



Aspects Of “Maternal Home System” In African Tradition

“A contested culture”, says Frantz Fanon, “is a dead culture”. Period! The “Maternal home system”, just like the African extended family system that I’d written about in the past should be of research interest to scholars and individuals who are interested in understanding types and nature of relationships in Africa.

It plays a pivotal role in the continent. Sometimes, I call it and the “Extended Family System” our Europe’s version of the “department of counselling.” There are a lot of counseling and absolute succor derivable under most African traditional systems.

However, over the years, this aspect of our culture has been affected by a lot of factors. These factors are both internal and external. The internal has to do with the strange amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by the British colonialist which had thrown up and is still throwing up, behaviour patterns that are ‘foreign’, schizophrenic, and have become inimical to the growth and development of Nigeria’s component nationalities and their cultural identities.

The external on the other hand has to do with the international slave trade, legitimate international trade, capitalism, colonial and neo-colonial capitalism and imperialism. With the exception of perhaps the legitimate trade, the rest were forceful economic practices and impositions on the African continent. But the internal factors created the enabling environment for the success of the external variables. In all however, the maternal home system has stood the test of time and is still standing - ‘Gidi-gbam’! {an Igbo coinage}.

What is this “Maternal Home System” or what I often call in Igbo parlance: “the Ukwu Nne factor in Igbo traditional system”? First, before I extend the definition, let us understand the meaning of maternal home. It is the homestead of one’s mother before she was married out to one’s father. In other words, and at a seemingly maximal exogamous level, if one’s father is from say Ede, in Osun state and one’s mother is from Agbor-Obi, in Delta state. One’s maternal home is Agbor-Obi. At a more minimal endogamous level, let us assume that husband {Ego} and wife {Super-ego} are from Ibusa in Delta state.

Then, if {Ego} is from Ogbeowelle lineage or quarters and {super-ego} is from Ogboli quarters, all in Ibusa, the maternal homestead of one {the self} is Ogboli quarters. The {self} is the begotten product of the marital union and intercourse between {ego} and {super-ego}. In Africa, there is an attached and patterned behaviour which goes with this type of relationship, the breach of which could bring social and even magical sanctions. The level of social sanctions however depends on the gravity of any breach.



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The “Maternal Home System” is therefore the institutionalised or patterned ways by which communities handle relationships between a married daughter and her husband’s family. It involves a lot of routinizing practices and patterns of behaviour which helps to maintain and sustain marital relationship. This relationship incorporates some expected traditional rights, entitlements, rituals and privileges. It also attracts banter, permitted disrespect and institutionalised rudeness. Or what social anthropologists call “Joking relationship”.

In English parlance members of a family that gave their daughter away for marriage are called “In-laws” if they are many, or “In-law” if one person. In Igbo, they are called “Ndi-ogoh” if they are many, but “Ogoh, Onye-ogoh or Ogom” if it is just one person. In Yoruba, they are called “Awon Ano” if many, but “Ano” if one person or one in-law. In Hausa usage, it is called “Siriki na, suun’nzo” if many but “Siriki na, ya zo” if just an in-law.

Now, in the advanced Western countries, because of their full grown democracies, nature and patterns of scientific developments coupled with the general provision of social security, this, and some other distinct forms of social relationships are not fully comprehended or appreciated. Even where they are appreciated, their impact are waning away. The effect is the increase in impersonal relationships, lack of community spirit, and crime among very restless youths. In other words, the more society develops, the more social relationships wane or decrease in intensity.

In Europe, Grand children rarely visit grand parents talk less of children visiting their maternal homes. They have only one home and that is their parents home. What one observes most often is a form of asymmetrical relationship that looks detached, lacks senses of feelings and deep cultural values. It is dangerously impersonal, un-patterned and un-institutionalised. It is a kind of an evolved “professionalized” behaviour patterns. Everything here is a profession even relationship with grand parents is literally professionalized. In a society of 50% mum and 50% dad, the popular culture that has evolved is “Hi mum, Hi Dad”.

In Africa we are socialised into patterns of behaviour and institutionalised relationships. The English concepts of uncle, aunt, cousins, step father, step mother, cross cousin, parallel cousins, first, second and third cousins don’t exist in most if not all African communities. To call your father’s brother, uncle is a misnomer. And to call your mum’s sister aunt or auntie is another misnomer. There are no such words in African ethnographic lexicons. Your father’s brother, who is old enough to be your father, is your father and is called father, while your mum’s sister is called mum. By extension, your father’s brother’s children are your “brothers” and “sisters”



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while the same principle applies to your mum’s sister’s children.

The reason this is so in Africa is because there are patterns of behaviour and mandatory obligations attached to each concept in concrete terms. What do I mean? If you call your father’s brother, “father” and mum’s sister, “mum,” they will both treat you as their child, even though they are not your biological parents. Your father’s brother will treat you as he will treat his own “biological” children. In modern times and in a true African traditional setting that is devoid of cynicism, if you call your father’s brother, uncle or your mum’s sister, auntie, the way and manner both will treat you in response and attitude will not go down well with you. This is because the term in the English context has behaviour patterns attached to it and such behaviour patterns are anathema in the African context.

It therefore connotes disrespect in most part of Africa. The fact is that Africans respect and cherish relationships a lot and that is why most African communities are careful in their application of Western terminologies and usage when it comes to understanding kinship systems, type of Marriages, and type of families. Their own usage is more often than not, limited to father, mother, brother and sister, period! No more no less! Like I’d said, these distinctions are important because there are patterns of acceptable behaviour attached to these names.

Question: what if for instance, one’s father’s brother is not old enough to be one’s father or that one is in the same age grade or bracket with him, which is possible, what then does one call him? In other words, mere looking at him or through inquiry, you realised he is not old enough to be your dad, do you still call him dad? Answer: No! you call him “brother”. Same applies to your mum’s sister: you call her “Sister” if she is not old enough to be your mum.

In most communities in Africa, marriages operate on the Patrilineal system and principle. In other words, as soon as all necessary rituals have been performed for a bride-to-be, she moves into her grooms house and they become husband and wife. This you find among the Bini, Urhobo, Igbo, Yoruba in Nigeria, Fante in Ghana, and I think among the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. In some communities like the Ashanti people of Ghana, it is the reverse, the man moves into the woman’s home -Matrilineal.

Children born in Patriarchy, which is anchored on patrilineage, belonged to the father while children born in Matriarchy, anchored on Matrilineage, belonged to the mother but they retain their biological father’s name. Although, in Africa and the world generally, there are different types of Patriarchy and Matriarchy just as there are different kinds of marriage residency rights



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and rites, e.g virilocal and uxori-local.

Aforementioned said, let us create a scene: if in a Patrilineage, a wife is often maltreated to the extent that it has become intolerable, what does she do after overtures for peaceful settlement have failed? She maybe recalled through the mutual workings of the maternal home system back to her Patrilineage until such a time she is guaranteed security by her husband’s family. The same principle also operates in matrilineages: the man returns to his Patrilineage too until tempers cool down or to his matrilineage if he had moved from a matrilineage into a matrilineal marriage.

It is quite unfortunate that Western civilization, globalization, mass mediated communications with their hi-tech effective and bleaching propaganda, historical distortions, mass production and consumption of conspicuous goods, substance abuse, Hollywood effect, uneven developments among countries, reification of democracy, spread of capitalist principles and selfish ethos etc, etc, have blinded most of us into thinking that Africa has no cultural values worth preserving. In fact, the books: Education For Critical Consciousness {2005} and Pedagogy of the oppressed {1996} by the late Brazilian Professor, Paulo Freire, tried to correct these overbearing misconceptions. Anyone who had lived in Europe or America and had seen how relationship of all kinds have been bastardised, will really come to appreciate and value African. We may not have made jets, ballistic missiles or improvised rocket launchers but we value relationships.

A very unique practice of the “maternal home system” which to this day is going on with passion is that between the people of Isiekeneisi in Ideato South local government area and the people of Dikenafa, their neighbour. I could not but marvel by what I had observed while doing my mandatory one year youth Service. Most children in these two communities go to school from their maternal and not from their paternal home. They can also own property, be given land to farm or build houses, marry and completely get absorbed into their mother’s community.

But does that mean they will abandon their paternal home or forsake their father’s name? The answer is no. It only shows you the extent to which a people can extend and sustain relationships. The intimacy between their married daughter, her children {“Umu Nwa-anyi”} and her in-laws, is cherished and ritualized. That relationship is greater than money. The people of Isiekeneisi and Dikenafa and its environ, like the people of Umudim, love this type of relationship so much that you can never destroy it with money.

You may have money but when they come to visit you, as their own child’s child or “Nwa Nwa”,



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they are not coming for your money, they are coming to show affection and passionate love. An interested observer will notice an unpretentious spirit of compassion and a dignifying sense of community oozing out the humanity in these people. They some times too, shower gift items, no matter the quality and quantity, on their child's child. Even the “Nwa Nwa”, deep inside him, sees the sweet lighting sensation of maternal brothers and sisters seeping through his blood. His wealth may be necessary, but it is not sufficiently valued in this relationship {ego gbakwa ogu}. He knows! And because he knows, he obliges and acknowledges them by showing appreciation in kind, not often in cash.

However, over the years this form of relationship seemed to be fading gradually but those at the village level are still trying to preserve and practice it. It is only those who have travelled to or are still living in “Obodo Oyibo” that seemed to be making the mistake of trying to undermine some of these Africa's deep rooted values and emotional attachment to relationships. When Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe told Ukpabi Asika that “No condition is Permanent”, the message in that classical philosophical uppercut and an established truism, was meant for every human being who understands how nature works.

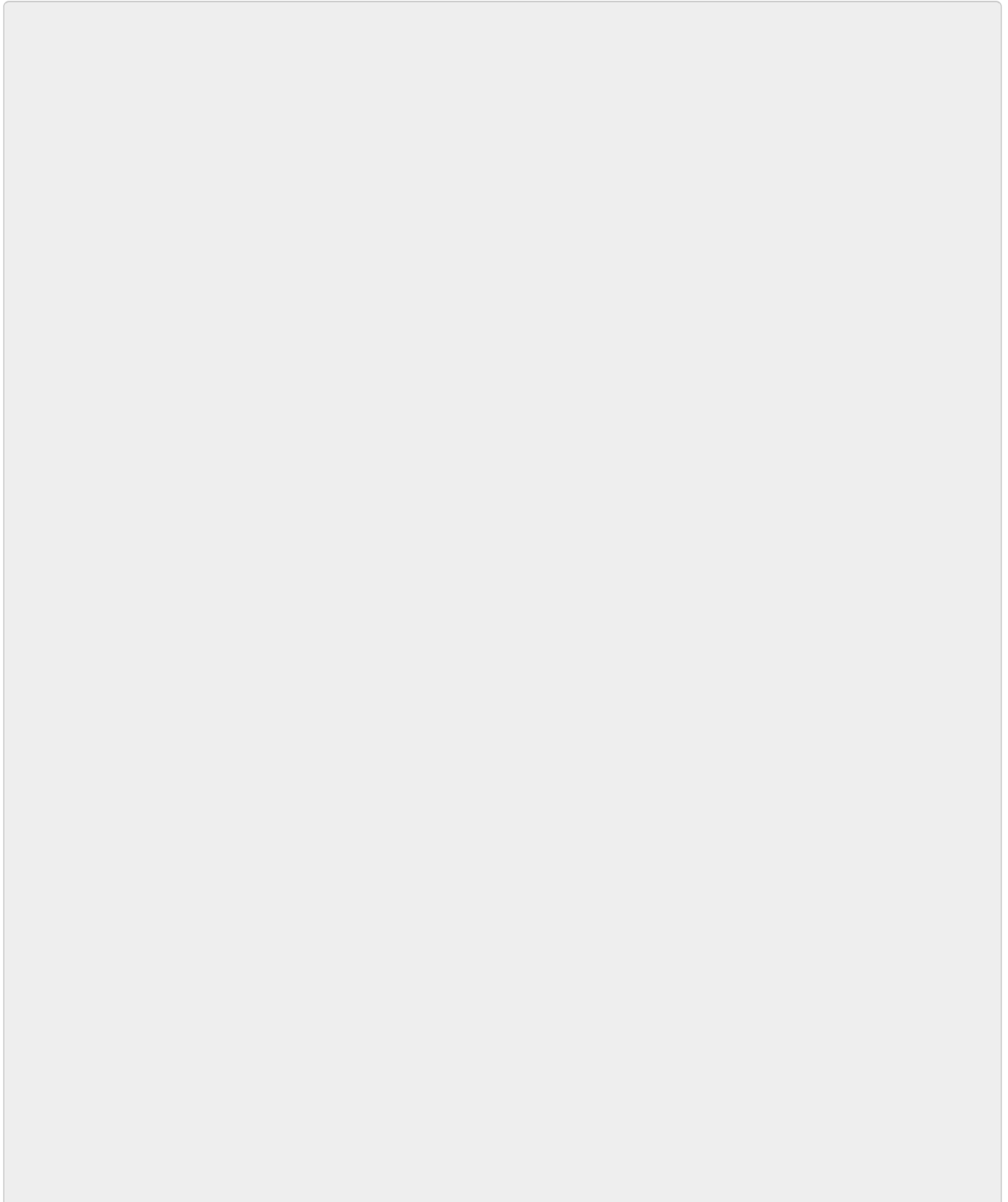
That Barack Obama, an African-American, won the US presidency does not mean that the British National Party {BNP} should loose sleep. The world moves in rhythms. In most historical cases, these rhythmic waves cannot be predicted. The party may spring a surprise one day and when that comes, only God knows what is going to be our lot.

I {only} hope that I have sent one or two messages across to Nigerians in Diaspora: You are from Africa, learn to value relationships, be proud of it, raise your head high and strive to maintain enduring relationships. Do not allow the British divide and rule, which operates smoothly in different guises, and has become an established government policies both here in the UK and as an exported ‘commodity’, to distort your vision and personality. I rest my case!

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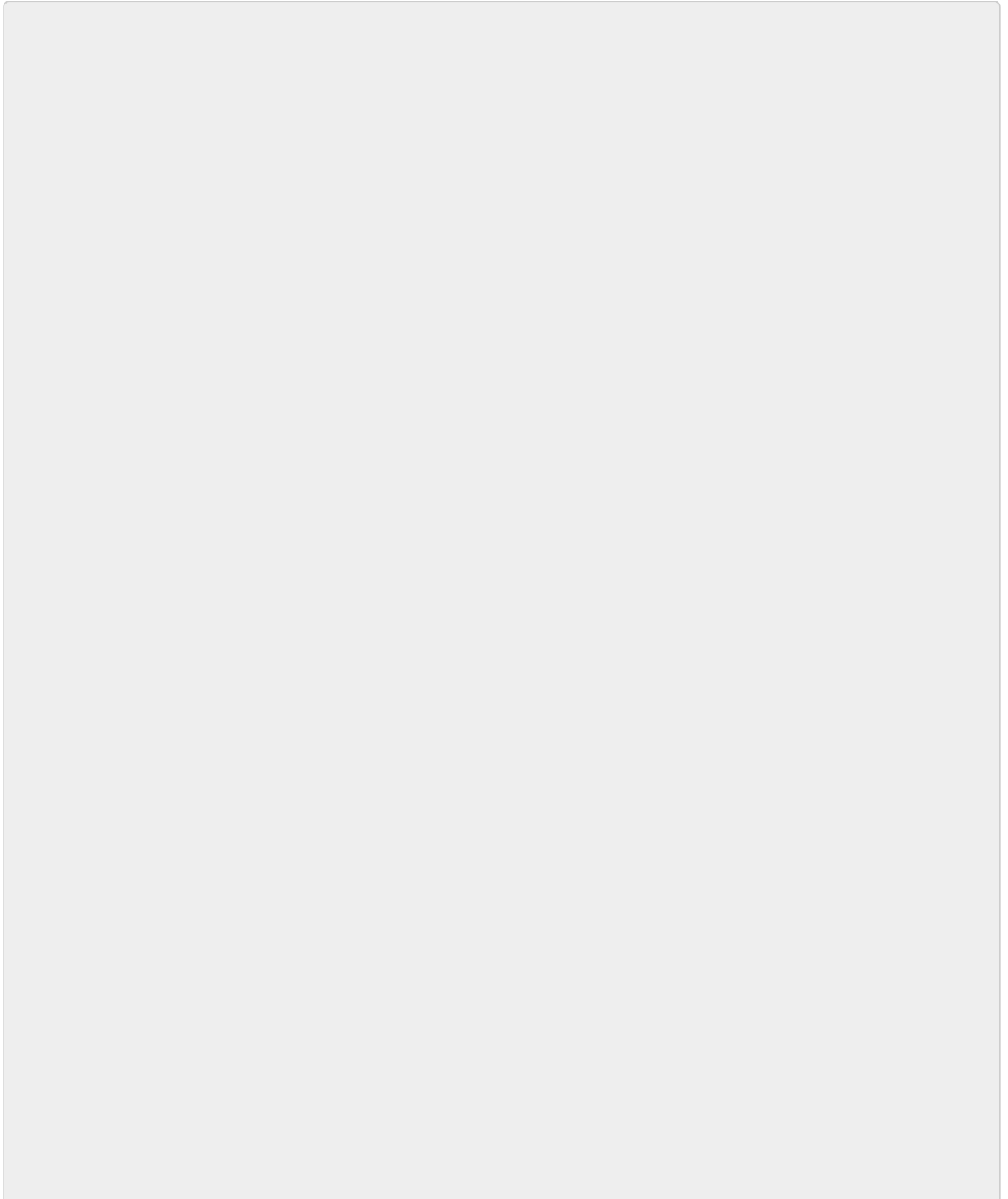
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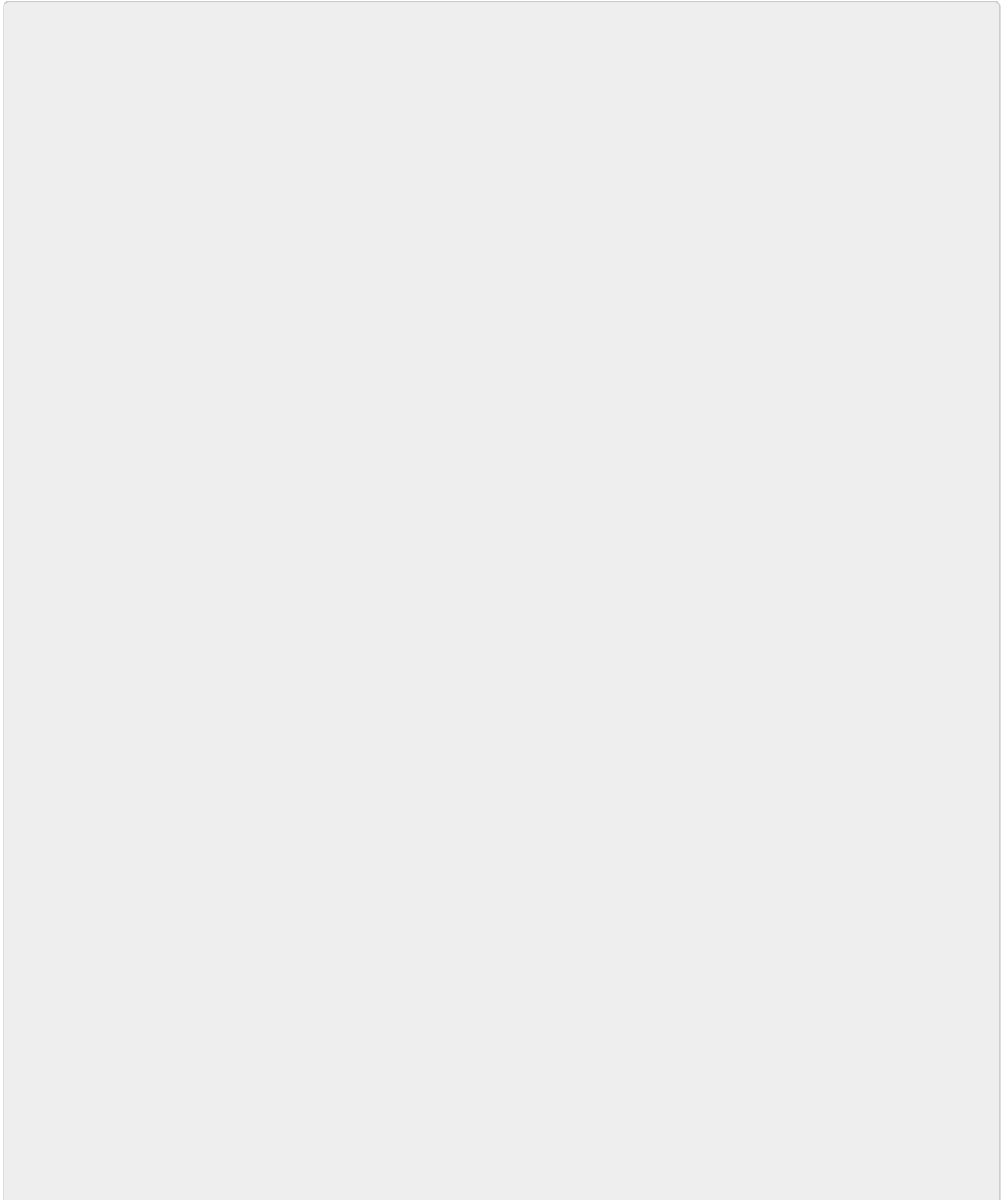
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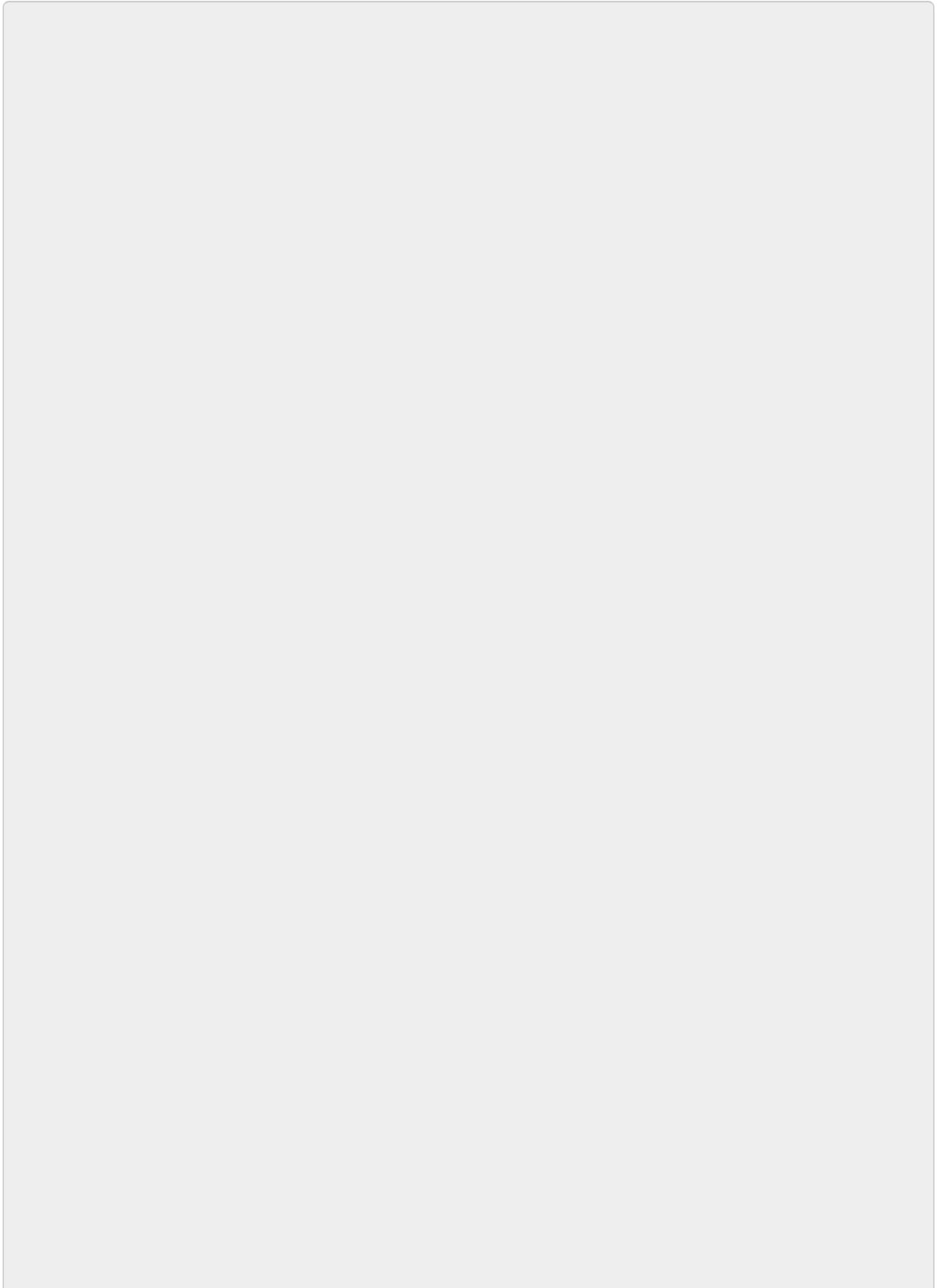
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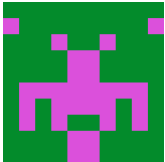
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