

Tricksterism and Subversion in Culture and Feminism

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Abstract- *This study examines the works of Francis Imbuga, a renowned Kenyan playwright, who challenges traditional societal norms and advocates for social change through his plays, Aminata and The Burning of Rags. Imbuga explores the tensions between tradition and modernity in African societies and the impact of patriarchal hegemony on women's lives. He challenges traditional gender roles and power dynamics by presenting wise and foresighted female characters who can integrate Christianity with their traditions and respond to change positively. Through his use of tricksterism and subversion, Imbuga advocates for the empowerment and inclusion of women in decision-making processes. This study contextualizes Imbuga's themes within the broader aspirations for social change in Kenya and beyond, highlighting his transformative vision that shifts the focus from solely addressing gender inequalities to encompassing concerns for the overall welfare and dignity of all individuals. Overall, Imbuga's plays are a powerful call for social change and an inspiration to challenge the status quo and strive towards a better, more inclusive society.*

Indexed Terms- *Tricksterism, Subversion, Culture, Feminism*

I. INTRODUCTION

Francis Imbuga is a renowned Kenyan playwright whose works challenge traditional societal norms and advocate for social change. In his plays, *Aminata* and *The Burning of Rags*, Imbuga explores the tensions between tradition and modernity in African societies and how patriarchal hegemony impacts women's lives. Imbuga portrays the conflicts that arise from contrasting beliefs and values, examining the clash between tradition and the changing dynamics of society. The female characters in his works are often marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes, but Imbuga also presents wise and foresighted female characters who can integrate

Christianity with their traditions and respond to change positively. Through his use of tricksterism and subversion, Imbuga challenges traditional gender roles and power dynamics, advocating for the empowerment and inclusion of women in decision-making processes. This study examines Imbuga's works, contextualizing his themes within the broader aspirations for social change in Kenya and beyond, and highlighting the transformative vision that shifts the focus from solely addressing gender inequalities to encompassing concerns for the overall welfare and dignity of all individuals.

II. TRICKSTERISM AND SUBVERSION IN FEMINISM

Imbuga employs tricksterism and subversion to challenge and subvert the traditional social order, particularly in relation to feminism. This study explores how Imbuga presents a positive response to feminism and offers a unique perspective that celebrates the roles of female characters, both in domestic and public spheres. This stands in contrast to the marginalized portrayal of women in traditional societal norms. Through the use of tricksterism and subversion, Imbuga enables her female characters to confront and overcome the social political issues they face in society. As a result, these female characters contribute not only to the moral content but also to the aesthetic values of Imbuga's works.

The study highlights how tricksterism and subversion play a transformative role in the portrayal of female characters in literary texts, aligning with broader social change aspirations within society. Ultimately, this transformative vision shifts the focus from solely addressing gender inequalities to encompassing concerns for the overall welfare and dignity of all individuals.

Aminata (1988) is set in Membe Village, a rural community in Kenya. The play was specifically written for the United Nations Decade for Women

Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985. It revolves around the protagonist, Aminata, who is educated and works as a lawyer. The play addresses various issues affecting women, including women's liberation, gender equality, family planning, and property and land inheritance. Initially championed by Aminata's father, Pastor Ngoya, these issues are later embraced and propagated by Aminata herself. Aminata delves into the negative socio-cultural attitudes and poor socialization that contribute to gender stereotyping and women's subjugation. It portrays a patriarchal society where female characters have internalized their marginalized roles to such an extent that they criticize the efforts of more enlightened individuals who fight for equality. The play offers insights into the structures that hinder women's progress and the playwright's perspective on women's equality. In *Aminata*, the playwright uses the microcosm of the fictitious Nyarango family and its extended members to explore gender roles in an African context. The family serves as a primary influence in shaping children's attitudes toward gender issues in society. In traditional societies, boys and girls learn their roles from older male and female family members, respectively. It is within the family that children are first socialized into the dynamics of power and dominance. Girls and women, in particular, experience the consequences of masculine power and privilege within the home and family (Shaw & Lee, 2009:387).

Pastor Ngoya, aware of the marginalization of female characters, takes it upon himself to subvert the social order within Membe society. In the play *Aminata*, the protagonist grows up with more privilege than other girls in Membe village due to her family background. Aminata's father, Pastor Ngoya, is a staunch critic of the customs, beliefs, and practices of their community, especially those that perpetuate stereotypes and marginalize women. Pastor Ngoya is portrayed as one of the early adopters of Christianity in the local community, denouncing traditional ways of life. His character reflects those local individuals who embraced Christianity during the nineteenth-century missionary activities in Africa, and who were utilized by the Christian missionaries to challenge indigenous cultures (Kabaji, 2005).

Imbuga employs role reversals within Ngoya's family as a form of tricksterism. Despite societal norms that permit polygamy in Membe society, Pastor Ngoya, who is widowed when Aminata is a baby, chooses to raise his daughter alone. This decision reflects his changed worldview and rejection of traditional customs and beliefs. Imbuga, advocating for women's emancipation, aims to challenge and shift attitudes towards women in Membe. Pastor Ngoya manifests his beliefs by providing Aminata with equal treatment, or even better, than his sons. She receives education, studies law, and becomes a successful professional, enjoying privileges that were previously reserved for boys. As a child, Aminata becomes a catalyst for social change as Pastor Ngoya subverts the social order. He uses her to lead women in drinking chicken soup, breaking the taboo that restricted it to men. Eventually, Aminata is even allowed to eat chicken, which was previously forbidden for women. Pastor Ngoya's subversive actions aim to challenge gender-based restrictions and empower women within Membe society. Significantly, before his death, Ngoya defies Membe's traditions by writing a will in which he bequeaths a piece of land directly to Aminata. This act contradicts the customary practice that only allows male heirs, such as the deceased's first male son or brother, to inherit property and land. Imbuga highlights this breach of tradition to emphasize the need for change and the importance of recognizing women's rights to inheritance.

Aminata's upbringing stands in stark contrast to the norm due to Pastor Ngoya's intentional subversion of societal norms. Aunt Kezia, on the other hand, represents a typical example of how a girl-child raised in a patriarchal rural family grows up to become a woman. This contrast leads Aunt Kezia to perceive Aminata as an unconventional figure. Imbuga employs a synthesis of cultural and Christian elements as a literary technique to portray relatively peaceful monogamous households in his works, in contrast to the polygamous homes characterized by tension and violence against women and children in Achebe's works. This technique, as observed by Ruganda (1992), can be attributed to Imbuga's own upbringing in a Christian household within a rural community.

The rural community of Membe, depicted in both *Aminata* and *The Burning of Rags*, is characterized by

male dominance. Within this community, domination represents a specific form of power, encompassing control, influence, steadfastness, and command (Ngezem in Kandji, 2006:152-153). The plays delve into the issues of dominance, power, and subordination, highlighting their impact on individual characters. Imbuga effectively contextualizes the themes addressed by the Women's Conference by shining a spotlight on the tensions and conflicts present in Membe village, which serves as a representation of certain communities in Kenya.

In the play, Imbuga portrays characters from various social strata in both rural and urban African societies. This representation allows him to subvert the established order and challenge societal norms. The depictions of these characters are influenced by socio-economic factors that create distinctions based on gender and social status. One category of characters consists of educated individuals who are more receptive to change. They include Aminata, the protagonist, her husband Dr. Mulemi, and her brother Joshua, who is pursuing further studies abroad. These characters are depicted as professionals and intellectuals who are more open to progressive ideas and willing to challenge traditional norms. The other category comprises characters who have grown up in the traditional ways of their community but have abandoned their previous beliefs and customs due to the influence of Christianity. These characters have embraced the teachings that condemn their traditional practices. The late Pastor Ngoya, for example, represents this category of characters who have adopted Christianity and rejected their former cultural traditions. Imbuga explores the dynamics between these different categories of characters, highlighting the tensions and conflicts that arise from their contrasting beliefs and values. By juxtaposing these characters, the play examines the clash between tradition and modernity, and the ongoing struggle for social change in African societies. In the play, Ngoya, Aminata's father and a village elder, is primarily referenced or appears in the form of memories through flashbacks. He is portrayed as a significant figure who has a lasting impact on the narrative, even though he is not physically present in the present timeline of the story. Ngoya's character represents the influence of the past and serves as a guiding force for Aminata. Another group of characters in the play is the

traditional elders who form the village council of elders. This council holds significant authority and is responsible for making important decisions that govern the entire community. Jumba, who is Ngoya's brother, holds the position of village headman and possesses symbolic authority through the traditional stool. The stool is a representation of power and is exclusively reserved for male elders, with women prohibited from sitting on it due to cultural taboos (Kabaji, 2005).

Imbuga subverts traditional gender roles and power dynamics by having Jumba relinquish his position as the headman of Membe and cleverly appointing Mama Rosina as the new headwoman. This reversal challenges the established norms and demonstrates Imbuga's intent to disrupt traditional patriarchal structures. In Aminata, Jumba and Aminata clash over the land bequeathed to her by her father. Jumba expresses his frustration to Nuhu and references their shared experience of circumcision, stating that he only opened up to Nuhu as a partner on that significant day. Similarly, in *Betrayal in the City*, Doga reminds Jere of the importance of respecting the age mates of their fathers due to the shared experience of circumcision. These references highlight the significance of age sets and rites of passage in African communities, where individuals who undergo the same rituals are expected to support and respect each other. However, these traditional structures and rites of passage often marginalize female characters. The social structures in many Kenyan communities historically excluded women from participating in decision-making processes (Oduol & Kabira, 1995:193). This exclusion denies women agency and influence in matters that affect their lives and communities. Imbuga's subversion of traditional power structures and the inclusion of female characters like Mama Rosina and Aminata challenges these limitations placed on women. It serves as a critique of the unequal gender dynamics prevalent in Kenyan society and advocates for the empowerment and inclusion of women in decision-making processes.

Indeed, the characters in the play crucial roles in exploring the challenges faced by educated and professional African women within the patriarchal socio-cultural context, particularly at the grassroots level. The organizational structure of the society

depicted in the play entrusts leadership and decision-making responsibilities to the council of elders, headed by the village headman who holds symbolic authority through the stool of rule. Adherence to tradition is a prominent aspect of this socio-cultural setup, governing the relationships and behaviors of the community. Belief in the power of ancestral spirits and the performance of rituals associated with various rites of passage and taboos are significant elements within this society. Jumba warns Nuhu about the ancestors, emphasizing that they become displeased when patience runs out. Similarly, Mama Rosina cautions Jumba not to disregard the wishes of his deceased brother, Pastor Ngoya. Interestingly, Jumba decides to cement Pastor Ngoya's grave as a means to lay his ghost to rest, demonstrating the community's reverence for ancestral spirits. These cultural beliefs and practices, while rooted in tradition, also shape the actions and decisions of the characters. The play explores the tension and interplay between tradition and the changing dynamics of the society, particularly in relation to women's roles and aspirations.

In the context of the Maragoli community in Western Kenya, Kabaji (2005) explains that members of the same clan would demonstrate private respects to the deceased and perform sacrifices to the ancestors, seeking their assistance in resolving societal issues. Additionally, he highlights the importance of male circumcision within the Maragoli cultural calendar. These aspects of Maragoli culture and tradition are reflected in some of Imbuga's works, which are examined in this study. For instance, in *The Burning of Rags*, the primary conflict revolves around Yona's circumcision, encompassing all the rituals associated with the rite of passage. This includes the burning of the boy's old clothes and the final cleansing of the circumcision wound. The play portrays the significance attached to the circumcision ceremony and its role in the development of the plot.

In *Aminata*, the significance of the ancestral tree, which was uprooted by the Christians to make way for the Church, is delineated by Jumba. He emphasizes that the tree was considered sacred because it grew at the exact location where Membe, the father of their clan, underwent circumcision. This reference underscores the cultural importance attached to circumcision and its connection to the ancestral

heritage of the Maragoli people. Imbuga's incorporation of these cultural elements in his works reflects his intention to portray and preserve the rich traditions and practices of the Maragoli community. By highlighting the significance of circumcision and ancestral beliefs, he provides insights into the cultural fabric and historical roots of the community, offering readers a deeper understanding of Maragoli culture.

According to Kabaji (2005), the Maragoli community developed a strong social fabric through associations and age sets formed during the time of circumcision. Imbuga makes allusions to this bond in his works. In Imbuga's novella/children's story, "Kagai and her Two Brothers" (1995), the family of Magomere travels from the town to their rural home in Maragoli for the initiation of their two sons. Although the boys have already undergone circumcision in a hospital, they are required to participate in additional ceremonies that complete the actual initiation process. This includes the selection and bonding of each boy with a friend from a different household.

Anderson (1997) highlights that patriarchy encompasses various social institutions that regulate and shape women's lives. In the play *Aminata*, there are clear taboos and societal expectations that govern the role and position of women within the society. The female characters are well aware that leadership, symbolized by the stool, is exclusively reserved for men. When Imbuga employs tricksterism to make Jumba decide to step down from the stool in favor of his wife, Mama Rosina, she quickly reminds him of her gender, stating, "I am a woman, have you forgotten that" (Imbuga, 1988:68).

Indeed, the rural female characters in *Aminata* are deeply influenced by the taboos and gender roles that dictate their positions within the society. They have internalized these norms to the point where they passively accept their subordinate positions. This portrayal in the play challenges proponents of women's liberation to recognize that women in African rural communities face complex gender issues that cannot be overlooked if progress is to be made. Kabaji (2005) identifies several taboos among the Maragoli community of Kenya that restrict women's participation in various activities

In *Aminata*, Mama Rosina stands out as a female character with a higher status compared to other village women. She is portrayed as someone who maintains harmonious relationships with every member of the family, even in the face of conflict, contrasting with the acrimonious attitudes displayed by Ababio and Jumba towards Aminata. Mama Rosina takes on the role of a family mediator, offering counsel to those who have strayed or are facing difficulties. Her language and actions reflect her important role not only within the family but also within the wider community.

The portrayal of elderly female characters like Elima in "The Burning of Rags" and Nora Ulivaho in "The Return of Mugofu" as insightful and moral forces further supports the argument that these works challenge the idealized depiction of old women often found in male-authored literary works. These characters defy stereotypes and offer a more nuanced representation of older women, highlighting their wisdom, agency, and moral guidance.

This study posits that Imbuga utilizes tricksterism and subversion to endow her female characters with the ability to reason astutely and provide counsel. Mama Rosina possesses the power of Jumba, which sets her apart from other female characters, and the elders are aware of this fact. To persuade Mama Rosina to support his plan against the elders, Jumba compliments her, and Nuhu acknowledges her advisory role. Aminata's evaluation of Mama Rosina accurately summarizes her value as a female character: "You have a great deal of wisdom concealed in your simplicity, and I often question whether we truly understand you" (65). The playwright's message is that a woman may possess a wealth of potential and insight, which is stifled by the restrictions imposed on her in a male-dominated society. Imbuga disrupts this order through subversion.

Another group of characters in the play consists of reckless and irresponsible men who not only subject their wives to domestic violence, intimidation, and harassment, but also hold a general belief that women are inferior. Ababio, who is Aminata's brother, falls under this category. On the other hand, marginalized males, such as Agege, represent a different category. Additionally, there are other characters who are

willing to embrace change, including the youth group and villagers like Mama Rosina and Nuhu. However, the most significant group is the illiterate villagers who cling to their traditional beliefs and customs, which often undermine female characters. Aunt Keziah is a character who belongs to this particular group of villagers.

Imbuga skillfully employs language to depict Aminata in "Aminata" and Hilda in "The Burning of Rags." Despite the differing contexts, Aminata's character development is built upon Hilda's portrayal. Hilda's depiction reveals glimpses of male writers' stereotypical views of the modern African woman as a city-dweller with loose morals (Chesaina, 1987; Kandji, 2006; Zola, 2010). However, Imbuga subverts this perspective through the use of ambivalence as a literary strategy. Only Agala, a traditionalist and male chauvinist, labels Hilda as a harlot for cohabiting with Denis. Other characters redeem Hilda's image by interpreting the relationship differently. The reader and remaining characters acknowledge that it is common in contemporary society for couples to move in and live together before formalizing their marriage plans.

Similarly, Imbuga employs language to depict Hilda's character in "The Burning of Rags." Hilda's previous love affair with Henricks is downplayed as all major characters in the play, regardless of gender, have a past they wish to overlook as they focus on the future. Although Hilda does not meet traditional male standards as a cook, she is highly informed on current affairs and has the freedom to attend feminist meetings and travel, interacting with other women. Denis, her partner, acknowledges his surprise at her knowledge (Imbuga, 1989:57). In "Aminata," Imbuga presents Aminata in media res, and it is not until almost halfway through the play that she makes her first appearance on stage. Despite this, the play centers on her, and the preoccupation of some characters early on serves to provide background information. Mama Rosina first mentions Aminata while informing Jumba of a messenger sent to halt the cementing of her father's grave against his wishes. Jumba's reaction prepares the audience for the binary oppositions and conflicting versions present in the play.

Ngoya's conversion to Christianity leads to a shift in his perception of women's status, which influences Aminata's development and how other characters perceive her. Imbuga uses Pastor Ngoya's views as a technique to challenge patriarchal hegemony. Aminata's childhood is atypical for her community. While other girls listen to their mothers' stories, Aminata's father's narratives shape her worldview. According to Smith (2012:145), stories are a means of passing down cultural beliefs and values, with the hope that future generations will cherish and continue to pass them on. Imbuga is aware of the power of narrative as a tool for preserving the past and promoting social change. Pastor Ngoya recalls and retells an essential story to Aminata before his death, which he believes will guide her.

During my childhood, our mothers were confined like prisoners and excluded from various activities, even certain types of food were prohibited to them. As a man of God, I recognized the unfairness of these taboos and superstitions, especially towards women. I led a campaign that allowed women to work alongside men with confidence. Aminata was involved in this campaign when she was still a baby. Initially, many women were afraid, but they gradually adapted to the change. However, the men were not pleased, and Jumba, Aminata's uncle, was the most discontent. If Jumba has animosity towards Aminata, it is because I used her to prove them wrong.

Pastor Ngoya's worldview is challenged by the past, leading him to champion women's liberation. As a result, his daughter Aminata enjoys privileges previously reserved for boys, including education. Smith (2012:146) argues that both the story and the storyteller connect the past with the future, linking generations, the land and its people through narratives. Pastor Ngoya uses his child in his campaigns for social change, and even after his death, Aminata becomes a living example of his gospel of women's liberation by inheriting his piece of land. Jumba's negative reaction to the Christian crusade reflects the acrimony it has bred within the family. He believes that Aminata conspired with her father to embarrass him and challenge his authority (Imbuga, 1988:17). Ruganda (1992:77) explains that Aminata's quest to acquire the land is an indirect way of subverting and invading the

male space delineated by tradition as a man's exclusive domain.

Aminata, a female character, is a new and uncommon occurrence in the patriarchal Membe community. As a result, she faces significant resistance and antagonism, particularly from male members of her family, including her brother and uncle, who perceive her achievements as a threat to their own status. Jumba's hostility towards Aminata is vividly portrayed through animal imagery, characterizing her as evil and separating her from her gender. He refers to her as a "tigress" (Imbuga, 1988:11), an egret that believes it is eating a bull while removing ticks from its back (15), "Membe's black sheep out to destroy the ways of ages" (13), and a "he-goat on heat" (15). These labels strip her of her feminine qualities, further isolating her from the "masculine" world that her father has pushed her into. In Jumba's mind, she becomes an oddity, something inhuman.

III. TRICKSTERISM AND SUBVERSION IN CULTURE

Patriarchy, as a cultural phenomenon, legitimizes men's authority over women, which becomes the dominant ideology of the society. This perpetuates male-dominated institutions in courtship, marriage, rites of passage, and kinship, which particularly affects women's inheritance rights adversely. In most families, property is owned by male relatives, and in the event of a man's death, his property is inherited by his sons or male relatives, not his daughters. Imbuga explores these cultural aspects in his works, such as *The Burning of Rags* and *Aminata*. *The Burning of Rags* (1989) focuses on the conflict between Agala and his son Denis over the circumcision of Yona, Denis's son. While Agala insists on a traditional ceremony, Denis, a university professor and acting head of the Department of Culture, prefers a hospital procedure. The play also explores sub-themes such as the death of Matilda, Denis's wife, and her presence as a ghost in the play, as well as the details of the rite of passage. In the Membe community, circumcision is only considered complete after the completion of other ceremonies that include washing the wound and burning old clothes.

The sub-theme of Denis' dilemma revolves around his conflicted feelings towards traditional circumcision. Although he initially consents to his son's circumcision under societal pressure, he fails to participate in the burning of rags ceremony due to his work commitments and his desire to break away from tradition. This decision leads to Agala embarking on a journey to Nairobi with Yona, who has fallen ill after the circumcision, and a bundle of his old clothes that were meant to be burnt. Accompanied by Babu and aided by Denis' friend, they eventually reach Denis' home where Agala tragically passes away. Yona is admitted to Gertrude's Children's Hospital, where he receives treatment and recovers, while Denis suggests that his son's circumcision should take place in a hospital setting, further subverting traditional customs. The Council of Elders, headed by Jumba, still holds power in the traditional system of leadership in Membe.

In Imbuga's works, the introduction of Christianity poses a threat to the traditional way of life, causing a rift between tradition and modernity. Ngoya is one of the first converts who breaks away from tradition by encouraging women, starting with his daughter Aminata, to eat chicken despite the traditional taboo against it. He also writes a will in which he bequeaths a piece of ancestral land to Aminata, going against the tradition that only male relatives can inherit property. This leads to a conflict between Aminata and her male relatives, including her uncle Jumba, after Ngoya's death. Despite this conflict, Imbuga portrays rural female characters with wisdom and foresight who are responsive to change and able to integrate Christianity with their traditions. Mama Rosina in *Aminata* and Elima in *The Burning of Rags* are examples of such characters. However, they also suffer from patriarchal authority, as their conservative male counterparts exclude them from decision making and remind them of their inferior status in society. Mama Rosina plays an admirable role as the wife of the village headman, commanding respect from both genders. She and other elderly characters are aware of the erasure of their cultural beliefs and practices by a younger generation influenced by Western culture.

Mama Rosina's position of power in her family allows her to influence her husband Jumba and act as his conscience. She is often the voice of reason, mediating

between family members and exposing Jumba's fears. Throughout Imbuga's works, Mama Rosina consistently displays open-mindedness and the ability to correct her husband when necessary or share his views when appropriate. She recognizes Agege as a valuable member of the community, despite his reputation as the village idiot.

Mama Rosina's power stems from her clear focus on community relationships. She appreciates Aminata's contributions to the family and the community, even when Jumba fails to do so. When Jumba realizes he cannot deny Aminata the piece of land she inherited, he cleverly wins her support and acknowledges her potential, stating that he "did not marry a fool."

In *The Burning of Rags*, Elima fulfills a role similar to Mama Rosina in *Aminata*, to some extent. She advises her husband, Agala, against his negative thoughts that lead him to communicate with the dead Matildah. However, unlike Mama Rosina, Elima remains submissive and acknowledges Agala as the head of the family, tolerating his chauvinistic remarks about her and her gender. Her status is comparable to that of Aunt Kezia.

Imbuga uses the characters of Misiah in *Aminata* and Matilda in *The Burning of Rags* to criticize domestic violence and arranged marriages respectively. Male violence is cited as one of the structures of patriarchy by Walby (1990:49), where men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Misiah is a representation of the typical African woman who silently suffers at the hands of a male chauvinist like Ababio, her drunk and irresponsible husband who believes that tradition gives him the authority to beat her. Misiah is a victim of the socio-economic and cultural conditions of African societies that disempower women, and she has no voice as a character. Her suffering is only brought to light by other characters, and her dependence on her sister-in-law, Aminata, for both emotional and material support highlights economic dependency as a factor in some female characters' passivity towards domestic violence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Francis Imbuga is a playwright whose works challenge traditional societal norms and

advocate for social change. Through his plays, *Aminata* and *The Burning of Rags*, Imbuga explores the tensions between tradition and modernity in African societies and how patriarchal hegemony impacts women's lives. Imbuga challenges traditional gender roles and power dynamics by presenting wise and foresighted female characters who can integrate Christianity with their traditions and respond to change positively. His use of tricksterism and subversion highlights the transformative vision that shifts the focus from solely addressing gender inequalities to encompassing concerns for the overall welfare and dignity of all individuals. Imbuga's works contextualize his themes within the broader aspirations for social change in Kenya and beyond, advocating for the empowerment and inclusion of women in decision-making processes. Overall, Imbuga's plays are a powerful call for social change and an inspiration to challenge the status quo and strive towards a better, more inclusive society.

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