Folklore and History as Twin Rivers of World Heritage: A Personal Narrative

By

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Abstract

This paper, originally presented at an International Conference on Folklore, National Integration and Development, held in Nigeria, appraises *Tatsuniya* (Hausa word for "folktale") as a richly-endowed form of folkloric expression in many African and non-African societies. It reveals that comparative study of the folklore of the Babur-Bura in north-eastern Nigeria and those of other countries, including the U.S, UK, Croatia, Jamaica, China and Sri Lanka, shows that folklore is a worldwide tradition whose roots could be empirically traced in history. Current studies in oral literature – or what the Ugandan scholar, Pio Zirimu, termed *orature* – have underscored the fundamental role folktales play as the earliest school of the child in many African communities. *Tatsuniya* is told both for its thrilling entertainment worth and for its educational values that further enrich the child's appreciation of the culture and history of his community and those of others. This study presents folklore as a treasured world tradition that ought to be explored with the same vigour and interest archeologists and historians employ in digging deep into our distant past. After all, the often inseparable linkages between folklore and history tend to suggest that both are twin rivers that flow into the same sea.

Keywords: folklore, history, culture, heritage, Babur-Bura, tatsuniya

Introduction

Let me begin this presentation which I deliberately titled, *Folklore and History: Twin Rivers of World Heritage*, with a personal confession. I am a firm believer in the truism that just as droplets of water form streams so

also do the collective actions of humans, either as individuals or groups, constitute the thread in human history.

Being an enthusiast of African folkloric tradition, I opted to devote time, energy and resources in researching deeply into the rich field of my native Babur-Bura folkloric tradition. In the course of this presentation, therefore, you will notice, at some points, that the arguments I advance are embellished with accounts from my personal experiences gathered from years of folklore research and publishing.

It was in 2005, *Voices in a Choir* and my other publications on public administrative matters had been published and I had just handed in for publication the manuscript of *Hatching Hopes*, my autobiography. Duve Nakolisa, my publisher, himself a writer of note, then asked me, "Why not turn your attention to folktales in your area?" I reflected on the question and remembered what I had experienced at home as a child and similar events that took place during my initial years of Western education in the early 1950s. I recalled the tales by moonlight narrated mainly by my mother and the introductory literature books in Hausa we had read in class. I called to mind books like *Dare Dubu Da Daya* (One Thousand and One Nights) and several others written by Abubakar Imam. I then resolved to go into the field and chose my Babur/Bura community as my principal research ground.

It was in the course of my research that I luckily met former Vice Chancellor of Bayero University, Prof. (Ambassador) Dandatti Abdulkadir. An expert in the field, he gave me very useful guidance on how to go about my assignment. I am immensely grateful to him for ensuring, through the careful review of the dedicated staff of BUK Centre for the Study of Nigerian Languages, that all my manuscripts written in Hausa were in accordance with standard Hausa language rules.

The books in Hausa were published in two batches. The first batch of six books (*Marainiya da Wasu Labarai*, *Jarumin Sarki*, *Yarima da Labbi*, *Tsurondi*, *Sandar Arziki*, and *Dankutungayya* were published in 2005.

The second, comprising eight books (*Gwaidayara*, *Dan Agwai*, *Tsohuwa da `Yan Mata Uku*, *Dankucaka, Al'ajabi, 'Yargata, Duguli Dan Bajinta*, and *Muguwar Kishiya*) were published in 2009. The publishing house was Gidan Dabino Publishers, Kano. The books are all in circulation within and outside the country. Within Nigeria, in Kano, Capital Primary School has included books 1-5 in their curricula.

The books have attracted the attention of a German NGO, IRENE Sahel, which sought my permission, which I gave, to publish the stories in "Boko" and "Ajami" as a way of educating the girl-child in Niger Republic's Qur'anic schools. So far, scholarly use is being made of the books outside the country at the following centres of learning: Hamburg University, Department of African Languages and Ethiopian studies Germany; School for Oriental and African Studies (SOS), London; Warsaw University Poland, Department of African Studies; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) Harmburg; Abdul Mumini University, Niamey; IRENE Sahel (NGO)-Germany; MAINZ University Department of African Languages, Cologne Germany; Institute of Research Studies, Dept of African Languages, Cairo University, Egypt.

The use of indigenous languages in teaching is an initiative which UNESCO is vigorously propagating in its current programmes worldwide.

Today, I can humbly say of the fruits of our collective achievement that I have written four short story books in English and fifteen in Hausa, all of them containing stories derived from our folklore. The fifteenth is the compendium of the fourteen books written in Hausa my Kano-based publisher has put them together as a readily available reference material.

Twin Rivers of World Heritage

The history of Africa, which includes the forceful enslavement and shipment to foreign countries of a huge number of its population, helped greatly in transporting and transplanting African tales to foreign shores.

Because the tales were spread by word of mouth, many scholars have observed, little variations in the storylines have occurred but without altering the essence of the tales. Its unique folktales, thus, constitute a very rich and fertile legacy that Africa bequeathed to many parts of the world, especially North America, South America, and the West Indies.

In the vast continent of Africa and other continents, folktales and myths serve as a means of handing down traditions and customs from one generation to another. In Africa, especially, the storytelling tradition, used to prepare young people for life, has continued to thrive over the ages. Although oral tradition is declining with the emergence of modern forms of communication, the invention of the printing press fortunately facilitated the documentation of tales in written form and their preservation and circulation on a wider scale.

Duve Nakolisa believes that some tales are historical and that such historical folktales tell the history of some ethnic groups. According to him (Nakolisa in Usman, 2006),

> In many parts of Africa, tales, generally speaking, are the history of the ethnic group and the ethnic portrayal of social interactions within the environment of that history. (Folktales) belong to the latter… (They) are not part of the grand tales of the origin of the people of the area, nor part of the revered exploits of any great ancestor. They do not belong to the canon of myths and legends, usually associated with dynasties and illustrious genealogies. Those ones belong to history, even where some of them sound somewhat like folktales. Indeed, under open and unbiased examination, many of such "histories" share canonical qualities with the simplest tale. That is why I assert that mythologies are generally the grandest form of the folktale tradition of any society, and the inspirational springboard for the ordinary tale.

To buttress Nakolisa's thesis which, as my research confirms, is also applicable to non-African societies, Khalid Imam (2010) further stresses that although most tales may have themes of universal concerns, a close study of some could reveal that such tales may well be telling the histories of some ethnic nationalities. He cites the popular story of

Bayajidda as a good example of a "grand tale" that lays claim to being the authentic origin of one particular group of people.

Imam could have easily cited further examples from Nigeria where almost every ethnic group – and there are more than 250 of them – lays claim to one mythic origin or the other. The most celebrated of such "grand tale" histories includes the "Ogiso" story of the Binis which has the contentious twist of a Bini prince being the pioneering Ooni of Ife. Key Yoruba scholars believe the more popular version, namely, that Oduduwa is the progenitor of the Yoruba race.

Similar "grand tales" from Nigeria are no less controversial. For instance, depending on the person telling the story, the Igala kingship is variously linked to the Yoruba, Nupe, Benin and Jukun. My own community of Biu has various versions of the origin of Yamtarawala, our own progenitor, equivalent to other legendary figures such as Oduduwa and Bayajidda.

In all these and similar stories across the world, what is the dividing line between history and folktale? Judging from the foregoing, it seems reasonable to say that history and folklore, in narrative origins, are two rivers which meet at the confluence of the communal imagination.

Comparative Study of Folktale Traditions

Following the encouragement and guidance I received from my publisher and the likes of Prof Dandatti Abdulkadir, I decided to dig deeper into the subject of folktales. I forayed into existing literature on the subject, seeking to have a comparative understanding of the place of folktales in global literature. I relied mostly on books I could lay my hands on. On the few occasions I travelled out of the country, my first attraction was the nearest bookshop where I went to in search of books related to folktales. I did that during my visits to the US, Jamaica, UK, Croatia, Sri Lanka and China, and I made some useful purchases.

According to Gerda Charles (1976), the Egyptians were rendering folktales on *papyrus* and inscribing them on stone as far back as 1300 BC. The Greeks later came out with *Aesop's Fables* which contained stories akin to that of the Hindus. The Hindus, like the Egyptians, had also written their stories, in *Sanskrit*. These were later commented upon and amplified by the Iranians or Persians.

The Arabians also adapted some and turned others into the famous Arabian Nights stories, some of which were embodied in the *One Thousand and One Nights* story book. It was the invention of the printing press in Germany which made it possible for folktales, such as the Arabian stories, to be reproduced and circulated in written form.

Short stories derived from folktales were not the preserve of one nation. Towards the end of the 19th century, the English came up with *Pickwick Papers* by the great writer, Charles Dickens. Some of Shakespeare's stories were rooted in folklore. The Germans, the Italians, the Japanese and the Russians have their own folktales.

In the United States, Charles Colcock Jones Jr. (1831-1893) came up with *Gullah Folktales from the Georgia Coast* (1888). Also known as "Negro Myths from Georgia Coast", it was told as vernacular tales he heard black servants exchange on his family's rice and cotton plantation. The tales ranged from the humorous to the instructional and included stories of the "sperits", Daddy Jupiter's "vision", a dying bullfrog's last wish and others about how "buh rabbit gained sense" and "why the turkey won't eat crabs." The tales were rendered in Gullah, the language of the African Americans on the East coast, which is akin to what is popularly known as pidgin English in West Africa.

Susan Millar Williams, who commented on the book, observed that the stories of 1888 were similar to West African stories and that they were imported into America by slaves taken to the Americas from that part of Africa. To the best of her knowledge, that was about the first book she knew on folktales in the US. The stories in the book used ghosts, foxes,

hares, squirrel, lions, leopards, land monitor (lizard /African alligators), hyenas, rats, elephants, and other animals commonly found in Africa, as characters. The stories were also laced with animals and insects found in the eastern parts of the USA.

Back home, Prof. D. Waterman, who had done a lot of work in the field of folktales, found that F. Edgar and A.J.N. Tremaerne and Rudolf Prietze were reputed to have written books on Hausa folktales in 1904, 1910 and 1911. The only indigenous scholar who had similarly done tremendous work in that field was Prof. Ibrahim Yaro Yahaya who wrote *Tatsuniyoyi da Wasanni* books 1-6 in 1972. Before then, North Regional Literature Agency (NORLA) published *Tatsuniyoyin Zamani* titled *Almara* in 1952, although the publication was not attributed to any individual as its author.

Albert Helser (1923), the American who was among the foreign pioneer missionaries who brought Christianity to my Babur/Bura community of Borno State in North-East Nigeria, published 55 folktales gathered from the area. In the preface, he remarked that:

> A sincere attempt to understand native culture is the only fair and effective approach to the native mind. From the first day I set foot in Lagos, Nigeria, British West Africa, in 1922 I have been making honest effort to appreciate the native view of life...While the Bura people had no written language, we found that they had an unusually full system of culture embodied in their folktales.

He noted the role of stories in ensuring that the heritage of shared values was transferred from one generation to another. His observation:

> It was a surprise to learn that quite small boys and girls had a rather clear idea of the socially desirable ends which had been set up by the Bura tribe. These ends had been taught and emphasised through the folktales which had been passed on by word of mouth. The most respected women of each community had assumed the responsibility of passing on the culture of the tribe by telling stories to the younger children in the evening time. The older children carried on by reciting the stories to one another.

He was describing the society in which I grew up and it is a mark of the sustenance of that tradition that I was able to gather several folktales in less than one year of research effort.

Franz Boas in the foreword to Helser's book (Helser, 1923, p. 7) threw some light on the universality of the folktales phenomenon. He stated that:

> The collection of Bura Tales by Mr. Helser adds another one interesting collection from Africa that have appeared from time to time... Early attention has been called to the wealth of African folktales by Bleek's "Renard the Fox in Africa", a series of interesting animal tales. Materials from all parts of Africa, so far as they are available, illustrate the power of imagination of the Negro. They also show the interesting relations between all parts of Africa, and the migrations of tales from one part of the continent to the other.
>
> They also prove that many of our folktales and much of the homely wisdom laid down in proverbs is common property of Africa, Europe, and Asia. Many of the African tales have a particular interest for us because their equivalents are found among our American Negroes, for instance in the well-known Uncle Remus tales.

Commenting further, Franz Boas said:

> Folktales from all parts of the world are of particular interest because they illustrate with great clarity the mode of thought, the homely wisdom, and the ethical concepts of the people. In Africa, more than among other so-called primitive tribes, many a tale illustrates a proverb relating to the proper everyday behaviour. The Negro is fond of moralising by means of moralising tales.

I can confidently confirm from the annotations at the end of each of the folktales in my publications that there are indeed many morals in the stories. Not only that, the stories are as varied as there are literary categorizations: you have the comic, the tragic and the tragi-comic; then there are the horror or terror stories.

And the characters are imbued with diverse qualities: some exhibit wisdom, cleverness, bravery, strength and nobility whereas others are

characters of cruelty, foolishness, selfishness, cunning, and sluggishness. The clash of the contradictory qualities of the characters in a folktale is geared towards moulding the character of the child during his or her early education in the informal setting.

Nelson Mandela (2010), former President of South Africa, attests to this when he recalled that:

> After supper we would listen enthralled to my mother and sometimes my aunt telling us stories, legends, myths and fables which have come down from countless generations, and all of which contained some valuable moral lessons. As I look back to those days, I am inclined to believe that the type of life I led at my home, my experiences in the veldt where we worked and played together in groups, introduced me at an early age to the ideas of collective effort. The little progress I made in this regard was later undermined by the type of formal education I received which tended to stress individual more than collective values. Nevertheless, in the mid1940s when I was drawn into the political struggle, I could adjust myself to discipline without difficulty, perhaps because of my early upbringing.

Historical Significance of Folktales

While Skinner (1980) categorizes folktales by themes and characters, Duve Nakolisa (2006) draws attention to the historical dimension and includes in his categorization historical tales which narrate social interactions.

The historical relevance has earlier been underlined by Harward (Musaeus-Higgins, 1910) who remarked that:

> All children love a story...though there are many stories which may fairly be considered to belong to all races and all countries, there are folktales which only come home to the people of a particular race or country. To the latter class belong the tales by which a child gains its first notions of the history of its own land and people.

The following dialogue (Musaeus-Higgins, 1910) between a teacher (referred to as 'mother') and one of her students ('Somarawattie') further illustrates the place of history in folktales:

> "Please mother, about what year are we now in History?"
>
> "King Manavamma died 726 AD," answered mother, "and I am sorry I have to tell you some more sad things, before we come to another great King."
>
> "Oh, I don't think the stories now are half as nice as they were at first," called out an impudent little Somarawattie. "At first you told us about golden boats and beautiful Asoka-Mala, and now! Well, they are not so interesting."
>
> "Well, my little girl, how do you think I can tell you interesting stories, when no interesting things have happened? Look here! I am telling you stories from History, I don't make up the stories and so you will have to be satisfied with what I can tell you."
>
> Somarawattie felt a little ashamed when she received that answer and she saw that she was wrong. She came up to the mother and said pleadingly:
>
> "Please excuse me, dear mother; I will try to remember that you are not making the stories from Ceylon History but that you tell us what has happened in our country long ago. I am sure we are learning something from all the stories you tell us, even if they are not as pretty as some of the former ones.

To further underscore the historical significance of folktales, Ratnatunga (2010), author of *Tales from Sri Lanka: Folk and History*, said in the preface that "It is of utmost importance that the record of the island's folktales is preserved for the day when we are sane again; when we can remember what was before Terrorism and Tsunami."

The blurb is even more explicit:

> Sri Lanka, one of the most beautiful islands in the world, has a rich cultural history of more than 2,000 years. *Tales from Sri Lanka* is an attempt by Manel Ratnatunga to preserve the fast-dying, oral literature and traditions of the country and to make people aware of their national heritage.

> Through these tales, Manel Ratnatunga has succeeded in reminding people about their glorious past which has been handed down from generation to generation.

The general appeal of the stories as well as their historical relevance is also emphasized:

> The fascinating stories, retold in a lucid and simple style, will succeed in keeping readers of all ages spellbound. A blending of folklore and history make the tales more interesting and lively. This collection gives a rare glimpse into the captivating culture and history of Sri Lanka.

The Future of Folktales Research

Some critics distinguish between "creative" literature and folktales. Of course, value should be placed on new thinking as that is one of the ways the society develops. It is necessary, however, to consolidate achievements made and one way by which this could be done is to dig into the past, preserve and pass on the findings to generations to come. Archaeologists and social scientists are doing so. Mankind is currently making some breakthroughs in technology which in future will be subject of study as to how we reached this far.

As miners dig into the ground in search of precious mineral resources; so, it could be argued that similar effort needs to be made in digging into folktales to find the hidden treasures. The field is unlimited. One such effort was made by Parker (2003) who published five hundred and nineteen tales of Ceylon in three bound volumes with a total of 1,243 pages.

That was for Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, a country of 21,513,990 people (2010) with two principal ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. For Nigeria, which has a population of about 140,431,790 million people (2006 census) with over 250 ethnic groups, it will be a full time job for anyone to compile as many of their folktales as possible.

Abela Publishing (Jacobs, 2009) which reprinted 43 English folktales first published by David Nutt (1890) dedicates the book thus: "To the

teachers and story tellers who keep folklore and history alive through the telling and re-telling of these tales."

Abela went on to invite readers to:

> Take some time out and travel back to a period before television and radio, a time when families would gather around a crackling and spitting hearth and granddad or grandma or uncle or auntie would delight and captivate the gathering with stories passed on to them from their parents and grandparents from time immemorial.

As I found out in the course of gathering the folktales in my community, this beautiful picture painted by Abela no longer exists today and the fairly old people, who are the repositories of oral literature, are fast disappearing. Folktales narrated by such people, therefore, need to be reduced into writing.

The following five goals of Klamidas Classic Folktales series (Usman, 2005, pp. 11-12), to which I have added the last two objectives, are some of the aspirations which motivated me to delve into folktale research and publishing:

- To present through multimedia the best folktales around the world for the enjoyment of everyone, thereby promoting cross-cultural understanding and respect for story-telling and other traditions of the world's diverse peoples.
- To revive the age-old practice of telling children instructive tales by preserving in writing many of the stories which are believed to be fast disappearing as their human repositories pass on.
- To encourage the younger generations to appreciate, through the story-writing workshop (to which a segment of some of the books in the series might be dedicated), the educative and artistic qualities of the folktales of every culture.
- To inculcate in the students, through theory and practice, the art of short-story writing.

- To contribute, through the morals drawn from the tales, to the moral upbringing of children as well as the moral regeneration of the larger society, thereby reinforcing the need for the pursuit of worthwhile goals.
- To provide additional pleasurable reading materials for the young and old in their leisure hours.
- To provide reading materials with illustrations from familiar environments to supplant or complement foreign publications.

Chuma Nwokolo (*Sunday Trust,* October 30, 2011), legal practitioner and author of *Diaries of A Dead African*, has stressed the importance of preserving African traditions:

> We must have constant conversations between our past and our future, which should tell us how to live in the present...Once the basic needs – food, shelter – have been sorted out, the next imperative is...identity... I visited the British national archives in Kew Gardens and was struck by the overwhelming number of elderly folk researching their ancestry.

Because, in Africa, our elderly folk are the best custodians of our folklore, the folklore researcher is, therefore, racing against time. While one should not over romanticize the olden days, it must be recognized that folklore, particularly *orature,* has assumed new importance as a field of study. It promotes oral traditions, including the desirable art of story-telling and the shared values and enduring wisdom that emanate from it.

Besides, folktales are universal and can be used to unite mankind more remotely than sports or the internet is currently doing. Every country has got its own share of folktales which its people can share with others, thereby demonstrating the oneness of mankind. Says Jacobs (2009): "Up to 1870, it was said equally of France and of Italy that they possessed no folktales. Yet, within 15 years from that date, over 1000 tales had been collected in each country."

The harvest from Nigeria is even more amazing. In my small community of Biu, which has a population of 452,304 (2006 census), I collected over

1000 folktales within two years. Helser (1969, p. 8) had collected over 800 tales in the same community in the 1920s. The potential in Nigeria for gathering folktales is, therefore, quite enormous.

Retaining a Folktale's Original Flavour

While rendering the folktales I derived from my Babur/Bura cultural setting in Hausa language, I consciously tried to retain the flavour of the original tales. I chose the Hausa language for wider circulation within and outside Nigeria while bearing in mind the current UNESCO emphasis on writing in the vernacular for purposes of language preservation and ease of learning by the child.

Chinyere Obi-Obasi, one of Nigeria's budding authors, may somewhat be right in her assertion that folktales "can be retold in any fanciful way as nobody has copyright over them" (*National Mirror*, August 5, 2011). However, she is not absolutely right because folktales belong to the community of their origin and there is a limit to which they can be acceptably altered.

I have, in the case of my tales rendered in Hausa, tried as much as possible to maintain the form and content of the original Babur/Bura folktales. I was guided by Rev. Albert D. Helser (1969, p. 11) who researched 55 Bura folktales which he published in a book way back in the 1920s. He remarked in his preface:

> At first I translated the stories as I heard them and wrote them in English. After I had completed a number in this way I found that I was losing the native flavour of the stories, so I burned them. I started again... I have tried to preserve the indigenous spirit of the stories. My translation is as literal as it was expedient to make it.

Indeed, he said it was unusual to tell tales in the daytime. "The spell of the dark is necessary to the full appreciation of the stories," he emphasized.

Re-creating the Original Tale

I would like to re-visit the dichotomy between "creative" writing, on the one hand, and oral folktales captured in writing, on the other. Let me begin by noting that there are four major ways of capturing an oral folktale in writing; they are: transliteration, translation, modification, and adaptation.

To transliterate an oral tale means representing its letters or words using equivalent letters or words of another alphabet. For instance, the Hausa warning, "Ba shiga" strictly transliterated into English would read, "No Enter," or "No Entrance" if loosely transliterated.

To translate an oral tale means rendering it using the words and idioms of a new language to make it textually meaningful to the hearer or reader of the new language. Translation is not necessarily a word-for-word exercise. The above simple example, "Ba shiga", could in translation into English be rendered as "No road", "No passage", "No thoroughfare" or even, loosely, "Go back."

Modification, in the sense in which the word is used here, means changing key elements of the original tale in order to infuse into it fresh elements, such as new characters or sub-plot. Modification usually takes place when there is need to amplify or modernize the folktale and build a bigger story out of it without losing the essence of the original tale.

It is in the process of modification that the short-story writer, deriving his material from folklore, has a great deal of creative latitude. Indeed, modifying an oral tale from its oral source and re-telling it in writing in another language is as creative as any short-story writing effort can be.

Modification is not mere translation. It is translation enhanced by additional information and the re-ordering of key elements of the original tale. Modification is an exercise in creative writing. Many of the stories in my three short-story anthologies published in English, namely, *The Bride without Scars*, *The Stick of Fortune*, and *Girls in Search of*

Husbands were modified versions of oral tales. But the reader of these stories would easily see that the modified versions written in English (and it could have been any other language) are more elaborate than their comparatively shorter and simpler oral versions, especially in terms of plot and characterization. As for literary devices, modified and written forms of oral tales are stylistically very similar to the modern short story; in fact, they are modern short stories with traditional roots.

We move now to the fourth method – adaptation. The traditional meaning of adapting a work of art to new uses is intended here, except that apart from being a change from one genre to another (e.g., from a folktale to a radio play), it is also, in this context, a change from the original language of the folktale to a new language (e.g., adapting a Biu folktale to a radio play in English).

Evidently, a combination of two or more of the four methods I have identified above is very possible. The creative writer inspired by folklore, one may conclude, can only be limited by his own imagination. His creativity, rather than being hindered by tradition, can be enhanced by it.

Conclusion

It is an established fact that folklore and history are among the two most treasured world traditions. They are so vital that objects and monuments whose relevance are essentially folkloric and historic in nature are designated around the world as "cultural heritage" by the UNESCO "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" of 1972.

Going by the facts which emerged from the comparative study detailed above, folklore and history really share some vital things in common. They maintain a symbiotic relationship. Folklore tells tales and some of the tales tell the history of communities and of mankind.

It is in the light of the above postulation that this paper is advocating that scholars, students and researchers should focus serious attention on the

study of folklore with the same vigour archeologists and anthropologists employ while digging deep into our distant past.

Maybe I should add, in closing, that I have conducted research in the folklore and history of my native Biu area, in north-eastern Nigeria, and that I have, hence, experienced and observed the close affinities between these two aspects of a people's cultural evolution. Indeed, the often inseparable linkages between history and folklore tend to suggest that they are twin rivers that flow into the same sea.

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