DESPITE A FLAWED SYSTEM, NORTHERN UGANDANS SEEK HOPE THROUGH EDUCATION

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A summer teacher exchange program immerses the author into the severely flawed rural Ugandan education system where students face huge class sizes, teacher absenteeism, lack of resources, and violent discipline. Despite the hardships and struggles of daily life, students place a high price on their education, making financial and personal sacrifices to overcome obstacles and attend school. This generation of students is growing up in a culture of war, never knowing peace. These are students who view education as the key to a peaceful and prosperous future for themselves and their country.

"The hunger that has hope for its satisfaction does not kill." - African Proverb

The village of Anaka in northern Uganda rises with the sun. Teenagers cart yellow jerry cans to the village's sole water pump and drink from their hands before filling jugs for their families. Leathered men looking older than their years carry sickles and hand plows to fields of maize and nuts. Women shuffle down the red clay roads, taking their goats to graze. And as the sun comes up through the netless, crooked goal posts of the soccer field, students in green skirts and slacks, white dress shirts, and the embroidered sweaters of the Anaka Secondary School cross the grassy lawn and gather in front of the staffroom in the middle of the new block of classrooms for morning assembly. Some of the students are finishing their breakfast cups of ugali porridge, while others are whispering quietly or giggling with friends. Behind the students are skeletons of the proposed new girls' dormitories, though construction stopped several months earlier when the supporting non-profit's funding ran out. The head boy and head girl step onto a deteriorating sidewalk and the hundred or so students in front of them maintain silence. The head girl sings a clear note alone, then is joined by her classmates in the Ugandan national anthem:

Oh Uganda! May God uphold thee, We lay our future in thy hands. United free, for liberty, Together, we always stand. In the summer of 2009, I spent six weeks in Anaka, Uganda, as part of the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Invisible Children (IC) teacher exchange program, which pairs up Ugandan and international (that year, American and Canadian) educators for team teaching, information sharing, and skill building, with the purpose of generating collaboration among global educators. The program took our cohort through an intense week-long training and information-gathering session and then placed us in Ugandan secondary schools with a Ugandan partner teacher to address teaching challenges and share strategies through team teaching.

While most of the cohort was housed in the *Invisible Children* house in Gulu, a city in northern Uganda, four teachers and I were placed in Anaka, a village (and former internally displaced persons, or IDP camp) an hour north near the border of Sudan. As an IDP camp, Anaka faced its own set of challenges. But its inhabitants also had quiet, careful hope for the future, a hope that the villagers felt the need to protect, lest it be ripped away by rebel soldiers or a distracted government.

I am no expert on Uganda, its history, or its educational system. My initial interest in *Invisible Children* grew from viewing the documentary *The Rough Cut*, presented in an assembly at the school where I student taught. My knowledge of the country and its people comes from Internet searches, reads and re-reads of the few books I could find on the subject, and the relationships I forged in

the short time I spent in the country itself. It would be presumptuous of me to even attempt to explain the current educational problems in the country, or offer proposed solutions. What I can and will share are my experiences and observations through my own cultural lens, through my journal entries and conversations with my teaching colleagues and Ugandan students.

Education in Uganda

A day after entering Uganda, the seventeen members of our newly arrived cohort were shuttled to the U.S. Embassy in Kampala to meet with Rose, a Ugandan employed by the Ugandan Department of Education, who would give us a history of the Ugandan educational system, especially regarding the impact of the recent end of the nearly thirty year-long civil war. Rose's presentation, however, was heavy with concerns and warnings for us: poor funding, scholarship scams, and high numbers of uneducated children due to abductions and the war.

According to Rose, teachers, like many Ugandans, struggle to make ends meet and will take on additional jobs to supplement their incomes. Some will even take on another full-time teaching position, running back and forth between two schools during a week. Teacher absenteeism is a huge national issue, and with no day-to-day-substitute teachers, students are left unattended and uneducated. Rose expressed serious concern over the lack of parental involvement, stressed the importance of parental interest in their children's education, and even suggested that parents should show up at the schools to hold teachers accountable for their attendance.

As expected, the lack of resources was a major issue, though we were made aware that while a school might actually own a set of textbooks, they often are locked away in cupboards to be kept safe. The news of inadequate, crowded facilities and large classes with little personal space did not come as a surprise, nor did the talk of trauma from war, lack of special needs programming, and extreme poverty, leading to a high dropout rate and secondary school graduation rate of 7.5%.

Surprising, however, was the dim view that Rose painted of the educational profession: a reflection of the failing system itself. Rose explained that in Uganda, teaching is taken up only "when people have failed out of everything else," and is the lowest paying government job. A teaching degree is obtained in three years, and generally is a fallback option for those who cannot get into a four-year university. Going into teaching in Uganda is not generally praised. I remembered comments from friends and family upon my own choice of career, suggestions that my "quality education" would be wasted on such a path. I questioned in my journal, "How has a job that more than any other has the potential to shape future generations developed a negative reputation both at home and abroad?" However, unlike in America where the majority of teachers enter the profession voluntarily and enthusiastically, a majority of the teaching population in Uganda did not choose the career for themselves. What does this mean for the students, and for the education system as a whole?

Along with a need for better educated and more motivated educators, Rose shared her educational wish list: health education in native languages to take on the subjects of pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other STDs, stronger local leaders in school areas, a focus on peace education, education for child mothers and children born out of wedlock (both are shunned by the community), and low-cost community housing for teachers to be closer to their schools.

Despite her frustrations and fears for the Ugandan educational system, Rose stressed the importance of education as the country recovers from the horrors of the recent civil war and begins to rebuild itself and its people. She spoke of the excitement in the villages in the north when schools were reopened, the lines of students waiting for their turn in the makeshift classrooms, the lessons taught by writing on clay ground with sticks and rocks with children crowding around the teacher, fighting for view. Ideally, education will serve as more than just the retention of subject knowledge for Ugandans. Instead, it will educate for peace, health, financial stability, organization, leadership, and hope for the future

of this country. She thanked us for our work and wished us luck for the journey ahead.

But after leaving the embassy, we visited a secondary school in Kampala, ranked among the top schools in the nation. With 80 kids to a classroom, a library with outdated and disorganized books, eight creaking machines in the computer lab, and a science classroom that differed from the other subject area rooms only by the presence of a sink in the corner, we wondered what to expect in our upcoming school assignments.

Invisible Children's Involvement

Invisible Children was founded when three college film majors traveled to Africa to "find a story." Their travels landed them in Uganda where they became aware of the civil war, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and a group of kids—called "night commuters" who traveled miles from home every night to sleep in the safety of bus depots and hospital basements to avoid abduction. They returned home and created from their footage the documentary Invisible Children: The Rough Cut, which they then began to show at screenings around California. Several years after their initial Ugandan experience, I watched this documentary with my students in inner-city Philadelphia, and was brought to tears by the image of a young boy holding a skinny wax candle for his friend who worked on his schoolwork in a dripping, puddled basement. Despite the violence and fear of his current situation, this student had dreams for his future, and knew education was the vehicle to get there.

As the LRA began to disintegrate and retreat into the Congo and Sudan, IC's leadership team in Uganda recognized the need for a shift of focus to educational support, and since many other NGOs' work is with primary schools, IC chose to focus on secondary schools specifically. In addition to the Teacher Exchange program, Invisible Children created "Schools for Schools" (S4S), which matches American schools with Ugandan partner schools for fundraising initiatives, and the Visible Child Scholarship program, which provides funding and a mentoring program for Ugandan students. During one of many visits to the Invisible Children office in Gulu, an

IC Schools 4 Schools representative stressed that the organization "... is a partnership, not a handout, and is concerned with economic development and sustainability." The organization generally does not build schools, but rather sets out to improve those already in existence, always with an exit strategy in place. There are many who know more than I about international aid and economic development, and there are many differing opinions about the role of westerners in the development of third world countries. For my part, however, I was regularly impressed by the organization's self-reflection in regard to their place in the rebuilding of northern Uganda, as well as their intelligent and dedicated Ugandan leaders, most notably Country Director Okot Jolly Grace, who has been with the organization since its inception.

Invisible Children has clear views for its educational involvement. First, the focus is quality rather than quantity at this point; other NGOs focus on quantity with disaster relief programs, and IC wants to take their sponsored schools and students "from good to great." Since IC's involvement, northern Ugandan students are receiving higher percentages of government scholarships. But beyond the numbers, the representative from Schools 4 School said simply, "Our involvement gives hope," and that the teacher exchange, an incentive program where the investment in schools is time and relationship, brings a huge "high" to the schools before, during, and after the program. I did not understand this dire need for hope within Ugandan schools, however, until I arrived in Anaka and came face to face with the flaws in the system that students, teachers, and administrators deal with on a daily basis.

Teacher Absenteeism

After a long, bumpy mutatu ride from Gulu to Anaka, the village where my four coteachers and I would spend the majority of the five remaining weeks of the program, we dropped off our baggage in the parish house where we would sleep. From there we went to school to meet with the Head Teacher, who showered us with school statistics: graduation rates, numbers of students taking exams, number of student clubs (though in five weeks,

we saw no club meetings). He seemed determined to impress. Ugandan conversations are slow and repetitive. In the U.S., repeating facts or stories shows flakiness or disorganization in Uganda, repeating information stresses its importance, so we heard these statistics over and over again. After our first meeting, we were to report to tea with our partner teachers and then attend the remainder of the day's classes with them. Only one of the five teachers had arrived at school that morning, despite the fact that all five of them were scheduled to be teaching classes while we were meeting with the Deputy Head, who called each of the missing teachers. In turn, each assured him they were on their way. None of the teachers showed up that day, and we spent the remainder of the day sitting in plastic chairs outside a block of classrooms, waiting.

Later that night, as we walked through the main road of the village that consisted of a few scanty buildings and a water pump, we ran into Aaron's Ugandan partner teacher. Okeny John (who we had met the weekend before at an educator's conference in Gulu) and sat down with him for a Coke outside the tiny shop that sold fabric, used shoes, and soda. His demeanor quiet and embarrassed, he apologized to Aaron for his absence at school, but explained that he spent the day in a government office in Gulu—his third visit of the week—unsuccessfully trying to sort out the fact that he had not received a paycheck from his teaching job in over eight months, and was struggling to feed his family at home. John turned out to be one of the more reliable partner teachers despite his failure to solve his paycheck problem during our stay. He and Aaron formed a solid, working relationship and strong friendship during their time together, and before Aaron left, he and John had enlisted IC's resources to handle the subject of John's missing salary.

Lalwen Nancy, partnered with American teacher Kelley, was the most reliable, enthusiastic, and adaptive teacher in our group of Ugandan partners. She was the only teacher to show up on our first day, and did not miss a single class for the first three weeks of the exchange. Nancy had a two year-old son living an hour away in Gulu with her family,

and a husband working in Kampala, and lived in a tiny, one-room apartment with another teacher to save money to support her family. Nancy was a strict disciplinarian in the classroom but encouraged and supported her students, designing lessons to make the most of the limited resources and crowded spaces. However, two weeks before the end of the program and the end of the term, Nancy was offered a job teaching Lwo, the native language of the Acholi tribe, to Peace Corps workers in Kampala. This would pay significantly more than her current teaching job, which she did not want to give up as the Peace Corps job was only for two months. She decided to take the supplemental job but kept the news private around the school, telling only the head of her department who told her to forge medical leave notes so that she would be able to miss the final weeks of the term without repercussions. Such are the challenges of the Ugandan teacher: the opportunity for two months to reunite with her young son and husband and earn a significant paycheck, while having to leave her students for the last two weeks of the term before exams. Kelley continued to teach for the remainder of the term using Nancy's lessons, and Nancy called every day to check in, see how classes went, and answer any questions before the next day's lessons.

Lack of Teacher Support Leads to Apathy

My partner teacher was a young woman named Lakot Grace. Grace had been displaced to Gulu from her village when she was eight years old, so Gulu had been home for most of her life. She and her husband Martin, also a teacher, met when they were both teaching in Gulu. Grace was teaching at Anaka Secondary's displaced location; Martin taught at another local school. They married and had a daughter, Martha, who was three at the time of my stay. Early into their marriage, Pope Paul XI School returned to its pre-war location in Anaka, and husband and wife were separated. For three years, Grace and Martin have lived over an hour apart; Martha lives in Gulu with Martin and his niece, who he took in after her parents died of AIDS. Grace explained that her living conditions in Anaka

were unsuitable for a child, and also that both her family and Martin's could help look after Martha in Gulu.

I asked Grace why she didn't look for another teaching job in Gulu to be closer to her family, and she explained that though you can request a specific teaching location, jobs are handed out by the government and you can be placed in any school across the country. The Ugandan motto is "All For Uganda," and the government's view is that any teacher should be grateful for a job teaching anywhere in the country. However, with over 47 native languages, if placements are not carefully planned there is a strong chance that students and teacher will not share the same native tounge. After Pope Paul XI School's return to Anaka, Grace put in a request for transfer to Gulu, but three years later had no opportunities to relocate. Looking at the clay floor of the staff lounge, Grace said that her "heart hurts" being separated from her daughter, and that when money allows, she goes home for the weekends to stay with her family. She often does not come back to Anaka in time to teach. Grace did not show up for the first full week of school, despite promises to the administration that she was on her way. Toward the end of the week, she did call our cohort's shared mobile phone to let me know that Martha was not feeling well, and she would be remaining in Gulu through the weekend. So her students had been without a teacher for a week, and were nearing the endof-term exams.

Of the twenty-five days Grace and I were to partner teach, she was at the school for six; out of those days, was present only once for her earliest class.

The last weekend in Gulu, Grace invited me to her home for Martha's birthday. She was a different person in her hut with her family, proudly showing off Martha's new knowledge of Ugandan and teaching me to cook traditional Acholi dishes of *posho*, spinach and beans. Despite Martin and Grace being happily married, Martha was clearly a child of a divided home and clung to her mother as if in constant fear that she could depart again at any minute. Teaching is an exhausting and demanding career and a settled and supportive home life is as important to teachers as it is to

the students. Grace's lack of hope for a reassignment closer to her family directly influenced her performance in her profession, as did Nancy's concern for supporting a family far away. Until the Ugandan government places greater emphasis on meeting the needs of teachers—whether it is timely salaries, being able to provide adequate financial support for families living in reasonable proximity to them—teachers will need to be the ones fighting for their own needs, often at the expense of the education of their students.

A Culture of Violence

The rebel army has been out of Gulu for over three years. The school returned to its pre-war location in Anaka from its displaced site nearly six months before our arrival. While exact populations are unknown, residents estimated that the population that had climbed from just a few thousand to over fourteen thousand in the IDP camp was finally returning to pre-war numbers. Walking to school one day, we watched two men gently pull the thatched roof from an abandoned hut in the middle of campus, relocating it along with their family to their original home. Anaka was returning to itself before our eyes, though the scars ran deeper than a pile of clay bricks and the circular stain of a hut's foundation in the dirt.

Despite the recent peacefulness and attempts to return to normalcy, this is a community and a country that has been heavily influenced by war; to know and feel this, you need do nothing more than walk through the village, notice the blank expressions on the faces of villagers, and wonder what horrors they witnessed. It is no exaggeration to say that every person in the village was affected by the war. Nearly one hundred elderly "orphans" lived in barren huts on the open land behind the parish. Displaced to Anaka, some as long as twenty years earlier, these elders had lost their families to the war. Unable to rely on the Ugandan tradition of caring for elders and living in family compounds, these individuals turned to begging to keep from starving. More than half of my students had lost at least one parent or older sibling to the conflict, and I had both abducted children and child abductors in the same classroom, coming together in search of an education. Once every week or so, the Ugandan border patrol switches out their officers, rattling through the village on the road to Gulu in souped-up, open-backed army trucks overflowing with soldiers holding AK-47's and duffel bags, it was an event that took some getting used to.

On one of the few days Grace taught classes, we were co-teaching a lesson on conditional sentences. After teaching the concept and creating examples as a class, we asked the students to create their own sentences in their notebooks while we walked around to offer our help. In a room of about 90 students, I read over thirty-five sentences specifically referencing violence, the war, drugs, or sex:

"If I were Kony, I would kill people."

"If I were Obama, I would kill Kony."

"If I were a girl, I wouldn't allow a boy to touch me."

"If I were alone, I would kill animals."

"If I found a dead body in the bush, I would report it to the police."

"When I am older, I will do opium."

My greatest concern was not the lack of understanding of the conditional sentence. Though reminders of the war are constant, there is no post-war counseling offered to the residents of Anaka, for two priests, Father Martin and Father Leonsyo from the parish house at the top of campus. The school is publicly operated, but it sits on land belonging to the Anaka Catholic Parish; in addition to teaching secular classes at the school (math and consumerism) these two men serve as community leaders, counselors, cooks, and medics.

Toward the end of our trip, I went with Father Leonsyo on one of his weekly visits to the orphaned elders who live behind the parish. Weekly, he visits each of the individual elders who lives on the parish land, sometimes simply to make sure they are still alive. Often, he takes them bread or several shillings, but expressed his frustration at the sheer number of people unsupported by other family members and his inability to provide them with the medical, financial, or social support they so obviously need. "These people live for now, not for yesterday or tomorrow," he told me

while walking from the hut of an elderly man who lost all five of his sons to the violence and his daughter to AIDS. So many in Uganda feel that they cannot plan for the future as a result of the war, or are unable to do so because of its emotional and physical effects.

As for the students, there was no transition from a "school-less" life of wartime to "normalcy" of regular education. One day school was closed, the next it was opened, and they returned, though clearly still affected by the conflict, with no psychological support. It should come as no surprise, then, that Kony and the rebels and fighting was at the surface of their thoughts, and that education—a foreign experience for so many—was so closely knit to these experiences of war.

In the middle of our time in Anaka, the community held a dance competition and students from many of the schools in the north came to our village to compete. Smaller dance groups performed in a tiny clay building with barred windows, and a teenage boy stood at the door with a tree branch, swatting at the calves of the young children who tried to peek in. The larger dances took place outside, and we had a front-row seat in the swaying mass of onlookers for the schools' creative dances. Though these dances incorporated traditional instruments and steps, there was an element of modernity where students acted out stories to music. Lalweny Nancy sat next to me and translated one of the modern dances: "They are at a school. See, that student is a door. Now the students are entering; see, they carry imaginary books. Now there is someone coming. Someone bad. He has a gun. He is stealing a child." A boy with a wooden gun danced into the circle that Nancy explained was the school, and as he put his prop to a student's back to "abduct" him from the classroom, the music became more frantic and the children wailed and danced violently. Two more dancers emerged, carrying two more wooden guns and wearing camouflage. "That is the police," Nancy explained, "They are coming to rescue the child. See, they are returning him to the school." Sure enough, the dancing "officers" sent the abductor away, returned the child to the classroom, and proceeded to build a "fence" around the school. planting bopping students along the perimeter

of the school building, linking their hands in a finale, and keeping the school safe.

Student Discipline: Violence and Humiliation

Journal entry from July 5, 2009:

"First week of the exchange, sitting in the staffroom with Aaron. Eight students are brought[from] their classes for dress code violations. Two are in sandals, without black leather shoes. A teacher pushes the students face down on the floor, takes off their sandals, and with a three-foot, half inch thick reed from the windowsill, is delivering sharp cracks to the students calves. The sounds - the cane slicing through the air, the child crying out in pain. I don't know what to do. The teachers in the staffroom are laughing and taunting each child, saying things like 'we'll show him a hard time!' John is here now, dragging a student by the collar of his dress shirt, and announces to the faculty, 'This is my brother's son. Which [cane] is good enough for you, boy?' He makes his nephew pick out his own cane. The boy is kneeling at the foot of the head table in front of the faculty, who are berating and humiliating him for his actions (wearing flip-flops instead of black leather shoes). He has been at the table now for nearly a half-hour. They are caning him too and sending him back to class.

A ninth boy is brought into the staffroom, accused of sharing his school fees with his brother so they could both attend classes. As a result, both boys are short the following term's fees. He, too, is pushed to his knees at the front of the classroom. He looks at the ground and silent tears run down his cheeks. A teacher comments, "Do you think your teachers are people to be deceived? Forgiveness is for the Lord.' This child, too, is beaten, after he is humiliated by his teachers.

Two girls are brought in for 'haircuts' – their hair is longer than ½ inch, and a teacher haphazardly cuts an 'x' into each child's hair and tells the girls not to return until the rest of her hair is as short as the 'x' This child will go to classes the rest of the day with a sweater draped over her

head in shame.

These kids risk coming to school out of uniform, or without haircuts, because they believe in education. I feel so helpless. Why am I here? What am I supposed to do?"

We were warned in our application packets for the program that caning, though illegal, was still used as a punishment in some Ugandan schools, and we were told to prepare ourselves for what we would do if we witnessed it, keeping in mind the cultural "tradition" of this type of punishment. While somewhat prepared for the possibility of the act itself. I was unprepared for the level of humiliation and demeaning taunting of the children that preceded the violence itself. When the last student left the staffroom, Aaron stood up, slammed his chair under the table, took me by the arm, and walked me outside. The teachers had gone back to their tea and chapati, and shaken, we returned to the parish house to consult with our IC educational reps in Gulu. Invisible Children, as an organization, does not condone caning or other forms of violent punishments, but the western members of the organization lack the cultural understanding of the roots of this type of punishment and hesitate to be the ones to step in and prohibit the actions. Rather, after heavy discussions and phone calls to Patrick, the Ugandan representative for the Schools for Schools program, we decided to have a round table meeting at the end of the week with our partner teachers to bring up the topic.

My immediate response to this decision was frustration; I felt an injustice had been done to these children, and I wanted to see the involved adults punished. I felt that IC was being too easy, too accepting, too lax. However, at the end of the week, when Patrick asked the roundtable about our thoughts on caning, an interesting discussion ensued. It turned out that much of the power in the school belonged to one of the deputy heads, an older man who had been in the educational field for many years. Our partner teachers, interestingly, expressed a similar feeling of helplessness, though some of them had been among those jeering earlier in the staffroom. They questioned the effects that this outdated punishment had on the relationships with their students; Nancy worried that "this violence is crushing the spirit of the students." We Westerners, rather than telling how it should be done, listened and validated their concerns, and then brainstormed alternate possibilities for student discipline. Later that week, we sat in that same staffroom and watched our Ugandan counterparts express their concerns about the canings to the administration and share their alternative ideas. The head teacher and one deputy seemed interested in the new ideas, while the other deputy defended the practice, resulting in some heated discussion with little resolution. But at least the topic was raised, discussions were opened, and alternatives were considered.

Later that week, the deputy head who supported caning stood in front of the morning assembly and lectured on the state of a particular girls' dormitory, naming those students who lived there, calling them "sluts" and "dirty slobs." Nancy grabbed Kelley's hand and began walking away from the staffroom door, away from the deputy head and the rest of the staff, with a smirk on her face. One of the other partner teachers saw Nancy's move, nodded at the other American teachers, and we all walked away from the assembly. When we were huddled behind the building, nervous and excited, Nancy said, "He may never change. But we do not have to follow him. This is our silent rebellion."

Hope for the Future

My personality is that of a problem solver, and my plan was to go to Uganda, find some problems, and help solve them. Once I arrived, I learned that I had grossly mistaken my role as a volunteer, and had to be content with being a cheerleader, a supporter, and a sounding board, allowing the Ugandan educators to take the lead in rethinking their country's educational system. We were told upon our arrival that the biggest resource the Teacher Exchange would provide to our partner teachers and schools was hope: for new possibilities, new approaches to learning, new ways to face challenges. I had to be content with this happening on a small scale: student leaders who review notes with a class when teachers don't show up for school, a priest who cares

for elders otherwise forgotten, teachers standing up for something they believe in.

On our last day at Anaka Secondary School, we stood before the morning assembly for the last time. Aaron, who had been given the Acholi name *Okeny* (meaning "man among women," as the only male in the five-teacher cohort), stepped up to address the students we had come to love and respect, and for whom we had at once both an ache of fear and hope. He told them how smart they were, how hardworking. How he wished that our students in America shared their respect for teachers and passion for learning. How they had taught us more than we could have ever hoped to teach them.

Behind us, the girls' dormitory, whose construction had been halted before our arrival, was alive with activity. The NGO had apparently found the funds to resume building, and workmen poured concrete and laid bricks. The girls would soon have a place to live that was sanitary and safe.

After the Ugandan national anthem was played, the head boy and head girl led their fellow students in the school song and we all stood together, united for a better Uganda:

We young women and men of Uganda Are marching along the path of education. Singing and dancing, we join together, Uniting for a better Uganda.

We are the pillars of tomorrow's Uganda, Let's rise now to embrace true knowledge, Yielding disciplined resourcefulness, To reveal a great, great pearl.

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