

NA EDUCATION IN THE FACE OF MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT

The Na are a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group straddling the Yunnan-Sichuan border in southwest China.¹ Their small population of 30,000 belies their considerable stature as the only remaining matrilineal society in all of China. Many of their traditions are being affected by mainstream Han Chinese culture, whose influence through schooling, television, and tourism is growing. New opportunities for Na youth to find employment outside of their villages also threaten the continuity of village life. At the same time, tourism is affirming the income-generating potential of ethnic identity and natural resources. Finally, the steady penetration of Han values is countered by a resurgence of Na religions. This paper is a preliminary report on findings from eight months of fieldwork conducted with support from a Fulbright research grant in 2002.

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A dozen young Chinese tourists and I huddled around the fire in the middle of Zhaxi's courtyard, exhilarated from the festivities that had just ended. Billed as a campfire party, every village household had sent a representative to this home to perform the traditional Na dancing and singing. But the ethnic display in this village, which was just beginning to become a major tourist destination, was different. After dancing for just five minutes, the villagers were tired of being watched and yanked the unsuspecting visitors to join them in the slow, rhythmic circle dance. With much laughter and embarrassed resistance, many were persuaded. Then, dancing over, Zhaxi announced that we would now hear from the young Na women. Clustered on one side, they sang first, followed by their male counterparts on the other side of the fire. The tourists resumed their role as audience ... but not for long. Soon they too were singing, one group at a time, as the Na hosts insisted they would only continue singing if the visitors did too.

As I sat down after taking my turn singing, it occurred to me how special was this mix of interaction and performance. Even after it was all over and the villagers had headed out, many of us stayed behind, peppering our host, Zhaxi, with questions about Na customs. The visitors were genuinely interested in learning more, and he obliged, spinning a few tales in the process. But then he stopped, and looked directly at me, said, "So many of you authors, scholars, TV crews, and filmmakers have come to see the Moso [Na] and show us to the outside world. But what I wish most is that instead of just telling about us, someone would help us figure out how to preserve our culture, how to

save it from assimilation. This is something that no one knows how to do."

Zhaxi put into words the thoughts of many Na with whom I had talked before. Living near Lugu Lake, nestled high in the mountains of the Yunnan-Sichuan border, this culture of 30,000 people has received worldwide attention for its unique kinship system. Nearly everyone stays in their natal house for life, and maternal uncles, not biological fathers, take responsibility for "fathering" the children.² Marriage is rejected as an institution that disrupts household harmony, and partnership is limited to nighttime sexual unions that have little affect on daily life. Yet several factors are prompting changes in the Na culture. State schooling, teaching the same curriculum across China, interferes with informal traditional learning by occupying much of children's time. Electricity is now available in many Na villages, bringing television programs into the extended family households every night. New roads accelerate the flow of goods and people, replacing traditional woven clothing with inexpensive commercial synthetics and bringing tourists in droves—many hoping they can try out the famous Na "walking marriage" (the nighttime sexual union). Roads also make work outside the village easier to access. Thus the influence of Han culture, with values contrasting quite sharply with the egalitarian Na worldview, is growing. Many wonder how long it will be before Na culture gives way completely to the Han way of life.

My hope is to unravel these questions by looking through the prism of education. I look at traditional, informal learning; religious education; and school education. Finally, I seek to understand the drain of youth from their villages to work in cities, examining the effect this may have on the future of the Na.

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TRADITIONAL WAYS OF LEARNING

Traditional education in the Na culture gives its lessons at the hearth instead of the formal space of the classroom. Like many indigenous peoples, Na children learn most about what it means to be a Na through example. Growing up in the same household with grandmothers and grandmothers' brothers, mothers and mothers' siblings, and many cousins, caregivers are plentiful. I often saw children sprawled across laps, or draped over shoulders, or sitting at the hearth with their families. The loving attentions of so many older people influence children to emulate them. Children growing up in Na households learn to respect others, and they help their elders to avoid quarrelling and consider the implications of their actions as a reflection on the entire household. They also learn the many speech taboos that govern their modesty system, allowing them to avoid embarrassing topics in the presence of relatives. Children who misstep are often reprimanded, "You don't understand the concept of modesty!" These reprimands are lighthearted, however: Na children are considered fragile, soulless beings in need of nurturing until they undergo an initiation ceremony during the Lunar New Year of their thirteenth year.³ Without spirits or souls, children are not held responsible for their actions, and punishment serves no purpose. Therefore, Na education traditionally takes gentle forms. The Na laugh constantly and like to smack each other good-naturedly, which makes Na who leave their villages exceptionally popular with their colleagues.

Na children also learn through play. Climbing mountains, they learn which plants have medicinal uses and which berries make delicious snacks. This young girl in the photo, for example, is picking berries on a mountain path above her village. They are creative, making toys from natural objects or adult leftovers to play "house," or they make slingshots. Even pebbles can be a fun game when several are thrown up in the air and caught single-handedly. These games are valued for their ability to build moral character. Bravery, intelligence, and quick wit arise from playing games (Guo Dalie 1992:73).

Many forms of indigenous knowledge are also spread by example. Children often play in the fields where their

mothers go to work and help with simple tasks as they get older. Contrary to popular belief, the Na are not matriarchal. Assumptions that Na women reign their households are invalid, with both Na women and men bearing responsibility for household and agricultural tasks. This labor is often divided by gender.⁴ Boys accompany their uncles fishing, while girls help their mothers with cooking. Few

Na still weave cloth from hemp. In most villages, this knowledge seems destined to die out with the current generation of grandmothers. And hunting, now banned, is no longer an important skill to pass down. But as many Na have prospered in the years of the Reform era (effectively reaching this region in the early 1980s), house construction and renovation is rapidly increasing, bringing with it a high demand for carpenters. This knowledge is often passed down through informal apprenticeships lasting several years, often with carpenters from different families.

Another form of specialized knowledge involves medicinal plants. Many older Na brew herbal remedies from mountain herbs. One elderly man learned medical arts from his uncle. Na travel far seeking his cures for broken bones. In many villages though, younger Na accustomed to the quick cures of Western medicines are no longer inter-

ested in learning to use herbs medicinally. The bone doctor has not found anyone interested in learning his craft. Religious practitioners, though, also offer remedies for illness. They include Tibetan medicine, with a clinic in the town of Yongning opened by a lama who studied in Tibet; and ceremonies conducted by *daba*. I witnessed a lama resuscitate a woman who had lost consciousness at her relative's funeral. He rubbed heated butter onto her pressure points, then sprinkled some Tibetan medicine into her mouth. With his help, she recovered quickly. These examples are demonstrative of a broader trend for the Na: traditional knowledge linked to religion is being preserved, while other forms of traditional knowledge are being lost.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Religious ceremonies, including initiation rites and funerals, reinforce many Na cultural values. During the com-



Fig. 1. While leading the author to a neighboring village, Archei Latzo wandered into the bushes and returned with heaps of berries (Sept. 2002).

ing-of-age ceremony, the daba chants verses impressing the importance of harmony and diligence upon the new initiates. Today, many villages are without dabas, so respected elderly members of the household chant in their place. During funerals, a daba offers food to the deceased and chants instructions on the path the soul should take to the ancestral home. These religious ceremonies provide another opportunity for children to absorb appropriate values and learn what it means to be Na.

With the exception of a book of thirty pictographs used for ritual calculations, the daba use no writing system. Their repertoire of oral classics, however, contains many mnemonic rhymes to help their successors learn the important chants and ceremonies (Shih 1993:167). These successors are carefully selected from the daba's sisters' sons, who could continue his tradition. After years of training, the daba conducts a ceremony to determine whether the youth has successfully received the mystical powers, initiating him if he demonstrates this gift. The oral tradition, though, is difficult to teach youngsters who are accustomed to memorizing written texts, and its traditional knowledge may be irretrievably lost as elderly daba pass away.

Tibetan Buddhism has coexisted with the indigenous Na daba religion since the thirteenth century. Both forms of religious practice were forbidden as feudal superstitions during the Cultural Revolution, and their leaders often suffered for their beliefs. Many dabas declined to train youngsters and died without having passed on their knowledge to a descendant. Other dabas have been unsuccessful in convincing youth to undergo the rigorous training necessary to become a daba. One documentary filmed by Yunnan Television with Lama Gatusa, a Na from Labai Township, shows a poignant scene of an elderly daba sitting on a hillside, teaching his disinterested grown nephew a daba chant. The nephew's boredom reflects the challenges of training adults to carry on the tradition. Today, in the entire Yongning basin only a single daba remains. A growing minority of boys study to be lamas, while few acquire knowledge of dabaism.

In recent years Tibetan Buddhism has eclipsed dabaism in both status and size. When both lamas and daba officiate at funerals, for example, each lama may receive hundreds of yuan more than the single daba. The lamas' robes and their droning chants intimidate and impress the children who peer at them through the doorway. When chanting a particular section, the immediate family of the deceased kowtow to the lamas. Even the smallest children participate in this show of respect. One high school stu-

dent, home for the winter holiday, saw the respect generated by a village lama and remarked, "I want to be a lama!" Having turned the opportunity down before, he now regretted his decision. Some young boys now attend a few years of primary school and then drop out, continuing their education with instruction from Tibetan Buddhist lamas who teach them how to recite scriptures and eventually train them to become lamas themselves. This is an interesting alternative to the national curriculum taught in schools, and one that the local Education Commission does not openly object to (its leader, in fact, is Na). "After all, studying to be a lama is a form of education too!" he noted jovially.

Studying to become a lama involves learning to read Tibetan script and rote memorization of scriptures. Theology is not an important component of the training. Boys visit their teacher's home for lessons once or twice daily and often contribute labor to the lama's household. In recent years, the Yongning Lamasery has instituted a semi-annual examination for the lama youth, cracking down on those who pursue religious training only to gain reprieve



Fig. 2. Teacher (Na) corrects papers after class at the Coke School (Nov. 2002).

from laboring in the fields with no intention of becoming a lama.

SCHOOL EDUCATION

Formal Chinese education is incompatible with Na tradition. In school, children are expected to be serious and obedient. They face pressures to learn to read in Chinese, an onerous task even for native speakers. While some village schools (grades one and two) in the area where Na live use informal bilingual education, it is transitional, encourag-

ing children's fluency in Mandarin Chinese. The content of the education often places Na traditions in a non-prestige role. Rote learning from texts which emphasize nationalist ideology replaces experiential learning from adult role models. Officially, moral, intellectual, and physical depth is the goal of schooling, but the emphasis on promotion through testing often supersedes these principles.

As formal schooling spread gradually throughout Yongning beginning in the 1960s, the government faced an uphill battle trying to convince the Na that schooling was relevant to their lives. Nominal school fees made schooling accessible, but extended households often considered labor needs first when deciding to send children to school. A household with several sons may send one son to school, train one to become a lama, and leave one at home. Daughters, whose helpfulness at home made families reluctant to lose them to schooling, were often kept at home. While conducting surveys in Walabi, a Na woman explained these patterns by saying that boys are often too mischievous for their families to control. "Struggling to get them to help around the house is more trouble than sending them off to school for the teachers to deal with!" she told me. She has several sisters, only two of whom had gone to school. In her case, her scrawniness made her family doubt her usefulness in the fields. Thus she went to school. An older sister, conversely, was kept at home to care for younger siblings.

The gender imbalance in school attendance is reflected in a government literacy survey conducted in 1998, which reveals that women are disproportionately represented among illiterates. In the four villages where I worked, women made up at least two-thirds of total illiterates (Table 1). Until the early 1980's, the allocation of food and resources to households according to a system of work points made children's labor particularly attractive as a source for points in a time of scarce resources. Children were often withdrawn from school after a few years of schooling. The rates of half-literacy, defined as three years or more of education without graduating from primary school, are also high.

Nine years of education were declared compulsory for all Chinese in the May 1985 Education Reforms, adopted by the National People's Congress on April 21, 1986. In Yongning, however, government efforts to achieve universal primary education remain far from successful.⁵ School fees, distance of school from home, teacher shortages, and the loss of children's labor all act as disincentives for children to attend school.

Primary school students must pass examinations in order to enter middle school (junior secondary school, grades 7–9). For rural children, attending junior secondary school imposes the heavy economic burden of living and boarding at the school. Senior secondary schools (grades 10–12) also admit students by examinations only. Policies granting minority students additional points are being phased out, and passing the entrance examinations continues to be a formidable task.

It is difficult for Na students to afford the living expenses of attending senior secondary school in the county capital, Ninglang. A single semester may require as much as 1,500 yuan, an astronomical figure for self-sufficient villagers whose crops are for personal consumption and do not generate cash income. The Minorities Middle School, which recruits students from these areas according to the geographic and minority makeup of the county, provide subsidized rice to students with high test scores and economic need. Yet university education remains out of reach for many Na.

EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

The existence of a single curriculum across China does not encourage efforts to make schooling more relevant to minorities like the Na, especially since the curriculum is dominated by Han values. Theoretically the Na have the right to develop their own curricula, as they live in an official designated autonomous area (Law on the Autonomy of Nationality Areas 1984). In reality, though, no schools in Yongning deviate from the state standard. Local history is seldom taught. Students often learn more about American history than about their own group's past (Yuan Mei 1997:168). Stories about traditional Chinese families, complete with fathers and mothers living in the same household, fill reading primers and engender a realization among Na children that they are highly unusual. Of course, these same textbooks emphasize family harmony, a central value for both the Na and the Chinese. Although the marriage campaign to obliterate traditional forms of Na social organization is over now, subtle pressures of sinicization remain strong through institutionalized education.⁶

In recent years, though, the arrival of tourism as a major force has created a new awareness of the attractions of Na culture. One primary school has replaced the standard calisthenics with Na circle dancing during the morning

Table 1. Yongning Township Education Survey, 1998

Village Name	Illiterate (%)	Illiterate who are Female (%)	Half Literate (%)	Moso (%)	Total Population
Dapo	23.9	68.7	23.9	99	482
Badzu	46.4	66.5	11.6	42	379
Walabi	43.7	72.9	15.3	97	295
Lige	41.7	74.1	11.5	94	139

break. Another, nicknamed the Coke School (Coca-Cola Hope School being a mouthful in Chinese), prepares for visits from donors by soliciting Na songs from its Na students, then teaching the non-Na half of the student body to sing these minority songs. The Yongning Middle School incorporates Na culture into its arts classes, but changes the traditional Na dance from a circle to a looser configuration of individuals swishing their long white skirts in a way that no Na would normally dance. This was first performed for the county education bureau on an inspection visit, then made into a Video Compact Disks to show to later visitors. When representatives of the Forest Protection Army visited the Spring Girls' Class they had sponsored at the Keypoint Primary School, they watched this video approvingly.

Tourism has also helped draw attention to the plight of Yongning schools, and several organizations are working to support school construction and help children pay for their education. A handful of tourists have even volunteered as teachers for a year. Two organizations have emerged explicitly to help local children. One, started by a German photographer, funded dormitory construction for girls at the middle school and provides subsidies to needy Na girls in conjunction with the county Education Bureau. The other, called the Yongning Mountain Region Education Fund, is based at a lakeside guesthouse and recruits long-term volunteers to link tourist dollars with needy children. Its founders include the Sichuan guesthouse owner, a Na teacher, and a Hong Kong scholar researching the Na. Two schools are official Hope Factory Schools, with one sponsored by Coca-Cola. Several retired teachers from Hong Kong, acting separately, have arranged donations for school construction and upgrades like outhouses and retaining walls. The Yunnan Foreign Affairs Office brought a Japanese businessman to see a crumbling school in a lakeside village; he subsequently funded the school's reconstruction. Another primary school was sponsored by the Yunnan Water & Power Company. At least two international organizations also provide funding for individual students to pay school fees, with one organization sending an American woman to teach primary school English in Yongning while helping with poverty alleviation projects.⁷

One of the most unique aid schemes in Yongning is the girls' class sponsored by the Forest Protection Army. They sponsored 50 fourth-grade girls from around Yongning to board at the Keypoint Primary School, then added a single boy whom they also wanted to help. The soldiers pool

their resources to pay most of the girls' expenses, provide blankets, and give them winter clothing. Seeing fifty little girls in a single classroom wearing army uniforms is a disconcerting sight. This class, while providing the girls with an education far superior than that which they had previously received in village schools, also raises questions of balance. The girls have classes every day for four weeks, then have three days off. For safety reasons, they are not permitted to leave the school grounds until their monthly three-day break. The intensity of this education



Fig. 3. From left, two retired Hong Kong teachers, current volunteer teacher, former volunteer teacher and current Education Fund worker, Tuozhi government official (Na), driver (Na) (Sept. 2002)

may overshadow the benefits of being selected for this special class.

These combined efforts, though numerous, have still not reached all students that need help. Furthermore, they pay no attention to the content of education received and may, in a perverse way, be contributing to the demise of the very culture that attracted outsiders' attention in the first place. In cases like the girls' class, formal education dominates their lives, leaving little opportunity for informal learning. The education they receive is designed to prepare them to leave their villages and seek employment in cities, not sustain their native cultures.⁸

TOURISM AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

As seen above, tourism has brought tangible benefits to the Na. In addition to casting attention on schools, it provides employment opportunities close to home and gives fluency in Chinese a new importance. Tourists seldom leave the lake area, though, and concentrate their spending in one village, Luoshui. This village now has a glut of

guesthouses, bringing the standard room rate down to 10 yuan per night from a previous 15 yuan. Income from rowing boats and giving horse rides, split between two rotating teams, has remained steady. The tourism industry, while bringing prosperity to certain Na communities and generating employment opportunities for others, has recast traditional Na culture in a voyeuristic light and ushered in prostitution. As men traveling to Lugu Lake in search of a free love utopia found most Na women unwilling to accommodate their fantasies, prostitution rose to meet their needs. At first, Na insisted that the women involved were all outsiders. Denying local involvement is no longer possible, though, with hotels in the red-light district opened and operated by Na. In one of China's poorest counties, the attractiveness of the income potential of prostitution is understandable.⁹ One Na principal, whose primary school dropouts and graduates alike often find their way into this trade, confided to me sadly, "I can't stand young Na." The development of the sex industry has divided the normally united Na, with stories abounding of old women spitting on these younger women in disgust.

Once I asked a policeman stationed at the lake whether their post had plans to deal with the sex industry, technically illegal in China. He chuckled and replied, "Deal with it? Most of the tourists come for that—if we tried to close it down the tourists would stop coming!" While his words exaggerate the situation, denying the influence of the sex industry is impossible. Many observers worry that HIV will reach the Na as well, fearing that Na traditions will foster its spread before symptoms signal the arrival of HIV.

Some Na are learning the value of their singing and dancing skills. A series of Minority Nationalities Parks have sprung up across China to take advantage of the domestic tourist industry. Each park recruits members of minorities to sing, dance, and explain their culture. Other ventures include a Na cultural center in Beijing, dancing at hotels, and working at other tourist attractions. While this is not long-term employment, youth appreciate the opportunity to see other parts of China without permanently committing to leaving home.

Na are scattered in minority parks in Kunming, Wuhan, Shenzhen, Beijing, Harbin, and Hangzhou. Recruiters who come to Yongning now find an unusual situation:

nearly all the youth who want to leave (and whose families permit) are already gone. In one case, a middle-aged woman was recruited to work, playing the mother in the coming-of-age ceremony. Not infrequently, Na discover that the outside world is not as ideal as imagined; they often find it difficult to adjust to different climates and interpersonal values. At this point, they are welcomed back home.

These jobs do not require high levels of education, but Na who never learned to read report feeling uncomfortable and insecure in cities. Several times they told me, "We are deaf and dumb, no better than our livestock." They usually stay home or take jobs as maids or restaurant workers. Their difficulties convince them that formal education is important, and they often ensure that children in their households acquire a rudimentary education.

The same roads that help tourists reach Yongning and connect Na with employment away from home also pro-



Fig. 4. These Na women performing in the Kunming Nationalities Park are swishing their skirts in a decidedly non-Na way. Photo: Kunming Nationalities Park, June 2002.

vide income to many drivers. Although licensing fees and permits are still expensive, purchasing a small minivan is increasingly affordable. Drivers take tourists from the county seat to Lugu Lake, a 93-kilometer journey of three hours, through three mountain passes. Road construction also provides work for Na men.

Finally, the prosperity of tourism has helped a small but growing number of Na afford higher education. While the system of government-assigned jobs for graduates has been terminated, connections have enabled some to secure government posts. For most of them, migration to cities is the only way to use their education. Once there, intermarriages with other ethnic groups and linguistic isolation often weaken their children's Na identity. Further-

more, Na employed by the government as civil servants or teachers are not permitted to have 'walking marriages', and are often required to marry.¹⁰

Na culture is at a crossroads. As youths leave the village to find short-term employment in cities, villages are being drained of their youths. Many minorities who move to cities become assimilated, while those who stay in their native villages retain strong links to their traditions and culture. If sustainable economic development would occur locally and labor and brainpower from drifting into cities, Na culture may benefit. Education, too, must be reconceived to contribute to rural agricultural life as well as preparing children for careers in the outside world. If expertise needed in the village can be identified, youth can be trained to fill these needs instead of reluctantly abandoning their communities.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous knowledge among the Na has been influenced by several major changes in recent years. Certainly, state schools conflict with informal learning, and electricity has brought mainstream Han culture closer than ever through television and video screenings. In some cases, new VCD recordings of Na music have even replaced the traditional Na flute music performed at dances. But even through these changes, one woman in the village of Walabi demonstrates the potential for preserving Na culture. She still spins cloth from hemp and weaves traditional Na clothing. Discovering that tourists liked her products, she set up a small room to display her wares and soon earned an average of 500 yuan (US\$60) per month. Now she has mobilized ten other village women to create these handicrafts. While they are still struggling to determine how to market their goods, the prospect of Na women working together to use indigenous knowledge as a source of income is exciting.

Another positive indicator of the tenacity of Na culture is Tibetan Buddhism, which has flourished amidst the unprecedented religious tolerance of the past two decades. A growing minority of boys studies to be lamas, even as few acquire knowledge of dharma. Finally, even as its darker sides divide the Na, tourism has reinforced elements of Na culture, giving it new prestige in schools and providing jobs for those who simply explain their culture to others. To answer Zhaxi's question, I would encourage him to focus on these positive developments and work to create local, sustainable projects that involve the entire village. In this way, the Na can enjoy a long future.

NOTES

1. I use "Na" to name this group because it is the ethnonym they themselves use. In Chinese, they are referred to as "Moso" in Yunnan and "Menggu" [Mongolian] in Sichuan. Officially, the Moso are classified as a subgroup of the Naxi nationality, a

debatable claim (see McKhann 1998, 1995). Choice of ethnonym is complicated by local and national politics.

2. Outsiders, projecting their own notions of moral decency on the Na, were frequently shocked by the Na and their absence of a father. Joseph Rock wrote in 1947, "The moral state of the Hli-khin [Na] population is certainly a peculiar one. The word father is unknown....The result [of monasteries which allow their monks free reign] is a horde of illegitimate children who know no father" (Rock 1947:391).

3. In the Na system, when children are born, they are considered one year old; after twelve months, their age is two. By Western reckoning, Na children are twelve years old when they "come of age". They do not record dates of birth but remember only the child's birth year. Furthermore, they add a year of age at the lunar new year. Therefore, a child born the week prior to the new year is considered two years old as soon as the New Year falls, even though the infant is just one week old.

4. See Walsh 2001 for an elaboration of the gendered division of labor.

5. Looking at county government statistics reveals a suspiciously different picture, however: only 2 percent of school-aged children do not attend primary school. If these statistics are credible, then I have personally encountered this entire 2 percent out-of-school population in just six months of research in a tiny fraction of the county. In reality, this is a case of statistics being modified to fit policy goals, a common occurrence in China.

6. The Na called the monogamy campaign, conducted during the Cultural Revolution, "the campaign for one wife and one husband" (Cai Hua 1997:297).

7. Despite all the charitable interventions discussed above, the conditions of formal education in Yongning remain poor. One wonders whether a policy change is not needed if schooling in these areas cannot be successful even with such significant support.

8. Li Xiaomin discusses the irrelevance of education to the Na and the urgent need to reorient education toward rural needs in her thesis.

9. The going rate for a "first night" is 5,000 yuan (US\$605), normally several years' income for rural Na households.

10. The marriage that result, however, sometimes take forms different from standard Han marriage. In many cases periods of cohabitation are short, with husband and wife living apart most of the time.

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