

Tonga Naming Practices in Chiwe Dialect

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Abstract: This paper is grounded in onomastics, and it specifically focuses on personal names given to children among the Tonga people of the valley, Zimbabwe (*Chiwe* dialect). It explores the traditional and current naming practices of this minority group. The aim of the study is to find out the perceptions of the Tonga people regarding gender and naming in their culture. The question to ask is what do these names reflect about masculinity and femininity? The position of the researchers is that names are conduits through which people communicate prevailing perceptions about various factors affecting their lives, and that includes gender perceptions. The paper is based on the premise that there is a strong interface between a people's language and their cultural practices. It mirrors on how language is used as a powerful tool to view and understand the world view of a particular society. This paper used the qualitative approach as it is located in the interpretive paradigm. Through documentary analysis, informant interviews and unstructured interviews, the paper provides empirical evidence to show how naming provides significant insights into changes in gender perceptions among the Tonga from the 1960s up to 2017. Findings of this research reveal that some feminine and masculine names in Tonga are distinguished by the presence or absence of the noun prefix *Sya-* and *Na-*, names do not express male supremacy over females like some names in other African cultures. Results also highlight that naming practices among the Tonga are governed by other factors other than gender to reflect history, beliefs, values, behaviour, emotions and circumstances at birth. The study thus concludes that gender is to a greater extent obliterated in the valley Tonga under investigation in this paper.

Keywords: Gender, Naming, Naming practices, Onomastics, Personal names.

INTRODUCTION

In African societies, the birth of a child is an event of great magnitude (Mbiti 1975). Great significance is attached to the naming of a child. Someone might ask why all the fuss about giving names to children? At the heart of this practice among Africans is a profound appreciation of the value of the human person. By giving the child, a name, parents and their family members go beyond seeing a child as a composition of cells to seeing the child as a person in search of an identity and a vocation. In most African societies, a name is considered a precious and marvellous gift. To the traditional African people, naming practices are very important since names are a reflection of a people's culture, that is, their beliefs, values, morals and way of life. They reflect the way in which people think and view the world around them. According to Mutunda (2017) a name is like a document where one can read the history, culture and heritage of the individual or the family in time and space. In most Western societies, naming is primarily a system of reference, not symbolisation, while choosing personal names in Africa goes beyond the narrow limits and confines of seeing them as mere tags that distinguish one person from another (Mutunda 2017). Giving a child a meaningful name in Africa requires accepting that the child has a personal dignity right from the moment of conception that needs to be respected and protected. The names given to the child assign him

or her a place in the family, the community, and the cosmos. The bestowal of names in Africa is rather a conscious decision than a random process. The name giving process is sensitive to various factors such as physical, socio-cultural, historical and religious. Tonga names are not an exception, these names are not just mere tags, but they provide insights into important social, cultural, religious and political events at the time of birth. The names children are given provide a rich and unique source of information with regards a particular culture. Africa has distinctive cultural qualities that the rest of the world can learn from. The study falls under the broad area of Onomastics, and is narrowly situated under Anthroponyms.

Purpose

This paper focuses on personal names given to children among the Tonga people of the valley, Zimbabwe (*Chiwe* dialect). The study explores the traditional and current naming practices of the Tonga minority group. The aim is to find out the perceptions of the Tonga regarding gender and naming in their culture. The question to ask is what are the factors that influence the choices of names of this cultural group and also what do these names reflect about masculinity and femininity.

The position of the researchers is that names are conduits through which people communicate prevailing perceptions about various factors

affecting their lives, and that includes gender perceptions. The paper is based on the premise that there is a strong interface between a people's language and their cultural practices. It therefore mirrors how language (through naming) is used as a powerful tool to view and understand the world view of a particular society.

Motivation

Although the amount of literature on onomastics across Africa is overwhelming, to our knowledge, there has been no literature on gender and naming among the Tonga speaking people of the Zambezi valley, Zimbabwe. Thus, this study explores the trends in the naming practices of the Tonga as well as establishing if gender is an influencing factor in naming. It is the hope of the researchers that such a study will enlighten people on the motives behind the names that the Tonga give to their children, the meanings of these names, the factors that influence naming as well as the beliefs of the Tonga on masculinity and femininity as reflected through the names. The objective of this study is to find out the perceptions of the Tonga regarding gender and naming in their culture. The researchers seek to understand whether or not gender is an integral factor in naming.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in anthroponomastics, the study of personal names, including their origins, meanings, and usage. Anthroponomastics examines the linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts of names, shedding light on identity, society, and culture (Alford, 1988). Combining anthropology, linguistics, and history, this field offers a nuanced understanding of personal names. Adopting an anthroponomastic approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the relationship between naming practices and gender perceptions among the Tonga people of Zimbabwe, specifically focusing on the Chiwe dialect.

This research employed a qualitative design, utilising semi-structured interviews with 30 adult participants. These participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, with the intentional focus on adults given their prominent role as name-givers in Tonga society. Thematic saturation was reached after 25 interviews, at which point no new themes or patterns emerged. Participants were Tonga individuals fluent in the Chiwe dialect who were willing to share their knowledge and experiences regarding Tonga naming practices. Data analysis involved a rigorous coding process, using both

deductive and inductive techniques to identify patterns and themes. Multiple rounds of coding and refinement were conducted to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the findings.

This study investigates how names reflect and shape cultural values, historical contexts, and societal views, particularly regarding gender. The premise is that names serve as a conduit for expressing cultural values and perceptions about gender, thereby reflecting broader societal views. The findings indicate that masculine and feminine names in the Tonga language are differentiated by specific noun prefixes, with the presence or absence of *Sya-* and *Na-* playing a key role. Notably, the study reveals that these names do not necessarily indicate male supremacy, which contrasts with naming practices observed in some other African cultures. This suggests that Tonga naming practices are more nuanced and context-dependent than previously assumed.

The research also highlights that factors beyond gender, such as history, beliefs, values, emotions, and birth circumstances, also influence naming practices. This implies that the concept of gender may be less pronounced among the Valley Tonga under study, and that naming practices are influenced by a complex array of factors.

This study's findings have implications for our understanding of the intricate interplay between language, culture, and gender. By examining the anthroponomastic context of Tonga names, this research offers empirical evidence on how naming conventions have evolved from 1960 to 2025, providing insights into evolving gender notions. Ultimately, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of identity, society, and culture within the Tonga community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Anthroponomastics, the academic field concerned with the origin, meaning, and use of personal names, to explore naming practices among the Tonga people of Zimbabwe, focusing specifically on the Chiwe dialect. By examining the linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts of personal names, this approach reveals insights into identity, society, and culture. This research specifically investigates the relationship between Tonga naming conventions and gender perceptions. Drawing on feminist theories, including intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and performativity (Butler, 1990), the study analyses how names reflect and construct cultural

values, historical contexts, and societal views on gender. The central premise is that names act as conduits for expressing both cultural values and prevailing perceptions about gender.

The study's findings indicate that masculine and feminine names in the Tonga language are differentiated by specific noun prefixes, with the presence or absence of **Sya-** and **Na-** being particularly significant. Importantly, the research finds that this linguistic distinction does not inherently suggest male supremacy, a feature that contrasts with naming practices observed in some other African cultures. This suggests a more nuanced and context-dependent understanding of Tonga naming traditions. Furthermore, the research highlights that Tonga naming practices are influenced by a complex array of factors beyond gender, such as history, beliefs, values, emotions, and birth circumstances. This implies that among the Valley Tonga, the concept of gender is less pronounced as a sole determinant of naming practices.

The findings have significant implications for understanding the intricate interplay between language, culture, and gender. By examining the Anthroponomastic context, this study provides empirical evidence on how Tonga naming conventions have evolved over time, from 1960 to 2025, thereby illuminating shifts in gender notions. In doing so, this research contributes to a deeper and more complex understanding of the dynamics of identity, society, and culture within the Tonga community.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards in accordance with established guidelines for research involving human subjects. A fundamental aspect of this adherence was obtaining informed consent from all participants. Prior to their involvement, participants were thoroughly informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study. This information was communicated in a clear and understandable manner, ensuring that participants could make an informed decision regarding their participation. As noted by Alhabsi (2024), informed consent is a critical ethical requirement that respects the autonomy and dignity of research participants.

To protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants, anonymity was maintained throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were not collected or recorded, ensuring that participants' responses could not be linked to

their identities. This approach aligns with the principles outlined in the Belmont Report, which emphasizes the importance of respect for persons and the protection of their privacy (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

Given the historical marginalization and potential vulnerability of the Tonga community, extra care was taken to ensure that the research process did not exacerbate existing power imbalances. The researchers were mindful of their own positionality and cultural sensitivity, striving to create a safe and respectful environment for participants to share their experiences and perspectives. This approach is consistent with the principles of decolonial research methodologies, which emphasize the need to prioritize the voices and agency of marginalized communities (Smith, 2012).

The researchers also took steps to minimize potential harm to participants. Given the nature of this study, no significant risks were anticipated; however, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By prioritizing informed consent, anonymity, and the protection of participants' rights and welfare, this study demonstrates its commitment to upholding the highest ethical standards in research involving human subjects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Personal names have been a subject of interest for scholars worldwide, with research highlighting their significance in shaping identity, culture, and social relationships. Alford (1988) notes that personal names reflect cultural values and identity. Studies have shown that names can influence an individual's self-perception and social interactions (Mead, 1934). Names can also convey information about an individual's family background, social status, and cultural heritage (Giles & Ogay, 2007).

Research has explored the role of names in shaping identity and belonging (Hall, 1997). Names can be a source of pride and connection to one's cultural heritage, or they can be a source of tension and conflict (Levi-Strauss, 1966). The significance of names in shaping identity and culture is a complex and multifaceted issue that has been explored in various contexts.

In Africa, names are often imbued with social-cultural identities that convey thoughts, traditions, fortunes, conditions, and histories. Research by

Mbiti (1969) highlights the significance of names in African cultures, while Ndlovu (2004) analyses the role of names in constructing identity. African names often carry complex meanings and connotations that are shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Gyekye, 1996).

Studies have shown that African names can reflect an individual's place within their community and their relationship to others (Mbiti, 1969). Names can also convey information about an individual's family background, social status, and cultural heritage (Ndlovu, 2004). The significance of names in African cultures is a rich and complex area of study that has been explored by various scholars.

In Zimbabwe, research on onomastics has shed light on the cultural significance of names. Studies by Zimbabwean scholars such as Sambulo Ndlovu (2004) have examined the role of names in identity construction. This study builds on existing research, exploring the relationship between naming practices and gender perceptions among the Tonga people of Zimbabwe.

The literature reviewed highlights the significance of personal names in shaping identity, culture, and social relationships. This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of naming practices in Tonga culture, particularly in relation to masculinity and femininity. Research has also shown that names can reflect societal views on gender (Butler, 1993). In the context of Tonga naming practices, this study seeks to explore how names convey masculinity and femininity. By examining the meanings and significance of Tonga names, this research aims to shed light on the cultural construction of gender in Tonga society.

BAPTISM IN TONGA CULTURE

The Tonga names are related to people's actions and their clans. In the Tonga culture when the child is born, they wait for eight days to give a child a name. In the Chiwe dialect the grandfather is the first person to give a child a name. If the child is a boy for example the child will be called *Syameenda* that if the grand father is called *Syameenda*. If the child is a girl the child will be named after the grandmother. During the ceremony of child naming, they will bring some beads or a handful of rapoko to spread on his face and wearing him or her some beads so that he or she may accept the name according to their beliefs. The parents will follow to give a child a name

following the midwife especially who helped the woman during child birth. The Tonga people preserve names of the clan by giving them to newborn children. According to Tonga beliefs it is believed that the child will become sick if he or she is not given the name that belong to the clan. These names will be carried in the family forever. If the child is born in town setup still that name of the grandfather has to be called to avoid to anger the spirits.

TRENDS IN THE NAMING PRACTICES OF BATONGA

The Tonga people in this study, like other African people, make use of different naming practices in giving names to their children. These naming practices have evolved over time, reflecting the complex interplay of cultural, historical, and social factors (Alford, 1988; Mbiti, 1969).

Naming Practices 1960s-1980s

During this era, Tonga naming practices were quite traditional, following a kind of strict pattern. Factors influencing naming were to a greater extent cultural, with other factors like Christianity, politics, and circumstances surrounding birth coming into play (Ndlovu, 2004). To the Tonga, names have been following lineage, meaning they could be traced in the family. This practice is rooted in the Tonga cultural belief that a person's name is a vital part of their identity and heritage (Gyekye, 1996).

The association of names with the clan and totems is a significant aspect of Tonga naming practices. For example, names like *Muleya* (goat), *Mudenda* (Zebra), and *Mudimba* (baboon) reflect the Tonga people's connection to their natural environment and their ancestral heritage (Levi-Strauss, 1966). These names not only identify a person's clan affiliation but also serve as a reminder of their cultural roots.

Names were also associated with situations prevailing at birth, such as *Miyoba* (born in the rainy days) or *Mainza* (rainy season), *Michelo* (born after medical intervention). These names reflect the Tonga people's connection to their environment and their experiences. They also highlight the importance of birth circumstances in shaping a person's identity.

In addition, names were given according to resemblance or behavior of one of the family members, such as *Ncheembele* (grandmother). This practice reflects the Tonga people's emphasis on family ties and their desire to honor their ancestors

(Mbiti, 1969). Names were often bestowed upon children with the purpose of remembering their late relatives. Parents may name a child after their late parents because of the love they had for them. This practice serves as a way of keeping the memory of loved ones alive and passing on family traditions.

The presence of missionaries in Zimbabwe also brought an influence into the naming practices of the Tonga people. As Christianity spread, Tonga names also changed as people started to embrace Christianity. Biblical names like *Davida*, *Jelemiya*, *Petulo*, *Lute* and *Maliya* became common (Butler, 1993). The adoption of biblical names reflects the impact of Christianity on Tonga culture and the desire of Tonga people to identify with the Christian faith.

Interestingly, some names were given to both boys and girls, such as *Chigambyo*, meaning miracle, and *Mumuni*, meaning light. These names reflect the Tonga people's desire to give their children names that convey positive messages and aspirations. Other names, like *Mwaala*, meaning a rock, were usually given to girls, highlighting the cultural significance of femininity and strength in Tonga society.

The liberation war also had an impact on Tonga naming practices. Children were given names that reflected the prevailing circumstances, such as *Luumuno* and *Nkondo*, given during the liberation struggle when people wished for peace to prevail in the country. This name reflects the Tonga people's desire for peace and stability during times of conflict (Ndlovu, 2004).

The colonial absorption also influenced Tonga naming practices, with names like *Pilot*, *Cup*, and *Doctor* being given to children. Most of these names were given to boys, reflecting the patriarchal nature of Tonga society during that time. These names also highlight the impact of colonialism on Tonga culture and the adoption of Western names and values (Giles, & Ogay, 2007).

The Tonga people's naming practices during this era reflect their complex cultural identity, shaped by their history, environment, and social interactions. The names given to children during this time period convey a sense of cultural heritage, family ties, and aspirations for the future. The significance of these naming practices lies in their ability to convey meaning and significance in the lives of the Tonga people. They reflect the Tonga people's connection to their environment,

their ancestors, and their cultural heritage. These names also highlight the importance of family ties and the desire to honor loved ones.

NAMING PRACTICES FROM 1980S TO 2000S

From 1980s going forth, there have been some notable changes in the naming practices. From this period, the traditional naming practices of the BaTonga started to be corrupted. Though there were some conservatives who were still adopting some traditional practices, one informant highlighted that the old pattern was getting blurred. Some of the factors that influenced these practices during this era include religious, cultural, political and social factors.

Political Influences

Around 1980s names changed to suit the political situation that prevailed that time. For instance, names like *Kaunda* were given to boys to commemorate the influence of politics on the society. Additionally, names like *Magwebbe*, meaning carrying loads on your back, were given to children, referring to rifles that were carried during Chimurenga time by war fighters. This reflects the impact of politics on the naming practices of the Tonga people.

Religious Influences

The influence of religion on naming practices became more pronounced during this era. Those with certain religious affiliations, particularly the Pentecostals, discouraged some cultural names saying they had negative meanings. Instead, they resorted to names such as *Chabota*, meaning 'this is good,' and *Chiwego*, meaning 'gift.' These names reflect the Tonga people's desire to express their faith and spirituality in their naming practices.

Cultural Influences

Due to intercultural marriages, for example between the Tonga and the Shona or the Ndebele, the father and the mother could both name the child. This led to a blending of cultural practices and the adoption of new naming patterns. As a result, names like *Sibusiso*, meaning 'gift' in the Ndebele language, and *Tanaka*, meaning 'we have become strong' in the Shona language, became part of Tonga naming practices.

Social Influences

Children were also given names pertaining to topical events in the society. For example, names like *Pilot*, *Treason*, and *Support* reflect the impact of social events on naming practices. Names were also given to express different emotions, such as

joy, anticipation of good things, love, consolation, pain, curses, and dispute. For instance, names like *Twabotelwa*, meaning ‘we are happy,’ are usually given to boys to express joy and happiness. On the other hand, names like *Bulindizi*, meaning ‘waiting for good things to happen,’ are usually given to girls to express anticipation and hope for the future.

In addition, names like *Musungwaazyi*, meaning ‘the one who encourages,’ are usually given to boys to reflect their role in encouraging and motivating others. Names like *Luyando*, meaning ‘love,’ are commonly given to girl children to express love and affection. Furthermore, names like *Muumuzi*, meaning ‘the one who consoles,’ are given to both boys and girls to reflect their role in providing comfort and solace to others. Names like *Milandu*, meaning ‘curses that have been committed by someone in the family,’ reflect the Tonga people’s belief in the impact of family actions on individual lives. Other names like *Makani*, meaning ‘news,’ reflect the importance of communication and information in Tonga society.

The changes in naming practices during this era reflect the complex interplay of cultural, historical, and social factors that shape the Tonga people’s identity. The names given to children during this time period convey a sense of cultural heritage, family ties, and aspirations for the future.

NAMING PRACTICES FROM 2000S TO CURRENT

The naming practices of the Tonga people from the 2000s to the present are predominantly influenced by modernity, education, exposure to other cultures and media, and Christianity. However, it is noteworthy to highlight that some traditional practices are still noticeable today.

Influence of Modernity and Celebrity Culture

Some parents are naming their children after celebrities, reflecting the impact of modernity and popular culture on naming practices. For instance, names like *Madinda*, after the footballer, and *Riyana, Ronaldo*, can be found among the Tonga people. This trend reflects the influence of global culture on local naming practices.

Uniqueness and Creativity

The young generation, as noted by Chauke (2012), is now aiming at being unique and creative in their naming practices. Modern Tonga parents search for special and unique names for their children that appeal to them and express their feelings. Names like *Aalimoyo/ Mpaalimoyo*, meaning ‘thus where

my heart is,’ reflect the desire for uniqueness and creativity in naming practices.

Influence of Western Traits

Tonga names also reveal the profound influence of Western traits. This is evidenced in English names like *Paul, John, and Letwin*, which have become common among the Tonga people. The adoption of Western names reflects the impact of colonialism and globalisation on Tonga culture.

Blending of Traditional and Modern Practices

Despite the influence of modernity and Western traits, some traditional practices are still noticeable in Tonga naming practices. Many parents continue to give their children names that reflect their cultural heritage and family ties. The blending of traditional and modern practices reflects the complex and dynamic nature of Tonga culture. The naming practices of the Tonga people from the 2000s to the present reflect the complex interplay of cultural, historical, and social factors that shape their identity. The names given to children during this time period convey a sense of cultural heritage, family ties, and aspirations for the future.

GENDER ANALYSIS

Gender and Naming Practices Among The Tonga People

The observations made by the researchers from the interviews and documentary analysis reveal that the Tonga people have unique naming practices that reflect their cultural values and beliefs. In Tonga, there are distinct boys’ names and girls’ names, with some names being specific to a certain gender. The presence or absence of noun prefixes often distinguishes these names.

Unique Boys’ and Girls’ Names

For example, a boy can be called *Mooya*, meaning ‘this air we breathe,’ while a girl would be called *Na-mooya*. Similarly, boys can be named *Mbizi*, while girls would be named *Na-mbizi*. These naming conventions reflect the Tonga people’s attention to detail in distinguishing between male and female names.

Prefixes and Gender-Specific Names

Boys’ names in Tonga are often prefixed with the prefix *Sya-*, which denotes masculine attributes or roles. Examples of such names include *Syambizi*, meaning ‘one who hunts/goes after the zebra,’ *Syamwiza*, meaning ‘he who comes,’ and *Syawala*, meaning ‘to hit a mark.’ These names not only reflect the Tonga people’s cultural values but also

highlight the significance of masculine roles in their society.

In contrast, girls' names often convey feminine attributes or roles. For instance, names like *Butika*, meaning 'to cuddle,' *Tiwooli*, meaning 'the one who does not stop quarrelling,' and *Kamentu*, meaning 'the one who does her things while kneeling,' are typically given to girls. These names reflect the Tonga people's perception of feminine roles and attributes.

Names Reflecting Masculine and Feminine Attributes

The Tonga people also have names that reflect masculine and feminine attributes or roles. For example, boys can be named *Syamaamba*, meaning 'someone who makes hoes,' *Mufutuli*, meaning 'saviour,' or *Lukono*, meaning 'the inheritance.' These names highlight the significance of masculine roles in Tonga society.

On the other hand, girls' names like *Mulisa*, meaning 'pastor or shepherd,' or *Muyambi*, meaning 'helper,' reflect the importance of nurturing and caregiving roles in Tonga culture. These names demonstrate the Tonga people's appreciation for the different roles that men and women play in their society.

Analysis of Name Meanings

The researchers analysed the meanings of these names and established that, to a greater extent, names have nothing to do with enforcing male supremacy over females. Unlike some other African cultures, Tonga naming practices do not seem to perpetuate gender inequality. Instead, the names reflect a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and attributes.

Views on Gender and Naming

The Tonga people hold diverse views on gender and its relationship with naming conventions. Interviewees' perspectives varied, with some emphasizing the importance of gender-specific naming, while others accepted unisex names. The latter group prioritizes the message conveyed by the name over the child's sex.

This study confirms that gender is often deemphasized in Tonga naming practices. Evidence for this trend includes the prevalence of unisex names and a focus on communicative functions unrelated to gender. This deemphasis is also apparent in how Tonga naming conventions lack a strong focus on gender differentiation,

which aligns with the interpretation that gender is less rigid within this context.

While acknowledging these patterns, the potential influence of external factors such as rural-urban migration and education merits consideration. Rural-urban migration may contribute to the adoption of more Westernized naming conventions, which could influence the use of gendered names. Similarly, higher levels of education may correlate with more egalitarian perspectives on gender and naming. Nevertheless, these factors do not appear to be the primary determinants shaping the core naming practices observed in this study.

In conclusion, this research provides insights into the intricate relationship between language, culture, and gender within the Tonga community. The finding that Tonga naming practices often obscure gender highlights the need for more nuanced understandings of identity, society, and culture in various African contexts. By investigating these naming conventions, we can attain a deeper understanding of the cultural values and social norms that inform identity and belonging among the Tonga people

CONCLUSION

The presence of unisex names among the Tonga people indicates that gender differentiation through names is not a priority. Instead, names are given based on various factors, including history, beliefs, values, behavior, emotions, and circumstances at birth. This suggests that the Tonga people are more concerned with communicating a particular message through names rather than emphasizing gender differences.

In conclusion, the researchers have established that gender, in terms of masculinity or femininity, is to a greater extent obliterated in the valley Tonga under investigation. The Tonga people's naming practices reflect a complex understanding of gender roles and attributes, and their emphasis on communicating meaningful messages through names takes precedence over gender differentiation.

The significance of this finding lies in its implications for our understanding of gender and culture. The Tonga people's approach to naming highlights the importance of considering the cultural context in which names are given and the messages they convey. By examining the naming practices of the Tonga people, we can gain a

deeper understanding of their values and beliefs and how they shape their identity.

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