

Commensality and the Variations in the Yagbon Community of North Gonja District of the Savannah Region of Ghana

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Abstract This Paper Examines Commensality and the variations involved in the Yagbon Community of North Gonja District of the Savannah Region of Ghana. In most cultures, food has a significant impact on how families conduct their lives. The level of significance however, varies from culture to culture and tradition to tradition. People are said to break bread with one another when they eat a meal together with friends. The symbolic interaction theory put out by Nungesser [28] was adopted and used for the study. It examines the arbitrary interpretations and variations that people place on things, incidents and behaviours in order to analyze the society. Both qualitative and descriptive approaches were used for the study. It was used because the former produces rich, detailed and valid process of data based on participants' perspectives and interpretations and the latter produces factual, reliable outcome data that can typically be generalized to some larger populations. The convenient sampling technique was used to select stakeholders because of the key roles they play in the study area. The targeted population included the chiefs, sub-chiefs, opinion leaders, the youth and households in Yagbon community. Focus group discussions interviews as well as observation were employed to collect the qualitative data and the data were summarized, grouped into major thematic areas and analyzed. Key findings were that commensality was seen as not only eating together on a table but also eating in the same bowl. Another key finding was that there was historical development of how eating together came into being in that community and this resulted in building a sense of familiarity with everyone in the group and fostering traditional bonding in the community. It was revealed that men and women don't eat together in the same bowl when it comes to communal eating in the area. This was seen as a taboo in the community. Again, different households eat from the same bowl to preserve and record cultural legacy. It is recommended that policymakers, Ministry of Tourism, Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies must create awareness on the significance of commensality. This can also be done globally, geographically and focus must be on the use of interdisciplinary methods to keep the Communities bonds and identities for the youth to emulate in future.

Keywords: *Communal eating, Culture, Tradition, Commensality, Food.*

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1. Background

In most cultures, food is a significant part of family life. The relative importance, though, varies from culture to culture and from tradition to tradition. Based on associations with other significant experiences, food has a symbolic connotations. It is stated that people "break bread" when they eat a meal together with friends. [1]. This phrase represents a location where friends gather to eat in a kind, welcoming, and relaxed way. People are encouraged to deepen their ties to their local community by being served shared meals. Many cultural values are reflected in communal eating. We do not exist in a

vacuum, and communal eating highlights the necessity for human connection. Together over a meal, we can share our thanks for the network of relationships we have.

The idea of communalism places a strong emphasis on the people's unity, solidarity, and togetherness. [2]. In place of independent affairs, it is the idea of cohabiting and sharing interests, belongings, and obligations. Several people sit together while dining communally so they can share a plate or table and any available drinks. This enhances interpersonal ties and helps to portray a sense of unity and togetherness. Sharing meals with others has been proven to significantly improve our wellbeing through research. In addition to improving our physical health, this also improves our social and emotional wellbeing. Communities of all kinds, from the work place

to the home, would benefit from having more shared mealtimes. The word communal is used to indicate a shared experience. When a group of individuals eat together, it is called a communal dinner. It frequently but not always has a social, symbolic, or ceremonial function. Some believe that culturally what makes humans unique from other species is our ability to eat together as a group. Both archaeologists and anthropologists have long been interested in communal meals. Although Community or social eating has generated a lot of academic debate, it also happens frequently when people eat with friends, family, or coworkers in the same bowl. Literature demonstrates how food and drink play a crucial role in people's lives.

Eating and drinking are seen and appreciated as more than just physical activities, and their significance goes beyond the importance of sustenance [1]. The opportunity to converse in casual everyday conversation and to exchange experiences is presented by eating meals with others. Eating socially or with others fosters relationships and is more likely to improve self-esteem, engage in a wider social network, and provide emotional support. Commensality and communal eating go hand in hand. Dining and drinking together strengthen bonds, create boundaries and hierarchies, as well as enjoyment, and is associated with communal eating.

Majority of us take eating meals together for granted, yet there are more benefits than we would realize. Food is much more than just fuel. It is essential to our wellbeing, relationships, culture, and general health. Eating meals together promotes communality and a sense of identity. Everyone dislikes dining alone [3]. Sadly, though, it is happening more and more frequently too many of us, especially in the UK. The annual UK National Food and Drink report (2017/18) at the end of the previous year revealed that nearly a third of us had dined alone within the previous month. [3] There will inevitably be moments when we eat by ourselves. But it is better for us if we can try to cut down on those times as much as we can. Eating meals with others is healthy for the body and mind [3].

Asian communal eating customs have not been altered for centuries from Middle Eastern huge rice plates shared around the table to Indian families eating 'naan' with shared curries in a five-star hotel are perceived as unsanitary and implicitly inferior to Western culture's individualized cuisine [4]. In most European countries, a 'community' is the dinner table [4]. We can converse, joke, and share while we are eating. We can actually connect when we take the time to catch up and chat. This is a crucial chance for families to unplug from technology and spend time together. A sense of community is fostered by family meals. According Kong et al [4] kids who have meals with their families frequently feel loved, protected, and safe. Contrary to popular belief, teenagers still value dining with their families. According to Maclean [5], the nicest part of family dinners for 71% of teenagers is meeting up with family members and interacting with them. In Chinese tradition, community dining entails the use of 'gong kuai' (appropriately translated as "public chopsticks") or 'gong shao' ("public spoons") [5]. The oldest or most respectable member of the party is traditionally the first to be served from their position at the head of the table, and then diners are served clockwise.

These practices, however, can change depending on the area.

Several African nations, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, Mali, and others, have a widespread practice of communal eating. African cuisine is distinctive, and the custom of sharing your plate and food with loved ones is considered to foster a stronger sense of community bonding since sharing is caring [6]. Typically, the evening meal was the primary meal of the day in Ghanaian households. Family members in Ghana rarely ate together at the same time and in the same location on weekday evenings. In Ghana, it is observed that there was no dining room table in any of the less wealthy homes. Women typically ate in the kitchen because it was their space and allowed them to keep an eye on the fireplace. Men, meanwhile, ate in a different area of the dwelling quarter.

The current body of research on Community development clearly acknowledges the importance of Communities in resolving local issues, assuring the effectiveness of community programs, and encouraging substantive local involvement. [7,8]. The main study gap, however, has been the requirement to acknowledge the many historical and contextual characteristics of communities, cities, and villages in the support of community development. Although the tradition is well-known in many Ghanaian communities, there is very little written about communal eating or communal work in general. There is no extensive literature on Community communal eating in Ghana, with the exception of Okia [6], who briefly mentioned the practice when discussing concerns related to colonial legacies in Africa and communal labour.

It is a long-standing custom in many cultures around the world for people to bond together to complete a specific activity in the good of the community [9]. The development of Ghana's traditional and cultural traditions has greatly benefited from communal eating [9]. The pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independent periods are when the practice first appeared. This was a tradition carried out by many ethnic groups and tribes in various cities and villages along the Gold Coast prior to the arrival of the Europeans. During this time, the local chiefs had a big impact on how the villages were governed. Since tenants in compound houses in Ghana share basic amenities like bathrooms, kitchens, food, and electricity meters, Lewis et al. [9] suggested that compound houses could serve as the cornerstone for communal meals.

1.1. Significance of Eating Together

Across cultures, communal meals are crucial to many rites and ceremonies [10]. By bringing individuals together to share food and take part in customs, these meals support group identification and social cohesion [10]. One ritual that frequently includes group meals is a wedding. The wedding feast is a significant component of the celebration in many cultures. The families of the bride and groom are able to connect over food and build new bonds. Eating together also represents harmony and the beginning of a new family. According to Oriji [11], people are more likely to feel content and pleased with their lives the more frequently they eat with others. According to recent research from the University of Oxford, social eating increases a person's likelihood of feeling content and happy in life. According to Preeti [12] people who eat

socially find it easier to trust others and interact in their community. They also felt that they had dependable friendships. People who eat frequently with others feel more connected and at ease in their personal relationships.

Another occasion where shared meals can be significant in rituals is at funerals. After the funeral, mourners may assemble for a meal in various cultures as a means to comfort one another through a trying period. Those who have endured loss benefit from a sense of camaraderie that is fostered by sharing food. Many other rituals and ceremonies, such as religious festivals or coming-of-age celebrations, weddings and funerals include community meals. People can gather together over these dinners to tell tales, build relationships, and get to know one another better. In order to maintain social cohesiveness and group identity among communities, communal meals are crucial. People are able to connect with others on a deeper level and build enduring relationships that improve their sense of wellbeing in general by taking part in shared customs centered on eating.

1.2. Cultural Organization of Social Eating

Every society or Community defines what food is, what is acceptable to eat, and how to consume [13]. Food has multiple social meanings and significances [14]. Ernest & Rebecca [14] also contended that, the creation, preparation, and consumption of food are important aspects of every religion, tradition, and culture in the world. For a very long time, anthropologists have thought about how the production, distribution, and consumption of food authenticate social order as well as moral and aesthetic values. The socialization mechanisms that support continuity and change between generations in a society's sociocultural life are less frequently studied. Eating together is regarded as a cultural setting for forming people into capable and respectable members of a society [15]. Eagleton, [15] opined that, a fertile ground for the emergence of sociality, morality, and regional worldviews can be seen in communal eating. Anderson-Fye, et al [16] indicated that, people associate certain foods with emotive, moral, religious, and health-related values, food is profoundly symbolic. Food has historically been used by both adults and children to express collective identity as well as to strengthen or weaken relationships with others. Anderson-Fye, et al [16] added that, families and communities have different moral and social standards for the quantity and quality of food depending on generation, gender, and social status. In terms of their unique personal traits and in relation to the numerous social groups they join, people creatively define who they are and create a social identity for it [17].

1.3. Culture, Society, Religion and Food

Commensality is a crucial topic of research in sociology and anthropology because it sheds light on cultural practices, beliefs, and values [18]. People from various cultural backgrounds consume various meals. Through communal eating habits, people establish a connection to their cultural or ethnic group. Food is frequently used by people to maintain their cultural identity [18]. Families' dietary preferences and dislikes are influenced by the

places they call home and by where their ancestors came from [18]. A cultural or regional group's patterns of food consumption are the outcome of these dietary preferences. Cultural beliefs on hospitality, social interaction, and food sharing are reflected in these variations in commensality practices. In contrast to Asian family dining, which emphasizes collectivism and a sense of community, Western table manners place a greater emphasis on individualism and personal space. Most African countries especially West African countries share food in the same bowl because of their extended family systems [17].

Society is the people who share a culture's views and practices, whereas culture is the group's beliefs and practices [19]. Without the other, neither culture nor civilization could exist. In the life of a person and in society, culture is crucial. It serves as a tool for the gathering, storing, and dissemination of human experience. People are shaped by their culture as they acquire knowledge; pick up the language, symbols, values, norms, and practices. Food and eating have an impact on many parts of our lives, including our appearance, health, emotions, habits, interests, livelihood, social groups, relationships, culture, and identity, in addition to providing nourishment and nutrition.

Food has a significant role in national identity and cultural legacy [20]. It can link friends and families together by tying us to places and people, and different cultures have different eating practices, such as whether or not you should finish everything on your plate. According to some research, kids learn about eating patterns by seeing how others eat. In our culture, marketing tactics that could or might not be for societal improvement also influence dietary behaviours.

The kinds of eating behaviours that different cultures associate with food also vary. For instance, eating with your hands or with others is customary in various cultures. But this is considered disrespectful in other locations [21]. At the very least, your dining partners will give you some strange stares. In some situations, it is considered courteous to eat everything on your plate; in others, it is a hint that your host did not feed you enough. Religion and ritual are also connected to food. An essential link to our cultural heritage is provided by food.

One of the most significant aspects of religious events is the food. Since many of these religions uphold religious rules, food is cooked differently and plays a significant part in religious culture as a means of demonstrating respect among their communities. The discovery of culture via eating is the meaning of food. What we eat, how it is obtained, who cooks it, who sits at the table, and who eats first are all forms of communication with a strong cultural foundation. What we eat and with whom we eat may inspire and deepen relationships between people, communities, and even nations beyond simply sustaining the body. There is no relationship that is closer than that of a family, and food has a significant impact on the roles, norms, and traditions of a family. It reveals our most fundamental beliefs about ourselves and others and aids in the discovery of attitudes, practices, and rituals related to food. A connection exists between culture and cuisine. This is a negotiation of our cultures, identities, and environs. Some dietary behaviours and beliefs have religious roots.

The expressions of culture, identity, heritage, and way of life are found in traditional meals. [22] To protect and grow a Community, Traditional food quality, safety, processing, preparation, and health are essential [12]. Indian culture places a strong emphasis on the family. Families typically dine together at meals. Eating chutney and curries on a large banana leaf, everyone congregates around the table or sprawls out on floor mats. Majority of our homes food preparation is historically done by women. When most family members are at home and want to eat, meals are offered. Children who feel loved by their family may not feel the need to seek acceptance from the wrong crowd. Adolescents are often more confident and less likely to experience depression when eating communally [12]. Food has a cultural impact in a number of ways, including tradition, religion, and family. As food can affect people's eating habits and religious beliefs, this characteristic is what set us apart from other people and give rise to a completely unique social structure. As indicated in the Bible, behold, I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. [23].

2. Theoretical Bases and Methodology

North Gonja District is one of the seven districts in Savannah Region, Ghana. Originally it was formerly part of the then-larger West Gonja District. North Gonja District is located in the western part of the Northern Region of Ghana. It lies within longitude 10 51 and 20 581 West and Latitude 80 321 and 100 21 North and has a total land mass of about 4,845.5sq km, representing 6.9 percent of the total land size of the Savannah Region. North Gonja has a total population of 61,432 made up of male, 30,759, female, 30,673. Male 50.1%. Female, percentage, 49.9%. [24]. The study was conducted in Yagbon. Yagbon is one of the traditional communities in North Gonja. It is surrounded by North East Region and Upper West Region. It has a total population of about 2,493, consisting Male, 1,250 Female, 1,243. The Community has 191 houses. [24] The area is predominantly Farming and hunting Community, largely made up of the Tampulma tribe and Gonjas. Tribe such as Mamprusis, Kassenas, Akans and Ewes also live in that Community. It is predominantly Muslim community; though other religions also exist.

There are several studies on "Commensality" which refers to the positive social interactions that are associated with people eating together on a round table [25]. In Sociological and Anthropological point, commensality is a key area of study as it provides insight into cultural practices, beliefs, identities and values [26]. The practice is centered on food and sharing time with the people who come together in order to share the meal and conversation on a meal table. A casual survey of the literature reveals a lack of comprehensive descriptions of communal eating in Ghana. This study seeks to close this scholarly variation gaps by charting the evolution of the practice throughout the history of the communities.

The study will also seek to demonstrate the profound traditional variations, social and cultural significance of commensality and eating from the same bowl throughout time and location. Yagbon was purposively chosen for this

study because of the different cultural and traditional symbolical meanings attached to "Commensality" and the variations involved in "Commensality" in the area which the study sought to unravel. The Yagbon Community was also chosen for this study because of its rich unique numerous superstitious beliefs, rich traditional, cultural linguistic belief systems, endogenous and taboo systems as opined by Shanunu et al [27]

The symbolic interaction theory put out by Nungesser [28] was adopted and used for the study. It examines the arbitrary interpretations that people place on things, incidents, and behaviours in order to analyze society. Because it is assumed that people act based on their beliefs rather than only what is objectively true. Subjective meanings are given precedence. The theory also serves as a pragmatic method to interpret social interactions. The human being must be understood as a social person and must also be understood as a thinking being [28]. The theory is used in this study to serve as a framework for building theories that see society as a product of everyday human interactions.

The theory focuses on how social interactions and people assign meanings to things around them. The study used both qualitative and descriptive approaches for the study: this was used because the former produces rich, detailed, and valid process data based on participants' perspectives and interpretations rather than the researcher's and the latter produces factual, reliable outcome data that can typically be generalized to some larger populations. This will give both the "what" and the "why" in one location. In consonant with the qualitative and quantitative nature of the study, the open-ended, closed-ended interview guide, focus group approach, oral interviews, visitation and observation were employed to collect the data.

Any clearly defined group of analytical units from which a sample size is determined is the target population [29]. The convenient sampling technique was used to select stakeholders because of the key roles they play in the study area. The study target includes all the following: Chiefs, Sub-chiefs, Opinion leaders, the Youth and Households in Yagbon community of North Gonja District of Savanna Region of Ghana and not all communities of North Gonja District. Each unit of analysis that was identified was thought to be a stakeholder and hence likely to be knowledgeable about and have firsthand experience with communal meals in the Yagbon community.

Data was collected from key stakeholders (Chiefs, Sub-chiefs, Opinion leaders, the Youth and the Households). The open-ended, closed-ended interview guide, focus group approach, oral interviews, visitation and observation were employed to collect the data, this was later transcribed, summarized, and grouped into major thematic areas based on the research objectives and manually analyzed.

3. Discussion of Major Findings

3.1. Why Share Food on a Round Table

The Yagbon Community's main chief ("Yagbon-Tinaa"), sub-chiefs, opinion leaders, youth, and households, participated in the study. 75% Males and 25%

Females. The range of educational levels was 22.5% of the population with no formal education, 62.5% with only senior high school, and 15% with university education. The length of stay by participants in the Community ranged from 73 years to a low of 27 years. According to the respondents, sharing meals necessitates a certain degree of candor and faith. To become more intimate with someone, one must be prepared to forgo resources. The experience is simultaneously social, cultural, and nourishing. Food and tales exchanged during a meal are two of the numerous ways that people can develop a sense of connection to others. The study found that respondents had a range of opinions on the topic under investigation as well as shared opinions. Majority of the study participants used their personal experience and knowledge from observation to illustrate the concepts. Inductively, from the data, a social group, such as a family, communal eating involves sharing meals across the board, commensality is essential to establishing and maintaining the family as a social structure.

One of the respondents indicated that:

‘when we eat with friends who are also used to sharing meals or eating communally, we treat meals as though they are being served to the whole table. We choose the nicest things to order so that we can sample a variety of flavours together. When the food is served, everyone receives a fair amount, and no one feels ashamed to request more. We discover each other’s culinary preferences and build a sense of familiarity with everyone in the group by doing this’

The results support Kittle, et al [21] who opined that people who eat alone have higher rates of obesity and are at higher risk of chronic diseases and complications. Adding to that, those who eat regularly with others often report feeling happier, are more trusting of the people around them, and feel more engaged with their community [21].

3.2. Why Communal Eating in Yagbon Community and Their Variations

In an interview with the chiefs and opinion leaders who have lived in the area for over 55 years on the history of commensality in the area, they opined that: During the olden days large families lived together in a compound house and worked together on the same farmland under one family head. While on the farm, they ate from the same bowl when it was meals time. At home, all the men ate together from the same bowl while the women also ate together in the same bowl. The data also revealed that the food is brought from different households to a centralized point where all family members eat from the same bowl. The overall chief (“Yagbon-Tinaa”) said that *“men and women don’t eat together when it comes to communal eating”, this are taboos in the community.* Some of the opinion leaders also intimated that they experienced a sense of belonging to a family that was both psychologically and physically absent when they shared these foods together.

The field data also showed that those who eat with others are more likely to feel better about them and have a larger social network that can offer social and emotional support in the community. According to Middleton et al [30], the findings imply that dining with others

strengthens social, cultural ties and positive feelings, as well as one’s sense of contentment and integration into the community. This results also deviate from the norm as Simmel [31] who opined that the opportunity to share food with friends and with strangers at public mealtime table and not eating in the same bowl. Most researchers are aware of seating around a table for meals.

3.3. What are the Cultural and Traditional Importance of Eating From the Same Bowl?

Agriculture, and by extension, food, are intrinsically rooted in culture and tradition [31]. The connection we have to our social network and cultural traditions are powerfully expressed via food. In a focus group discussion, the respondents to this question included households, the youth, sub-chiefs and chiefs. These respondents are stake holders in the community and also are abreast with activities of the Yagbon Community. Most concerns raised by the respondents include: ensuring that the family head checks the food to make sure it has not been poisoned, it supports the family system and relationships from a Cultural and Traditional standpoint. Additionally, showing appropriate engagement in mealtime prayers may be a crucial aspect of children’s Cultural and Traditional dining manners. In addition, dietary variations aid in the separation of social classes, serving as a kind of cultural capital as well as the relatively uncommon and highly prized information, abilities, attitudes, and preferences that help define an elite status culturally and traditionally.

One of the sub-chiefs added that *“eating from the same bowl allows all the participants to hit their hands and fingers in the bowl, which has a cultural meaning of togetherness and one spirit and one ancestor”*

The results confirm the opinion of Tela et al [32] who indicated that sharing a meal with others is a key part of human social contact, throughout time and across cultures and traditions, Communal dining has been crucial to fostering relationships and fostering community cohesiveness. One of the youth members indicated that *“it provides a platform for apprenticeship and language socialization; two activities that are essential to the cultural and traditional structuring of mealtime is socialization, some people pick up knowledge by actively observing and taking part in activities alongside someone who has greater experience”*.

3.4. What are the benefits of eating together in your Community?

Respondents included the following: the youth, households, sub-chiefs and opinion leaders. In all, 450 questionnaires were sent out to gather information on what are the benefits of eating together in the same bowl in your community, but only 400 was retrieved. The field data revealed that 140 participants constituting 35% agreed that: A shared meal in the same bowl is a metaphor of a shared life. When families share meals together, children feel more embraced, safe, and secure as long as the setting is supportive. The connection of trust between

the parents and children, which is crucial for promoting healthy eating, could be cultivated through eating or dining in the same bowl.

The field data also revealed that 160 (40%) of the respondents have this to say as central among others: Families are able to detect any absence of a member and search for that person. They can also maintain food security, ensuring that no member of the family goes to bed hungry. Members get the chance of tasting all kinds of foods brought to the table and also from different households. In addition to the above statements on the benefits of eating together in the Community, 100 (25%) of the respondents claimed that Eating together reflects and shapes on going patterns of social inequality, in which some people have more access to material and cultural advantages than others. A definite indicator of improved social and mental health is eating together. It lowers the likelihood of depression in humans and boosts their resilience and sense of self.

Figure 1. Benefits of Eating Together



Field Survey 2022

This result affirms the opinion of Bhattacharyya [33], that, food and community are inseparable. Additionally, studies have shown that social eating increases people's likelihood of feeling content and pleased with their lives [34]. The findings also show that when people eat in groups, there is generally more food accessible to each person. One of the opinion leaders indicated that "Even in the face of stress, eating without friends and family feels strange".

3.5. What are the Effects of Communal Eating or Eating in the Same Bowl?

Commensality is not a casual affair, but rather a social scheme or design through which some specific aspects of a social relationship can be communicated symbolically through the sharing of food; it has definite rules and regulations to protect it, detects defaulters, preserve the unity of its members, and ensure the continuity of the principle embodied in the alliance. Regardless, it has some effects. This question was an open question to all the targeted groups in the study. The field data revealed some effects of communal eating or eating in the same bowl but uniquely out of the lot is as follows:

It can cause disease spread among family members, and children can also listen to adult conversations. When one member of the family refuses to eat what is on the table, it can be aggravating. Timing of the food served was also

mentioned as an effect; according to the data if the food is cooked or served late some members of the group may have some health condition challenges because they need to eat early. It sometimes leads to conflict within members, especially when members constantly notice that a particular house hold food is not tasty enough.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the profound traditional variations, social and cultural significance of commensality and eating from the same bowl throughout time and location. The central issue in the paper has been to find out the variations involved in how commensality in Yagbon community maintain and shape their identities. Inductively, communal dining promotes Multiculturalism and Transculturalism because that society is made up of diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious communities that coexist as a single community. Food, in general, is an essential component of commensality. This study demonstrated how food is depicted in both texts to play distinct roles at the individual and communal levels.

Commensality, as revealed by the study, is aggressive and carries within it vital force that protects not only its purity but also its continuance. This rationale is not far-fetched because a commensal group is both an interest and a value group. As a result, commensal communities are cognizant enough to have an in-built defensive mechanism to safeguard the values they cherish. The study revealed some significant variations and traditional benefits and effects of eating in the same bowl. At the same time, it brought out some historical facts of commensality in the Yagbon Community in the Savannah Region. In order to preserve and record our cultural legacy, policymakers, Ministry of Tourism, Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies must create globally motivated, geographically focused, interdisciplinary methods to keep our communities bonding and identities intact.

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