

## Exploring Subtlety in Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Many critical readers have been contended to characterise Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* (1975) as being primarily focused on family relations which seem to be breaking down irrevocably. The argument of this paper is that *Waiting for the Rain* goes beyond mere exploration of the family relationships of the Mandengu family to be a subtle and calculated attack on the colonial regime in all its manifestations. Mungoshi's decision to write during a time when the war of liberation in Zimbabwe was in its decisive phase is a decision which called for self censorship. The 1970s, the most painful and brutal years of Zimbabwe's struggle for independence mark the decisive phase of the liberation war. The settler government had established and consolidated its array of repressive machinery to perpetuate its existence. There was need for subtlety to camouflage political messages from colonial authorities and at the same time ensure that the message of protest reached the intended audience with significant impact. The text will be analysed through Historical Criticism through selected tenets of Psychoanalysis where necessary.*

**Key words:** *Historical literature, colonialism, Second Chimurenga, subtlety, historical criticism.*

### Introduction

Written Zimbabwean literature in English emerged in response to the traumatic effects of colonialism on indigenous Zimbabweans. By the 1960s and 1970s the colonial regime had become paranoid in the way it exerted control on the indigenes. After the brutal crushing of the first uprising of the Zimbabwean people, also known as First Chimurenga of 1896 to 1897, "formal means of representation such as parliament and the media, by design, did not create space for the blacks to voice their discontent with the system" (Kwaramba, 1997). The settlers consolidated a state based on outright suppression of democratic rights by means of brutal laws and military force. Progressive writers like Mungoshi felt a compelling need to artistically capture the predicament of the African. The repressive colonial machinery, through its intolerance to dissent, drove writers into self censorship. Revolutionary messages and critiques of the colonial regime had to be subtly packaged.

*Waiting for the Rain* could be understood in the framework of historical literature. Historical literature is literature which is anchored on factual and authentic historical events and information where factual events are portrayed in a fictionalised form. Historical African literature in English, in the main, sought to put the record straight about the humaneness of

Africans through the presentation of Africa's heroes and Africa's dignified past to refute the fallacy about the so-called Western civilisation (Zhuwarara, 1987:132). It is clear though that because of a hostile and repressive political environment especially after Smith's Universal Declaration of Independence in 1965 in the then Rhodesia, Zimbabwean writers could not be overt in the criticism of colonialism. These writers differ from writers like Chinua Achebe, who, in *Things Fall Apart* openly sought to set the record straight by capturing the African past with all its imperfections to suggest that the African past "was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (Achebe, 1975:45).

Historical criticism, on the other hand, "views a work of art against the background of the age in which it was written" (Tilak, 1996:13). According to this theory, "The historical context, then, serves to shed light upon the object of primary concern, the text" (Bressler, 1994:128). A sound understanding of *Waiting for the Rain* is enhanced by looking at the historical circumstances under which Mungoshi writes and those depicted in the setting of the novel.

Psychoanalysis as a literary theory is largely derived from Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and tries to explain behaviour in terms of internal psychological struggles. Though psychoanalysis has many tenets, this paper looks at how the unconscious, the largest part of the brain ahead of the conscious and the preconscious, manifests in certain human behaviours like dreams which Freud in *Ridgway* (2006:11) describes as "the royal road to the unconscious". The unconscious is critical because it is the source of a person's motivations (Rahim, 2002 cited in Ahmed, 2012).

This article scrutinises Mungoshi's style and characterisation around the main characters in the novel. The article critically, through reference to real historical events, mainly examines the portrayal of the Old Man, Uncle Kuruku and Lucifer. Through the Old Man, the effects of colonialism on the cultural life of the Zimbabwean people are exposed. Lucifer is analysed as a creation and embodiment of the colonial education policy whilst Uncle Kuruku represents the inevitable rise in the oppressed people's consciousness.

## THE OLD MAN AND THE COLONIAL NIGHTMARE

*Waiting for the Rain* is set in Zimbabwe of the 1960s though it was written at the height of the Second Chimurenga in 1975. It is centred on the Mandengu family in its extended form. The Old Man and his wife Old Japi are parents to Uncle Kuruku and Tongoona whose wives are Rhoda and Raina respectively. Much of the focus of the text is on Tongoona and Raina's family. Garabha, the wild one is the first born whilst Lucifer comes second in Tongoona and Raina's family.

Colonialism as an institution was firmly entrenched and driven by myths about White supremacy and to the African, the colonialist posed as a super being. This was because of the psychological

trauma the African was exposed to through physical and psychological violence from the colonisers. Having been debased and subjugated, the majority of Africans lost any sense of self worth and self belief and viewed the Whiteman as a demigod who deserved to be respected and emulated (Fanon, 1968). Acquiring the Whiteman's education was therefore seen as a significant stride towards 'civilisation' which the colonialists purported to stand for. As a result, education through the formal school system introduced by colonialism was revered and envied by the African who regarded it as a passport to superiority, socially and economically. This is the reason why the impending family gathering of the Mandengu family to bid farewell to Lucifer, the Old Man's grandson and Tongoona and Raina's, child draws a lot of attention in the Mandengu family. The whole novel is centred on Lucifer's home coming. Lucifer is held in high esteem by the family because he is attending school in town. The excitement becomes feverish as the whole extended family gets to know that Lucifer has been offered an opportunity to study Art abroad by a white friend of his. Lucifer is coming home to bid the family goodbye. As the family gathers, reflects and gossips over Lucifer's arrival from town and his eventual departure overseas, Mungoshi takes an opportunity to subtly expose the negative and divisive impact of colonialism on the African way of life.

The Old Man is advanced in age having participated in the ill-fated fight against settlers in the First Chimurenga of 1896. There is no doubt that from the brutal quelling of the uprising, through the use of superior fire power by the whites, the Old Man has immeasurable fear for the white man. The nightmare he experiences, especially the flapping metal bird which torments him in the violent and scary dream could be a reflection of the impact of that first and forgettable encounter with whites. The nightmare could also be seen as a dramatisation of the whole drama of colonialism - colonialism put Africans under serious and perpetual torment.

From the nightmare, the Old Man wakes up and walk around his homestead to check if everything is all right. He reflects on his "once one hundred head of cattle – when grass was still the earth's grass – now reduced to ten. Old Mandisa's unknown numbers now down to six" (Mungoshi, 1975:5). Mungoshi is quite subtle in not clearly giving the reasons for such a terrible reduction in numbers of cattle. The truth is that after the defeat of the Shona and Ndebele in the First Chimurenga, the settlers consolidated their gains through enactment of draconian legislation meant to effectively subjugate Africans. One of the key grievances of the Shona and Ndebele which led to the First Chimurenga is the introduction of Hut tax by the settler regime. Africans saw no justification for it and resisted. However, having suffered defeat in the First Chimurenga meant a lot of other draconian pieces of legislation. The cruelest piece of legislation which, to a very large extent, became the fatal blow to African traditional way of life was the Land Husbandry Act of 1951. In 1951, following recommendations of the Godlonton Commission, the colonial government promulgated the notorious Native Land Husbandry Act which used the smokescreen of scientific research to dispossess blacks of their land and cattle through destocking (Alexander, 2006). The act introduced the notion of land rights to justify "coercive

intervention” (Alexander, 2006:44) by the colonial regime in the name of the state’s duty to bring progress and increased productivity. What effectively resulted from the act was a clear repudiation of the communal ownership of land in favour of secular ownership.

This legislation was the death knell for African traditional economies because it seriously curtailed the African’s claim on land, apportioning small pieces of land to Africans, and in the process, making destocking inevitable as the settlers sought to disempower Africans in order to create a pool of perpetual beggars who would have nothing else to offer save for their labour on colonial farms, factories and mines. The land Husbandry Act of 1951 brought with it severe consequences on traditional African agriculture especially on land and other economic storehouses like cattle. With land expropriated, it was imminent that the colonial government would call for destocking - a move clandestinely tailored to ensure that Africans were left with nothing except their labour to sell on mines, farms and in factories to raise money for family sustenance and for the mandatory taxes like the Hut tax. Wilson Katiyo (1976) in *A Son of the Soil* has the temerity to uncover what colonialism has done to the

African’s way of life through the reflections of Chief Makosa who notes that

The government keeps on reducing our cultivating land  
They still keep reducing the number of cattle per family.  
They say it’s to make everything better. But you can see  
for yourself, things are getting worse all the time. We  
reap less than we used to. They are taking the most fertile  
land away. Year after year they are increasing taxes  
(Katiyo, 1976:103).

While Katiyo could afford to be overtly hard-hitting in his critique of colonial regime because he is writing in exile, away from the draconian regime, for writers like Mungoshi, it simply meant covert protest and mobilisation of the Africans.

The dispossession is quite evident later on in the novel when Mungoshi pays attention to detail in his description of Lucifer’s journey home. The Hampshire Estates are described as “rolling ranches... with their tall dry grass and the fertile soil under that grass” and yet the neighbouring Manyene Tribal Trust Land is wistfully described as “scorched nothing-between-here and-the-horizon white lands” (Mungoshi, 1975:39). The Tribal Trust Lands, a colonial creation of the Tribal Trust Land Act of 1961, created fixed boundaries for reserves; furthermore these reserves were marked by infertile and rocky soil largely unsuitable for any form of agriculture (Ranger, 1985). De Villiers (2003:6) observes that

the Land Tenure Act allocated 15.5 million ha to 6,000, mainly  
white, commercial farmers, 16.4 million ha to 700,000 black families

and 1.4million ha to 8,500 small-scale commercial farmers. In addition to this inequity, the land held by whites was generally in areas with higher rainfall and better soil quality.

It is such skewed land distribution which led to the drastic reduction of the Old Man's head of cattle. By paying attention to detail, in a seemingly honest narrative of an ordinary journey, from Salisbury to Manyene, Mungoshi manages to make his point clear: the colonial system is responsible for the woes of African families like the Mandengu. The Old Man is simply agonising over such sad and unfortunate historical developments.

Lucifer's homecoming has attracted the likes of John, Lucifer's cousin and Uncle Kuruku's son. As a mark of respect, John comes to greet the Old Man. It is interesting to note that though the Old Man claims not to like John, he engages in a lengthy discussion with him on issues of national importance. Mungoshi tactfully portrays John in negative light for fear of making him a role model; creation of a model nationalist with revolutionary thinking would invite the ire of colonial authorities. After some exchanges with the Old Man on political issues, John murmurs something about a "defeatist attitude" (Mungoshi, 1975:33). This is quite revealing in terms of Mungoshi's style. Firstly it is not stated as to who actually carries the defeatist attitude and secondly, it is only a 'murmur'. It is only a murmur but a loud murmur in terms of Mungoshi's intention to show why Africans would not have a resolve to fight.

Indeed John is quite right in revealing the fear which has almost paralysed the Old Man to the extent of making him appear demented in his nostalgia for a life gone by. The Old Man is now obsessed with drum making to the extent of being unconsciously environmentally insensitive. He is engrossed in the cutting of trees to make drums because,

He has cut nearly every big tree he can find here and the shed is full to the brim with logs, half finished drums, mortars and what not...(Mungoshi, 1975:49).

The Old Man simply displays hopeless nostalgia for a way of life which is gone and gone forever. Of what use will be the five big drums he no longer plays? The Old Man's desire to give Garabha more and more drums is indicative of how he continues to harp on to a way of life which has outlived its vitality because of colonialism.

The Old Man is replicated in the Grandfather in "*Who will stop the Dark*" in Mungoshi's *Some Kinds of Wounds* (1980). Grandfather encourages Zakeo, his grandson, not to go to school choosing to mentor him in mouse trapping and hunting. The colonial situation simply calls for proactive responses from Africans. Mungoshi seems to be saying that the solution lies in going to school to be able to appreciate true history of the African like what John advises. The exchange between John and the Old Man, therefore, becomes Mungoshi's political lecture to the oppressed

Africans. The defeatist attitude is what the Africans need least, if at all they need it in the struggle against the white man.

The Old Man also strikes the reader as enigmatic, apparently dropping his defeatism to advise John about the dangers emanating from complicit purveyors from amongst the Africans who would always want to sell the cause out. Indeed sell-outs were there in the first Chimurenga. Indeed if the struggle has to succeed the likes of John have to contend with spies and sell-outs. Mungoshi, in a subtle way, seems to be underscoring the need for unity in the fight to dislodge colonialism.

It is not an act of coincidence that Mungoshi presents John as having come all the way from Bulawayo where he works. Bulawayo is significant as the city of the dispossessed King, Lobengula. Unlike places like Harare, Bulawayo has strong elements of identity and it is only logical that nationalists emerge from it. One historical fact is that most manufacturing industries of the colonial government were located in Bulawayo for easy access to the ports through South Africa. As evidenced in Ousmane's *God's bits of Wood* (1995), political consciousness in Africans grew through their involvement in industries and farms. Though they produced goods, the remuneration they got was not commensurate with their sweat.

As the Old Man continues to converse with John, he seems to have a change of perception. The Old Man advises John not to panic in the struggle against whites and John declares that "we will fight" (Mungoshi, 1975:31). Through John's use of "we" the point is driven home that the struggle calls for the 'we' and not for individualism. As Mungoshi treads on dangerous territory, he makes the Old Man appear unprincipled and vacillating yet he is focused on one thing: the need to recover stolen heritage from whites.

It is also interesting to note that though John harbours revolutionary ideas; his own life is shrouded in controversy. He has allegations of selling out his brother to the police and he in turn is alleged to engage in an adulterous relationship with the wife. Though these are unsubstantiated allegations, they are enough to make John as a character appear 'harmless' in the eyes of colonial authorities. Such allegations do not, however, disqualify John as a nationalist. In fact, Mungoshi seems to be saying that nationalism is for all and sundry; anyone regardless of his fallibilities can and should join the struggle against colonialism. The revolution will not be expedited by the holy only but through an alliance of real human beings.

The exchange between the Old Man and John can be seen as a subtle mobilisation campaign by the writer. There is a subtle demolition of the myth of invincibility of the White man through the Old Man's sarcastic observation that "Those white men brought everything else but forgot the medicine to cure old age and death" (Mungoshi, 1975:32). This is meant to show that whites are mortal beings and can therefore be defeated. The Old Man even reflects on the First Chimurenga:



“Those of them we killed, died, and those who survived, like Mataka who owns that big farm up there grew old and died” (Mungoshi, 1975:32).

It is observable that Mungoshi manages to infuse his political message in events and discussions which appear irrelevant and detached from politics.

### **The Inevitable Rise in Consciousness: Uncle Kuruku**

In the evening, the Old Man, Tongoona, Raina, Old Mandisa, Lucifer, Betty and Old Japi are locked in bickering over a number of trivial issues. The arrival of Uncle Kuruku and his wife draws attention because “There is a loud knocking on the door” (Mungoshi, 1975:59) and indeed Uncle Kuruku has a ‘loud’ message. The knock is significant and symbolic: people like Uncle Kuruku will set people free from focusing on side shows without looking at the real problem. He comes in to show them the real devil they should fight and not the shadows they have been heckling over.

Uncle Kuruku seems to have played the mentor to John in terms of political consciousness. He has a clear perception of the situation which the Africans are in. This is so because Uncle Kuruku himself worked in town for a considerable period of time. What is intriguing about Uncle Kuruku is the name which is a Shona corruption of the English word, crook. Apart from the name which suggests a crook, Uncle Kuruku comes drunk. Indeed Uncle Kuruku would be easy to dismiss as a misguided and drunk crook yet the ideas he presents reflect a clear perception of the colonial situation.

There is no doubt Uncle Kuruku is Mungoshi’s mouthpiece on the political discourse of the day. Uncle Kuruku talks about his encounters with a local chief, Chief Rukwa. True to the meaning of the Shona name, Rukwa is a poison amongst his own people in the sense that he has been compromised by the colonial government to act as their puppet. Through chief Rukwa, Mungoshi is able to attack the British colonial policy of indirect rule. Unlike French colonialism which sought to assimilate Africans, the British were too cunning and bribed those who commanded positions of authority within the African traditional way of life in order for them to execute the British settler policy by proxy. Those chiefs who chose to go against the settler regime had to sacrifice with their lives like Chief Makosa in Katiyo’s (1976) *A son of the Soil*. Such people like Chief Rukwa lack political insight and have been fed on a diet of propaganda by whites. Chief Rukwa admits his lack of insight and power over the turn of events in his land because Uncle Kuruku reports that Chief Rukwa does not have an idea of “what it will be like here in five or so years” (Mungoshi, 1975:62). Chief Rukwa would have Uncle Kuruku burn his *Ngundu*, traditional head dress, but Uncle Kuruku has outgrown the domination and subjugation which religion sought to instil in Africans. His interaction with Father Kamba indicates that he has seen beyond the smokescreen of the white man’s burden.

Uncle Kuruku tries to instil a sense of self identity in Lucifer through telling him that no matter how learned he might become, the whites will never take him as an equal (Mungoshi, 1975:62). Indeed Kuruku's advice to Lucifer that he should go and "hear everything and reveal nothing" is very valid yet it is told to the wrong person because Lucifer is itching to leave for good. Uncle Kuruku is amazingly clear about the colonial education system which he derides as "new-fangled" (Mungoshi, 1975:62). He is right in advising the family that they should move away from "Hare-and-Baboon story of hunger, sons and fathers and daughters-in-law" (Mungoshi, 1975:61) to focus on more serious issues.

It is important to examine why Mungoshi makes Uncle Kuruku drunk but able to perceive the broader political issues in a sober manner. Around 1975 when Mungoshi wrote the novel, a number of nationalists including Joshua Nkomo, and Robert Mugabe were languishing in detention and Hebert Chitepo was assassinated in Zambia by the colonial regime (Chung, 2006). There was virtually no room for freedom of speech - those who would dare speak did it perhaps through the courage derived from alcohol.

It is also Mungoshi's tact to appear to diminish Uncle Kuruku's value in the eyes of the colonial authorities and yet what he says is quite sobering. One realises that Uncle Kuruku is not operating in isolation. He is getting inspiration from nationalists of the day like Joshua Nkomo who donned the *Ngundu* and carried a walking stick always. The *Ngundu* and walking stick became symbols of black identity and defiance in colonial days. Though Chief Rukwa wants Uncle Kuruku to burn it, he has stubbornly donned it.

Kuruku is also aware of the damage which has been caused by trivial colonial goodies like sugar. He tells the family about Old Makawa who stabbed his daughter - law after she failed to give him tea. The niceties are destructive; even Chief Rukwa is wasting away because of his drinking habits since he took over the Chieftainship "and the government gives him a regular salary" (Mungoshi, 1975:62). The money Chief Rukwa gets from the government is seen as infectious and leading to illness. This shows Mungoshi's veiled attack on the settler government and its policies.

From the diatribe Kuruku launches against colonialism and its puppets like Chief Rukwa, one wonders if Uncle Kuruku is really drunk. If there is anyone with a politically sober disposition, it is Kuruku. His diatribe becomes a subtle mobilisation strategy for Africans to fight the settlers. Already Kuruku bears the scars with one of his sons, Paul, incarcerated for political reasons. Like what Chenjerai Hove depicts in *Bones* (1988) and *Red Hills of Home* (1985), colonialism has pushed Africans against the wall and they have no option but to fight hence Kuruku declares: "I am not afraid of them. I was, yes, once. But you get to a point where you can even face fire, no longer afraid" (Mungoshi, 1975: 64).



Kuruku has a lot of suppressed anger that when John reminds him that it is time to go home, he makes an outburst at him, reminding John that he cannot keep quiet when the colonisers “have spread themselves all over the world like the devil’s weed” (Mungoshi, 1975:64). This is a subtle attack on colonial occupation of African territory.

Indeed Kuruku is prophetic in saying that Lucifer will never like to live at his home because “there is no breathing space in this desert” (Mungoshi, 1975:64). The resolution from Uncle Kuruku is to fight because

They have given us enough hell – a few more years of waiting  
won’t make the slightest difference from what we have seen of  
them. Only a few more years and we will show them  
(Mungoshi, 1975:63).

There is no doubt Mungoshi makes use of a drunken Uncle Kuruku for the colonial machinery to dismiss him as a drunken person who is misguided. It is through Kuruku that *Waiting for the Rain* transcends the ordinary wait for the rains. It is implicit from the description of the landscape that even if the rains fall, they will only aggravate the already dire situation through erosion and siltation already evident in the once mighty Suka River. *Waiting for the Rain* as a title becomes an effective metaphor for the long wait for independence. It is only through independence that restoration of land stolen by whites can be realised.

The fact that Uncle Kuruku possesses a clear perception of the African predicament and yet seems to be an undisciplined drunk, could also be seen as indicative of Mungoshi’s scepticism towards those who led nationalist movements.

It is still evident though that the struggle against colonialism called for innovative ways of fighting because all orthodox channels were systematically shut. Kuruku’s message to all the family members who listen sinks deep and at the end “there is something oppressive in the air, something that doesn’t call for mirth. They can all feel it. A heavy silence settles” (Mungoshi, 1975: 65). There is no doubt, what Uncle Kuruku has said is enough food for thought.

### **Colonial Education: The Lethal Weapon**

Charles Mungoshi’s subtlety is also ostensible in his treatment of the main character, Lucifer. Unlike John, who shares a name with the biblical John the baptist who paved way for Christ, or Uncle Kuruku who seems to ‘crook’ the white man, Lucifer has the unfortunate name of the disgraced and dethroned archangel. Lucifer is the incarnation of the colonial education ideology towards Africans. One looks at Lucifer’s alienation from his own people with a sense of revulsion as to why he behaves the way he does. The truth is that Lucifer’s abject hatred for his own background, parents, home and country is indicative of how colonial grandstanding and posturing about superiority has created a rootless young man. Mungoshi craftily and subtly raises

the anxiety of the reader as Lucifer's clear entry in the novel is made in the fourteenth chapter when he travels home.

What is most disgusting about Lucifer is not his observation that the land is dead but his sense of self denial, defeatism and escapism. He, unlike John cannot sustain a meaningful conversation with anyone in the family. Even the childish and attention seeking Old Japi loses her patience with Lucifer and she impatiently challenges Lucifer on how he could lock himself up in his room on his first day home (Mungoshi, 1975). The extent of Lucifer's rootlessness and alienation is seen when he tries to reject himself. He retorts thus:

I am Lucifer Mandengu. I was born here against my will. I should have been born elsewhere – of some other parents. I have never liked it here, and I never shall and if ever I leave this place, I am not going to come back (Mungoshi, 1975:162).

Colonial education never sought to teach the African the value of his individuality and humaneness. The history taught was a falsified version meant to portray whites as having rescued Africans from the throes of barbarism. Lucifer himself does not have the slightest hint of the historical developments which have moulded his country, home and self because, "he can never seem to completely dig up and cut the roots that plant him in the earth of this dark arid country" (Mungoshi, 1975:52). The most insensitive of Lucifer's actions is shown when he leaves behind the peanut butter painstakingly prepared by Old Mandisa. His perception of the world is adversely contaminated with colonial hogwash on African primitivism and the civilising mission of colonialism.

From such thinking Lucifer fits well in the shoes of his namesake, Lucifer the archangel who turned against God, his creator. Mungoshi portrays the divisive effects of colonialism through its lethal tool - education. Most of the self hatred, complicity and indifference are direct effects of a colonial education tailored to dislocate Africans spiritually and morally. Colonial education created immoral anti-heroes and non-believers like Sam in Nyamfukudza's *The Non-believer's Journey* (1980). Frantz Fanon (1968) rightly observes that colonialism created a class of black people who had white masks.

Through Lucifer, Mungoshi manages to undress colonialism for what it was: a divisive tool meant to alienate a select few Africans from their communities through the creation of a class of complicit purveyors driven by a false conscience of superiority.

## Conclusion

*Waiting for the Rain* is a subtle political attack on colonialism and a loud call for a revolution to restore the expropriated heritage to the indigenes. Unlike his contemporaries like Solomon

Mutswairo and Stanlake Samkange in *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* (1983) and *The Mourned One* (1975) respectively, who retreated to the pre-colonial past where they “resurrected” African heroes to convey to their fellow citizens that colonialism had diminished their humanity through racist and misinformed reasoning, Mungoshi is subtle in his criticism of colonialism.

*Waiting for the Rain* can, therefore, be read as a veiled and subtle attack on the settler regime in Zimbabwe. Mungoshi’s seemingly innocent narrative communicates loudly, a clear message of colonial injustice, manifested through the grabbing of land from the indigenous people and the subsequent implementation of policies which sought to protect and perpetuate the illegal occupation of Zimbabwe.

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