Truly national? Social inclusion and the Ghana@50 celebrations

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TRULY NATIONAL? SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND THE GHANA@50 CELEBRATIONS

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Introduction

In 2007, Ghana celebrated fifty years as an independent nation. The program drawn up to commemorate this occasion, dubbed Ghana@50, was described as an opportunity to “celebrate, reflect and look forward.”\(^2\) Thus, while much was written and said about the Ghana@50 program—especially about the composition and work of the National Planning Committee and the decision to spend twenty million dollars on the celebrations—members of the public also took the occasion of the jubilee to reflect on the state of the Ghanaian nation over the past fifty years and to project its future.

This paper makes use of the concept of social exclusion to analyze public perspectives and experiences of the Ghana@50 celebrations. Social exclusion as an analytical tool has gained popularity in recent years in policy circles. However, the phenomena that it describes are not new (Jehoel-Gijsbers and Vrooman 2007), nor is the concept, which goes back to sociologist Max Weber’s theory of social closure or the “attempt of one group to secure for itself a privileged position [in society] at the expense of some other group through a process of subordination” (Parkin 1979 in Todman 2004: 2).

\(^1\) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the panel “Ghana@50: Celebrating the Nation” at the African Studies Association (ASA) Conference in Chicago, on November 15, 2008. We wish to thank Carola Lentz and Isidore Lobnibe, the organizers of the panel, and Jean Allman, the discussant, for their comments on the paper. A grant from the University of Ghana Research Committee made attendance at the ASA possible. We also thank Mark Obeng and Evans Afful, both of the Sociology Department of the University of Ghana, for assistance with data collection and coding.

\(^2\) N. Dadson, How Ghana@50 is heading towards a no-celebration, *Daily Graphic*, 17 January 2007, p. 21.
Despite its uptake by some scholars, there continues to be vigorous debate about the suitability of the concept of social exclusion as a measure of disadvantage and about its critical distinction from other concepts. There are questions raised also about the political intentions of scholars and policy makers in promoting social exclusion as an analytical concept, with some charging that it reflects collusion by academics and politicians to veil the bare face of poverty and social inequality (Gray 2005; Oyen 1997). Nonetheless, its proponents maintain that social exclusion marks an advance beyond the narrow conceptual focus on poverty as the measure of marginalization and disadvantage (Burchardt et al. 1999; Room 1999); it is argued—and usefully for our discussion—that the multi-dimensional approach to social exclusion allows it to engage with non-economic and non-monetary dimensions of social disadvantage (Rodgers 1995; Todman 2004).

The literature highlights a number of dimensions of exclusion, including political participation, social interaction, consumption, production, economic benefits, as well as characteristics relating to individuals, neighborhoods, religious groups and spatial groupings. These dimensions interact so that marginalization in one context may result in marginalization in other aspects of life. As a result, the concept of exclusion can be used to analyze manifestations of social inequality as wide-ranging as political alienation, unemployment and homelessness (Percy-Smith 2000; Room 1999).

The utility of a tool of policy research for the analysis of public discussions of the Ghana@50 celebrations might not be immediately obvious. However, we make an argument for the relevance of the concept of social exclusion for such an analysis on the following grounds: first, the commentaries and reports on the Ghana@50 celebrations make explicit and implicit statements about the dynamics of social exclusion in the Ghana@50 celebrations. Further, as we show in our analysis, connections are made between exclusion in the Ghana@50 activities and histories of systematic exclusion of certain groups. This brings us to the doorstep of policy, and having arrived there, social exclusion
allows us to look at of the question of participation in the process and benefits of nation building and development.

Methodology
This paper is based on analyses of newspaper articles that referenced the Ghana@50 celebrations. We examined newspapers archived over a 13-month period from June 2006 to June 2007, covering the initial government announcements about preparations for the celebrations, the first publication of the official schedule of activities, and the climax of the celebrations in March and its aftermath. Each edition of Daily Graphic and The Ghanaian Chronicle within this time period was browsed for articles that referenced Ghana@50; these included news reports, adverts, editorials, letters, and op-eds. In all, 142 articles were pulled out of The Chronicle and 251 from Daily Graphic.

Each of the 393 articles was coded for the specific category of exclusion that was mentioned and the social group referenced. These codes were entered into a database along with details of date, source, author, and page on which it appeared.

The two newspapers were chosen on the basis of circulation and to represent a balance of political orientations and diversity in terms of news stories. Daily Graphic is the most popular paper having the highest circulation; it has offices in all ten regions and is therefore read in parts of the country that other newspapers do not have the organization and finances to reach. The Daily Graphic is state-owned; consequently its reportage tends to focus on government activities and official statements. Its news report would not normally include overt criticism of the government of the day (although it does publish commentaries, features, and letters from the public that are critical of the government). In all, the Daily Graphic is seen to be the most credible print source for information (Gadzekpo 2008). The Chronicle, arguably the most popular private newspaper (Hasty 2005), comes out three or four times a week and has a circulation of approximately 20,000. By comparison, the rest of the estimated 40 registered private newspapers have much less coverage and readership, some less
than 1,000 per edition. Since it is privately-owned, the paper can be more critical of the government and also attends to stories of wider public interest.

It is important to acknowledge that a paper on social exclusion that examines public discourse through newspaper reports is itself

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3 Kojo Yankah, media consultant, personal communication. However, note that the readership of these newspapers is higher than the sale of hardcopies would indicate because articles and editorials from the major newspapers such as the *Daily Graphic* and *The Chronicle* are placed verbatim or summarized on the Internet. Further, news stories and headlines are quoted on radio and television.

4 We recognize that all papers have political leanings and ideological agenda in the stories they tell and how they tell them. The difference in orientation of the state-owned and private newspapers in Ghana has been described and analyzed by Hasty (2005) and Gadzekpo (2008). From the first independent government of Kwame Nkrumah the state-owned press has been the mouth-piece of government and has been used as a tool in the construction of nationhood and a common identity. In this context, the state press has assumed the characteristics of “development journalism” in which it mainly covers formal state ceremonies and the activities and speeches of state officials, steering clear of any story that might cause controversy or embarrassment to the government and its officials. The private press, lacking the resources of the state-owned media and unable to deliver “hard news” on a daily basis, and also often being a target of repressive governments, has made its purview exposés of public officials (Hasty 2005). However, it cannot be said that private papers are consistently anti-government; there are those that have clear alignment with particular parties and can therefore be labeled “pro-government” when their party is in power. In the case of *The Chronicle*, it built its anti-government reputation from the 1990s, during the presidency of Jerry Rawlings, the founder of the NDC; this—coupled with the fact that the editor was seen to campaign against Rawlings and the NDC in his editorials during the 1996 elections—would suggest that *The Chronicle* is pro-NPP, despite the protestations of its journalists and editor about objectivity and non-partisanship. Nonetheless, compared to other private papers, *The Chronicle* generally does refrain from explicit alignment with any political party (Hasty 2005). In any case, whatever the ideological leanings of the paper, it continued the tradition of investigative journalism into government affairs during the NPP administration from 2001 to 2009 and therefore continues to be “anti-government” relative to the *Daily Graphic*. One reason therefore for the choice of the *Daily Graphic* and *The Chronicle* in this study is to provide a balanced perspective on the (NPP) government in terms of its handling of the Ghana@50 celebrations.
in danger of sidelining a number of voices. This is especially true in Ghana where those with access to newspapers (as writers and readers) are limited to a minority of citizens who are literate and have a certain level of disposable income. It is also a fact that both the publication and circulation of the majority of newspapers are concentrated in the capital, Accra (Hasty 2005). Increasingly, radio (especially phone-in programs) has become a popular avenue of self-expression because the FM media has wider reach spatially and demographically than do newspapers. By one estimation, there were 135 FM stations as at the end of 2009. However, for the purposes of this paper, the argument in favor of newspapers is that they are the most feasible measure of public discourse, because radio stations in Ghana generally do not keep transcripts and do not make available archives of their programs.

Nonetheless, recognizing the limitations of newspaper archives, we also rely on our own first-hand experience of the celebrations. In this paper, therefore, we hold dual positionalities as critical intellectuals analyzing the experiences of Ghana@50 and as members of the Ghanaian public at which the Ghana@50 celebrations were targeted. From the latter location, we were privy to the events, conversations and atmosphere that characterized the celebrations, and we draw on these recollections to inform our discussions.

**Level of Newspaper Coverage of Ghana@50**

Figure 1 illustrates the flow and rapid ebb of reporting on the Ghana@50 celebrations. The graph shows a slow build up of articles in the newspapers in the months leading into January 2007 (the official start of the celebrations), a peak in coverage in March 2007, and a sharp drop immediately thereafter. In fact, the National

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5 It should be noted that the increase in the number of radio and television stations over the years has meant that the “readership” of newspapers has expanded even to the non-literate since many radio and television programs summarize articles from the major newspapers.

Planning Committee was compelled to issue a statement reminding the public that the celebrations were supposed to last till the end of the year,\(^7\) a plea not heeded by at least one columnist who proceeded to do a post-mortem of the Ghana@50 celebrations within a week of the climax of the celebrations on March 6, Independence Day.\(^8\)

One can take the newspaper coverage to be one indication of interest in, and excitement about, Ghana@50, which would suggest that enthusiasm was low until just about two weeks before Independence Day (6 March), even though the program had started in January 2007 and preparations had begun months before then. And indeed, a lack of public animation was remarked on by non-Ghanaians in the country, including a British twenty-something year old who wondered at the “reserved excitement” of Ghanaians instead of the “giddy euphoria” one might expect on such a


historical occasion. (He did however go on rightly to note that on the day of the anniversary itself Ghanaians made up for this initial lack of enthusiasm).

The lower-than-expected level of excitement in the lead up to Ghana@50 was in stark contrast to the national mood on the occasion of Ghana’s first appearance at the World Cup the previous year. Our feats on the football field, it can be argued, occasioned more public displays of national pride (gauged by the level of flag waving, wearing of national colors, and public articulations of pride) than had been seen since independence. In fact, the World Cup seemed to be a fortuitous lead-in to the anniversary celebrations; within the year, Ghana celebrated Kofi Annan’s return home at the end of his tenure at the United Nations; President J. A. Kufuor took up the Chair of the African Union; and, in advance of Ghana@50, Ghana received unusually high and positive attention from the global media. The fact that a planned Ghana@50 compared unfavorably to the largely spontaneous celebrations of Ghana at the World Cup could have two explanations: either the subject of the celebration (fifty years of national independence) was less than exciting, in the face of what some commentators saw as both a dismal history and uninspiring present, or there were significant reservations about the official

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9 D. Harris, Crossing Cultures: Celebrating Ghana@50 as an “obroni,” The Chronicle, 5 March 2007, p.5.
10 Some commentators specifically mentioned Ghana’s World Cup debut in their write-up about Ghana@50, either as an example of the country’s achievement, or to suggest that the Ghana@50 celebrations could benefit from the overt patriotism and sense of unity of the World Cup period. See, At the portal of 50 years of independence, The Chronicle, 29 December 2006, p. 5; Towards Ghana@100, The Chronicle, 12 March 2007, p. 5.
11 For example, The Economist, 24 June 2006, Black star tries to rise, again: Ghana, 50 years after independence. The international press, including CNN and BBC, also carried stories of the celebration on Independence Day, 6 March, 2007. See, for example, How the international press covered Ghana@50, The Chronicle, 7 March 2007, p. 2 & 15.
handling of the celebrations.\textsuperscript{12} In this paper, we suggest that the answer was both.

\textbf{Content of Newspaper Coverage of \textit{Ghana@50}}

The newspaper pieces collated as data for this paper included reports of events or statements made by government officials and other public figures on the topic of the celebrations. Some articles gave an idea of how the celebrations were being experienced by persons in various parts of the country.\textsuperscript{13} There were a number of announcements and advertisements (mostly coming out of the \textit{Ghana@50} Secretariat) requesting public participation in events.\textsuperscript{14} It is not surprising that the majority of these official announcements or straight reporting on Ghana@50 events came from the state-owned \textit{Daily Graphic}.

The newspaper commentaries or op-ed pieces are more revealing of public perceptions than the straight news reports.\textsuperscript{15} There were observations and critiques about the planning of the jubilee celebrations; we will discuss these in more detail in the next section. Public conversations were not limited to the details of the jubilee events, but also included reflections of Ghana’s history as a nation and on what we might expect in the future.\textsuperscript{16} As happened with merchandise, it seemed that one could add value to

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{13} E.g. Kumasi prepares for Ghana@50, \textit{The Chronicle}, 19 January 2006, p. 8; How other areas celebrated the Ghana@50, \textit{The Chronicle}, 14 March 2006, pp. 6, 9, 12.
  \item\textsuperscript{15} These include regular columns and features, editorials, and letters to the editor.
\end{itemize}
an idea by speaking about it in the context of the independence anniversary. The authors of various articles seized the moment of soul-searching and historical auditing to table issues of perennial concern (for example, environmental sanitation, women’s rights, participation, education and health provisioning, governance and agenda setting, corruption, preservation of cultural values, etc). It appeared that relating these concerns to the prosperity of the nation gave them added urgency and significance.

In the next section, we look at what the newspapers revealed about public perceptions and experiences of exclusions; we look first at public exclusion from the programmes of Ghana@50 and, second, exclusion from nationhood, both in its history and its possible future.

**Perceptions of the Organization and Cost of Ghana@50**

At the onset, two aspects of the Ghana@50 celebrations occasioned immediate and heated public debate; these were the planning process and the projected cost of the celebrations. This contentious start to the anniversary programme may partly account for the tepid public reception of the official program. (Other likely reasons are the very late start of preparations, poor organization and low publicity).  

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17 One columnist wrote bemusedly about the sudden appearance of Ghana@50 hair styles, chewing gum, “fabrics, t-shirt, openers, scarves, caps [and] shoes,” E. Loh, Everything now @50, *Daily Graphic*, 2 March 2007.


The Planning Process

As soon as government preparations towards Ghana@50 were made public, discussions of the event took on decidedly partisan overtones. The main opposition party at the time, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), and other parties in the minority accused the government of the National Patriotic Party (NPP) of systematically excluding them from the planning process. Certainly the composition of the planning committee and its location within government made it difficult to dismiss the allegation; the committee was put together by the President and chaired by the Chief of Staff and Minister of Presidential Affairs, and further the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Ghana@50 Secretariat was appointed by the President. In effect, the planning and implementing bodies were sited in the heart of the executive.

The opposition believed, and made the point forcefully, that a national celebration of the significance of Ghana@50 should be overseen by a bipartisan body or a non-partisan representation of social groups.

The political wrangling over the organization of the jubilee celebrations was only one instance of the ongoing contestation of power between Ghanaian governments and political parties, a

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21 This impression was solidified by the consistent refusal of the CEO of the Ghana@50 Secretariat to appear before parliament during the celebrations to account for the monies expended, with his reason being that he was accountable to the president and not to parliament. See E. A. Gyamerah. Parliament puts Charles Brobbey on carpet, Daily Graphic, 26 February, 2007, p. 14.
recurring theme of which is the accusation that the party in power purposefully marginalizes and even persecutes the opposition. A cursory examination of the news archives will turn up occasions when the main opposition party, be it NDC or NPP, has staged a “walk-out” of parliament with the claim that they had been sidelined by the government of the day. It is instructive that barely a month to the climax of the celebrations on Independence Day, 6 March 2007, the NDC staged a boycott of parliament in protest of the criminal conviction of a minister in the preceding (NDC) government. The chairperson of the party declared at a press conference that the conviction was a “politically motivated travesty of justice” and evidence of an NPP agenda “to destroy the NDC.”

A public statement by another NDC party official linked the exclusion of the NDC from the planning of Ghana@50 again with a government agenda to destroy the party. On a related note, an ongoing saga in the lead-up to the celebrations was the question of whether Jerry Rawlings, founder of the NDC and immediate past president of Ghana, would take a public part in the official events—and specifically in the activities marking Independence Day, to which other heads of state and foreign dignitaries had been invited—or whether he would be conspicuously absent in protest of perceived slights from the NPP government, including the discrediting of his presidency.

In response to the protests of the opposition, President J. A. Kufuor’s administration maintained its propriety stance to Ghana@50, pointing out that it was the government’s prerogative to organize national celebrations. And certainly the administration put its mark on the celebrations. There is some irony in the

23 V. Kwasuwunme, Ghanaians don’t feel Ghana@50 celebrations, Daily Graphic, 21 February 2007, p. 17.
fact that the celebration of a moment of independence that was articulated in terms of national liberation and social-democratic values was turned into a performance for an international audience, one hoped-for result of which would be closer integration into a globalized capital system. This interpretation of the government’s posture would be consistent with its arguably more liberal orientation relative to the opposition NDC, evidenced by its economic policies and its stated intent to usher Ghana into the “golden age of business” and make the private sector “the engine of growth.”

So loud were the voices of politicians that they drowned out demands from other citizens for a say in the content and organization of the program. It should be mentioned that the Secretariat did ask the public to submit proposals for activities and programs that could be inserted into the official program. In addition, local committees were set up at regional and district levels to organize public activities and events. However, the Secretariat was clearly a commanding presence over the celebrations, with their resources and their ability to put out publicity material. Thus, rather than being original ideas, programs at the district and regional levels tended to be “miniaturized” versions of events in Accra (Lentz 2008).

The 20 Million Dollar Debate
Another public aspect of Ghana@50 in which everyone seemed to have an opinion was its budget of twenty million dollars. There was support in some quarters for the planned expenditure on the

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26 E.g. At 50, a sense of belonging needed (2007, January 9). The Chronicle, p. 5; Djannie, A. (2007, February 27). The Chronicle, p. 5. One columnist remarked that the official published program was top-heavy with lectures and other staid events that were unlikely to whip up enthusiasm. He went on to suggest, tongue-in-cheek, that a qualification that was overlooked in the appointment of a Chief Executive of the Ghana@50 Secretariat was dancing ability for, “a person who cannot dance cannot be trusted to lead a celebration,” N. Dadson, “How Ghana@50 is heading towards a no-celebration,” Daily Graphic, 25 January 2007, p. 21.
grounds that Ghana as a nation deserved to celebrate its achievements. Even if it had no achievements to celebrate, as some claimed, that was more reason to cheer ourselves up and inspire ourselves on to a better future. The author of one newspaper article talked about the “coiling in” of the Ghanian spirit after so many coups d’état and opined that the jubilee was an opportunity to reawaken our self-confidence and raise our image in the world. Others pointed to the potential of the celebrations to unite us towards the common purpose of national development.²⁷

However, the overwhelming public reaction to the sum allocated for the celebration was one of incredulity and anger.²⁸ The themes of social exclusion were at the heart of the objections raised about the price tag of Ghana@50. One common opinion, illustrated in the following commentary, was that it was irresponsible to spend such an amount on celebrations when we had such pressing needs as a developing country:

Ghana has to cut its coat according to its size and think of the citizens first… How many computers, hospital beds, or boreholes can half of this money provide to the people? The president’s son is schooling in the USA where computers are common. How many do we have in all our universities? At least half of the $20 million can buy a lot or provide chairs and tables for students who wouldn’t have to stand outside during lectures.²⁹

As did the author of the preceding quote, other commentators referenced the “ordinary Ghanian” who would benefit more if the money were to be spent in alternate ways.³⁰ Some recalled the

²⁷ A. Abdulai, Ghana @ 50 is worth a big celebration, Daily Graphic, 4 August 2006, p. 9; K. Kwarteng, Golden Jubilee celebrations justified. Daily Graphic, 4 February 2007, p. 3.
²⁸ S. Bonsu, Anybody but Wereko-Brobey, The Chronicle, 1 August 2006, p. 3; Ghana@50: Are we setting our priorities rights?, The Chronicle, 2 March 2007, p. 5; S. M. Issaka, Ghana’s 50th anniversary celebration: Should it be that grand? Daily Graphic, 22 December 2006, p. 9.
²⁹ S. Bonsu, ibid.
³⁰ For example, Ghana@50: Are we setting our priorities rights? The Chronicle, 2 March 2007, p. 5.
teachers, doctors, and nurses who had gone on strike for better pay during the 2006 year; the energy crisis that had affected the entire nation and that resulted in power outages prior to and during the anniversary celebrations; the international drug trade that had left footprints across Ghana; and the perennial problems of poverty, unemployment, low quality education, and health services. The implied rhetorical question was, “Would the country not be better served putting the money into addressing any of these issues?”

In response to these protestations, the Chair of the planning committee hastily put out a statement that the twenty million dollars was not budgeted for mere “merry making.” The Ghana@50 Secretariat was also careful to explain that part of the monies of Ghana@50 would be used for planting trees, for building jubilee parks and jubilee public toilets, and for other “heritages” that would last beyond the celebration. In effect, the public was being assured that expenditure of the money voted for the anniversary would be of practical benefit to all Ghanaians.

When the celebrations actually started and the public had more information about the disbursement of the twenty million dollars as well as the millions donated by mainly corporate and other sponsors, the expressions of dissatisfaction intensified. When it was reported by the media that millions of dollars had been spent on a fleet of cars and presidential suites for visiting VIPs, the perceived disjuncture between the interests of the government and the Ghanaian people was articulated in even more dramatic terms.

33 Ghana@50: The people demand accountability, The Chronicle, 19 February 2007, p. 5.
Specific “vulnerable groups,” such as children, mothers, and youth, were evoked for effect:

Whilst some of us felt Ghana had not yet reached the point of economic and social development to blow $20 million on celebrating our “Independence,” others saw no wrong in spending as much as $6 million on luxury cars, whilst our mothers and babies bled to death in our hospitals… After all the pomp and pageantry, our VIP guests departed…plunging the rest of us into the reality of darkness, no water, no work, etc… I still have more questions such as “How have we as Ghanaians benefited from all the money the Ghana@50 Secretariat has spent?”… Are our youths permanently off the streets and gainfully using their time in either studies or employment? Do our hospitals have equipment and well-trained staff who are well remunerated? How about our teachers, lecturers, deans? … Do they now, after blowing over $20 million on celebrating our “Independence,” have better living and working conditions? How about our orphanages? How about our farmers?

In this line of argument, the government was characterized as uncaring and irresponsible in “wasting” resources instead of spending it on those who needed it most. Implicit in this discussion was the idea that the celebrations would not benefit these “needy” groups, proportionately or at all, and certainly not in the ways that were most important to them.

It was in this context that calls for the promised public facilities (the toilets and parks, among others) became strident. There were angry commentaries on the radio about the jubilee toilets that were supposed to be built in all the districts but which, by 6 March 2007, still had not been completed.

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34 The phrase has become a stock of policy-speak in Ghana. It is used to refer to any disadvantaged group but mostly to “the poor,” women and children, and the disabled.


36 We (the authors) recall that the unfulfilled promise of the construction of public toilets around the country were fodder for radio talk shows but have not been able to find the records of these shows for this article. We can, however, cite one example of a commentary on the toilets made by political satirist Konkonsa on his talk show on 13 March 2007 on Radio Gold 90.5 FM. He
Close to two years after the celebrations, it came out that the estimated price tag of the celebrations might be in the region of sixty million dollars.\(^{37}\) The call for an account of the funds for Ghana@50, which began during the celebrations, have continued and culminated under the new NDC government, which came into power in January 2009, subjecting the activities of the Ghana@50 Secretariat to investigation.\(^{38}\) The big question still is whether Ghanaians benefited from the disbursement of the funds. Here again, the “jubilee toilets” have been a focus of attention.\(^{39}\) It is worth remarking that next to a front page headline that states that the Ghana@50 Secretariat had been queried in parliament about the use of the twenty million dollar budget was a cartoon captioned “Public Toilets for Ghana@50.”\(^{40}\) One can only deduce that the promised toilets came to represent one concrete way that ordinary Ghanaians could have benefited from Ghana@50. It seems the thinking is that if millions could be spent on luxury cars for officials, a few millions could have been spared for basic necessities for ordinary folk.

\(^{37}\) Ghana@50 in arrears; already spent $60 million, Ghana News Agency, 26 January 2009 Retrieved on 30 January from www.ghanaweb.com

\(^{38}\) The findings of the Duose Commission suggest serious lapses in the management of Ghana@50, including inefficiency in the organization and unrestrained executive powers in the allocation of resources to the Secretariat. Although the Commission did not come out with incriminating findings with regards to “improper use of public or any other funds” (CDD 2010, p. 9), there are intimations of possible criminal prosecutions of officials of the Secretariat.


\(^{40}\) The cartoon shows journalists arriving with cameras to document the existence of these facilities and being told by an Everyman character, pointing to the “Chairman” (presumably of the Planning Committee), “Ask that man! Whether he will build or bring ready-made toilets, we are waiting to see!” The Chronicle, 17 February 2007, p. 1.
“Inclusion” and Exclusion in Ghana@50 Activities

Public Contributions to Ghana@50

Even though members of the Ghanaian public had not been adequately included in the planning process, they were clearly required to play a role in implementing the program. Private businesses were urged by the government to make donations to the Ghana@50 Secretariat. To that end, the President hosted a reception to woo some of these companies, and thereafter the Daily Graphic contained many reports (with accompanying pictures) of national and multinational companies such as GOIL, Coca Cola, and Barclays presenting checks to the planning committee.

For the rest of the public, there were a few, clear tasks. First, they were to clean up the capital and the rest of the country for the many visitors that were expected. There were repeated calls (to the general public and sometimes to specific groups such as churches and schools) to participate in tree-planting and clean-up exercises. Home and shop owners were also urged to paint their buildings.

As evidence of the preoccupation of both private individuals and government officials on this theme of cleanliness, there were three full-length commentaries devoted to this topic, and many others mentioned in passing our unsanitary environment and habits. The quote below is illustrative of the tone of these commentaries:

Although the celebration is going to be a national affair, most of the

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43 E.g. AMA orders property owners and occupiers to paint premises, The Chronicle, 16 December 2006, p. 5; C. Boateng, Ghana@50 to launch clean-up campaign, Daily Graphic, 2 December 2006. Greening Ghana Initiative, Daily Graphic, 6 October 2006, p.10.
activities would be centred in Accra and that is the more reason why Accra should be tidy... How do we receive so many very important personalities (VIPs) in a filthy environment? ... Apart from the filth on the streets and in gutters, it is sad to observe that some suburbs of the city are gradually being turned into big slums... The issue of hawkers [street vendors], who contribute to so much of the insanitary condition of the city, [should not] be glossed over at this time.\textsuperscript{45}

These commentaries would usually contain some mention of the need for the country to put on its best face for visitors. The 11 January 2007 edition of \textit{The Chronicle}, for example, contained a full-page add from the Accra Metropolitan Assembly announcing a “Massive Jubilee Clean-up Exercise” involving “every patriotic citizen of the Capital City,” reminding them that “Foreign Dignitaries, including Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and dozens of Heads of State from all over the World [would] be visiting Ghana.” These edicts again bring up the question of at whom exactly the celebrations were targeted—the citizens of Ghana or the international community—and the extent to which the celebrations were an opportunity by the government to spruce up its image for the outside world. Indeed, national holidays are in part a performance of nationhood for both a local and international audience (Lentz 2008).

Some sections of the public were presumably to help the cause of beautifying Accra with their absence, and authors of newspaper articles called for the removal of vendors and other undesirables off the streets. Local government officials threatened exactly that.\textsuperscript{46} The repeated threats and attempts at displacement caused the local branches of two international agencies, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and Amnesty International, to issue a statement:

\begin{quote}
Under the guise of beautifying Accra and other cities around Ghana for the celebration of the Golden Jubilee, thousands of vendors and
\end{quote}

stall owners earning their living by selling goods and foodstuffs to Ghana’s public have had their structures demolished and many of them have been forcibly evicted from their places of sale by the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA)…. Again, in preparation for the 50th Anniversary, the AMA, the Department of Social Welfare, the Ghana@50 Secretariat and Accra Psychiatric Hospital are reported to be conducting a “clean up” of the destitute and mentally ill residing on the streets of Accra.47

The statement pointed out that ironically the violation of the human rights of these Ghanaian citizens was occurring as a result of the celebration of the Ghanaian nation.

It must be mentioned that the attitude of city authorities to traders and vendors in particular is not new or isolated. The Ghanaian state has a history of treating traders, especially females, as scapegoats. Under military rule they have been physically assaulted and had their goods and places of work destroyed (Adomako Ampofo 1993; Bentsi-Enchill 1979; Robertson 1983; Tsikata 2007). The literature cited suggests that this violence was partly due to the perception that these women had undue social and economic power; in other words, their exclusion was premised on gender, income and perhaps class. Even under recent democratic governments, traders, and vendors have been tagged by local officials as nuisances, evidenced by the persistent efforts to remove them from parts of the capital and other cities.48 Alternatively, they have been ignored as citizens attempting to make a living in what is called the “informal economy”; an area that has been neglected by economic policy and development planning even though it employs 84.6 percent of the economically active population and is estimated to contribute between 20 and 40 percent to Ghana’s GDP (Appiah-Kubi 2007).

47 Government asked to have respect for human rights during nation’s 50th Independence Anniversary, The Chronicle, p. 4.
48 Note the tone of the city’s officials in an article in which the Accra Metropolitan Assembly warns street vendors and “recalcitrant” traders who had been ejected as part of a “decongestion” exercise from their against returning to again to crowd the streets. Don’t return to the streets, AMA warns traders. Daily Graphic, 27 February 2007, p. 27.
As the example of traders and vendors indicates, exclusion is multidimensional, intersecting and temporal. Scholars and analysts such as Williams (1998) and Young (2002) have noted that it is difficult to conceptualize a category of the “excluded” since it is possible for some people to be included in some areas and be excluded in others; for instance, people may be excluded from education but be very active in areas of the economy (such as trading) or in religious activities. Moreover, dimensions of exclusion interact with and build up on one another. The exclusion of street vendors and stall owners in the ways described in the preceding newspaper statement is a question of social and economic exclusion. On the other hand—and as the joint statement by the human rights groups went on to point out—many of them are “included” in market tolls that the city collects, and are therefore given tacit approval for their activities. Finally, exclusion as a temporal phenomenon is clearly illustrated in the case of the vendors, beggars, sex workers, and any other persons whose presence on the streets presumably make the city “untidy” because attacks on them (verbal and physical) come sporadically, such as when the country receives VIPs. The trend has always been to sterilize our streets for the sake of visiting dignitaries, but over the years, and with the expansion of the informal economy and the consequent increase of the numbers of traders and hawkers on the streets in the major cities, attempts at “clearing the streets” have come to be seen primarily as an exercise in ridding the streets of vendors and their unauthorized structures. The most recent example of attacks on street vendors was during the visit of U.S.

49 In 1961, Time Magazine’s coverage of the visit of Queen Elizabeth to Ghana included a report that “Ghana prettied up and cleaned up. People driving into Accra who could not prove that they had been vaccinated were summarily jabbed with a smallpox injection. To reduce the threat of pick pocketing, the police rounded up all ex-convicts on parole, and threw them into the cooler for the duration of the visit. Mothers were urged not to let their children run naked in the streets,” Ghana: the Queen’s Visit, Times, 17 November 1961. Retrieved on 3rd April, 2010 from http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,939314,00.html
president Barack Obama to Ghana in 2009.\textsuperscript{50}

If other members of the public took issue with the treatment of persons making a living or home on the street, the reaction was too muted to have made any mark on public conversation. The following aside in a newspaper column is representative of the marginal attention this group received:

Our streets were cleaned of both dirt and hawkers (anybody else wonder [sic] these people managed to feed themselves on the days they were prevented from trading)...\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{Public Participation in \textit{Ghana@50} Events}

The advertised program of activities for \textit{Ghana@50} included parades and durbars, religious services, musical concerts, performance of plays, reenactments of historical events, film and art exhibitions, conferences and seminars, as well as renovations of places of historical significance and the construction of social infrastructure such as public toilets and parks.

In February 2007, the Committee for Joint Action (CJA) announced that it was going on a “People’s Jubilee Procession” for “the ordinary people who have been excluded from the official celebrations” which were “narrow and exclusive.”\textsuperscript{52} Their spokesman noted that some of the most important events were by invitation, which limited access to political and social elites. He added that even for those events that were open to the public, admission rates were prohibitive:

“Why is it that the highlighted entertainment and social events carry price tags that make them inaccessible to all but the rich? Nowhere is there a street party or a free concert; events through which ordinary people can express themselves creatively and freely” [the spokesman] said.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} A look back @ March 2007, \textit{The Chronicle}, 29 May 2007, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{52} CJA declares positive defiance, \textit{The Chronicle}, 20 February 2007, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
The issue of cost that the CJA raised was an important one. For instance, there was a dinner where a plate of food was priced between 150 and 300 dollars and yet was billed as a “Ghana as One” event that would be attended by 400 people from “all walks of life.” Newspapers reported public complaints that the souvenirs were expensive.

The discussion of the CJA’s protest brings up a point that could be posed at any point in this paper—the sources and motivations of the criticism of the Ghana@50 celebrations. The CJA is an organization that has been involved in public protests and criticism of the NPP government, leading some to perceive it as a civil society version of the NDC. From this background, one might be justified in seeing its attack on the Ghana@50 as an indirect attack on the government, which had effectively monopolized the celebrations. It could be that the CJA, calling itself a grassroots (populist) movement, was aligning itself rhetorically with a political (Nkrumahist) ideology that was oppositional to the NPP’s liberal orientation. And indeed one could infer political or ideological motivations to the other sources of criticism, albeit with less justification since less is known about the authors of the various newspaper articles under review.

Beyond the price of the Ghana@50 events was the issue of their content. The program was top heavy with lectures and seminars and other talk-shops. The Ghana@50 lectures that were billed as a forum for a national reflection on important questions of integration, development, culture, and so on, were delivered in English mainly by men to a majority middle-class audience at the Accra International Conference Centre.

Moreover, many of the events were concentrated in urban

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54 Ghana as One – Big party for Ghana@50, The Chronicle, 21 October 2006, p. 6.
Accra and this fact did not go unnoticed by residents in other parts of the country. One commentator living in Kumasi, the “second city,” griped about this fact and connected it to the reality that, even outside of the celebrations, everything tends to be concentrated in the capital:

Like many Ghanaians who live outside Accra, it took a little bit more effort than it should for me to whip up the Ghana@50 fervour…. The street leading up to the Regional Coordinating Council was worryingly bare and free of Ghana flags until March 5 or so…. Many people in Kumasi made sarcastic comments about “Accra@50.”

One imagines that if these were the feelings of people in one of the country’s three major cities, those outside these spaces, and especially those in rural areas, would have felt even more left out.

In sum, the Ghana@50 celebrations privileged the participation of educated (male) persons with relatively higher incomes living in certain areas of the country. These examples of gender, class, cultural and spatial exclusion were relatively less remarked upon in newspaper reports than the question of political exclusion. This could be partly explained by the fact that the majority of newspaper contributors are themselves educated, urban residents of relatively high socio-economic status who may be less sensitive to marginalization of people from other social strata. It may also be true that Ghanaians are alert to political and economic exclusion, but less attuned to exclusion on a social front. In support of this hypothesis are the many newspaper reports about the politicians’ take on Ghana@50, as already discussed, and also the newspaper reports of the frustration of retailers at the scarcity of the official Jubilee clothing materials on the markets, and about the rising prices of souvenirs.

56 D. Takyi-Boadu, & D. Harrison, Ghana@50 Secretariat disappoints. The Chronicle, 17 February 2007, p. 1,3
58 M. D. Aklorbortu, Mad rush for anniversary cloth, Daily Graphic, 3 March 2007, p. 17. D. Nonor, Soaring prices of anniversary paraphernalia – The public
Having mentioned the economic interest of retailers in the anniversary celebrations, one must add that shoppers also expressed similar frustration at not being able to find the souvenirs in stock and at affordable prices. The high demand by members of the public for souvenirs (in particular the anniversary cloth) could indicate that people were invested in specific aspects of the celebrations, and perhaps showed a preference for personalized symbols and behavior, such as wearing of custom-made outfits in the specially-designed anniversary material.

The retreat of citizens from the public aspects of national holidays towards more personal celebrations has been noted in the literature as a consequence of the heavy hand of the state in prescribing national celebrations (see Lentz 2008). This observation can be put in context of Peter Ekeh’s (1975) claim that citizens in post-colonial Africa do not usually take ownership of state projects or initiatives because of their distance from them. The argument is that the processes and conflicts leading to political independence and the formation of the civic public have resulted in the popular perception of this public as distant and coercive. It is probable that, were one to look at these “private” celebrations, one might have seen more excitement and positive emotion than was evident in the public’s reaction to the government’s version of Ghana@50.

Exclusion from the National Narrative And National Development

Who is Who in the National Narrative?
Many persons took the opportunity that the Ghana@50 celebrations provided to look back on our history, to examine our achievements and to recount our failures. The discussions in newspapers, on radio and in other public contexts offered conflicting

59 ibid.
perspectives on these questions.

The next level of questioning was, “Who was worth celebrating?” and again the question turned into a match-up between the political traditions jostling for primacy in the nation’s narrative. Some accused the then government of “historical revisionism” that understated or undermined the contribution of certain Ghanaian leaders to our history. Nkrumah became a point of contention, with the parties in opposition pointedly claiming him as a part of their political tradition, in reference to the fact that the founders of the party in power—the New Patriotic Party—had at one time been Nkrumah’s fierce opponents. There were demands for Nkrumah’s name to be reinserted appropriately into historical accounts. The Chronicle ran a series of articles—with screaming headlines—about the neglect of Nkrumah’s birth place as a cultural and tourism heritage site, implying that this showed disdain for the first president.

The politics surrounding this debate is important to mention here. Nkrumah’s legacy has been claimed by various political parties, including the two main parties, the NPP and NDC. Leaving aside the merits of their respective cases on the basis of history, political ideology and policies, there is no doubt that there is political cache in an association with Nkrumah, and especially during a celebration of an event of which he is popularly credited as chief architect. It should then be clear why it would be a grave indictment on the government presiding over the 50th anniversary

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60 Indeed, Jean Allman (personal communication, December 4, 2008) suggests that Nkrumah, “one of the most controversial figures in 20th century history” is the core “problem” for any attempt at creating a historical narrative, for both an internally conflicted audience, and for the international community.

61 A. A. Afrifa, Ghana@50: History vs. Revisionism, The Chronicle, 5 February 2007, p. 5.

to accuse it of denigrating Nkrumah’s memory.

Again, the contestations about Nkrumah’s name and memory, and more broadly about which historical figures to valorize as national heroes, is also a question about which version of history predominates. One could see continuity between these political battles during the anniversary and the consistent efforts of political figures from independence (including Nkrumah) to write opponents out of the nation’s history. In the spirit of “national” celebration, then, writers became advocates for certain historical figures they believed had been marginalized. Tellingly, many of these were male. We remark on this because there were another group of persons who took issue with the versions of history highlighted by the anniversary. A coalition of women’s groups issued a statement that read, in part:

We note that the 50th anniversary celebrations, while recollecting the roles of key figures and various social groups in our pre-and post-independence struggles, have not adequately recognized or honored the contributions of women…

The women linked their relegation to “a footnote” in history with their present and everyday marginalization in political and social life. The women’s groups were by this making an attempt to claim a rightful place in the country’s historical narrative.64 The march of a coalition of women’s groups, however, received little public attention.65 While a few articles cautioned against amnesia

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64 There were radio and television programs (mainly those dedicated to women or women’s issues) that talked about women’s roles in Ghana’s history. As one instance, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, the then Head of the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy, University of Ghana, was on a radio station in Accra and again on a panel on a women’s talk show on television which traced the history of women in the independence struggle and in the building of contemporary Ghana.
65 March to celebrate women achievers tomorrow, Daily Graphic, 24 April 2007, p. 11.
about women’s roles and achievements, by and large, it appears that the parameters of the political debate about national heroes was a closed one that sought to validate certain political traditions by valorizing their founding fathers; these discussions did not admit a debate about the inclusion of women.  

There have been attempts to uncover and to highlight the active roles of women in national life, which has included their active involvement in the independence struggle, and their organizing for political and social self-advancement in post-colonial Ghana (Aidoo 1985; Arhin 1983; Manuh 1993; Tsikata 1989, 2001). However, since the Nkrumah era, when a conscious attempt was made to include women in government, their representation in formal politics has been unimpressive. To use parliament as an example, while women’s contestation of parliamentary seats increased from 53 to 95 between 1996 and 2000, the numbers elected increased only marginally from 18 to 19 in same period (Allah-Mensah 2007). Women’s access to economic and social resources has consistently been unequal to that of men. An important dimension of economic access is the extent to which women have use of, and control and ownership over land. The evidence is that women’s access to land is more restricted and tenuous than men (Kotey and Tsikata 1998), a situation that is worrying given women’s high presence in agriculture, and because of the importance of agriculture for their livelihood needs and to the national economy also (Agbosu et al. 2006). Therefore, women’s relative invisibility in the Ghana@50 story, while regrettable, is not surprising since it mirrors a history of marginalization both in terms of acknowledgement of women’s contributions and in terms of access to political and economic benefits and opportunities.

Two other newspaper articles linking gender to the Ghana@50

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celebrations were not very helpful to the cause which the coalition of women’s groups was trying to espouse, but perhaps better reflected public perspectives of how women fit into the celebration. One, a news report on the dearth of jubilee cloth on the market, was curiously put in the Women’s Section of the newspaper. In the other, the female author of a letter to the editor commented that the Ghana@50 Secretariat needed to generate publicity about the celebrations and gave the following suggestion about how to include women: “I believe women should be involved in the celebration; the anniversary cloth should be made available to the market women.”

Who has Benefited?

During Ghana@50, assessment of our national progress over time included the question of whether Ghanaians, on balance, had made expected progress. The response to this was a resounding “no.” The public made political leadership culpable for this lack of “development.” In fact, the poverty of ordinary citizens was sometimes contrasted with the relative wealth and well being of members of government. Commentators set up the “government,” “policymakers,” “leaders,” “politicians,” and “political parties” in opposition to “ordinary Ghanaians” and “hardworking citizens” who had done their share to build the nation but had not benefited from their investments. Social or demographic groups, which featured prominently in newspaper and other public discussions as being disadvantaged, were the “poor” (and the “rural poor,” in particular), farmers, and children/youth. These social groups, idioms in policy and public discourse about disadvantage, were used

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67 Mad rush for anniversary cloth – as demand outstrip supply, Daily Graphic, 3 March 2007, p. 17.
as weapons to castigate the government.

Even those who believed that Ghana had made decent progress pointed out that the benefits of this progress (whether monetary, or in terms of social and political capital) had not been distributed equitably, thus underlying the idea that exclusion is relative and relational. Todman (2004: 6) observes that social exclusion “is premised on the belief that individuals are socially embedded.” This understanding of social exclusion sees individuals or groups as disadvantaged relative to others within their particular context.

In spatial terms, we have already noted the perception that Ghana@50 could be labeled Accra@50 since the capital received most of the attention. Again, this fits into the reality that development has tended to be unduly weighted to the capital. Another dimension of spatial inequalities is the gap between southern and northern Ghana. Residents in the three northern regions of Ghana (Upper East, Upper West, and Northern Regions) were mentioned as being excluded from the celebrations.70 There was faint discussion of the historical neglect of Northern Ghana and the need to put that part of the country on the national agenda in concrete ways, such as by tarring roads.71 Given the very real historical disadvantages that the region has suffered, this theme of spatial exclusion should have received much more attention in news coverage than it did. It shows, as does our discussion on gendered exclusion, that there is disjuncture between the intensity and frequency of a particular type of disadvantage and the attention given it by the public or by the government. This opens up the question of power; that is the question of who has the social and political capital to speak and to make people listen.

We mentioned the youth as a social group that featured in some of the commentary as being disadvantaged. This is worth further comment. The concern about the youth is also a response to the recognition of the failure of the school system and the labor market

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70 E.g. Upper West in darkness about Ghana@50, Daily Graphic, 10 February 2007, p. 23.
to absorb young people, and of the perception that this was one reason for the increase in violent crime.\textsuperscript{72} The \textit{Daily Graphic} reported that the youth of the La area in Accra had gone to court to seek an injunction against the building of presidential suites on lands that past governments had compulsorily acquired for what were said to be national purposes.\textsuperscript{73} The tensions between the government and the indigenes of the capital Accra over land is not a new issue,\textsuperscript{74} but it was given greater poignancy because it underscored existing schisms and contentions—over land, over the heritage and future of a traditional area, over the plight of young people who feel that their government has mortgaged their future. The \textit{Daily Graphic} report also highlights the fact that the “national” celebrations have the potential to disenfranchise (or deepen the disenfranchisement of) some parts of society. It points to the possibility that some youth (and other members of the public) may have voluntarily excluded themselves from aspects of the \textit{Ghana@50} celebration in reaction to feeling marginalized. Indeed, some young people said on radio and in seminars organized during this period that they could find no reason to celebrate the nation—what had Ghana ever done for them?\textsuperscript{75}

\textbf{Conclusion}

National holidays provide opportunity for the discursive construction of nationhood (Lentz 2008). The roles of the state and of social and political elite in these celebrations are consistent with their domination of the process of nation-building (Fuller 2004) in that they purposefully use oratory, symbols and rituals to project their

\textsuperscript{72} G. Eugenia, 50 years of what? ... Growth or maturity? \textit{The Chronicles}, 5 March 2007, p. 5; S. A. Quaye, Ghana at 50 and youth unemployment, \textit{The Chronicle}, 18 March 2007, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{73} M. Mensah, and C. B. Okine, La Council halts Ghana@50 project, \textit{Daily Graphic}, 11 August 2006, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{74} Tensions between government and indigenes over land date to the early colonial period; see Parker 2000.
\textsuperscript{75} Ghana at 50: the voices of Ghana’s youth. Retrieved on 5\textsuperscript{th} April, 2010 from http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/1252_ghana/
version of nationhood and to consolidate power in the “imagined community.” Events such as Ghana@50 are therefore occasions for the exercise of political and socioeconomic power in ways that create and maintain the exclusion of certain social groups.

This paper has shown that Ghana@50, for all that it was billed as a national celebration, was perceived and experienced by some Ghanaians as exclusionary in its organization and in the narratives that accompanied the celebrations. Our discussion has highlighted the exclusion of individuals and groups on the basis of political affiliation, age, gender and spatial location. We have argued that these instances of exclusion evidence continuity with historical patterns of social disadvantage. A salient example is the attempted exclusion of political opponents from control over the jubilee celebrations, which is characteristic of post-independence politics in Ghana and in other African countries. 

These protestations about exclusion from the Ghana@50 celebrations came to the fore because national holidays, while ostensibly promoting a sense of unity and common identity, are also sites of “vigorouss debates regarding national history, current achievements and problems, and visions for the future” (Lentz 2008:2). Despite the state’s monopoly over the official program of Ghana@50, ordinary citizens were able to challenge the value and meaning of the fiftieth anniversary of Ghana’s independence. Thus, while public discussions of Ghana@50 revealed schisms in Ghanaian social, economic and political life, the anniversary encouraged broad based discussions of national issues in a way that, paradoxically, promoted inclusion by allowing citizens to assert their versions of Ghana nationhood and Ghanaian identity.

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76 According to Cooper (2008: 187), though this exclusion is more evident at the political level, it is tied into competition over economic resources. The stakes are higher in the competition for political power as “unlike the case in richer countries with more diverse economies, the consequences of losing power in most African states were likely to be dire.”
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