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Representations of the Conflict between Christianity and African Traditional Religion in Selected Nigerian Plays

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of the conflict between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) in Anigala's *The Living Dead* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Drawing on Postcolonial Theory, the study investigates how both playwrights portray religious conflict as a reflection of the cultural and ideological tensions created by colonialism. Adopting a qualitative approach based on comparative textual analysis, the study closely examines characterization, dialogue, symbolism, ritual, and setting as dramatic techniques through which the two plays construct competing religious worldviews. The findings show that it is represented not only as a system of faith but as a cultural force that is closely linked with colonial influence and the displacement of indigenous traditions. African traditional religion is portrayed as a storehouse of cultural memory, communal identity, and moral values that is resistant to cultural erasure despite pressures of colonialism and religious conversion of the people. The study utilizes dramatic techniques to confront colonial representations of African spirituality while affirming the resilience and relevance of African religious traditions. A comparative analysis of *The Living Dead* and *Death and the King's Horseman* contributes to the intellectual discourse on Nigerian drama by showing that religious conflicts in the selected plays constitute not only a thematic concern but also a literary representation of struggles over cultural identity, historical memory, and post-colonial self-definition.

Keywords: African traditional religion, Christianity, Nigerian drama, Post-colonial Theory, Religious conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The conflict between Christianity and African traditional religion (ATR) is a crucial cultural experience in Nigerian history, which raises questions of identity, cultural authority, and the consequences of colonialism. The contributions of Christianity to the growth of Western education, literacy, cultural and religious beliefs and practices have long shaped the social life of several Nigerian communities. Consequently, the conflict between African traditional religion and Christianity has attracted scholarly attention because it shows how religion has become a basis for negotiating culture, resistance, and identity formation in the post-colonial era in Africa (Evwierhoma, 2024; Olupona, 2014; van Klinken, 2020). Nigerian playwrights have represented these

conflicts in several dramas as a means to explore competing worldviews, through a combination of dialogue, characterization, symbolism, ritual performances, and spectacle, including the socio-cultural consequences of colonialism, rather than presenting it as a disagreement in religious ideology.

Consequently, religious conflict in Nigerian drama often becomes symbolic of the struggle over memory, cultural authority, and the survival of indigenous cultural traditions (Peel, 2000; van Klinken, 2020). Intellectual scrutiny of the relationship between Christianity and African traditional religion has been done from different perspectives. While some of them focused on the historical impact of missionary activities on indigenous religions, others have explored the resilience of African religious traditions despite colonial influence (Adogame, 2023; Olupona, 2014).



Similarly, researchers have examined religion in Nigerian drama through the lenses of ritual, colonialism, identity, and cultural conflict, especially in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. However, little attention has been given to the comparative reading of Soyinka's play alongside Austin Anigala's *The Living Dead* to examine how both playwrights represent the conflict between Christianity and African traditional religion as a postcolonial struggle over cultural authority and indigenous identity. This paper, therefore, addresses this gap by comparatively analysing *The Living Dead* and *Death and the King's Horseman* through the lens of postcolonial theory. Using the ideas of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Homi K. Bhabha, this paper argues that the selected plays represent religious conflict not simply as a clash between two faiths but as a contest over cultural authority, indigenous identity, and spiritual legitimacy. This comparative lack of textual cross-examination justifies the deployment of new critical approaches to African literature, which demand that older canonical dramatic works be placed in ongoing structural dialogues with more recent texts to observe the evolving lines of cultural and spiritual resistance (Ojaide, 2012).

This paper demonstrates, using close textual analysis, that both playwrights challenge colonial representations of African spirituality while affirming the resilience and relevance of indigenous religious tradition in present-day Nigerian society.

Theoretical Framework Post-colonial Theory

This paper adopts postcolonial theory because it explains how colonialism shaped African cultural identities and systems of knowledge beyond political rule. The theory contends that colonial powers operated not only through the organs of government but also through religion, education, and language, which portrayed African cultures as inferior while propagating the superiority and universality of European values (Said 1978; Fanon 1963). Said (1978) is of the view that colonial writings on Africa negatively represented Africans and their cultures to justify imperial domination. African traditional religion was branded as primitive and uncivilised, while Christianity was presented as the only legitimate religion. Fanon (1963) explains how colonialism encouraged the colonised to reject their own cultural heritage and embrace European values, which led to cultural alienation and a conflict in identity. Although Bhabha (1994) emphasised cultural negotiation and hybridity, this study draws mainly on Said's and Fanon's ideas because they explained more clearly how the cultural and religious conflicts are represented in the selected plays.

The post-colonial theory is useful for analysing Anigala's *The Living Dead* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. It provides an appropriate lens for analysing *The Living Dead* and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* because it highlights how religious conflict reflects struggle over cultural or indigenous identity and spiritual legitimacy. The theory, therefore, enables this study to examine how both playwrights confront colonial representations of African spirituality, while affirming the resilience of traditional religious traditions.

Religion in Nigerian Drama

The relationship between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) has attracted sustained scholarly attention in African literary studies because it reflects the broader cultural consequences of colonialism and religion. Rather than viewing Christianity and ATR as mutually exclusive belief systems, recent scholarship increasingly argues that their interaction has shaped new forms of cultural identity, social organisation, and literary expression across Africa. Literary pundits agree that African literature has become a basis for examining how religious conflicts influence questions of identity, memory, power, and cultural survival (Olupona, 2014; Adogame, 2013; Kalu, 2008; Ranger, 1986; van Klinken, 2020).

These studies show that religion in Nigerian drama goes beyond spiritual concerns to deal with issues of conflicts between Christianity and African traditional religion, colonialism, and indigenous cultural traditions. Research on plays such as Soyinka's *Trial of Brother Jero* and Rotimi's *The God are not to Blame* demonstrates how theatre criticises religious charlatanism and dogmatism. These studies highlight the function of theatre as a tool for social criticism and exploration of religious issues (Banham, 1994; Gibbs, 1986; Jeyifo, 2004; Ogunbiyi, 1981). Immense scholarly ink has been spilt on issues of indigenous spirituality in Nigerian drama, particularly through studies of Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Current research argues that these plays portray African traditional religion as an organised worldview that is grounded in communal responsibility, ritual practice, and moral order rather than as a catalogue of superstitious beliefs (Rotimi 1971; Jeyifo 2004; Irele 2001; Ogunbiyi 1981; Dukore 1974). Scholars observe that the ritual performance, sacrifice, divination, and ancestral reverence are not mainly dramatic devices but expressions of indigenous philosophy and cultural identity.

These studies examine religion in relation to colonialism and postcolonial identity. They contend that Nigerian playwrights portray religious conflicts as part of a wider struggle over cultural identity, history, and identity rather than as purely theological conflicts (Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, 1986; Ashcroft, 2002; Adogame, 2013; van Klinken, 2020; Olupona, 2014). They also show that drama challenges colonial views of African culture while affirming the strength of African traditional beliefs and practices. Consequently, religion in Nigerian drama is increasingly understood as a cultural and political discourse through which playwrights negotiate the continuing legacies of colonialism. Although these studies have made important contributions to the understanding of religion in African literature and Nigerian drama, they have largely examined Christianity, African Traditional Religion, ritual, and colonialism as separate or text-specific concerns. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how Nigerian playwrights represent the conflict between Christianity and African Traditional Religion across different dramatic texts as a sustained postcolonial struggle over cultural authority, indigenous identity, and spiritual legitimacy. In this study, representation refers to the ways playwrights construct and

communicate ideas about religious conflict through characterization, dialogue, symbolism, ritual, and other dramatic techniques.

By comparatively analysing Austine E. Anigala's *The Living Dead* and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the present study seeks to extend this scholarly conversation by demonstrating how religious conflict functions as both a dramatic strategy and a critique of the enduring cultural consequences of colonialism.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using textual analysis and comparative literary criticism. The selected plays, *The Living Dead* by Austine E. Anigala and *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka, were purposively chosen because they foreground the interaction between Christianity and African Traditional Religion within different historical and cultural contexts. The study employs close reading to examine dialogue, characterization, symbolism, ritual performance, and dramatic conflict as key elements through which religious tensions are represented. Guided by Postcolonial Theory, the analysis focuses on how the plays construct religious conflict as a struggle over cultural authority, indigenous identity, and spiritual legitimacy rather than merely a disagreement between two systems of belief. The comparative approach makes it possible to identify shared patterns and significant differences in the ways both playwrights represent the relationship between Christianity and African Traditional Religion.

Christianity and Colonial Cultural Displacement

In both *The Living Dead* and *Death and the Kings Horseman*, Christianity is presented not just as a religion but also as a tool of colonial oppression aimed at eroding traditional religion. This is in line with the post-colonial view that colonialism employed religion to gain both political and cultural control (Said 1978 and Fanon 1963). This is evident in Sergeant Amusa's refusal to arrest Elesin Oba in *Death and the King's Horseman* because Mr and Mrs Pilkings were wearing the Egungun costume, which is a revered cultural symbol.

Amusan: *I arrest the ringleader, but I do not touch Egungun. That Egungun carries death. I no touch. I treat Egungun with respect* (Soyinka 1975, p. 20).

Although Amusa has become a Christian and works for the colonial government, he still respects Yoruba religious beliefs. His reaction reflects the experience of many African converts with divided identity who continue to value their traditional culture. Amusa's deep-rooted indigenous spirituality is not undermined by his conversion to Christianity. But Pilkings does not understand this and replies:

What do you mean, it is only two years since your conversion, don't tell me all that holy water nonsense, also wipe out your tribal memory (Soyinka 1975 p 24)

This shows the contradiction in colonial thinking. Pilkings rejects African religion as superstition but still expects Amusa to remember his culture when it benefits the colonial government. The colonial officer also describes Elesin's ritual as 'barbaric custom' (Soyinka 1975, p. 24). By calling it barbaric, they justify stopping the ritual without trying to understand its meaning. Soyinka uses this to show how colonial rule not only denies the legitimacy of Yoruba religion and cultural traditions but goes ahead to disrupt them.

The desecration of the Egungun costume further reinforces this idea. The costume in the Yoruba community is representative of ancestral presence and spiritual authority. However, Pilkings and his wife wear it casually as fancy dress, reducing this sacred object to a form of entertainment. This act symbolizes colonial disregard for African religious institutions. As Said (1978) argues, colonial discourse frequently represents indigenous culture as uncivilised to justify colonial intervention. Soyinka shows this dramatically by showing how ignorance of Yoruba spirituality leads directly to a conflict and tragedy.

Anigala presents cultural displacement from a different angle in *The Living Dead*. He shows how indigenous converts to Christianity serve as agents of cultural change within their own community. The conflict develops as Christian converts reject ancestral beliefs and condemn traditional practices as evil. The continuous verbal attack on the shrines' ancestral rituals and the authority of the elders reveals how the new religion creates division within families and the community in general. This is evident when Opone, the Christian convert, dismisses the traditional religious practices as powerless and advocates taking up the new faith.

Opone: *Sir, it is a pity you do not want to give your life to Jesus... Those charms and secret societies do not protect you against evil power. They only make you a slave to Satan.* (Anigala, 2006, p. 42).

Expressions such as these demonstrate how Christian teachings encourage some converts to view their own cultural heritage as incompatible with the new faith. Unlike Soyinka, whose conflict is driven largely by colonial administration, Anigala emphasizes the internal consequences of religious conversion. The struggle is no longer between Europeans and Africans but between members of the same community who hold opposing religious beliefs. This internal conflict reflects Fanon's argument that colonisation often succeeds when the colonized starts to reject their own cultural values in favour of those introduced by the colonizer. This results not only in religious disagreement but also in the fragmentation of communal identity and social harmony.

Comparatively, both plays show that Christianity is represented less as a personal belief system than as a catalyst for cultural transformation. Soyinka highlights the external imposition of colonial values through administrative powers, while Anigala examines the internal divisions that arise when members of the community embrace those values.

The plays suggest that the encounter between Christianity and African traditional religion is fundamentally a struggle over cultural authority and identity. This way, they support the post-colonial view that religious conflict in colonial and post-colonial Africa cannot be separated from the history of cultural domination and resistance.

African Traditional Religions as Cultural Memory and Identity

While Christianity is represented in both plays as a force of cultural change, African traditional religion (ATR) is portrayed as the foundation of communal identity, historical continuity, and moral order. Religion is depicted not merely as a system of worship, but both plays depict it as a way of life that binds individuals to their ancestors, their community, and their cultural heritage. The playwrights, through this representation, challenge colonial assumptions that African spirituality is primitive and instead affirm its philosophical and social significance.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Yoruba religion is presented by Soyinka as an integrated worldview connecting the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. Elesin's ritual suicide is therefore not portrayed as an act of personal choice but as a sacred responsibility necessary for the maintenance of the cosmic balance. This understanding is reinforced by the praise singer who repeatedly reminds Elesin of 'the dying wish of the father of all' (Soyinka 1975, p. 42). This expression places Elesin's sacrifice within the cultural and spiritual framework, showing that his actions are intended to preserve the harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. Soyinka therefore presents the ritual not as superstition but as an essential cultural institution that demonstrates that the Yoruba religion is founded on duty and collective responsibility that safeguards communal order. The significance of indigenous spirituality is further reinforced through the praise singer, whose dialogue consistently reminds Elesin of his spiritual obligations. The praise singer, as the representative of the collective voice of the community, understands the deeper meaning of the ritual. His presence shows that traditional religion serves to preserve historic memory by transmitting cultural values from one generation to another. The interruption of the ritual by the colonial administration, therefore, threatens not only a religious ceremony but the continuity of the Yoruba cultural identity. A similar understanding of African traditional religion is presented by Anigala in *The Living Dead*, although within a community already experiencing religious division. There is a relationship between traditional religion and communal solidarity, reverence for ancestors, and respect for traditional customs. Those who defend indigenous beliefs emphasise continually that abandoning the religion of the ancestors is tantamount to abandoning values that sustained the community for generations. This is evident in Uche's speech:

It will be mere madness to believe in the things that one cannot see. How am I sure my enemies will not pounce on me the instant I throw away my charms (Anigala, p 42)

This statement reflects the play's central argument that cultural identity cannot be separated from indigenous spirituality. Unlike the Christian converts, who judge traditional practices through the teachings of the new religion, the custodians of ATR view ancestral worship as a source of wisdom, moral guidance, and societal cohesion. This is demonstrated with Uche's recourse to the native doctor for the revelation of the cause of his son's predicament and the protection of the son's life through ritual sacrifice. The resistance of believers of African traditional religions to religious conversion is therefore not simply opposition to Christianity but a defence of cultural memory and communal identity. Anigala presents this conflict as a struggle to preserve traditions that define the community's history and worldview.

A comparison of the two plays shows that both playwrights reject colonial stereotypes of African Traditional Religion. Soyinka emphasizes the philosophical depth of ritual and tradition, while Anigala highlights its preservative role in safeguarding communal values and ancestral traditions. Despite the difference in dramatic context, both writers present indigenous religion as a legitimate cultural institution that provides meaning, identity, and social cohesion. This representation is supportive of post-colonial arguments that reclaiming indigenous spirituality is a crucial step in resisting colonial narratives that try to denigrate African cultures and religions.

Dramatic Techniques in the Representation of Religious Conflict

The effectiveness of religious conflict in both *The Living Dead* and *Death and the King's Horseman* lies not only in the themes they explore but also in the dramatic technique used to present these themes. Both writers utilized characterization, dialogue, symbolism, ritual, and setting to reveal the conflict between Christianity and African traditional religion (ATR). These dramatic techniques portrays religious conflicts as a theatrical experience with cultural and ideological implications.

Using characterisation as a dramatic technique for the portrayal of religious conflicts, Soyinka employs contrasting characters comprising Olude, Iyaloga, the praise singer, and the other believers who defend Traditional religion and Yoruba cosmology, with Mr and Mrs Pilkings, who are of the Christian faith and view indigenous religion from Western perspectives.

While the former are deeply rooted in indigenous belief and communal responsibility, the latter judges African traditions by European standards. Pilkings dismissal of the Egungun costume as fancy dress demonstrates not only ignorance of Yoruba cosmology but also a cultural arrogance that ascribes superiority to Western religion (Soyinka, pp. 23-24). Through these contrasting characters, Soyinka presents religious conflict as a clash between different ways of understanding the world.

Adopting a similar strategy in *The Living Dead*, Anigala unravels the conflict within the community between opposing groups comprising Christian converts and the custodians of traditional religion. This contrast is reflective of the internal divisions caused

by converts who now condemn ancestral practices as sinful, while defenders of traditional religion see traditional ritual practices as the bases for communal identity. This conflict is evident in the exchange between Opone, the preacher, and Uche.

Opone: *It is a pity, sir that you do not want to give your life to Jesus Christ... Those charms and secret societies do not protect you against evil power.*

Uche: *... I don't believe in your heaven or hell. You can deceive those who will listen to you.*

By placing these opposing perspectives in confrontation, Anigala demonstrates how religious conversion transforms neighbours and family members into ideological opponents.

Dialogue is a technique employed by both plays to show the differences in cultural beliefs, values, and the understanding of traditional culture. Soyinka's dialogue exposes the failure of the colonial authority embodied in Mr and Mrs Pilkings to understand the spiritual meaning and implications of Elesin Oba's sacrificial ritual, which they view through Eurocentric lenses. This is clearly expressed in the conversation between Olunde and Mrs Pilkings when he sees her wearing the Egungun costume designed to be used at the ball hosting the Prince of England.

OLUNDE: (mildly): *And that is the good cause for which you desecrate an ancestral mask?* **JANE:** *Oh, so you are shocked after all. How disappointing.*

OLUNDE: *No, I am not shocked, Mrs Pilkings. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand* (Soyinka 1975, p.50)

This brief dialogue captures a central idea of the play. Rather than accusing the colonial administration, Olunde identifies ignorance as the source of its interference in the people's religious life. His juxtaposition of the captain's sacrifice to save people at the harbour with Elesin's self-sacrifice to save the community (Soyinka 1975 p51) goes counter to the Eurocentric colonial stereotypes that Africans are uncivilised, stating that it is the westerners who fail to understand other people's culture.

OLUNDE: *I slowly realised that your greatest art is the art of survival. But at least have the humility to let others survive in their own way.*

This way Soyinka critiques the attitude while affirming the intellectual depth of Yoruba religious philosophy. Similarly, Anigala uses dialogue to expose the growing tension between Christian converts and traditional worshippers. The dialogue in the plays is marked by accusation, defence, and emotional appeals, which reveal that the conflict goes beyond religion to issues of identity, belonging, and preservation of culture.

Symbolism was also crucial in communicating religious meanings in the death of the King's horseman. The Egungun costume symbolizes ancestral powers, while the interruption of the ritual sacrifice symbolizes a threat to the tradition and spiritual survival of the community which in turn shows the lack of understanding of

African culture by the whites. In the Living Dead, shrines, sacred places, ancestral objects, and traditional rituals symbolise traditional cultures which preserve indigenous traditional religion. The rejection or attempt to destroy these symbols is indicative of religious conflicts and an assault on the historical identity and collective memory of the community.

Ritual serves as an important dramatic technique in both plays. Soyinka builds his drama around the ritual transition of Elesin Oba, which is the central focus of the play. The attempt at truncating the ritual results in the tragic conflict and demonstrates the consequence of interfering with the culture. Anigala, on the other hand, uses traditional ceremonies and communal religious practices to illustrate the importance of African traditional religion to the society. Ritual, therefore, is presented in both plays not as spectacle but as a meaningful expression of communal values, moral responsibility, and spiritual order.

Setting serves to reinforce the religious conflict in both plays. Soyinka contrasts indigenous religious spaces with the colonial administrative environment, while Anigala places the conflict in everyday communal settings where daily life intersects with religious practices. Together, these settings show that the struggle between Christianity and African traditional religion is not restricted to sacred places but affects all aspects of community life. These dramatic techniques show the artistic sophistication with which both playwrights represent religious conflict.

Through characterisation, dialogue, symbolism, rituals, and settings, both plays present the conflict between African traditional religion and Christianity from different viewpoints. As a result, the plays show that the conflict supersedes religion to include struggles over culture, identity, and history.

Resilience and the survival of indigenous Religion

The conflict between Christianity and African tradition notwithstanding, The Living Dead and Death and the King's Horseman did not present indigenous religion as a defeated or obsolete belief system. Instead, it was portrayed by both playwrights as a solid cultural institution responsible for shaping communal identity, irrespective of the pressures from colonialism, the conversion of some indigenes, and the alteration of the people's culture. These pressures notwithstanding, the values, memories, and traditions that define the indigenous communities continue to defy obliteration through the representation of African spirituality in modern societies.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the interruption of Elesin's ritual sacrifice by the colonial administration may seem like an initial success for the colonial authority to undermine indigenous religious tradition, but Olunde's action overturns this seeming victory and restores the moral order that his father's failure disrupted. Olunde's Western education did not whittle his commitment to Yoruba cosmology, as shown by his acceptance of the responsibility of his cultural heritage. His decision demonstrates that indigenous traditional values can survive the

influence of colonialism when individuals remain connected to their cultural identity. The strength of traditional religion, as portrayed by Soyinka, rests not just in ritual performance but in the unwavering commitment to its moral and philosophical foundations by the community.

This resilience is portrayed by Anigala in a different but equally significant way, in *The Living Dead*, where Christianity causes division within the community and challenges old, age-old religious practices. The plays continuously portrayed traditional religion as a source of wisdom, continuity, and communal stability. Wild Christian converts like Opone jettison ancestral beliefs, but people like Uche continue to defend the customs handed down by the ancestors. This resistance is not because of hostility towards Christianity alone, but the conviction that abandoning their traditional religion would mean abandoning their history, identity, and tradition. Anigala argues through the actions of these characters that the survival of culture depends on the preservation of the values embedded in traditional religious practices. The portrayal of resilience in both places reflects the post-colonial experience of African societies. African culture is portrayed not as a passive victim of colonial domination but one that has the capacity to adapt, resist and preserve vital aspect of the people's identity, which challenges colonial viewpoints that seeks the obliteration of indigenous religion following the spread of Christianity. Traditional religion, from the writer's viewpoint, remains an important cultural resource that serves as a medium for communities to interpret their history and social life and maintain a sense of belonging.

A comparative analysis of the two plays, therefore, shows that the conflict between Christianity and African traditional religion does not end with the complete victory of one religion over the other. Instead, both playwrights represent the encounter as a continuous negotiation in which indigenous religion demonstrates a remarkable resilience despite internal and external pressures from converts and Western colonisers. While Soyinka emphasises the restoration of cultural order through ritual sacrifice and communal responsibility, Anigala emphasises the preservation of ancestral heritage by the community in the face of religious transformation. The two plays affirm that African traditional religion is still a significant expression of cultural identity and an enduring symbol of resistance to the eradication of culture.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the conflict between Christianity and African traditional religion in Nigeria using Anigala's *The Living Dead* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* as frames of reference. Using the postcolonial theory as the basis for the analysis, the paper found that the portrayal of religious conflicts in both plays goes beyond differences in beliefs to encompass the struggles over identity, indigenous authority, and historical memory within the colonial and post-colonial period. Despite addressing these issues using different dramatic contexts, both playwrights presented African traditional religion as a coherent system of belief that aids the preservation of communal

values, moral responsibility, and cultural continuity despite the influence of colonialism and Christianity.

By comparatively analysing the two plays, this study demonstrates that religious conflict in Nigerian drama functions as both a literary representation and a postcolonial critique of cultural displacement. It further shows that the playwrights engage similar concerns through different historical and cultural perspectives, while affirming the resilience of indigenous spirituality. Ultimately, this paper shows that these plays encourage a fresh understanding of culture, identity, and religious coexistence in post-colonial Africa. They demonstrate that religion in African drama remains a powerful tool for challenging colonial history and imagining indigenous post-colonial futures (van Klinken, 2020)

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