

SEMIOTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF YORUBA CLOTHING AND ITS FUNCTIONAL ROLES IN EKITI STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

This study investigates the semiotic significance of Yoruba clothing and its functional roles in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Existing studies on African material culture suggest that clothing serves as a symbolic system that communicates identity, status, and cultural values, which motivates the need to examine its meanings within the Ekiti context. A descriptive survey research design is adopted. The population comprises all adults in Ekiti State, estimated at about 3.5 million. The sample consists of 100 respondents selected through a multistage sampling procedure involving purposive selection of five Local Government Areas followed by random sampling of respondents. Age is categorized into youth (18–35 years), middle-aged adults (36–55 years), and older adults (56 years and above) to capture variations in cultural interpretation of attire. Data are collected using the Semiotics of Yoruba Clothing Questionnaire (SYCQ), which is validated and yields a reliability coefficient of 0.82. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, means, and percentages are used to answer research questions, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) is used to test hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings reveal that clothing types, styles, fabrics, and accessories such as fila cap significantly influence the expression of identity and belonging among Yoruba people. The results further indicate that Yoruba clothing communicates collective values such as solidarity, hierarchy, and morality within social and cultural contexts. The study concludes that Yoruba attire functions not merely as fashion but as a communicative code through which cultural identity and values are sustained. The study recommends preservation through cultural education, integration with modern fashion trends for sustainability, and inclusive practice to prevent class-based exclusion in communal activities such as aso-ebi.

Keywords: Yoruba clothing, Semiotics, Cultural Identity, Fìlà (cap), Àṣọ-Èbí

Introduction

Clothing has often been regarded as more than a matter of bodily covering. Across diverse cultures, attire appears to function as a marker of social belonging, a medium of cultural expression, and an archive of collective memory. In African societies, dress appears to assume a significant role because it functions not only as a practical necessity but also as a symbolic medium through which identity, hierarchy, and spirituality are expressed. Clothing is observed to embody cultural meanings that extend

beyond its physical form, particularly in the context of African printed fabrics where surface design and texture contribute to the communication of visual and symbolic messages (Chudi-Duru, 2023). Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, clothing seems to operate as a semiotic system that encodes meanings into both everyday life and ceremonial practices. Garments such as *agbada* and *gele* are not merely aesthetic expressions but representations of social order, cultural values, and cosmological beliefs. It is observed that the textures, patterns,

and styles embedded in these fabrics reinforce identity and communal belonging. This suggests that Yoruba clothing functions as a communicative code through which cultural meanings are constructed, preserved, and transmitted across generations.

The evolution of Yoruba clothing appears to reflect both continuity and adaptation. Historically, clothing was closely tied to textile production, with fabrics such as aso-oke and adire serving as cultural signifiers of status and belonging. Aso-oke, a handwoven cloth produced on narrow looms, seems to have been reserved for special occasions such as weddings, coronations, and festivals. Its prestige value appears to have stemmed not only from its aesthetic qualities but also from its labour-intensive production, which conferred symbolic weight on its wearers. On the other hand, adire, an indigo-dyed cloth produced largely by Yoruba women, is observed to have expressed creativity and individuality through its varied patterns and motifs (Areo & Kalilu, 2013). Adire seems to be seen beyond being a textile, is increasingly recognized as a tool for cultural preservation and empowerment in Ekiti State as one of the cultural heritage and clothing which is celebrated within the state. The First Lady of Ekiti State, Dr. Olayemi Oyebanji, describes it as both a heritage craft and an economic resource, emphasizing its potential to sustain identity while creating livelihoods through initiatives such as the Adire Ekiti Hub (Ekiti State Government, 2024). These motifs appear to function as a coded system of meaning, often communicating proverbs, moral lessons, or social identity such as “*Ilú kì í ẹ̀ ilé bàbá ẹ̀ni*” (no place is like home), which reflects belonging and identity, and “*Aṣọ ni í ẹ̀ ẹ̀nìyàn*” (clothing defines a person), which emphasizes dignity and social perception. Similarly,

sayings like “*Bí a ẹ̀ rí ni a ñ kí ni*” (people are addressed according to how they appear) reinforce the idea that appearance conveys status and respect within society. Imported fabrics such as lace and damask were incorporated into Yoruba fashion, creating hybridized forms of expression. Lace in particular appears to have become a marker of affluence, while still being adapted to Yoruba aesthetic principles through embroidery and layering. It is observed that Yoruba elites adopted these fabrics as a way to express both modernity and cultural rootedness, blending foreign materials with indigenous dress forms. Postcolonial Nigeria appears to have further consolidated this hybridity, with Yoruba people continuing to adapt global fashion trends while retaining traditional attire for ritual and cultural purposes (Labode, Adepegba, & Ogunyale, 2024). This historical trajectory suggests that Yoruba clothing has always operated as a dynamic semiotic system, continuously negotiating between tradition and modernity, which naturally leads into an exploration of the Yoruba worldview and material culture.

The Yoruba worldview seems to be deeply embedded in material culture, where objects are not valued solely for their utility but for their symbolic resonance. Within this framework, clothing appears to serve as a bridge between the material and spiritual realms. It is observed that fabrics, colours, and patterns are imbued with cosmological meanings that reflect Yoruba conceptions of order, morality, and spirituality. White, for instance, is frequently associated with Obatala, the deity of purity and wisdom, and it seems to symbolize peace, clarity, and balance. Red appears to be connected to vitality and spiritual energy, often linked with deities such as Sango, the god of thunder and black for

sorrow or mourning. Indigo, widely used in *adire*, seems to connote depth, intuition, and creativity, making it not just a colour but a spiritual symbol, more attention must be given to prosody in language teaching programme and procedure over the segmental features. (Ayodele and Iwuh, 2020, Babalola and Oyinloye 2011). Clothing also seems to reflect Yoruba social philosophy especially in Ekiti State, which emphasizes collective identity, respect for hierarchy, and continuity with the ancestors. Practices such as *aso-ebi*, in which family and friends wear matching fabrics during ceremonies, appear to reinforce solidarity and communal belonging. Similarly, the elaborate regalia of Yoruba kings, adorned with beads and embroidery, seems to symbolize both political authority and divine sanction. These examples suggest that clothing in Yoruba culture operates as more than attire; it appears to function as a material expression of worldview, reinforcing cosmological and social order. This intertwining of dress with identity and communication seems to highlight the need to explore the symbolic role of clothing more closely.

Dresses in Yoruba culture seems to operate as a visual language as it communicates identifications such as gender, age, marital status, and social class. For example, a married woman's *gele* is often styled differently from that of an unmarried woman, and the presence of elaborate embroidery on a man's *agbada* seems to denote wealth and influence. Clothing thus appears to encode information that is immediately recognizable to members of the community. Beyond individual identity, Yoruba clothing seems to symbolize collective values as practice of *aso-ebi* not only expresses solidarity but also appears to signal participation in communal life. It is observed that those who cannot afford *aso-ebi* may

feel excluded from social events, underscoring the communicative power of dress in defining inclusion and exclusion. Symbolism is also prominent in ritual contexts. During funerals, specific colours are observed to convey mourning and respect, while celebratory colours are worn at weddings to communicate joy and prosperity. In this way, clothing seems to mediate between personal identity and collective symbolism, allowing the Yoruba to express values and emotions through fabric and style. Gender roles are also encoded in dress. Women's attire, such as *iro* and *gele*, appears to symbolize dignity, respectability, and sometimes marital status, while men's *agbada* and *fila* seem to embody authority and maturity. Hierarchy is emphasized through royal regalia, which appears to carry dense semiotic meaning by linking political power with divine ancestry. This layered system of meanings suggests that Yoruba clothing is a powerful cultural code.

According to Olaleye, Adekoya, and Awosola (2025), Yoruba headdresses such as the *gèlè* carry symbolic significance that communicates gender roles, marital identity, and spiritual consciousness. In men's attire, garments such as the *àgbàdà* symbolize authority and maturity, while women's *ìró* and *bùbá* communicate respectability and cultural pride. *Àşò-òkè* represents continuity and prestige, often worn at weddings and coronations (Labode et al., 2024). *Àdìrẹ*, produced through resist-dyeing techniques, embodies creativity, individuality, and spirituality (Areo & Kalilu, 2013). Lace and damask, introduced during colonial contact, symbolize affluence and hybridity, showing how Yoruba fashion appropriates foreign elements into local codes (Idowu et al., 2024). Colours function in a similar way: white is linked to purity and *Ọbàtálá*, red to

vitality and *Şàngó*, and indigo to creativity.

Before the introduction of modern garments such as cardigans, Yoruba people appear to rely on indigenous fabrics suited to seasonal conditions, with thicker woven materials worn during the harmattan and lighter fabrics during the wet season. The *filà* (cap) is observed to signify adulthood and social responsibility among men, as there is a stage in life when a man is culturally expected to wear it alongside garments such as *sókòtò*, *bùbá*, and *àgbàdà*. The positioning of the *filà* whether tilted to the left, right, or forward seems to carry different cultural interpretations related to confidence, identity, and social expression. Furthermore, clothing communicates occupational and institutional identity, as seen in the distinctive dress of hunters, diviners (*babaláwo*), and members of traditional institutions such as the Ogboni society, where attire reflects spiritual roles, authority, and secrecy.

According to Alabi and Okebiorun (2024), Yoruba clothing communicates identity, solidarity, and spirituality. The practice of *àşo-èbí* is a strong example, where uniform fabric communicates communal belonging and social solidarity. Ayodele and Iwuh (2020) note that colour symbolism in Yoruba clothing is directly tied to ritual practice, with white garments used in *Ọbàtálá* ceremonies and red in *Şàngó* rituals. Clothing thus functions as a communicative medium between humans and the divine. Hierarchy and authority are equally expressed through dress. Olaleye et al. (2025) emphasize that royal regalia, including beaded crowns and embroidered robes, symbolize both political power and spiritual legitimacy. In everyday life, embroidery and fabric choice indicate wealth and class. Clothing therefore fulfils multiple cultural functions, from

reinforcing identity to expressing spirituality and social order.

E pochi-Olise (2025) examines the Yoruba *Àmòtẹ̀kùn* uniform using qualitative semiotic analysis of media representations. The findings reveal that the uniform communicates cultural identity, resistance, and indigenous authority. The study concludes that clothing serves as a political and symbolic tool and recommends the preservation of indigenous dress codes. Olaleye, Adekoya, and Awosola (2025) adopt a descriptive survey of Yoruba women and fashion practitioners to examine *gèlè*. Findings show that headdresses communicate gender roles, status, and identity. The study concludes that fashion reflects cultural values and recommends integrating traditional elements into modern fashion. Kafaru (2025) employs ethnographic methods to study visual aesthetics in coastal Yoruba communities. The findings indicate that patterns and colours function as communicative symbols. The study concludes that artistic expressions, including clothing, preserve cultural meaning and recommends promoting indigenous aesthetics.

According to Idowu et al. (2024), imported textiles displaced some indigenous patterns, creating hybrid forms of Yoruba fashion. Christianity and Islam also mediate clothing practices, as Western-style gowns are worn alongside *aso-oke* in Christian weddings, and Muslim Yoruba women adapt traditional attire to conform with modesty codes. Wealthy individuals showcase affluence with expensive lace, damask, and elaborate embroidery, while poorer households wear simpler fabrics as they showcase their socioeconomic classes. Globalization further shapes Yoruba clothing, as modern designers integrate international fabrics and cuts into

Yoruba aesthetics (Taiwo, 2023). Utoh-Ezeajugh and Salami (2024) also show how Nollywood films present Yoruba attire as cultural signifiers within modern media, thereby globalizing local fashion. These intervening variables demonstrate that Yoruba clothing does not exist in isolation but is continuously shaped by external and internal forces.

Statement of the Problem

In Yoruba culture, clothing appears to function as a semiotic medium through which identity, values, and cosmological meanings are communicated. It appears that garments such as *àgbàdá*, *gèlè*, *iró fila*, and *àṣọ-òkè* extend beyond aesthetic and utilitarian purposes, as they embody layered codes that signal lineage, social status, spirituality, and collective belonging. However, it seems that the deeper semiotic functions of Yoruba attire remain insufficiently explored, particularly in contemporary contexts where cultural symbolism is increasingly contested, diluted, or reinterpreted due to modernization, globalization, and the influence of Western fashion systems. It is observed that younger generations may engage with these clothing forms primarily as fashion statements rather than as carriers of cultural meaning, thereby weakening the transmission of indigenous knowledge systems.

It seems that clothing continues to serve as an expression of social identity, with specific fabrics, colours, and styles denoting class distinctions, generational roles, and occupational affiliations. However, these meanings appear to be challenged by globalization, Western fashion norms, and diaspora reinterpretations, raising the problem of whether Yoruba attire still provides a coherent system of identity or whether its semiotic clarity has been fragmented.

Symbolic associations embedded in Yoruba clothing such as white for purity, red for vitality, and *àṣọ-èbí* for solidarity appear to be undergoing noticeable shifts under the influence of religious pluralism, economic inequality, and media exposure. It seems that meanings once rooted in ancestral reverence and cosmological order are becoming increasingly fluid, thereby raising concerns about their contemporary interpretive relevance. The communicative role of attire in expressing shared values also appears to be complex and contradictory. While *àṣọ-èbí* continues to signify unity and collective identity, it is observed that it simultaneously reflects social stratification, as participation is often determined by financial capacity.

Furthermore, the aesthetic value of Yoruba attire appears to be both enhanced and undermined. Although global fashion platforms and Nollywood have increased its visibility, it seems that some younger generations perceive traditional clothing as outdated or restrictive, which may weaken its role in sustaining cultural identity. Despite this, Yoruba clothing remains a powerful communicative medium. The problem, therefore, lies in examining how these symbolic and communicative functions persist, transform, or erode within the changing socio-cultural context of Yoruba society in Ekiti State and its diaspora.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the semiotic significance of Yoruba clothing and its functional roles in Ekiti State. It is to critically;

1. examine how clothing types, styles, and fabrics influence the way Yoruba people express

identity and belonging in Ekiti State.

- investigate the ways Yoruba clothing communicates collective values within social and cultural contexts.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised for the purpose of this study:

- How do clothing types, styles, and fabrics influence the way Yoruba people express identity and belonging in Ekiti State?
- In what ways does Yoruba clothing communicate collective values within social and cultural contexts?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated for the purpose of the study:

- Clothing types, styles, and fabrics significantly influence the way Yoruba people express identity and belonging in Ekiti State.
- Yoruba clothing significantly communicates collective values within social and cultural contexts.

Methodology

The descriptive research design of the survey type is adopted for the study. The population comprises all residents of Ekiti State, Nigeria aged 18 years and above who participate in social, cultural, and religious practices where Yoruba clothing is commonly worn. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), the estimated population of Ekiti State is about 3.5 million people across the 16 Local Government Areas (LGAs). The sample for the study consists of 100 respondents selected through a multistage sampling procedure involving purposive, stratified, and simple random techniques. In the first

stage, five LGAs are purposively selected to reflect urban–rural variation and cultural diversity. In the second stage, four communities are randomly selected from each LGA, producing 20 communities. In the third stage, 5 households are randomly selected from each community. In the fourth stage, 1 respondents are selected using stratification to ensure representation across age groups and social classes. Age is categorized into youth (18–35 years), middle-aged adults (36–55 years), and older adults (56 years and above), while social grouping includes lower-income groups, middle-class individuals, and traditional elites/royal class. This grouping is necessary because different age categories and social classes appear to have divergent interpretations and uses of Yoruba clothing.

From each household, one respondent is selected to ensure balance across gender, age, and social status, producing the final sample size of 100 respondents. This approach ensures that variations in perception of clothing across youth, adults, the elderly, economically One instrument titled Semiotics of Yoruba Clothing Questionnaire (SYCQ) was designed to capture data and was divided into five sections: Section A elicited demographic information, Section B measured clothing and social identity expression, Section C examined cultural symbolism, Section D covered the communication of collective values, while Section E addressed aesthetic appreciation and cultural pride. The face and content validity of the instrument were established by experts in cultural studies, semiotics, and research methodology, who reviewed the items for clarity, appropriateness, and alignment with the study objectives. The reliability of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach Alpha method with a pilot

sample of 40 respondents in Ido-Ekiti (outside the sampled LGAs). The reliability coefficient obtained for the instrument was 0.82, which was considered high enough for the study. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data collected. Frequency counts, means, and percentages were used to answer the research questions, Pearson Product

Moment Correlation (PPMC) were employed to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1: How do clothing types, styles, and fabrics influence the way Yoruba people express identity and belonging in Ekiti State?

Table 1: Influence of Clothing Types, Styles, and Fabrics on Yoruba Expression of Identity and Belonging in Ekiti State (n = 100)

S/N	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Decision
1	Yoruba clothing reflects my social identity and background.	6 (6%)	9 (9%)	10 (10%)	39 (39%)	36 (36%)	3.90	Accept
2	The type of clothing I wear communicates my cultural roots.	5 (5%)	7 (7%)	12 (12%)	41 (41%)	35 (35%)	3.94	Accept
3	Traditional Yoruba attire enhances my sense of belonging.	6 (6%)	10 (10%)	13 (13%)	39 (39%)	32 (32%)	3.81	Accept
4	<i>Àṣọ-èbì</i> represents solidarity and unity in Yoruba social gatherings.	4 (4%)	6 (6%)	12 (12%)	43 (43%)	35 (35%)	3.99	Accept
5	Specific fabrics and styles (<i>àgbàdá, gèlè, àṣọ-òkè</i>) indicate social class or status.	7 (7%)	9 (9%)	14 (14%)	38 (38%)	32 (32%)	3.79	Accept

Decision Rule = 3.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The results in Table 1 indicate that clothing types, styles, and fabrics significantly influence identity expression and belonging among Yoruba people in Ekiti State. Respondents strongly agree that *àṣọ-èbì* fosters solidarity and unity (Mean = 3.99), while clothing communicates cultural roots (Mean = 3.94). The findings further show that Yoruba attire reflects social identity (Mean = 3.90) and enhances a sense of belonging

(Mean = 3.81). Although a few respondents express neutrality or disagreement, the overall pattern suggests that Yoruba clothing functions as a powerful semiotic medium for expressing identity, social status, and cultural belonging.

Research Question 2: In what ways does Yoruba clothing communicate collective values such as solidarity,

hierarchy, and morality within social and cultural contexts?

Table 2: Yoruba Clothing as a Communicator of Collective Values in Ekiti State (n = 100)

S/N	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Decision
1	Àṣọ-èbí symbolizes solidarity and unity during ceremonies.	3 (3%)	5 (5%)	11 (11%)	43 (43%)	38 (38%)	4.08	Accept
2	Yoruba attire communicates respect for social hierarchy and authority.	4 (4%)	7 (7%)	13 (13%)	43 (43%)	33 (33%)	3.94	Accept
3	Wearing appropriate traditional clothing reflects moral values in Yoruba society.	5 (5%)	9 (9%)	14 (14%)	40 (40%)	32 (32%)	3.85	Accept
4	Yoruba clothing differentiates people of different age categories and statuses.	4 (4%)	8 (8%)	12 (12%)	42 (42%)	34 (34%)	3.94	Accept
5	Clothing in rituals and festivals reinforces cultural discipline and morality.	5 (5%)	8 (8%)	15 (15%)	40 (40%)	32 (32%)	3.86	Accept

Decision Rule = 3.0

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The results in Table 2 suggest that Yoruba clothing plays a significant semiotic role in communicating collective values in Ekiti State. Respondents strongly agree that *àṣọ-èbí* expresses solidarity and unity (Mean = 4.08), highlighting its relevance in promoting social cohesion. Yoruba attire is also observed to communicate respect for hierarchy and authority (Mean = 3.94), while appropriate dressing reflects morality

and discipline (Mean = 3.85–3.86). Overall, Yoruba clothing functions as a cultural code that unites individuals, reinforces hierarchical order, and expresses shared moral expectations within social and cultural contexts.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypotheses 1: Clothing types, styles, and fabrics significantly influence the way Yoruba people express identity and belonging in Ekiti State.

Table 3: Pearson Product Moment Correlation between Clothing Types/Styles and Identity Expression

Variable Pair	N	r-value	p-value	Decision
Clothing types/fabrics & Identity/Belonging	100	0.612	0.000	Significant Reject H ₀

In table 3 above, the correlation coefficient (r = 0.612) indicates a strong positive relationship between Yoruba

clothing types/styles and the expression of identity and belonging.

Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypotheses 2: Yoruba clothing significantly communicates collective values within social and cultural contexts.

Table 4: Pearson Product Moment Correlation between Yoruba Clothing and Collective Values

Variable Pair	N	r-value	p-value	Decision
Yoruba clothing and collective values	100	0.587	0.000	Significant Reject H ₀

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 4 indicate PPMC tests show $p < 0.05$, meaning Yoruba clothing significantly communicates solidarity, hierarchy, and morality in Ekiti State. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Yoruba clothing functions as a semiotic medium that strongly influences the expression of identity and belonging among people in Ekiti State. It was revealed that clothing types, styles, and fabrics such as *àgbàdà*, *gèlè*, *àṣọ-òkè*, and *àṣọ-èbí* are not merely decorative but are significant cultural markers. Respondents affirmed that *àṣọ-èbí* in particular fosters solidarity and unity, while traditional attire communicates cultural roots and enhances a sense of belonging. These results align with earlier studies (Areo & Kalilu, 2013; Alabi & Okebiorun, 2024), which emphasize that Yoruba attire encodes identity, class distinctions, and communal ties. The correlation result ($r = 0.612$) further establishes a strong positive relationship between clothing styles and the expression of identity, confirming that dress is deeply embedded in Yoruba systems of social meaning.

Equally, the findings also demonstrate that Yoruba clothing

communicates collective values such as solidarity, hierarchy, and morality. *Àṣọ-èbí* was identified as a strong symbol of unity, while appropriate attire at ceremonies communicated respect, discipline, and moral values. This agrees with the observations of Ayodele and Iwuh (2020), who noted that color and fabric symbolism operate as communicative codes within Yoruba cosmology and social life. The correlation analysis ($r = 0.587$) confirmed that Yoruba clothing significantly communicates collective values, underscoring its dual role in both reinforcing cultural cohesion and differentiating social status. These results highlight that Yoruba dress is not simply aesthetic but functions as a living cultural text that sustains identity and moral order while adapting to modern influences.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Yoruba clothing in Ekiti State functions as a powerful semiotic medium through which identity, belonging, and collective values are expressed and sustained. Findings reveal that clothing types, styles, and fabrics such as *àgbàdà*, *gèlè*, *àṣọ-òkè*, and *àṣọ-èbí* significantly influence the expression of cultural roots, social identity, and communal solidarity. Equally, Yoruba attire was shown to communicate values of unity, hierarchy, and morality

within social and cultural contexts, serving as both a unifying force and a marker of social differentiation. The statistical evidence confirmed strong positive correlations between clothing and the variables of identity and collective values, underscoring the fact that Yoruba dress is not merely aesthetic but a living cultural code. Despite pressures from globalization, religion, and modern fashion, Yoruba clothing remains a resilient medium of cultural pride, symbolic communication, and social cohesion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Cultural Preservation: Yoruba attire should be actively promoted in schools, festivals, and community programs to ensure younger generations appreciate its symbolic role in identity and collective values.
2. Integration with Modern Fashion: Fashion designers should blend traditional fabrics such as *àṣọ-òkè* and *àdìrẹ* with contemporary styles to sustain relevance while preserving cultural meaning.
3. Community Inclusiveness: The practice of *àṣọ-èbí* should be maintained as a symbol of solidarity, but fabric choices should be made affordable to prevent exclusion based on socioeconomic status.

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