

ESSENCISM AS PART OF CONVERSATIONALISM

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Abstract

There has been a great waste of intellectual energy exerted in the discovery of African philosophy. This can be seen in the various efforts made to define African philosophy, and to answer the questions - What is African philosophy? What is the method of African philosophy? It becomes more complex and confusing given the several and diverse problems associated with the documentation, history, language, logic and critical questions that have to do with African traditional tradition. All these intellectual exercises tend to suggest that African Philosophy was lost or never existed before now. These, perhaps, also suggest the alleged inferiority of African Philosophy to that of the western tradition. In this paper therefore, effort will be made to assert that African Philosophy is as superior and systematic as any other philosophy, either in the West or Asia. We will also challenge the uncharitable position that the method of African philosophy is different from that of the West and Asia among others. We will posit that the method of philosophy is the same globally, and it has to do with dialogues through the exchange of ideas in the form of conversation that has been tagged and categorized as conversationalism. At the end, we will show and conclude that essencism is a part of this universal conversational method of philosophy, which bears African, Asian and Western ideas. This will be provided a historical pathway to establish and validate our logic of discourse.

Keywords: Africa, Conversationalism, Essencism, Method, Philosophy.

Introduction

African philosophy has been smeared with so many controversies that hinged on certain interrelated issues that anchored on the nature and direction of African philosophy. These controversies are traceable to the 1960s and '70s when some of the then emerging African philosophers dared to oppose the view that traditional African beliefs and world-views as established before the emergence of colonialism within the African cultural heritage can be rightly classified as authentic African philosophy. These emerging African philosophers then, which include Peter Bodunrin, Paulin Hountondji, Odera Oruka and Kwasi Wiredu, posited that African philosophy must necessarily be critical rather than being a descriptive account of traditional African beliefs and cultural styles. This discourse created an intellectual gulf among African philosophers as can be seen between those who shared the view that African philosophy's major task must be aimed at the discovery and documentation of indigenous African beliefs, thought systems and cultures, and those that advanced the idea that African philosophy must in character be reflective and critical in nature while focusing on the diverse dimensions of human experience generally instead of its limitation to only African experience.

These two philosophical poles erected within the then African embryonic philosophical enterprise greatly diminished the intellectual fertility needed to have grown African philosophy to a beautiful and flourishing farmland of cherished tradition and nourishing value system. This becomes more agonizing and confusing as African philosophers have been holding on to these two philosophical poles while peeping into the created gulf to see if they may discover what was lost in it when in actual fact there was nothing lost. The intellectual gulf was a manifestation of efforts by the then emerging African philosophers to apply their newly acquired European philosophical knowledge (orientation) to African situations. These efforts

created confusions in the minds of the then emerging African philosophers who were African thinkers by their skins (race), but clearly Europeans by their trainings (minds).

Indeed, this introduced unscholarly attitude into the emerging field of philosophy in Africa. This arrogance was pioneered by the earlier listed emerging African philosophers, who were very harsh in their criticisms of the patriotic African philosophers among them that made conscious effort to apply their new ideas within the context of African experience to provide a universality of philosophical discourse. This can be seen in the words of Peter Bodunrin when the western wool fell off his eyes. He said in repentance:

...This is why I now think that we were rather harsh in our criticism of those patriotic scholars who were in search of the indigenous equivalents of western thinkers. But if we see philosophical concepts with which to understand human experience, then there is absolutely no reason why one cannot apply the concepts discovered in one culture to the study of another. One has to start somewhere. One cannot assume a priori that are not applicable without trial (10).

It can be gleaned from the above that the western orientations of the early African philosophers could not naturally yield African beliefs, cultures and systems that they were trained to see as inferior and unphilosophical. So, the mis-education of the earlier African philosophers posed serious challenges to the development of African philosophy. These are manifest in the numerous problems that plague and hinder the actual development of African philosophy. These problems include the definition of African philosophy, methodological issues in the history of African philosophy, the language issue, African self-definition, among others.

In this paper therefore, effort will be made to show that all the problems that hinder the development of African philosophy are self-inflicted by African philosophers themselves. It will be argued that the African philosophers abandoned the actual task of philosophizing for the benefits of Africa to pursue non-existing problems which are irrelevant to its development. It is the position of the paper that philosophy is one universal discipline that can be applied to various cultures and aspects of human experience. We contend that philosophy has always been a dialogue right from the beginning as can be seen in conversationalism. The various ideas espoused by philosophers have been in line with this universal method of conversationalism as can be seen in Essencism.

Problems of African Philosophy

African philosophy is plagued by several problems that are self-inflicted. These problems seriously divert the intellectual rigour and energy of Africans from the core issues of philosophy. This has in diverse ways hindered the development of African philosophy. Indeed, African philosophers have erroneously pursued the shadow of philosophy instead of philosophizing in the strict and technical sense of the word. The foundation for this diversion was through the process of colonialism that Africa encountered around the second half of the 19th century. Through colonialism, the Europeans exerted so much influence on the African continent and promoted “political subjugation and economic exploitation”. This is because colonialism was an ideology developed to legitimize the denigration of “African beliefs, values, cultural practices and institutions”. The fundamental idea of this was because “Africans were primitive, superstitious, uncivilized” and so are inferior. Colonialism was therefore, projected as a mission to civilize the continent of Africa (Oladipo, 10). The European

ethnocentrism portrayed above has a solid philosophical base as can be seen in the views and works of such European Philosophers like Immanuel Kant, Fredrick Hegel, and Karl Marx who have in various ways provided justification for the “equation of civilization and reason with Europe. These philosophers also expressed strong views that tend to denigrate and “degrade the African personality and culture” (Hallen, 215). So, in clear terms, colonialism was articulated and presented as a basis and standard in which all “other cultures and forms of identity” could be measured (10).

From the above analysis, it could be argued that there was a deliberate colonial policy to create confusion in the minds of Africans about what is African and what is European. This affects the entire facets of the African life particularly education and philosophy. As a result, Africans attempt to react to the denigration of African people, and this has made the discourse on the nature of African philosophy possible. This effectively pulled the early African philosophers away from actually doing philosophy or philosophising, but rather dwelled on such trivial issues like the definition of African philosophy, the methodological issue in the history of African philosophy, the language question in African philosophy, African self-definition, among others. At this juncture, it is germane to look at these issues or problems briefly with an effort to see how they have affected the developments of African philosophy.

Definition of African Philosophy

The debate on what is African philosophy is traceable to the post World War II era of certain “western-trained African intellectuals” that accepted the responsibility to establish and lay the foundation for the development of numerous intellectual disciplines in Africa. Inclusive in this list were some emerging African philosophers that rejected in its entirety the “traditional African ideas on man, society and nature”, which they viewed as faulty thinking because it was based on oral tradition. They instead opined that traditional African thought should be characterized by criticism, conceptualization and reconstructivism. However, this view was strongly opposed by the scholars that accepted “traditional culture” as the basic “foundation for an authentic philosophy” (Oladipo: 11-12). It is this disagreement that split African philosophers along certain lines of thoughts that have been termed traditionalist, modernist and reconstructionist views. The traditionalist view, which is also regarded as ethnophilosophy defines African philosophy as the general or collective world-view of Africans as it relates to man, nature and society. This definition admits proverbs, folktales, myths, the oral traditions of the African people as can be seen or discovered in their socio-cultural practices. So, for us to have an authentic African philosophy, there must be investigation into these, which has to be in record and in a way analysed. Following this therefore, African philosophy is not what is developed through analytic and rigorous contemporary activities by university-trained philosophers, but will instead be something that will be discovered and disseminated by these philosophers (12). This definition of African philosophy is aptly captured by John S. Mbiti when he says African philosophy:

...refers to the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African think, act or speak in different situations of life. The religions, proverbs, oral traditions, and ethics and morals of the society concerned (2).

This suggests that there are various ways we can understand African philosophy, which include religion, anthropology or ethnography that the scholars of Africa produce. This lays credence to the ethnocentric view of the western scholars that Africans were not capable of engaging on any reflective and critical exercise or activity. This traditionalist conception of

African philosophy, according to Oladipo, “fore-close the possibility of critical engagement that would allow for the emergence of a new synthesis, which would be relevant to contemporary African life” (14). It is largely due to this drawback of the traditionalist view point that the modernists emerged. This group of philosophers that include Peter Bodunrin, Odera Oruka, Paulin Hountondji, Anthony Appiah, and Kwasi Wiredu among others argued that African philosophy must necessarily contain certain elements that are “critical, conceptual and reconstructive” (14-15). This then creates a tussle between what has been termed folk philosophy and critical philosophy. The first is characterized by it being communal, unwritten, unsystematic, uncritical, and generally transmitted through the process of socialization. The second on the other hand, is an “intellectual inquiry which is ratiocinative, critical and individualistic” that adopts such tools of modern logic and conceptual methods (Oadipo, 15; Wiredu, 14).

Some scholars have made efforts at a synthesis of the two views analysed above. This synthetic approach further widens the African philosophical gulf for more confusion that will yield no fruits for the African philosophical nourishment. To us therefore, African philosophy demands no definition. This is because philosophy as a discipline is anchored on speculation, analysis, critique, reflection, evaluation and logic. These are the elements that define and constitute what can classify an activity to be philosophical or not. It is this universal characteristics that should define western, Asian, Islamic, Christian or African philosophy depending on where these are applied.

Methodological Issues in the History of African Philosophy

There exists a controversy that clouds the issue of the “corpus of work that can be rightly” referred to as African philosophy which concretely generates the problem of “methodology and the history of African philosophy” (Ozumba, 22). This methodological question has been the sword of debacle and the dark cloud that prevents the visibility of what can be termed “African philosophy”. This has actually occupied the minds of African philosophers in this century, and has in several ways pulled African philosophers away from being active in the art and science of philosophizing in the real sense. This drift is aptly captured by Ozumba when he writes:

Today like wounded lions, an appreciable number of philosophers of African origin have demonstrated a new zest which has been manifested in the outburst for the show of not only patriotism but a display of the intellectual excellence that characterizes the scholarship that obtains in African universities, especially in the faculty of philosophy. In recent time we have witnessed plethora of articles and books that could rightly be said to fall into the area of African philosophy. Is it that Africans have only of late realized that the unwritten nature of African world-view is causing the existence of lacuna in chain of world philosophy? Africans must have realized the need to show as other continents have done that she has her own system of thought and perception about life (22).

This is actually a misdirection of vital intellectual energies and scholarly excellence. What is today described as “Western philosophy” is the product of individual western philosophers that apply their rigorous inquisitive, reflective and critical minds nurtured by philosophical training in the interrogation and investigation of their western environment and cultures. These western philosophers were not in contention to discover any methodology for their thoughts and ideas. So, the history of western philosophy simply refers to the history of

the individual philosophers whose rigorous, reflective and critical thoughts constitute this particular western framework. What we are simply saying here is that western philosophy is just the philosophical activities or interrogations of Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, Fredrick Hegel, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North-Whitehead, Wittgenstein, John Rawls, Richard Rorty, etc. (Oladipo, 22). However, we do not have the historical records of the individual African philosophers, which to a large extent could be attributed to lack of documented records if we are to follow the arguments of Onyewuenyi in his book *The African Origin of Greek Philosophy: An Exercise in Afrocentricism*. Rather, what we have in Africa is a catalogue of unidentifiable “collective communal framework”. This in away has negatively affected the historical documentation of African philosophical enterprise. The Africans and the colonial foundation of the educational system could share in this faulty approach. African philosophers have been busy trying to look for a methodology of African philosophy which has been categorized into several confusing terms.

Our position here is that philosophy has a universal methodology which is reflective, speculative, critical and analytic. So, every thought of all Africans must contain these elements for such to be termed philosophical. This is how the western world developed their philosophy. The west never quarrels over the methodology of its philosophy. They were all involved in the discourses, dialogues and conversations that their various thoughts and ideas generate or throw up.

The Language Question in African Philosophy

Colonialism introduced the problem of language into African philosophy. Again, the response of emerging African philosophers to the denigration and attack of African culture and people needed to be responded to in the language the Europeans will understand and these European languages include English, French and Portuguese. So, the very first way African philosophy was eclipsed by colonialism was through the killing of the African languages. Through colonialism, Europeans created philosophical confusion in Africa through the taking away of African languages, African religions and African cultures. This triad constitutes the philosophical source of any group of people or continent. It is upon this triad that a systematic philosophical investigation can be successfully launched or carried out.

Clearly therefore, the English, French or Portuguese language(s) we have in Africa as a means of dialogue and conversation would have created certain fundamental barriers that have influenced or affected the African ontological, epistemological and aesthetic authenticity. This is because specific languages encapsulate the distinctive pattern of experience, and definition of a particular group.

The African metaphysics could not be adequately captured or appraised critically because of the problem of language. This was because, colonialism also led to a serious mental and intellectual assault and subjugation of the Africans. This was achieved effortlessly because the Africans were comprehensively re-educated and miseducated in the ways of the western paradigm that has no regard for the place and dignity of the Africans. This intellectual arrogance of the west can be seen in the words of Hegel as quoted by Soyinka when he argues that the African had gotten to the level he (Hegel) has:

...attained that realization of any substantial objective existence as for example, God or Law in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realized his own being...this distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his

essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained: so that the knowledge of absolute being, another and a higher than his individual self is entirely wanting (14).

This shows a high dose of racism as can be found in Western scholarship. These overdose of arrogance can be found in western archive as can be seen in Onyewuenyi's book earlier mentioned here. Indeed, Africans need to dislodge this intellectual racism so as to regain their self-worth, and dynamic intellectual fortress. The logic here is that African philosophers need to abandon these pseudo-quasi intellectual endeavours that aimed at outlining the basic qualities of African philosophy, but should rather confront "hegemonic oppression" that was theorized and pragmatically utilized to dethrone African intellectual kingship and thereby deny Africans their rightful place in the global sphere. It is in realization of this that we challenge all African intellectuals and scholars to unite in decolonizing the continent in all fronts. This may not be an easy task especially within the context of enforced neo-colonization and imperialism that is colored and dressed in the fashion of liberalization and globalization.

African Self-Definition in the 21st Century

Through the imperial instrument of colonialism, Africans were structurally excluded from the global route map of development, which include the physical and spiritual aspects. The dark eclipse on the continent of Africa the blurred the language, religion and culture of Africa completely destroyed all that Africa stands for and represent in the sphere of intellectualism, education, economy, politics, science, technology, value and even philosophy. This greatly decimated the continent and created confusion in the minds of Africans who were educated and colonized by the Europeans. Embedded in this new education was a tacit, systematic and aggressive mis-education that denigrates the African people and projects them as savages, primitive, lacking in logic, values and incapable of engaging in the rigorous reflective activities of philosophy.

This kind of education, coupled with colonialism did collateral damage to the self-confidence of the emerging African intellectuals, scholars and philosophy. It is this scenario that generated the problem of self-definition in Africa. To correct this ethnocentric and racial falsehood, the emerging African philosophers made patriotic efforts. This in a way derailed these African philosophers and in a way prevented them from actively engaging in philosophizing in a manner that will promote the development of African philosophy. This struggle by Africans is graphically presented by Oladipo thus:

...the issue of self-definition in Africa, that issue of how best we can achieve freedom and development without compromising our identity. This issue has its provenance in colonial and post-colonial attempts by African nationalist scholars, writers, and philosophers to defend African culture against its underestimation by some European scholars. It is one issue which defines "the struggle for identity in Africa by means of the definition of reason, its nature, and its functions". Two questions are involved in this issue: the question of how best to respond to the colonial denigration or underestimation of African cultures, and traditions, and the question which is still very relevant of how best to achieve development in Africa without compromising our identity (59).

This reveals the patriotism behind the quest for self-definition in African philosophy. This on its first value appears very logical and justifiable, but this logic could be invalidated when we raise the fundamental question; how has this approach at self-definition helped in the development of Africa and African philosophy? The necessity of this question can be attributed to the fact that, even the so called Europe or Western world was at a point colonized and treated like the Africans too. So, the next question becomes; did the Europeans approach their development and the growth of their philosophy through focusing on “self-definition” to the detriment of their self-awareness and expansion of their individual philosophical thoughts? A sincere response to this vital question will show that they never looked back to their colonial past or the views of others about them. The western scholars, intellectuals and philosophers ignored their past. They tasked themselves to carve a niche for themselves and their continent. This manifests in the vast ideas that are attributed to western philosophers. It is therefore, the critical and reflective engagement of themselves in the form of dialogues in analysing and evaluating their intellectual works that brought them to where they are in the global arena. So, what the western philosophers did right was to involve and engage themselves in constructive and critical discourse of their ideas. It is this constructive dialogue or conversation that characterizes western philosophy. This also, is what made western philosophy to flourish beyond its shores.

The mistake of African philosophers is their entanglement in efforts to redo, rewrite, redefine, remake and restructure the continent of Africa to eradicate the western sign-posts and structures that has hindered the development of African philosophy. Indeed, this has been one of my discouragements to engage in what some scholars wrongly tag “African philosophy” in our universities. The point must be made that there exists a great deal of intellectual and philosophical vitality in African universities, but the focus cannot constructively erect a philosophical edifice or architecture that will attract global attention. African philosophers should not only focus on responding to western negative ideas about Africa. How many western philosophers or scholars have reacted or responded to Kwasi Wiredu, Innocent Onyewuenyi, Odera Oruka, Bodunrin, among others?

However, the western philosophers are interested in African ideas and thoughts (philosophy) that have universal applicability. It is only such philosophy with universal appeal that will inspire western philosophical discourse. It is only when we put forward philosophies or ideas like “Integrative Humanism”, “Complimentary Reflection”, “Harmonious Monism” and “Essencism” that we can provoke and invite the western philosophers to engage us in a conversation which is the hallmark of philosophy. The 21st century philosophy world is not keen in retrogressive ideas of ethnic and racial ideas that tend to split the world and stoke the flame of racial discrimination and sentiment. The contemporary era is characterized by analysis, which is conversational.

Essencism and Conversationalism

There is a great confusion in our continent concerning the issue of African philosophy with regards to its methods and all other invoked problems deliberately inspired by some western scholars and colonialists. These issues have indeed derailed and removed most philosophers from the continent of Africa from philosophizing for the benefit and development of Africa. The concentration has been on the distractions set before them, when some western scholars, historians, and anthropologists assert that Africa has no history, no philosophy and that Africans do not even have the mental capacity to engage or be involved in philosophy. The tacit agreement to deny Africa of contributing to world development was an ingenious tactics and idea to stall and prevent Africa from further development to enable the west to catch up

with Africa. Credence to this assertion are elaborately outlined and discussed by Innocent C. Onyewuenyi. He writes:

On the origin of the doctrine of immortality of the soul which history books attribute to Aristotle, and other Greek philosophers, the Greek historian Herodotus states that the Egyptians were the inventors of the doctrine. They held that when the body dies, the soul enters another person or animal that is being born at the time. The cycle is completed in three thousand years, after which the soul is thoroughly purified. This doctrine was appropriated by the Greeks at different times without acknowledgement to its Egyptian origin... (47).

This shows that Africa was the seat and centre of wisdom from which the historical root of philosophy can be traced. This historical fact is further confirmed in the words of Aristotle, when he states:

When all such inventions (inventions related to the necessities of life and art) were already established the sciences which do not aim at giving (physical) pleasure or at the necessities of life were discovered, and first in the places where men began to have leisure. That is why the mathematical arts (science or precise knowledge or philosophy) were founded in Egypt", for there the priestly caste was allowed to be at leisure (14).

The Egyptian origin of philosophy is enormously corroborated by several historical documents, which sharply contradicts the false universal claim of Thales as the father of philosophy. Historical evidences have revealed that Egypt was the cradle of civilization, while the Egyptian Imhotep was the first physician of note and not Hippocrates as canvassed by the west. All these facts tend to show that Africa was better advanced intellectually before the west. So, to hold the Africans back, the west has to reinvent the wheel through colonialism, religion and education. It is the totality of these that has led to the wrong engagement of the African minds. The focus therefore to define African philosophy and its method are exercises in futility. This ought not to be the case. Philosophy is a universal discipline that all humans are consciously or unconsciously involved in. It is what we acquire on a daily basis without knowing it. It is a product of our interactions in the form of exchanges of ideas with one another through dialogues or conversations. These merely become cultural or continental when majority of the people of a given place "catch" the same beliefs and values. William Lawhead captures this more graphically, when he states:

The fact that a philosopher's idea can influence without our knowing it raises an important issue. We acquire most of our beliefs, concepts, values, and attitudes unconsciously. In other words, we "catch" our beliefs and values the way we catch cold. When you wake up coughing with stuffy head and congestion, you know you have a cold. However you usually do not know when or how you caught cold (unless, of course, a very close friend had it the week before). What happened is that the cold virus was floating around your environment and you simply breathed it in and now it is part of your internal system. Similarly, ideas and values are

floating around your culture. You simply absorb them without thinking about them, but now they are your beliefs and your values... (xxiv)

The implication of this is that philosophy floats around us without us knowing it. We only get this philosophy through interactions, which usually happen through communication or dialogue. It becomes African philosophy when such dialogues or conversations are taking place in Africa or among Africans. It becomes western when this happens in the western world. Philosophy right from time has been conversational in terms of method, and this is universal. However, Africans, tend to abandon this universal method of philosophy in search of the African method of doing philosophy. The universal method of philosophy is aptly captured by Lawhead when says:

...make clear the continuity of the centuries – long philosophical conversation. A course in the history of philosophy should not be like a display of different philosophical exhibits in glass cases. The guiding image is philosophy as a big party where new conversations are continually starting up, while the themes of previous conversations are picked up and carried in different directions as new participants join the dialogue (xxviii - xxix).

This is the missing-link of African philosophy. African philosophers have not been involved in this universal conversation. What must be done is for all African philosophers to engage one another in this philosophical dialogue. This can be achieved when African philosophers begin to interrogate and engage each other's philosophical ideas and contributions. This will assist to broaden the scope of our conversations and deepen our understanding of our conversations. This way, the authentic history of African philosophy will emerge since there will be vast literature to aid the expansion of the conversation. This is what the western world did with their individual philosophers starting with Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant etc. It is the conversation of the individual western philosophers that provides the characters of the various historical epochs in western philosophy. In Africa, we are now within the era of Complementary Reflection, Harmonious Monism, Integrative Humanism and Essencism. These philosophical conversations tend to offer Africa a particular character of discourse. What African philosophers should do is to engage in these conversations so as to widen the scope of the conversation.

Essencism as a philosophical idea is a coinage that has its etymology from the word "essence", which is what makes a thing what it is. It is an idea that seeks to establish the essence of man. This philosophy or idea sees man as being dual in nature, which is the physical and spiritual. It advocates that these aspects of man must be developed through the educative process to create a balanced personality. This idea has been applied to technology, education, environment, society, politics, bioethics, development, corruption, leadership, etc. Indeed, so much has been discussed and said about essencism as a way for global peace. It has been severally applied to various aspects of the socio-political life of Nigeria, Africa and the world. It is a philosophical conversation that transcends the African continent. Essencism indeed is part of conversationalism that will refocus the direction of African philosophical conversations.

Conclusion

It is a fact that African philosophers have done so much in the areas of articulating African philosophy. These efforts to our minds have not really promoted African philosophy

to the level it ought to be. The reason for this is because our colleagues merely have been describing what obtains in various African societies. This approach has been very subjective and limits the development of African philosophy to meeting global standard of conversationalism. This is to say that African philosophers have not been able to identify the universal method of philosophy. So, much time and energy has been wasted in fruitless exercise in efforts to define and proffer solutions to the various problems that the African philosophers created in their minds.

Philosophy as a discipline has a universal method, which has been established as conversationalism. It is this method that we urge African philosophers to adopt as this is the only way to develop the enterprise of philosophy within the continent of Africa. No continent owns this discipline (philosophy), because it is a discipline that naturally exists wherever there are human beings. Essencism is a product of an African mind, which like existentialism, essentialism, idealism, pragmatism, naturalism, rationalism, empiricism etc. continues the philosophical conversation towards providing solution to our developmental needs and problems. It is a philosophical conversation that is interdisciplinary and very engaging, which can be applied to every aspect of human developmental needs. It is an African philosophical contribution that satisfies the universal model of conversationalism.

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