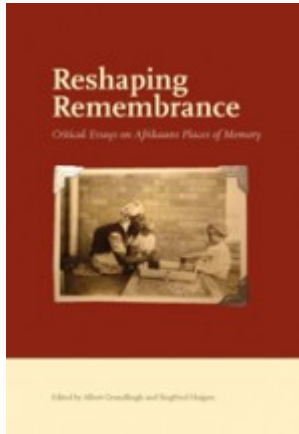


# Reshaping Remembrance ~ Bantu: From Abantu To Ubuntu



To speak about 'the other' is not a matter of course. Just as 'us' usually carries a positive meaning, the affective value of 'them' is usually less optimistic. We experience this sharply when outsiders write or speak about us in a manner that hurts. Afrikaansspeakers are sensitive to the use of terms such as 'Afrikaners', 'blankes' (whites), 'kleurlinge' (coloureds) and 'Boere' (farmers). A racist video, made at the Reitz residence of the University of the Free State, recently caused quite a stir. The stereotyping in the media of white

Afrikaans-speakers as racists was a painful experience to many who felt 'ons is nie almal so nie' (we are not all the same). Terms referring to people, especially terminology of social categories, are political instruments and not merely objective labels in the same class as the taxonomies of fishes or stars. The notion of 'Bantu' is a good example of the way in which a label for a social category follows social practice, in contrast to the assumption underlying the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (that practice follows language). Over time, a term such as this one accretes various meanings, some of which may be linked to strongly divergent emotions. The term 'Bantu' contains, similar to 'Afrikaner', positive and negative meanings in Afrikaans and in other languages in South Africa, depending on the historical moment, the social positionality and experience of the users.

'Bantu' as a term went through a number of important shifts in meaning. It originated as a linguistic term that denoted the kinship links between a large number of indigenous languages and this meaning was retained in the field of African languages. The term was subsequently also used to refer to the people that spoke these languages, e.g. in anthropology. The notion became naturalised in the everyday languages of South Africans and attained official status in government policy and legislation. In the second half of the 20th century the notion became entangled with the apartheid policy as it referred to black people and their inferior political position. It is this connotation that gave the term a strong negative emotional content among the opponents of apartheid. As the apartheid policy was increasingly debunked, the negative connotation grew

and made the term itself unacceptable. Especially the freedom struggle and the global rejection of apartheid had an effect on the use of the term in South Africa. From the 1980s onwards the use of the term decreased and was ultimately replaced by 'black'. Today, the term is seldom used outside its reference to African languages, although one can still hear it among conservative whites and coloureds.

My argument about the use of the term 'Bantu' is that the notion was created in a specific social context and that it evoked strong resistance due to its negative associations. As the resistance changed the context, the use of the term had to adapt and this process eventually led to the demise of the term, especially since people experienced it as oppressive and undemocratic. The term 'Bantu' is in this sense one of a lineage of terms that became unacceptable, starting with 'Kaffir', followed by 'native', then 'Bantu'. More recently, 'black' and 'African' became the politically correct terms. The social and political use of the term 'Bantu' in South Africa is permanently tied to the divide-and-rule politics of both the British imperial and the Afrikaner regimes. The notion was therefore rejected, together with white supremacy. Concepts usually exist in sets and their meanings imply boundaries with contrasting ideas. The terms 'blanke' and 'Afrikaner' with their racial connotations developed as opposites to 'Bantu' and 'non-white' but also in relation to these terms. These terms may disappear in future if Afrikaans-speakers reject the racial element as negative baggage. The problem with any labelling of a social category is that it is an attempt to generalise by using a term that assumes a social classification. A term denoting a group or social category easily leads to negative stereotyping and essentialism. This means that one characteristic is taken to determine the identity of every member of the social category. In this essay I briefly look at the origin and development of the term 'Bantu' in order to explain its changing meanings with reference to the various contexts in which it existed. Ultimately, the question is: why did these shifts occur and what do they tell us?

### *Origin in linguistics*

The first use of the term 'Bantu' as a scientific category was documented in 1862 with the publication of the book *Comparative Grammar of South African Languages*, by Wilhelm Bleek. Under the influence of Sir George Grey, this German linguist decided on this name in order to group the languages of black people in South Africa together in one category, based on their strong

grammatical resemblances, but also to have a term originating from these languages. Missionaries and linguists had by that time already proven that the grammatical structure of the indigenous African languages in South Africa showed many similarities and that they were related to the language groups north of the Limpopo. With this innovation, based on the Zulu word for people, *abantu*, the use of the term 'Kaffir languages' came to an end and a more acceptable term was created: 'The Kafir Language belongs to an extensive family of languages [...] Members of this family of languages, which we call the Ba-ntu family [...] are also spread over portions of West Africa ...' **[i]**

This linguistic meaning has, therefore, already been in existence for about 150 years and is still widely used in the study of African languages to denote a large group of languages, spoken from West Africa to East, Central and southern Africa, across a third of the continent. The German linguist Carl Meinhof even reconstructed a hypothetical original Bantu language, termed 'Ur-Bantu'. The origin of this group of languages lies probably in West or Central Africa and is associated with a rapid spread of the population across large parts of the continent, from approximately 2000 years ago. Due to the political use of the term 'Bantu' in the second half of the 20th century, the notion of 'Bantu languages' started to suffer from the political association. The result was that departments of Bantu languages at South African universities changed their names to 'African languages' by the mid-1980s. Evidently, the new term was less precise, but at least it did not give offence by association. Outside of South Africa the term 'Bantu languages' lives on as it creates no problem at all, due to the fact that the negative political association is not applicable.

#### *White volkekunde and anthropology: 'The Bantu' as 'tribes' and 'peoples'*

One of the first areas in which the notion of 'Bantu' appeared outside African language studies was in anthropology. At the University of the Witwatersrand a Bantu Studies Department had been established by 1921. Stellenbosch University appointed Dr. W. M. Eiselen in 1926 as the first lecturer in 'Bantoelogie' (Bantu Studies). He would play an important role in the implementation of the policy of 'separate development' in his later life. Initially the study of Bantu languages was also located in these departments. The ideological difference between social anthropology at the mainly English-speaking universities and the form of anthropology that was to be known as 'volkekunde' at Afrikaans-speaking universities already appeared in the early years of the discipline in South Africa.

Basically the difference was that a unitary South Africa was taken as the unit of study in social anthropology, whereas 'volkekundiges' emphasised segregation between black and white as well as the cultural distinctions between 'peoples' among Bantu-speakers. The book of Bruwer (1956) *Die Bantoe van Suid-Afrika* (The Bantu of South Africa), written in the volkekunde tradition, reflects the dominant ideas of his time among white Afrikaans-speakers: 'For three centuries already the whites and the Bantu are neighbours in South Africa [...] It is therefore necessary that we should understand each other as peoples. Despite this self-evident fact there are hardly any publications in Afrikaans which discuss the Bantu as ethnic communities (volksgemeenskappe).' **[ii]** He continues: 'Apparently, the Bantu did not develop into large civilised communities.' And: 'Throughout southern Africa the history of the Bantu peoples is one of continuous mutual struggle, conflicts, genocide and violence.' **[iii]** Note that 'the Bantu', according to Bruwer, have to be studied as 'peoples' and that their development is lower than that of 'the whites'. The prime volkekunde text, prescribed for decades to Afrikaans-speaking students of volkekunde, like myself, *Inleiding tot die Algemene Volkekunde* **[iv]** consistently spoke of 'Bantu tribes', because 'the Bantu' could only be conceived of in terms of 'tribes' and 'primitive peoples' in the paradigm of apartheid.

Likewise, in English-speaking anthropology, the term 'Bantu' appeared regularly as a name for the people and not only the languages. Bantu Studies was launched in 1921 as a journal for the anthropology and linguistics of the indigenous people and languages of southern Africa and, as was to be expected, was renamed to its present name, African Studies, in later years. An overview of the anthropological knowledge about 'the Bantu' appeared in 1937 with the Cape Town anthropologist, Isaac Schapera as the editor: *The Bantu-speaking Tribes of South Africa: an Ethnographical Survey*. **[v]** The new title of the 1974 edition, with David Hammond-Tooke as the editor, was significant: *The Bantuspeaking Peoples of Southern Africa*. **[vi]** 'Tribe' was no longer seen as an appropriate term, but the existence of 'peoples' was uncritically, as in Afrikaans, linked to the existence of languages.

An important publication from this period was the well-known *Preliminary Survey of the Bantu Tribes of South Africa* of 1935, compiled by the state ethnologist, N. J. Van Warmelo (Department of Native Affairs). **[vii]** It indicated the historical relationship of different chieftaincies and showed by means of maps and tables

where the subjects of the chiefs and headmen were settled. This survey and classification was part of the state's implementation of the policy of segregation which was already applied in the 19th century in colonial South Africa and which led to systematic and unequal separate allocations of land in the 19th and 20th centuries. Again, the link between 'tribes' and 'Bantu' is striking. Incidentally, the estimated number of rural 'Bantu' in this publication was based on the number of tax-payers per district. The classification of Van Warmelo was based on a combination of criteria: historical and political groupings, geographical distribution, cultural traits and language, as none of these on their own could be used for a watertight classification - typical of the problem that emerges when an attempt is made to produce a systematic classification of people.

### *'Bantu' as a term among black people*

Although the official classification of 'the Bantu' would have a profound impact on the access to resources such as land and development, about all in the country used and accepted the term initially. In 1918 reference was made to the Bantu Women's Movement. The African author S. M. Molema completed a book on the black people of South Africa in 1918 that was only published in 1921 (due to the scarcity of paper in the war time) as *The Bantu: Past and Present*. Molema used the terms 'natives', 'Bantu', 'Bantu nation' and 'Bantu race' as synonyms, as was then common in general usage.

His description of the history, language and customs of 'the Bantu' followed the pattern of his time and expressed the civilisational prejudice that was associated with formal education and the Christian faith. However, he was outspoken about the injustices of land dispossession and the absence of political rights that led to active resistance by the 'Bantu National Congress' (his term for the South African Native National Congress, later known as the ANC).**[viii]** The ANC continuously demanded political rights for black people in South Africa. In the periodical of the ANC, *Umsebenzi*, it was formulated in the following terms in the 1940s: 'The Bantu must demand equal economic, social and political rights, ...'.**[ix]** Two clearly separate meanings of the term were therefore evident: one that emphasised separation and tribal affinity, especially in the Afrikaans conservative, but also in the English liberal use of the term, and another that foregrounded the unity of black people and their rights in the progressive and radical use of the term, especially as used by black authors.

Another remarkable use of the term 'Bantu' among black people is as a

personal name. The best known person named 'Bantu' was ironically one of the most prominent anti-apartheid intellectuals and activists against the divisive use of the term 'Bantu'. The use of 'Bantu' as a personal name was completely separated from the ethnic or racial meaning that the term acquired generally in the South African society and actually evoked the original and literally most human meaning: 'bantu' = people. He was born in 1946 in Tarkastad, in the Eastern Cape. His father, 'Mzingaye' chose to name him Bantu Stephen Biko. 'Bantu' literally means 'people'. Later Biko called himself 'son of man'. Although this was done often with tongue in cheek, Malusi Mpumlwana interprets Biko as understanding his name to mean that he was a person for other people, or more precisely, *umntu nguntu ngabanye abantu*, 'a person is a person by means of other people'.**[x]** Biko's black power philosophy, the struggle against the enforced use of Afrikaans in 'Bantu education' and the Soweto youth revolt of 1976 prepared the country for the freedom struggle of the 1980s, the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the democratic transition of 1994 in which the official use of the term 'Bantu' was virtually erased.

*The transference of 'bantu' from language classification to political discrimination*  
In place of the term 'kaffir' that was in general and even in official use until the start of the 20th century, the term 'native' and later 'Bantu' became the more politically correct terms. 'Kaffir' still has a diminishing meaning and is used by white and coloured racists in private to refer to black people. In the 1970s the notion of 'black people' was introduced and more recently also 'Africans'. These terms indicated the nature of the terminological genealogy related to the contested use of labels for social categories by a hegemonic group referring to a suppressed one. Derogatory references to black people in association with any of the successive terms was common, also in the literature of the time. The report of the Carnegie commission into 'the poor white problem' expressed itself in the following terms in 1932: 'Vulgar, dirty and clumsy ways of expression are often learnt from the native. Especially the kaffir custom to use lies, or to evade the truth, is imprinted on the white child. Because a kaffir seldom reveals the truth, he likes to use a detour.'**[xi]** And a bit further: 'Uncivilised barbaric lifeways influence the white family and destroy the efforts of school, church and home. In the native there is generally, according to European views, no finesse of feeling and taste, no culture or civilisation, but rudeness and barbarism that involuntarily affects white family life.'**[xii]**

It is striking that the use of 'Bantoe' in Afrikaans was mostly derogatory or from a position of superiority. Minimally it referred to a category that was seen as totally different and that was usually referred to as a 'race' or a 'people'. Ironically, the meaning of a shared humanity that the term originally had was usually absent in the use of the term and the associated behaviour among Afrikaans-speakers. The term was not about people in the first instance, but about units: 'peoples' or 'tribes' ('primitive peoples') as a projection from within Afrikaner nationalism. 'Bantoe' in its exclusive and divisive semantic reference in Afrikaans was, like the category 'English', apparently needed to depict an opponent, counterpart and contrasting image. The 'Bantoe' were needed for the process of ethnic mobilisation and the creation of a separate state for Afrikaners. In Afrikaans the term 'Bantoe' attained the meaning of people that were culturally totally different to Western people and that were seen as inferior, people that should be politically and economically subjected. Over time, the term became gradually an ascribed social label from outside and less of a term of selfidentification from within.

In the paper trail of the development of apartheid, the summary of the congress of the Dutch Reformed Churches on the 'native problem' gives further indications of the meaning of the term in Afrikaans. **[xiii]** 'Volkekundiges' and other social scientists advised the clergy at this congress. Alternatingly, the terms 'native', 'kaffir', 'non-white', 'Bantu', 'Bantu people' and 'Bantu race' were used, as if these problematic categories had self-evident and identical meanings, merely because they were all referring to black people. **[xiv]** Government policy that aimed to realise apartheid between black and white and to create separate 'Bantu homelands' was developed in that period. Nice words were used about development and guardianship, but the bottomline was selfpreservation, in order to let whites as an identifiable social entity survive in a position of power, with their own languages and their 'divine calling'.

In the large bureaucratic apparatus that was deployed since the 1950s, parallel to the public sector for whites, a variety of terms and associated practices emerged that were intended to order and control the life of 'the Bantu'. Legislation, commissions of investigation and numerous other initiatives had to implement this racial separation that was presented as the political consequence of normal cultural difference. The report of the Tomlinson Commission **[xv]** was the basis for the 'consolidation' and 'development' of the 'Bantu homelands' from the 1960s

onwards. 'The Bantu' were presented as a threat to the whites unless radical separation was implemented geographically, politically and economically. In the discussion of 'the Bantu' in this report, traditional culture was essentialised, serving the objective to emphasise radical cultural differences that were supposedly justification for the harsh logic of apartheid. Inequality and disdain were inherent in apartheid thinking: 'The white man [sic] brought civilisation to this country and everything that the Bantu now inherits with us, was brought about by the knowledge and diligence of the white man', said dr. Hendrik Verwoerd in 1960.**[xvi]** In this context of disdain about black culture and justification of white control over 'the Bantu', often compared to the role of guardians towards minors, a series of terms were affixed to the root term 'Bantu' in order to manage the seamless bureaucratic system of structural discrimination:

*'Bantu labour' was everywhere regulated by permits while it was officially prevented in the Western Cape in order to protect so-called white and coloured areas from the permanent urbanisation of black people.*

*The 'Bantu Investment Corporation' was given the task to promote black entrepreneurship in the 'Bantu homelands' for the promotion of 'Bantu development', but few people benefited from this.*

*'Bantu authorities' were installed under the authority of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development in the 'Bantu areas', based on traditional authority systems in order to lead each 'Bantu ethnic unit' to development and independence.*

*Only for these authorities a limited 'Bantu franchise' was realised, but meanwhile the white 'Bantu affairs commissioner' continued to control these areas.*

*'Bantu education' was offered to black people, under the management of Verwoerd and Eiselen, to replace the church-managed schools that had been available previously, but this occurred at a much lower funding level than in white education. This education was generally regarded as inferior by black people.*

*The government used 'Bantu beer' as a potent source of income for the local authorities for 'Bantu' in the urban areas. The beer halls were later targeted by black scholars in the Soweto revolt as places where the older generation was enslaved.*



*The government promoted its policy and its 'successes' in its magazine Bantu and also founded Radio Bantu to provide black people with propaganda in their own languages.*

The term 'Bantu' in this way became completely entangled with apartheid in South Africa. Due to the fact that the term was used by a white minority regime for its oppressive racial policy, it became increasingly a term of offence. Resistance against the term was for instance expressed in the notion of 'Bantustan' that was used in a derogatory way by foreign and domestic critics of the policy of separate development to refer to the balkanisation of South Africa's homelands.

#### *A politically incorrect term*

By the late 1970s the resistance against apartheid became overwhelmingly strong and even the governments of Vorster and Botha had to make major adjustments. Since the black power activism of Steve Biko and the Soweto revolt, Black people had become much more politically conscious and began using 'black' or 'African' proudly as terms of self-reference, in resistance to the ethnic division associated with the term 'Bantu'. This resistance found its resonance even within Afrikaans literature with the publication of the highly praised book of Elsa Joubert in 1978: *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*. [xvii] The influence of this book on the thinking of socially sensitive Afrikaansspeakers was probably enormous. This book enabled them to question the policy that attempted to create 'Bantu homelands' at great human cost. From then on the use of the term 'Bantu' became increasingly unacceptable everywhere in South Africa. The name change of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development to the Department of Plural Relations was an example of the extent to which the term 'Bantu' had become useless, even for the government that had made it central to the execution of its policy of separation between black and white. It is remarkable that the term 'Bantu', in contrast to 'swart' (black) and 'Zulu', as far as I could ascertain, has not been used in Afrikaans poems. Poets, therefore, seemed to have been unwilling or unable to use the term, despite its public prominence, to express something profound or to celebrate intuitive poetical associations. This emphasises once again the artificiality of the term and its political use as an unpoetic construction.

Today the term 'Bantu' is only used by conservative or uninformed Afrikaners and coloureds to refer in a distanced way to black people as a generalised

category. The neo-conservatist Dan Roodt uses the term intentionally on Litnet.[xviii] He claims that the 'Bantu' of South Africa did not have their own civilisation, while whites did bring the technology of the wheel and hinge to Africa. He emphasises that 'Bantu cultures' did not have their own form of writing, did not know how to build multi-storey houses, were not associated with scientific thinking, but with cannibalism and war. This line of thinking is a direct continuation of the ideas of the volkekundiges and Verwoerd, but in a totally different context, more than a generation later, in which this type of thinking is more anachronistic than ever. Claims to civilisation were of course often made in history, e.g. by the Romans in their comparisons to the Teutons that were at that time regarded as uncivilised. It is, however, not only Roodt's use of 'Bantu' that is a continuation of white racism. One can very often hear callers to the Afrikaans radio station Radio Sonder Grense referring to black people in terms of the so-called unsurmountable cultural distance that they experience between black people and whites. The basic idea about the huge boundary between black and white continues to flourish. It feeds on inequality, prejudice, historical negation and self-justification. The underlying racism does not need a term such as 'Bantu' to survive in the new South Africa.

While before 1994 the emphasis was on the difference between groups in the country, the need for national unity and nation-building has become very strong subsequently. Metaphors such as 'the rainbow nation' are expressions of this imagined unity. A shift away from the notion of 'Bantu' to the notion of 'Ubuntu' (humaneness) is an indication of the new spirit of the age.

#### *Ubuntu: Unity and humanity in Africa*

Ubuntu is a notion that was promoted by former Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It refers to the unity between people based on their common humanity. The term appeared at the start of the new democracy in South Africa in the early 1990s. Ubuntu and the idea of 'the rainbow nation' were used together to express the political need for nation-building in the new South Africa. A further characteristic of ubuntu is that it refers in the first place to the positive contribution to this unity made by black people in South Africa. Their supposed collective consciousness strengthens the search for unity, forgiveness, healing and other positive characteristics that will enable the former white rulers to be accepted and respected as co-citizens. In this context ubuntu has already served its purpose in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and in the Constitutional Court. Another

context where the idea was grabbed for instrumental use was in the consultation industry around management change and diversity management. In that context ubuntu is a metaphor for everything regarded as good in black culture and social life. The problem is, of course, that this term easily presents an idealistic image of a reality that was also marred by conflict and jealousy (e.g. witch-hunts, raids and oppression of women). Underplaying ethnic and other divisions among black people in the new context is, similar to apartheid and neo-conservatism, an ideological phenomenon. **[xix]**

### *Essentialism in both bantu and ubuntu*

People need terms to order and classify complex realities and to communicate about them, but the underlying problem with social terms that classify people, such as 'Bantu' and ubuntu, is that they create boundaries and allocate content to them that do not reflect those complex realities sufficiently. Very often those classifications are too homogeneous and one-sided where complexity and diversity are involved. Social classification evokes strong emotions related to the identification and collective survival of people. Social boundaries are indeed used to differentiate the 'us'-group from 'them'. When the 'them'-group is seen as inferior, oppression can be justified, as happened during the apex of the apartheid policy regarding 'the Bantu'. In reality, the use of the term 'group', when speaking about large social entities such as 'the Bantu', does not reflect the complex social reality. The term 'Bantu' is therefore rather a social category, a form of classification and not a reference to a group with recognisable members and interaction (such as a family or a political party). 'Bantu' and ubuntu share the fact that they are variations of the word denoting humans. The first term refers to the plurality of people, specifically in Afrikaans the plurality of Bantoevolke ('Bantu' peoples) that had to fit into the idea of a white state. Ubuntu refers to humanity, the sociability of people, black and white, that can form a unity in South Africa on the basis of a new constitution and values that derive especially from the African tradition. Both notions usually acquire an essentialist meaning in South Africa, as only some specific characteristics are taken as a point of departure and the assumption is then made that these terms tell the whole story about society. In the case of 'Bantu' that black people are traditionalists who want to live in tribes and ethnic groups and who want to be treated as minors by their guardians, the whites. In the case of ubuntu the assumption is that everyone in the country will develop a desire for unity and that this humaneness contains only a positive character based on African traditions. Assumptions about social

boundaries linked to tradition and with an eye on a fabricated future are present in both cases. The remarkable change in the use of these terms reflects the recent South African political history. Classification and subjugation of black people has been replaced by liberation and self-identification. 'The Bantu' do no longer exist, ubuntu is the new ideal. The harsh reality of xenophobia towards other Africans in South Africa is an indication of the limitation of an ideological notion such as ubuntu.

The history of the notion of 'Bantu' indicates that words are a means to control reality, but this reality is fluid and reacts historically to the terms that are our cognitive instruments. Knowledge is power, as the French philosopher Foucault indicated: knowledge is never neutral, but it is formed and kept in place by those who possess power. Large historical changes in South Africa led to the replacement of 'Bantu' and the domination over black people with ubuntu and a search for a new national unity. The continued existence of the notion of 'Bantu' in the context of African languages is remarkable - there power relations may be less directly at stake than in organised politics. But how many Afrikaans-speakers, relatively protected by their economic power, have found it necessary to learn an African language? Is the term 'Afrikaner' going to follow the route of the term 'Bantu'? Although 'Afrikaner' is a term of selfreference and not only of ascription, it may well show shifts in its meaning, especially due to the negative external perception of the term. As long as white Afrikaans-speakers identify with a racial feeling and become emotional about it, the term will have a place in everyday speech. May there be a day on which the socially negative meanings of 'Afrikaner' and 'Bantu' find each other in oblivion.

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- xiv.** Federale Sendingraad, *Die Naturellevraagstuk: Referate Gelewer op die Kerklike Kongres van die Gefedereerde Ned. Geref. Kerke in Suid-Afrika*. Bloemfontein: N.G. Sendingpers 1950, 21, 54, 170.
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- xvii.** E. Joubert, *Die Swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg 1978 (English translation: *Poppie Nongena: One Woman's Struggle Against Apartheid*).
- xviii.** D. Roodt, *Sangomas of Newton*. Grasperk, Litnet. Accessed on 6 September 2007 <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/gras/vigs.asp>, circa 2005.
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