
The Role of the Internet in the Maintenance of Diasporic Relations: The Case of Mungaka

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With global immigration patterns, the movement of people has also meant the spread of languages. Mungaka, an indigenous language spoken in Bali, Cameroon, has moved to domains beyond its borders due to such migration patterns. Mbonbani is an online forum created to maintain communication between those who moved away and those who stayed. This study investigates language use and ideologies as manifested on this online forum and seeks to find out the following: 1) How does language use in an online diasporic Internet group mediate the exchange of cultural knowledge and sustain relations between Mungaka indigenous populations abroad and the home country? 2) How do diasporic communities, while dislocated from their homeland, create a linguistic awareness of their indigenous language? 3) What role does information technology play in preserving these diasporic relations? The paper looks at language use on Mbonbani to underscore how the Internet allows a linguistic space where participants appropriate new technologies for language display. It highlights how a variety of languages is used to negotiate indigenous knowledge through the construction and deconstruction of meaning. Whether or not the Internet can serve to maintain the language as a mode of communication remains to be seen.

INTRODUCTION

A lot has been said about the Internet creating a global village, reducing space and time, and maintaining a sense of community (Appadurai, 1999; Choi & Danowski, 2002; Param, 2004). Discussions abound about the Internet as a new means of global communication and its great impact on language use. With ongoing immigration patterns, the movement of people has also meant the spread of languages. Africans, for example, have migrated to different parts of the world in search of better economic and educational opportunities. In Cameroon, the absence of reasonable prospects for decent future at home have led Cameroonians to migrate mainly to the United States and Europe, where economic and educational opportunities are thought by these immigrants to be plentiful. These migratory patterns have given rise to a certain degree of dislocation where speakers of a certain language find themselves isolated from their home environment. Sometimes the tension between the desire to maintain their cultural identity with the reality of living in a new environment has made for the emergence of virtual communities through the use of the Internet. Among such speakers, the Internet has facilitated communication and interaction and allowed for the adaptation of their language to emergent technologies—an advantage for those languages that thrived solely through oral form. In this paper, I examine language use on *Mbonbani*, a diasporic online group of indigenes of Bali Nyongha, a village in Cameroon West Africa where Mungaka is the indigenous language. I analyze how the Internet serves to maintain relations between those who have migrated and those who have stayed in the homeland. I also look at how language use in this diasporic virtual community mediates the exchange of cultural knowledge and reflects the traditional values of the people of Bali. Languages used on Mbonbani

include English, Mungaka, French, and Cameroon Pidgin English. On this forum, Bali language has moved into domains beyond its immediate geographic borders, from strictly oral traditional spheres to an online environment, coexisting with larger languages such as English, French, and Cameroon Pidgin English.

I begin by providing a brief history of the sociolinguistic situation in Cameroon, the home country of Mbonbani participants. I explain how globalization sped up the creation of diasporic populations of Cameroonians and brought about pockets of Mungaka speakers scattered around the world. I move on to consider how the Internet fits into this diasporic environment with its new ways of disseminating information and facilitating contact over space and time. Members of this diasporic community use language and the Internet to construct, deconstruct, negotiate, renegotiate, and contest their individual and group identities based on local, religious, national and global ideologies (Bahri, 2001; Iganacio, 2000; Lal, 1999; Mitra, 1997a, 1997b; Rai, 1995). They also adapt their ways of communication to the new technologies and expand the domains of use of an indigenous language, which otherwise would remain in a strictly oral/aural environment. I argue that the Internet creates a linguistic space through which participants appropriate online technologies to advance, enhance, and display cultural traditions. Thus, although English had a head start in Internet use over other languages, the Internet has also made it possible for other languages, both big (e.g., German, French, Japanese, and Spanish) and small (e.g., Mungaka), to exist on the Internet. I conclude with implications of the study and speculate about potential venues for further inquiry.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

This study investigates language use and ideologies manifested in an online forum and seeks to find out the following:

1. How does language use in an online diasporic Internet group mediate the exchange of cultural knowledge and sustain relations between Mungaka indigenous populations abroad and the home country?
2. How do diasporic communities, while dislocated from their homeland, create a linguistic awareness of their indigenous language?
3. What role does information technology play in preserving these diasporic relations?

I was drawn to conducting an ethnography on Mbonbani because of the complex nature of the communicative practices that its participants engage in. I set out to explore how a particular group of people engage in online communications, what they make of it, how they relate its possibilities to themselves and their futures. In this sense, I look at the use or effects of a new medium by members of a specific culture; how they attempt to present themselves in a transforming communicative environment, how they find themselves in this environment and, at the same time, how they mold the environment to their own image. In order to establish an empirical context, I begin with a brief survey of language use among Bali indigenes offline. The survey was an effort to include multiple data sources to ensure triangulation and strengthen my data analysis. It also sought to monitor members' offline language choice and communicative practices. I created an online survey and sent a link to Mbonbani participants. The survey questions requested participants to indicate if they were Bali natives, the countries/cities in which they currently reside, and the languages used at home in their childhood. I also asked subscribers about their reading, writing, and speaking

proficiency and fluency in Mungaka and requested parents to indicate the languages in which they communicated with their children. Out of the 751 members on Mbonbani, 367 of them responded to the survey. I categorized and analyzed their responses. In this manner, this study utilized a qualitative and ethnographic approach (Hymes, 1974).

Between September 2008 and April 2009, I collected a primary set of interactional data. I gained access into Mbonbani by personally subscribing and sometimes contributing in the online discussions. I also had private exchanges with other members. During this period, I collected data from the public exchanges and selected those that debated or discussed any aspect of the Bali tradition, language, and/or culture. I also included personal interviews in my data. A total of 20 interviews were administered. I selected interviewees based on their active presence online and their willingness to contribute to the knowledge base of the indigenous group. Once the data were collected, I coded the exchanges and did a qualitative content analysis of the messages. Helped by my understanding of Bali cultureⁱ and migrant experiences in Europe and the United States of America, I focused on how the Internet has been adapted to suit users' discourses and practices. Looking at patterns in the online discussions, I examined how aspects of Bali Nyonga language and culture are consciously and unconsciously mediated, how meaning is constructed and deconstructed, and how identities are negotiated.

THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION IN CAMEROON

Cameroon is a multilingual country, in which 247 indigenous languages, two official languages, and Cameroon Pidgin English are used (Breton and Fohlung, 1991; Boum Ndongo-Semengue & Sadembou, 1999). Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) is widely spoken by an estimated 50% of the population. The two official languages, English and French, were introduced in 1916, when Britain and France divided Cameroon into two parts after defeating the German forces in the country. The colonizers then imposed their languages in the areas of education and administration. This led to the solid implantation of the two languages during the colonial era, a situation that was later reinforced after Cameroon became independent.

The Current Status of Indigenous Languages

In Cameroon, where official usage is reserved solely for French and English, indigenous languages continue to be limited largely to oral usage within family and group circles in rural settings and urban centers (Bitja'a & Zachée, 2001). Although the sensitive issue of mother-tongue literacy has received close scholarly attention (Tadadjeu, 2004), the very existence of indigenous languages is still threatened today, especially in towns and cities where more and more young people tend to use the official languages from childhood. PROPELCAⁱⁱ has experimented with mother-tongue education through formal schooling. Indigenous languages such as Ewondo, Duala, Fe'efe'e, and Lamnso' have been used in a pilot project for mother tongue education at the primary level (Tadadjeu, 2004). Yet the success of the project has not led to an implementation of nationwide literacy initiatives in indigenous languages. Furthermore, the push to promote mother-tongues is also evidenced in media outlets which use some local languages in their broadcast of news and programs. From 1970 to 1977 these languages were used over national public radio to popularize native languages. In the early 1990s, Cameroonians witnessed an ushering in of FM stations as well as an easing of restrictions on private ownership of radio stations in Cameroon. Each provincial station,

responding to the linguistic profile of its audience, began producing ethnic programs which entailed use of the local languages on a fixed schedule. Radio Bamenda, the northwest regional station, for example, allocated 23 hours per week for the 22 community languages in the region of which Mungaka is a part. (Ayuninjam, 2007). Despite such initiatives however, the introduction of Cameroonian languages into the regular academic curricula has been slow in coming, and the two national languages continue to dominate institutional spaces (Tadadjeu et al, 1988). Even remote villages are not exempt from this gradual encroachment of foreign languages into local linguistic spaces as reflected in the following post from a Mbonbani subscriber:

In the Bali of today, you are most likely to hear more English, Cameroon Pidgin English and French being spoken than Mungaka, because every one—the young and old alike—thinks it's a cool thing to do. (T.B.)ⁱⁱⁱ

The History of Mungaka

Mungaka, a Bantoid and primary language of the Bali-Nyonga has an estimated 45,000 native speakers. When the Basel Mission Church arrived in 1903 from Switzerland and southern Germany, it adopted Mungaka as a language of communication and this led to an extensive and intensive use of Mungaka for both religious and secular interactions. It was subsequently initiated into formal education and was at one point the lingua franca taught by Swiss-German missionaries. Mungaka became one of the first Cameroonian languages to be codified. Based on a slightly modified German orthography, a Mungaka dictionary was soon developed. By 1915, a translation of Bible stories was available in Mungaka. Outside Bali Nyonga, Mungaka became a lingua franca for non-native speakers. Used as a language of communication in many parts of the northwest, it enjoyed the status of other widely spoken languages such as Duala, Ewondo, and Ffulde. Today, relatively few people are schooled in Mungaka, as it is no longer taught in institutions of learning. Hence, many native speakers are unable to properly use the written Mungaka that is based on the modified German orthography.^{iv} The spoken form of the language on the other hand, remains less formal and more diversified, characterized by language mixing and various forms of linguistic interference. Speakers who grew up in Bali have mastered the language and demonstrate superior fluency since they not only lived in the L1 setting, but had to participate in various local, traditional, and cultural events carried out strictly in the mother tongue. Speakers who, on the other hand, grew up outside of the village setting cannot boast of such fluency; their Mungaka is marked by other linguistic interferences.

THE RISE OF MUNGAKA DIASPORIC POPULATIONS

For a quarter-century following independence in 1960, Cameroon was one of the most prosperous countries in Africa. The 1980's slowing economic growth led Cameroon to accept Structural Adjustment Programs^v to open the local market to foreign investors. The programs failed to turn the economy around. As a result, Cameroonians began to migrate abroad for education and economic reasons. This resulted in the formation of huge diasporic populations of Bali indigenes and Cameroonians around the globe.

Indigenous populations have remained in contact with their place of origin by using communication technologies to reconstruct what it means to be a member of a community in a situation of geographical displacement (Boczkowski, 1999). Those individuals who have

desired to remain in contact with their places of origin have relied heavily upon communication technologies such as mailing lists and bulletin boards, where migrants have regular exchanges with their fellow nationals, almost always about issues linked to their nationalities and their migration experiences (Li, 1990; Mitra, 1996; Rai, 1995). In this fashion, Mbonbani members have assumed the responsibility of creating and maintaining a public space for fellow diasporics (Karim, 2003).

Mbonbani: the Online Internet Group

Mbonbani was created in 1999 and to date has 751 members who reside in different parts of the world. Below is a pie chart showing the distribution of members around the globe:

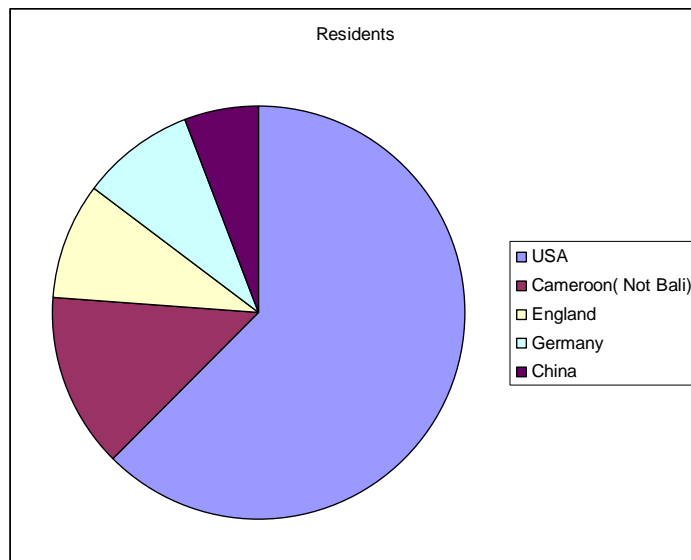


Figure 1. Member distribution of Mbonbani by region.

Group members share news about the homeland, list social events for members of the diaspora, and provide relevant links to the home culture. The online forum provides a virtual public space where diaspora members can “meet” others like themselves to discuss and negotiate their “we-ness” (Goel, 2004). Participation in this space is primarily framed in the experience of negotiating identity “between poles of original homeland and a newly acquired host culture” (Sinclair & Cunningham, 2000, p.15).

Mbonbani is a moderated forum with a single moderator. To belong to the group, individuals have to send a request to the moderator to have their email addresses added to the listserv. Prospective members are required to have two sponsors who should be existing members in good standing. This move is to avoid anonymous emails as postings can be traced to individuals. This action allows for openness and self-regulation within the forum as members serve as gatekeepers of the underlying rules of respect and proper behavior. A discussion usually starts with a series of replies to an initial post.

Some postings do not generate enough interest to spur a discussion and could go largely unanswered. The forum adheres to strict rules of courtesy and politeness. The forum administrator may suspend a member’s privilege if his or her postings do not conform to the forum’s policy of courteousness and respect.

Is Mungaka an Endangered Language?

Mungaka speakers harbor the fear that a decrease in Mungaka speakers might endanger the language. The rise in migration of Mungaka indigenous populations has led to an increase in intermarriages between Bali indigenes and people from other tribes and countries. Furthermore, migrants who complete their studies abroad tend to settle in these foreign countries because of the lack of economic opportunities at home. In 2004, the chief of Bali village paid a visit to the Bali groups in the United States. In his address to Bali people in the diaspora, he pleaded with them to strive to uphold the cultural ways of Bali people and teach the children how to speak Mungaka. He reiterated the fears of some that Mungaka might become endangered if steps are not taken to promote the language and support the cultural traditions of its speakers.

According to Anthony Woodbury, a linguistic anthropologist affiliated with the Linguistic Society of America, an endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future when parents no longer teach the language to their children and do not use it actively in everyday matters (Woodbury 2009). He also maintains that when a community loses its language, it often loses a great deal of its cultural identity at the same time since much of the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual life of a people is experienced through language. A people's history is passed down through its language, so when the language disappears, it may take with it important information about the early history of the community. In open letters to the group, several subscribers described this angst.

In our attempt to seek the fulfillment of the proverbial American dream, some of us have abdicated our responsibilities towards our children.....cases where a parent is busy calling for pizza or Chinese food, or taco delivery, or is busy preparing macaroni and cheese while pots of fufu, nkundong, dju', mali, ekwang, ndole or any other delicacy are simmering on the back burners. Why? Because her american pikin (dem) no longer have a taste for those African foods. You and your child do not even speak the same language anymore; you might have become too sophisticated to speak Mungaka.....Let's hold on to our children but most importantly, allow them to develop affirmative connections with Bali, Cameroon and Africa... speak Mungaka with them, and make them eat the same food from the same pots as everyone else and at the same time! (SDD)

SDD highlights the subtle ways in which aspects of Bali culture have literally and metaphorically been relegated to the back burners by indigenous populations abroad. *Fufu* (the official Bali dish), *nkundong* (plantains), *dju* (yams), *mali*, (beans) *ekwang*, *ndole* (traditional Cameroon dishes) which are considered delicacies have been devalued in some households, while dishes such as macaroni and cheese take center stage to cater to the taste buds of American “pikin (dem),” children in Cameroon Pidgin English.

SDD's use of the term *American pikin dem* also underscores the contested identities within immigrant households as highlighted in the following post:

We are going to loose our culture and tradition by neglecting the role of children..... Our children are neither Americans nor Cameroonians. We have lost our bearings in a foreign culture by neglecting our culture and tradition that define us. Now most of us who....have been blessed to acquire western education, have decided to throw our language, culture and tradition in the rubbish pit (YV)

Members in diasporic communities lack opportunities to use Mungaka in everyday situations unlike their childhood years where Mungaka was used predominantly.

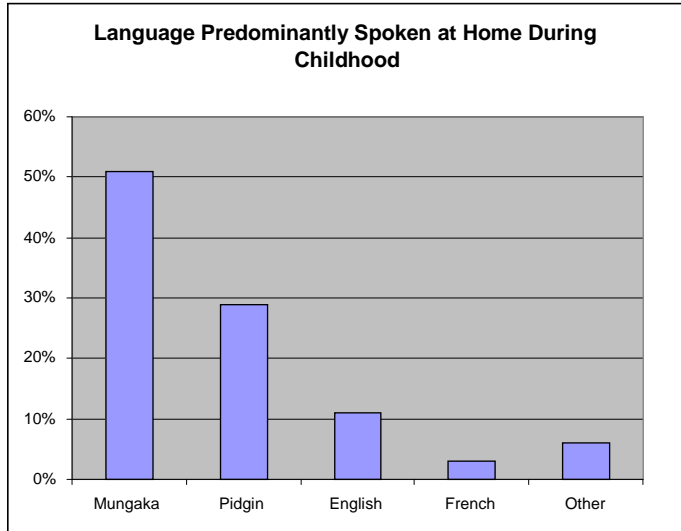


Figure 2. Principal languages spoken by children in the home.

There are several reasons for the limited use of Mungaka in current times. The urban drift of the younger population and the clustering of diasporic populations in new homelands have taken native speakers away from environments where Mungaka is the primary language. Away from their homeland, some speakers perceive their language as lacking in prestige and feel the pressure to integrate with a larger more powerful linguistic group of their new residence. In the survey that I administered, only 25% of the participants feel comfortable speaking their native language in a non-Mungaka public setting while 30% speak Mungaka to their children at home. Below is a snapshot of the Mungaka capabilities of Mbonbani members:^{vi}

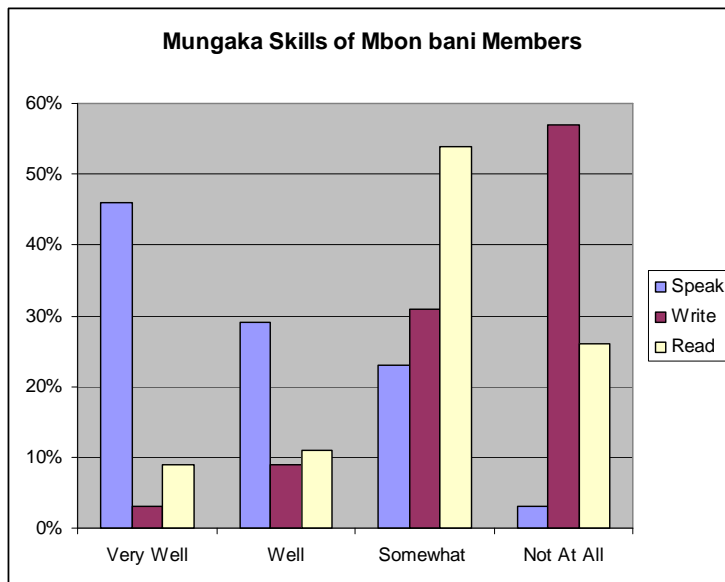


Figure 3. Mungaka proficiency of Mbonbani users.

Since very few members know how to read Mungaka, written Mungaka on the forum is usually accompanied by an English translation. The question thus arises if the dominance of English as the language of the Internet undermines the preservation of ancient, non-Anglo-Saxon cultures online. One might be tempted to believe that such is the case with Mungaka, as Cameroon is officially organized along linguistic lines, none of which include any indigenous language. While French and English are accepted as the *lingua franca* of education and business, English has become more prestigious as Cameroonians have been drawn into an emerging global monoculture defined by consumerism and American-influenced culture with great popular appeal. English is thus regarded as the privileged route to becoming a global citizen and the reliable key to any reasonable hope for wealth and influence. Not surprisingly, young Cameroonians acquire a high proficiency in English, much to the chagrin of some members who believe Mungaka will become extinct if this practice continues. Since language shapes, organizes, and structures what we communicate, how we think, and what we experience (Whorf, 1956), their angst over losing the Mungaka language and culture may be legitimate. But upon closer examination of language use on the Mbonbani forum, members have created a space for Mungaka language and Bali culture and they maintain traditional ways of exchanging cultural knowledge even though English is predominantly used.

Language Use on Mbonbani

Members use this online community to engage in cultural practices such as disseminating announcements about deaths and wake keeping. Death ceremonies and funeral rites are very elaborate in Bali; the event could span a couple of days. When death occurs in the community at home or abroad, announcements about the wake-keeping, funeral and “cry-die” are disseminated on the forum to serve as reminders for members to acknowledge the passage of life. Members who cannot attend any of the events send out condolence messages and eulogies to the bereaved family through the forum.

Additionally, books and magazines on Bali history and culture are advertised and sold online to cater to the needs of individuals who are removed from their home language environment. These reading materials seek to provide a traditional and cultural context for individuals who are miles away from their homeland. Historical and cultural anecdotes, articles and short essays on various aspects of the Bali culture are sporadically provided by individuals. A recent article on the “Lela Festival” provided a historical perspective on this annual tradition, while an article on “The Ayaba Factor” gave a brief history of one of the pioneers of Bali Nyongha. Members also engage in transnational matters by keeping abreast in matters of politics in Cameroon. Also, village and palace updates keep participants informed about local happenings.

Updates on the educational and professional achievements of individuals are announced to promote a shared sense of success and to open up conversations for mentorship—an extension of informal learning and apprenticeship. Traditional music and videos are disseminated to impart cultural values in younger children and to update those who no longer live in the L1 setting. Members are also constantly reminded to be actively involved in their local communities and to fulfill their civic duties by voting in both the home and host countries. Elders, for their part, are sometimes called upon to mediate disputes between individuals and families.

For the purpose of this study, I look at how community cohesion is sustained through language use online. Online forums have allowed Mungaka to transcend locally bounded spaces and allowed diasporic populations to use their indigenous language as well as English to negotiate meaning, culture, and traditional ways of exchanging knowledge in an online forum. They have also created a website on Bali, www.balinyonga.com, which serves as an information resource for Mbonbani members at home and abroad and have thus adapted their communicative practices to emerging technologies. Through quizzes and miscellaneous requests for information, participants engage in dialogue, create, and maintain an awareness of the linguistic and cultural knowledge within their diasporic community. Quizzes are given out by subscribers who may want to stir up a discussion on some aspect of Bali culture. Sometimes the questions are framed entirely in English, and sometimes a mix of English, Mungaka, and Cameroon Pidgin English is used. The questions address a range of historical, socio-cultural, and linguistic aspects of Mungaka. A quiz starts a chain of exchanges and lasts over a couple of days until the correct response is offered. Participants often engage in discussions in the quest for the right answers and they sometimes debate one another on the validity of a response. Some participants demonstrate superiority of knowledge by situating their responses within historical contexts. In general, the exchanges employ culturally specific language and participants use all the languages at their disposal to negotiate meaning and identity. In this environment of language plurality, Mungaka language and culture are foregrounded.

THE DATA

The following data, a combination of quizzes and miscellaneous requests for information, were culled from Mbonbani. The quizzes are given by specific individuals, while anyone can ask for miscellaneous bits of information on some aspect of the Bali traditional ways. The quizzes in this data set are posted by VM, the moderator of the group. He usually announces the exercise as a quiz and offers a winning prize to encourage participation. Just like the riddles that were used to socialize children in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of communities in traditional Africa, the quizzes foster critical thinking and help transmit indigenous knowledge. As Nakene (1943) correctly observed, riddles were used as a means of critical education for African children, training them to think quickly and critically. Here is a sample quiz:

In Bali Nyonga, there are several advise that are given to mourners, sympathizers and well-wishers regarding death celebration or “cry-die”. ONE advise in particular stands out and is universally/widely accepted. What is it? (VM)^{vii}

The above quiz deals with a subject that is central to Bali culture—death celebrations and funeral rites. Death celebrations and rites, or *keung vu*, span a couple of days and include elaborate programs of dances, ceremonies, speeches, gun-firing, church services, feasting, and drinking. Sometimes several hundred people will be entertained. It is the very financial success of migrants (whether nationally or internationally) which funds these expanded death celebrations. Death celebrations are sometimes used to flaunt the economic success of the living while lauding the dead. In this quiz, participants have to draw on the current debates on death celebrations, which have been viewed by some as a wasteful and ostentatious process.

In yet another quiz, forum members deliberate on socio-cultural aspects of *Lela*, the yearly dance festival that commemorates the wars during which the Bali Nyonga fought and conquered other tribes. Such discussions along with videos, pictures, and narratives of *Lela* on the Internet allow indigenous populations to connect with fellow speakers at home and abroad and reflect on the traditional practices of a people. There is a shared sense of community as members draw on their collective knowledge in their exchanges with one another. As with oral traditions such as riddles and folktales, these quizzes help to transmit indigenous knowledge.

While code-switching is frequently practiced in Bali, on Mbonbani it takes a different form. Code-switching involves the use of two or more languages in the same conversation, usually within the same sentence (Myers-Scotton, 1993). When a speaker switches code, multiple identities may be associated with each of the linguistic varieties involved (ibidem). The following quiz thematizes code-switching in Bali.

In Mungaka, there is a word that refers to what in the English Language refers to: Sweetheart, Dear, Love—in short, terms of endearment to your lover, wife, “njumba”. What is the word? (VM)

In the above example, the use of *njumba* suggests the age group of the speaker and indicates a time and physical place that this word would be employed. *Njumba* is Cameroon Pidgin English for *concubine* and speakers who utilize this term would be of an older generation. By using the term, the speaker invokes the cultural practices in the village where polygamy is still practiced and where the notion of concubines is still widely accepted. The author resides in the U.S. where such practices are disallowed, but his use of the term foregrounds a social practice with which older members of the forum are familiar. Code-switching in this case is used as an expression of individuality, with the speaker opting to use *njumba* in order to align himself with the group with which he wishes, from time to time, to be identified. Here, Mungaka is showcased in a dictionary-like manner, where specific words and phrases are written out in isolation alongside their English equivalents. Language thus becomes a cultural artifact, an extension of the display of cultural history and traditions that is so central to Bali culture. FF is one of those members who takes great pride in exhibiting his knowledge of Mungaka orthography and history. He was schooled in Mungaka and is well-respected on the forum because of his extensive life experiences, his ability to communicate in multiple languages and his advanced degrees. In his responses to subscribers, he goes to great lengths to be comprehensive, situating his answers within a social and historical context. In response to the following question, he uses Mungaka with an English translation. The discussion is centered around the different appellations of the verb “boil”:

Ba FF

With reference to your Mungaka translation for the word Boil (related to cooking) I would rather use the word *lumti* which means “to boil”. For example, we do hear it say *Lumti jum* that is to boil plums. I wish to have your own comment on the above opinion.

Thanks,

ZH

ZH

In Muñgaka, proper, it is said: *lumti ntsi nuñ ndzom ma ndzi ; a ye mu? A bi ndzi nga bo dzu .* Boil water and put plums in it and get them ready for consumption. The word *lumti* is

ambiguous in its application: it means boil like the case of water; it means warming cold food and get it ready to eat. Plum would fall in the former category and corn meal cooked the previous day would fall in the latter category.

(FF)

The didactic nature of Mungaka use is also highlighted when subscribers request miscellaneous information. Members who respond to such requests for information are usually well-respected, older members with a sound knowledge of the language and culture. Their knowledge of the customs and traditions of the people command them authority and respect. Below is an example of such a response; it is a reply to a subscriber who had requested names of fruits and animals in Mungaka.

Greetings to you and the family. Below is your list with the Mungaka appellations:

Animals - *Ba nyam*

Tortoise - *nkimanko'*

Lion - *Bu'mben*

Tiger - *Ngu*

Elephant - *Swuen*

Duck - *Ngob-Ntsi*

Cow - *Nyam-Ntsi*

Fruits - *Ba Ntam-ntu*

Banana - *Lipo'*

Pineapple- *Panapu* (*Ntsu Panapo*=Idiomatic expression)

Mango - *Manguli*

Orange - *Lamsi*

Stay well with your family - *Tsi mbonkad nfo'ti ngod u.*

Another subscriber labels cow as *mfong* and this leads to a follow-up question;

Can any of you clarify if cow is both “mfong” and “nyam ntsi”? I mean can both appellations be used interchangeably?

The above question prompts the following response:

As for the cow translation, there is the short horn specie of cows that was common in Bambui and Buea called “Mfong”. The Mungaka dictionary uses “mfong” as the translation for cow. “Mfong” fearlessly roamed the streets in Bali-Nyonga, independently without any control, and returned to Titam where their salt ration was deposited..Cow was called “Nyam-Ntsi” because they were led to the stream twice or thrice per day to either drink water or cross to grazing areas....Their share of salt ration was deposited around where the herds-men lodged in the huts. (FF)

From the above, it is worth noting that *nyam* means *animal*, while *ntsi* means water. Literally *cows* would be called *water animals* because of their drinking ritual at the stream. These historical perspectives serve to clarify word meanings and give readers a sociohistorical context for appellations.

Another characteristic of language use on the Mbonbani forum is diglossia. Ferguson (1959) describes diglossia as a kind of bilingualism in a given society in which one of the

languages has high prestige (H), and another of the languages has low prestige (L). Fishman (1967) introduced the notion that diglossia could be extended to situations found in many societies where forms of two genetically unrelated (or at least historically distant) languages occupy the H and L niches, such that one of the languages is used for religious, educational, literacy, and other such prestigious domains, while another language is employed for more informal, primarily spoken domains. Such is the language situation of Cameroon, the home country of Mbonbani subscribers; two languages of high prestige are used by the government and in formal texts, while spoken indigenous languages are usually the languages of low prestige. Online Mbonbani members have established a diglossic situation or linguistic plurality by using English to parlay Mungaka. As a result, Mungaka, a language that would otherwise stay in the oral realm, has an online readership because users provide Mungaka translations alongside the English equivalents.

This phenomenon is evident in the response that follows this quiz.

In Mungaka if a child is deviant and errant, what do people say? If by the same token, this same child is well behaved and successful in school, what do people usually say?
(VM)

The following response highlights the leveling of a diglossic situation—the interlocutor uses three languages in one entry. While the placement of the sentences reflects the language diglossia offline, with English occupying the H niche and Mungaka occupying the L niche, their use in a single entry sort of levels the diglossic situation; the three languages are placed side by side as equivalents and Mungaka occupies the same linguistic space and position as English.

Who is his/her mother? English
Na who be e mami? Pidgin
Na e beh war? Mungaka

Who is his/her father? English
Na who be e papa? Pidgin
Ba e beh war? Mungaka

The subscriber's use of three languages not only demonstrates the diglossic language situation but also highlights socio-cultural concepts of childrearing. The response to the question indicates that if a child grows up and becomes successful, the father receives credit. On the other hand, if the child is not successful, inquiries are made about the mother to blame and shame her for failing in her duties.

The Internet has also accorded native speakers the ability to communally negotiate indigenous knowledge as evident in the following chain of exchanges. It begins with a question on *togbu*, the traditional regalia worn by men during elaborate traditional festivals such as Lela, and turns into a lengthy discussion that touches on sartorial meanings, hierarchies, exclusive traditional groups, and what it means to be Bali. The question is from a female subscriber, who resides in Canada. She had observed how this Bali traditional clothing had been used by Cameroon delegates as the official uniform during the country parade at the most recent Olympics. In addition to soliciting information, her inquiry also highlights the sacredness of select symbols in the Bali culture:

Dear all,

This afternoon I was reading an article on African textile and fashion and it got me thinking about the traditional wear (ndzi ngong) worn by Bali people during Lela and other celebrations.....the hugely detailed outfit is usually composed of different motifs marked with bright threads such as red, yellow, green, and white. Motifs range from flowers, stars, animals and many others. It is my understanding that some motifs such as the moon are used to connote particular status or social hierarchy within our society. Who can wear a traditional outfit with the motif of a moon on it? Are there gender hierarchies observed in this? Better still, can both men and women wear one with a moon motif marked on it? And is it true that the gong was usually reserved for men's outfits only? (HL)

Here are some responses in answer to the above enquiry from forum members who all hold positions of power. BV is a respected woman who has lived in Bali, Cameroon, Europe, and the USA. She is of an older generation and well versed in the customs and traditions of the people. JNJ is a middle aged Bali prince with inside knowledge on traditional practices within the palace, the official residence of the Bali Chief, who is also known as the Fon.

The moon sign is embroidered on garments that the Fon wears.....Many Titas (princes) have traditional clothing with the moon sign on them—given to them by the palace.....Traditionally, if a Bali male receives a *togbu* with the moon sign on it the Bali male will rightly do well to take it to the palace—the Fon may 'bless' it and give it back to the person, if he chooses (BV)

In Bali Nyongha, these outfits are usually given out by the palace as a decoration in recognition of some outstanding endeavour to the community. It serves as a medal for hard work and devotion to the Bali cause. A Bali person who receives this decoration from some other fon, takes it to the Bali Fon for endorsement. (JNJ)

The gong is an announcement tool used during special events where the Fon and or his representatives are present/coming or about to say some thing. In other words, its sound announces the royal presence during an occasion.....However, the Voma and Ngumba use the same tool to alert people of their coming—so people can hide or lay 'prostrate' face down with eyes closed—a sign of fear/respect for the juju. Females are not allowed to see any type of Voma but all males can see the dancing type. (BV)

While the first two responses explicate the symbol of the moon and how one begets a *togbu*, the third example veers into the topic of traditional exclusive groups. *Voma* is a male-only group in which membership is hereditary. Women born into families belonging to this group can only gain membership in their menopausal years because it is believed that if a woman sets eyes on the *juju* or supernatural object of *Voma*, she will not be able to bear children. The *Voma* group comes out on select days, and the gong is used to alert people to go into hiding. When *Voma* comes out during weekdays, girls stay home from school and women do not go out to work in the fields. The *Ngomba*, on the other hand, is a group of select people who execute the mission of the Fon. It is also a male-only group that uses the gong to call people's attention before they deliver messages orally from the palace.

Such random questions create opportunities for subscribers to delve into the social, cultural, and historical events of the Bali people. The discussion now moves on to issues of identity, as evident in questions about how the *togbu* is worn:

Is there a standard way to properly wear the standard two pieces of garment that accompany the *toghu*? I am referring to the wraps...worn underneath the gown itself. I have seen some people wear it with the front wrap around longer than the back one. Others wear the front piece shorter than the back one. Then some wear it with trousers. I personally think no self-respecting Chamba man should be seen wearing a *toghu* with a pair of trousers... (HL)

The question gets the following response from FF who, as I mentioned earlier, is of the older generation, and is well versed in traditional practices.

The *ndap* material, *ndzi su'* made in the form of *su'ndzi*, is *ngwo* in Mungaka. It goes to the back because of its length that drags. The wearer usually looked for two dedicated people to lift and hold the two long ends to keep it from being dirty as well as avoid any step-on by mischievous individuals. It is also dignifying to have people hold your *ngwo*, to keep you company till the end of the ceremony. That is the only time that the Balis wear the *ngwo* with two long ends (*ntsɔ mi*) at the back. The *toghu* is worn with a normal short-sleeve T-shirt inside. The short *su'ndzi* goes to the back and the long to the front. Any *mfa tu'* or jewelry will do...(FF)

Ndap is a special black cap usually worn by older titled men, while *ndzi su'* and *su'ndzi* are two separate long wraps of the *ngwo*, another traditional attire. The discussion continues in the following post in which another subscriber, SDD, is curious to know if one can recognize someone from Bali solely by his garb. SDD is middle-aged and lives in the United States of America. He spent his childhood in Bali and his pursuit of further education brought him to the US which has become his home ever since. He is very fluent in Mungaka and contributes regularly on the forum:

Are there some distinct features of the *toghu* that can distinguish its wearer as a *muba'ni'* as opposed to *mutum*? There was a time that I could have identified some design patterns as being typical of the *tsamba* and then there were those that one saw mostly with *batum*. Now several 'ba'ni nyonga' people regularly don the *toghu's* with patterns that seem, for want of a better word, 'alien' to Bali Nyonga patterns. Any comments???(SDD)

When you see *batum* in the traditional regalia, the placement of the *ndap* and the alignment of the *tassa* at the back-head are completely different. The V at the front of the *ndap* is supposed to be pointing up straight. But theirs (*batum*) are collapsed and placed on their head with no finesse. They wear the *toghu* with shirt inside and with a trouser (pant); some wear beads that have no matching colors to the *toghu*. Wait until you get to the *su'ndzi*, the short one is behind and the long behind. No matching socks. (FF)

Batum is the plural of *mutum*, which means foreigner, or someone who is not from Bali. *Muba'ni'* means someone from Bali, while *tsamba* is the Bali tribe.

FF's response underscores the high esteem in which the Bali people—males especially—view themselves. His portrayal of other tribes' color blindness and lack of finesse reveals the pride Bali people take in their tradition and culture as manifested in their sense of style. While Bali is known as a warring tribe by its neighbors, Bali people take a different view. They regard their war victories as a significant part of their history which they commemorate with pomp and pageantry during the annual *Lela* festival where everyone dresses up in their

finest traditional regalia. They believe that the inhabitants of neighboring villages are simply miffed at such elaborate cultural displays. Furthermore, Mungaka was once the lingua franca of the entire region, and this led Bali folks to think of their culture as superior to that of the surrounding regions. Even though English is predominantly utilized in these discussions, the content is steeped in the traditional values of a people. It is worthwhile noting the power positions of the participants in this discussion. While JNJ is a prince with inside knowledge of the traditional rites, FF and BV are well-respected older members on the forum who, by virtue of their experiences in Bali, possess the authority to adequately respond to questions. Mungaka would normally be used in oral, nonformal situations, but on Mbonbani, diasporic populations have given Mungaka an online presence as members embed indigenous words in cultural debates and discussions. Although there are spelling variations in members' written Mungaka (*su'ndzi* or *subji*, and *togho* or *toghu*,), the meaning is not lost to forum participants. In the two sentences below, meaning *keep well*, the first utterance utilizes the English alphabet while the second employs the modified German alphabet that uses diacritics to indicate stress patterns and intonation:

Chi mbonkad English alphabet

tsi mbonkăd German alphabet

The first spelling is by KL. He is middle-aged professional who resides in the U.S. He writes regularly on the forum but uses the alphabet without any diacritic marks. The second spelling comes from FF, who is well versed in written and spoken Mungaka.

Such spelling variations sometimes reveal who was schooled in Mungaka and who was not. Responses to the question below from WK highlight such spelling discrepancies. WK is a middle aged professional and parent who communicates orally with his child in Mungaka in spite of the fact that he does not live in the L1 setting. Responses to his question are proffered by XL and FF and are presented in the table below:

Folks,

I need your help with a few words. Every now and then, some of us are “caught” in deep mixture of English and our Bali tongue, sometimes even when there are translations for such English terms in our own native language. Personally, I'd like to stop using the following English words when speaking the Bali language....! Kindly help me meet this commitment.

The words are as follows:

Noise

Milk (cow milk)

Melt

(WK)

	XL	FF
Noise	dzod	dzoñni [noun] (dzóñni – imperative make noise)
Milk (cow milk)	bun nyam ntsi	bun (bun nyam ntsi)
Melt	Ndzen (ngwad:oil)	dzen (ngwed: oil)

Table 1. XL and FF's responses to WK's questions.

The responses of XL and FF demonstrate the discrepancy that exists in native speakers' written Mungaka. While FF has received mother-tongue instruction, XL has not.

In their responses to the question about the Mungaka appellation of *noise*, XL's equivalent is *dzod* while FF provides both the noun *dzoñni* and its imperative, *Dzóñni*. The imperative thus changes form and intonation with the addition of the diacritic mark on the letter *o*. With regard to their translation of cow, the diacritic mark underneath the letter *u* in FF's response is the only feature that distinguishes their respective spellings. In Mungaka, *nyam ntsi* is *cow*, while *bun* is *breast*. *Milk* would be *ntsi bun nyam ntsi* (water from cow breast) or *bun nyam ntsi* (cow breast). While XL spells *melt* as *ndzen* and oil as *ngwad*, FF writes *dzen* and *ngwed* respectively.

Mungaka online is enabled through the mixing of various units (words, phrases, clauses, and sentences) from two linguistic systems. Yet members seldom correct the written Mungaka online. On the other hand, if the content or historical context is wrong, there would be a flurry of responses to correct the fallacy.

DISCUSSION

The Internet affords the creation of a cultural space where traditional values of the Bali Nyongha tribe are displayed within a collective virtual community. These online interactions are not divorced from the offline social contexts within which participants live their daily lives. The quizzes and informal requests replicate the home-country learning environment where knowledge is disseminated informally. Ishumi (1980) argues that traditional quizzes and riddles could be equated in function to present-day psychological tests that assess knowledge and creativity in associating, differentiating, and establishing cause-and-effect. Just like in oral traditions where folktales, riddles, historical legends, proverbs and myths are used to impart practical knowledge to children, these quizzes and information requests allow Mbonbani subscribers to negotiate aspects of their culture with older members of the forum serving as savants. English thus helps sustain a diasporic identity that would possibly disappear with the use of various home languages by member subgroups (Goel, 2004).

When I initially embarked on this project, I was intrigued by the presence of Mungaka, an oral/aural language, in an online forum of subscribers located around the world. Mungaka rarely transcends oral spheres in contemporary times but participants on Mbonbani employ Mungaka lexical items to a certain degree. I therefore asked three questions:

1. How does language use in this forum mediate the exchange of cultural knowledge and sustain relations between Mungaka indigenous populations abroad and the home country?

2. How does this diasporic community maintain an awareness of linguistic and cultural knowledge within the structures of dislocation?
3. What is the role of information technology in preserving diasporic relations?

For my analysis, I focused on particular forms of data: quizzes and miscellaneous requests for information. What became apparent is the use of Mungaka not for communicative but for didactic purposes. No discussions are conducted in Mungaka entirely. While communicative practices occur in English, Mungaka is used in isolated words or sentences. The didactic nature of the use of Mungaka is like a showpiece; language is a display of a culture and heritage. So while relations are sustained in the English language, Mungaka is displayed as a cultural artifact. Such acts are not divorced from members' offline habits, as Bali people are noted for their self-pride. Their feelings of superiority can be traced to pre-colonial times when their victorious battles with neighboring regions gained them a reputation as conquerors. Additionally, Mungaka, one of the few Bantoid languages with a written system, was taught in schools and became the lingua franca of the entire region. According to Ethnologue (2009), there are 50,100 Mungaka speakers in Bali. While the home language situation boasts a vibrant linguistic community, most Mbonbani members in the diaspora do not interact in the indigenous language on a daily basis. Since an important component of language maintenance is having peers with whom one can speak the language, one might be led to believe that Mungaka might become endangered, since members' "oral communicative practices do not often occur" (Hinton, 1999). Subscribers have raised concerns about the fate of Bali culture if conscious efforts are not made within diasporic households to uphold the traditional values of the people. These include speaking the language with young children born in the diaspora, eating the same dishes as in the homeland, and engaging young children in cultural activities. I initially viewed the display of Mungaka as an effort to compensate for the lack of face-to-face environments as members used Mungaka alongside English words and phrases. I also viewed it as a conscious effort to impact language use by reappropriating cultural and linguistic knowledge in a mediated space. To determine if the language could be better served through the online environment, I focused on how members consciously create linguistic and cultural awareness. If members' online activities mirror offline communicative practices, could the Internet provide a lasting impact on language use? Could this online forum be construed as a medium of communication just like its offline environment? Although the socialization process on the forum replicates offline processes, the communicative practices in each setting are diametrically opposed to one another. While Mungaka is used to communicate orally offline, written English is used online. Although members have replicated the social practices in an online forum and use Mungaka online to create an awareness of the lexical items of the language, such practices do not seem to help in the development of members' fluency given that individuals still communicate predominantly in English. Although subscribers are actively engaged in deciding what is to be learned, the exchanges are not conducted entirely in Mungaka. As earlier mentioned, few members read Mungaka well. Members have chosen an asynchronous forum which only allows communicative practices in the written form. The choice of the written mode combined with the fact that members are no longer in the L1 environment makes English the dominant language of Mbonbani. The asynchronous nature of the forum thus limits the extent to which members can actively use the local language, and Mungaka, an oral language, is not well served as a mode of communication.

Notwithstanding, the Internet still plays a significant role in the preservation of diasporic relations. Mbonbani members exhibit behaviors that mirror a traditional offline community. They make rules for themselves, elect leaders, sanction behaviors, identify themselves as members of the group, and restrict membership to those who belong. In this online community, web technology has offered a full-fledged metaphor for the building of social and cultural community (Lam & Kramersch, 2003). Mbonbani subscribers engage in the exchange of personal and cultural aspects of their home country and village, while members in the diaspora have appropriated the Internet to facilitate sustained contact and mutual support with their extended families. They also have adapted to the structural conditions and cultural practices of their adopted country, and to a certain degree, have been able to reconcile their home culture (and its languages/practices) with the host culture. The Internet thus serves as an important agent for socialization, as information about both home and host societies is shared, and communication is facilitated amongst members of the diaspora themselves. This digital forum has fostered multiple forms of group-belonging and cultural participation across national borders and enabled recreation and sustenance of social relations of various sorts.

We have also seen the limitations of Internet technology to revitalize and maintain primarily oral languages. The asynchronous nature of Mbonbani forum seems to favor the display mode of linguistic and cultural information rather than the action mode of linguistic communication in the case of a purely spoken language like Mungaka. At the same time, an awareness has been created on the possible use of Mungaka online for other purposes. While some members have acknowledged gains in new knowledge just by reading the online exchanges, some have proffered ideas for developing interactive language learning materials for online use. While such efforts might not replace the communicative aspect of the language, they would allow for more interaction in Mungaka online and would minimize the use of language as a museum piece.

CONCLUSION

Global migration trends have produced transnational groups such as Mbonbani where members are related by culture, ethnicity, and language. Because the Internet can connect these members instantly across continents, new possibilities of communication have opened up and Mungaka, a primarily oral/aural language, now has an online presence. The emergence of digital technologies has enabled members of this online diasporic group to expand their communication activities in new ways and make their indigenous language visible online. Their language choice and use are the primary means of signaling their cultural identity online. The Internet thus provides spaces for user interaction which “offer a safe and comfortable place where people of particular ethnic groups can digitally hang out” (Mitra, 2003, p. 1019) and share their stories, using a variety of languages.

The Internet is a technology of multiple potentials that may both undermine and assist the efforts of Mungaka speakers in the diaspora as they negotiate linguistic and cultural identity. On the downside, the Internet has its limitations. The use of an asynchronous online medium changes the communication dynamics so that meaning negotiation does not correspond in all respects with oral face-to-face negotiations, an environment in which Mungaka would thrive. Use of online technologies may also create new social groupings and consequent identities whose existence depends on the usage of the Internet and thereby exclude speakers with limited technology skills as well as limited Internet access. On the plus

side, the Internet transcends a physical presence and could allow members to construct a dynamic and multifaceted identity by creatively negotiating and fashioning their Bali selves. For example a debate once ensued on who is a hero in Bali. Members from all over negotiated the meaning of hero and what constitutes a heroic deed. This discussion was an initial step towards a compilation of personal histories of people who have made significant contributions to the people and village of Bali. Historical archives, photographs, and personal narratives were some of the evidence that members advanced to support the nomination of specific individuals. A female subscriber advocated for gender equity by calling attention to some women who have made significant contributions as well. It was an engaging debate in which members collectively sought to construct the social identity of a Bali hero through an online forum. The ease with which historical evidence and archival information could be accessed and shared was enabled by the use of online technologies. The Internet thus offers extra potential for engaging in what they already do in their face-to-face oral communicative practices and could expand possibilities for new kinds of thought, interaction, and action. Bound by a common national origin and ethnic descent, Mbonbani members can use the Internet to renew and sustain their sense of belonging to both a cultural and an online group. It could also open up new possibilities of communication and collaboration between Bali people abroad and at home and contribute to sustain a linguistic and cultural identity. There have been several discussions among forum participants about using emergent technologies to develop didactic materials for Mungaka. An online forum could thus serve as a unique medium of cultural learning and enhance the resources for linguistic awareness and identity construction.

NOTES

ⁱ I am originally from Bali, a village in the north-western region of Cameroon.

ⁱⁱ PROPELCA is French acronym for the Operational Research Project for the Teaching of Languages in Cameroon.

ⁱⁱⁱ Text is cited exactly as it appeared in the original posting.

^{iv} For example *walking stick* is translated as *bāng*, while *Math* is *tāng*. But speakers who have not mastered written Mungaka might write ‘bang’ for the former and ‘tang’ for the latter without diacritics.

^v Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) are economic policies for developing countries that have been promoted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) since the early 1980s by the provision of loans conditional on the adoption of such policies. SAPs resulted in deep cuts in programs such as education, health, and social care and removed subsidies designed to control the prices of basic foodstuff.

^{vi} Linguistic self-assessment is notoriously unreliable, but nevertheless these figures reflect interesting trends within this online community.

^{vii} Text is cited exactly as it appeared in the original posting and may contain errors.

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