

## **JUDE ONEBUNNE'S CONCEPT OF BEING AS BELONGINGNESS**

**A Viable Philosophical Option for Curbing Individualism  
of the 21st Century Africans**

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### **Abstract**

In the chequered history of man, Philosophical traditions are replete with many conceptual appreciation of being. Western philosophical tradition claimed to be very premier in this regard. However, African philosophy as a result of African philosophical tradition has entertained many ideas and views with regard to proper appreciation of being. Onebunne coming from African philosophical tradition in his thesis appreciated being as belongingness. For being cannot but belong in one way or the other. This is to say that belongingness remains an African metaphysics to be. This work is as a result of Jude Onebunne's doctorate thesis and later a Metaphysical text, titled: *Being as Belongingness: Expanding the Hermeneutics of African Metaphysics of To Be*. Using the method of critical analysis, the researcher finds out that being and belongingness remains a critical option for curbing individualism in continental African 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Philosophical tradition, being, belongingness, individualism,

### **Introduction**

There can be no actually existing society without members. Only rational and free beings can form a society, since it is a union based on agreement about goals. There must be at least two; otherwise there can be no togetherness or commonness of interests and activities. Society is not a physical thing. The only thing physical about it is the members and their actions (Gonsalves, 1986: 310). Human beings include souls waiting to be born, those alive now in the world, and those who have died. They make up the human community (Fuller, 1986:18). Pantaleon believes that the Igbo world into which a child is born crying *abatala m ya* (I have come into it) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny (1995:344). Without any choice of its own, with neither interrogations nor dialogue, the child is born into the Igbo world. Even as the baby sleeps in its cradle, it already has its being, performance and *akaraka* (destiny) partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo world (Iroegbu, 1995:345). The communal individuality of the Igbo is expressed in proverbs such as, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akparaya* (If a

lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs. Premised on the above ladder, Onebunne sees being not just as *uwa* as in the case of Iroegbu but undeniably affirms that it is belongingness. Thus, both being's identity and fundamental quality in understanding being are all embedded in his notion of being as 'belongingness' (Onebunne, 2019:2). With his view, this work aims to curb the individualistic *cum* egocentric nature and styles of living prevalent amongst the 21<sup>st</sup> century Africans.

Scholars are generally of the opinion that kinship, with all it implies, has been one of the strongest ties in African life. Chinua Achebe opines that we are better than animals because we have kinsmen (1958:132). The characteristic African family is an institution in which everybody is somebody. Reacting to this, Mbiti affirms, 'I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am' (1969:108). Onebunne, in addressing Mbiti's *corgio ergo sum*, rightly corrects that "the statement is not only subjective but equally sells off the African practice of communism since it puts the individual interest of 'I' against 'We'. For Onebunne also, he sees Mbiti's expression as not only faulty in the promotion of African way of life, African moral order, African economic progress, epistemological, aesthetico *cum* political order *et cetera* but is also an expression of personal identity which is based on individual, never connected with others or community" (2019:151-152). He rather prefers Mogobe B. Ramose in his *Ubuntu* ontology, because "for him and with the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, of course which originated in Bantu language, no one can live in isolation of others" (151). This, partly co-operates with his understanding of being as belongingness. Achebe also avers that, "He that has a brother must hold him to his heart, for a kinsman cannot be bought in the market, neither is a brother bought with money" (123). That community gives the individual his existence is not merely meaningful, but it also suggest the possibility of existence only in a community. For the Bantu people, their psychology cannot conceive of man as an individual. The Igbo's believe in the Akan saying that when a man descends from heaven, he descends into a community. The community rejoices and welcomes his arrival, finds out whose reincarnation he is, gives the person a name and interprets that arrival within the circumstance of the birth. As the child grows, he becomes aware of his dependence on his kin group and community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group. It is from this background that Onebunne develops his concept of being, not just as a 'force', '*dasein*' as for Heidegger or '*uwa*' for Pantaleon Iroegbu, but as belongingness.

Belongingness is the human emotional need to be an accepted member in a world where its being; its perception, future and global vision has been covered. A world where the predominant factor is the group, the community, the togetherness. Iroegbu defines

belongingness as “the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness” (374). In this case, the recipient-subject of belonging is involved: something belongs and it belongs to something. Belongingness is a special noun from the verb “to belong”. It means to be part of, or to be a member of a group. The communal individual cannot, because he wants to become something spectacular, destroy the peace, order and harmony that exist in the community. The communal good takes precedence over the individual good. For if the community is destroyed, the individual is destroyed with it (Iroegbu, 1995:356). No wonder Onebunne cried out that “the reality of Africa has undergone a series of changes irrespective of the fact that the name, *Africa*, still remains. The Africa of yesterday (traditional Africa), the Africa of today (contemporary Africa) and Africa of tomorrow (the future Africa) are really different in many respect. Expounding further, he avers that part of this problem was as a result of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism among others, which have all scattered Africa and Africans across the globe and most probably lost its glory and splendor, colonialism took over and divided Africa in many countries, languages and ideological order” (228a).

Modernization downed on the African culture with so many practices that are contrary to the core African traditional practices. It has successfully united the global world while separating the immediate world which is the family and the community. In the chase of modernization, indigenous cultures have been destroyed, replaced by a more Westernized one. Families are drawn through the emissions of the mass media and the pluralistic nature of the society, into cultures that are materialistic and secularist. The African identity has also been destroyed and the African person has been spurred into a crisis of identity. This research was motivated by an evening visit to my colleague’s hostel where some friends of mine live. On approaching the hostel, everywhere was dead quiet and it made me wonder whether there was anybody around. Entering the hostel, I noticed that all inside were not talking with themselves. Why? Because, everyone was busy chatting with his people far away that they lost consciousness of their immediate surroundings neither did they noticed my presence. At this point, the natural human consciousness in me began its activity of wondering about the essence of our being as Africans. What defines us as Africans and as African beings? The only one without an Android phone was now thinking of how to get one by fair or foul means. While still reflecting over this particular occurrence, there was an encounter with Onebunne’s definition of being as belongingness in one of Kanu's online articles. The name of the book not only spurred interest in me on how to get the book but also pushed me to the extent of contacting a senior colleague whom I believe would have it. From there, it became clear to me that if we comprehend our African existence as belongingness, many of the evils that came as a result of exposure to modern facilities might not actually be our problem. This is the experience that motivated this research

work. The main thesis of this work is to analyze in particular, Onebunne's concept of being as belongingness as a mental tool for eradicating the menace of individualism in the present day African society.

### **The Human Person (*Mmadu*), God, gods and Spirits (*Mmuo na Ogwu*)**

Iroegbu began his analysis of the human person from analyzing the Igbo concept for person, *mmadu*. The human person is not a pure spirit but a corporeal being. According to Iroegbu, a human person is "thus body; limited, fragile, contingent and human, merely human. The conclusion from this is that, part of the essence of *mmadu-ness* is body, *ahu*" (352). The corporeal dimension of the human person is very significant to the understanding of person that often *ahu* (body) is as though it were the person. For instance, the Igbo would say, *Ahuadighim* (my body, meaning I am not well). It is not enough to have a body to become a human person, for animals do have a body. The Igbo also speak of *Uche*-reason, mind, intellect. Thus Iroegbu asserts that to be truly human, "It is important that one is able to reason, to dialogue reasonably, to do things in a way different from other beings with bodies, i.e., brutes... One is more excellent human person who can reason more excellently" (352). A third constituent of the human person is the *mmuo* (spirit), which determines a lot about the personality of any given person. It is that which persists in existence even when the body disintegrates. It is the indestructible immortal element of a person. After death it sojourns to the world of the ancestors and through re-incarnation returns to the family. Another essential component of the human person, according to Iroegbu is the communal, he is a being-with. Onebunne, in contrasting this notion, began by asserting that aside the transcendental notions or properties of being, that another notion of talking of being is by hierarchy of beings and forces; as in its African metaphysical connexion and denotation (106). Put simply, being is not merely as *mmadu* or *mma-ndu* as Iroegbu began would not have been the starting point since he '*mmadu*' did not just begin 'to be' or exist all of a sudden but is contingently in existence by a necessary being '*Chukwu*' or '*Chi-ukwu*'. To this end, the hierarchy of being as in 1. '*Chukwu*' (God), 2. '*Chi*' (Major divinities, minor divinities, spirits, ancestors etc), 3. '*Mmadu*' (human being-chiefs, elders and others according to their primogeniture), 4. '*Ife*' (things as in animals, plants, minerals etc). Succinctly, Onebunne is with no intervention in maintaining that '*mmadu*' ranks the third degree or level in the hierarchy of beings or forces. When this is rightly understood, it becomes a perfect credit to him as he is of new approach in the discourse of being. With his hierarchy of being also, it summarizes the common transcendental notion of being that has remained prevalent amongst many African philosophy. For them, these transcendental properties or qualities include: goodness (*bonum*), truth (*verum*), must be a thing (*res*), beautiful (*pulchrum*), otherness (*aliquid*), a being must be one (*unum*). For him, naming these properties this way are not only substandard but are only sub-categories. Seen from another perspective, it is

another way of saying that the hierarchical chart contains all the known transcendental qualities of being. He is not wrong pointing out that every being insofar as it exists and has all the given properties, is capable of belonging. Thus, in the words of Onebunne, all forms of human beings with body and soul belong to the category of ‘*mmadu*’ (106). ‘*Mmadu*’ is not just the body as Iroegbu only pointed out. He must have soul, this soul is the ‘*mma*’ or beauty of his ‘*di*’ (that is, being). Put more technically, while Iroegbu concentrated on the physical person (that, which is outside) and *uwa* to ply through his understanding of being, Onebunne maintained that what makes a being is both the inner and outer features and natures (body and soul). This notion will lead us to cause and essence of things. But should be avoided now. It is what qualifies a being to actually belong in every society and community. The inner, he calls spirit (*mmuo na ogwu*). Here, is found every supreme deity (106). The spirits are made up of not just forces but powerful spirits, evil spirits etc. Metaphysically, these are not occultic, they are in reality, and they exist. And this is also what metaphysics is all about.

On the other hand, when a human person is born into his community, he shares in the religious worldview of the community, where life is religion and religion is life. The knowledge of God is not taught to him, it is obvious and innate. Iroegbu wrote, “God is ubiquitously involved in the life and practices of people. He forms the ontological foundation and explanatory ground of what they are, what they do and what they have. He determines the way they relate to one another, to nature, and to their cultural data (givens)” (359). He is called variously by the Igbo, as *Obasidin’elu*, which means God on high, speaking of his nature as transcendent, and thus not being of the same composition with other realities; he is also called *Chukwu*, the Supreme God. The idea of *Chukwu* suggests that there are other minor gods. They are his deans, servants, as such function at the instruction of *Chukwu*.

### **Causality and Essence**

Iroegbu defines causality “as the act of bringing into reality what was not in reality” (364). It asks the dual question of for what? (*maka gini?*) and why? (*gini kpatara?*) He said that “The two questions are actually one question, but posed from two different ends: the end point (for what?) and the starting point (why?)” He contrasts the ‘why’ question with the ‘how’. While the how requires a description of the process, event or reality the way it has come to be, which is empirical question, the how goes deeper to the ontological level, far beyond the empirical, it explores the reason, explanation and justification for. In the entire process of cause, God is the cause who remains uncaused, while every other reality outside of God are the effects of God’s power. However, even as effects, they could also cause other realities. Thus effects could both be effects and causes. Iroegbu distinguishes between ontological cause and functional cause. The ontological cause explains the being or coming into existence of the effect, and without

it, the effect wouldn't be in existence. There is also the functional cause which explains the reason for the operations of a being. As a dualist, Iroegbu avers that there are two mighty forces: good and evil, while good things come from the force of good, evil things come from the force of evil. The human person possesses these forces within himself. The question that arises then is the source of evil. Iroegbu argues that if God is the source of good, bad spirits are the source of evil. However, above is God who has the power to put evil in check if human beings cooperate and carry out their legal, natural and customary responsibilities. Man, however, has the ability to manipulate the forces of good against evil, and also evil against good. Iroegbu wrote that, "the result of his being, his life, his community is the fruit of his work in manipulation. In his contribution is his responsibility. In his responsibility is his freedom. Freedom is participation in good. His reward is thanks to his responsibility" (370). He defines responsible freedom as "... an active involvement in, and a successful contribution towards the increase of the good, and the decrease of the evil in man and his world" (370).

### **Applications of Belongingness and Question of Belongingness in 21<sup>st</sup> Century African Society**

Although, it was Iroegbu who first sort for the four sub-themes of belongingness as 1. Be-On, 2. Be-On-Going, 3. Be-Long, 4. Be-Longing. The effort here is not to begin to explain them in detail but use this to drive through Onebunne's 'belongingness'. In his words, Onebunne purports that "belongingness remains a word with hidden and loaded meaning both in African metaphysics and communalism (142). The question still remains that from where should we recover these SAN-CO-FA (the African past values and ideal Africanness) in this present age? With the notion of being as belongingness also, the idea of EBUB-Egbe-Bere-Ugo-Bere (Let kite perch and eagle perch), *Ohazurume*, *Umunna*, *Ibuanyidanda*, *Igwebuike* and *Ubuntu* philosophies among others would perfectly be attained especially in African societies and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa. With the above clear understanding, it remains obvious that such ends remain very difficult to be attained owing to what is practicably obtainable in this 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa. The African man has jettisoned these communitarian practices, African thoughts, values and systems. The question of the structure of his political, economic, aesthetic and ethical systems have all gone in shambles. His copy-copy nature and seek to modernize virtually everything that concerns him has put him in a terrible state of losing his worth, values, precepts and even the dignity in his name as an African before the wider world. This menace is not only regrettable but appalling to every African who really recognizes these lapses and many more. Premised on this synopsis, Onebunne's bold attempt in pointing where these infractions have remained obvious; using his notion on being as belongingness, could still be curbed with the hope to having the ideal African 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa.

### **Being as Belongingness**

Africa has a very rich heritage of what past generation of African People thought, did, experienced and passed on to their children. This heritage forms along line which linked African Fore-fathers with their descendants who now feel proud of it, and its study makes it possible to see and understand something of the people who lived only a short while ago, but several hundred or thousand years ago (Mbiti, 2). We see some traces of these past glories of African empires and civilizations in the work of arts and buildings which have survived to this day. The human person is a social being who lives and works together with other beings in his or her search for the basic necessities of life (Kanu, 283). Belongingness is the answer to what makes being, being and what it means to be in the *uwa* as argued by Iroegbu. It makes sure that all belong and none is marginalized: both contributively (duties and responsibilities), and distributively. It is the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness (Iroegbu, 374). In this case, the recipient-subject of belonging is involved: something belongs and it belongs to something. Belongingness is a special noun from the verb 'to belong'. It means to be part of, Daisein-with or to be a member of a group. To be is to belong and to belong is to be. Pantaleon argues that the Igbo principle of *Egbe bere Ugo bere* (let the kite perch, let the eagle perch) re-enacts the contents and significance of belongingness as the essence of reality. Onebunne, thus, believes that what a being is, is its activity of perching (belonging). To perch is to be. To be is to perch. To be is to belong and to belong is to be. Obviously, the idea of 'To be is to belong and to belong is to be' may sound tautological, but it is the definitional circle involved in any description of being as being (Onebunne, 267).

#### **4.1.1. The Multi-dimensional Significance of Belongingness**

From the Onebunne concept of belongingness as the synthesis of reality and experience and as an ideology which does not welcome individualism (Onebunne, 217)), it is obvious that the idea of belongingness touches on every aspect of reality. Therefore, the question of its significant implication cannot be treated with levity. It extends to the political, economic, social and ethical dimensions of being.

#### **Political Significance of Belongingness**

The political implication of belongingness is that each citizen be given a sense of belongingness in the political arena, and democracy has no other purpose than the realization of belongingness for all (Iroegbu, 2000:3). Elaborating further on this, Onebunne condemned that when the political arena is not for the interest of all, as equally noted by Iroegbu, the result of individualism becomes the prime. For him, individualism here means "that the individualists are interested in the promotion of one's goals and desires with the hope of being independent and self-reliant, while opposing most external interference upon one's interests, whether by society, family or

any other group or institution” (Onebunne, 217c). For him, belongingness is democracy, democracy is belongingness.

*“Democracy here is a form of political organization in which all people, through consensus, direct referendum, or elected representatives exercise equal control over the matters which affect their interests” (Onebunne, 212).*

Unfortunately, the neglect of this political dimensional implication of belongingness is at the base of most ethnic and political violence in Africa. Belongingness helps a government to discover the circumstances that can link human beings who inhabit a country, igniting and increasing in the led a feeling of personal security and group preservation (Iroegbu, 278). Belongingness proposes a system of government which will concede coexistence to all linguistic groups, on the basis of equality, within a framework of political and constitutional warrantees. Such a system of government would protect individual freedom under the rule of law and thus preserve and sustain linguistic groups (Azikiwe, 278). Once there is a failure in political belongingness, then loyalty to the tribe would replace loyalty to the nation (Azikiwe, 278). The level to which each member of the political society belongs determines the future of a successful politics.

### **Economic Significance of Belongingness**

The twenty first century is characterized by the creation and expansion of economic opportunities. Virtually, every activity is geared towards economic interest. When people meet, it is for economic reasons. Friends are made based on economic interests. The yearning for a global village was born out of economic needs (Anah 247). But as long as people are robbed of their economic belongingness, situations of conflict would always arise. This may have prompted Onebunne in dedicating chapter seven of his work to drive down on the economic advantage of belongingness in our African economic order; noted “that the traditional African economy was made up of land, trade, agriculture, the possession of wealth, etc., and in all these, the entire community had a fair share. He continued, land for instance was a common property for all the members of the community and every family had a piece of land allotted to it. This was so because...it was through the land that the living is connected to the dead. Thus, to deny a family of a share of the community’s land is to deprive such a family of its external link to its ancestors” (Onebunne, 234). It suffices to say that belongingness in the primitive African society was more of brotherhood, communism and equal economic share. If therefore this practice was the identity marker for every African society and organization, it poses numerous questions on the ‘obtainable’ in our present African institution. Onebunne continues that “since independence, there has been constant flow of foreign aid into Africa” (235). No doubt, the benefits of this aid have been misappropriated, mixed. Where are we? Where are we going? What happens to

our (Africans) ideal African values and practices and many more? On the other hand, the Niger Delta crisis is born out of the feeling by a few that they have been robbed of their economic belongingness. A situation where few have and many do not have, in relation to resources that is meant for all, is against the principle of economic belongingness. Every people who desire a glorious future must employ this Onebunne ideology of belongingness while taking decisions that border on economic interests.

### **Social Significance of Belongingness**

The society is the perching ground for belongingness, and the sense of belongingness it is able to offer its members is very significant. When people who are members of a society do not feel the sense of belongingness, it affects their contribution towards the development of the society. The social dimension of belongingness for Onebunne, would call for the jettisoning of all forms of prejudice, be they racial, national, tribal, societal, political, ethical, etc. This is why Onebunne maintains that communalism centers into the contemporary African society (230c). Because for him, the African traditional social order was communal in nature (230b). If then this is so, it means that to postpone the breaking down of all forms of barriers of tribal prejudice, be they inter-tribal or intra-tribal is to postpone the social unity and advancement of a society. The social significance of belongingness is solidarity, which would create a society where everyone would relate and contribute to the well-being of the other.

### **Ethical Significance of Belongingness**

When people do not have the feeling of belongingness, lots of anomalies abound, such as suicide, abortion, armed robbery etc. (Anah, 249). The ethical or moral belongingness here ensures that human actions are not only pleasant or good to the individual alone but to the entire community (Onebunne, 231c). Human actions were not given selfish interpretations but rather, they were adjudged good or bad based on the way it affects the community (Onebunne, 231c). When people feel that they are part of a system, they would carry out their duties responsibly. For instance, situations of suicide arise most of the time when the sense of belonging is lost, mutual trust betrayed, kinship bond broken. When a person undergoes this experience, he sees nothing to live for and as such no desire to go on living (Azez, 256). Belongingness gives us the sense of differentiating between what is morally upright from what is not (Anah, 250). When the kite perches and the eagle perches, then there will be harmony and complementarity, to do what is right will not be a problem to the people because they fully incorporated in the mainstream of the societal affairs. Unfortunately, today, moral awareness is gradually being acutely perceived especially in our so-called 21<sup>st</sup> century, an ugly experience for Africa and Africans. At a time when we are fast losing

much of our values of comradeship, the ethical significance of belongingness needs to be emphasized, especially, using Onebunne's notion as a viable tool.

Summarily, the idea of belongingness in Onebunne's metaphysics can be criticized in various ways. Nevertheless, Onebunne's philosophy of belongingness is one that touches virtually on every aspect of the human life, be it political, economic, social, ethical etc., and demands an inextricable reciprocity with the act of acting, relating and communing. It is also one that identifies with the categories of the African people. As an idea, it is substantive, egalitarian, communalistic, transcendental and yet concrete.

### **Conclusion**

The western way of life is individualistic. It emphasizes the survival of the fittest. The individual need takes precedence over the need of the community. With the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the work of the missionaries, the Europeans were able to penetrate Africa and Igbo land. They came with their culture of individualism among other things. Seeing how affluent and prosperous they appeared to be, we accepted their culture relegating the African cultural values to the background. This was the genesis of our problem for those cultures that are antithetical to our nature as Africans. The fight between the African culture and the foreign culture has spurred the African man into the crisis of identity. He no longer understood his personality which was formally communal and peaceful. This has hindered the communal development as individualism has set in and individual development is now paramount. This individualism may sometimes involve trampling on other members of the community in order to achieve individual goal. So many other vices like corruption, masturbation, gaysim, depression etc. have also captured our minds as a result of individualism.

The negative effects of individualism cannot be over emphasised. The realization of belongingness is a stepping stone for us to realign our purpose in life. We do not have bad intentions or anything but we can be better than what we are now. At a time when globalization with its weapon of individuality, among others, is eating deep into Africa and her values, Onebunne's philosophy of belongingness is in tandem with the call for an African cultural renaissance. Above all, the philosophy of belongingness answers the fundamental question of the reason for existence, not just abstractly but concretely; the reason to be is belongingness. Be proactive, we only have one life to do the work. Let's not waste that. Poverty of the mind is an affliction from the gods. Material affluence notwithstanding, once a person is mentally bankrupt, the person will have a corrupt understanding and embrace the evil of selfishness and individualistic way of life as good. Today, most of the African values have been set aside in preference to things that are foreign and inimical to our interest as people. The cause of our value has changed and the yardstick for measuring it has also changed. Must we change with

times? Let us not forget that the change that involves disregarding to the dictates to the culture of our people is evil. The individualism problem of African people today is rough and tough and it comes from our total embrace of modernism. Iroegbu's belongingness is the spirit and substance of making people participate in the life and activities of the community and making the task of upholding the cultural values a common goal. This helps the individual of the community to feel wanted, needed, cared for and important. It is an affair of all for the good of all. We live in a community. We are affected by other people's actions directly or indirectly and the other way around. To maintain a peaceful community is to slightly trim our own sharp edges as well as adjusting to the sharp edges of others. We are not living in this world to be alone; we are a social animal after all. It's not always finding what's best for you, you can be more than that. You can have a bigger role in the community by allowing yourself to sacrifice a little of your comfort by giving it to someone who badly need it.

The concept "Belongingness" is a gadfly to the Youth's mental emancipation and awakening light to consciousness of the virus that have eaten deep and still, have disfigured our nature which is said to have, according to the hierarchy of being came after the spiritual entities. People are not just individuals but their personhood comes from the status of a responsible member of the community in which mutual values, mutual aid, care and concern for the others, solidarity, reciprocal obligation, social harmony, respect and moral consciousness etc., have contributed to its sustenance to this very day to which our generation have been privileged to have shared in existence. To properly deal with this problem of individualism which has made us loose our African values, we must resuscitate the sense of belongingness. With that, we will have the joy and comfort that comes from knowing that the community has got our back in everything we do. People are respected in the community by the wealth of their virtue and not by the virtue of their wealth. The wealth of their virtue ethically implies belongingness in African community.

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