff was also traditionally expected to present Kola nuts to the elders.¹⁴ During the indigenous judicial proceedings, the elders weigh in on the matter and guided by the customs and traditions of Igbo land to ensure not only speedy resolution of the dispute but the dispensation of justice as well. This explains why some measure of appreciation is expected from the parties involved at the end of the case. Hence, when the plaintiff later comes to give the elders Kola at the end of the hearing, this is to show appreciation and say “*Imela*”, that is, thank you for the just way the matter was handled.

More so, in cases where there is need to appeal the decision of the elder through the consultation of the deities, Kola nut is heavily involved. The Chief Priests normally demands Kola from Igbo people patronizing the shrine whether it was for a fresh case or to appeal an existing decision (old case). Thus, Kola diplomacy in Igbo land also serves to promote peaceful relations between the human realm and the spirit realm. “*Eze mmuo*”, as the chief priests are traditionally called are regarded as the eyes and ears of the deities. And when they speak their words are regarded as the voice of the gods. Under these circumstances, whatever pronouncement the chief priest makes on a matter is usually

regarded as final. Therefore, it can be said the shrine of *Eze mmuo* serves as the Court of Appeal and Supreme Court at the same time. What is important here is the fact that arbitration as a tool of diplomacy in pre-colonial Igbo land was an established peace management and conflict resolution mechanisms. Arbitration diplomacy therefore in Igboland whether it was for promoting reconciliation between man and man or man and the gods (spirits) was rooted in Kola nut. Kola nuts are the diplomatic commodities that are in most cases used to get the engine of arbitration started and end the arbitration process.

Kola nut Diplomacy and Marriage in Igbo land

Marriage in Igboland as in elsewhere is used to cement and solidify the bond of friendship between a man and a woman; and between the husband's family members and the wife's family members. It was social institution in Igboland that is heavily diplomatic. The process involves a lot of consultations, negotiations and bargaining in Igboland. This is because the bride price in Igbo communities is not static nor cast in iron. Consequently, the payment of the bride price "*Ego Nwanyi*" involves a lot of negotiations before a final agreement can be reached on the fixed amount. However, all those processes are rooted in Kola nut usage. Without Kola nuts there can be neither introduction nor marriage in Igboland. In fact, it is safe to say that marriage in the southeast starts with the observation of Kola diplomacy. Eugene Uzor observed that Kola nut is the first item that a would-be husband and family must present first to the family of the woman they intend to marry. And the family of the woman is traditionally required to offer the prospective groom and his family Kola nut in return as a show of acceptance.¹⁵ Implicit in this practice, is the fact that Kola nut is the medium of communication used to express marriage interest and intent; and to accept and give consent to marriage proposals in Igboland.

Aloysius Dim observed that Kola nut is so important to the Igbo people that it is featured in all ceremonies and activities of the people.¹⁶ At the domestic level, it demanded from all visitors and in-laws as a means of expressing and cementing friendship and peace; and for the offering of prayers to seeking the blessing¹⁷ of the Supreme being, *Chukwu Abiama*. Therefore, after the marriage ceremony is over Kola nut still plays a vital role in the sustenance of the peace established on the wedding day. The bond that is created through the use of Kola nut is expected to last for a lifetime. Understandably, during burial ceremonies in-laws are traditionally expected to be on ground. And when they are coming, they are expected to come along with Kola nuts; and their host would also welcome them with Kola nut. In this regard, the use of Kola nut in Igboland is cyclical and reciprocal. It is a diplomatic practice that does not end once a bond has been created through it at any point in time.

Kola nut as a Symbolism of Peace and Security in Igboland

Over time and space, mankind across societies had developed many symbolisms to connote peace and security. Different religious groups, political and cultural organisations, and social movements have invented different symbols to communicate peace, harmony and reconciliation.¹⁸ Some of them are the olive branch, whose use in Western civilization to symbolize peace dates back to the 5th century Greeks. It olive branch was believed by the Greeks to have the power to drive away evil; and to be one of the attributes of the Greek god of peace *Eirene*. There is also the dove that has been used to symbolise peace for thousands of years; the Mistletoe that was considered to be a sacred plant has also been used to symbolize peace and love. Politically, the rainbow has also been used by societies such as South Africa to symbolize peace and unity; a whit flag has also been used to connote peace in political context as well as a broken rifle. Furthermore, white poppy, the pax cultura emblem, the ‘V’ hand sign, and the paper crane among others are symbolisms of peace.¹⁹

However, in pre-colonial African societies peace and friendship signs also included the use of green leafs, white fowl, *ukor*²⁰ (traditional emissaries in Igboland sent to invite neighbouring communities for dialogue in times misunderstanding), and Kola nut. The focus of the study here is to highlight Kola nut as a peace symbolism in Igboland. In inter-personal and inter-communal relations in Igboland, Kola nut served as an important peace sign that cannot be overemphasized. Family members, friends, guests, visitors and strangers are traditional expected to present Kola nut to their host; and the host to their guest as a sign of peace and security. It is in this regard that the Igbo people strongly believes that “He who brings Kola, bring life”. In this diplomatic context, Kola nut serve as an assurance that all is well and that the visitor is visiting with a good intention; and the strangers and guests can feel safe in the home of whoever is hosting them. The implication of this traditional overture and gesture is the fact in the event that Kola nut was not presented, accepted and offered in return the peace and security of visitors, guests and strangers cannot be guaranteed. This is arguably so in pre-colonial Igbo communities such as *Isi-Alangwa* and *Abiriba* that was reputed for killing and eating strangers in the past. It follows that in such societies Kola gives life or preserves the life of the person offering it when it has been accepted and eaten by a tribal chief of the indigenous community or the member of that community (family head) hosting him. And the gesture is reciprocated by the chief or host (family head). The eating of the Kola nut of strangers and visitors arguably confers on the eater the responsibility to protect him and ensure their safety while in the host community or the home of a family head.

Conclusion

Kola nut is an important crop in Igbo society. Yam, which the Igbo people regard as the King of crop, is the only commodity that was arguably more esteemed than it in southeast Nigeria. The socio-cultural relevance of Kola nut in Igboland transcend the fact that the people use it for almost all activities such as marriage, burial, ritual, cleansing and widowhood rites among others; its usage was highly diplomatic. It was central to peace-building and friendship building processes in Igboland. Therefore, findings in this study showed that to a large extent whoever brought Kola nut in the region arguably brought life and peace. The findings of this study uphold Igbo indigenous epistemology and demonstrate the contribution of the Igbo people to the practice of diplomacy. Kola diplomacy in Igboland is a new frontier in diplomatic studies that needs to be explored and incorporated into mainstream texts on global diplomacy. This study concludes that, the knowledge of how the tools of diplomacy work is incomplete without the knowledge of how commodities such as kola nut in pre-colonial Igboland aid their success.

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