The Quandary of Eurocentric Truth and Prospect of Cultural Sensitivity: Echoes from Richard Rorty

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Abstract

Most Eurocentric narratives undermined African cultural values and projected western values as superior, objective and built on truth. This paper exposes the underlying pretensions in the narratives and their deleterious consequences. It also demonstrates that such epistemic pretensions underlie modality of cultural interaction within the African societies. The analysis shows that such narratives provide ideas that are less propitious for African growth. There is a need for alternative narratives. Thus, the paper examines Richard Rorty's moral pluralism and extrapolates its basic elements to make a case for Cultural sensitivity. It argues that cultural sensitivity harbours more humane moral bases and values for social cohesion necessary for social reconstruction.

Keywords: African culture, values, Rorty, Eurocentricism and cultural sensitivity

I. Introduction

Dualistic distinctions, such as, the distinctions between 'objective and subjective', 'absolute and relative', 'we and them', 'good and bad', 'facts and value', 'the real and unreal, 'man and woman' are part of our common sense vocabularies. The distinctions are what Derrida calls 'binary opposition' that is, a way of dividing the world into the good Xs and the bad non- Xs^1 . The divisions are indispensible tools of inquiry, because they aid in classifications and understanding of things in the world. However, there are some specific ways of making the distinctions that is negative and undermines our pragmatic moral sensibilities. This kind of distinction is divisive and subordinating. It divides reality into two where one aspect is glorified and raised to the level of pure rationality, superiority and imperceptible to the ordinary senses; and the other aspect is subordinated and considered irrational and inferior level.

This subordinating distinction was given impetus in the Western scholarship by the strands of thoughts developed among the ancient scholars. The chief speaker of this period is Plato. He divided the world into two - the real world and the unreal word. The real world is purely rational, ideal, conceptual, superior, metaphysical and one; the truth lies in this world and it is incorrigible. The unreal world is empirical, materialistic, multiple and corruptible; truth is absent in this world. In the course of the centuries, the earliest Western intelligentsia - the philosophers and the anthropologists - became the vanguards of Platonism. In their thoughts, the western world is the material presence of Platonic ideal-rational world while the rest of the world, such as Africa, is the world of irrationality, world of mater and uncivilized.

Accordingly, the Western culture became the ideal culture, rational and superior. African culture became irrational, baseless, inferior and in need of remaking. It is in this kind of conception that consists Eurocentric truth - a belief about how things are, where everything, ideas, persons, events, way of lives are "fit into a single context, which will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined and unique". To be sure, the term 'Eurocentric truth' is used here to represent the sociological, anthropological, religious and philosophical ideas of those scholars who follow in the tradition of Plato to classify the world into the real and appearance, and then use the model to classify human culture. They developed the model to denigrate other cultures. The model is seen as the only means of conceiving the universe, the only thing that matters in shaping our lives, because it would be the only one in which those lives appear as they are.

It did shape the lives in the world for centuries in different fonts – social, political, religious, and cultural lives. On a closer scrutiny, the Eurocentric truth is found to be culturally hegemonic, untrue, increasingly declining and inadequate in leading us to our goals of social cooperation and trust. This is due to its inherent contradictions and insensitive presuppositions. It weakens our sense of human solidarity across cultures. Scholars are reinterpreting the idea of culture so as to reposition our world of meaning towards global brotherhood. Accordingly, this paper interprets Richard Rorty as giving us advice on how to get rid of the old dualism and transcend the Eurocentric truth. This will make us realize that there are different cultures that

¹ Group Rorty, R., *Philosophy and Social Hope*, England: Penguin, 1999, xix

harbour equally respective values. Thus, being sensitive to these cultures would reveal their relevant values and help us move closer to our social goals and fulfillment which consists largely in cooperation and mutual trust.

II. Eurocentric Truth and the Metaphysics of Presence

There is a tradition of ideas that follow Platonic metaphysical divide to classify things into reality (how things really are) and appearance. In this conception, truth is that which corresponds to the intrinsic nature of reality. Truth is obvious, self-evident, fixed and objective. It is discoverable by reason. It is distinguished from the appearances, which are multiple, varied and relative. In time, this distinction became central to what Derrida calls 'the metaphysics of presence', (that is the search for a full presence beyond the reach of common sense or an absolute beyond the reach of rationality). Adherence to this fixed and dogmatic distinction is what is called rational in the tradition of Western thought which was bequeathed to African scholarship. In this tradition, rationality consists precisely in representing the distinction between the reality and appearance, absolute and relative, object and subject. Any idea that does not follow such traditional is considered irrational. The above description is what is referred to as Eurocentric truth; its essential features are "hierarchical thinking" and "value dualism" that are fundamental to the "logic of domination" according to Karen Warren².

It is the cognitive framework of the Eurocentric truth that informed the mindset of Western anthropological and philosophical intelligentsia. It became their tool for understanding and classifying realities, especially social, cultural and political realities. Using this tool, the emerging crop of scholars justifies Western culture as superior, prestigious, higher, rational, and objective and sees African culture as deficient in those characteristics. Among the scholars are, James Frazer, Edward Tylor, Max Muller, Lucy Levy-Bruh, and the philosopher, Hegel.

The narrative described Africa and her culture in derogatory, distortive and divisive manner. They used Logico-scientific criteria of rationality developed within the western culture, in their narratives, to see traditional African beliefs as arrant nonsense, illusory and lacking objective elements.

For instance, Levy-Buhl, an anthropologist with training in philosophy, in, *How Natives Think*, (1910), made a distinction between "Western Mind" and "Primitive Mind". The primitive mind does not differentiate the supernatural from reality but the Western mind does. Primitive mind does not address contradictions. The Western mind does by using speculation and logic. Evolution is teleological, leading from primitive mind to Western mind. In his thought, African mind is primitive.

A more philosophically devastating narrative was that of George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher. His Eurocentric narrative posited a universal and liner development of consciousness or spirit - from less conscious to conscious or absolute state. Thus,

² Karen Warren, 1998, p.74

he identifies three stages: (a) subjective spirit, (b) objective spirit, and (c) absolute spirit. In the first state, the spirit is still part and parcel of the physical world. It is undifferentiated from nature. In the second state, the spirit manifests itself in objective social phenomenon" such as morality, legal system and political philosophy "³. The third stage is the final and most developed. It is where the spirit is self-conscious and expresses itself through art, religion, philosophy, etc., as found in Europe. For Hegel, the spirit has failed to develop in Africa. It has rather remained in the final subjective state. He thinks that African man has not progressed beyond his immediate existence. With this idea, he erroneously divided Africa into (a) Egypt, the territory that is connected to Asia (Hegel, 1956). He then argues that the real Africa is Africa proper, the Negro which he refers to as "the land of childhood", lying behind the day of self-conscious history. It has not attained 'substantial objective existence" and it is "natural in its completely wild and untamed state" (Hegel, 1956:93). Thus, Africa is unhistorical, undeveloped spirit devoid of religion, morality and political constitution. These conceptions have moral implication for cross-cultural interactions.

III. 'Hierarchical Thinking' and 'Value Dualism' in Eurocentric Truth and the Problem for Cross-cultural Relations

The idea of Eurocentric narratives presupposes 'value hierarchical-thinking' and 'valuedualism'. Karen Warren's analysis of the idea of logic of domination provides a good understanding of these concepts. In her analysis, value hierarchical thinking is an up-down thinking that places higher value, status and prestige to what is up rather than what is down. It divides the world into two and places one above the other. What is above is taken to be better than what is below. Value dualism is a disjunctive pair in which the disjunts are seen as oppositional and exclusive rather than as complementary and inclusive. It places higher value on one of the disjuncts rather than the other. A narrative that is informed by hierarchical thinking and value dualism divides reality into two and arbitrarily places higher value on one above the other. Eurocentric truth conceives Western culture as superior, prestigious, higher, rational, and objective and African culture as deficient in those characteristics. This is one of the basic reasons why the scholars who uphold the Eurocentric truth justifies western domination of African cultural space, expressed in various forms of colonization.

One of the basic implications is that it prevents the opportunity to realize that there are different ways of leading human life. The idea of truth is not limited to one of those ways alone. History shows that certain things that were considered to be the truth, in the long run were found to be false after all. Consider the notion of the universe that was at a time known to be flat and at other time truly spherical. Thus, it is arbitrary to consider truth as one, objective and unchangeable.

³Mazama, Ame, Ed., *Afrocentric Paradigm*, Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc. 2003:20. Morris, Brian, (1991), *Western Conceptions of Individual*, Oxford and Washington, D. C.: Berg, 1991, p.199; Mazuri, Ali, (1980), *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis*, London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. Morris, 1991:199, Mazama, 2000:21

Secondly, the idea of Eurocentric truth widens the lacuna between cultures. It makes it difficult to create mutual trust and social coordination across cultures. This is because what is seen as superior culture would consider the inferior cultures as unequal and incapable of contributing to the social belonging. At best, the relationship between the superior and inferior cultures would be that of domination, subjugation and denigration as it existed for centuries between the West and the South.

Thirdly, it undermines the status of others as cultural equals and their right for independent cultural existence. By this, it overlooks cultural specificities, freedom and sensitivities to distinct and diverse human need cultural and moral sensitivity is lacking in the oppressive conceptual framework of Eurocentric narrative. The narrative undermines the moral status of human agents in other cultures. It lacks sensitivity or relational sensitivity towards the other. Attitudes and behaviors should be within the context of social morality. The notion of liberty, equality and human dignity projected by European intelligentsia is contrary to their conception of Africans and their claims lack moral tenor. To dismiss African rationality based on oppressive framework is cultural insensitivity. However, the fundamental problem with Eurocentric conception of Africa is not their unawareness or ignorant of African cultural realities, but their insensitivity to African culture, belief, religion and so on. You can be aware of the existence of the other and his or her existential problems without being sensitive to the problems. The narrators were aware and sensitive to their human and cultural existence and insensitive to the Africans cultural existence. So in relation to African culture they were Eurocentric than Euro-sensitive or culturally sensitive.

IV. The Problem of Eurocentric Truth in Rorty's Tradition of Thoughts

Richard Rorty is an American pragmatic scholar. His philosophical topoi provide some rational and moral foundation for justifying the notion of cultural sensitivity. He provides a theory of pragmatic moral pluralism. His pluralism stands in criticism of the idea of Eurocentric truth which he described in another term, 'redemptive truth'. Redemptive truth represents a belief that things have their true nature or there are principles that underlie reality; or simply put, there is a reality behind the things that appear to us in the world. It is up to us to discover this reality.⁴ Knowledge inquiry is an attempt to discover this true nature of things or the intrinsic metaphysical reality, through a mature and developed reason, a privileged consciousness that is found in the Western culture. To be sure, redemptive truth represents a set of beliefs that would end once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves.

In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Rorty argues that we should reject such attempt to conceive and classify the world in such an "old Platonic dualism" precisely because "their deployment weakens our sense of human solidarity". Following John Dewey, he maintains that "discarding the dualism will help bring us together, by enabling us to realize that trust, social cooperation and social hope" are our common goal and the purpose of our social inquiry⁵, not only for the particular culture but for all cultures.

⁴ Richard Rorty, *The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of Literary Culture*, 2002, 2-3).

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social* Hope, London: Penguin books, 1999:xv)

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He contends that redemptive truth manifests in the religion of the West, in traditional philosophy and in Western culture. It is glorified in Western culture as the only civilized one with developed rational criteria and we can see this reflected in the works of Levy-Bruhl, James Frazer and Friedrich Hegel. In religion, the search for redemptive truth is simply a search for a metaphysical being, God, beyond human empirical reach as we can see in the thoughts of St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. In traditional philosophy, it is a rational search for objective truth by scholars from Plato, through Aristotle, to John Locke, Descartes and Jurgen Harbermas. In science it manifests in two senses. In the first sense, it manifests among the positivists who "insist that science attains objective truth in a way that no other type of culture does". The positivists of this description argue that science is the paradigmatic possession of intellectual virtues, notably the love of truth" (Rorty 14). In the second sense, it manifests among the positivists who think that science does more than to tell us about how things are. It also tells us about the best way to live our lives. Rorty refers to the believer of this description as 'materialist meterphysicians". However, Rorty argues that it is myopic to conceive only the empirical science as the only paradigm of intellectual virtue. This is because the scientist's love of truth seems no different from that of the classical philologists or archive-oriented historians. In essence, the "need to get it right is central to the peoples sense of who they are or what makes their live worthwhile and it is the contributions of people of different professions or commitments that combine to achieve our common goal. Secondly, the contributions of natural scientists have moral significance as well as those of accountants, surgeon or literary artists. In essence, the idea of redemptive truth as it manifests in the various traditions and commitments is misplaced inquiry.

Following William James, John Dewey and Hillary Putnam, Rorty thinks that we should abandon the single minded approach or the hopes that seek for the objective nature of things. Such hopes have waned given room for the rise of another sort of culture that is problem solving and allows for recognition of diversity and pluralism. Rorty describes this culture with the term literary culture. What does literary culture entail? It is a "culture which has substituted literature for both religion and philosophy" and "finds redemption neither in a non-cognitive relation to a non-human person nor in a cognitive relation to propositions, but in non-cognitive relations to other human beings, relations mediated by human artifacts such as books and buildings, paintings and songs. These artifacts provide glimpses of alternative ways of being human."⁶

The argument of Rorty is that in literary culture, different literary works present different ideas and views without necessarily subsuming ideas to a single search for a single truth. Rather, different literary genres represent different views about the universe of meaning. They are plural interpretations and conversations about human experiences – including rational, emotional, moral and practical experiences. The idea of literary culture expresses an idea of sensitive to different human attempts to respond to problems of social existence. Scholars like Cervantes and Shakespeare projected this culture. Through the literary thoughts, they played up diversity and downplayed commonality, that is, they underlined the differences between human beings rather

⁶ Richard Rorty, The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of Literary Culture, 2003, p. 6-7

than looking for a common human nature? (8). Kierkegaard, Sartre and Nietzsche theorized on such diversity of human inquiry. This change of emphasis weakens the grip of redemptive truth.

To be sure, the decline of redemptive truth, the Eurocentric truth, gives rise to a culture of inquiry or cultural sensitivity that sees objectivity as simply inter-subjective agreement under ideal communication among the inquirers. In this conception of culture, the effort of man in their inquiry is to drive at ideas that would be tools for resolving social problems and not ideas that would correspond to certain reality. The effort is to seek for a high culture that will do most to create and sustain the climate of tolerance among cultures that flourishes best in democratic societies.

High culture is informed by argumentation and deliberations that are not only essential for social cooperation, but also provide a model of honesty, tolerance and trust. The model gives room for reasoned agreement or rational cooperation.⁷ In essence, reasoned agreement is the objective of a culture that is sensitive to diversity and not in a culture that cajoles everyone into obedience to a monolithic and unified universe of meaning in search of declining Eurocentric truth.

V. The Rise of Cultural Sensitivity

The foregoing analysis is set to provide a philosophical justification for the claim that cultural sensitivity holds a better promise for achieving social cooperation and mutual trust in the society. The way of life of the people is named their culture. What Rorty refers to as high culture is a literary description of practical way of relating with the universe of meaning. It is about being rationally sensitive to diverse ways of responding to issues of social existence. Some words about 'cultural sensitivity' are important at this point.

The concept, culture has different meanings. The anthropologist, Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture (1871)*, conceives culture as a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Over time, the term has been used to refer to different human commitments: appreciation of good literature, music, levels of civilization, attitude of mind, different academic disciplines and so on. Culture could be broadly conceived as the total way of life of a people. As far as there are people, according to Linda James Myers, "they will have a way of life"⁸. Culture refers to shared experiences or commonalities that have developed and continue to evolve in relation to changing social and political contexts. Yet, culture is a product of human interaction with the immediate environment (environment includes human, non-human), which embodies values, norms and regulations that have endured over the years. Yet, culture "determines quality of life in large measure"⁹. As Ali Mazuri observed, it is the standards of evaluation, criteria of

⁷ Ibeid, p.22

⁸ Myers, Linda James, (2000), "The deep Streture of Cultre: The Relevance of Traditional African Culture in Contemporary Life" in A. Mazama Ed. *Afrocentric Paradigm*, Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc. 2003, p.124 ⁹ Ibid

right and wrong, good and evil, beautiful and ugly¹⁰. It provides frameworks for interpreting events and determining what is significant in a people's life. It provides conceptual framework for perceiving and interacting with the world. Every culture has conceptual framework, definitional system. We speak in terms of "European conceptual system as well as African conceptual system, each being distinctly different from the other in terms of basic survival thrust and fundamental character"¹¹.

We conceive it here as framework of ideas and beliefs for responding to the problems of social existence. Different societies have different ways developed over time in the attempt to respond to precarious situations to their immediate environment. It is not pre-established but relational. So it is varied from place to place and society-to-society. Culture is instrument of action.

The awareness of the existence of one does not mean non-existence of the other. And culture is not static. The values of cultures lie in the extent to which they aid us in responding to our problems of human existence. As a tool, a problem solving one at that, their value lie within their practical import in responding to human problems for a larger goal of social cooperation. This is the reason why creativity and improvement should be part of cultural framework.

Accordingly, our immediate attitudes to cultures should not be that of reactionary, evasiveness and denigration. Such approach has only led to cultural centricity. To be culture centric is to be concerned with one's culture in exclusion of others. It is exclusive and less considerate in relation to others. It leads to cultural glorification and does not give room for both critical reflection on one's culture and rational engagement with others. Though cultural centricity underscores localization, centeredness and helps in preservation and retention, yet, it could obstruct growth and creativity if it is exclusive. Our attitude towards cultures should be that of sensitivity. We should be culture sensitive.

Cultural sensitivity is a means of being aware that cultural differences and similarities exist and have an effect on values, learning, and behavior¹². The definition helps to underline an idea of sensitivity but it limits to mere awareness. It does not underscore its practical import. Cultural sensitivity goes beyond mere awareness. Massen and Kowalewski recognized this fact when they state that cultural sensitivity involves more than just being tolerant of differing lifestyles. It involves more than just suspending your judgments. Being culturally sensitive means having the capacity to function effectively in other cultures. It is valuing and respecting diversity and being sensitive to cultural differences¹³. This definition hints at some concepts that

¹⁰Mazuri, Ali, , *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis*, London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1980, p. 53

¹¹ Baldwin, J., "The Psychology of Oppression". *Contemporary Black Thought*, M. Asante and R. Vandt (eds), New Bury Part, CA.: Sage, 1980

¹² Stafford, Bowman, Eking, Hanna, & Lopoes-DeFede (1997).

¹³ Kowalewski, B., Massen, A. and Mullins, S. *Cultural Sensitivity Training Module*. (2010). http://www.weber.edu/CommunityInvolvement/Mentoring_Tutoring.html

are important in understanding cultural terms. These are 'capacity to function' and 'valuing and respecting.

Cultural sensitivity is a functional concept. It is not a passive one. It is a capacity to value or critically examine one's culture and other cultures in the bid to respond to existential problems. It is therefore a rational consideration of cultures with the aim of indentifying programmatic ideas for solving problems that confronts man in their relation with the world.

VI. Cultural Sensitivity as a Programmatic Relation

Cultural sensitivity is a moral and programmatic concept. It is moral in the sense that it implies rational and sympathetic consideration of others, their experiences, interest and identity for mutual respect and perspicacity. It respects the dignity of human person in different cultures. It is programmatic in the sense that such respect of the dignity and value of human person simply motivates and directs the course of action. To be sure, no culture is self sufficient, absolutely good or absolutely bad. Every culture has some good elements and bad one. What makes a culture good or bad is not based on a pre-established principle but on the ability or ways it promotes social cooperation and human well-being in responding to problems of human existence. In essence, the basic components of cultural sensitivity can be understood in the analysis of Rorty's pragmatic thought. Let us outline these components bellow.

Recognition of diversity: According to Rorty, there are plural ways of leading human life. Valuing and recognizing the importance of one's own culture and those of the others is an important component of cultural sensitivity. As Rorty indicates, cultural sensitivity does not fit every culture into a single context and does not seek for an objective redemptive truth. It rather respects the import of cultures. It considers other cultures as alternative methods in responding to human problems or what Olusegun Oladipo describes as "alternative beliefs and forms of actions",¹⁴ they are tools of inquiry. Again, cultures do not need to have same belief to work together. As Rorty pointed out, the difference between a believer and the theists do not have to be settled before the two can cooperative in communal issues in responding to social problems.

Moral tolerance: cultural sensitivity creates and sustains the attitude of tolerance, honesty and trust. The idea of tolerance does not imply that everything must be accepted; else tolerance will not have moral tenure. It only means that certain kinds of actions or things need to be tolerated in so far as they are tools for achieving the fullness of our life together.

Active and Critical Mind: The analysis of the idea of 'higher culture' reveal that one of the basic components of cultural sensitivity is what Ayn Rand calls active mind¹⁵. Rand distinguishes active mind from the ambiguous catch phrase, 'open mind'. This distinction is instructive for understanding the idea of active mind as fundamental element of cultural

 ¹⁴ Olusegun Oladipo, *Philosophy and Social Reconstruction in Africa*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2009, p.25
¹⁵ Ayn Rand, *Philosophy Who needs it*, USA: Penguin books, 1984, 21-24.

sensitivity. According to Rand, 'active mind' is not the same an 'open mind'¹⁶. Open mind is usually taken to mean objective and unbiased approach to ideas, but on the contrary it means a perpetual skepticism and probably docility. The opposite, 'a closed mind' on the other hand is usually taken to mean the attitude of a man impervious to ideas, arguments, facts and logic, who clings stubbornly to some mixture of unwanted assumptions, tribal prejudices and emotions. In essence, this is not a closed mind but a passive one, because it is a mind that does not have the practice of judging or thinking and is threatened by any request to consider new things. What cultural sensitivity requires is not an open mind but an active mind – "a mind that is able and eagerly and willing to examine ideas, but to examine them critically. It does not remain floating forever in a vacuum of neutrality and uncertainty¹⁷, it has cultural convictions that does not stagnate its ability to engage in critical examination of both old and new ideas. Thus, cultural sensitivity is self reflective and other regarding. It engages in critical reflection on its cultural paradigms with regard to new social problematic, and it engages in critical appreciation and acceptance of other cultural valuable alternatives. It exposes one to be active minded. Cultural sensitivity requires what Oladipo calls "culture of inquiry" and "culture of belief"¹⁸- culture of inquiry is sensitive and investigative while culture of belief is its anti-thesis.

Communication and Adaptability: cultural sensitivity requires the avoidance of undue cultural glorification. It requires willingness to adapt one's communication and behaviors to be compatible with another's cultural norms if necessary. The necessity lies in the need to respond to social issues. To be sure, communication is not just an exchange of linguistic terms. It is about sharing our humanity in an attempt to respond to communal problems. The need to share our humanity, experiences, feelings, fears and joy with due comprehensions in turn requires the willingness to learn about the traditions and characteristics of other cultures. In essence, heuristic communication and adaptability is important elements of cultural sensitivity.

VII. Conclusion

The argument of this paper is that we need to go beyond cultural centricity, whether in the typology of Euro-centricity or Afro-centricity, to cultural sensitivity. This is because; the notion of centricity limits our quest for common brotherhood. Sensitivity accommodates and motivates us towards social cooperation and reconstruction. Cultural sensitivity is foundation for the value of moral pluralism, tolerance, active mindedness and critical engagement with cultures whether in our own or in those of other. It seeks for the strengths and possibilities that cultures offers and dissuades the negative elements.

¹⁶ Madhucchanda Sen identifies 'open-mindedness' and a mark of critical thinker and 'closed mind' as its obstacle, See M. Sen, *An Introduction to Critical Thinking*, Delhi: Longman, 2010, pp. 4,16 'Active mind' seem to be a better term to describe the mark of a critical thinker.

¹⁷ Ibid, 21.

¹⁸ Olusegun Oladipo, *Philosophy and Social Reconstruction in Africa*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2009, p.24

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