From Distant Tales:
Archaeology and Ethnohistory
in the Highlands of Sumatra

Edited by

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Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I: General</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dawn of Humanity in Sumatra: Arrival and Dispersal</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry Widianto</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Neolithic in the Highlands of Sumatra: Problems of Definition</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominik Bonatz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland-Lowland Connections in Jambi, South Sumatra, and West Sumatra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th to 14th Centuries</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Miksic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: Northern Sumatra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a Batak History?</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Reid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramics, Cloth, Iron and Salt: Coastal Hinterland Interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the Karo Region of Northeastern Sumatra</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Edwards McKinnon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity and Colonization in Northeast Sumatra: Bataks and Malays</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Perret</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Local Informants in the Making of the Image of &quot;Cannibalism&quot; in North Sumatra</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masashi Hirosue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents

Part III: Central Sumatra

The Megaliths and the Pottery: Studying the Early Material Culture of Highland Jambi .............................................. 196
Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz

Adityavarman’s Highland Kingdom .................................... 229
Hermann Kulke

Tombo Kerinci ................................................................. 253
C. W. Watson

Piagam Serampas: Malay Documents from Highland Jambi ... 272
Annabel Teh Gallop

Settlement Histories of Serampas: Multiple Sources, Conflicting Data, and the Problem of Historical Reconstruction ........ 323
J. David Neidel

Social Structure and Mobility in Historical Perspective: Sungai Tenang in Highland Jambi ................................... 347
Heinzpeter Znoj

Kerinci’s Living Past: Stones, Tales, and Tigers .................. 367
Jet Bakels

Kerinci Traditional Architecture ...................................... 383
Reimar Schefold

The Meaning of Rainforest for the Existence of Suku Anak Dalam in Jambi ......................................................... 402
Reino Handini

Part IV: Southern Sumatra

Mounds, Tombs, and Tales: Archaeology and Oral Tradition in the South Sumatra Highlands ................................ 416
Dominique Guillaud, Hubert Forestier, Truman Simanjuntak

Southeast Sumatra in Protohistoric and Srivijaya Times: Upstream-Downstream Relations and the Settlement of the Pencplain 434
Pierre-Yves Manguin

From Bukit Seguntang to Lahat: Challenges Facing Gumay Origin Ritual Practice in the Highlands of South Sumatra ........ 485
Minako Sakai

Contributors ........................................................................ 501

Index .................................................................................. 504
IS THERE A BATAK HISTORY?

ANTHONY REID

Introduction

The 6-8 million Bataks of northern Sumatra are one of Indonesia's most important and intriguing groups (fig. 5-1). Their ancestors have clearly been on Sumatra for thousands of years. They have attracted a large number of studies of religion and missiology, and a few good ethnological and language studies. Yet they remain a people without history.

It seems a classic case of Eric Wolf's argument, in Europe and the People without History, that the neglect of the history of such stateless people was not just an absence but a distortion (Wolf 1982: 3). Ethnographers and colonial officials of the 19th and 20th centuries created such categories as highlanders, primitives, proto-Malays, and indeed Bataks as ethnic categories, and assumed their unchanging isolation from the currents of world history. But the Bataks, who were forcibly brought into the scholarly world's consciousness at that stage were, to follow Wolf's argument, already wholly transformed by international influences - their "isolation" was itself a historical process.

Ashis Nandy makes the more specific charge that it is the statelessness of pre-modern non-Europeans that has denied them a history. In his view, my profession - modern secular history as practised in the academies - is inextricably linked as a mode of analysis with the modern nation state and its rise. History traces the lineage and legitimacy of modern states, and distorts our understanding of the past by doing so (Nandy 1995).

Highland Sumatra does appear to support his case. Until the 20th century, the great majority of Sumatra's people, and its complex, irrigated-rice-growing, literate societies, were in the highlands. Yet these are never mentioned in the historical record. Virtually the only way in which Sumatra appears in histories of either Indonesia or the wider world before 1500 (except as a visiting-point of travellers like Marco Polo) is through Srivijaya, thought to have ruled a large area from its seat in Palembang between the 7th and the 10th centuries. Concrete evidence on the ground about this state and its people is as scarce as what we know about highland societies in a similar period. Yet because Srivijaya appeared as a state in Chinese and Arab records, it alone is celebrated in the history books.

1 This paper was initially delivered as a Public Lecture in the Museen in Dahlem, Großer Vortragsraum, Berlin, 22 September 2006.
Historiography

The curious absence of Batak history does indeed apply chiefly to the history as written by academics, as Ashis Nandy might have expected. To my knowledge only three professional historians have written dissertations in English on Batak history. All wrote exclusively about the 20th century, and all regrettably remain unpublished in the original English (Castles 1972; van Langenberg 1976; Hirosue 1988). In French there was a unique attempt by Daniel Perret (1985) at a more comprehensive history, albeit of the North Sumatra region rather than Bataks per se. Fortunately church or mission history is better served, especially in German. The publications here include one extremely detailed history of the early Karo mission written by anthropologist Rita Kipp (1990).

The general dearth of histories of any highland people in Indonesia is reflected in the national histories of Indonesia and regional histories of Southeast Asia. The more detailed studies may report the Christianization and incorporation of highlanders into the colonial state at the end of the 19th century, but nothing before that and almost nothing after. One of the recent histories of Indonesia, that of Jean Taylor (2003), has no mention whatever of Bataks.

Bataks themselves have written history, though to a very limited extent in the professional academy. The favourite topic of popular writers was, as in many other regions, the official link between minority ethnicities and the nationalist narrative - a “national hero” sanctioned by the process inaugurated by Sukarno in 1959. Singamangaraja XII (1845-1907) was surprisingly the first Sumatran to make this list, in 1961, after a campaign throughout the 1950s by some of his descendents and affines to make him the pre-eminent Batak hero. He was well-placed as not only the last major resistance leader against the Dutch, hunted down and killed in 1907, but also the scion of the dynasty to approach nearest to sacred king-like status, albeit most respected by the Sumha group of Toba Batak lineages spread around his western-lake redoubt of Bakkara.

The first hagiography was published in 1951 by Adniel Lumban Tobing (1957), who was also the leading figure in a festive reburial of his remains and the erection of a statue in his honour in the Toba Batak heartland, at Tarutung, in 1953. Further writing in this genre was stimulated by the success of this campaign when Singamangaraja XII was declared an Indonesian national hero in 1961, and a huge statue (fig. 5-2) erected in his honour in Medan (marking the Toba Batak’s definitive arrival in the regional capital). Mohammad Said was one of the pioneers to build on Tobing’s slim work by marrying Dutch sources with local legend (Said 1961). Among a plethora of speculative works which followed, the book of Bonar Sidjabat (1982) of the Jakarta Theological Seminary sought to establish Singamangaraja’s credentials in the Indonesian academic world.

The increasing role of Singamangaraja XII in Toba Batak popular self-identification was based largely on this success in elevating him to the official national pantheon, and therefore into the national textbooks read by all Indonesian school-children. For later generations educated in Indonesian national schools, he became the sole Batak historical figure. His lineage, although historically shadowy before the 19th century, could also represent a simulacrum of a state, a key for later Batak intellectuals to try to read the “state” back into their earlier history.

Fig. 5-2: Statue of Si Singamangaraja XII in Medan, inaugurated by President Sukarno in 1961. The Aceh-influenced flag of the dynasty is depicted on the pedestal.
In the 1957 reissue of his original 1951 book, Tobing (1957: 14-19) put a version of this legendary lineage into print, beginning with the miraculous virgin birth of the progenitor of the line. The imaginative engineer Mangaradja Parlindungan took speculation of this kind to new heights in his 1965 book, Tuanku Rao, of which more later. Batara Sangti, a Toba Batak government official (wedana) who had accepted the task in the 1950s of writing an “official” history of Singamangaraja XII, finally produced his book well after Parlindungan’s. In 1977, this was the first book to call itself a “Batak History”, and was hailed by its publisher with the words, “until this time it can be said that there was no book of ‘Batak History’ of a general and complete kind, which was on a level with the histories of the kingdoms that formerly existed in the northern Sumatra region and/or Indonesia” (Batara Sangti 1977: 3). He took the portentous step of providing dates for these shadowy figures, by the simple device of allowing thirty years between the birth dates of each of the twelve. By this means “history” was pushed back to the imagined birth of the first Singamangaraja in 1515 (Batara Sangti 1977: 22).

The most interesting figures in linking Batak sources with international history-writing are two Batak intellectuals to whom we must return. Mangaradja Parlindungan (1965) has puzzled both historians and the Batak identity industry ever since his remarkable book Tuanku Rao was published in 1965. He reconstructed Batak history based on evidence he claimed his father had assembled with the Dutch colonial official and Batak-kemner C. Poortman, reconciling oral and written Batak sources, many of them mysteriously lost to all other researchers, with the data available in Acehnese and Dutch writing (Mangaradja Parlindungan 1965: 424-435 and passim). Secondly, there was the poet Sitor Situmorang, who began to take an interest in Batak history when in a kind of exile in Holland in the 1970s and ’80s. His first writings on Singamangaraja XII were capable of being compared with the tradition of Dutch ethnography, and to ensure the association did not sully his credentials, he never mentioned Parlindungan or Poortman in his work (Sitor Situmorang 1987: 221-233). After his return to Indonesia, however, he developed the idea of “the institution of Singamangaraja as the principle of Toba unity.” He sought to qualify Lance Castles’ reading of “statelessness” (Castles 1979) through the notion of the ritual community or bias, 150 of which were individually sovereign throughout the Toba Batak territory, yet formed a kind of federative unity through the Singamangaraja. He made a bold use of Batak mythology to construct what he called “The socio-political history of an institution from the 13th to 20th centuries.” (Sitor Situmorang 2004: 20).

“Batak” in the Historical Record

Historians are anxious to find voices that speak directly from a vanished past rather than through the medium of multiple generations of memory. Inscriptions and archaeological evidence from within, and the information of travellers from without, are their preferred keys to the proto-historic past. There is no doubt that we are at a terrible disadvantage in this respect with highland peoples such as those in Sumatra, Tomé Pires (1944: 165), our most reliable recorder of all manner of states and societies in 16th century Southeast Asia, merely records “There are many heathen kings in the island of Sumatra and many lords in the hinterland, but, as they are not trading people and known, no mention is made of them.”

As with all shadowy protohistories, the question arises with Batak whether we are on safer ground tracing the history of a place, the domain currently dominated by the six major Batak ethnolinguistic groups of today’s North Sumatra province, or of a people called Batak or identifiable in some other way. And if the latter, what does this concept mean before the period of national self-definition in the 20th century?

In terms of place, physical remains have so far offered us three major urban complexes in the northern Sumatran area prior to the Islamization of coastal ports. All must have been important gateways for the trade of the interior highlands, though on the borders of what is thought to be Batak territory today. Starting with the oldest, they are:

- The Camphor and benzoin port of Barus on the west coast, flourishing from the 8th to 13th centuries, and recently excavated by a French-Indonesian team led by Claude Guillot (1998, 2003).

- The Buddhist temple complexes of Padang Lawas, and particularly the fortified settlement of Si Pamatung, near the confluence of the Pane and Baruman rivers. The ten inscriptions (two of which in Batak script) on these sites, the Chinese ceramics associated with them, and the architectural remains, all confirm occupation between the 10th and early 14th centuries but a peak probably in the 11th-12th centuries. The sites may be associated with the kingdom of Pane mentioned in both a Cola inscription (1025) and the Nagarakertagama of Java (1365), as well as later texts. Although in the extreme south of current Batak territory, its location 200 km up the Barumun River, near an important east-west corridor of trade, suggest an important medium through which Indian and Buddhist ideas reached the Batak (Miksic 1996; Perret et al. 2007; Dupolizar 2007).
conclude that these would have been sites through which Indian (especially), Chinese, Javanese, and other influences entered the Batak lands at this time if not before. Kota Cina is usually associated with the influx of Hindu elements among the Karo, and Barus among the Toba Batak. But Padang Lawas remains mysterious, and the new work there may prove it to be a more important key to a state-forming "path not taken".

The only element of "Batakness" spectacular enough to be noted in the earliest sources is their cannibalism. Foreign sources note its presence in Sumatra long before the appearance of the term "Batak" or any other feature which could be identified with it. Ptolemy was the first, around 100 CE, to record the presence of cannibalism in what he identified as an island cluster of Barusae, presumably Sumatra (Hirosus, infra). Following him a long series of Arab, Indian, and European sources, including Marco Polo, attest to the existence of cannibalism in the island, including on its more accessible north coast. Nicolo da Conti was the first European, in 1430, to use the term Batak (Batech) for this cannibal population in Sumatra.2

The term Batak appears even earlier in Chinese sources, but as a polity or place, not a people. Chau Ju-kua (1226) has an obscure title of insuanae (Taprobana) or Sumatra, as connected with Srivijaya, while the Yuan (Mongol) dynastic chronicle mentions Ma-da next to Samudera (Pasai), both offering tribute to the Imperial court in 1285-1286. Ma-da would be pronounced Ba-ta in Hokkien, the likely language of Chinese trader informants.3

This 13th century Bata appears to have survived to the beginning of the 16th century, the first great watershed in Batak self-definition because of the confrontation with Islam. About 1515, before the rise of Aceh, Pires described a nominally Muslim kingdom in the same area.

The kingdom of Bata is bordered on one side by the kingdom of Pasu and on the other by the kingdom of Aru (Darau). The king of this country is called Raja Tomjano.4 He is a Moonsh knight. He often goes to sea to pillage. He is the son-in-law of the king of Aru. He brought in the ship Frol de la Mar which was wrecked in a storm off the coast of his country, and they say he recovered everything water could not spoil, wherefore they say he is very rich. (Pinto 1989: 145-146)

Pires' most specific geographical information is that this Batak possessed the sources of petroleum in the Tamiang-Perak area, later a precious resource for Aceh. The fact that the king was listed as Muslim and a son-in-law of the Aru king, also in some sense Muslim, indicates that the religious situation was still fluid, the inhabitants of the island recognised themselves by place rather than ethnicity or religion, and that the natural centre for state-like formations for the interior peoples was at their points of connection with maritime trade. But Mendes Pinto did not list this presumably hybrid Karo state as cannibalistic; that honour was reserved for the west coast area above Singkil (Pires 1989: 163).

For Pinto writing of 1539, northern Sumatra had been transformed by the expansion of Aceh along the north coast, swallowing whatever kingdoms were between its Banda Aceh centre and Aru. The militantly Islamic character of this expansionism was vividly described by Pinto, but is also evident in other Portuguese, Turkish, and Acehnese sources on the 16th century confrontation between an Aceh-led commercial coalition and the Portuguese, with whom were associated both non-Muslims and kingdoms like Aru whose Islam had rested lightly on the ruling court (Reid 1993: 11: 143-150; 2004: 69-93; Pinto 1989: 20-49). This confrontation seemed already to have turned the term Batak definitively into a description of a people, a people defined by their resistance to Islam in this militant new form. But it was still a people with a king, "the King of the Bataks", whose capital was at Panajau, now on the west coast, about eight leagues (50 km) up a river Pinto calls Guateamig (Pinto 1989: 20-25). This was presumably one of the west coast rivers to the south of Singkil giving access to the campobor and benzoin land west of Lake Toba. The capital's name Panajau is reminiscent of the kingdom of Pano (Plo) mentioned in the same area by Pires,5 and the Panu discussed above.

Pinto makes his story of the Bataks a tragic one, with a king first refusing the offer of Islam and determining to fight the Acehnese sultan, then making a treaty and marriage alliance with him, which the sultan treacherously broke by attacking and killing his sons. The Batak king then assembled a major alliance of local chiefs to fight the Acehnese, whose Turkish reinforcements however proved too much for him. He then retreated far up the river (Pinto 1989: 20-30).

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2 "in ejus insulae [Taprobana=Sumatra], quam dicit Batech, part. anthropophagi habitant [...]." cited in Yule/Burnell (1979: 74).
3 I owe this point to Geoff Wade.
4 This title may be the same as the Timorrajah ("eastern king") in the title of the king reputedly encountered by Pinto around 1540 (Pinto 1989: 20).
coast, and the Toba Batak on the west, each preserved from the earlier period a certain memory of statehood, often linked through tradition with Aceh. Thus the four Sibayak who had a certain ritual primacy in the Karo area, and the four Raja who held a somewhat stronger position in the Simelungun area, were popularly believed to have been inaugurated during the period of Aceh hegemony over the coast (Joustra 1910: 23; Kipp 1993: 215-217; Rae 1994: 63-64). Parlindungan claims Toba sources from Bakkara chastised the Karo and Simelungun for erecting their own states and thereby falling away from the “Sori Manggadja” dynasty, but it is very doubtful there was ever such a sense of common identity among the different ethnolinguistic groups.

Many Toba Batak traditions also linked a principal of sacred descent with the coastal kingdoms they remembered - Aceh and Barus. The latter was long recognised as a crucial port for Toba Batak, and therefore some ritual tribute was to be expected. Meint Joustra (1910: 25-26), was struck by the surprisingly uniform set of traditions about the Barus link with Bakkara and the Singamangaraja line. I will present the story here in the form of the Barus Hilir chronicle edited by Jane Drakard, which describes the journey of the founder of the Muslim dynasty of Barus Hilir, Sultan Ibrahim, through the Batak territories prior to establishing his kingdom on the coast. First in Silindung, and then at the Singamangaraja’s sacred place of Bakkara, and finally in the Pasaribu territory, the local chiefs pleaded with him to stay and become their king. At Bakkara he urged the Bataks to become Muslim, because then they would be one people (bangto) with him and he could stay as king. The Bataks responded apologetically, “We do not want to enter Islam. Whatever else you order we will obey.” He therefore moved on, but not before fathering a child by a local woman, who became the first Singamangaraja. In each place agreements were sworn to by both sides, establishing the long-term relationship between upland Batak producers on one hand and coastal Malay traders on the other. These included establishing the “four penghulu (headmen)” of Silindung as a supra-village institution linked to the Barus trade (Drakard 1990: 75-80).

Since Barus and other ports on the west coast were themselves frequently under Aceh suzerainty, it is not surprising that Aceh also figured in Batak memory. Its ritual pre-eminence over the Singamangaraja line was acknowledged in various ways in the better-documented 19th century, including the Singamangaraja’s seal and flag, both of which appear modelled on those of the Aceh Sultan. This link, mythologised in the mysterious Batak progenitor-figure Raja Uji who disappeared to Aceh, may go back to the 16th or 17th century links.
For Parlindungan, however, and the Batak manuscripts of the Arsip Bakkara he claims as a source, there was another powerful connection with Aceh in the late 18th century. He claims that these documents reveal a treaty of friendship between the otherwise unknown Singamangaraja IX and Sultan Alauddin Muhammad Syahi, known to have ruled Aceh uneasily from 1781 to 1795. The treaty purportedly agreed that Singkil was Acehnese, the Uti Kanan (Simpang Kanan?) area Batak, and Barus a neutral zone. But the Acehnese cannon which killed havoc among some elephants at Bakkara that Singamangaraja IX developed for pepper cultivation, and Tapanuli rather than the British ones. "I would have sought to lock suppliers and traders into their networks rather than the British ones.

Let me throw in a further fanciful vignette, if only to undermine further what remains the idea of Batak "isolation" during the long 18th century. In 1858 a Frenchman or Eurasian called De Molaë told a Pondicherry newspaper that in the last quarter of the 18th century "his family settled in the most savage part of Sumatra, established magnificent agricultural establishments there, acquired great influence among the natives and succeeded in reforming their customs." The head of the family "had recently been elected chief of the confederation of Bataks, a Malay people whose lands border Dutch possessions and the kingdom of Aceh." While no doubt largely invented, this story is sufficiently consistent with the supernatural inferences drawn about 19th century visitors to the Batak highlands, including Burton and Ward, Neubronner van der Tuuk and Elio Modigliani, that we should not be surprised if such a pattern began earlier.

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6 Lee Kam Hing (1995: 67-75). The British record on this seems unlikely to have been available to Parlindungan, though it may have been to his alleged source, Resident Poortman, who he says was an official in Singkil around 1900 and in retirement made a trip to British archives in 1937.

7 Le Moniteur Universel (Paris) 104, 4 April 1858: 467.
The difficult Batak manuscripts, the *pustaha*. They have so far seemed so difficult and so ahistorical as not to repay sustained effort to master their contents. Yet the claims of Parlindungan/Poortman are so suggestive, those of Sitor Situmorang so ingenious, that somebody ought to follow these tracks systematically, to establish what can be known about the connections with Islam, with Aceh and Barus, and with the east coast; what can be said about the Padri incursion and the social upheavals they brought, and what was the dynamic of Batak society in that century before Christianisation.

The “underside” of history can be accessed through the slaves who found their way to Malacca, Padang, Batavia (modern-day Jakarta), Penang, and Singapore. There is an unfortunate avoidance of this feature by nationalist historians, though the documents are richer on slaves than any other non-elite category. It may well be, for example, that the Sumatran slave who accompanied Magellan around the world, Enrique, was as much a Batak as anybody at that time. Penang counted 509 Batak among its population in 1824 and 561 in 1835, and some did enter into court and other records before being assimilated into Malay or Chinese populations (SSR 113, 1825: 344; Low 1972: 126, 290-291).

A fuller examination of material culture, including the textiles which Sandy Niessen (1985) used to such effect; the systems of trade and exchange which effectively unified the coastal regions and the interior of Sumatra in an efficient four-day market cycle (Sherman 1990: 36-47); and the ritual systems which helped establish the coherence of Batak society. By these and other means our successors may eventually reveal through Batak history how to truly write a history without states. I wish them well.

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1. Magellan and Pigaletta agree that Enrique was a Sumatran, purchased by Magellan in Malacca around 1514. Yet curiously it is Filipinos and Malaysians who have competed to claim him, never Sumatrans to the best of my knowledge.
Is there a Batak History?

Lee Kam Hing

Low, James

Mangaradja Parlindungan

Miksic, John

Milner, Anthony; Crothers, Edmund Edwards; McKinnon, and Tengku Luckman Sinar

Nandy, Ashis

Niessen, Sandra A.

Perret, Daniel

Perret, Daniel; Heddy Surachman; Lucas Koestoro, and Sukawati Susetyo

Pires, Tomé

Rae, Simon

Said, Mohammad
1961 *Singamangaradja XII*. Medan: Waspada.

Sherman, George

Sitor Situmorang


SSR - Straits Settlements Records, Public Record Office

Taylor, Jean

Teuku Iskandar, ed.

Wolf, Eric R.

Yule, Henry and Arthur C. Burnell
Hermann Kulke: Department of History, Kiel University/Germany; Main book: The Devaraja cult (1974); Kings and cults. State formation and legitimation in India and Southeast Asia (1993); The state in India (1995); A history of India (1998).


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