Music in Christian Missions: From Ethnocentrism to Cultural Adaptation

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> *Culture is the expression of all that is human. Each of the various people groups of the earth has its own unique personality, expressed in its music, its customs, its poetry, and its language. No aspect of human personality should be ignored as an avenue of approach; musical expression is one of the most significant and characteristic expressions of the pattern of culture. An indigenous hymnody is one of the first signs that Christianity itself is truly indigenous.*
>
> —Dr. T.W. Hunt, professor of music in missions at Southwestern Baptist Seminary (Hunt, *Music in Missions* 15)

Since the missionary journeys of St. Paul in the first century A.D., music has been an integral part of Christian missions. In many cultures, missionaries presented the message of Christianity as a cultural neutrality, although it in turn profoundly impacted the cultures that it touched. In others situations, however, Christian missionaries came with unexamined presuppositions about culture, and thus the Christian message was presented as inextricably shackled to the culture from which the missionaries came. Perhaps nowhere has the use of music in missions been in this latter category more than in the modern evangelical mission movement.

The aim of the full study from which the following excerpt comes is to take a critical look at the way evangelical missionaries have viewed music, how problems have been caused by the thoughtless introduction of Western music in non-Western contexts, and how missionaries' changing views of culture have revolutionized the approach to music in evangelical Christian missions. In other words, this study traces the historical progression from ethnocentrism to the acceptance of the cultural relativity of music by a part of the evangelical Christian subculture. The excerpt below details the final stage in that progression.

Growing Awareness of Music as a Cultural Phenomenon

In the explosion of the social sciences that occurred during the late nineteenth century, *comparative musicology* became an established field that used Western methods and theory in studying non-Western music. Due to felt inadequacies in the methodology, in the mid-twentieth century, a new discipline emerged from comparative musicology integrating several disciplines, including music, sociology, and anthropology. This new discipline, *ethnomusicology*, has been defined broadly as "the study of music in culture" and "the study of music as culture" (Merriam 204).

In the nineteenth century, many sociologists, anthropologists, and those in the fledgling discipline of ethnomusicology began conducting studies on the relationship of music to culture. Many previously held Western notions were challenged by results of these studies. One such revolutionary finding was the idea that music was as unique a part of culture as the native language and rituals. Sociologist Hugo DeJager argues:

> Every social group has its own standards of what it considers to be "music" and proper behavior with regard to that music. New members in a group are taught what is considered good and bad or beautiful and ugly. In this sense, aesthetic emotion is deeply influenced by social and cultural factors in that people have learned from certain other people what to like and what to listen for in musical sounds and patterns. (163)

Therefore, musical preference is shaped by experience and can be considered a conditioned response to one's cultural environment (Goudeau 21). Because of the impact of this learned aesthetic preference, music is not a "universal language," for one musical system often does not

retain the same beauty or meaning when used in a different setting. Music has since come to be seen as a worldwide phenomenon and "a universal means of expression" (Castlen 23) that conveys ideas and emotions non-verbally to those familiar with the manner of conveyance (i.e., the musical style elements). However, this manner of conveyance differs widely from culture to culture.

Ethnomusicologists Vida Chenowith and Darlene Bee term this phenomenon of transitivity the "music barrier," which is similar to the language barrier because it hinders communication (205). Listening to a conversation in another language or music of an unfamiliar culture may indeed be entertaining; however, it will not communicate to the unconditioned or untrained listener. Understanding another musical system takes perhaps more diligent effort than learning a foreign language. Ethnomusicologists have even coined the term *bi-musicality* to refer to the phenomenon of understanding two musical languages (Hood 55).

The musical correspondence to language extends even further, with the "native" musical language being termed "experiential music," "associational music," or "heart music." J. Nathan Corbitt, a missionary ethnomusicologist in Mombasa, Kenya, describes "heart music" as the type of music that most distinctly expresses ideas and emotions, based on past associations and experiences (*Music* 3). A particular style or styles, or even a certain song, may be considered "heart music" to a particular person or group of people. Corbitt observed the following concerning heart music of the African people: "When singing western hymns, the people were listless, singing as if from routine. Whenever they were singing "their" music, it was as if their hearts were poured out" (*Music* 4).

Many scholars trace the beginning of the change in approaches to music in evangelical missions to the mid-twentieth century (Hustad 253). It seems that at the same time as academic studies were shattering previously held Western myths about culture, many missionaries began recognizing the need for the use of indigenous music styles on the mission field, especially in non-Western cultures. As missionaries' views of culture began to change, they became more sensitive to the cultures of the people to whom they were ministering. As a result, the mindset about indigenous music began to change; in fact, by the middle of the century, missionaries were accepting as fact that one of the signs that Christianity has "truly taken root" in a culture is people's development of their own indigenous hymnody, in their own language and musical style (Chenoweth and Bee 206).

Donald Hustad, authority on evangelical music, summarizes some of the reasons for this paradigm shift in the following statement:

> No doubt spurred by growing antagonism to their programs, and encouraged by rising worldwide interest in anthropology and ethnomusicology, missions have taken a new look at music in relationship to society, and are encouraging the use of indigenous modes and instruments where they are still a strong element in the local culture. (253)

During a personal interview, Bud Mial, a missionary working in broadcasting for the Christian evangelistic TransWorld Radio, recounted the event which sparked his own recognition of the need for indigenous Christian music. In the mid-1970's, Mial and his wife were in China touring a radio station that was affiliated with TWR. In the radio station control room with a Chinese Christian who worked at the radio station, Mial asked through a translator to hear some "Chinese Christian music." As the worker selected a record and put it on the turntable, Mial was expecting to hear traditional Chinese music, with native instruments and the classical Chinese vocal style. To his surprise, the tape contained the music of a choir singing a familiar Western hymn in four-part harmony—translated into Chinese. "No," Mial interjected, thinking there had been a translation problem, "I want to hear *Chinese* Christian music." Looking slightly perplexed, the worker, who had understood Mial perfectly the first time, obediently put on another record. On this recording, too, was an American hymn translated into Chinese. It was then Mial realized that this *was* what this Chinese man considered "Chinese Christian music"—translated hymns written in the Western tradition (Mial).

As a result of the changing mindset about cultural materials, several missions organizations began sending out "music missionaries"—who were to serve as both evangelizers and amateur ethnomusicologists—partly in an attempt to remedy the harm caused by thoughtless introduction of Western music (Hustad 253). The first couple to be termed "music missionaries" were George and Violet Orr, commissioned by the Southern Baptist convention in 1951 (Hunt, *Music in Missions* 37).

Although these music missionaries did sometimes use principles of academic ethnomusicology, it is important to note that the occupations "music missionary" and "ethnomusicologist" are not synonymous. The relationship between academic ethnomusicology and music missionary studies is analogous to the relationship between pure and applied science. In pure science, researchers conduct experiments to prove laws and abstract theories about the universe—they study nature for the sake of learning. In applied science, researchers conduct experiments with the underlying purpose of application of the knowledge they find to something specific, e.g., the discovery of a more effective antibiotic or a type of paint that is less harmful to the environment. In the same way, ethnomusicology is the "pure" discipline—ethnomusicologists study music for the sake of acquiring knowledge about a particular culture for knowledge's sake. Music missionary techniques, on the other hand, were purposed to go beyond knowledge into application. Once a basic knowledge of a culture's musical system was acquired, music missionaries would apply it in the translation of existing hymns or the composition of new hymns in the people's musical language.

After ethnomusicology became an established academic field, many evangelical ethnomusicologists came alongside the music missionaries, employing their academic knowledge in the effort to spread the Christian message. Both music missionaries and missionary ethnomusicologists were instrumental in bringing cultural understanding to the forefront through the influence of scholarly journals and the beginning of training programs in the use of indigenous music in missions in universities and seminaries.

Discovery of Obstacles Resulting from the Use of Western Music

As evangelical missionaries began to critically examine the effect of their Western music on other cultures, problematic attitudes toward and incongruous elements of their Western hymnody became evident. Missionaries began coming to the sobering realization that Western music was serving more as a barrier than as a bridge to the reception of the gospel by placing two main obstacles in the way of the indigenous audience: linguistic and musical barriers.

The first obstacle, the linguistic barrier, consisted of problems with linguistic translation of Western hymns into other languages. Missionaries realized that a good translation of hymns was much more complex than had been thought previously. One problem often encountered was a difference in poetic meter between Western language and the indigenous language. Much of Western hymnody is in iambic meter, beginning on a weakly accented syllable and proceeding to one more strongly accented. However, many other languages are trochaic, beginning on the strong accent and proceeding to the weak (Goudeau 62). In Latin America (Tucker 273), Africa (Goudeau 64), and the Middle East (Goudeau 57), there have been numerous cases of the translation of Western hymns where no consideration was given to the natural linguistic patterns of the local language. Indigenous people have viewed this thoughtless translation of hymn texts as humorous at best; many times, however, as Eugene Goudeau notes, they have been offended and insulted by the indifference of the Western missionaries to the linguistic aspects of their culture (57).

Another problem included in the linguistic barrier was frequent mistranslation in tonal languages, which rely on pitch, as opposed to volume, to accent words (Hockett 100). Although all languages, including English, use pitch to some degree in communication (e.g., the ascending pitch in the interrogative sentence, as opposed to the descending pitch at the end of the declarative sentence), the very meaning of individual words in a tonal language depends upon the pitch their syllables are given. Mandarin, the main language of China, which claims more

speakers than any other language in the world, has four pitch levels (Wiant 39). Other examples of tonal languages include most tribal languages of Central Africa (Hockett 102) and many Far Eastern languages, including Vietnamese, Burmese, and Cantonese, which includes a bewildering nine tones (Hockett 100).

Word meanings have been terribly skewed when Western hymns have been translated into tonal languages without regard to the tonal contour of the other language. For example, if a word that is meant to be on a high pitch falls on a low note in the song, the meaning of the word may change dramatically. Missionary James Riccitelli points out that in translating the hymn "Take the Name of Jesus with You" into the tonal language of African Buamu people, translators did not take into account the correspondence of the song's melody with the tonal patterns. The verb "lâ" ("to take") should be on the same pitch as the name "Yesu" ("Jesus"); however, due to the melody of the song, the word "lâ" falls so far below the "Yesu," that its meaning becomes "to chew or to eat." Thus, to most first-time hearers of the hymn, the first stanza would state "Chew the Name of Jesus" (Goudeau 59).

Far from being an isolated occurrence, this translation problem became evident all over the world in evangelized cultures that speak tonal languages. Timothy Heiney cites several examples of this problem in the Lutheran Swahili hymnal: "In the hymn 'Jesus, My Courageous Lord,' several words are sung on the wrong tones. Hence, 'those afraid to die' becomes 'those afraid to be good.' Also, in 'The Work is Yours, My Lord,' the phrase 'it dies simply to rot' becomes 'it is good for you to rot'" (11). For the native Mazateco tribe of Mexico, the phrase "come to Jesus, all you sinners" was rendered "come to Jesus, all you fat people" (Goudeau 60). In one of the stanzas of the Christmas hymn "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "true God, not created" was rendered for the African Igbo tribe as "God's pig, which is never shared" (Goudeau 60).

This problem of linguistic translation is further complicated by the fact that many Western hymns are strophic in form, meaning that several verses of text are set to the same melody. So, even if the translators are fortunate enough to make one of the verses conform to the tonal contour of the language, there may be other verses of the song that are completely incompatible with the pre-established melody line (Hunt, "Music" 66).

The second and perhaps the more substantial obstacle has been the music barrier. As discussed previously, Western missionaries often naively assumed that music is a "universal language"—i.e., that it communicates the same emotions or ideas to anyone in the world. However, upon examination, they began to see that some cultures have very different musical systems than that of Western culture. Missionary ethnomusicologist Mary Key identified these basic musical elements as scale, harmony, rhythm, and form, which nearly all cultures employ. In much of Western hymnody, a very limited set of these four elements is used. For example, nearly all hymns use the major or minor scales, four-part harmony, a metrical pattern organized in groups of three or four, and strophic form. Research shows that whereas almost all other musical systems employ the same four basic musical elements, they differ widely from Western music in their use.

First, from one culture to another there is much divergence of musical scales, the culturally limited set of tones around which that culture's music is built. Since the development of the well-tempered scale in the mid-seventeenth century, Western music has been composed within the context of twelve equally spaced tones, which are usually further limited to a set of seven tones constituting the major and minor scales. Some cultures, however, compose within the context of fewer notes, such as the Asian and African cultures who use the pentatonic, or five-note, scale (Heiney 13). Other cultures have substantially larger scales, such as the Indians and Pakistanis, who have twenty-two unequally spaced pitches, termed *shrutis*, in their scale (Maniyattu 50). People of the Middle East also employ many notes and have more than ninety different scales (Heiney 14).

To these cultures employing differing scalar materials, Western music sounds at best distinctly foreign and at worst acutely distasteful. To people who have fewer notes in their scales, Western singers sound as if they are "singing in the cracks—where no notes should be"

(Heiney 13). R. LaVerne Morse, former missionary to China and Burma, reported that people in cultures with a pentatonic scale are literally unable to sing “fa” and “ti,” the fourth and seventh degrees of the Western major scale, without a great deal of training. He adds that many “non-Westernized Asian nationals” become “psychologically uncomfortable” when they hear “fa” and “ti” in Western music, making Western hymnody a “barrier to the communication of the message of Christ” (14). To people who have more notes in their scales, Western music sounds incredibly simplistic. They perceive it as repetitions of the same few notes again and again, at unfamiliar intervals (Heiney 15).

Another element of musical style is the use of harmony, or the juxtaposition of notes found in the scale. Harmony plays a substantial role in Western music, and thus most Western hymns employ four-part harmony governed by Western aesthetics and voice leading practices. However, some cultures have different concepts of harmony. To some African and Asian peoples, harmony is formed when other parts are in parallel fourths or fifths with the melody (Wiant 40). Still others have no notion of harmony whatsoever. Vocal harmony is not a material used in traditional Chinese music (Wiant 41). A confused Chinese Christian once told Bliss Wiant, missionary to China and authority on Chinese music, that “when missionaries sang he couldn’t tell which one was the melody of the four voices singing together” (41).

The third common element in musical systems is rhythm. In Western music, rhythmic material is generally kept quite simple, with most songs having only one predominant metric pattern that does not change. However, in other systems of music, rhythm plays a much more central role. African missionary A. M. Jones has stated that “rhythm is to African music as harmony is to Western music” (qtd. in Goudeau 18). According to Jones, Africans find “aesthetic satisfaction” in the “complex interweaving of contrasting rhythmic patterns” (qtd. in Goudeau 18). These juxtaposed rhythmic patterns, known as cross-rhythms, are so complex that they cannot be understood or duplicated by the average Westerner without extensive immersion in the culture (Ward 64). In some African music, the beat cannot be grouped in measures because the words of the song regulate the meter, whereas in Western music, the choice of text is often governed by the selected meter of the song. Goudeau concludes that many native African Christians consider Western music “stupid and amusing” because of the relative simplicity of its rhythmic patterns (18).

The fourth element in musical materials is that of musical form. Most Western hymns are in strophic form: that is, they consist of several stanzas of verses each set to the same music. However, as explained in the previous discussion of tonal languages, strophic form would be a highly ineffective musical form because of the difficulty of choosing words that conform to the melodic contour.

There are many cultures that employ forms different from those in Western hymnody. One of the most common forms is the call-and-response form, in which one person termed the “caller” sings or chants a solo phrase and the others then respond in unison to each phase that he sings. In African call-and-response singing, the people first form a circle where a caller steps out into the center. When the caller is finished, he rejoins the circle; then the next caller comes to the center (Corbitt, *Orientation* 62). The people of India also have a call-and-response form of song termed the *bhajan*, which originated in Hindu worship ceremonies (Maniyattu 58).

So, as a result of the differences in other cultures’ use of language and of the musical materials of scale, harmony, rhythm, and form, many evangelical missionaries concluded that in many cases Western hymnody was not useful in communicating the Christian message to people from a non-Western culture—in fact, in many cases, it had been detrimental and confusing.

Present Musical Situations

Due to the differences in musical systems and the resentment caused by enforced Westernization, some might be led to conclude that missionaries should use only music indigenous to the people whom they are evangelizing. However, the issue is much more complex. In some situations, because of a prior heritage of the use of Western music, some

established groups of indigenous evangelicals prefer Western music in their worship. Also, due to the global effects of communications technology such as the radio, television, and internet, some parts of the world are voluntarily becoming increasingly Westernized and are very receptive to elements of Western culture (Schaeffer).

A helpful method of chronicling the present global situation faced by modern-day missionaries has been proposed by T.W. Hunt, professor of music missions at Southwestern Baptist Seminary. Hunt identifies the following three musical situations which evangelical missionaries may face in today's world: the pioneer, syncretistic, and urban situations (*Music in Missions* 113). In the pioneer situation, the culture has had no exposure to musical systems other than its own. The pioneer situation is becoming more and more rare, existing mainly in rural or isolated localities. In a pioneer situation, it is highly likely that people have had access to only one musical system. Thus, according to Hunt, it is of utmost importance that the missionaries encourage an indigenous hymnody in the people's own musical style in order that Christianity is not seen as foreign (*Music in Missions* 114).

One recent example of missionaries in the pioneer situation occurred in Mongolia. According to Rick Schaeffer, a former missionary to Mongolia, the Mongolian musical situation is unique. Due in part to geographical isolation and a government generally hostile to outsiders, rural areas of Mongolia have had little to no contact with Westerners and their culture. Missionary work in Mongolia has been extremely recent—in fact, the first Mongolian evangelical church was established as late as 1989. Because of this, there was no legacy of Western hymnody. Magnus and Maria Alfonce, two of the first missionaries to Mongolia, helped to create a legacy of indigenous hymnody by employing an adaptive approach to music in the church that they established by purposefully deciding to withhold Western hymnody and encouraging composition by Mongolian converts. Today, according to Schaeffer, the Mongolian people have a wholly interculturated hymnody, consisting solely of the people's "own indigenous expressions of worship" (Schaeffer).

In Hunt's syncretistic situation, the culture has its own indigenous musical system but also has been exposed to music of other cultures through radio, television, or early missionary contact. Much of present-day Africa falls into this category. In *Jubilate: Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition*, Donald Hustad records a letter received from an African pastor in Sierra Leone aptly describing the syncretistic situation:

> We are having a tremendous experience here in Africa. Indeed, we have had to sublimate our own musical tastes to promoting indigenous music in the churches and over the radio. Drumming is what touches the heart of the tribesman over here. But the young people in school quickly pick up a liking for modern hits and western style harmony as it comes over the radio. The local station is playing gospel songs and the kids are singing them. (241)

Modern missionaries in the syncretistic situation have typically responded in one of two ways, depending on the desire of the people: either to try to dispose entirely of the Western musical style or to integrate Western music with the local style and instruments. The first approach has been shown to be useful in the cases in which the people view Western music as inappropriate for worship in their culture. Throughout the world, native converts have been leaders in the development of an indigenous hymnody. An elderly woman called "Mama Esther" from the Giriama tribe of Kenya recounted her story to Nathan Corbitt as follows:

> I always remember passing the big stone church of the early missionaries. I really enjoyed singing but I could not understand what they were singing. It just didn't fit my ears. And they held these books in their hands. I couldn't read anyway, but it looked as if the people's hands had been handcuffed. I was used to clapping my hands and dancing. I surely would not enjoy that type of singing. One day a black evangelist visited my home. He had been living in Mombasa and had become a Christian. He was now returning to his home sharing the Good News with the people of his *home area*…I accepted Jesus. Jesus began to heal me and I felt I must share in praise with others who believed in him.

> But I could not go to the big church. That night there was a rally under the tree in the next village. I went to see how this black man would lead. I was so surprised and excited because we sang songs that talked about the power of Jesus, how He had saved us and how He would return again. We even clapped our hands, rejoiced, and danced. (qtd. in Corbitt, *Orientation* 56)

In the second approach, which consists of "the marriage of Western and indigenous music," Hustad cites the following two ways in which indigenous and Western materials may be mixed: by either adapting Western tunes to the indigenous music style and/or instruments or, conversely, by adapting indigenous tunes to Western style and/or instruments (240). When integrating Western and indigenous styles in a syncretistic situation, it is important to identify which aspects of the indigenous musical language are needed for the hymnody to seem culturally authentic to the people. For example, from his work in various places in Africa, Corbitt has identified three qualities necessary for Christian worship music in Africa: a singable melody (sometimes involving a use of the indigenous scale), a danceable rhythm, and a text that is meaningful to the particular group of people (*Orientation* 55). Arthur Appianda, a Ghanaian ethnomusicologist, affirms these qualities as necessary for worship in Africa, warning that "as long as congregational participation (such as 'call and response patterns, antiphonal singing, hand-clapping, dancing, rhythmic body movements, etc.') is not encouraged by the church, the African participant will always feel alienated from the worship service" (qtd. in Corbitt, *Orientation* 50).

Finally, in the third situation described by Hunt—the urban situation—the people have had exposure to a wide variety of different musical styles. As its name implies, the urban situation is often found in densely populated areas with people from many different ethnic groups, such as some parts of Africa and much of Asia. Thus, the musical solution that would seem to be the most effective in urban situations would be to use the musical style most effective with the chosen audience.

The tiny island of Taiwan serves as an excellent example of the urban situation. Milton Lites, who served in Taiwan as a music missionary, writes that "the musical picture in Taiwan is very complex" because the people of cosmopolitan Taiwan have many different musical influences affecting them (99). Traditional music from China is still very prevalent, due to the effort of historical and cultural societies (99). Most of the people have also been heavily exposed to Western music through the influence of Western classical music, in which many Taiwanese are trained from an early age, and through the American popular music that is played on local radio stations (96).

For the missionary, the situation in Taiwan can serve as a challenge because of the many different musical traditions already existing within evangelical churches. Many evangelicals in Taiwan have a Christian tradition involving the exclusive use of Western hymns. This hymn usage is firmly entrenched, beginning at the time in which Western missionaries came to mainland China and used Western hymns for their worship (Lites 95). Later, when Chinese Christians were sent to evangelize Taiwan, they brought the Western hymnody that constituted their worship. Another Western influence in religious music in Taiwan is the contemporary Christian music heard on Christian television stations, sold in bookstores, and performed for youth rallies. This music has been especially influential on Taiwanese youth because it is similar to the secular American and Japanese popular music that they listen to on the radio (Lites 97). Not all evangelicals in Taiwan employ Western music, in their worship, however. When a large percentage of the "mountain people," or aboriginal inhabitants of Taiwan, converted to Christianity, they developed much of their own indigenous hymnody (Lites 96).

Conclusion: A Forward Look

> *The same traditional instruments David used while caring for the sheep were brought into the temple for the holy praise of God. We should learn to use our own cultural traditional instruments and music forms in this same Scriptural way—to praise God who gave us the gifts to make both songs and instruments.*

—Joyce Scott, missionary ethnomusicologist with Africa Inland Mission (Corbitt, *Music* 62)

Though evangelicals have indeed made tragic mistakes in the past in their approaches to music in missions, several measures are being taken in the present which provide hope for the future of the evangelical missions movement. There has been a general recognition of past mistakes and a commitment to learn from them. Hunt writes the following on the direction evangelical missionaries are taking in relation to music:

> Since the appointment of large numbers of music missionaries beginning in 1951 and the establishment of seminary courses in music missions, missionaries have become even more conscious of the value of music as a tool for outreach, and new strategies to make the use of music more effective have been tried. Awareness has been heightened also by frequent articles in mission journals and music journals. (*Music in Missions* 13)

The dawning of cultural understanding among the greater part of evangelical missionaries has provoked a myriad of other positive results, including an increased emphasis on cultural training (not just Bible or language training) for missionaries that is often integrated with the disciplines of ethnomusicology and anthropology and an emphasis on the importance of indigenous expression in the Christian worship of other cultures (Hunt, *Music in Missions* 9). One missions expert believes that the twenty-first century inaugurated the "age of the non-Western missionary," with increasing numbers of evangelical missionaries being commissioned from non-Western countries (Schaeffer). Also, some missions organizations are deploying missionary teams from mixed nationalities in an attempt to curb the tendency toward an ethnocentric approach (Schaeffer).

In conclusion, the progression from an ethnocentric to a culturally adaptive mindset is a lesson in cultural evolution of a subculture of which repercussions echo around the globe. Through turning away from old ways of thinking about culture and choosing to see legitimate forms of expression in each culture's musical system, evangelical missionaries have taken and are continuing to take steps to become closer to the ideal Christian unity that transcends culture, status, and gender, set forth by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28, NIV).

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