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Punjab's Male Public Culture: a Study of Popular Visuals of Delight

Abstract

This paper looks into the particular leisure time activities and popular sports of pleasure in secular life of rural Pakistani Punjab which is the main reason for the production of popular posters. The methodological foundation for this research study is based on ethnographic surveys. This research study takes an interdisciplinary approach with close observation of public spheres where visual data was found. The popular posters discussed in this study provide a delightful sight for the viewer with a basic sense of the narrative through frozen images whose form is derived from different sources of popular, traditional and modern art cultures. Though naïve, such posters are actually a complex maze of cultural, aesthetic and social values that have shaped the way the poster functions as an object of art, as an icon and a commodity. This study argues that on one hand, the popular posters and advertisements are not only the frozen images of our lived culture but they also evoke a sense of nostalgia and on the other hand they develop an understanding of how economic, political and ideological systems utilizing a similar field of cultural production ultimately create a rich heritage of “cultural capital”.

Keywords

Entertainment, Ethnographic Research, Lived Culture, Nostalgia, Popular posters

Introduction

One can find several forms of popular visual expressions in Pakistan's private and public spheres. Both spheres represent local vivid themes ranging from religious posters to commercial advertisements. Thus, every visible surface especially in the public sphere represents a different scenario due to occupation by popular printed materials which shape all aspects of Pakistani society. In this milieu, it is important to assess the role of such popular printed materials and wall paintings in the larger socio-cultural picture. This paper looks into the leisure time activities and popular sports of pleasure in secular life of rural Punjab (Pakistan) which is the main reason for the production of popular posters of entertainment and popular advertisements. Popular entertainment and leisure activities and their representations emerged in our local culture as new visual evidences which are not restricted to any social class but are accessible to everyone. According to social anthropologist Elgar Zekiye who conducted an extensive field research in rural areas of Punjab

(Pakistan) that; “These new cultural interests and practices contributed to, as well as grew from, changes in the social organization of aesthetic production available to the vast majority of ordinary people”.¹ The study of art and visuals and their representation and reception in public spheres has to view the subject in its ethnographic and social context.² In this context, this study takes an interdisciplinary approach which is combined with a review of related literature and anthropological field research. Anthropologists take this interdisciplinary approach which is “congruent with the modern study of materiality of objects, which is methodologically and theoretically inspired by anthropology, semiotics and art history, as well as the theory of reception”.³ On the other hand, it is compatible with trends in contemporary ethnography which according to social anthropologist Sarah Pink “...may combine textual, historical, narrative, statistical or a whole range of other research practices which may intertwine and overlap or link conceptually as the research proceeds”.⁴ The methodological foundation for this research study is based on ethnographic surveys of male informants. According to Ingvild Flaskerud that there are two research methods which are typically associated with ethnographic

field research - observation and interview. She referred to cultural anthropologist Victor Turner who argues that “...an observer has a wider and better overall perspective of a ritual than a participant who is in the midst of the action.”⁵ She endorsed this idea and further states that “... actually this vision allows one to appreciate certain “ways of seeing” as important avenues for understanding values, interests and symbolic discourse. When researchers apprehend this vision, this may produce ethnographic knowledge”.⁶ Pink writes about the ethnographic field research that “the materialization of the visuals their meaning in the context where they are displayed can be studied at the site of production, the image itself and in the social context of its reception”.⁷ In the light of the above ethnographic methods the data collection is mainly based on extensive fieldwork in which we have collected data in the form of photographs and documented their use as a primary visual source.

In their recent study anthropologists Jürgen Wasim Frembgen and Paul Rollier explain about the leisure time activities in the Punjab (Pakistan) which are wrestling; pigeon flying; kite flying; watching movies; table games of mental dexterity like chess; card games and games of chance (*pachisi* and its modification *chaupad*) and many others.⁸ According to them many

of these pastimes were brought in from Persia. In the field of sports in Punjab, *kabbadi* and wrist wrestling are also very popular. Apart from playing cricket which is quite popular in the whole of Pakistan, polo is another very ancient game of Persian origin, but that is only played by the elite, some army personnel or horse riders in Gilgit. However, wrestling *kushti* (and *kabbaddi*) is an off shoot of the wrestling tradition and is a very old and popular sport that is an integral part of our native culture. But this sport is less advertised in the form of popular printed posters and other genres when compared to *dangal*. The present study deals with these printed posters for the announcement of above-mentioned male oriented pastime activities. Due to the lack of scholarly interest in these popular printed posters, very little academic scholarship is available about the pastime activities of people in Punjab, particularly how such activities are advertised in popular media to invite people to join popular activities, either indoor or outdoor.⁹ Many social anthropologists have studied such popular arts and painted visual images in their respective societies. They are of the opinion that such popular arts have great resonance and play a pivotal role in the lives of common people and reflect the history of their daily life. Many western scholars have regarded such popular posters as garish products which do not reflect any aesthetic appeal. However, they are an integral and legitimate form of our local popular culture

Traditional Sports and Pastimes in Lahore. Karachi : Oxford University Press, 2014, p. xiv.

⁹ Such as popular photographic posters, hoardings or leaflets and many other printed materials.

¹ ZEKIYE, E.: *A Punjabi Village in Pakistan*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1960, p. 144.

² FLASKERUD, I.: *Visualising Belief and Piety: Representation, Reception, and Function of Imagery in Iranian Shiism*. [Dissertation thesis]. Bergen : Faculty of Humanities, University of Bergen, 2008, p. 11.

³ Ibid., p. 11; See also: ALINA, B.: *Seeing is Believing: On Piety in Iranian Shi'ism*. In *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 2011, Vol. 10, No. 28, p. 228-233.

⁴ PINK, S.: *Doing Visual Anthropology: Images, Media and Representations in Research*. London : Sage Publications, 2007, p. 8.

⁵ FLASKERUD, I.: *Visualising Belief and Piety: Representation, Reception, and Function of Imagery in Iranian Shiism*. [Dissertation thesis]. Bergen : Faculty of Humanities, University of Bergen, 2008, p. 22.

⁶ Ibid., p. 23-24.

⁷ PINK, S.: *Doing Visual Anthropology: Images, Media and Representations in Research*. London : Sage Publications, 2007, p. 179-192.

⁸ FREMBGEN, J.W. - ROLLIER, P.: *Wrestlers, Pigeon Fanciers, and Kite Flyers*:

aesthetics as well as representing the modern visual landscape of Pakistan.¹⁰ This paper discusses basically three popular leisure activities such as wrestling (*dangal*), watching movies in popular mini cinemas as well as spending leisure time (*gupshup*) in urban cafes and their representations in popular media.

Discussion and Results

Popular Visuals of Delight: Dangal (wrestling) Posters

One popular outdoor masculine sport is wrestling (*dangal*). The event is advertised through popular posters often seen on urban and rural street walls which attract many people.

The importance of wrestling (*kushti* or *pehlwani*) and wrestlers in our rural culture might seem to once again be a product of a male oriented society. However, we would like to point out that every ethnic culture has two fields of cultural activity; one of strength and physical prowess, in which naturally males participate and the other of dancing, music, etc., which are activities based more on entertainment and mediums of expression. In the latter women take part. Thus, the intrinsic importance of wrestling in our rural culture does not necessarily indicate male dominance; rather it is reflected in the lack of female participation in most public, cultural activity and in exaggerated codes of honour among men.

Wrestling (*dangal*) takes place in *akhara*s (places where wrestling is taught and practiced). It is a popular sport with a rich cultural tradition that is thousands of years

old. The *akhara* is a shrine of strength. Practically every village in Punjab boasts a *pehlwan* or two. *Nawabs* used to patronize wrestlers. Wrestling reached great heights in the Punjab when the legendary Gama Pehlwan (1878-1960), the protégé of the Maharaja of Datia, beat the renowned Zbyszko in 1910. (records in England show Frank Gotch to be the world champion from 1908 to 1913, but actually after Gama defeated Zbyszko, "Doc" Benjamin Roller of the U.S., Maurice Deriaz of France, the European champion Johann Lemm of Switzerland, and the previous world champion Jesse Peterson from Sweden, Gotch and other contenders for the title demurred from accepting his challenge). Other legendary wrestlers of India were, inter alia, Gardee, Dara Singh, Kareem Bux and Raheem Bukh (the previous *Rustam-e-Hind* before Gama).¹¹ Traditionally wrestlers embodied the honour of their home villages and the strength giving produce of its crops and livestock. Before partition they also represented the righteousness of their religions. They would show themselves as paragons of all physical abilities, including eating prodigious amounts; doing phenomenal amounts of exercise; having great physical endurance and also as defenders of the weak. In this age *kushti* or *pehlwani* has become modern in various aspects. The rural aspirations are no longer that important and they learn karate and parts of other martial arts. According to Akhtar: "...the wrestlers view themselves as extraordinary men and are concerned with a dramatic presentation of the

self".¹² It is important to note the art of wrestling (*pehlwani*), either traditional or modern, is quite popular in India and many other parts of the world. In India, several movies have been made on this theme that have been blockbuster hits such as *Dangal* produced by Amir Khan and *Sultan* by Salman Khan in the Bollywood film industry.

Functions and Characteristics of Dangal Posters

Wrestling *Dangal* as well as *kabbadi* competitions take place once a month or year in the majority of the cities, towns and villages in Punjab. Their announcement posters occupy the visible surfaces on those places where many people sit together or such as on the façade of shops. These posters always follow the same format as often seen in religious announcement posters and people recognize them immediately. They will present an array of masculine strength, showing all the wrestlers that will participate in the event wearing their wrestling *jangias* (briefs) and the most famous pair will feature in larger size, as major iconic images. They are the focal point of interest of the poster. The rest of the wrestlers (*pehlwans*) are presented in a symmetrical way with their names and titles, and several wrestlers will be sporting their trophies of belts or traditional wrestling prizes. All their names will be written and occasionally their lineage may be mentioned. Also, smaller pictures of the organizers, the guests of honour (mostly now political personalities, such as

¹² AKHTAR, A.: The Mace and the Sceptre: Iconography in Pehlwan (Wrestler) Posters. In ZAIDI, S. (ed.): *Mazaar, Bazaar: Design and Visual Culture in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 71.

¹¹ See: http://www.oocities.org/worldwebb/gama_versus_zbyszko/ and <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/ghulaam-mohammed-the-great-gama-indian-wrestler>.

¹⁰ ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2016, p. 45.

Nazim or councilors), sponsors and other people associated with the event will be shown, along with their names, the more important arranged in one line at the top or bottom. The most important point in the composition is, as in posters for religious functions, protocol has to be observed not to miss out anyone concerned and each person's picture is accorded hierarchical prominence. The visual content in the poster is kept as the maximum while the text is reduced to the minimum. This tends to have an ancillary, reinforcing function in the composition. The array and bright colours make their own decoration for the poster. Of course, the venue and date of the event are given prominently.



Figure 1: Pehlwan poster is pasted on wall on a roadside tea-stall in Multan. (Source: From author's archive.)

These posters are printed in big cities such as Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad and many other big towns. The majority of the spectators who come to watch these *dangals* (wrestling competitions) are poor or working class men and boys, handcart pullers, day labourers, semi-skilled factory workers, etc. Akhtar states that "...the *dangals* themselves are shows that require minimal appurtenances: all that is needed is an open space, a dug-up area in the centre, a referee, a

drummer and the audience".¹³

The posters (Figure 1 and Figure 2) are pasted in prominent places in the streets of towns and villages by the organizers about a month before the event. They catch the eyes of viewers immediately. In use of colour, approximate dimensions and narrative layout they are similar to popular devotional or secular imagery; one can say they resemble one another like members of one family, after all the origins are the same and they follow the set idioms of the genre. The *pehlwan* posters provide the viewer with a basic sense of the narrative through frozen images whose form is derived from different sources of popular, traditional and modern art cultures. Though naïve such posters are actually a complex maze of cultural, aesthetic and social values that have shaped the way the poster functions as an object of art, as an icon, a semiotic moment and commodity. They arouse the curiosity of the passer-by. They are well-loved cultural objects which urge viewers to support their beloved *pehlwan* in the *dangal*.

The figures of the *pehlwans* or others depicted in the posters may appeal to different viewers for a variety of reasons. It may be their youthful handsomeness, fine physiques, their popularity or other such features. Most of all these posters hold out the promise that soon the fan will be able to see the strong *pehlwans* in action in front of him. The popular folk-art style and pictures of the *pehlwans* of the posters represent a visual vocabulary which bridges the relationship between numerous spectators who come from different

areas to see the *dangal*. Since the audience generally has a low literacy rate, the poster speaks a language they understand. Thus, these posters perform a social function of communication to spread this popular sport. *Dangal* fans relate to and are fond of these posters and they also present icons of their favorite *pehlwans*. Therefore, we argue that these pictures of *pehlwans* can be considered as being both a prelude to the event and a vital ingredient to the public's acceptance of these champions and this ultimately increases the "power of the posters". As proposed by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai;

"... the social meaning and value of the cultural object may be located in its historical circulation; by following its forms, contexts of uses and trajectories --- "it is things in motion that illuminate the human and social context".¹⁴



Figure 2: A large size dangal poster is displayed where dangal took place in Muzaffargarh. (Source: From author's archive.)

Visual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or pleasure are sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology. By

¹⁴ APPADURAI, A.: *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 5.

visual technology, we mean any representation designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from high art to popular; that is produced by some form of apparatus; either modern and sophisticated or evolved through old fashioned machinery and techniques to meet modern needs. Visual culture has come to be a common feature of our society in which the need for a better or different way of doing something is acknowledged and expressed on a material level, if not met. It connotes “politics of change”, albeit a “change” that resides wholly on the surface of things. The intention is not to open a debate here about visual culture however the posters under discussion are an important element which form it.

After the *dangal*, like posters of religious functions, many people continue to display the poster in shops or at home for long periods as mementos of the event or as an icon of some favorite wrestler. *Pehlwan* posters are a regular feature of contemporary urban and rural visual art in Punjab, frequently seen in public places, pasted on walls, in shops or tea stalls. Interestingly often such posters are quite old and they begin to acquire an aura --- a sort of “gallery effect” that reflects a narrative about local culture. Anthropologist Christopher Pinney, in his masterful study of the printed image and political struggle in India, has ingeniously explored the possibility of a ‘visual history’. He explains;

“... a history built up by visuals in which these were actually just related to contemporary times and indirectly these visuals could construct the historical narrative that was already established “by other

means.”¹⁵

In rural Punjab, folk entertainment is very much alive. Folk tales and folk dramas perpetuate values enunciated in epics and legends according to which people still conduct their lives. Monthly or yearly *Kabbadi* and wrestling competitions are great events and people of all ages from various towns and villages settle down to see the match.

Popular Advertisements and Wall Paintings

Gone are the days when viewers would gather in the house of a relative wealthy enough to afford a black-and-white TV set, to watch some programs on the sole channel Pakistan Television Channel (PTV). The TV would often be encased in a stylish wooden concertina cabinet and kept covered by an embroidered dust-sheet.¹⁶ The whole family would sit together to watch their favorite popular english programs or movies of the 1980s such as *Mr. Chips*, *Knight Rider* etc., Urdu comedy drama series such as *Alifaur Noon*, *Fifty Fifty* and PTV dramas like *An Kaheen*, *Andheran Ujala*, etc., were exceptionally good in those days with nothing to measure up to them now. Today, due to the advent and widespread use of cable TV, internet and mobile phones and an incipient return of a cinema culture, these old get-togethers have vanished from the cultural scenario. Similarly, in the same old period, long staff

¹⁵ PINNEY, C.: *Photos of God: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London : Reaktion Books, 2004, p. 117.

¹⁶ ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : Lit Verlag, 2016, p. 86.

(*gandasa*) culture Punjabi films became very popular and the cinema houses drew packed audiences. That was the time when the popular Punjabi film *Maula Jutt* hit the screens and revolutionized the Pakistan film industry. The character of *Maula Jutt* as portrayed by Sultan Rahi influenced the audience on Punjab. He epitomized strong, brave, Punjabi masculinity. He defined a popular culture and was a symbol of heroism and masculinity particularly in Punjab. After the record-breaking success of *Maula Jutt*, movies with lots of violence became the trend of the industry which continued until 2000.

In our modern times, most of the towns in Punjab have TV cable networks which provide local and foreign entertainment services at low prices. However, many villages are deprived of such services and some rich villagers have installed dish TV to enjoy their favorite entertainment. Those who cannot afford dish TV at home, often go to village tea-stalls to fulfill their desire of watching favourite movies. The village tea-stalls offer ranges of local and Indian Hindi films through playing DVDs which are popular among the common villagers. Of course, there is a commercial aspect involved in it; they offer space to sit. Many villagers interact with each other about everyday life while others spend their time only watching movies. During this time tea is served usually at the cost of between PKR. 12 and PKR. 20. The cup of tea and the entertainment give them the only relief from loneliness, alienation, hunger and grim living conditions. Moreover, such mini tea-stall cinemas fulfill the customers need for film, music, drama, dancing escape into illusions of high living into fantastic dreams of sin and modernity.



Figure 3: A village tea-stall showing popular advertisements in the village of Muzaffargarh. (Source: From author's archive.)

With the import of Indian Hindi movies in Pakistan and household viewing of films on cable, computers and cell phones, the previous Lollywood film industry collapsed and people lost interest in the Punjabi films that were well loved by the lower classes here. Now they are being preserved in the hearts of the people in the form of popular billboard advertisements promoting Punjabi culture (Figure 3). This photograph shows a village tea-stall where a billboard depicts still images of popular stars of the heydays of Sultan Rahi and Mustafa Qureshi epitomized by the film *Maula Jutt*. The proprietor of the tea stall caters to the taste of the people and plays songs from Punjabi and shows these old action movies on a TV. The customers are mainly lower-class daily wage earners, who come here and enjoy watching these old movies back to back and also excerpts of dances from these films. The popular figures of female Punjabi stars are also depicted on such billboards. This entertainment and pastime activity provides an escape for the clients from the tensions and problems of daily life. This mini cinema house offers a number of facilities, for instance tea is sold on a per head basis (somewhat more expensive) which allows customers to have as many cups as they want and they can sit

here enjoying watching movies. The walls of these mini cinemas are often plastered with colourful posters of particularly female stars which operate as a public memory linked to the local or foreign film industry. Film historian Laura Mulvey referred to popular female icons as “visual pleasure” for common people; “... these satisfy a primordial desire for pleasurable viewing... this incipient trend of a reappearance of such icons of woman in middle- and lower-class public places might raise qualms in some more religious minded people who object to these sort of representations.”¹⁷



Figure 4: An urban café showing a painted wall of local Punjabi film culture in Faisalabad. (Source: From author's archive.)

Both in urban and rural areas of Punjab, many tea-stalls reflect popular Punjabi culture (Figure 4). Even some posh cafes in cities use Punjabi themes¹⁸ to heighten their décor. Simply put, such representations are frozen images of narrative cinema and other cultural fields whose

¹⁷ MULVEY, L.: *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. In BADMINGTON, N., THOMAS, L. (eds.): *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. London : Routledge, 2008, p. 204.

¹⁸ There are several modern tea-stall in the posh areas of big cities like Lahore, Multan, Faisalabad whom every visible surface represents scenes from popular culture such as from truck art and popular Punjabi films.

primary object is to arouse the curiosity of potential spectators, to persuade them to enter to the mini cinemas and cafes. Similar to the popular macho icons represented on the rear of trucks and auto-rickshaws, the posters of entertainment and wall paintings present a vibrant, kinetic gallery of visuals about the feelings, ethos and aspirations of various people from different provinces and sometimes these pictures cannot help but grab the attention of the most blasé motorist passing by.¹⁹ Each one evokes visual pleasure, and shows unique and different methods of composition in this genre. The consumption of such posters and stereotypical themes painted on the walls of cafes in urban Punjab reflect as Pinney termed “carpothetics” and ethnography of image consumption which entail a desire to fuse image and beholder, and the elevation of efficacy “... as the central criterion of value”.²⁰ Through image consumption this culture promotes a social homogeneity that binds social relations and unites a hierarchical society.

Conclusion

The popular posters and advertisements and wall paintings of pastimes activities adorning the public spaces represent Pakistan's male public culture. They are a sort of visual vernacular of representations that are a lingua franca of Punjab (which is continuously shifting with developments in technology

¹⁹ The research study titled “Macho Icons Going Places” which deals with the representations of popular icons on Punjabi truck and auto-rickshaws by the authors of this article is in press.

²⁰ PINNEY, C.: *Photos of God: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London : Reaktion Books, 2004, p. 194.

and production) and this has a cumulative impact on the local culture and society. It serves as broad analytical tool to understand the role and expression of an underlying aesthetic sensibility (however kitsch) that is manifested in popular art.²¹The pastime activities and their advertisements attract the public attention-at-large. The modern dynamics of image-making and image-painting as well as the grandiloquence of photography and film has rendered opportunities for people to draw close associations more and more available for one another. The selection of the most popular icons from popular sport and film in a visual frame deeply affects in many ways that brings visual pleasure to the people. Applying new forms of storytelling, the designers and the artists focus on the content of those themes and icon poses which are popular among the general public. They simply become surrogates for what social psychologist Harry Overstreet termed the “eye of the mind”.²² The popular advertisements have the ability to replicate and magnify the immeasurable power of the moment within human experience. Of course, the photographs and their replicas, posters and billboard advertisements provided a new paradigm which arrests the heartfelt eyes of the public at large. It is therefore safe to argue that pastime activities and their visual representations build a strong relationship between new forms of visual expression and the contours of daily life of the Punjabi people. Similar to Pakistan's, in neighbouring

foreign mass public cultures (such as in India and Bangladesh) these popular “visuals of delight”²³ are ostensibly ephemeral and essentially transnational in form, and therefore enjoy vast public acceptance. The venues of pastime activities produce a cultural space; a space where different castes and classes may collectively and legitimately participate in the same cultural diet. Due to the power of their visual contents they arrest the viewer's attention and bring him to a halt. This art form is developed into a powerful category of aesthetic and life practices which offer a glimpse into our local vibrant tradition. The medium and the idiom of such posters reflect the taste of common people. We wish to argue that on one hand, the popular posters and advertisements are not only the frozen images of locally lived culture but they also evoke a sense of nostalgia because the individual photos are sometimes cut out from posters and pasted into the frames of family photos²⁴ and on the other hand such posters, advertisements and wall paintings develop an understanding of how economic, political and ideological systems utilizing a similar field of cultural production ultimately create a rich heritage of “cultural capital”.²⁵ This cultural capital deeply affects the psyche of the common people, gives meaning to and partially controls the lives of people of different faiths and purposes. The other popular representations of pastime activities

such as tea and food culture, cricket playing and many more in Punjab as well as of other provinces of Pakistan and their cross-cultural comparison with foreign cultures need to be studied by scholars which can produce interesting results.

Acknowledgement

This research study is extracted from Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) funded project titled “Identities and Manifestations: The Material Context of Art and Visual Culture inside Domestic and Public Spaces” under Thematic Research Grants Programs during 2016 - 2017.

²³ KIRKPATRICK, J.: *Transports of Delight: The Ricksha Arts of Bangladesh*. [CD-ROM]. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2003.

²⁴ ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : Lit Verlag, 2016, p. 132.

²⁵ BOURDIEU, P.: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 74.

²¹ ASGHAR, M.: *The Sacred and the Secular: Aesthetics in the Domestic Spaces of Pakistan/Punjab*. Zurich : Lit Verlag, 2016, p. 39-40.

²² EWEN, S.: *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge : Basic Books, 1988, p. 22.

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