

Important Quotations Related to African Ecclesiology

NOTE: Especially important quotations are marked in **bold**.

Content

1. St. John Paul II's 1995 Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa*. No. 63 on "The Church as God's Family:"

Not only did the Synod speak of inculturation, but it also made use of it, taking the *Church as God's Family* as its guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa. The Synod Fathers acknowledged it as an expression of the church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa. For this image emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust. The new evangelization will thus aim at *building up the Church as Family*, avoiding all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups, favoring solidarity and the sharing of personnel and resources among the Particular [Local] Churches, without undue ethnic considerations. **"It is earnestly to be hoped that theologians in Africa will work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church".**

All this presupposes a profound study of the heritage of Scripture and Tradition which the Second Vatican Council presented in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*. This admirable text expounds the doctrine on the church using images drawn from Sacred Scripture such as the Mystical Body, People of God, Temple of the Holy Spirit, Flock and Sheepfold, the House in which God Dwells with Humans. According to the council, the Church is the Bride of Christ, our Mother, the Holy City and the First Fruits of the Coming Kingdom. These images will have to be taken into account when developing, according to the synod's recommendation, an ecclesiology focused on the idea of the Church as the Family of God. It will then be possible to appreciate in all its richness and depth the statement which is the Dogmatic Constitution's point of departure: "By her relationship with Christ, the church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humankind."

2. Pope Benedict XVI's 2011 Apostolic Exhortation *Africa's Commitment*. No. 172 on "Conclusion: 'Take Heart; Rise, He Is Calling'"

"While earnestly desiring to help implement the directives of the synod on such burning issues as reconciliation, justice and peace, I express **my trust that theologians will continue to probe the depths of the trinitarian mystery and its meaning for everyday African life.**"

3. Pope Benedict XVI's 2011 Apostolic Exhortation *Africa's Commitment*. No. 136 states:

The Catholic Universities and Higher Institutes in Africa have a prominent role to play in the proclamation of the salvific Word of God. They are a sign of the growth of the church insofar as their research integrates the truths and experiences of the faith and helps to internalize them. They serve the church by providing trained personnel, by studying important theological and social questions for the benefit of the Church, **by developing an African theology, by promoting the work of inculturation, by publishing books.**

4. Pope Francis' 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*. No. 33 states:

Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: "We have always done it this way." I invite everyone to **be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.** A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. I encourage everyone to apply the guidelines found in this document generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.

5. Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996 and Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997. Section Four on "African Metaphors of Church" in Chapter Three on "Church as the [Extended] Family of God" describes some African metaphors or images or symbols or models of church using African proverbs, sayings and stories. See pp. 123-128.
- a. The Church as the Extended Family of God.
 - b. The Church as the Clan of Jesus Christ.
 - c. The Church as the Universal Family in Christ.

Theologian Paul Sankey points out: "Avery Dulles has categorized theories of church into a number of models: institution, mystic communion, sacrament, herald, and servant. A possible African model is the church as clan, a family or social group related to a common ancestor."

6. Small Christian Communities developed as a result of putting the communion ecclesiology and teachings of Vatican II into practice. Small Christian Communities make real the vision of Vatican II that calls on the Church to be (shine forth as) "a people made one with the unity (brought into unity) from the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (No. 4 of *Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church of the Church*). No. 17 refers to the Trinitarian understanding of the church as "the People of God, the Body of the Lord and the Temple of the Holy Spirit."

From Joseph Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*. Free online Ebook at:
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7. The famous AMECEA Study Conference on “Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s” in Nairobi, Kenya in December, 1973 stated: **“We have to insist on building church life and work on Basic Christian Communities in both rural and urban areas. Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working.”** This pastoral policy was in the context of the statement: **“We are convinced that in these countries of Eastern Africa it is time for the Church to become truly local, that is, self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting.”**
8. The AMECEA Study Conference on Building Small Christian Communities” took place in Nairobi, Kenya in July, 1976. The key statement was: **“Systematic formation of Small Christian Communities should be the key pastoral priority in the years to come in Eastern Africa.”** This is the single most important statement made about SCCs.
9. The Small Christian Communities Model of Church has a very specific meaning and context. Although the term “Small Christian Communities” is used in many different ways, as a “new model of church” it specifically refers to **pastoral, parish-based SCCs (usually small neighborhood communities) being part of the official ecclesial structure, leadership, ministry and life of the parish. SCCs are a pastoral, parish-based model that helps to build the parish structure. The parish is a communion or network of SCCs within a “communion of communities” ecclesiology.** SCCs are the central “place” of ecclesial identity, ecclesial life, ministry and mission. In recent years a shift has occurred in Eastern Africa where much more of the ecclesial life takes place in the SCC, not in the outstation church or parish church. For example, the celebration of the sacraments, religious education, catechesis and other ministerial and service activities.

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10. **This Small Christian Community Model of Church is based on the church as communion (*koinonia*). In terms of contemporary theology this is part of Trinitarian Communion Ecclesiology and a “communion of communities” ecclesiology.** There is an African saying *If God lives as a community, we must do the same.* SCC members are called to a life of sharing modeled on the Trinity.
 - a SCC is a communion of families.
 - an outstation (also called a chapel, prayer house, outchurch and sub-center) is

- a communion of SCCs.
- a subparish (also called a Sunday Mass Center) is a communion of outstations.
- a parish is a communion of subparishes.
- a deanery is a communion of parishes.
- a diocese is a communion of deaneries.
- a metropolitan (ecclesiastical province of one archdiocese and suffragan dioceses) is a communion of dioceses.
- a country (for example, the national bishops' conference) is a communion of dioceses and archdioceses.
- A regional bishops' conference (such as AMECEA) is a communion of national bishops' conferences.
- A continental bishops' conference (such as SECAM) is a communion of regional bishops' conferences.
- the World Church or Global Church is a communion of national and continental bishops' conferences.

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11. Tanzanian theologian Father Laurenti Magesa, "The Joy of Community in Small Christian Communities," *New People*, No. 149, March-April, 2014, pp. 22, 24."

SCCs are groupings of a drastically different, much deeper order: they are formed not only to achieve a goal, whatever that may be, but theologically they are themselves the goal. This is because they are the church; they constitute the root from which the wider church emerges. Without them the broader, or "catholic," church cannot be realized in the manner that Pope Francis describes it in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*. At least, it cannot endure. Authentic love, joy, peace, justice, and the common good as illustrated in the Gospels grow as a result of *communion*, the theological element that is the essence of SCCs. SCCs are therefore not only "communities" in the usual sense of the word. Each is a communion analogous to a body of Christ that St. Paul elaborates on (1 *Corinthians* 12).

12. Regarding the "Ecclesiology of the Church-as-Family" at the 1994 First African Synod the *Final Message of the Bishops of Africa to the People of God* in Section 28 on "The Church-as-Family and Small Christian Communities" states: "**The Church, the Family of God, implies the creation of small communities at the human level, living or basic ecclesial communities...These individual Churches-as-Families have the task of working to transform society.**" This is an inculturated African ecclesiology.
13. Number 89 under "Living (or Vital) Christian Communities" in the 1995 Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa*: "Right from the beginning, the Synod Fathers recognized that **the Church as Family cannot reach her full potential as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human**

relationships. The Assembly described the characteristics of such communities as follows: primarily they should be places engaged in evangelizing themselves, so that subsequently they can bring the Good News to others; they should moreover be communities which pray and listen to God's Word, encourage the members themselves to take on responsibility, learn to live an ecclesial life, and reflect on different human problems in the light of the Gospel. Above all, these communities are to be committed to living Christ's love for everybody, a love which transcends the limits of natural solidarity of clans, tribes or other interest groups."

14. Nigerian theologian Emmanuel Orobator, *The Church as Family, African Ecclesiology in its Social Context*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000. p. 24.

The 1994 [First] African Synod made a decisive option for the formation and development of SCCs as the privileged means for actualizing the model of church as family. Presently a significant number of African theologians laud the rapid implantation and growth of SCCs, which they judge as the active embodiment and tangible manifestation of "a new way of being Local Church."

15. Ugandan theologian Father John Waliggo, "The Church as Family of God and Small Christian Communities," *AMECEA Documentation Service*, No. 429 (1 December, 1994), p. 1

The [African] bishops could have chosen the Vatican II concept of church as Communion or as People of God. They purposely chose Church as Family; they wanted to use the African family as the model for being and living church. The family model includes everyone, baptized and non-baptized, involving every member. It serves well the emphasis on Small Christian Communities.

Process or Method

1. **Today there is an emphasis on a new African Theological Process or Method that is called by a variety of names: "African Palaver Theology;" "African Theology as Conversation;" "African Conversation Theology;" African Christian Palaver Theology;" and "African Christian Conversation Theology." or just "Palaver Theology"/"Conversational Theology"). It is both the name of a process/method of theology and the name of the type of content of theology (like Liberation Theology). Method heavily influences/determines content and vice versa. It is a two-way process that illuminates and enriches African values and Christian values.** It is similar to Mango Tree Theology, Theology Under a Tree, Shade Tree Theology and Story-telling Theology. It is related to *Matatu* Theology. This is African Theology as Conversation, Active Dialog, Intensive Listening and Learning from Each Other (described as "listening in conversation") and Consensus. Conversation is a very important way of doing theology on the continent of Africa.

This is a new way of doing African Christian Theology that is conversational, participatory, collaborative, cross-disciplinary, and multi-generational. It includes oral theological conversation.

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2. Nigerian theologian Emmanuel Orobator states in *Theological Reimagination: Conversations on Church, Religion and Society in Africa*, p. 9:

Of all the models of conversational and communicative styles in African cultures *palaver* seems the most theologically fertile.” The essays in the book *Theological Reimagination: Conversations on Church, Religion and Society in Africa* resulted from an experience of African *palaver* that doubled as a theological research project. *Theological Reimagination* depicted the central task of the African theologians who gathered in conversation about church, religion and society. Whether as *palaver* or *Ubuntu* the theological enterprise operates as a collaborative effort regulated by the communicative ethics of mutual listening and respective dialogue.

3. American theologian Father Robert Schreiter, CPPS in *Constructing Local Theologies*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 30th Anniversary Edition, 2015) points out that **local theologies can be constructed with the local community as theologian:**

The experience of those in the Small Christian Communities who have seen the insight and power arising from the reflections of the people upon their experience and the Scriptures has prompted making the community itself the prime author of theology in local contexts. The Holy Spirit, working in and through the believing community, give shape and expression to Christian experience. Some of these communities have taught us to read the Scriptures in a fresh way and have called the larger church back to a fidelity to the prophetic Word of God... Many of the Small Christian Communities have experienced again and again the power of the Word of God as they gather to reflect upon the Scriptures.

4. American theologian Jay Carney in “The People Bonded Together by Love: Eucharistic Ecclesiology and Small Christian Communities in Africa,” *Modern Theology* 30: 2, April, 2014, p. 316:

DR Congo CEVBs (*Communautés Ecclésiales Vivantes de Base*) embrace a well-honed process of Christian communal reconciliation following the African model of “palaver.” In the traditional palaver model, community elders would gather with representatives of the disputing sides, offering them the opportunity to dialogue on their grievances and ritually celebrate their reconciliation. In contemporary DR Congo, CEVB advocates and other parish leaders known as “Guardians of

Reconciliation” serve in these mediating roles. Both sides are given the opportunity to discuss openly and honestly their perspectives on the conflict, and perpetrators are urged to take responsibility for their actions. Once a resolution has been reached, perpetrators signal reconciliation through giving victims a chicken, goat, house or other material sign of repentance. Reconciliation is then ritually marked within the broader community; the conflicting sides publicly hug, shake hands, and share a meal together. In the words of one Tshumbe CEVB leader, “you can’t eat with your enemy,” so the shared meal is perhaps the most important sign of communal reconciliation.

5. Small Christian Communities are theologizing from their own experience and context, for example, SCCs that use the annual Kenya Lenten Campaign booklet, the Ndoleleji Research Committee in Shinyanga, Tanzania and small communities that use the "See," "Judge" and Act" process as part of a theological reflection method in Zambia. Once given a start, these local groups make the connections in a process of participatory theology. Creative ideas emerge in the group reflection process. This is the local African Christian community theologizing. Local gatherings of SCCs in Eastern Africa reflecting on their daily lives in light of the gospel can be a real theological locus or theological moment. No. 89 in St. John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa* under "Living (or Vital) Christian Communities" states: "These small communities reflect on different human problems in the light of the Gospel." Archbishop Anselm Sanon of Bobo Dioulasso Archdiocese in Burkina Faso emphasizes that "theology becomes again a community affair. African theologians must work with and within the Christian Communities."

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6. An interesting Case Study of African Palaver Theology/African Theology as Conversation in a small community context on the grassroots, local level was the time when the author was asked to prepare the Homily Notes for the "Weekly Reflections for the 2012-2013 Election Year" inspired by the *Bible* Readings of each Sunday in the "Yes, Kenya Matters Campaign" that was a new online resource to promote civic education before the Kenya General Election in March, 2013. These reflections were circulated by the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission (JPIC) Commission of the Religious Superiors Conference of Kenya (RSCK) free every week for personal prayer, homilies and SCC meetings.

I could have prepared these notes in the traditional way –by myself and using commentaries, biblical exegesis, etc. Instead I prepared these notes in an African *palaver*/conversation way with members of my St. Kizito Small Christian Community (SCC) in the Waruku Section of St. Austin's Parish in Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya. Eight of us (six men and two women) first read the three Sunday Reading ourselves. Then we met together to read and reflect especially on the First Reading and the Gospel. Then we applied the readings to our daily life and local Kenyan context. In the process we theologized – what American theologian Robert Schreiter calls "the local community as theologian." Our secretary wrote a draft of our reflections. Then we revised it.

A summary of these Homily Notes for the **FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (B) 6**
May 2012

1. Readings:

Acts 9:26-31

I John 3:18-24

John 15:1-8



2. Scripture Focus/Biblical Reflection

- Let us make our home in Jesus Christ as he makes his home in us. As disciples of Christ we must remain in him as His words remain in us. We are branches united with God in Christ Jesus.
- God is love. We should love one another as we are all God's creation.
- If we are united in Jesus Christ we will see people from other ethnic groups (tribes) in Kenya as our brothers and sisters.
- The peace of the Risen Christ brings healing. We should embrace forgiveness and reconciliation in order to bear more fruit.

3. Link with Catholic Social Teaching (CST)

- "Elections represent a platform for the expression of a people's political decisions, and they are a sign of legitimacy for the exercise of power. They provide a privileged opportunity for healthy and serene public political debate, marked by respect for different opinions and different political groupings. If conducted well, elections call forth and encourage real and active participation by citizens in political and social life. Failure to respect the national constitution, the law or the outcome of the vote, when elections have been free, fair and transparent, would signal a grave failure in governance and a lack of competence in the administration of public affairs" (Number 81 in *Africa's Commitment*).
- Small Christian Communities are "Living (or Vital) Christian Communities committed to living Christ's love for everybody, a love which transcends the limits of natural solidarity of clans, tribes or other interest groups" (Number 89 in *The Church in Africa*).
- "We have experienced that a properly trained and led SCC adds great value to the promotion of reconciliation. This is because deeper biblical reflection and more regular use of the Pastoral Circle empower our Christians to engage effectively in the social life around them. Here formation in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) at all levels must be a priority" (AMECEA Statement).
- "It can be helpful for you to form associations in order to continue shaping your Christian conscience and supporting one another in the struggle for justice and peace. The Small Christian Communities (SCCs) and the 'new communities' are fundamental structures for fanning the flame of your Baptism" (Number 131 in *Africa's Commitment*).
- "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully app to us as a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from

every oppressive situation” (No. 6 in *Justice in the World*, 1971 World Synod of Bishops).

4. **Yes, Kenya Matters (Kenyan Life Focus)**

- As the Kenya National Anthem suggests let justice be our shield and defender and may we dwell in unity, peace and liberty.
- As SCC members we are branches of our Kenya Government on the grassroots to promote peace and unity with our brothers and sisters.
- During this Election Year in Kenya it is our responsibility to promote civic education on the local level.
- We should encourage the equal distribution of resources in Kenya.

5. **Questions for Reflection and Sharing**

- How can you participate in the next General Election as an individual/Small Christian Community/Community?
- What is your role to ensure peaceful elections as an individual/Small Christian Community/Community?
- In the light of the Gospel how can we promote forgiveness and reconciliation in Kenya in order to bear more fruit?
- What can we do to bring about peace and unity in our families, communities and country of Kenya?

6. **African Wisdom**

- In the light of the Gospel there is the African story “God Is like a Large Baobab Tree:”

One day my pick-up truck broke down. After I waited for half an hour, a big Coca-Cola lorry came by and the driver, a Muslim named Musa, kindly towed my vehicle to the next town. While we drove into town I sat in his big cab and we talked about, of all things, religion. In commenting on the tensions between Christians and Muslims in East Africa, he said, ‘There is only one God. God is like a large baobab tree with different branches that represent the different religions of Islam, Christianity, African Religion and so forth. These branches are part of the same family of God so we should work together.’ Simply put, Musa taught me a wonderful African metaphor for world religions and interreligious dialogue.

- One finger does not kill a louse.
- *Unity is strength, division is weakness.*
- *If you live in a glass house don’t throw stones.*

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7. A second interesting Case Study of African Palaver Theology/African Theology as Conversation in a small community context on the grassroots, local level was the Homily Notes for the **THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (C) 3 March 2013:**

1. Readings:

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15;
I Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12;
Luke 13:1-9

2. Life Situation:



In Kenya we are in the middle of the 2013 Lenten campaign to prepare for the general elections tomorrow, Monday, 4 March, 2013. After the terrible post-election violence in 2008, can Kenya elect a new president and government in peaceful, just and fair elections? We realize the whole world is watching.

Photo of Maasai woman voting in 2007 election from the *Daily Nation*

- The overall theme of the [2013 Kenya Lenten Campaign](#) is “United and peaceful Kenya: The change I want to see”. The specific theme for this Third Sunday of Lent is “county governance.” The *2010 Kenya Constitution* provides for a devolved governance structure that sets up 47 counties that are guided by democratic principles, separation of powers and reliable sources of income to facilitate local development.
- The Lenten campaign booklet uses a see-judge-act methodology or process to reflect on these issues. Catholics in their local groups, such as the 45,000 Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Kenya, are encouraged to reflect on such questions as: “How can we, as Small Christian Communities, contribute to good governance in the Church and our counties?” We are challenged to participate in civic education programs and to study and reflect on the qualities of good leaders.

3. Scripture Focus/Biblical Reflection:

- In the first reading Moses experiences God in the desert especially in the burning bush. Today do we experience God in the “other” – the person from another ethnic group (tribe)? The person of another color or sex or race or religion? Are we open to meeting Jesus “in disguise:” in an economically poor person; in a person with less education or wealth than we have; and in various outsiders/marginated people in our society?

- Research indicates that 75 percent of the members of Small Christian Communities in Nairobi Archdiocese are women. In interviews Catholic women have said: “In the hierarchical, clerical Catholic Church in Kenya we women feel at the bottom. This is reinforced by traditional African customs and traditions. But in the SCCs we feel that we women are equals and have a voice.”
- In the Gospel Jesus uses the parable of the fig tree that helps us reflect on repentance, reform and renewal during this Lenten season. Are we cultivating our personal and communal “ground,” that is, our simple lifestyle, our good habits, our balanced attitudes, our reaching out to needy people? Or do we tend to be judgmental, promote stereotypes and give labels to other people? Are we using the good fertilizer of prayer, fasting and almsgiving during this Lenten season to change and deepen our lives? Then we will bear the good fruits of community, equality, justice, listening, peace, serenity and silence in our personal and communal lives.

4. **Pastoral Resources**

The 2013 Kenyan Lenten campaign offers us a special opportunity to use many concrete pastoral resources during this 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, this Year of Faith and in the spirit of the New Evangelization:

- *Africa’s Commitment (Africae Munus)*: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation from the 2009 Second African Synod on “Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.”
- *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace)
- *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (commonly known by the Latin title *Gaudium et Spes*)

The opening words of this last document – “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [people] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” – is a permanent challenge to the Catholic Church’s self-understanding as a community in mission.

5. **Yes, Kenya Matters (Kenyan Life Focus)**

- In this 2013 calendar year the African continent will have general elections in Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Tunisia and Zimbabwe. *The New York Times* describes multiparty democracy in Africa as “messy and unpredictable.” But with the help of God and the determination and active endurance of the African people we shall succeed.
- Kenyans marveled at how after the U.S. presidential debates the candidates and their families could shake hands, embrace and talk warmly with each other. A major challenge in Kenya and throughout Africa is that political candidates should sacrifice their pride, desires and ambitions and be good losers if they don’t win the election. An important ----- Swahili (Eastern and Central Africa) proverb applies to elections in Africa: “The person who cannot accept defeat is not a competitor.” The test and maturity of democracy and ongoing good governance in Africa is for the losers to openly accept the results of the public vote (“the voice of the people”).

As we evaluate the above examples of African *Palaver* Theology/African Theology as Conversation we can ask. Is this African? Yes. Is this *Palaver* or Conversation? Yes. Is this Theology? Yes, but in a new way. This is not the traditional classical theology of a science, of a systematic presentation of definitions, theses and propositions, of catalogued truths. This is the lived theology of African SCC members, especially lay people on the grassroots level. This is the lived experience of the Christian Churches in the light of God's Word.

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Compiled by:

Rev. Joseph G. Healey, MM
Maryknoll Society
P.O. Box 43058
00100 Nairobi, Kenya
0723-362-993 (Safaricom, Kenya)
973-216-4997 (AT&T, USA)
Email: JGHealey@aol.com
Skype: joseph-healey

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