

cultural anthropology political traditions and social networks

Cultural anthropology political traditions and social networks are deeply intertwined, forming the very fabric of human societies and influencing how power is wielded, traditions are maintained, and communities coalesce. This exploration delves into the intricate relationships between these three fundamental aspects of human organization, examining how anthropological perspectives illuminate the complexities of governance, kinship, and community structures across diverse cultures. We will uncover how political systems, whether formal or informal, are shaped by long-standing cultural norms and how the fluid dynamics of social networks can both reinforce and challenge these traditions, ultimately shaping collective behavior and identity. Understanding these connections offers invaluable insights into the persistence of certain practices and the forces that drive social change.

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The Foundational Role of Cultural Anthropology

Cultural anthropology provides the essential theoretical framework and methodological tools for dissecting the complex interplay between political traditions and social networks. It's the discipline that encourages us to step outside our own cultural assumptions and to view human behavior and societal structures with an open, analytical mind. By focusing on lived experiences, symbolic systems, and the emic perspective (the insider's view), cultural anthropologists can reveal the underlying logic and meaning behind seemingly disparate practices. Without this foundational understanding of cultural context, any analysis of political traditions or social networks would remain superficial, failing to grasp the deeper motivations and historical forces at play.

This field emphasizes holism, meaning it examines all aspects of human life as interconnected. So, when we talk about political traditions, we can't simply look at the laws or the leaders. We have to consider how these are understood and enacted within the broader cultural worldview, how they relate to kinship structures, economic systems, religious beliefs, and, crucially, the informal social networks that bind people together. It's this comprehensive approach that allows us to appreciate the resilience of traditions and the subtle ways social ties can influence everything from everyday interactions to the grandest political decisions.

Key Anthropological Concepts for Understanding Politics and

Networks

Several core concepts in cultural anthropology are particularly illuminating when examining political traditions and social networks. The concept of "culture" itself, understood not as static artifacts but as dynamic, shared systems of meaning, symbols, and practices, is paramount. This includes everything from language and belief systems to social customs and values, all of which profoundly shape political engagement and the formation of social bonds. Furthermore, the anthropological understanding of "social structure" moves beyond formal organizations to encompass the patterns of relationships and the distribution of power and influence within a group, which is directly relevant to how social networks operate.

Another vital concept is "ethnography," the immersive research method involving fieldwork and participant observation. This allows anthropologists to gain an intimate understanding of how political traditions are lived and experienced on the ground and how social networks function in everyday life. By observing interactions, conducting interviews, and participating in community life, anthropologists can uncover the unwritten rules and informal power dynamics that often supersede formal structures. This detailed, qualitative data is crucial for understanding the nuances that quantitative data alone might miss.

The Importance of Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is a cornerstone of anthropological inquiry, urging us to understand beliefs and behaviors within the context of the culture in which they occur, rather than judging them by the standards of one's own culture. When applied to political traditions, this means avoiding ethnocentric judgments about different forms of governance or leadership. For example, a system that appears hierarchical or undemocratic from a Western perspective might function effectively and be widely accepted within its own cultural framework, supported by strong communal bonds and reciprocal obligations. Similarly, social networks might be organized around principles of kinship, age, or gender that are central to that society's cultural logic.

This principle is not about condoning all practices, but about fostering a deeper, more objective understanding. By suspending our own biases, we can better appreciate why certain political traditions endure and how social networks are mobilized to support or contest them. It allows us to see the internal coherence of a society's systems, even when they differ drastically from our own, leading to more insightful analysis of how power is negotiated and maintained, and how community solidarity is fostered through various social ties.

Understanding Political Traditions Through an Anthropological Lens

Political traditions, as viewed through the lens of cultural anthropology, are far more than just institutional frameworks; they are deeply embedded cultural constructs that dictate how power is organized, legitimized, and exercised within a society. These traditions are shaped by a society's history, its core values, and its collective understanding of order, justice, and authority. They are

learned, transmitted across generations, and often reinforced through rituals, narratives, and shared symbols. An anthropological approach seeks to understand the meaning these traditions hold for the people who practice them, rather than simply describing their outward forms.

When we study political traditions anthropologically, we are looking at how leadership is understood and conferred, how decisions are made (whether through consensus, decree, or deliberation), and how conflicts are resolved. These elements are not universal; they vary dramatically from one culture to another, reflecting different emphases on individual autonomy versus collective well-being, or on hierarchical structures versus egalitarianism. The study also considers the informal mechanisms through which political power operates, recognizing that formal institutions often coexist with, and are influenced by, informal social arrangements.

Forms of Political Organization and Authority

Cultural anthropologists have identified a wide spectrum of political organization, ranging from small-scale, egalitarian bands and tribes to more complex chiefdoms and states. Each form is characterized by distinct patterns of leadership, decision-making, and social control, all of which are interwoven with cultural norms. For instance, in some societies, authority might be vested in elders who are respected for their wisdom and experience, their decisions guided by ancestral traditions and the need to maintain social harmony. In others, leadership might be charismatic, based on personal prowess or spiritual endowment, and its legitimacy constantly negotiated through performance and public opinion.

The concept of authority itself is culturally defined. What makes someone a legitimate leader can vary immensely. Is it lineage, achieved status, religious sanction, or the ability to provide resources? Understanding these different bases of authority is crucial for comprehending why certain political traditions persist and how they are maintained. Anthropologists examine how these forms of organization are learned and reproduced, and how they adapt to changing circumstances while often retaining core elements of their traditional underpinnings.

The Role of Ritual and Symbolism in Political Legitimacy

Rituals and symbolism are powerful tools for establishing and reinforcing political traditions. Through ceremonies, festivals, commemorations, and the use of symbolic objects or imagery, political authorities can legitimize their rule, solidify social cohesion, and transmit cultural values. These performances often dramatize core beliefs about order, hierarchy, and the relationship between the human and supernatural realms, making abstract political concepts tangible and emotionally resonant for participants. For example, a coronation ceremony in a monarchy is not merely a symbolic act but a profound reinforcement of the divine right or historical legitimacy of the ruling lineage.

Similarly, symbols can encapsulate complex political ideologies and historical narratives. National flags, anthems, and iconic monuments all serve to create a sense of shared identity and collective purpose, often invoking specific political traditions. Anthropologists analyze these symbolic systems to understand how they contribute to social order, how they are used to mobilize support, and how

they can be contested or reinterpreted by different groups within a society. The meaning of these symbols is not fixed; it is actively produced and reproduced through social interaction and can be a site of political struggle.

Conflict Resolution and Social Control Mechanisms

Every society has mechanisms for resolving disputes and maintaining social order, and these are often deeply tied to their political traditions. These mechanisms can range from informal mediation by community leaders to formal legal systems. Anthropological studies reveal that how conflict is perceived and addressed is culturally specific. In some cultures, emphasis might be placed on restoring relationships and achieving reconciliation, while in others, punishment and deterrence might be the primary goals. The underlying principles guiding these processes—whether justice is seen as retributive, restorative, or distributive—are shaped by enduring cultural values.

Furthermore, social control isn't solely exercised through formal sanctions. Gossip, shame, ostracism, and the enforcement of social norms within kinship groups or community networks can be incredibly effective in guiding behavior. These informal controls are often deeply intertwined with political traditions, as leaders or elders may rely on these mechanisms to uphold established order. Understanding these varied approaches to conflict resolution and social control offers a nuanced picture of how societies manage internal tensions and maintain their unique political trajectories.

The Power of Social Networks in Shaping Political Landscapes

Social networks, the intricate webs of relationships that connect individuals and groups, are not merely conduits for social interaction; they are dynamic engines that profoundly shape political traditions and outcomes. These networks, whether based on kinship, friendship, work, religion, or shared interests, create channels for information flow, resource mobilization, and the formation of collective identities and loyalties. In many societies, especially those with less formalized political structures, these informal networks are the primary arenas in which political influence is exerted and decisions are made. Understanding their architecture and dynamics is therefore essential for grasping the true nature of political power.

Anthropologists often study social networks using concepts like "tie strength" (the intimacy and frequency of interaction between individuals) and "network density" (the proportion of possible connections that actually exist). These factors influence how easily information spreads, how trust is built, and how collective action can be mobilized. Strong ties within a network can foster deep loyalty and solidarity, making group members more likely to act in concert. Weak ties, on the other hand, can bridge different networks, providing access to diverse information and resources, and facilitating broader alliances or social movements.

Kinship and Patronage Networks

Kinship, the system of social relationships based on descent and marriage, is often a fundamental organizing principle of social networks and, consequently, political traditions, particularly in many non-Western societies. Family ties can dictate alliances, establish lines of authority, and influence access to resources and political positions. In societies where kinship is paramount, political power may be inherited, distributed within extended family structures, or negotiated through intricate alliances between different kin groups. These networks create strong bonds of loyalty and obligation, making them potent forces in political maneuvering and governance.

Patronage networks, closely related to kinship in their emphasis on reciprocal obligations, also play a crucial role. In these systems, a powerful individual (the patron) provides resources, protection, or favors to less powerful individuals (the clients) in exchange for loyalty, support, and often political allegiance. These relationships create hierarchical structures of influence that can bypass formal political institutions and exert significant control over voting patterns, resource distribution, and the appointment of officials. Understanding the ebb and flow of these patron-client relationships is key to understanding power dynamics in many contexts.

Informal Communication and Influence

Social networks are vital channels for informal communication, which can be just as, if not more, influential than formal media or official pronouncements. Information, opinions, and rumors flow through these networks, shaping public perception and mobilizing sentiment. This is particularly true in societies where access to mass media is limited or where trust in official sources is low. Word-of-mouth, conversations within families, at community gatherings, or in marketplaces, all contribute to a collective understanding of political issues and leaders.

Moreover, these networks are fertile ground for the exercise of informal influence. Individuals who are well-connected or respected within their networks can sway opinions, broker agreements, and mobilize support for particular causes or candidates. Anthropologists often analyze "opinion leaders" or "social gatekeepers"—individuals whose advice and opinions are highly valued by their peers—to understand how influence is diffused through a community. This informal influence can significantly impact the success or failure of formal political initiatives and the evolution of political traditions.

Mobilization for Collective Action

Social networks are indispensable for mobilizing people to act collectively, whether for celebrations, protests, or political campaigns. The strength and structure of these networks determine the ease and effectiveness with which groups can be organized and coordinated. When individuals are embedded in strong, cohesive networks, they are more likely to feel a sense of shared identity and responsibility, making them more amenable to collective action. The presence of trusted intermediaries within these networks can facilitate communication, coordinate logistics, and build consensus.

For example, a political movement might leverage existing religious congregations, neighborhood associations, or alumni groups to organize rallies, disseminate information, and encourage voter turnout. The ability to tap into these pre-existing social structures can dramatically reduce the costs and challenges of mobilization, allowing even nascent movements to gain traction. Conversely, fragmented or weak social networks can hinder collective action, making it difficult to forge the solidarity needed to challenge established political traditions or enact significant social change.

Intersections and Dynamics: Where Tradition Meets Network

The true fascination lies in the dynamic interplay between established political traditions and the ever-evolving landscape of social networks. It's rarely a simple case of one dominating the other; instead, they engage in a continuous, complex dialogue, each shaping and reshaping the other. Political traditions provide the underlying cultural logic and historical context, while social networks offer the fluid mechanisms through which these traditions are enacted, adapted, or sometimes, subverted. Understanding this intersection is crucial for comprehending social change and the persistence of cultural practices.

Consider how a long-standing tradition of communal land ownership might be reinforced by kinship networks that emphasize shared inheritance and collective decision-making. Conversely, the emergence of new economic opportunities or external influences might lead to the formation of new social networks based on market relationships, potentially challenging the traditional communal ethos and altering political dynamics around resource control. It's this constant negotiation that makes studying cultural anthropology, political traditions, and social networks so captivating.

Reinforcing and Adapting Traditions

Social networks often serve as powerful mechanisms for the reinforcement and transmission of political traditions. When individuals are embedded in networks where certain political norms, beliefs, and practices are consistently valued and performed, these traditions become deeply ingrained. For instance, in a society where respect for elders is a core political tradition, kinship networks can ensure that younger generations are socialized into these values through daily interactions and observations, solidifying the authority of elders in decision-making processes. Similarly, celebratory rituals that reenact historical political events, often organized through community networks, serve to reaffirm national or group identity and loyalty to established political narratives.

However, social networks are not static entities. They evolve, adapt, and can also be catalysts for the adaptation of political traditions. As societies change—due to migration, economic shifts, or technological advancements—new forms of social connection emerge. These new networks can introduce novel ideas, challenge established hierarchies, and create pressure for political traditions to evolve. For example, the rise of online social networks has provided new platforms for political discourse and mobilization, allowing for the rapid dissemination of information and the formation of advocacy groups that can pressure governments to adapt their policies or practices, sometimes leading to the reinterpretation of older traditions.

Challenging Established Power Structures

While social networks can reinforce existing power structures, they can also become potent instruments for challenging them. When individuals feel marginalized or disenfranchised by established political traditions, they can leverage their social connections to form counter-networks and mobilize for change. These networks, often emerging organically from shared grievances or aspirations, can foster a sense of solidarity and collective efficacy that empowers individuals to question authority and demand reform. The Arab Spring uprisings, for instance, vividly demonstrated how social media networks could be used to bypass state-controlled media, coordinate protests, and galvanize opposition against long-standing political regimes.

The effectiveness of these challenging networks often depends on their ability to connect with broader social movements, gain access to resources, and articulate compelling alternative visions. They can highlight the disconnect between the idealized pronouncements of political traditions and the lived realities of different social groups. By building trust and facilitating communication among those who feel excluded, these networks can gradually erode the legitimacy of existing power structures and pave the way for new political arrangements, often drawing on or reinterpreting elements of older traditions in novel ways.

The Role of Transnational Networks

In our increasingly interconnected world, transnational social networks play a significant role in shaping political traditions and influencing power dynamics beyond national borders. These networks connect individuals, communities, and organizations across different countries, facilitating the flow of ideas, resources, and political movements. Diasporic communities, for example, often maintain strong ties with their homelands, influencing political discourse and actively participating in homeland politics through remittances, lobbying, and advocacy. International NGOs and global social movements also operate through transnational networks, advocating for human rights, environmental protection, or democratic reforms, thereby exerting pressure on national political traditions.

These transnational connections can introduce new political ideas and models of governance that may then be adopted or adapted by local communities. They can also foster transnational solidarity, enabling groups facing similar challenges to collaborate and support one another. However, they also raise complex questions about sovereignty, national identity, and the influence of external actors on internal political affairs. Understanding how these global connections interact with local political traditions and social networks offers a critical perspective on contemporary global governance and social change.

Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology, Politics, and Social Ties

Examining specific case studies from cultural anthropology offers concrete illustrations of how political traditions and social networks interact in diverse settings. These real-world examples allow

us to move beyond theoretical discussions and witness the complex, nuanced realities of human societies. By looking at different cultures, we can appreciate the vast spectrum of political organization and the myriad ways social ties are mobilized to shape power, maintain order, and foster collective identity. These studies underscore the importance of ethnographic detail in understanding these intricate relationships.

Whether it's the subtle power plays within a village council, the enduring influence of kinship in a national election, or the emergent political force of online communities, each case provides valuable insights. They demonstrate that political traditions are not simply abstract doctrines but lived practices, constantly negotiated and infused with meaning through the daily interactions and relationships that constitute social networks. The lessons learned from these diverse contexts are universally applicable to understanding human sociality and its political dimensions.

The Maasai of East Africa: Age-Sets and Political Authority

The Maasai people of East Africa offer a compelling example of how age-set systems structure political traditions and social networks. Traditionally, Maasai society is organized into a series of age-sets, groups of men initiated into adulthood at roughly the same time. These age-sets progress through distinct stages of life, each carrying specific rights, responsibilities, and forms of political authority. The 'warrior' age-set, for example, is responsible for defense and cattle raiding, while older 'elder' age-sets hold significant decision-making power and judicial authority. These age-sets form strong social bonds and create a dynamic system of reciprocal obligations and political accountability.

Within this framework, social networks are largely defined by age-grade membership, kinship ties, and locality. Elders within a particular age-set network might consult and make decisions affecting their community, drawing on customary laws and traditions. The collective identity and mutual support within these age-sets are crucial for maintaining social order and asserting political influence, both internally and in interactions with other groups. This system illustrates how a formal political tradition can be deeply integrated with the structure and function of social networks, creating a robust system of governance and social control.

The Iroquois Confederacy: Federalism and Consensus

The Iroquois Confederacy, also known as the Haudenosaunee, presents a fascinating example of an early form of federalism rooted in consensus-building and a complex system of social and political organization. Their Great Law of Peace established a council of sachems (chiefs) representing different clans and nations. Decisions within the Confederacy were traditionally made through lengthy deliberation and consensus among these representatives, emphasizing harmony and the long-term well-being of all member nations. This tradition of consensus-driven governance is deeply embedded in their social structure, which includes matrilineal clans and moieties that create intricate networks of obligation and alliance.

The social networks among the Iroquois were crucial for the functioning of the Confederacy. Clan affiliations and inter-clan relationships formed the basis for political alliances and served as conduits

for communication and deliberation among the sachems. The oral tradition, passed down through stories and ceremonies, reinforced these political traditions and the values of peace and cooperation. This case highlights how a sophisticated political tradition can be sustained by deeply interwoven social networks that prioritize collective deliberation and mutual understanding, offering a powerful counterpoint to more hierarchical or adversarial political systems.

Modern Urban Movements and Digital Networks

In contemporary urban settings, we see a powerful illustration of how new forms of social networks, particularly digital ones, can emerge to challenge or adapt existing political traditions. Movements advocating for social justice, environmental protection, or political reform often leverage online platforms like social media to organize, share information, and mobilize supporters. These digital networks can bypass traditional gatekeepers of information and create spaces for diverse voices to be heard, fostering new forms of political engagement and collective identity.

These movements demonstrate a dynamic relationship between established political traditions and emergent social networks. While they may seek to reform or even overthrow existing political structures, they often draw upon and reinterpret older traditions of resistance or community action. The rapid dissemination of information through social media can quickly amplify grievances, create pressure for policy changes, and potentially destabilize established political arrangements. This highlights how social networks, especially in their modern, technologically mediated forms, are not just passive reflections of society but active forces in shaping its political future and the evolution of its traditions.

Conclusion: A Holistic View of Human Societies

In conclusion, the study of cultural anthropology, political traditions, and social networks reveals the intricate, indispensable connections that define human societies. It's clear that to truly understand how societies function, we cannot isolate these elements. Political traditions provide the historical blueprints and cultural scripts for power and governance, but it is the fluid, ever-present architecture of social networks that breathes life into these traditions. These networks, whether based on kinship, community ties, or digital connections, are the conduits through which political ideas are transmitted, influence is exerted, and collective action is mobilized.

The anthropological perspective compels us to appreciate the diversity of political forms and the cultural logic that underpins them, while also recognizing the universal human need for connection and belonging that drives the formation of social networks. As societies continue to evolve, influenced by globalization, technology, and changing demographics, the interplay between these three domains will only become more complex and significant. A holistic understanding, grounded in anthropological inquiry, is essential for navigating these complexities and fostering more just, equitable, and resilient societies for all.

The Enduring Significance of Interconnectedness

The enduring significance of interconnectedness cannot be overstated. Our lives are shaped by the stories and structures passed down through generations—our political traditions—but they are also profoundly influenced by the people we know, trust, and interact with daily—our social networks. The strength of these bonds, the information they carry, and the support they offer are fundamental to our individual and collective experiences. Whether these networks are face-to-face within a village or virtual across continents, they are the very essence of social life.

This interconnectedness is not merely an observation; it is an active force. It dictates who holds power, how decisions are made, and how communities respond to challenges. By appreciating the deep symbiosis between cultural traditions and social networks, we gain a more profound understanding of human behavior, the persistence of cultural practices, and the dynamics of social change. It's a reminder that behind every political system and every tradition lies a human story, woven through countless relationships.

Future Directions in Research

The study of cultural anthropology, political traditions, and social networks remains a vibrant and evolving field, with many avenues for future research. As technology continues to reshape how we connect, understanding the impact of digital social networks on political traditions—especially in terms of polarization, misinformation, and the formation of new political identities—will be crucial. Further exploration into how transnational networks influence local political structures and traditions, and how indigenous political systems adapt to global pressures, offers rich ground for inquiry.

Moreover, the increasing awareness of intersectionality—how various social identities like race, gender, class, and ethnicity intersect to shape experiences of power and belonging—provides a critical lens through which to re-examine political traditions and network dynamics. Investigating how these intersecting identities influence participation in social networks and shape the reception and adaptation of political traditions will undoubtedly lead to more nuanced and comprehensive understandings of human societies. The ongoing dialogue between these concepts promises to yield ever-deeper insights into the human condition.

FAQ

Q: How do kinship systems influence political traditions in societies studied by cultural anthropologists?

A: Kinship systems are fundamental to political traditions in many societies. They often dictate lines of authority, inheritance, and alliance. For instance, in matrilineal societies, political power might be vested in a woman's brother rather than her husband, influencing how leadership roles are understood and transmitted. Kinship networks also create strong bonds of loyalty and obligation, which can be mobilized for political support, resource distribution, and conflict resolution, often

shaping how political traditions are enacted in daily life.

Q: What role do informal social networks play in challenging established political traditions?

A: Informal social networks are powerful vehicles for challenging established political traditions. They allow individuals to connect outside formal structures, share dissenting views, and mobilize collective action. By fostering a sense of solidarity and shared grievance, these networks can bypass traditional gatekeepers of information and power, creating space for alternative ideologies and movements to emerge. Examples range from community organizing against oppressive policies to the use of social media for political activism, demonstrating their potential to disrupt and reshape political landscapes.

Q: How does cultural anthropology define "political traditions" differently from political science?

A: Cultural anthropology views political traditions as deeply embedded cultural constructs that encompass not just formal institutions but also the shared meanings, values, and practices surrounding power, authority, and governance. It emphasizes understanding these traditions from an insider's perspective (emic) and through ethnographic fieldwork. Political science, while acknowledging cultural influences, often focuses more on formal structures, policies, and quantifiable outcomes, whereas anthropology delves into the symbolic, ritualistic, and lived experience aspects of political life.

Q: Can you provide an example of how social networks help reinforce political traditions?

A: Consider the tradition of ancestor veneration in many cultures, which often involves specific rituals and beliefs about the continuity of lineage and the influence of past leaders. Social networks, particularly within extended families and community groups, are crucial for ensuring these traditions are passed down and practiced. For example, family gatherings where elders recount stories of their ancestors, or community-wide ceremonies honoring lineage, directly reinforce the political tradition of respecting ancestral authority and maintaining social order through inherited social status.

Q: What is the significance of studying transnational social networks in relation to political traditions?

A: Studying transnational social networks is significant because it reveals how political ideas, movements, and influences flow across national borders. Diasporic communities, for instance, can maintain strong political ties to their homelands, impacting elections and policy debates. Global advocacy groups use these networks to pressure governments on issues like human rights or environmental protection. This challenges the notion of purely national political traditions and highlights the increasing interconnectedness of global politics, where external influences can shape internal governance and cultural norms.

Q: How do rituals and symbolism, facilitated by social networks, contribute to the legitimacy of political traditions?

A: Rituals and symbolism are key tools for solidifying the legitimacy of political traditions, and social networks are essential for their performance and transmission. Through shared participation in ceremonies, festivals, or symbolic displays, communities collectively reaffirm their commitment to established norms and leaders. For example, national holidays that involve parades, speeches, and communal gatherings, often organized through local social groups, reinforce national identity and the legitimacy of the state's political traditions by creating shared experiences and emotional connections to historical narratives and symbols of power.

Q: In what ways can digital social networks alter traditional forms of political participation?

A: Digital social networks can dramatically alter traditional forms of political participation by offering new avenues for engagement and information dissemination. They can facilitate rapid mobilization for protests, enable direct communication between citizens and representatives, and create platforms for niche political communities to form. This can bypass traditional media and established political parties, potentially leading to more direct forms of democracy or, conversely, to increased political fragmentation and the spread of misinformation. The speed and reach of digital networks fundamentally change how citizens interact with their political systems.

Q: How does the anthropological concept of "cultural relativism" apply to understanding different political traditions?

A: Cultural relativism is vital for understanding diverse political traditions by urging us to suspend our own cultural biases. It means analyzing a tradition within its own societal context, recognizing that what might seem unusual or even negative from an external viewpoint can be logical and functional within that culture's unique historical, social, and belief systems. For example, a society with a strong emphasis on communal decision-making may appear inefficient to someone from a highly individualistic culture, but cultural relativism encourages understanding its value in maintaining social cohesion and respecting group consensus within that specific cultural framework.

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