

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The word “Almajiri” is a Hausa language which is derived from Arabic “Al-Muhajir”, that is; any Muslim who had migrated from any place to Madinah during the life time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), before the conquest of Mecca. It also refers to a person who migrates from his home to other place or to a popular teacher in the quest for Islamic knowledge, while Islamic Education is the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values by considering the principles of shariah (Islamic law). The paper looked at the history of Almajiri system of education from the pre-colonial administration down to the present time, how it has been bastardized, the menace it posed to the society and the effort made by the Government in combining the western system of education with Qur’anic system of education (Integration). The method used in gathering information concerning this study was the secondary source such as text books, Journals and electronic media. The findings of this study revealed that the Almajiri system of education that was established as an organized and comprehensive system of education for learning the Qur’an as well as other fields of Islamic knowledge before the coming of the colonial administration has now been bastardized. This is as a result of withdrawal of support from the government and the seizure of power from the Emirs by the colonial administration to date, which rendered the Almajiris to beg for livelihood. The menace of begging in the name of Almajiri has turned Islam to be disrespected in the eyes of adherents of other faiths, despite the fact that Islam frowns at begging except for necessity. The paper recommends that the Government should enhance the integration of the Qur’anic Schools that have been in operation in some States by giving them Federal recognition. Streets begging should be banned by the government and to be supported by religious leaders as well as all members of the community in order to protect the image of Islam and Muslims in general.

Keywords: *Almajiri, Islamic Education, Begging.*

Introduction

All thanks are due to Allah who creates and guides through His ultimate message, the *Qur’an*. May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon the seal of the messengers,

Muhammad, who explained the *Qur’an* and obliged every Muslim to learn and teach others. May Allah be pleased with the Companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon them) who learn the *Qur’an*

from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and dispersed to the nooks and crannies of the earth to teach others. Zubairu (2018:2) states that “the introduction of Islam into the Hausaland witnessed the establishment of centres of learning *Qur’an* as well as other disciplines in various places such as Gwandu, Kano, Katsina and Zazzau, among others”. Islamic education has a long history of existence in Nigeria, long before the advent of western education. It operated through the *Qur’anic* schools, whose main objective was to teach pupils the *Qur’an* and probably become Islamic scholars. The main curriculum of this system of education is the *Qur’an*. This is because it plays a vital role in the life of a Muslim spiritually, politically, socially, economically and so on. But the system was later relegated to the background by the colonial administration (Shittu and Olaofe 2015:38).

Today, the system is faced with challenges and abnormalities. A number of the *Almajiri* pupils never find their way back home. Many of them are subjected to exhaust most of their hours of learning on the streets in the name of seeking for livelihood, while some of them eventually drop out in the long run (Babagana, Danjuma et al, 2018:9). NSRP and UNICEF (2017:9-10) report that “Most of the reasons why *Almajiri* joining bad groups is hunger and starvation which make them roam up and down begging on the street. They are going on the street with nothing to eat so when you give them some small amount of money or something to eat, they get convinced easily to join that

group”, while others might end up as security guards, housekeepers, bus drivers, conductors, and so on. The lazy ones who are comfortable with the life on the street continue to beg throughout their lives. More so, today in Nigeria there are some children who roam the street begging in the name of *Almajiri*, where their schools could not be located. I.e they only beg but they are not students of any school. Such children are not students of any school but purely beggars. They consider begging as a source of generating livelihood (Shittu and Olaofe 2015:40). Therefore, this research assesses the *Almajiri* System of Education in Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework

The term *Almajiri* is a Hausa word for pupil or student. The word is derived from the Arabic term *al-muhajir*, meaning the migrant. The term has its origin in the famous migration of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) and his companions from Makkah to Madinah in the early days of Islam (Shittu and Olaofe 2015:39). Allah (S.W.A) says:

قَالَ تَعَالَى: ﴿وَالسَّابِقُونَ السَّابِقُونَ﴾

الْمُهَاجِرِينَ وَالْأَنْصَارَ وَالَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوهُمْ بِإِحْسَانٍ

رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ

تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا أَبَدًا

ذَٰلِكَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ ﴿١٠٠﴾ التوبة: ١٠٠

And the first to embrace Islam of the Muhajiroon (those who migrated from Makkah to AlMadinah) and the Ansar (the citizens of Al-Madinah who helped and gave aid to the Muhajiroon), and also those who followed them exactly (in Faith). Allah is well-pleased with them as they are well

pleased with Him. He has prepared for them Gardens under which rivers flow (Paradise), to dwell therein forever. That is the supreme success. (at-Taubah 9:100)

In Nigeria, the word *Almajiri* means those who left their villages or town, parents, relations, and friends in search of Islamic religious knowledge and scholarship (Husain 2015:15). The Almajiri system was established as an organized and comprehensive system of education for learning Islamic principles before the colonial administration in Nigeria. During that period in Northern Nigeria, the system was funded from the state treasury and 'zakat'(alm) funds under the control of the emirs. Apart from this, the community supported these *Almajiri*, most of whom came from faraway places to enroll in these schools. The students were at liberty to acquire vocational and occupation skills in between lessons and so were involved in farming, fishing, well construction, tailoring, and so on. (Babagana and Danjuma, 2018:8).

The arrival of the colonial administration in Nigeria has totally withdrawn the support that was given to the Almajiri system of education that was under the Emirs, and the Emirs became ordinary traditional ruler. The Emirs lost control of their territories and accepted their new roles, as mere traditional ruler. They also lost fundamental control of Almajiri School arguing that, they were religious schools. The British introduce "Karatun Boko" meaning western education (Sebastine & Obeta, 2015:2). This resulted to the collapse of Almajiri system of

education. The colonial masters made all their effort before leaving to ensure that those that would succeed would do the same to *Almajiri* system of education. Maigari (nd:396) stated that before the Colonial masters left, they had already groomed those who would replace them and continue to do exactly what they have been trained to do, which was marginalizing and disregarding the Quranic School system.

The *Almajiri* system of education today is faced with some challenges and abnormalities. Since the sources of funding have been cut, they were left "to whom it may concern". Many of them lost their lives through street violence, ritual killing, kidnapping, disease and hunger. Those who are able to survive the harsh condition are subjected to exhaust most of the profitable hours of learning on the streets in the name of seeking for their livelihood, while majority of them eventually drop out in the long run. Instead of being brought up educationally, morally and, above all, religiously. It is on record that the current insurgency in Nigeria and neighbouring countries handily recruit their foot soldiers from the *Almajiri* schools after brainwashing them that the Western system of education is a sin, while some of them end up as security guards, housekeepers, bus drivers, conductors, and so on. The lazy ones who are comfortable with the life on the street continue to beg throughout their lives. (Shittu and Olaofe: 2015:40)

Concept of Islamic Education

Islamic education is a way of learning and passing whatever is learnt in such

a way that Allah (S.W.T.) is regarded as the only Creator of everything and Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) as his Messenger. According to Haque (2010:3)

Islamic education is a system of learning which is to be developed and disseminated in a manner that recognizes Allah (S.W.T.) as Lord and Creator of the universe and man as His servant as well as Allah's vicegerent on earth. This knowledge is to be utilized in accordance with His will and any endeavour in this regard is to be considered as an act of *Ibadah* (worship).

By looking at the above quotation, Islamic education is a way of guiding people to know Allah as the Creator of the universe and the only One who deserves to be worshiped, and he (man) is to be Allah's vicegerent on earth as well as to consider whatever he is doing for the sake of Allah as an act of worship.

Meaning of Islamic Education

Islamic Education could be understood as the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values by considering the principles of *shariah* (Islamic law). This will give the students an idea of acquiring the knowledge not merely to satisfy their worldly benefits, but to develop as rational, righteous beings and brings about the spiritual, moral and physical welfare of their families as well as other people in general. Husain and Ashraf (1979) in Zubsairu (2018:19) stated that:

Islamic Education is an education which trains the sensibility of pupils in such a manner that in

their attitude to life, actions, decisions, and approach to all kinds of knowledge, they are governed by the spiritual and deeply felt ethical values of Islam.

Islamic education covers all human endeavours, be it religious, social, political as well as economical. That is to say, there is no aspect of life which is left untouched by Islam as the most complete way of life.

Aim and Objectives of Islamic Education

The main purpose of Islamic education is to produce a good man both morally and spiritually, who serves Allah in accordance with the Islamic principles. Through education of this type, a man shall get to know that his knowledge may be meaningless if it lacks *adab* (good manners) as well as /failure to know how Allah (S.W.T) should be served in the true sense. Through education, a man would also get to know his position as a member of the community and the contribution he can give to the community, as well as learns how to interact with other members in the community. That is why it is also aimed at producing well-mannered people that are rational and just in all aspects as stated by Aroosi (1980:122):

Islamic education aims at creating a type of thinking and a pattern of study which should be the basis of human behaviour and its peculiarity in relation to all activities undertaken as prescribed by Islamic jurisprudence.

The above quotation also shows that the aim of Islamic Education is to impart knowledge to the people, on

how to worship Allah the way He commanded us to worship Him; as well as groom them to be good Muslims in the community. This can be through educating them on how to discharge their responsibilities as Allah's vicegerents on earth by commanding people to do what is recommendable and leave what is evil (*al Amr bil Ma'ruf Wannahyi Anil Munkar*).

Makarantun Allo (Qur'anic/Slate School)

The Qur'anic School was established to teach children how to read, write and memorize the Glorious Qur'an. In addition to that, their mental and intellectual capabilities should also be developed. This form of School was established in houses, mosques, shade of trees and some public places. The establishment of such schools was not the responsibility of the federal, state or local government authorities, but was a communal responsibility. This form of School teaches children how to write and recite the Holy Qur'an as well as its memorization. (Abubakar, 1982) in Zubairu (2018:43). Sebastine & Obeta (2015:3) stated that 'the literacy outreach of *Almajiri* system is limited to ability to read and write Qur'an only. In addition to the above, NRN (2013:1) reports that "the *Almajirai* learn to read, write, and recite the Qur'an. Modern subjects and Islamic subjects, apart from the Qur'an, are not part of their curriculum. After their graduation, some of them enroll themselves in Makarantun Zaure (ilm schools) where they will learn other fields of knowledge like Fiqh, Seerah, Hadith, Tauheed, Luggaha etc. Hussain, (2015:22). However, the instructional

material in the Qur'anic Schools is the Glorious Qur'an, where students are expected to memorize part or all of it before graduation. More so, students are taught the rudimentary principles of ethical values such as how to respect their parents, teachers and elders in general and also how to behave at home and in public. According to Hassan in Galadanci (1993:100) stated that: "the pupils would know, for example, how to behave at home and in public and how to respect their parents, teachers and elders generally". This shows that the School does not focus only on learning how to read the Qur'an, but also, other aspects of religious and social life are also considered in such Schools. According to Hassan in Galadanci (1993:100):

This stage of education was comparable to primary stage in our present system of education. Having gone through the process of learning in this stage, the boys would proceed to the next stage while the girls, depending on their social status, could go to a lady teacher trainer; but this is not simple to get.

Most times, the graduates of the *Qur'anic* School would stop there after graduation. Only a few numbers of them proceed to *Ilm* School (advanced School). But the rest would continue with their parents' occupation or any occupation of their choices.

Background to the Almajiri System of Education in Nigeria

According to Abdul-Qadir (2003:21) "The *Almajiri* system in Northern Nigeria was said to have begun



around 11th century in Kanem-Borno and was later replicated in the Sokoto Caliphate after the victory of the Jihad led by Sheikh Uthman Ibn Fodio”. That was during the pre-colonial era. It was established as an organized and comprehensive system of education for learning Islamic principles, values, jurisprudence and theology. Idris and Mohammed (2018:8) observed that “The Danfodio revolution brought with it some modifications, the establishment of an inspectorate of Quranic literacy, the inspectors reported directly to the emir of the province, concerning all matters relating to school.” This made the system well-funded by the state treasury and the state zakkah funds, and was under the control of the emirs of the traditional government system that existed before the coming of the British. Since Islam encourages charity to a wayfarer and to a student of learning, the community as well readily supported these *Almajiri* most of whom came from faraway places to enroll in the Tsangaya/Qur’anic schools.

The *Almajiri* system, though funded, was not over dependent on the State. The students were at liberty to acquire a vocational and occupational skill in between their Islamic lessons and so were involved in farming, tailoring, fishing, trade, production, small businesses, well construction etc. which made some of them to be among the great farmers of the northern Nigerian cotton and groundnut pyramids (Sebastine & Obeta, 2015:1). They were among the traders in the commercial city of Kano. They were also among the leather shoe and bags makers in the

old Sokoto Empire. The cap weavers and Tailors in Zaria city were said to be *Almajiris*. Thus they formed the largest percentage of the community workforce and made significant contribution to the economy of the society. Probably that was the reason why Shittu and Olaofe (2015:37) stated that “the *Almajiri* system in Nigeria used to be a decent and reputable scheme that produced eminent scholars and policy makers. It got support and solidarity from all stakeholders and propelled the nation to enviable status in literacy, social, diplomatic and economic spheres, to mention a few.” The system also produced the judges, clerks, teachers etc. and laid an elaborate system of administration in Northern Nigeria. *Almajiri* system was a civilizing agent second to none, but the system, as practiced today, in Northern Nigeria, is completely bastardized Hussain (2015:17-18).

Almajiri teachers and their pupils also freely provided their community with Islamic Education. There were many *Almajiri* schools in Northern Nigeria through which writing came to the North first before any other region. Apart from being responsible for the literacy of hundreds of millions of our children over a span of ten centuries, more importantly, the *Almajiri* system is the only one today known in the Muslim World that has retained the reproduction of the Qur’an in writing direct from memory. Without looking at any copy, an *Alamma* (the person who memorizes the Qur’an) studiously writes the entire Qur’an portion by portion, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, beginning with all its consonants, then he returns to add all

its vowels, then its full stops and commas and so many little things that vary from page to page. He does all these without a single mistake and despite the abundant verses or portions that appear similar in different places. Nigerian Alamma who reproduces it direct from memory may not even be sure of his next meal but he is never bothered since he is already used to such hardship from his early days as a learner.

Almajiri System of Education in Contemporary Nigeria

In the contemporary Nigeria, the *Almajiri* system of education has been completely bastardized and faced with some challenges and abnormalities, which made most of them exhausting most of their profitable hours of learning on the streets in the name of seeking for their livelihood. Therefore, most of them end as rituals victims, security guards, housekeepers, bus drivers, conductors, singers and so on, rather than being brought up educationally, morally and, above all, religiously. It is on record that the current insurgency in Nigeria and neighboring countries recruit their soldiers from the Almajiri schools after brainwashing them that the Western system of education is a sin, (NSRP AND UNICEF 2017:11). More so, the lazy ones among the Almajiris who are comfortable with the life on the street continue to beg throughout their lives. (Shittu and Olaofe: 2015:40)

Therefore, the Federal government authority took special interest in integrating the Almajiri system of education into the main stream educational system in order to

improve the educational sector as well as curtailing vices and victimization in the country. The Programme, would also involve acquisition of various skills to enable them participate more positively in the development of their immediate environment and the nation at large. This development is an indication that the Federal Authority has not turned a blind eye to the menace of the *Almajiri* system (Hussain, 2015:25-26).

Therefore, the Federal Government has constructed classrooms for smooth implementation of the programme in some parts of the country where the Almajiri system is being practiced. The Federal Authority sometimes collaborates with the State authorities in providing infrastructures, while the States take care of staffing and pupils enrolment. Among the benefiting States in this intervention are Niger, Jigawa, Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba, Yobe, Adamawa, Bauchi and Katsina for the al-Majiri pupils to be properly educated. Shittu and Olaofe (2015:42-43)

Who is a Beggar?

A beggar is any person who begs for assistance on the street or from house to house as a result of some deformity or disability. Children who roam about with the purpose of getting assistance or alms (sadaqah) could also be considered as beggars whether they are students of slate/Qur'ani School or not. Begging has no root in Islam; as it was strongly discouraged by the Prophet (may peace be upon him) in many Ahadith. Some of these are as follows:

It was narrated from Hamzah bin ‘Abdullâh bin ‘Umar that he heard his father say: “The Messenger of Allah said: ‘A man will keep on begging from people until he comes on the Day of Resurrection with not a bit of flesh on his face.’”(Muslim, vol.3, 2398, p;84)

Begging is no more than laziness and manipulating humanitarian feelings of the community. Such people do not even abstain from interpreting the idea of *tawakkul* (putting one’s trust in God) according to themselves. They deem it *tawakkul* to sit back idly and expect some things from others.

It was narrated that Abū Hurairah said: “I heard the Messenger of Allah say: ‘For one of you to go out and gather firewood on his back, then give it in charity and make himself independent of people thereby, is better than asking a man who may give to him or withhold from him. And the upper hand is better than the lower hand, and start with those who are under your care.’”(Muslim, vol.ii, 2400; pp.;84-85).

Begging is a popular attitude in Nigeria, particularly in Northern part of the country. Although there are evidences of existence of poverty in Nigeria, the act of begging is supposed to be the last resort to earning a living. As it is in the following Hadith:

It was narrated that Qabisah bin Mulchâriq Al-Hilâlî said: “I incurred a debt (in order to reconcile between two parties) and I came to the Messenger of Allah to ask him (for help) with it. He said: ‘Stay with us until the charity comes, and we will order that something be given to you.’ Then

he said: ‘O Qabisah, asking for help is not permissible except in one of three cases: A man who has incurred a debt (in order to reconcile between two parties), for whom it is permissible to ask for help until he has paid it off, then he should refrain; a man who has been stricken by a calamity that has destroyed all his wealth, for whom it is permissible to ask for help until he gets enough to get by’– or he said –‘he gets enough to meet his basic needs; and a man who is stricken by poverty and three men of wisdom among his people acknowledge that so and-so has been stricken by poverty, then it becomes permissible for him to ask for help until he gets enough to get by’– or he said- ‘to meet his basic needs. Apart from these cases, asking for help, O Qabisah, is unlawful, and the one who begs is consuming something unlawful.” (Muslim, vol.3, 24041, pp; 87-88).

The Prophet (peace and blessings upon him) regarded begging as disgrace to humanity.

Furthermore, it was narrated that Abū Hurairah said: “The Messenger of Allah said: ‘Whoever begs from the people in order to accumulate wealth, it is as if he is asking for a live coal, so let him ask for a little or a lot.’”(Muslim, vol.3, 2399, p; 84).

There is no other religion or moral system which teaches humans the ways to preserve their integrity, morality and honour as much as Islam does. The Prophet (may peace be upon him) tried to keep Muslims away from such an evil as begging on the one hand, on the other hand, he

advised them to work hard and earn a living.

The *Almajiri* system of education was primarily funded by scholarships from the Emirates system, members of the community and parents also contributed through *Sadaqah* (Giving of alms). However, the British sidelined the *Almajiri* system after their 1904 invasion as they did not recognize it as a standard educational system, ceased official funding and established a new system of Western Education. Though funding went down, interest in *Almajiri* remained the same. As contributions from parents and community members were not enough to sustain the practice, the students started begging. According to Abdul Qadir (2003), in Taiwo (2013: 67):

The British invaded the region and killed most of the Emirs and disposed some. The Emirs lost control of their territories and accepted their new roles, as mere traditional rulers. They also lost fundamental control of the Almajiri system. The British deliberately abolished state funding in respect to the system arguing that, they were religious schools. With loss of support from the government, its immediate community and the helpless Emirs, the Almajiri system collapsed like a pile of cards. Karatun Boko, western education was introduced and funded instead. The pupils now turned, Almajirai together with their Mallams, having no financial support resorted to begging and other menial jobs for survival. This is certainly the genesis of the predicament of the Almajiri system today. Hence begging became the order of the day.

With loss of support from the government and the helpless Emirs, the Almajiri system thus collapsed. The responsibility of the Almajiri was then taken over by the local scholars who deemed it a moral and religious duty to educate these pupils for the sake of Allah. Although there was scarcity of funds and overwhelming number of pupils to cater for, the system continued to flourish with the support of the immediate community and begging was still not a norm.

These children would be seen everywhere in the society from one street to another, house to house, vehicle to vehicle. They move everywhere like Markets, car parks, restaurants, university gates, hotels, ATM machines etc. They became a burden as well as nuisance to the society. They roam about, dirty, tattered, bare feet, pale with flies pecking on their cracked lips and dry faces, which is filled with rashes or ringworm. Some of them sleep on worn-out mat in an uncompleted building most at times. Some people give them a stipend or leftovers out of sympathy or after exploiting them for menial jobs. Many of them eventually became traders, drivers and so on. Those who could not make it are condemned to menial jobs, since they have no skills at hand. They resort to wheelbarrow pushing, louting and so on. The nomadic search for livelihood and the struggle to support the *Mallam* take much of their time rather than engage in learning.

Findings

The following are the findings of the research:



1. The Almajiri system of education was established as an organized and comprehensive system of education for learning Islamic principles, values, jurisprudence and theology before the coming of the Colonial administration, with support from the Emirs and the community.
2. The Almajiri system of education has now been bastardized as a result of withdrawal of support from the government and the seizure of power from the Emirs by the colonial administration to-date, which rendered the Almajiris to begging for livelihood.
3. The menace of begging in the name of Almajiri has turned Islam to be disrespected in the eyes of adherents of other faiths, despite the fact that Islam frowns at begging except for necessity.
4. Government has intervened in the Almajiri system of education in order to enhance it as well as combining it with western education for betterment of their lives.

Conclusion

Islam encourages acquisition of knowledge and attached a great reward to whoever learns the Qur'an and teaches it as well as other fields of knowledge. The Prophets (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) says:

عن عثمان رضي الله عنه عن النبي صلي
الله عليه و سلم قال: خيركم من تعلم
القرآن و علمه. رواه البخاري

The Prophet (SAW) said: "the best among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it. Khan (ND) (Bukhari, Vol.vi pp;501-502 no;545)

Islam also forbids begging and attached a great repercussion to whoever engages himself/herself in that, as it is in the aforementioned Ahadith reported by Muslim. Almajiri in a real sense is not a beggar, this is because, begging (Bara) and learning (Almajiranci) are two different things; in every prospect we should try to differentiate between them. Almajiri as mentioned above could be linked to those who migrated from Makkah to Madinah during the life time of the prophet (may peace be upon him). But in Nigeria today, Almajirai turned to be beggars, where they could be found everywhere roaming the street at any time begging in a disgraceful manner. In fact, you hardly differentiate between their time for study and for begging. This is because, some of them mostly spend their time begging, and probably that is the reason why they are referred to as beggars not learners. Begging (Bara) as a syndrome to Almajiranci had caused grievous hurt to the system, but it does not render the system to be totally evil. This is because, the product of the Almajiri system of education could be seen everywhere in the northern part of the country as respectful scholars. That is the aim of the Islamic education, but not to produce people that would be nuisance and jeopardy to the society.

Recommendations

1. Government should enhance the integration of the Qur'anic School that has been in operation in some states by given them Federal recognition. Since the integration is all about merging some element of Basic Education into the Qur'anic school curriculum

- without interfering with the goals of the Qur'anic education. These shall be with the view to improve their capacities and empowering them.
2. There is need for the government to train the teachers of the Qur'anic schools on their responsibility towards handling, educating and nurturing the children entrusted to them. And to provide them with conducive learning environments and inculcate in the learners, knowledge of some Islamic rites that will be taught from the Qur'an, Hadith, Fiqh, Surah and Tahdhib.
 3. Government should construct a big school that would accommodate like five Almajiri schools in one place and employ their teachers to teach in such school, rather than living the schools the way they are. But, feeding should be from government's pocket.
 4. Begging is un-Islamic, it should be banned by the government and supported by religious leaders and people in the community in order to protect the image of Islam. That is to say, any teacher of the Almajiris caught sending them to beg should be punished by the government and no religious leader should be against that. Rather, they should support government for doing so.

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