

## CHAPTER

# 8

### THE MAKING OF MEANING IN THE THE NSIBIDI VISUAL METHOD

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#### **Abstract**

This paper focused on the need to give the Nsibidi art Culture of Eastern Nigeria an artistic visual design identity based on their traditional and modern visual communication design approach. There is the need therefore to differentiate between traditional and modern visual communication design experiences. The exploratory design analysis which is used is based on the concepts ideas and materials for the old and new methods of the Nsibidi culture. It has been analyzed and synthesized into a more dynamic indigenous system of visual communication in Nigeria that will enhance the general development of the society. The analyses of signs, symbols, posters and other artworks were carried out based on their artistic, aesthetic and functional design mainly as it concerns the Nsibidi visual method of communication design in modern times. The research attempted to harmonize the traditional and the modern method to develop a new visual communication method based on their culture and technology in recent times. The Nsibidi had a definite operational way of communication. The culture just like their close neighbour could also reduce these signs and symbols into simple codes for confidentiality, security, affection and economic transitions among themselves.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Communities, societies and others worldwide have modes and means of communicating ideas, feelings and messages to each other. The Igbo who employ different means is not an exception. Traditionally, Igbo and other societies in southeastern Nigeria employed different modes of communication in reaching out and doing business with each other.

The Nsibidi method is one of the ways of communication in the eastern part of Nigeria, which is indigenous to the people of southeastern Nigeria. It is also used by neighbouring Ibibio, Efike and Igbo communities in Nigeria. Aesthetically compelling and encoded, Nsibidi does not in anywhere correspond to any one spoken language of the world. It is an ideographic script whose symbolism refers to the abstract concepts actions or things and those used to facilitate communication among the people speaking different languages of that area.

The intra and inter-ethnic nationality of visual communication methods assisted communities in Eastern Nigeria to improve and advance their present level of general development. Visual communication is a study through visual aids and is described as the

conveyance of ideas and information in a form that can be read or looked up. Visual communication in part or whole relies on vision and is primarily presented or expressed with two or three-dimensional images; it includes sign, typography, drawing, graphic design, illustration, colour and electronic references. It also explores the idea that a visual message accompanying text has greater power to inform, educate, or persuade a person or audience.

One of man's valuable tendencies, which are common to all communities and nationalities irrespective of place and time, has as one of its objectives the achievement of specific developmental goals. This success and continuity of such gregariousness and subsequent developmental achievements, in turn, depends largely and often wholly on the methods and levels of communication, for any form of interaction aimed. Thus communication is the inevitable binding force for any form of interactions aimed at development'.

The early artist did not in all cases consciously start what we refer to today as artistic visual communication. Rather, some of them gave meaning to and adapted images and symbols as artistic. They, later on, built their visual abilities and functionalities on and around such interpretations and adaptations. Some of the comprehensive and figurative representation of their experience was pictures simplified into signs. Sketches and designs have been turned into sophisticated pieces. By imagination, meaning has been read into clouds in the sky which are seen as forming objects like human beings, galloping horses and so on. The same can be said of spilling liquids on the flour, many of the shapes and forms can be attached to some meaning. The Jews used specific dressing as a very significant visual communication of virgins (Nelson, 1990. p. 287. Communication must have a source and target. Parson (1978.36) elaborates on the essential term involved in communication. According to him, the person who initiates and sends messages is referred to as the 'transmitter', the subject matter being communicated as the 'message', the route of communication as the 'form of communication', and whosoever the message is directed as the 'receiver' or audience.

All over the world, from the pre-historic to the present time, visual communication has passed through various stages. This has consequently affected human development. In the context of this paper, therefore, there is a need to differentiate between traditional and modern visual communication design. Urdang (1991 pp 276, 511) defines 'tradition' merely as custom, practice or habit. On the other hand, he refers to 'modern' as current, contemporary, present-day or latest. Traditional visual communication in the Nigerian context is considered a type of communication that was devoid of Western influence while the 'modern' is what has been influenced by the Western world.

Communication is a way of passing a message from one person to another. Hornsby (1995 p. 229) says communication is to make something known; exchange information, news or ideas with somebody; to make one's idea or feels clear to others. This information exchangeability and clarity of the same are dependent on the communication technique employed.

### **Innovation in indigenous visual communication**

The innovation of new things, ideas, or ways of doing something is one way of changing and developing the environment and society. Artists (Uli and Nsibidi) have introduced new ways of representing their works in the contemporary era. Innovation and creativity have increasingly come to be seen as Africa's response to their condition or, to put it differently, as the expression

of local agencies in Africa. Communication in any setting is an important aspect of human activity. Most means of human communication are carried out using putting a line around something or by drawing a sign or symbol to name it and further enumerate its characteristics

Nsibidi comprises nearly a thousand symbols that can be drawn in different media as gestures, on the ground, on the skin (as tattoos), on houses, and in art forms, such as masks, and textiles. Though it is enjoyed as an artistic practice by the general public, deeper knowledge of the Nsibidi symbols is restricted to the member of men's association of a certain society in a community, which once controlled trade and maintained the social and political order of the society. Nsibidi is used on wall designs, calabashes, metals, leaves, swords, and tattoos. It is important to state that it is primarily used by the Ekpe leopard secret society, which is mostly found across Cross River among the Ekoi, Efik, Igbo people, and other nearby communities.

The symbols are at least several centuries old: Early forms appeared on excavated pottery as well as what are most likely ceramic stools and headrests from the Calabar region, with a range of dates from 400 to 1400 CE. There are thousands of Nsibidi symbols, of which over 500 have been recorded. They were once taught in a school to children. Many of the signs deal with love affairs; those that deal with warfare and the sacred are kept secret. Nsibidi was divided into a sacred version and public, more decorative versions are used by women.

Traditionally as it concerns the original owner of the tradition that is before the British colonization of the area Nsibidi was divided into a sacred version and a public, more decorative version which could be used by women. The Ikpe from Enyong written in nsibidi as recorded by J. K. Macgregor Nsibidi was used in judgment cases known as 'Ikpe' in some Cross River communities.

In case of any dispute between communities, people or individuals or as the case may be the record is of an Ikpe or judgment case. Artistically the illustration can be demonstrated with the visual below

#### COURT

- (a) The court was normally held under a tree as is the custom,
- (b) The parties in the case,
- (c) The chief who judged it,
- (d) His staff (these are enclosed in a circle),
- (e) Is a man whispering into the ear of another just outside the circle of those concerned,
- (f) Denotes all the members of the party who won the case. Two of them
- (g) Are embracing,
- (h) Is a man who holds a cloth between his finger and thumbs as a sign of contempt? He does not care for the words spoken. The lines round and twisting mean that the case was a difficult one which the people of the town could not judge for themselves. So they sent to the surrounding towns to call the wise men from them and the case was tried by them
- (j) And decided;
- (k) Denotes that the case was one of adultery or No. 20.

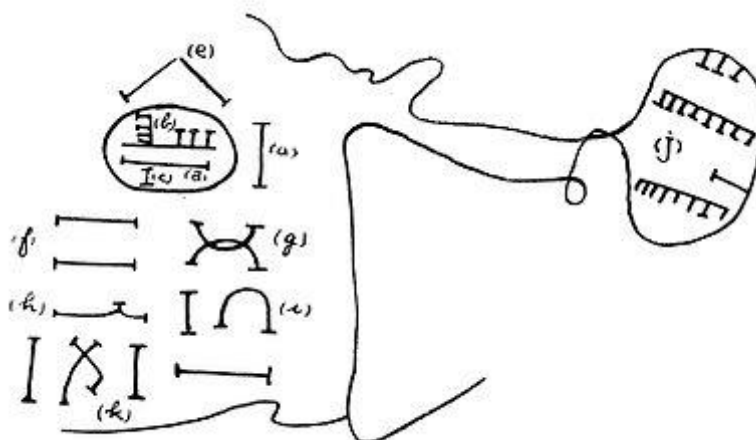


Figure 1: Nsibidi Symbols in Design

Visual communication design indeed is an essential part of our daily lives. Design skills acquired in visual communication are used to persuade and communicate specific information and messages that can inspire thoughts using symbols, signs, words and images informing good design for effective problem-solving through practical application. The use of signs, symbols and motifs in communication is described as the conveyance of ideas and information in a form that can be read or looked upon. It in part or whole relies on vision and is primarily presented or expressed in two or three-dimensional images and texts. The term "visual" presentation in graphics communication is used to refer to the actual presentation of information to the public through a visual medium such as text, images, symbols, and a combination of other graphics elements via any of the following graphic media: posters, billboards, labels, flyers, calendars, package postage stamps and a lot of others. Graphics designers predominantly use this method of visual communication in their professional practice,

Nsibidi was first documented in the Western world by T. D. Maxwell, district commissioner of Calabar, Nigeria. In 1904, he discovered that Nsibidi signs were used as decorative symbols on calabashes and native pianos during the exhibition of native goods. No historical evidence is available that can help date the creation or evolution of Nsibidi as a cultural concept but few writers on Nsibidi insist that it is of considerable age as it possesses a certain amount of conventionality about its sign language. It is understood from the available literature that it evolved from traditional visual communication as a sign and body language. It can be seen as a logographic system of communication that is popular with the southeastern people, particularly the Cross-River region of Nigeria.

Nsibidi is referred to by Macgregor (1909:209) as "the native name for writing, used in the Calabar district of the eastern province of southern Nigeria, more largely up the cross river and the inland". Macgregor then a Presbyterian missionary posted to teach at Hope Waddel Training Institute, Calabar. Kalu (1978:77) describes Nsibidi as an ancient script, that existed before the coming of the Europeans. Kalu (1978:84), Umoetuk (1985:40) and Ubom (1987:75) agreed that

Nsibidi was an ancient pictographic writing used within and around South Eastern State before the coming of the colonial masters. They stated that Nsibidi was not restricted to secret societies but that it was secularized to meet the economic and social needs of the people. Ubom further stated that it was used for the identification of labels, public notices, private warnings, declaration of taboos, amorous messages, reckoning goods and money, keeping records and body decoration. Most Nsibidi symbols are also used for their body adornment as enumerated by Umoetuk (1985:40-49).

Isichei (1983) states that Nsibidi writing forms worked on the same principle as Chinese Writing. He further states that these writing were in the form of tattoos on the human body, paintings or incisions on calabashes, stems, house walls and drawings on the ground. Nsibidi signs or objects serve economic, political, cultural and social functions; it is used within secular and sacred systems in sending public notice, public warning, and recording goods and money as well as for decoration. Nsibidi transmits and conceals various kinds of information using a wide fluid vocabulary of geometric and naturalistic signs placed on objects.

Nsibidi as a symbol is important to visual communication design because it has been described as a fluid system of communication that has hundred of pictographic signs. In the traditional era, it was used for messages, cut or painted on split palm stems, it is a kind of primitive secret writing, chiefly carried out using poke work on calabashes, canoes, stools and so on, but occasionally by marking on the body and face (Talbot 1912:308, 1969:932). This traditional motif known as Nsibidi is generally associated with or originated from the Ekoi people of Southern Nigeria. It is primarily used or employed by the Ekpe Secret Society of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Nsibidi is a means of transmitting or communicating in secret terms the Ekpe symbolism. It is a form of drawing or design used or found on walls, calabashes, metal, leaves, swords and as tattoos. Nsibidi as a visual communication design concept is used for recording decisions, facts, thoughts and communicating messages. The type of messages varies but the most frequent are short messages and letters sent at a distance. These motifs are still in use by contemporary artists in their work and linking it with visual communication.

Visual communication has been in existence from the older generation (the time of our forefathers) through the use of traditional motifs, symbols, and patterns, which are art forms and also part of our cultural heritage. Some of these traditional Nigerian motifs include Uli design of the Igbo culture of Nigeria, the Nsibidi design of Southern Nigeria, and Islamic motifs of Northern Nigeria to mention but a few.

### **The Artist Victor Ekpuk and His Works**

The artist and his works who have engaged in the innovation of re-creating indigenous art forms, Nsibidi and Uli concepts of representation here presented and discussed Victor Ekpuk attended the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, with a BA degree in Fine and Applied Arts (specializing in Painting), during his years in the University, he was an active member of Ona group of Artist. This group encouraged the use of traditional or indigenous motifs such as Uli, Nsibidi and others in creating contemporary artworks. Victor has for long being producing and exhibiting artworks, especially with Uli and Nsibidi motifs.

Victor was born into a culture where nsibidi is an open secret. Nsibidi ceremony is usually performed among members of Ekpe and Ekpo secret societies. During ceremonial rites of passage, some nsibidi signs were painted as decorations on the bodies of maidens. Nsibidi is an ancient form of sacred communication among the male secret societies of the Ibibio, Efik, Ejagham and Igbo (Ohafia) peoples of southeastern Nigeria. It uses mime, speech, and placement of objects and graphic symbols that represent concepts. Being secret codes of communication, their meanings were revealed only to initiates. Some aspects of these signs are secularized and used for public notices and record keeping. The graphic aspect of Nsibidi thus becomes one of Africa's indigenous writing systems.

Victor Ekpuk derives his artistic creative inspiration from different sources (Uli art, Nsibidi and others) are Nigerian indigenous communicative visual ideas. In his renderings mainly on black and white backgrounds as a narrative to his art, employs many mediums from sand to black and colour marker to creatively express both traditional and contemporary human experiences, which are so evident in almost all his works. According to Ekpuk, his limited knowledge of Nsibidi signs today is from a memory of observations and documented anthropological archives. He further stated that what immensely inspired the direction of his work has taken the past two decades as a professional visual artist and his contact with Nsibidi has inspired the essence of an ancient art form to express contemporary experience.

He now resides in the U.S.A Victor's as among the exponent of this new innovation into indigenous traditional art form, began an exploration of Nsibidi traditional visual communication and writing system in Nigeria from which he has developed a style of drawing and graphics means of communication.

Critical looking at his works, forms are reduced to their linear essence, depicting the interplay between art and writing in the form of drawing. His works showcase a wide spectrum of meaning that is deeply rooted not only in African culture but in global contemporary art discourse.

**Some of his works are here presented and discussed**

Plate 1: "Kiss and Tell" shows two figures presented in abstract form, these figures seem to be having fun by kissing each other. According to the artist as interviewed by Egwu 2013 the title came about as a reference to "Don't Ask Don't Tell" which use to be the official position of gays and lesbians in the United States military.

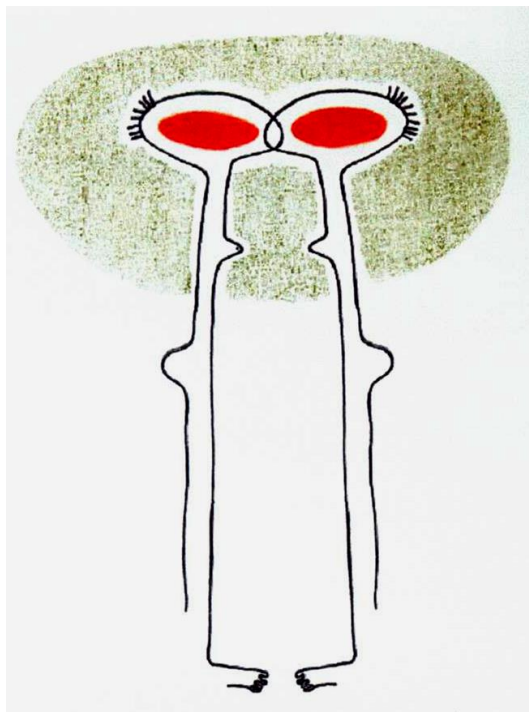


Plate 1: Kiss and Tell. Ekpuk



Plate 2: Night Watch  
Victor Ekpuk

Victor in this “Night Watch” plate 2 animals has half its that of a leopard, and ornaments on it, and with doors and the background of the forming a circle. A pictures treated in around it. The artist different wavelengths

There are red oval shapes seen in the heads of the figures. The background of the work has tiny Nsibidi designs which form an oval shape and the upper parts of the figures are inside the oval-shaped design. Another work titled “Fiestpad Blues” by Victor used bright colours. He used orange, blue, and green in addition to black to harmonies the design. Lines are used to create designs in different ways; an eye can be seen and under it are blue dots. Three figures presented abstractly can also be seen, the one in the middle appears to be the mother and the other two her children, one in her front and the other at her back on a bicycle. According to the artist interviewed by Egwu 2013, the artist noted that the work was inspired by his memory of the Netherlands properly when visited the country. He further stated that the bicycle is very central to the everyday life of the Dutch people.



(54" x 45")

work made use of lines in “to form animals, one of the body with dots around it like another seems to have there are about four houses, two other with none. The work has small dots all around moon can also be seen in the blue with a candle-like object made use of lines and shapes of in his rendering.

Plate 3: Escape Goat. Victor Ekpuk

Plate 3 is titled “Escape Goat”; here symbols are used to form a square with an opening in it that has the picture of two figures carrying an animal probably as suggested by the title of the work. The animal is being carried on a stick with the figures holding each end of the stick. In other

parts of the work, there are figures of animals that seem to be running, and also pictures of what appears to be a hunter chasing or hunting the animal. The title of the work expresses the human condition.

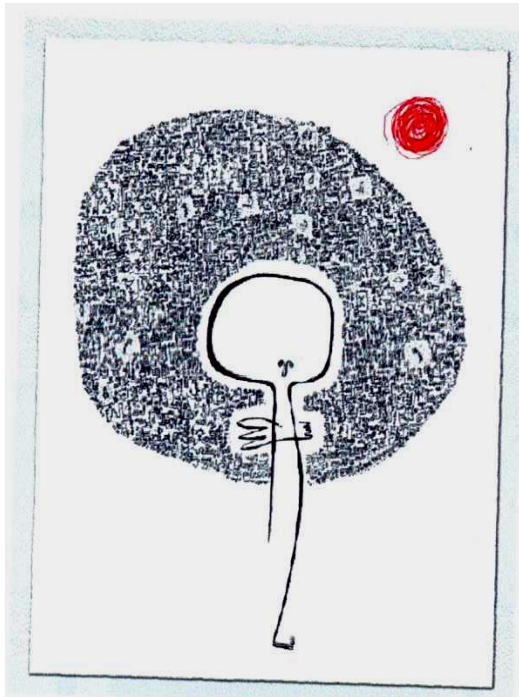


Plate 4 is titled “Child in the Wilderness”, here the artist made use of lines ranging from bold lines to tiny lines, the child is presented abstractly and these tiny lines form a circle around the head, the hands of the child have the look of wings and it has one foot. Also it appears to have very features on its face such as the eyes and nose, it does not seem to have a mouth. There is also a red spiral circle at the top. According to the artist as interviewed by Egwu (2013) the artist was considering a state of loneliness in a world of chaos. The figure in the middle is a stylized form of Akwaba doll from Ghana, he explores the aesthetics of classical African sculpture in this work.

Ekpuk

Plate 5 titled with a foot, like the brain underneath. The figure stranding out down in such This work is here he tries hairstyle of Nigeria.



Plate 4: Child in the Wilderness. Victor

“Uyan Iban” shows an abstract figure and a very large head that has what looks treated in white and red dots, with black It also has an outer circular layer around has tiny streaks of hair, about four on its head; while the other parts went a way that one can say is a female figure. one of his recent renderings or drawings; to explore the female aesthetics in the the Ibibio Culture of South Eastern “Uyan Iban” means Beautiful Maide

Plate 5 Uyan Iban. Victor Ekpuk





Plate 6 is titled “Bird Call”, the artist made use of lines to create different forms, abstract faces, figures, and shapes when looked at closely. The lines and forms depict an aspect of the Igbo and Ibibio Cultures of Nigeria. The bird is done with red colour and blue and white dots on its body. The bird has a very long leg, with its claw. The background of the work has a mixture of white and yellow patches; there are also blue patches that can be seen at closer observation.

Plate 6: Bird Call. Victor Ekpuk.

### **Analysis of Victor Ekpuk’s Works**

The aesthetics philosophy of Nsibidi rendering where that ideas and forms are reduced to their essence, forms the basis of Victor Ekpuk’s works. Sometimes there are specific uses of Nsibidi signs in his compositions, if the subject matter demands it at other times, he uses symbols. There are times when symbols are not used at all. The general idea of his work is not so it could be read literally, grasping the essence of the work is equally important. The artist believes that his styles of artwork have aroused conversation about literacy, writing and other modes of communication in Africa. Victor in his innovative thinking and exploration believes that his works have added to the conversation that challenges the Eurocentric notion of Africa as an illiterate culture

Some of his works are meant to explore the aesthetic pleasure of the composition rather than meaning. “Kiss and Tells” (Plate 1). In this presentation, the artist depicts an experience of two women lovers kissing on the street of The Netherlands. The artist asserts that the title came about as a reference to “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell “It used to be the united official position of guys and lesbians in the United State Military. Plate 2 “Fiestpad blues” was inspired by Victor’s memory of the Netherlands. The bicycle was central to the everyday life of Dutch people. The figure in the centre is a woman and her two children on a bicycle.

Plate 3 titled “Night Watch” expressed a typical nightlife where lines were employed to form animals. A moon is depicted shining and watching over them in a cluster can also see up the pictures treated in blue with candle-like objects around them. In this work, one can see a combination of different techniques and media that indicates an experiment with different materials. The contemporary mood is seen in The Night Watch and it is the relative simplicity of

this particular work that seems modern and I think is influenced by modernist art forms and shapes. It is visible clear that the animal forms in this work “Night Watch” the artist was inspired by terracotta equestrian figurines of the Niger region in Mali. It is important to observe that the artist's works are highly stylized and relatively simplified in terms of forms and functions which make his works wear a contemporary look.

Plate 3 titled “Escape Goat” expresses the situation about the human condition; the pictures depict a statement or show hardship. Plate 4 titled “Child in the Wilderness” the work depicts loneliness in a world full of chaos. The figure represented in the middle of the work is probably a stylized form of Akwaba doll from Ghana, here he tries to explore the aesthetics of classical African sculpture. On closer observation, one can see the amalgam of symbols and can recognize signs that could further explain the representation

“Uyan Iban” plate 5 is one of Victor’s recent drawings where he explores the female aesthetics in Ibibio culture, “Uyan Iban” means Beautiful Maiden, and the focus here is on the hairstyle. Plate 6 titled Bird Call, here is the idea and forms of Nsibidi's aesthetic philosophy in his lyrical presentation of lines and various images within a certain environment.

The finding of this paper indicates that visual communication design is an essential part of our daily lives. Design skills acquired in visual communication are used to persuade and communicate specific information and messages that can inspire thoughts using symbols, signs, words and images informing good design for effective problem-solving through practical application. Graphics designers predominantly use this method of visual communication in their professional practice; Nsibidi transmits and conceals various kinds of information using a wide fluid vocabulary of geometric and naturalistic signs placed on objects.

Nsibidi as a symbol is important to visual communication design because it has been described as a fluid system of communication that has hundreds of pictographic signs. Artist 8n general in recent time has have engaged in the innovation of re-creating indigenous art forms, especially using Nsibidi and Uli concepts of representation in the eastern part of Nigeria

## **Conclusion**

The ideas or ways of doing something new are one way of changing and developing our environment. Uli and Nsibidi artists have introduced new ways of representing their works in the contemporary era. Africans have embraced creativity and innovation as a way forward towards the expression of our artistic ingenuity to the whole world. Creativity and spontaneity may succeed in limiting uncertainty leading to more stable living conditions in Africans. Changes brought by creativity and spontaneity can be subsumed under the more general framework of a quest for order which can be assumed to lie at the heart of any kind of socialization. The symbols, signs and motifs used by Nsibidi and Uli artists are a form of visual presentation and communication which indeed form part of our daily living. In the traditional setting these signs, symbols and motifs were used by the past generations to communicate messages, ideas and information in a form that can be read or looked upon for aesthetics and other purposes. The term "visual" presentation in graphics communication is used to refer to the actual presentation of information to the public through a visual medium such as text, images, symbols, and a combination of other graphics elements via a particular media of presentation.

A lot of modern Nigerian artists have been using these indigenous images in this contemporary period for aesthetics, function and other purposes. Among these artists are Uche Okeke, Aniakor, Obiora Ude Uchukwu, El Anatsui, Tayo Adenaike, Godwin O. Uka, Kyris Ikuemessi, Chijioke Onoura, Ekene to mention a few and Victor Ekuk whose works have been used for this analysis. Victor's technical proficiency in drawing, design, composition and surface manipulation are basic tools that convey his visual imagery that captures and sustain the attention of viewers. This paper has tried to analyse and expose indigenous symbols, images, signs and their role in visual communication using victors works as case study.

### **Pointing the way forward**

More similar research papers are encouraged thereby.

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