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BETWEEN FORGETFULNESS AND MEMORY: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE IDENTITY OF THE XOCÓ PEOPLE, BRAZIL, THROUGH ORALITY

ENTRE O ESQUECIMENTO E A MEMÓRIA: A RECONSTRUÇÃO
DA IDENTIDADE DO POVO XOCÓ, SERGIPE,
ATRAVÉS DA ORALIDADE

ENTRE EL OLVIDO Y LA MEMORIA: LA RECONSTRUCCIÓN
DE LA IDENTIDAD DEL PUEBLO XOCÓ, SERGIPE,
A TRAVÉS DE LA ORALIDADE

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RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a reconstrução da identidade indígena do povo Xocó por meio da oralidade. Ele parte da seguinte hipótese: as memórias orais da luta pelo território contribuem para a reconstrução da identidade coletiva. Para testar essa hipótese, na fase inicial é realizada uma revisão da literatura sobre identidade indígena e o contexto histórico do povo Xocó na luta pelo território, necessária para a segunda parte do estudo, que analisa as narrativas de seis entrevistados Xocó em pesquisa de campo realizada na comunidade. Por meio da transcrição das memórias, são desenvolvidas três categorias de análise utilizando o método de análise de conteúdo, o que permite concluir que as memórias da luta pela terra preservam a história da escravidão e a supressão dos traços indígenas, enquanto a recuperação territorial restaura a identidade do povo Xocó. Por fim, a transmissão oral entre gerações revitaliza a cultura Xocó, moldando seu modo de vida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Identidade indígena. Memórias. Oralidade. Território. Xocó.

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the reconstruction of the indigenous identity of the Xocó people through orality. It starts from the following hypothesis: the oral memories of the struggle for territory contribute to the collective identity reconstruction. To test this hypothesis, a literature review on indigenous identity and the historical context of Xocó people in

the struggle for territory is conducted in the initial phase, which is necessary for the second part of the study, that analyzes narratives from six Xocó interviewees in field research conducted within the community. By transcribing the memories, three categories of analysis are developed using content analysis methodology, which allows to conclude that the memories of the land struggle preserve the history of slavery and the suppression of indigenous traits, while territorial reclamation restores the Xocó people's identity. Finally, oral transmission between generations revitalizes Xocó culture, shaping their way of life.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous identity. Memories. Orality. Territory. Xocó.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la reconstrucción de la identidad indígena del pueblo Xocó a través de la oralidad. Parte de la siguiente hipótesis: las memorias orales de la lucha por el territorio contribuyen a la reconstrucción de la identidad colectiva. Para probar esta hipótesis, se realiza una revisión de literatura sobre la identidad indígena y el contexto histórico del pueblo Xocó en la lucha por el territorio en la fase inicial, lo cual es necesario para la segunda parte del estudio, que analiza las narrativas de seis entrevistados Xocó en una investigación de campo realizada dentro de la comunidad. Mediante la transcripción de las memorias, se desarrollan tres categorías de análisis utilizando la metodología de análisis de contenido, lo que permite concluir que las memorias de la lucha por la tierra preservan la historia de la esclavitud y la supresión de rasgos indígenas, mientras que la recuperación territorial restaura la identidad del pueblo Xocó. Finalmente, la transmisión oral entre generaciones revitaliza la cultura Xocó, moldeando su forma de vida.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Identidad indígena. Memorias. Oralidad. Territorio. Xocó.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Xocó people, the only remaining indigenous ethnic group in Sergipe, Brazilian state, currently live on the São Pedro Island, in the municipality of Porto da Folha, in the countryside of the state of Sergipe. According to the last census of the Information System for Integral Indigenous Health Care (SIASI) conducted in 2014, the Xocó population numbers approximately 340 people.

The history of the Xocó is marked by “long processes of comings and goings within their territory” (Lima, 2022), due to the expropriation by the farmers of the region, resulting in silencing and denial of identity as a way to survive the context of slavery and violence. The retaking, an event that marks the reconquest of the territory by the Xocó people in mid-1979, coincides with the reconnection of these people with their culture, and it is possible to establish a link between territory and identity reconstruction. The Toré dance, the sacred ritual of the Ouricuri, the songs, the body paintings, practices that were previously muted, are put back on the path of returning to their origins, continuing “the process of construction of a way of life, the recovery or adoption of cultural traits to display the difference insistently demanded and revived as significant elements of being Indians” (Dantas, 1997, p. 93).

It is in this context that the importance of orality as a keeper of the traditions of indigenous peoples is found, threatened by the erasure of their identity as a justification for the expulsion from the territory and enslavement of the Xocó people in the farms of the agrarian elite. The transmission of memories is the guiding thread of the present research, embodied in interviews with members of the Xocó community, during a technical visit to the village, so that it would be possible, based on memory, to record the course of the retaking of themselves as an indigenous people.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the reconstruction of the indigenous identity of the Xocó people based on the basis of orality. It is based on the following hypothesis: the memories of the struggle for the retaking of the territory, transmitted orally by the Xocó people, have allowed the reconstruction of the collective identity of this ethnic group.

The article is structured as follows: in the first part, a theoretical review is developed on the elements of configuration of the indigenous identity and the points of contact with the history of the Xocó people, from the expulsion to the retaking of the territory; then, based on the field research undertaken in the Xocó territory, with the application of semi-structured interviews, the rescue of the indigenous identity and the cultural traits that mark this group and that, from the oral transmission, are perpetuated and reconstruct the Xocó ethnic identity is analyzed.

For the collection of interviews, the method to be used favours the execution of forms with people who participated in, or witnessed, events, conjunctures, worldviews, as a way of approaching the object of study (Alberti, 1989), suitable in historical, anthropological and sociological research.

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2 THE TERRITORY AND INDIGENOUS IDENTITY IN DISPUTE: THE XOCÓ CASE

Indigenous identities have been defined according to different criteria, be it racial, legal, cultural or ethnic self-definition (Espinoza; Gerardi, 2017). The multiplicity of factors is explained by the difficulty of precisely defining indigenous or aboriginal identity, which is mainly due to the place that the original peoples have historically occupied in relation to the state and the dominant society (Espinoza, 2011, p.6).

The practices of non-recognition of indigenous populations, based on the assimilationist ideology of nation-building (Dantas, 1997), are repeated in most countries and have one factor in common: interest in the territory occupied by these peoples. In Brazil, the regulation of land ownership by King Pedro II through the Land Law of 1850 marks the institutionalisation of the expulsion of indigenous peoples from their lands by the country's agrarian elite. In order to solve the problem of property and the lack of labour, given the imminent prohibition of the slave trade (Santana, 2015), the law, although it provided for the allocation of land to indigenous peoples, created "loopholes so that the Indians, especially those in areas of previous colonisation, were expropriated from their territories" (Dantas, 1997, p.89).

The justification for the expulsion was found in the invocation of miscegenation. In order to exploit public lands and promote foreign colonisation, the discourse that diluted indigenous identity used the category of 'caboclo' to refer to the regional population, with exclusionary connotations and an identity that "bound the group and the subjects to a social immobility" (Lima, 2009, p. 27).

In Sergipe, the term was also used to refer to the Xocó people in order to support the end of the villages³ with the land law. The "caboclos of Caiçara" were forced by the context of violence to adopt this "identity" in order to hide their indigenous origins and thus survive the repression of the peasants (Santana, 2015). Despite being inhabitants before the arrival of settlers in the region, the indigenous people who were concentrated there were recognised in a position of subalternity (Souza, 2011). This was the result of government actions that, in 1853, abolished the Directorate of Indians and excluded any reference to it in official records, allowing the term caboclo to appear in its place as a "way of classifying the inhabitants of the former villages" (Dantas, 1997, p.89).

According to the oral tradition of the Xocó people, the land was donated by the Portuguese Crown in 1700. The invasions by cattle ranchers soon became routine in the region, with the aim of rendering the donation ineffective (Dantas, 1997). The importance of the memory transmitted from one generation to the next lies in the group's resistance to attest to the legality of the possession of the territory, which is directly linked to the foundation of the collective identity and culture of this people (Krenak, 1999).

The context of the Xocó's expulsion was transformed by the new political circumstances of the 1980s. Redemocratisation brought with it the legitimisation of difference as part of the democratic regime, politicising the indigenous subject with its own discourse and demands, from channels of inclusion

³ The villages emerged as a colonial policy with the function of "domesticating the Indians through spiritual assistance" (Souza, 2016, p. 33). Land was needed to sustain the missions, which led to disputes between the missionaries and the local squatters, who valued the space for cattle and crop production.

and respect for diversity (ESPINOZA, 2011). In this scenario, alliances are formed with the rural workers of São Pedro Island, from members of the Catholic Church to students, university professors, anthropologists, historians and governmental and non-governmental institutions (Dantas, 1997).

The intense mobilisation that accompanied the legalisation of the territorial issue led, not without continuing clashes and violent intimidation of the peasants, to the recognition of São Pedro Island as indigenous land in 1984. However, the Caiçara region claimed by the Xocó was not demarcated until 1991 (Souza, 2011). This formal registration, which confirms the territory to the group, “contributes to the feeling of belonging and the recognition of the indigenous presence” (Queiroz, 2020, p.38).

The permanence in the territory, the resistance to the attacks and death threats of the agrarian elite, the refusal to erase their customs, say something about the direct relationship between collective identity and the anchoring of their feet in the place where they were constituted as a people. The reconquest of the land involves, at its core, the recovery of ethnic consciousness, based on the recovery and reinvention of cultural traits that define the distinctive elements of indigeness.

It is in this process of recuperation that the transmission of memory functions as an instrument for saving and reconstructing the identity of the Xocó people. Orality makes it possible to access the events, traditions and practices of the culture that characterise them as a social group, aspects that we have tried to gather by listening to the testimonies presented in the following topic.

3 “IF HISTORY IS TO BE TRANSMITTED, IT MUST BE TOLD⁴”: THE RETURN OF THE SELF IN XOCÓ MEMORY

At this point, the work takes the direction of field research, based on semi-structured interviews. This type of method allows information to emerge more freely, bringing to light issues of great value to the interviewer (Boni; Quaresma, 2005), in order to perceive a reality different from the official one (FERNANDES, 1991, p.15). Above all, the interview process with the Xocó indigenous people consisted in identifying the autonomy of the indigenous community in “deciding who its members are without imposition from other agents” (Espinoza, 2011, p.6), based on the reconstruction of the collective identity of their people.

To develop this, a script was prepared beforehand with the following open questions: i) How were you organised before the expulsion from this territory? ii) Was there a hierarchy between you before the expulsion? iii) What do you think were the reasons for this expulsion? iv) How did you organise yourselves to regain the territory?

The interview was conducted with 6 indigenous Xocó people. They were: Jair Acácio dos Santos, 50 years old, Pajé; Elaine Bezerra Lima Santos, 36 years old, nursing technician; Jussara Apolônio de Lima, 47 years old, teacher; Maria Creuza, 65 years old, housewife; Lucimário Apolônio Lima, Cacique Bá, 40 years old and Anísio Apolônio Lima, 36 years old.

⁴ Excerpt from the interview with Anísio Apolônio Lima, 14/04/2023. São Pedro Island - Porto da Folha/SE.

Each response was recorded in an audio file, with the prior consent of the participants, so that the results could go through the phases of a) transcription, in order to obtain the analysis data in document form; b) analysis, in which the reports are grouped, looking for relationships between the responses; and c) interpretation, which examines the meanings of the reports and relates them to the literature, in order to answer the research problem or test the hypothesis (Bortolozzi, 2020). At the time of interpretation, the knowledge accumulated from the literature review carried out in the first part of this study will be mobilised.

In the analysis phase, given the focus of the study, the study tried to identify, in the aspects in which the answers coincided, the link between the territory and the recovery of the indigenous identity and the cultural characteristics that characterise the Xocó people. From the transcription, the answers were reduced to what we wanted to analyse, so that the extracts presented below are only a part of what the interviewees said. The method of content analysis was used to systematise the responses to each question, grouping them in order to identify the categories of analysis, which were consolidated into three, as shown in the table below:

Table 1 - Categories of analysis

CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS	RESPONSES
	<p>“Friar Enoque was the main priest to call for responsibility to fight for this people, for recognition, right? He was one of those responsible for the real discovery that there was a people here and that it was an ethnic people called Xocó”. (1- Pajé Jair Acácio dos Santos, 50 years old)</p>
	<p>“[...] There was a lot of help from different people, including Friar Enoque, right? You saw that he was perhaps the greatest leader to fight and fight for the liberation of the Xocó. Along with him there were others who also gave their blood for the land. [...] but who fought for it here as if he too were Xocó”. (2- Elaine Bezerra Lima Santos, 36 years old, nursing technician)</p>
<p>1) Support from the Catholic Church in the person of Friar Enoque</p>	<p>“I know that this organisation was done through a priest, right? That was Friar Enoque, he was the one who started to wake up in hiding so that the peasants would not know that we owned these lands, that was Caiçara. [...]” (3- Jussara Apolônio de Lima, 47 years old, teacher)</p>
	<p>“This Friar Enoque, he wasn’t afraid of anything, he was really fearless. Then he went ahead and told us the whole reality of our situation, he looked for documents in Bahia and I know he found out that we were Indians. And if we wanted to fight for our land, he was ready to fight with us, and that’s what we did.”. (4 – Maria Creuza, 65 years old, housewife)</p>

CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS	RESPONSES
	<p>“Then there came a point when the church came to visit. The Catholic Church. And those people who were suffering began to announce to the four corners of the world that such a people still existed.”. (5- Cacique Bá, 40 years old)</p>
	<p>“You’ve heard of Friar Enoch, haven’t you? [] The one who awakened, the one who was sent by God himself to be the light, when he came, what he saw, the people in this misery, in this hunger, he was from the Church, he studied, he was trained, for sure. Deep down, deep down, he knew that this was Indian land.”. (6 – Anísio Apolônio Lima, 36 years old)</p>
<p>2) Erasure of indigenous identity as a justification for displacement</p>	<p>“[...] we couldn’t sing quietly, “it’s a quiet song, because if I sing and the farmer knows, he’ll kick us off this land”. So, beyond the life of slavery, but deep inside, Xocó knew he was an Indian and could not perform his dance, the Toré.” . (1- Pajé Jair Acácio dos Santos, 50 years old)</p>
	<p>“[...]We have never had the right to sing, to dance the toré that we love so much. Even that was denied. If you wanted to dance, you had to dance in hiding. Or not dance at all, because we don’t have the land for it.” (2- Elaine Bezerra Lima Santos, 36 years old, nursing technician)</p>
	<p>“The reason was that he said we had no rights, that nobody was Indian, right? And that this land was not ours. [...] So I think he expelled us because first of all we don’t have that characteristic, right, so for them we had no right to anything and I think it was like that” (3- Jussara Apolônio de Lima, 47 years old, teacher)</p>
	<p>“We lived in Caiçara and we lived like this: we didn’t know who we were. They knew but they didn’t want to talk because the Brito scared us. Anyone who said they were Indian was expelled without any rights and where did we go?” (4 – Maria Creuza, 65 years old, housewife)</p>
	<p>“And there, at that time, we were only indigenous people, but without being able to recognise ourselves because we had been silenced for over a hundred years and we couldn’t say that we were indigenous because we would be expelled or beaten or killed, as was the case with some of the people at the Colégio (Porto Real do Colégio/AL), right?” (5 - Cacique Bá, 40 years old)</p>
	<p>“[...]The importance and the need for the people to make this resumption, because it was the only way out for the people to be discovered and researched so that the true ethnicity of the Xocó people was really known, and so it was done. [...]” (1 – Pajé Jair Acácio dos Santos, 50 years old)</p>

CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS	RESPONSES
	<p>“I think just the fact that we were the owners, the fact that we were the owners and they were aware that we were the owners and that we were somehow fighting to conquer that space, I think that was enough for them to have this vision of wanting to see us far away.” (2- Elaine Bezerra Lima Santos, 36 years old, nursing technician)</p>
<p>3) Reclaiming the territory and the Xocó identity</p>	<p>“Then comes the story that it was when it was discovered that we were indigenous, then came the question of saying that every indigenous community must have a chief, then came the studies, it was not us who said today we will have a chief, then came an anthropologist, did the studies, you know?” (3- Jus-sara Apolônio de Lima, 47 years old, teacher)</p>
	<p>“Then it gained strength, then there had to be an anthropological survey, everything, to really know if we were indigenous, because until then we had even forgotten what we were, right?” (4- Cacique Bá, 40 years old)</p>
	<p>“That we have to find our place, our way of having a chief chosen by God, by nature, by the strength of the native spirit. And then, when the people realised that the election was getting hot, we also started to organise ourselves as Indians. We started to organise our Ouricuri, which is the ritual of the election” (5- Anísio Apolônio Lima, 36 years old)</p>

Source: Author’s elaboration (2023).

The highlighted extracts indicate the importance of what is to be studied (Bortolozzi, 2020) and constitute the categories of analysis. The first category, “The support of the Catholic Church in the figure of Friar Enoque”, is repeated in the memories of the six interviewees, indicating the alliance of the Church for the reconquest and recognition of the Xocó people, mainly through Friar Enoque, a Franciscan follower of liberation theology. In a completely opposite way to the role played in the context of catechisation, the Church begins to position “the different tones of reparation for the missionary past” (Souza, 2016, p. 18).

The Church’s support was fundamental in the process of the Xocó people reclaiming their territory, shaping collective memory and outlining the identity to be rebuilt. The tone of recognition and gratitude for the Catholic’s actions permeates the group’s memories, considering him part of Xocó history, as noted in the speech of interviewee Elaine Santos: “we feel like he is Xocó because he fought like Xocó. And in a way he is”.

The impetus provided by the mobilisation of the Church and sectors of civil society, especially university students, contributed to the resistance of the Xocó people to their ancestral rights to land and to the confrontation with the conditions of slavery of the peasants. The second category of analysis, “The erasure of indigenous identity as a justification for displacement”, is highlighted by the memory of the silencing of

group practices, such as the Toré dance and the songs, which, according to Pajé Jair dos Santos, should be sung “in silence, because if I sing and the farmer knows, he will expel us from this land”.

These elements of Xocó culture were suppressed by the agrarian elite, along with the notion of indigenous identity. For Maria Creuza, “we didn’t know who we were. They knew, but they didn’t want to talk because the Britos scared us. Anyone who said they were Indian was expelled without any rights, and we went where?”, demonstrating the instrumentalisation of fear in the process of erasing identity. To this is added the “caboclo” factor as a pretext for mestizaje, in order to consider them “less Indian” (Oliveira, 2022) and thus take away their land. Cacique Bá’s speech illustrates this method when he states that “we were considered caboclo. So you see, they treated us like caboclo. Why did the Brito treat us as caboclos? Because I was indigenous. They didn’t want to say that we were indigenous”.

The use of the term caboclo, as discussed in the first part of the study, not only expresses but also creates an immobile category in social relations, carrying “the colonial history of subordination that compromises the destiny of a population” (Lima, 2009, p. 28). The loss of indigenous characteristics, a project of those who had an interest in the Xocó territory, is indicated in Anísio Apolônio’s speech when he recalls the practice of marriages: “Indians were forced to marry some caboclos, with cowboys, because the idea of the peasant was to be erased”. In the same vein, Jussara Apolônio recalls: “he said that we had no rights, that no one was Indian, right? And that this land was not ours”.

The last category analysed, “Recovering the territory and the Xocó identity”, is structured around the importance of recovering the land as a way of reconstituting “the true ethnicity of the Xocó people”, in the words of Pajé Jair dos Santos. The cultural characteristics of the Xocó ethnic group are recalled in the speeches of the interviewees, which express the link between the territory and the possibility of existence that is present in the memories of the Pajé: “Today we can dance wherever we want on our land. We can dance whenever we want, and there’s no longer any need to say: no, I can’t dance my toré, I can’t go to the river to fish. Because now we are free”.

The reconstruction of identity was also influenced by the structure of the indigenous community. According to Jussara Apolônio, the group “did not know that in an indigenous community you have to have a chief and a shaman”. Anísio Apolônio confirms this, saying that “we thought that the fact that FUNAI recognised us as indigenous was enough for us to remain as a people. We didn’t worry about culture, about these things. We coloured ourselves with school crayons”.

In this sense, Anísio’s memories, captured in the interview, point the way to the encounter of the Xocó with their own forms of organisation, “like Indians”, in his words. Previously, the election of the cacique and the pajé had been carried out “like a white man”, in his words, with a secret vote and then an open vote, which caused “a great deal of unease”. The break with the practices of the whites, who “guided how an election should be, how an election should be won”, occurred with the ritual of the Ouricuri, breaking with the pattern then in force since 1983 (Souza, 2016).

The Ouricuri ritual is perceived, especially in the speeches of Pajé and Anísio, as strengthening the self-affirmation of Xocó identity. The lacuna in the description of the ritual concerns, on the one hand, the restriction of this practice to the Xocó people, which contains secrets of Indianness forbidden to non-Indians (Souza, 2011). But above all because it occupies a place that is beyond the ability to understand, as Anísio Apolônio recounts:

And then there was this outpouring of the Spirit, which is even difficult to talk about because it is something that goes beyond our ability to understand. No matter how much we delve into it, try to explain it, even those who experienced it, many of those who received that power, that transformation that day [...] Because it is the spiritual world that no one explains. But there was a power coming from above, the birds, the wind, the sun, everything was different. Everything seemed to be concentrated there. And every voice was saying, “He is the chief. Pointing to Bá”. (Anísio Apolônio Lima, 14/04/2023. São Pedro Island - Porto da Folha/SE).

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study was based on the following hypothesis: the memories of the struggle to regain the territory, passed on orally by the Xocó people, made it possible to reconstruct the collective identity of this ethnic group. In order to demonstrate the validity of this hypothesis, the speeches of members of the Xocó ethnic group, collected through semi-structured interviews carried out during field research in the community, were analysed. In order to carry out the analysis, it was necessary, at the outset of the work, to review concepts of indigenous identity and the history of the Xocó people’s struggle for territory.

Indigenous identity is intersected by disputes over land ownership. To justify the expulsion of indigenous peoples, the agrarian elite uses assimilationist arguments, subtracting the characteristics that mark indigenous peoples as such and that link them to the territory they occupy. The term “caboclo” has been identified as an instrument to erase, neutralise and subordinate identity, since without it there is no reason to allocate land to indigenous peoples. In this sense, land confirms the ethnic existence of an entire community.

The history of the Xocó is not different from that of the indigenous peoples of Brazil. The Land Law (1850) was used by the local farmers as a legal basis for the usurpation of territory and the enslavement of these people, who, although their ethnic reality is still present in the memories of their elders, have been subjected to constant death threats and all kinds of suffering that have forced them to silence their songs and abandon the characteristic dances of their culture.

At this point, the work takes the methodological route of field research, in order to compare the literature review with the reality as it is remembered by the Xocó people. Through the process of reconquering the territory, the aim is also to find out about becoming Xocó by identifying the cultural traits that make up the ethnicity of this people in the speeches of the interviewees. It was possible to establish that i) orality corresponded to the results of the bibliographical research carried out and ii) the method of content analysis of semi-structured interviews confirmed the hypothesis that underpinned the work, based on the elaboration of three categories of analysis.

The analysis of the categories formulated from the transcribed speeches of the Xocó interviewees allowed us to identify the role of the Church in the Xocó community before, during the colonisation period and afterwards, in the context of the re-democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s. The mobilisation led by Frei Enoque, an omnipresent figure in the memories of all the interviewees, was essential

in strengthening the struggle to regain the territory and thus to regain themselves as a people with their own customs, way of life and organisation. The Toré and the Ouricuri were revived, and it was through this ritual that the community's organisational form was reconfigured in the choices made by the leaders, in order to reflect the indigenous ancestry and the link with nature.

It's through oral transmission that the Xocó culture is rescued, reconstructed and updated with each generation. The past of slavery and denial of identity is present in the memories of these people, who have persevered in keeping the elements of their culture alive through the autonomy of telling their own story, marked by the resistance of a people that refused to be erased.

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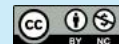


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