

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN IGBO LAND: PATRIARCHY, GENDER FLUIDITY, AND COLONIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract

This paper investigates the constructions of gender and sexuality in Igbo land, the homeland of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, across the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Drawing on the foundational ethnographic work of Ifi Amadiume, the political history of Judith van Allen and Gloria Chuku, the oral history scholarship of Nwando Achebe, and the sociological analysis of Evelyn Nwachukwu Urama, among others, this paper argues that Igbo gender systems were never simply binary or rigidly patriarchal in their pre-colonial form. The Igbo maintained flexible gender categories, expressed most visibly through the practices of 'male daughters' and 'female husbands', that allowed for social mobility predicated on wealth, lineage need, and spiritual authority. British colonialism substantially eroded this complex gender architecture, entrenching a masculinist patriarchy that continues to shape gender

relations in Igbo land today. The paper examines the 1929 Ogu Umu nwaanyi (Women's War), the institution of bride price, female genital mutilation, the Umụada and Omu institutions, and the postcolonial feminist scholarship that has sought to recover and critique these indigenous gender frameworks.

Introduction: Approaching Gender and Sexuality in Igbo land

The study of gender and sexuality in Igbo land is both an exercise in historical recovery and a critical scholarly intervention. For much of the twentieth century, dominant Western discourse rendered African women passive, their societies uniformly patriarchal, and their gender systems derivative of biological difference. Scholars working on Igbo land have systematically dismantled these assumptions, demonstrating that the societies of southeastern Nigeria possessed sophisticated, internally coherent systems for organizing gender identities and sexual relations that operated according to their own logic and fulfilled specific social, economic, and spiritual functions. The Igbo people inhabit the five southeastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo in present-day Nigeria, and the scholarship produced both by Igbo scholars and by Africanist researchers has made Igbo land one of the most richly theorized sites for the study of African gender.

Any serious engagement with gender in Igbo land must begin with Ifi Amadiume's landmark 1987 work, ¹ *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Based on fieldwork conducted in the Igbo town of Nnobi in Anambra State,

Amadiume demonstrated that pre-colonial Igbo society maintained a system in which biological sex did not always align with ideological gender. This insight that gender roles were not naturally determined but socially and institutionally constructed, had far-reaching implications not only for the study of Africa but for feminist theory globally. The present paper builds upon Amadiume's foundational argument while drawing on subsequent scholarship to explore the full texture of gender and sexuality in Igbo land across time.

The paper is organized into seven substantive sections. Following this introduction, Section II examines the pre-colonial gender system, including the dual-sex political structure, the roles of women in the economy, and the institutions of the Umuada and the Omu. Section III analyzes the practices of 'male daughters' and 'female husbands' and the phenomenon of woman-to-woman marriage. Section IV examines the regulation of sexuality, including bride price and female genital mutilation. Section V explores the impact of British colonialism, particularly the imposition of indirect rule and the 1929 Women's War. Section VI considers the postcolonial period, including the influence of Christianity and emergent feminist scholarship. Section VII offers a conclusion reflecting on the dialectic between tradition and modernity in contemporary Igbo gender.

The Pre-colonial Gender Order: Duality, Power, and Women's Authority

Pre-colonial Igbo society resisted the rigid binary opposition of male dominance and female subordination that later colonial and postcolonial observers projected onto it. While Igbo society was broadly patrilineal; meaning that descent and inheritance primarily followed the male line, scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that this did not translate into the wholesale exclusion of women from power.² Rather, Igbo communities maintained what Gloria Chuku and other historians have described as a 'dual-sex political system,' in which women and men exercised authority over distinct but complementary spheres of communal life.

Pre-colonial Igbo communities were composed of small autonomous villages governed by councils of non-formal, non-hereditary leaders whose responsibilities were determined by age-grade membership, sex, social status, and ritual roles. Within this framework, women were not merely passive subjects of male authority but active participants in governance, markets, and religious institutions. Many Igbo societies had Omu institutions, and female monarchs, who wielded significant political authority. Among the western Igbo of Onitsha, the Obi (male king) governed in consultation with the Omu (female monarch), and the demise of the Omu institution under colonial rule represents one of the most dramatic examples of how colonialism restructured gender authority in Igbo land.³

The Umụada — the association of daughters of the land, derived from the Igbo words umu (children)

and *ada* (a generic name for daughters) — constituted one of the most powerful women's institutions in pre-colonial Igbo land. As an organization of women who traced their origins to the same natal community, the *Umụada* wielded significant judicial, political, and social authority.⁴ They intervened in disputes within their natal communities, set codes of conduct, and could impose sanctions on those who violated communal norms. Their power derived from collective organization, which gave them structural authority operating independently of male institutions.

Women's authority in pre-colonial Igbo land was also rooted in the economy. The market was a central institution of Igbo social life and a domain in which women exercised considerable power. Women dominated the palm oil trade, produced and sold agricultural goods, and managed complex trading networks that extended across regional boundaries.⁵ The economic independence that market trading afforded women was not merely material; it was the foundation upon which women's social and political power rested. A woman of exceptional wealth and standing could take a title — one of the highest markers of status in Igbo society — and even assume roles traditionally associated with men.

The title system itself illustrates the complexity of pre-colonial Igbo gender arrangements. In many Igbo communities, women who achieved sufficient wealth and social distinction could take on roles otherwise reserved for men. Nwando Achebe's research in the *Nsukka* area of northern Igbo land has documented female kings, female fathers, female husbands, female

warriors, and male priestesses — a range of gender crossings that challenges any simple account of Igbo society as uniformly patriarchal.⁶ In pre-colonial Igbo land, gender was in important respects a social achievement rather than a biological given.

Male Daughters, Female Husbands, and Woman-to-Woman Marriage

Among the most intensively studied phenomena in Igbo gender studies are the institutions of 'male daughters,' 'female husbands,' and woman-to-woman marriage. Amadiume's analysis of these practices remains foundational. In her account, pre-colonial Nnobi society, though starkly divided by sex, maintained a gender system flexible enough to allow wealthy women to acquire wives and become 'husbands,' and to allow certain daughters to be conceptualized as male in order to inherit the position of household head from their fathers.⁷ As Amadiume argued, because biological sex did not always correspond to ideological gender, women could play roles usually monopolized by men without social stigma being attached to the transgression of gender rules.

The practice of 'male daughters' arose in families where a man had no male offspring to inherit his property and continue his lineage. In such cases, one of his daughters could be designated through a cultural rite known as 'Igba Ndu' as a male daughter.⁸ This female child, upon the conferment of male status, assumed all the social and legal roles of a male in the family. She was not to be married out of the family compound, as her departure would defeat the purpose of the designation —

to keep property and lineage continuity within the paternal line. The male daughter was empowered to take a wife, creating the phenomenon of woman-to-woman marriage, whose children would be culturally attributed to the male daughter's father.

The 'female husband' institution operated on similar logic but with different social conditions. A woman could acquire the status of female husband if she was childless or widowed and wished to produce male children to carry on her late husband's name, or if she amassed sufficient wealth and took up formal political authority.⁹ In Igbo land, women of exceptional wealth and social standing, and those who were past menopause, could pay bride price for other women. By paying bride price, the female husband's status was elevated to that of her male counterparts.

It is critical to understand what these institutions were not. As scholars have consistently emphasized, woman-to-woman marriage as practiced in Igbo land was not the equivalent of what contemporary Western discourse understands as same-sex marriage or lesbian union. The relationship between the female husband and her bride was not primarily amorous or based on sexual attraction between the two women.¹⁰ Rather, it was a social and economic institution designed to address specific problems within the patrilineal system — particularly the challenge of lineage continuity in the absence of male heirs. The wives of female husbands were free to take male lovers who would father children attributed to the female husband.

The scholarly debate around these institutions has been substantial. Some scholars have characterized

woman-to-woman marriage as an instrument for the preservation of patriarchy, on the grounds that the obsession with male lineage continuation that drove these practices was itself a patriarchal imperative.¹¹ This critique has genuine force: these institutions did not challenge the principle of male primogeniture; they accommodated it through creative adaptation. On the other hand, Amadiume and others have emphasized that these practices nonetheless afforded women significant social power and mobility within the context of their own cultural frameworks.

Evelyn Nwachukwu Urama's 2019 study draws attention to the costs borne by women within these institutions, including the physical, psychological, and health risks faced by brides of female husbands and male daughters, who were often compelled to have sexual intercourse with men selected by their 'husbands' without meaningful consultation.¹² While the institutions of female husbands and male daughters represented a form of gender flexibility, they were also embedded within and ultimately served a patrilineal system that imposed significant burdens on women.

Nwando Achebe's research in northern Igbo land has further deepened our understanding of these gender categories. Her work documents women who served as female kings, female fathers, and female husbands, revealing that gender crossing in Igbo land was widespread across the region and not confined to a single community or sub-group.¹³ This breadth underscores how deeply institutionalized these practices were in pre-colonial Igbo culture.

Sexuality, Marriage, and the Regulation of Women's Bodies

While the practices of male daughters and female husbands reveal a degree of gender flexibility, the regulation of female sexuality in Igbo society has also been marked by forms of control that subordinated women's sexual autonomy to patriarchal imperatives. The institution of bride price, the practice of female genital mutilation, and the norms governing premarital and extramarital sexuality all reflect the complex ways in which Igbo society managed female bodies and desires.

Bride price, the payment made by a groom's family to the bride's family as part of the marriage transaction, is one of the most widely discussed institutions in Igbo and African social life. In Igbo land, marriage is not considered valid without the payment of bride price, which confers legal recognition on the union and on any children born of it.¹⁴ Bride price is notably high among many Igbo subgroups and reflects the perceived value placed on the bride and her family's social status. Critics have argued that the institution effectively transfers a measure of control over a woman from her natal family to her husband's family. Proponents counter that bride price in the Igbo context confers social dignity and legal protection on the bride, and that it is better understood as a form of compensation to the bride's family for the loss of her labor and social contributions.

The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) has been documented in many parts of Igbo land, though

its prevalence and form vary significantly across subgroups and has declined substantially in recent decades due to public health campaigns and legal prohibitions.¹⁵ In its Igbo context, FGM was understood as a means of managing female sexual desire, specifically, of diminishing women's sexual pleasure in order to enforce premarital virginity and post-marital fidelity. The cultural rationale for FGM in Igbo land was explicitly linked to the control of female sexuality, reinforcing a patriarchal system in which women's bodies and desires were regulated by male-dominated social norms.

The regulation of sexuality in Igbo land also operated through norms governing premarital and extramarital relations. While men in traditional Igbo society were permitted to take multiple wives, women faced significantly harsher sanctions for sexual transgression.¹⁶ Adultery by women could result in severe communal punishment. The sexual double standard embedded in these norms has been a subject of sustained critique by Igbo feminist scholars, who have challenged the cultural acceptance of male sexual license alongside the strict policing of female sexuality.

Woman-to-woman marriage also had distinct implications for the sexual autonomy of the wives of female husbands. As noted above, these women were free to take male lovers to father children for their female husbands. This arrangement granted the wives a degree of sexual freedom unavailable to women in conventional heterosexual marriages.¹⁷ This dimension of woman-to-woman marriage represents a potential space of female sexual agency within a patriarchal

system, though the constraints within which this agency operated must not be overlooked.

Among the Owerre-Igbo, one of the most thoroughly studied Igbo subgroups, historical marriage forms included heterosexual marriage, woman-to-woman marriage, and child marriage, in which the betrothal was contracted when the girl was very young.¹⁸ Although child marriage has been significantly curtailed by modern law and changing social norms, it illustrates the extent to which control over female bodies and sexuality was exercised from the earliest stages of a girl's life in traditional Igbo society.

Colonialism, the Women's War of 1929, and the Restructuring of Gender

The encounter between British colonialism and Igbo gender arrangements represents one of the most consequential transformations in the history of gender relations in southeastern Nigeria. The colonial project systematically dismantled the dual-sex political institutions that had granted Igbo women significant authority and restructured gender relations in ways that entrenched a form of masculinist patriarchy that had no precise precedent in pre-colonial Igbo society.

The British system of indirect rule, formalized under Governor-General Lord Frederick Lugard in 1914, governed Nigeria through male intermediaries called the 'Warrant Chiefs'. They handpicked by colonial officers and vested with day-to-day administrative authority over local communities.¹⁹ Traditionally; Igbo chiefs had been elected through a process that incorporated community consensus and, in many communities, the input of

women's institutions. The appointment of Warrant Chiefs overrode these processes, installed men who were often outsiders or of low status within their communities, and inflated male authority at the expense of the complex balance of powers that had previously characterized Igbo governance. Women's political institutions; the Umụda, the Omu, the ezeala , were systematically ignored or suppressed by the colonial administration.

As Gloria Chuku has documented, the British indirect rule system governed through male authorities and also formalized male institutions, while simultaneously ignoring female equivalents.²⁰ Village assemblies were replaced with Native Courts run by British officers and handpicked Igbo men, and women's oversight of marketplaces was replaced with male market administrators. The colonial administration also restructured the economy in ways that disadvantaged women. The introduction of forced labor, the imposition of taxation on men, and the transformation of trade networks all eroded the economic base of women's power.

The imposition of colonial rule was not accepted without resistance. In November and December of 1929, one of the most significant anti-colonial uprisings in the history of British Africa occurred in southeastern Nigeria. Known in Igbo as Ogu Umu nwaanyi — the Women's War — and in British colonial records as the 'Aba Women's Riots,' the uprising mobilized tens of thousands of women across six ethnic groups across the provinces of Owerri and Calabar.²¹ The events were sparked by a dispute in the town of Oloko between a

woman named Nwanyeruwa and a colonial census-taker, who instructed her to count her goats, sheep, and people, which she interpreted as a prelude to taxation. She invoked the Igbo principle that women do not pay tax.

The Women's War was far more than a tax protest. As Judith van Allen argued in her foundational 1972 essay, the uprising represented an amplification of the traditional Igbo women's practice of 'sitting on a man'- a form of collective protest in which women would gather at the residence of an offending man, making noise, singing, and demanding redress.²² The war mobilized this traditional mechanism of political action on a massive scale, targeting Warrant Chiefs and Native Courts across a vast area. During the two months of protest, at least 25,000 Igbo women participated. Sixteen Native Courts were attacked, most destroyed. Many Warrant Chiefs were forced to resign.

The colonial response was brutal. By the time the uprising was suppressed, approximately 55 women had been killed by colonial troops.²³ The Aba Commission of Inquiry, convened in 1930, demonstrated the colonial administration's ignorance of Igbo women's political institutions and its fundamental inability to comprehend the organized, politically coherent nature of the women's action. As Nina Mba has argued, the Women's War marked a historical dividing point in British colonial administration in Nigeria with far-reaching implications for gender and governance alike.

The long-term consequences of the Women's War for gender in Igbo land were mixed. The colonial administration dropped its plans to tax women and introduced some reforms to the Warrant Chief system.

But the structural conditions that had precipitated the uprising; the suppression of women's political institutions, the marginalization of women in the colonial economy, the replacement of dual-sex governance with exclusively male authority all remained fundamentally unchanged.²⁴ The Women's War stands in the historiography as both a monument to Igbo women's political agency and a marker of the limits of that agency within the colonial order.

The introduction of Christian missions, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and intensifying through the colonial period, added another dimension to the transformation of Igbo gender relations. Christianity introduced new models of femininity which is centered on domesticity, sexual purity, and male headship of the household, that reinforced certain aspects of patriarchal control while also offering women new avenues of education, literacy, and social mobility.²⁵ The complex relationship between Christianity and Igbo gender is irreducible to either simple liberation or simple oppression; it represents a field of contestation that continues to shape gender relations in Igbo land today.

Postcolonial Transformations: Law, Christianity, and Feminist Responses

Nigeria's independence in 1960 did not restore the dual-sex political institutions of the pre-colonial period. Rather, the postcolonial state inherited and in many respects deepened the masculinist structures of the colonial order. The Nigerian legal system, derived from British colonial law, frequently conflicted with traditional Igbo concepts of gender, lineage, and

inheritance, typically in ways that disadvantaged women.²⁶ Women's customary property rights, which had been eroding throughout the colonial period, faced continued challenge in the postcolonial legal framework.

One of the most enduring gender inequalities in postcolonial Igbo land is the denial of women's land inheritance rights. The principle of male primogeniture; the inheritance of land exclusively through the male line, has been maintained across most Igbo communities, even as women's contributions to agricultural production and household maintenance remain central to economic life.²⁷ Women who are widowed or who have no brothers face particular vulnerability, as they may be expelled from family land upon the death of a husband or father. Scholars have documented the range of quiet strategies, including woman-to-woman marriage, the practice of nrachi (traditional single parenthood), and levirate marriage - that Igbo women employ to navigate these restrictions.

The influence of Christianity on postcolonial Igbo gender relations has been profound and paradoxical. On one hand, Christian churches, particularly the Pentecostal and charismatic churches that have proliferated since the 1980s, have reinforced patriarchal gender norms, emphasizing male headship of the household, female submission, and condemning practices like woman-to-woman marriage. On the other hand, Christian churches have historically been among the most significant providers of education for Igbo women, creating new possibilities for women's social and professional advancement.²⁸

The postcolonial period has seen the emergence of a rich body of Igbo feminist scholarship and literary production that has engaged directly with gender and sexuality. Writers including Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta used fiction to explore and critique gender inequality in Igbo land, while scholars including Ifi Amadiume, Nwando Achebe, Gloria Chuku, and Evelyn Nwachukwu Urama have produced rigorous academic analyses of Igbo gender systems.²⁹ This body of work has been both intellectually sophisticated and politically engaged, seeking not only to describe but to transform the gender conditions under which Igbo women live.

Buchi Emecheta's novels, particularly *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), have been especially influential in representing gender inequalities in Igbo society for both Nigerian and global audiences. Emecheta's work illuminates how patriarchal practices, including bride price, the pressure to bear male children, and the social stigma attached to barren women, produce suffering at the level of individual lives.³⁰ Her fiction also traces the intersection of Igbo patriarchy with colonialism and Western modernity.

The question of sexuality in postcolonial Igbo land is particularly fraught. Nigeria's 2013 Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, which criminalizes LGBTQ+ organizations and same-sex public displays of affection, has created conditions of severe legal jeopardy for Igbo people. In this context, the traditional institutions of woman-to-woman marriage and male daughters, which involved forms of gender and social identity crossing that do not map neatly onto Western sexual categories, occupy a deeply ambiguous position.

They are simultaneously celebrated as evidence of indigenous cultural flexibility and invoked in debates about the compatibility of African culture with sexual minority rights.

Women's organizations have continued to play a significant role in postcolonial Igbo land, building on both the pre-colonial tradition of the Umụada and the colonial and postcolonial history of women's political mobilization. As Chuku has documented, since the colonial period Igbo women have struggled to regain the traditional dual-gender system of association that fostered community-based modes of female mobilization.³¹ These transgenerational institutions carry forward the legacy of pre-colonial women's authority into a radically transformed social landscape.

Conclusion: Tradition, Modernity, and the Ongoing Negotiation of Gender

This paper has traced the construction, transformation, and contestation of gender and sexuality in Igbo land across the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Several overarching conclusions emerge from this survey.

First, pre-colonial Igbo society was characterized by a gender system of considerable complexity and internal flexibility. The dual-sex political institutions, the Umụada, the Omu, the title system, and the practices of male daughters, female husbands, and woman-to-woman marriage all illustrate a society that recognized the social construction of gender and institutionalized forms of

gender mobility that allowed individuals , particularly women of wealth and achievement to transcend the categories into which they had been born.

Second, British colonialism inflicted severe damage on Igbo gender arrangements. The imposition of indirect rule through male Warrant Chiefs, the suppression of women's political institutions, the restructuring of the economy along masculinist lines, and the introduction of a legal system derived from British patriarchal norms collectively eroded the complex gender architecture of pre-colonial Igbo land. The 1929 Women's War (Ogu Umu nwaanyi), stands as the most dramatic collective expression of Igbo women's resistance to this process.

Third, the postcolonial period has seen the entrenchment of certain patriarchal structures, particularly in the domains of land inheritance, marital law, and legal prohibition of non-normative sexuality, alongside the emergence of new forms of feminist critique and women's political organization. Christianity, Western education, and globalizing feminism have all intersected with indigenous Igbo gender frameworks in complex and non-linear ways, producing a contemporary Igbo gender landscape that is neither simply 'traditional' nor simply 'modern' but a dynamic synthesis of multiple influences.

Fourth, the scholarly debate on Igbo gender and sexuality has itself been a productive site of theoretical contention. The question of how to analyze institutions like woman-to-woman marriage , whether as expressions of women's agency, as instruments of patriarchal reproduction, or as both simultaneously

remains open. This debate reflects a broader tension in African feminist scholarship that has yet to be resolved.

Finally, the study of gender and sexuality in Igbo land offers important resources for global theoretical debates. Amadiume's distinction between sex and gender, elaborated in the context of a specific African society more than a decade before Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, is a reminder that the most important theoretical innovations in gender studies have not always originated in Euro-American academic centers. The complexity and sophistication of Igbo gender arrangements, past and present demand ongoing scholarly attention and offer rich material for continuing theoretical reflection.

ENDNOTE

1. Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987).
2. Gloria Chuku, 'Igbo Women and Political Participation in Nigeria, 1800s–2005,' *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2009): 81–103.
3. *Ibid.*, 84–85.
4. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 15–16. See also Chuku, 'Igbo Women and Political Participation,' 84.
5. Chuku, 'Igbo Women and Political Participation,' 83.
6. Nwando Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern*

- Igbo land, 1900–1960 (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), xii.
7. Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 15–16.
 8. Evelyn Nwachukwu Urama, 'The Values and Usefulness of Same-Sex Marriages among the Females in Igbo Culture in the Continuity of Lineage or Posterity,' *SAGE Open* 9, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019850037>.
 9. Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 15–16; Chuku, 'Igbo Women and Political Participation,' 84.
 10. Urama, 'Values and Usefulness of Same-Sex Marriages.'
 11. Ibid.
 12. Ibid.
 13. Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings*, xii, 110–54.
 14. Urama, 'Values and Usefulness of Same-Sex Marriages.'
 15. Ibid.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Ibid. See also Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, 15–16.
 19. Judith van Allen, "'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6, no. 2 (1972): 165–81.

20. Chuku, 'Igbo Women and Political Participation,' 88.
21. Marc Matera, Misty L. Bastian, and Susan Kingsley Kent, *The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
22. Van Allen, "'Sitting on a Man,'" 165–81.
23. Matera, Bastian, and Kent, *The Women's War of 1929*.
24. Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900–1965* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1982), 79–97.
25. Matera, Bastian, and Kent, *The Women's War of 1929*, chaps. 1–2.
26. Chuku, 'Igbo Women and Political Participation,' 95–99.
27. *Ibid.*, 95.
28. *Ibid.*, 99–103.
29. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands; Achebe, Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings; Urama, 'Values and Usefulness of Same-Sex Marriages.'*
30. Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (London: Allison & Busby, 1979).
31. Chuku, 'Igbo Women and Political Participation,' 101.

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