



AN OVERVIEW OF PROHIBITIONS IN THE HOLINESS CODE AND TABOOS IN YORUBA LAND.

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ABSTRACT

“Holiness Code”, a term used in biblical criticism in reference to Leviticus chapter 8:17 – 26, has been elaborately elucidated and discussed by critical biblical scholars. No attempt has however been made by these scholars to examine the prohibitions in the holiness code and their interrelatedness to prohibitions and taboos in Yoruba land. The focus of this study therefore is to discuss the relevance of prohibitions in the holiness code to taboos in Yoruba land. The findings of this works reveal that prohibitions and taboos are reflection of societal boundary lines, marking off the extent of acceptable behaviours. The work also reveals that prohibitions and taboos are established as a result of the need to sanitize the society and prevent cultural abuses. Being an historical study, the work employs historical method in its analysis. Since adherence to prohibitions and taboos can enhance societal growth and development, the work therefore recommends that taboo should be considered as part of societal culture and should be held in high esteem.

KEYWORDS: *Taboo, prohibitions and restrictions, holiness, behaviour, code.*

INTRODUCTION

The distinct characters of the collection of laws in Leviticus 17 – 26, according to Joosten (2014) was first recognized in the 19th century. It was given the name “Holiness code” by Klostermann and since that period has been widely adopted by biblical scholars due to its highly repeated use of the word “Holy”.

The code also uses a noticeable different choice of vocabulary, repeating phrases such as “I, The Lord, am holy,” “I am the Lord, and I the Lord, which sanctify” in unusually large number of times. Critical biblical scholars have regarded it as a distinct unit and have noted that the style is noticeably different from the main body of Leviticus.



Code of Holiness, is a collection of secular, ritualistic, moral and festival regulations in Old Testament book of Leviticus chapters 17 -26. The code stresses that the people of Israel are separated from the rest of the world because Yahweh (God) has chosen them. They are to demonstrate their unique election by disassociating themselves from profane and worldliness and by retaining the ritualistic and moral purity (code of holiness, n.d.).

Within the Holiness code, there are certain Prohibitions. For instance, in Leviticus 17:15 – 16, there is a prohibition against consuming the naturally dead. Leviticus 21:10 emphasizes prohibition against an anointed high priest uncovering his head or rendering his clothes while there is prohibition against offering by Aaronic priests who are blemished in Leviticus 21:21 – 22.

Taboos on the other hand often reflect a society's boundary lines marking off the extent of acceptable behaviours of many types based upon number of factors including what other social groups do, real or imagined historical or mythical experiences of the group, and their class boundaries, and so on. Taboos often form the lines upon which rituals (Social or religious practices) center.

The selection of prohibitions and taboos as the domain of inquiry in this study has partly been conditioned by an increasing rate of ethical violations, gross abuse of societal values and moral decadence persistently witnessed in our clime. This paper shall therefore examine Holiness code, prohibitions in the Holiness code, taboos in Yoruba land and the relevance of Holiness code to taboos in Yoruba land.

Holiness Code

Holiness Code, a name designating the collection of laws in Lev 17 – 26, according to the classical documentary hypothesis constitutes a particular division within the so called priestly sources (p). One of the characteristics of the Holiness code is the demand that Israelites be holy and thereby imitate the Lord their God (Holiness Code, n.d.).

The singularity of Holiness code is discernible also in its structure and style, except for the fact that it does not have a special heading, its structure is parallel to that of the book of the Covenant (Ex 20:21 – 23:33) and the collection of laws of Deuteronomy (Deut 12 – 28). Like these two codes, Holiness code opens with a discussion of the proper place for making sacrifices and the legitimate form of eating with admonition and warning for Israel



to observe the laws contained therein (Lev 26:3 – 45). The conclusion of Holiness code (Lev 26:46) is similar to that of the Deuteronomic code (Deut 28:69) (Holiness code, n.d.) This conclusion is represented in minor variation in Lev 27:34 and it appears indeed that Lev 27 is a kind of appendix to the Holiness code. The style of Holiness code is generally close to that of priestly source though it has certain features of its own. The style of the book of Ezekiel is close to that of priestly code and of Holiness code, but its connection with the Holiness code is much stronger than the other parts of priestly sources.

Ezekiel often enumerates a number of laws in the same order as the lists of Holiness code. The similarities in Ezekiel and the admonitions at the end of Holiness code are numerous. One of the characteristics of Holiness code include several phrases that do not occur or occur only rarely, in the other parts of priestly source. Holiness code is also characterized by the use of the following idioms: “neighbours”, “Fellow man”, “Sabbath”, “the bread of his God” and so on. All the laws of the Holiness code concern everyday affairs of the Israelite community and individual.

A cursory reading of Lev 17 – 26 makes it clear that the law, Holiness code, is addressed to “Israel”. The name is used 36 times in 10 chapters, 17 of these features in the various formulas specifying the addresses of the prescriptions (Joosten, 2014). Though the name “Israel” is polysemic, it refers to people of Israel led out of Egypt by Yahweh and then encamped at the foot of mountain Sinai, where in preparation for their entry into the promised land they received Yahweh’s instruction through Moses (Joosten, 2014). Even though in Holiness code itself, only the tribes of Dan and Levi are mentioned explicitly. We may probably suppose that the concept is that of an Israel with 13 Tribes (Counting Manasseh and Ephraim separately).

In Leviticus 18:1, we see that the Holiness Code is also addressed to the “Sons of Israel”. In Holiness Code, as in the priestly tradition in general, the expression “Sons of Israel” is the usual designation whenever the people of Israel are being referred to. A critical look at the expression implies that “Sons of Israel” is being addressed specifically to mean the Israelite menfolk. In another instances, prohibition on bestiality were addressed to both men and women (Lev 18:23). Whereas the commandment concerning men is given in the second person: “And you shall not lie with any beast” (Lev 18:23a), the commandment concerning women is given in the third person: “Neither shall any woman give herself to a



beast to lie with it" (Lev 18:23b). The reason for this variation as recorded in the Holiness code might probably be that the audience of the law are the Israelites men, who are thus made responsible for their own behaviour. Although, women are made subject to the law, it is the men that are made responsible for the observance of the laws.

As observed by Joosten (2014), the intention behind the use of the phrase "Sons of Israel" is not, therefore, to exclude women but rather to subsume them under the person of the man in whose household they live. The Israelites men are addressed, not so much as individuals, but in their quality as head of the family. The expression "Do not profane your daughter by making her a harlot" places the responsibility of the daughter's conduct squarely on the shoulders of the father (Lev 19:29). Wright (1990) corroborates this view as he emphasizes the central role of the household in Israel's relationship with Yahweh. He therefore argues that the family constituted the basis social fabric through which Israel's relationship with her God was "earthed" and experienced. Since the Israelites men, as head of their families, represent the whole people, it is not surprising to find that the expression "Sons of Israel" may elsewhere designate the entire people of Israel.

The Holiness code is also addressed to the "House of Israel". The expression occurs four times in Holiness code. (Lev 17:3, 8, 10, 22:18). Out of the four laws concerning slaughter, sacrifice, eating of blood, hunting of animals (Lev 17:3 – 13), the first three cases are addressed to the "House of Israel" while the fourth was addressed to "Sons of Israel". This may perhaps be taken as an indication that the first expression includes women, who might occasionally slaughter an animal or bring a sacrifice and would be concerned about the interdiction against eating blood but who would not normally go hunting.

The expression certainly does not include the resident alien, as is shown by the fact that he is usually mentioned explicitly alongside "The house of Israel".

Lev 19:2 and 24:14,16 also mentioned (*edah*) the assembly as part of the addressees of the "Holiness code". In its precise, technical meaning, the "*edah*" includes all male Israelites from the age of (20) Twenty upwards who are able to go to war.

The term therefore has the same referent as the expression "Sons of Israel", but whereas "Sons of Israel" according to Joosten (2014) is the general term. The word "*edah*" carries a non – technical meaning when it refers to the whole people inclusive of wives, and children. In the Holiness code, "*edah*" is used in the same way as in other priestly



texts. In Leviticus 19:2 which states: “Speak to the entire assembly of the sons of Israel and say to them: you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God Am Holy” “edah” refers to the whole people. It is explicitly stated therefore that “edah” which Moses is commanded to address is made up of the “Sons of Israel”, the Israelites menfolk. The import of the “Sons of Israel” as addressees of the command to be holy is to be understood in the light of the discussion above: Holiness is the charge of every single Israelites, but the responsibility for this assignment is entrusted to the families, of which the men are the head.

As rightly observed by Joosten (2014), the use of the term “edah” has added another dimension to the individual and familiar levels expressed by the phrase: “Sons of Israel”. The term expresses a communal aspect which implies that all the Israelites, the community as a whole must be holy. Apart from being one of the addressees of the Holiness code, “edah” is responsible for the execution of justice, the entire assembly must stone whosoever has committed chronic sin. So whenever a serious transgression is committed against Yahweh, the collective, that is the assembly must execute the transgressor. Holiness code directly addresses the people of Israel, as we have earlier explained in this study. There are also indirect addressees such as the resident alien, sojourner (Lev 25:23), Foreigner (Lev 22:25) and human being (Lev 18:5).

The inclusion of indirect addressee in the Holiness code shows that although the laws are directly addressed solely to the Israelites, the outlook is not narrowly ethnocentric. This implies that the force of Yahweh’s commandments is not limited to Israel. Everybody is subject to the laws in Lev 18:24 – 28 even the previous inhabitants of the land were in a sense subject to these laws: it is because they did not observe them that they were vomited out by the land. We can therefore venture to submit that the Holiness code emphasizes the universal tenor of the Old Testament law in general.

Prohibitions in the Holiness Code

Prohibition is one of the noticeable elements of Holiness code, these include prohibitions against sexual relations, eating of blood, dishonest behaviour, unfair treatment of workers and so on. These prohibitions are followed with the warning: “Lest the land vomit you out”. Most of these prohibitions appear in both chapters 18 and 20 in different forms. While Leviticus 18 represents them as a simple list, Leviticus 20 presents them in a



chiastic structure based on the seriousness of the crime and the punishment deemed appropriate for each ranging from excommunication to execution are attached (Holiness code, 2009).

➤ **Prohibition against consuming the naturally dead** (Leviticus 17:15 – 16).

God expressly warned the Israelites that touching and eating of animals that died naturally is prohibited. If by mistake they came in contact with such animals, they must bath and wash their clothes for this will free them from its attendant evil. It is probable that God instructed them to abstain from such animals since eating or touching them might affect their health and spiritual well – being.

➤ **Prohibition against the eating of blood** (Lev 17:10).

God vows to set his face against whosoever eats blood. In verse 11 (Eleven), God states the reason the eating of blood is prohibited. “For the life of the flesh is in the blood...”. “Anyone of the people of Israel or of the people of Israel or of the aliens who resides among them who hunts down an animal or bird for the purpose of eating must pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

Since blood carries carbondioxide and other waste materials to the lungs, kidneys and digestive system, part of the waste materials of the animal may still remain in the blood, this will no doubt portent danger to the man’s health if such blood is consumed. This might probably be the reason for this prohibition.

➤ **Prohibition against incest and bestiality.** God’s warning against incest and bestiality is clearly stated in Leviticus 18: 6 thus:

None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness. I am the Lord” you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother, she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife it is the nakedness at your father. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether born at home or born abroad, you shall not uncover the nakedness



of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife daughter, begotten by your father, since she is your sister. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister, she is your father's flesh. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your flesh you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife, she is your aunt. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law. "She is your son's wife" you shall not uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife, it is your brother's nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter and you shall not take her son's daughter her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness they are your flesh, it is depravity. And you shall not take a woman as a rival to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.

God frowns against the above-mentioned sexual sin in its totality and the punishment is so severe "the land will vomit the transgressor out"

God also kicks against homosexuality; "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman" Lev. 18:22. God describes homosexuality as abomination.

➤ ***Prohibitions against bestiality.***

"You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it; nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: "Lev. 18: 23. God however reminded the Israelites that the inhabitants of the land that were guilty of bestiality were punished, "The land vomited them out"



➤ **Prohibition against dishonest behaviour** (Lev. 19:11-12).

The command in Leviticus against stealing, dealing falsely, lying and violating God's name by swearing to false oaths all find more familiar expression in the Decalogue. The statement: "you shall not lie to one another" (Lev. 19:11) literally implies that "a person shall not lie to his companion, friend, or neighbour. This surely includes fellow members of Israel's Community and by extension according to Leviticus 24: 22, the resident aliens. One can therefore submit that Israel's ethics and morality incorporate the nations around them even to the point that the immigrants from other nations were treated the same way like the native-born citizens.

➤ **Prohibition against unfair treatment of workers** Lev. 19: 13.

In Leviticus 19:13, the prohibition against unfair treatment of workers is highly emphasized. "You shall not defraud your neighbour... and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer until morning" In Israel just like other nations of the world, labourers that take wages are generally poorer people who lacked land where they can cultivate. They are especially dependent on immediate payment for their work; they therefore need to be paid at the close of each day. This prohibition is necessary to avoid the employers taking the advantage of the vulnerabilities of the employees.

In our clime today, labourers most especially those who lack documentation for legal employment such as the refugees, internally displaced persons, rural citizens that lacks urban residency permits, illegal immigrants, children under age of legal employment are often subjected to untold hardship and unfair treatment. In most cases, both the employers and employees are working outside the law, the employers take the advantage of the situation by paying the workers less per hour. A times, they are denied certain benefits by providing poor or dangerous working conditions. In many cases, they are completely at the mercy of the employees. Holiness code therefore reminds us that Holiness must be at the core of our thinking. Holiness in labour matters arises out of a concern for the needs of the most vulnerable workers.



➤ **Prohibition against maltreatment of disabilities** (Lev 19:14).

The command: “You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind” paints a vivid picture of cruel treatment of people with disabilities. Though a deaf person cannot hear, he is being cursed, neither can the blind see object placed on his part to obstruct him, yet Leviticus 19:14 reminds the Israelites to “Fear God” and be conscious of the fact that God hears and sees how everyone is treated.

➤ **Prohibition against unjust judgment.** (Lev 19:15 - 16)

“You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor..... With justice you shall judge your neighbour” (Lev 19:15-16). The command no doubt upholds the biblical value of justice. The first part is a warning for the judges while the second part warns everyone. “Do not judge court cases with partiality and don’t judge your neighbour unfairly. God frowns at perversion of justice in its totality since he is not partial, His expectation is that the Israelites will always honour him by kicking against impartiality.

➤ **Prohibition against cheating in business** (Lev 19:35 – 36).

Leviticus 19:35 – 36, prohibits cheating in business by falsely measuring length, weight or quality, and is made more specific by reference to scales and stones, the standard equipment of trade. The fact that the word “Honest” appears four times in Leviticus 19:36 alone emphasizes the importance that God attaches to the concept of Holiness.

From the foregoing, it is however obvious that prohibitions as recorded in the Holiness code were put in place to sanitize the society and prevent social, cultural and religious abuses. They provide a set of rules serving as a moral guidance or a law in the community to ensure that peace and security are present.

Taboos in Yoruba land

Taboos which is interpreted as “eewo” in Yoruba land, is something which is forbidden. Taboos in similar terms represent system of prohibition with regard to certain persons, things, acts or situation (Saka, 2015). From time immemorial, they had been considered as norms and code of conduct believed to facilitate orderly maintenance of the society. The notion of taboos among the Yorubas of Southwestern Nigeria has therefore



been a vital component of African religion and culture. Though, they are not written in any revealed law, yet people learn them, practice them and teach others in the society.

According to Saka (2015), things considered as taboos are perceived to contain within them certain assumed danger that always has repercussions against anyone who transgresses them, though it may not be well defined or perceived immediately by senses. Nevertheless, the consequences of that danger will continue to hunt the transgressor. Taboos in Yoruba land are very helpful in regulating the behaviour of a group of people. In so many rural towns and villages in the past where people could not have access to institutions such as the court and the police, taboos played very important roles in the maintenance of law and order. They either had their origin from the gods, ancestors or some particular members of a society. Though taboos in Yoruba land vary from one locality to another, in general, they play significant and positive roles as highlighted below:

- They prevent people from doing wrong things. They help people to focus on the expected norms of the society. As observed by Saka (2015), they are better than modern law, because, in most cases, breaking of taboos is associated with an automatic punishment.
- When one lacks an intellectual ability to inculcate moral values and principles, taboos are a useful way of transmitting the same value from a different perspective.
- Taboos serve as a means of social control. Chaos and Anarchy are averted in the society where taboos are strictly adhered to. In most cases, the motivation for abiding by the normative principles are provided and reinforced by the religious sanctions from the gods and the ancestors or directly from the supreme being.

In Yoruba land, as in any other society, keeping of taboos ensures good harmony between the visible and the invisible world. They represent the main source of the guiding principles regulating and directing the behaviour of individuals and the community towards the supreme being and the ancestors in the society. Taboos in Yoruba land promote well – being virtues such as modernization, democratization, qualitative education, and critical consciousness while well – being vices such as dependency, bribery and corruption, unwarranted military interventions, dictatorship and the abuse of human rights are diminished, hence, one can readily concede that taboos enhance development and harmonious living.



There are different categories of taboos in Yoruba communities. As stated above, the taboos vary from one community to the other, but the common and general ones are as follows:

- A pregnant woman must not sleep with the stomach. This is to guard against having a stillbirth. Medically, it is not even advisable for a pregnant woman to sleep with her stomach because when she does, it will be difficult for the foetus to kick while still in the stomach and this may claim the life of the baby. This taboo is probably in force in Yoruba land to instill fear in the mind of careless women.
- It is an abomination in Yoruba land for a baby to fall from its mother's back. This might be the reasons many new mothers are warned to strap their babies firmly to their back most especially when the babies are not well positioned. It is believed that a male child that falls from its mothers back will always lose his wife at adulthood and a female will always experience the death of every lover she makes contact with. Where a baby eventually falls from its mothers back, the mother is expected to carry out some rituals to prevent evil from happening to the child in the future.
- In Yoruba Land, it is forbidden for pregnant women to walk about in the streets or go to the stream when the sun is shining at its peak. It is believed that evil spirits roam the town during the period and can easily enter a pregnant woman and this can make her give birth to deformed babies. It is forbidden for any man to climb a pawpaw tree. It is believed that any individual that does that will die. Pawpaw tree is not strong enough for anybody to climb. It may break and cause serious body injuries which may eventually lead to death (Saka. 2015).
- Adultery is forbidden in Yoruba land. It is a taboo for married women to commit adultery with another men who are not their husbands. This taboo is more critical against women than men , it is indeed a serious crime and even a social stigma for a wife to cheat on her husband. A man that suspects that his wife is cheating could be tempted to lace her with "Magun", and this would lead to the death of her adulterous lover (Cultural Taboos, n.d).
- It is a taboo for a child to beat up his or her parents in Yoruba land. It is believed that a child that does this will die in wretchedness. This taboo is probably put in place to show absolute respect for our parents.



- The Corpse of a person that drowns must not be brought for burial at home. It is forbidden for the corpse of a person who dies in a river to be buried at home rather, the corpse is expected to be buried near the river just as the corpse of anybody that falls from a tree should be buried under the same tree. Bringing their corpses home for burial in Yoruba traditional belief would incur the wrath of the ancestors who may cause people to die prematurely without any genuine reason.
- It is forbidden for a pregnant woman to eat inside a cooking pot. This is to avoid the child's buttocks turning black. It is even a sign of laziness and dirty habit for any person especially a pregnant woman to do this. This attitude is bad because when the food in the pot is leaked the saliva will come in contact with the pot used to cook for the entire family.
- A woman is forbidden to deep her hand into the pocket of a man who is not her husband. It is believed that child of any woman that does this will be stealing. The reason for this taboo might probably be to effect good habit because when a woman deeps her hand in to the pocket of another woman's husband to take money, her child who sees her may think it is proper to do so.
- Eating of dogs, pigs and cats are forbidden. It is generally considered unclean to consume dog, meat, pork and cat meat among others in Yoruba land. This taboo varies from one locality to another. In some communities, consumption of dog is allowed. It is also forbidden to relay dreams in the afternoon. When this is done, it is believed that the dream will come to past (Cultural taboos n.d.).

From the foregoing, one can submit that taboos as part of Yoruba culture cannot just be discarded in view of their significance in the society. In Yoruba worldview, taboos serve as an effective system or means of preserving and transmitting moral values, if people adhere strictly to taboos most especially as practiced in Yoruba land, some of the societal problems such as religious violence, post – election violence, inter – tribal fighting, insecurity, insurgency, corruption and greediness would become things of the past in Yoruba land even in Nigeria as a whole.

The Relevance of Prohibitions in the Holiness code and taboos in Yoruba land



From the discussion so far, it is obvious that the need to sanitize the society and prevent religious pollution, social perversion and cultural abuses has no doubt led to the establishment of cultural taboos in Yoruba land and prohibitions in the Holiness code. God being a holy God always wants his people to be Holy since he is not ready to associate himself with the profane. It is also believed that action or conduct of one man or woman within the community can affect other members for good or evil, hence, the Yorubas put in place taboos as code of conduct which individuals must adhere to for the good of the community as a whole.

To prevent humans from becoming rebellious, God established set patterns or codes of behaviour. From time immemorial human being had always demonstrated rebellious attitude to the extent that the land had vomited some of them. For all the prohibitions, God therefore attaches the punishments that the transgressors would suffer. Taboos among the Yorubas are a form of prohibited actions and breaking the ban is followed by supernatural penalty.

Prohibitions in the Holiness code are instituted by God as instruments of social control for protecting the sanctity of worship most especially of Yahweh, that is why the phrase "I am the Lord" is repeatedly used. Taboos being a sacred term for a set of cultural or religious prohibitions are instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments of social control for protecting the well-being of their communities.

In the Holiness code, prohibitions are designed by Yahweh to regulate the behaviour of the Israelites and the community towards himself the Supreme being, hence, the persistent need for the people to undergo ritual cleansing as a means of moral or ontological purification whenever they are guilty of moral and legal violations. This might be the reason God says, "Any person who eats what died naturally of what was torn by beasts ... shall both wash his clothes and bathe in water... then he shall be clean" (Lev 17:15). Since taboos are also designed to regulate the behaviour of people, rituals are persistently done to cleanse the moral law violators, for instance, if a strapped baby accidentally falls, the mother would be asked to perform certain rituals to prevent the child from being wayward in the future. When the corpses of an individual that falls from a tree is mistakenly brought home for burial instead of burying the victim under the tree, the whole community involved must undergo ritual cleansing for violating the taboo before peace can return to the land.



Adhering to the prohibitions in the holiness code will enhance harmonious relationship among the people most especially the resident alien, or the foreigners who dwell in the land of Israel. The prohibitions in the Holiness code ensure good harmony between the visible and the invisible world. Violation of taboos in Yoruba land implies that the violators has offended the ancestors and gods believed to be custodian of public morality, that is why community suicide is an abomination in Yoruba land, the dangling body is not expected to be lowered down until some sacrifices are performed to appease the gods. The corpse is also buried in the evil forest and outside the town to avoid the anger of the gods. From the foregoing, we can assert that life and its quality is seen as crucial, to preserve it, God applies a variety of methods, prohibitions in the Holiness code are no doubt used by God to preserve lives. The relevance of taboos in Yoruba land to the prohibitions in the Holiness code is a pointer to the fact that the traditions and cultural beliefs of the Yorubas do not exist in isolation.

CONCLUSION

Prohibitions in the Holiness code and taboos in Yoruba land both represent code of conduct, moral laws and regulations , they are reminding us that holiness must be at the core of our thinking. This Holiness can be interpreted as seeing others with a depth of insight that goes beneath face value.

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