

INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE,
COLONIAL DISRUPTION AND POSTCOLONIAL
ENVIRONMENTAL DECOLONISATION IN ESAN, EDO
STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Africa's indigenous environmental knowledge and traditional conservation approaches have attracted substantial academic interest, whereas the role of totemic institutions in how the Esan people of Edo State, Nigeria managed their environment has barely registered in historical scholarship. Drawing on indigenous cosmological beliefs, oral traditions, colonial administrative records, and contemporary environmental policies, the study explores how totemism and associated taboos, known as *ebane* or *awaa*, functioned as informal yet effective regulatory mechanisms for biodiversity protection and sustainable ecosystem management in pre-colonial Esan society. The paper investigates the disruptive impact of British colonial governance on these indigenous conservation practices through the colonial legislative instruments and judicial codes which reclassified communal territories as state-controlled assets, dismantled clan-based stewardship, criminalised totemic prohibitions, and prioritised resource extraction over sustainability. The paper traces post-colonial efforts to reclaim indigenous heritage through the resurgence of traditional festivals, language revitalisation, and the integration of traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation strategies. It concludes that the marginalisation of totemic cultural practices under colonialism precipitated

ecological imbalances that persist in contemporary Esan communities, and that effective conservation requires integrating indigenous knowledge with modern strategies to achieve sustainable development.

Keywords: Totemic taboos, Natural resource conservation, Colonialism, Esan people, Indigenous ecological knowledge, Cultural decolonisation.

Introduction

This paper examines the role of totemic taboo observances in natural resource conservation among the Esan people of Edo State, Nigeria, from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period. It explores how indigenous belief systems, particularly totemism and associated taboos, functioned as informal regulatory mechanisms to protect biodiversity and manage ecosystems sustainably, as well as the interplay between totemic taboos and colonial interventions, highlighting their implications for natural resource management. Furthermore, it investigates how post-colonial Esan societies have engaged in cultural decolonisation to reclaim indigenous ecological knowledge and integrate it with contemporary conservation strategies.

The Esan people of Nigeria's Edo State historically relied on totemic taboos known as *ebane* or *awaa* (forbidden) to regulate human interaction with natural resources. These taboos, rooted in cosmological beliefs, prohibited the exploitation of sacred animals, plants, and landscapes, thereby fostering environmental stewardship.¹ The place of totems and taboos in Esan culture and environmental governance was affirmed by a resident, Mr. Anebuokhae, thus:

Eghe-agbonba, emin-nane, bi eneneole, okpa-elekhin
ramude-enaden-na maiman-mudian bhodonomin,
adoghere adonor-re bho-otoesan.²

Interpretation:

Traditionally, totems and their adherents were bound by a deep spiritual relationship, making totems an important institution for maintaining peace, social order, and communal harmony in Esan society.

The foregoing reveals that the prohibitive cultural laws enacted in the olden days protected the local environment and native culture by ensuring peace and stability in the society. Indeed, in many African societies, during British colonial rule, the imposition of foreign governance systems and economic policies undermined these indigenous conservation practices, often prioritising resource extraction over sustainability.³

Pre-colonial Esan society was organised around patrilineal Egbele (clans), which functioned as the primary social, political, and religious units. Each clan traced its lineage to a common ancestor and occupied distinct territories governed by Odiowe (elders) and spiritual leaders. A defining feature of these clans was their association with specific totems – animals, plants, or natural phenomena revered as spiritual guardians of their land and people. These totems symbolised the clan's identity, history, and covenant with the divine, reinforcing communal cohesion and ecological stewardship.⁴

The sanctions associated with the violation of the totems transcended symbolic ritualism; they were rooted in a deeply held conviction that violating the totem would destabilise the moral and ecological order, precipitating disasters such as famine, pestilence, or communal strife. Totems, called *ulen*, *ebane*, *awaa*, or *anee* in Esan, are revered living or non-living symbols that carry positive or negative cosmological significance for lineages, tribes, and villages in Esan.⁵ This framework of taboos operated as a mechanism of ecological governance over time. This paper reveals the ecological

implications of attributing spiritual consequence to the violation of nature. It opined that such cultural practices among the Esan ensures the protection of keystone species and maintaining biodiversity. Subsequently, the social change marked by the incursion of the British from 1900–1960 witnessed the imposition of socioeconomic policies that undermined these indigenous conservation practices, often prioritising resource extraction over sustainability. Consequently, cultural decolonisation in post-colonial Esan reflects a complex interplay between reclaiming indigenous identity and adapting to the lingering influences of colonial structures. This paper examines this historical change in Esan over time.

Conceptual Note

Totemic institutions in Esan functioned as sacred ecology. This is a system wherein cosmological beliefs, social organisation, and environmental stewardship were inextricably intertwined, and their trajectory from pre-colonial stewardship through colonial rupture to post-colonial reclamation can be understood through historical ecology. Totemism is neither animal worship nor primitive superstition but a sophisticated system of collective representation through which clans constitute their social identity and moral order, with the totem functioning simultaneously as a name, an emblem, and a cosmological principle classifying the universe into sacred and profane domains.⁶

For the Esan, the totemic animals and plants (*den*, *ebane*, *awaa*, *anee*) serve as what Durkheim termed the “totemic principle,” the externalised force of collective consciousness binding clan members to one another and to their ecological landscape, which illuminates why violating totemic prohibitions was believed to precipitate communal disasters such as famine or pestilence. The *ebane* were not merely conservation rules but cosmological commitments embedding

ecological stewardship into social reproduction, extending Durkheim's framework by recognising that the "negative cult" of taboos,⁷ that is, prohibitions against killing, eating, or harvesting totemic species, operated as an informal but remarkably effective regulatory mechanism for biodiversity protection.

In Esan, the sacred groves (*Oto-Ebo*) dedicated to deities (*Osenobulua*) functioned as biodiversity reservoirs maintained not through state enforcement but through the spiritual authority of clan elders (*Enijie*) and age-grade associations, and this system exemplifies traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) as a way of building on experience and adapting to changes. Elders and spiritual leaders served as custodians of ecological knowledge transmitted through oral traditions, folklore, and rituals, while the taboo system itself constituted adaptive management regulating hunting seasons, rotational farming, and forest use, demonstrating that indigenous governance operated through living, evolving practices rather than static prescriptions.

Elsewhere, in East Africa, the Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania maintain complex relationships with certain animal species that reflect their pastoral lifestyle and environmental adaptation.⁸ While the Maasai are perhaps best known for their lion hunting traditions, they also maintain strong taboos against the consumption of wild animals, preferring the meat of their domestic cattle, sheep, and goats. This dietary preference, rooted in cultural belief rather than ecological science, has nonetheless functioned as an effective conservation mechanism, reducing pressure on wild game populations in Maasai territories. The Maasai also maintain sacred groves and watering holes where hunting is prohibited, creating ecological refugia that support diverse species during dry seasons. Indeed, culture provides the basis of social relations in society. It determines what is considered ideal in society.

These manifest in taboos restricting the social behaviour of members of society. Taboos often change as their importance as a social regulatory code transforms over time. While a taboo is a product of cultural history, it could arise from a deep subconscious restriction that connects several generations of people.

In Ghana, it has been noted that sacred groves function as effective conservation zones where traditional management protects threatened species and maintains biodiversity in ways formal protected areas often fail to replicate.⁹ This offers a direct analogue to Esan totemic protection of species such as the leopard, integrating Esan totemic practices with modern conservation strategies.

The eco-political transposition, i.e., the subordination of indigenous environmental knowledge to imperial economic agendas, captures the colonial disruption.¹⁰ In Nigeria, colonial forestry legislation, enacted under the rhetoric of environmental protection, was designed to ensure the continued availability of raw materials. The devaluation of indigenous knowledge enabled the logging of sacred groves, the damming of sacred rivers, and the commercial hunting of totemic species, with the near-eradication of some rare species, once reserved for royal regalia, exemplifying how colonial commodification destroyed the material and symbolic foundations of indigenous conservation. The post-colonial period offers a lens of cultural decolonisation and community-based natural resource management (CBNRM), though Nigerian independence in 1960 did not immediately restore indigenous governance; rather, the Land Use Act of 1978 further centralised land ownership under state control, perpetuating colonial patterns of ecological disregard and leaving traditional authorities without territorial sovereignty to enforce customary stewardship.

As contemporary conservation increasingly recognises the value of community-based resource management, the Esan experience demonstrates that integrating indigenous ecological knowledge into national conservation policy can strengthen biodiversity protection, restore degraded landscapes, and promote more equitable environmental governance. This model posits that totemic taboos constituted a functional system of environmental governance rooted in cosmological beliefs that achieved biodiversity protection through social and spiritual sanction rather than state coercion, while colonial rule represented a structural rupture that alienated land, criminalised customary practices, and imposed extractive economic logics incompatible with sustainable indigenous management.

Post-colonial environmental governance remains haunted by colonial legacies, evidenced by the continued marginalisation of traditional authorities and the persistence of state-centric land management frameworks.¹¹ Nevertheless, cultural decolonisation offers a pathway toward sustainable governance through the deliberate integration of indigenous knowledge systems with modern conservation science. This framework positions the Esan case not as an isolated ethnographic curiosity but as a critical instance of broader African and global patterns in which indigenous environmental knowledge has been systematically devalued, disrupted, and potentially, reclaimed as a foundation for sustainable development, demonstrating that the recovery of totemic institutions and their sacred ecology is not merely cultural preservation but an essential strategy for addressing contemporary environmental crises through the revitalisation of cosmologically grounded, community-based stewardship systems.

Pre-Colonial Indigenous Conservation Systems and Environmental Governance in Esan

Before colonial rule, the Esan people had a well-established system for managing their natural resources. The region was predominantly agrarian, with communities relying on forests for timber, fuel, and game. Villages maintained vast forests and farmlands, which were collectively owned and managed under the guidance of traditional rulers and elders. This communal approach ensured sustainable use of resources, allowing for rotational farming and hunting practices that preserved the ecological balance. Esan is characterised by its lush vegetation, primarily consisting of moist deciduous forests. This region is rich in timber and various types of forest wood, as well as animals that are regarded as sacred.¹² The forests in Esanland were deeply revered and often isolated, surrounded by woods perceived as harbouring evil spirits. This reverence indicates that the attitudes of the Esan people towards their forests may have originated from a sense of fear. The fear of the custodians of the land through the agency of totemic taboo observances affected the lives of the people in several ways.

Most of the totems, plants, or animals in Esan society are chosen based on a unique historical experience, thereby making the totems a source of local history. For instance, some animals are believed to conceal paths or reveal information about enemy camps, saving people from being captured or killed. Examples include the leopard, hawk, sheep, partridge, bush dog, rabbit, snake, and crocodile, among others.¹³ Certain animals are seen as providing food or shelter to people in hopeless situations. Therefore, whenever there is a violation of a totemic taboo, such as eating a forbidden animal, certain rituals would be performed to avoid negative consequences. Hence, in pre-colonial Esan, totemic taboos determined what they could eat and not eat, trees they could cut down and not

cut down, and sometimes where they could marry and not marry. In this way, totemic beliefs perceived specific animals or plants as sacred, serving as informal conservation mechanisms. These beliefs fostered respect for biodiversity, as harming a totem was akin to disrespecting historical heritage, thus deterring the exploitation of these species.

Traditional ecological knowledge plays a crucial role in resource management in Africa. Elders and community leaders were custodians of this knowledge, passing it down through generations. This system of governance was largely effective in conserving biodiversity before colonial policies disrupted these practices. Emphasis would be placed on understanding these indigenous systems that are essential for contemporary conservation efforts, highlighting their potential relevance in modern environmental management strategies.¹⁴ For example, the pre-colonial Esan communities maintained sustainable resource practices rooted in cultural and spiritual values, which included sacred forests (Oto-Ebo). These groves were dedicated to deities (Osenobulua) and were protected from exploitation, serving as biodiversity reservoirs. The land was held collectively, with seasonal fallowing and rotational farming ensuring soil fertility. Hunting was not left out, as there were taboos that restricted hunting during breeding seasons. These laws were enforced by age grades to ensure compliance.¹⁵ These practices reflected a symbiotic relationship between culture and ecology, ensuring long-term sustainability.

Though unwritten, these indigenous ecological practices proved remarkably effective, operating through customs deeply rooted in a worldview that saw nature not merely as an economic resource but as inherently sacred. Knowledge of the environment was passed down orally through folklore, proverbs, rituals, and community laws, with elders, clergy, hunters, and farmers serving as its primary keepers. These

tradition-bearers possessed an intimate understanding of seasonal cycles, soil fertility, forest regeneration, and animal behaviour, recognising that the community's survival hinged on maintaining harmony between human needs and environmental sustainability.

A cornerstone of indigenous conservation was the creation of sacred forests and groves, regarded as dwelling places for ancestral spirits or deities and therefore strictly protected from exploitation. These unofficial conservation zones banned tree-felling, hunting, and farming, and the spiritual authority attached to them ensured strong community compliance. As a result, these sites preserved biodiversity, safeguarded water sources, and allowed the natural environment to rejuvenate. Traditional hunting practices reflected a similarly sophisticated grasp of ecological balance. Rather than allowing free-for-all harvesting, hunting was governed by seasonal restrictions and cultural taboos. Certain species were protected during breeding seasons to ensure population recovery, while young hunters were taught to avoid animals considered spiritually significant or ecologically vital. Violating these rules invited spiritual retribution, which in turn reinforced adherence to conservation norms.¹⁶ For example, taboos served as a critical regulatory tool. Felling trees without approval from elders and priests was forbidden, and trees with medicinal or wildlife value received special protection. These were not empty religious gestures; they carried real ecological weight, preventing overexploitation and ensuring the sustainable use of timber, herbs, fruits, and game. Cultural festivals and rituals reinforced this conservation ethic, weaving environmental stewardship into the very fabric of communal identity.

The political structure that sustained these practices was decentralised yet hierarchical. At the top sat the *Enijie*, the traditional monarch who oversaw village affairs, supported

by councils of elders, lineage groups, and age grades. Land was treated as communal property held in trust for present and future generations, with traditional leaders controlling its allocation to prevent reckless individual exploitation. Age-grade associations enforced environmental laws and organised communal labour for maintaining dams, clearing shared lands, and fighting bush fires, building social cohesion alongside sustainability. Religious institutions rounded out this governance by managing sacred sites and weaving resource stewardship into ritual life.¹⁷ Together, these arrangements ensured that environmental care was not the preserve of a few leaders but a shared responsibility embedded in the everyday life of Esan society.

Colonial Disruption

As part of the British imperial conquest of groups in Nigeria, an Expeditionary Force in 1901 laid siege on some Esan communities, especially Uromi, for over 45 days (March 16, 1901, to April 30, 1901) and conquered the community.¹⁸ With the effective occupation of Uromi by the British, the territory of Ishan had come under colonial rule (1900-1960). Meanwhile, the whole of Nigeria had earlier been administratively divided into Provinces headed by Residents, with the former Benin kingdom being one of the provinces with headquarters in Benin City. The Benin Province was divided into five divisions of Benin, Ishan, Kukuruku, Agbor, and Asaba, headed by District Officers, while the Ishan Division was further subdivided into five districts of Ubiaja, Uromi, Irrua, Ekpoma, and Ewohimi under the supervision of native kings with headquarters at Ubiaja. The colonial regime introduced two pillars of administration to administer the Nigerian territory; these were the Native Administration and Native Courts. The Native Administration replaced the indigenous form of political governance, while the Native Court took over

indigenous judicial practice.¹⁹ Hence, the colonial encounter in Esanland in the late 19th and early 20th century fundamentally transformed land use and spiritual ecological systems, as the British administrators imposed Eurocentric governance models that marginalised indigenous cosmologies.

The laws and customs of the Esan people were unique until they had contact with the Westerners. Lands were no longer held by individuals or the community. Hence, viewing Esan totemic traditions and sacred groves through enlightenment rationalism and Victorian Christian biases, colonial officials dismissed these practices as primitive superstitions, framing them as obstacles to “civilised” economic progress. The imposition of colonial rule often prioritised economic exploitation over the sustainable practices that had been integral to Esan culture. The British sought to exploit the rich natural resources of the region, including agricultural products and minerals. This pursuit often led to the over-exploitation of these resources, undermining traditional conservation practices that had previously ensured sustainability within the community. For instance, the British authorities replaced Esanland’s clan-based land stewardship with individualistic tenure laws like the Crown Lands Ordinance (1903), which reclassified communal territories as state-controlled or privatised assets.²⁰ This legal shift severed the spiritual bond between clans and their totemic landscapes, enabling forests protected as sacred groves to be logged for timber or cleared for rubber plantations (e.g., the Benin Rubber Scheme). Sacred rivers were dammed or mined, disrupting ecosystems central to clan rituals. The prohibitions against killing totemic animals were undermined. Leopard skins, once reserved for royal regalia, became lucrative exports, precipitating a near eradication of the big cat. Monocultural farming replaced traditional methods. Cash-crop economies

(e.g., palm oil, cocoa) displaced traditional rotational farming, degrading soil fertility and biodiversity-dependent spiritual practices.

The 1914 Land and Native Rights Ordinance, for example, alienated communal lands, eroding the authority of clan heads (Enijie) to enforce totemic taboos. Missionary activities further devalued indigenous beliefs, replacing them with Judeo-Christian doctrines that lacked ecological stewardship frameworks. The introduction of firearms exacerbated overhunting, leading to the near extinction of totemic species. The erosion of totemic taboos under colonialism illustrates the tension between indigenous ecological knowledge and imperial economic agendas. The British implemented various policies that allowed them to take control of Esan's forests. They created reserves and granted licenses to foreign companies for timber extraction, effectively depriving local communities of access to their natural resources. The exploitation of timber resources became a focal point for colonial economic interests. Companies such as the United African Company (UAC) began large-scale logging operations without consideration for cultural practices.

In addition, the British encouraged the cultivation of cash crops like rubber and palm trees in Esan. This shift required larger areas of land than were previously used for subsistence farming, leading to further alienation of communal lands. As individuals began to claim ownership over rubber plantations, the traditional communal land tenure system was increasingly undermined. The introduction of cash crops was aligned with British industrial needs in Europe as a response to the high demand for raw materials. The focus on export-oriented agriculture transformed local economies but often at the expense of the local culture of environmental conservation. This was legalised through the imposition of colonial forestry legislation in Nigeria with the rhetoric of environmental

protection, but the aim of the legislation was to ensure the continued availability of timber products for export.

Colonial forestry legislation entailed the reservation of land for state-controlled forest estates. In effect, the colonial administration set a target in the early twentieth century to reserve 25 per cent of Nigeria's land area, mainly in the country's southern regions, which were rich in forests. The 1940s largely met this objective. This policy framework paved the way for the integration of communal forests in Esaland into state-controlled forest reserves, hence redefining indigenous land tenure systems. This was further reinforced through the use of forest ordinances, which granted ownership to the colonial government while customary rights were limited to privileges. This transformation was intended to nurture assets for imperial benefit, not actually a regulatory endeavour.

The implementation of forest policies by colonial authorities further undermined indigenous natural resource management systems. Colonial authorities created forest reserves for the exploitation of timber for export. This, although done in the name of conserving the environment, further excluded indigenous people from their lands, which had been designated for hunting, gathering, and farming activities. They were further prevented from accessing forests, which had been their source of identity. Colonial forestry regulations' enforcement also failed to take into account the spiritual value of certain areas. Sacred forests and ritual sites, which were previously conserved through various cultural practices, were in some cases incorporated into colonial forests without any recognition of their cultural value. The common practices that had been instrumental in these areas were undermined or rendered obsolete in the new order.

Colonial legal systems further discredited indigenous environmentalism by replacing indigenous law systems with

Western law systems. Environmental regulations were introduced under colonial law systems, but they were unaware of indigenous environmentalism. Traditional authorities, who had previously been responsible for communal resource management, were made to play junior roles in the new colonial systems. This, therefore, marked the beginning of the disconnection between indigenous culture and environmental management. The change in indigenous conservation systems had some social consequences. With the decline of communal land ownership, people started claiming individual ownership of land-based resources. This, therefore, created some new relationships, which were often characterised by conflicts. There was no moral authority to control environmental exploitation, especially due to the lack of traditional control systems. The post-independence era inherited these extractive systems, with multinational corporations and state policies perpetuating colonial patterns of ecological disregard. However, despite these changes, some elements of the indigenous conservation practices survived the colonial era. This is because these practices had been deeply rooted in the culture and beliefs of the people, and many of the communities continued with their cultural taboos and community environmental practices despite the lack of recognition by the colonial government.

Post-Colonial Cultural Decolonisation Efforts

The independence of Nigeria in 1960 heralded a new era in environmental governance. However, the immediate post-independence period saw limited attention to environmental issues at the national level. The focus was primarily on economic development, including agricultural expansion and industrialisation, often at the expense of environmental sustainability. In Esan, the impact of these national policies was evident in the extensive clearing of forests for cash crop

plantations, particularly rubber and oil palm. While these activities boosted economic growth, they also led to significant deforestation and soil degradation.²¹ Subsequently, the Federal Government enacted the Land Use Act of 1978, which centralised land ownership under state control. This legislation had profound implications for natural resource management in Esan, as it shifted authority away from traditional custodians to state actors. The Land Use Act also had unintended consequences for communal land management. Traditional landholding systems, which emphasised equitable distribution and sustainable use, were often undermined by state interventions. This led to conflicts over land ownership and usage rights, further complicating environmental conservation efforts in Esan.²²

In response to growing environmental challenges, Edo State, under which Esan falls, began implementing environmental policies in the 1990s. Notable among these was the establishment of the Edo State Environmental Protection Agency (ESEPA) in 1992. The agency was tasked with addressing issues such as deforestation, waste management, and water pollution.²³ For Esan communities, this period marked a transition from reliance on traditional practices to a hybrid system where modern laws complemented indigenous knowledge. Community-based initiatives, such as tree-planting campaigns and the promotion of agroforestry, gained traction. These programmes often involved collaborations between local governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international development agencies. One notable initiative was the "Green Esan Project," launched in 1995, which aimed to restore degraded lands and promote environmental education in schools. This project emphasised the importance of youth involvement in conservation efforts to promote a new generation of environmental stewards.²⁴

The post-colonial period witnessed efforts by the Esan people to reclaim their cultural heritage. For instance, the Esan language, which was relegated and subordinated to the English language, became a focal point of cultural decolonisation. The imposition of the English language during colonial rule as the *lingua franca* marginalised indigenous languages. To redress this cultural assault, post-colonial Esan intellectuals and educators advocated for the inclusion of the Esan language in schools and media.²⁵ These efforts were aimed at resuscitating pride in Esan heritage, such as totemic taboos, as well as ensuring the sustainable conservation of the environment.

Despite the complex environmental challenges Esan faces in the 21st century, such as climate change, population pressure, and illegal logging, government enforcement mechanisms in synergy with grassroots movements have played a critical role in promoting environmental awareness. Historically, external interventions in Esan, such as those introduced during colonial rule, were top-down and often alienated local communities. Today, partnerships between government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) allow a more inclusive approach. Involving local stakeholders, these collaborations promise to bridge the gaps in policy enforcement and foster a sustainable environment through cultural renaissance.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that totemic taboos among the Esan people were far more than cultural or religious observances. Totemic taboos constituted a sophisticated indigenous system of environmental governance that conserved biodiversity and maintained ecological balance long before modern conservation science emerged. Through the protection of totemic species, especially the leopard, and

the preservation of sacred groves (Oto-Ebo), Esan society institutionalised sustainable resource management that safeguarded keystone species, protected forest ecosystems, and regulated hunting. Built on environmental integrity with communal well-being, these practices were enforced by clan elders (Enijie) and transmitted across generations as ecological knowledge.

British colonial rule profoundly disrupted this conservation framework through Eurocentric policies that alienated communal lands, criminalised customary forest use, encouraged commercial logging and monocultural cash-crop production, and dismissed indigenous beliefs as primitive. The resulting erosion of sacred groves, decline of totemic species, weakening of traditional authority, and loss of ecological knowledge accelerated environmental degradation and cultural dislocation. Nevertheless, Esan communities demonstrated resilience through cultural defiance and the continued preservation of traditional ecological knowledge in oral traditions and local practices. As contemporary conservation increasingly recognises the value of community-based resource management, the Esan experience underscores that integrating indigenous ecological knowledge into Nigerian conservation policy can strengthen biodiversity protection, restore degraded landscapes, and promote more equitable and culturally grounded environmental governance.

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