

# Four Problems with Barry Hallen's Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy

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**Abstract: Four problems with Barry Hallen's analytic experiments in African philosophy.** Barry Hallen's two classics of African philosophy, *Knowledge Belief and Witchcraft* (subtitled: *Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*) and *The Good the Bad and the Beautiful*, resulted from a nine-year cross-cultural work that began in 1970 among the Yoruba of Nigeria. In the field, Hallen relied on the expertise of several Yoruba *onisegun* (masters of medicine) to analyze the meanings of key Yoruba epistemological and ethical terms underscoring the criteria governing their correct usage. In the two books, Hallen compares the criteria governing the correct usage of some of the Yoruba terms with those of their supposed English equivalents, drawing several, significant philosophical and cross-cultural inferences from the comparisons. A self-proclaimed analytic philosopher, Hallen describes the method he employs in the two books as 'conceptual analysis.' In light of this method, the main purpose of my essay is to critique four important aspects of Hallen's work in terms of such 'virtues' of analytic philosophy as clarity, validity, relevance, and consistency.

**Résumé: Quatre problèmes qui s'attachent aux expérimentations analytiques que Barry Hallen a conduites en philosophie africaine.** Les deux classiques de la philosophie africaine, *Knowledge Belief and Witchcraft* (dont le sous-titre était : *Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*) et *The Good the Bad and the Beautiful*, de Barry Hallen résultent de neuf ans de recherches effectuées à partir de 1970 chez les Yoruba du Nigeria. En la matière, Hallen s'est appuyé sur l'expertise de plusieurs *Onisegun* (maîtres de la médecine) pour comprendre les significations des principaux termes épistémologiques et éthiques yoruba afin de mettre en évidence les critères de leur bon usage. Dans

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les deux ouvrages, Hallen compare les critères régissant l'utilisation de certains termes yoruba avec leurs supposés équivalents en anglais et aboutit à des résultats significatifs tant au niveau culturel que philosophique. Se définissant comme un philosophe analytique, Hallen qualifie comme « de l'analyse conceptuelle » la méthode qu'il utilise dans ses ouvrages. A la lumière de cette méthode, le but principal de mon article est de faire la critique de quatre aspects importants de son analyse au regard des « vertus » de la philosophie analytique telles que la clarté, la validité, la pertinence et la conséquence.

**Key words:** aesthetics, African philosophy, conceptual analysis, epistemology, ethics, *onisegun*.

**Mots clefs :** l'esthétique, la philosophie africaine, l'analyse conceptuelle, l'épistémologie, l'éthique, *onisegun*

## **Introduction**

Barry Hallen's two classics of African philosophy, *Knowledge Belief and Witchcraft* and *The Good the Bad and the Beautiful*, resulted from a nine-year cross-cultural work that began in 1970, among the Yoruba of Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> His research project consisted mainly in analyzing the meanings of key Yoruba epistemic and ethical terms and comparing those meanings with those of their supposed English equivalents. In the process, Hallen ended up drawing several significant cross-cultural and philosophical conclusions. The overarching goal of his project was to introduce some of his findings into the Nigerian university curriculum, whose philosophical content was then dominated by British analytic philosophy, 'so that the "problems" and "topics" of academic philosophy could become more relevant to a Nigerian student body.' (2000: 5) Hallen (2000: 7) claims to have received his original inspiration from the work of the English philosopher J.L. Austin, the founder of ordinary-language philosophy. A self-proclaimed analytic philosopher, Hallen (1997: 10, 40, 2000: 35, 38) describes the method he employs in the two books as 'conceptual analysis.' In light of this method, the main purpose of this essay is to critique

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<sup>2</sup> *Knowledge Belief and Witchcraft* was co-authored with J. Olubi Sodipo. But for the sake of simplifying subsequent references to this book I will treat it as Hallen's single-authored work.

four important aspects of his work in terms of such 'virtues' of analytic philosophy as clearness, consistency, validity and relevance. This type of critique is not only germane to the type of philosopher Hallen is it is also a safe tool for someone like me who lacks even proficiency in the Yoruba language. Let those knowledgeable of Yoruba language and culture carry on the more substantive critical engagements of Hallen's work that are based on direct language interpretation and analysis. Let me proceed with the four criticisms.

### **1. Lack of clarity regarding the extension of the first criterion of Imo**

Hallen's main task in Chapter 2 of *Knowledge Belief and Witchcraft* is to undertake a four-tiered comparison of the meanings of the English epistemological terms 'know' and 'believe' with those of their supposed Yoruba equivalents, which, according R.C. Abraham's *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba*, are *mo* and *gbagbo*, respectively. Hallen (2000: xiii) refers to this 'most venerable of Yoruba-language dictionaries' as 'the established translation manual' (etm). The comparison is four-tiered in the sense that he compares the meanings of these two pairs at the levels of their references, their objects, the criteria governing their correct usage, as well as their sources. In specifying the meanings of 'know' and 'believe', Hallen relies especially on the works of leading English-language epistemologist Keith Lehrer, Rodney Needham, and H.H. Price. He bases the meanings of the Yoruba equivalents on the analyses of some twelve *onisegun* (master of medicine) of the *Ekiti* region of Yorubaland, who were regarded as wisest by both other members of their professional society (the *egbe*) as well as their clients. In this section I will focus on the criteria governing the correct usage of the terms 'know' and *mo*, since it is at this level of meaning and with these two terms that Hallen's analyses and comparisons entail the most significant cross-cultural and philosophical results.

Hallen (1997: 45-50) regards 'knowing that' as 'the most common' variety of knowledge and proceeds to identify its two least controversial

criteria or necessary conditions as truth and belief. That is, where S is a person and P is a proposition, S knows that P only if it is true that P and S believes that P. After adducing several direct quotations from the *onise-gun*, Hallen concludes that the *onisegun* articulate two necessary conditions for *imo* (the noun form of *mo*). The first one is *ri* or visual perception. ‘The person who claims to *mo* must *literally* have seen the thing himself.’ (1997: 60)<sup>3</sup> The second condition is *eri okon*, the witnessing of the perceiver’s *okon*<sup>4</sup> (etm: heart and mind or apprehension) that what is perceived is *ooto* (etm: true, truth). That is, ‘As well as seeing the thing first-hand, one must also comprehend what one is seeing and judge that one has done so...’ (1997: 61)

It is the first condition of *imo*, *ri*, that, according to Hallen, accounts for the precise difference in meaning between ‘know’ and *imo*. Whereas, *ri* leaves no room for any *imo* derived from second-hand information, the conditions of ‘knowing that’ do. Consequently, some information that qualifies as knowledge can fail to qualify for *imo*. For example, the average American knows (from second-hand sources) that George Washington was the first President of the United States. But he or she cannot be said to *mo* this ‘fact,’ since he or she cannot be in a position to witness it. According to Hallen, the Yoruba system of thought relegates all second-hand information to the level of *igbagbo* (the noun form of *gbagbo*), the second-best epistemic status.

The criteria that define the respective extents of and interrelations between *imo* and *igbagbo* stipulate that any experience or information which is not first-hand, personal, and direct must by definition fall under the heading of *igbagbo*. The sense of *igbagbo* may therefore be paraphrased as ‘comprehending, and deciding to accept as possible...information that one receives in a secondhand manner. *Imo*...and *igbagbo*...together exhaust all the information that human beings have at their disposal. (2000: 17)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The emphasis is added.

<sup>4</sup> Is it ‘*okon*’ or ‘*okan*’? The former is used throughout *Knowledge Belief and Witchcraft*, the latter is used throughout *The Good the Bad and the Beautiful*.

<sup>5</sup> Hallen (1997: 64) analyzes *igbagbo* as a conflation of *gba* (etm: agree) and *gbo* (etm: hear) and paraphrases its sense as ‘agreeing to accept what one hears from

Even though Hallen (1997: 84) claims that the meaning of *igbagbo* differs from that of 'belief' he does not give a criterion for *igbagbo* comparable to *ri* that sharply distinguishes the meaning of one term from that of the other. Can information that passes for belief fail to pass for *igbagbo*, or *vice versa*? This question cannot be answered by reference to Hallen's texts alone. What I find most puzzling though is the fact that after taking the criterion of *ri* to imply that 'there is virtually no margin for *imo* that has not been empirically confirmed' (1997: 72), Hallen proceeds to provide two contexts in which *imo* does not involve *literal* visual perception. The first context pertains to introspection the second involves insight. Let me elaborate.

According to Hallen (2000: 43, 51, 82) a person has privileged access to his or her motives and feelings through introspection as a result of which he or she can be said to know (*mo*) something about his or her character (*iwa*). Hallen supports this claim by invoking the words of the *onisegun* according to which an individual can *mo* if he or she is an enemy to another person.

It is only the person himself or herself who can know (*mo*) [introspectively] whether he or she is an enemy...to any other person. Because if a person could know who their enemies...are, they would do as much as possible to avoid them, but the mind of an enemy...may be very dark [difficult to identify, much less access]. (2000: 82)

This quotation provides us with a clear case of *imo* that does not involve *ri* in the literal sense of the term. I say this, because in his exposition of the Yoruba concept of the self (*inu* or *emi*), Hallen (2000: 50) attributes introspection, not to the sense of sight, *ri*, with its physical components, but to a faculty of the self called *iye inu*. But according to Hallen (2000: 89-90) the object of introspection, the self and its faculties, is not physical. Hence introspection has no physical components by virtue of either its object or the faculty responsible for it. Therefore it must be distinct from *ri*.

The possibility of *imo* by introspection evokes several questions regarding *ri* as one of *imo's* criteria. Is *ri* necessary for all cases of *imo*? If

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someone.'

so, the *onisegun* just quoted by Hallen are using the term *imo* incorrectly. But who would expect the wisest of the wise experts in Yoruba culture to make this sort of error in the context of articulating the criteria that govern the correct usage of a small set of terms that includes this very term? Is *ri* perhaps only required for *imo* claims pertaining to things that are distinct from the subject's self? If so, then one wonders why Hallen did not see the need to make this restriction explicitly clear in his two major works.

Claims of *imo* by insight evoke similar questions and puzzlement. Hallen takes the *onisegun* to attribute insight to a special faculty of the *emi*, called *oju inu*. According to a direct quotation from the *onisegun*, there are some people known as *aje* who, by virtue of their more powerful *oju inu*, are capable of acquiring *imo* of things that are beyond the scope of the sense of sight, *ri*.

As some people are more powerful...than others, so also their intuitive insight (*oju inu*) is more powerful. There will be two [eyes] outside and two inside. We call them 'aje.' You see...that he or she will be more powerful than someone with [only] two [two eyes...]. Some people can sit down here and may know (*mo*) what is happening down there [on the other side of the town]...Their intuitive insight (*oju inu*) may be seeing other places. We call then 'aje.' (2000: 93)

As was the case with introspection, the *imo* the *onisegun* attribute to the *aje* in this passage cannot be said to involve literal *ri* by virtue of either its objects or the faculty responsible for it. Might it be the case that *ri* is only required for *imo* claims of ordinary people and that extraordinary peoples' *imo* claims, such as those of the *aje*, are exempt from this requirement?<sup>6</sup> If so, Hallen does not give a clear statement of this exemption in his two main texts?

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<sup>6</sup> Even though conventionally translated as 'witch,' Hallen (2000: 86-97) renders 'aje' into English as 'intellectual.' He attempts to demythologize the *aje* and proceeds to regard them as human beings with superior intelligence and ability. The *onisegun* quoted by Hallen claim that, unlike ordinary human being who have one *emi*, the *aje* have two. It is not exactly clear from the text though if the number is literal or metaphorical.

## **2. Classification of information acquired by inference**

Judging from the above-quoted passage in which Hallen explains the difference between *imo* and *igbagbo*, all information that is not acquired directly should be classified as *igbagbo*, even if the acquisition of the information in question involves *ri* in some indirect manner. It is puzzling then to see the *onisegun* calling *imo* some information that by Hallen's admission (2000: 67) is acquired by inference. According to the *onisegun*:

If you are doing ... what is good... they will say your character (*iwa*) is good... If you are doing what is bad ...they will say your character (*iwa*) is bad... They know (*mo*) your character (*iwa*) from the way you behave... (2000: 41)

The biggest problem with classifying as *imo* information that is acquired by inference from what is directly visible to what is invisible is that the classification undermines what Hallen regards as a significant cross-cultural consequence of the *imo/igbagbo* distinction. Let me elaborate.

Hallen (1997: 72-73, 2000: 13-19) contends that, as explicated by the *onisegun*, the *imo/igbagbo* distinction puts a critical check on the hasty generalizations about traditional people by 'intellectualist,' like Robin Horton. Horton (1967) argues that there is a striking similarity between traditional people and theoretical scientists, because both groups seek to explain the visible world in terms of the invisible world. Horton, however, observes a two-fold difference between the two groups. The first difference is one of medium of explanation. Whereas, traditional people's explanations are in terms of the behavior of gods and spirits, a fact that makes their explanatory beliefs religious, scientists' explanations are in terms of the behavior of such theoretical entities as atoms, particles, and so on, making their explanatory beliefs 'theoretical.' The second difference is one of attitude toward the explanatory beliefs. According to Horton, traditional people see their religious beliefs as constituting a revered, closed system that must be accepted uncritically and passed on unchanged from generation to generation. According to Horton, empirical testing is alien to traditional people for whom appealing to the ancestors

is the only known form of justification. In contrast, Horton contends that scientists regard their theoretical beliefs critically, as always open to revision through further empirical testing.

Hallen's contention is that Horton's generalization is contradicted by the case of the Yoruba. According to Hallen, the *imo/igbagbo* distinction in the language of these traditional people suggests that they don't revere their religious beliefs to the extent suggested by Horton. Since the Yoruba acquire their religious beliefs from oral tradition, which is a second-hand source, they cannot accord them the highest epistemic status of *imo*. Instead, they relegate these beliefs to the lower epistemic status of *igbagbo*, the status of information that one agrees to accept as possibly true. As for the alleged lack of criticism and empirical testing, Hallen says that the *imo/igbagbo* distinction suggests that the Yoruba treat critically all beliefs acquired from oral tradition (including all religious beliefs), as merely hypothetical, until they are verified by first-hand observation.

What was said to be distinctive about African oral traditions was the relatively uncritical manner in which they were inherited from the past, preserved in the present, and passed on to future generations... One problem for this...portrait of the African intellectual attitude toward tradition is that it is contradicted by the manner in which the Yoruba employ 'mo' and 'gbagbo' in discourse. If my grandfather tells me that he knows the recipe for a potent headache medicine (that he in turn learned from his grandfather) and teaches it to me-this exchange of information would still be on the level of *igbagbo*, of secondhand information. I could not be said to have *imo* of this medicine as medicine until I myself had prepared it, administered it to someone, and witnessed its curative powers... [A] tradition deserves to remain a tradition only if it proves effective... Until this has been proved in a direct and personal manner its empirical status can be no more than hypothetical, something that may possibly be true (or false) and therefore must be classed as *igbagbo*. (2000: 19)

Hallen's critical check on Horton's generalization would be beyond reproach if all traditional Yoruba acquired all their religious beliefs from the secondhand source of oral traditions. Yet if Horton is right, and Hallen does not oppose this particular aspect of his views, there are traditional Yoruba that acquire at least some of their religious beliefs by inference from what they perceive directly. An *onisegun* might, for example, acquire by inference a religious belief about a certain ancestor in

the process of diagnosing the cause of an unusual body rash. In general, any creative traditional thinker may, by observing some puzzling phenomenon in the visible world, infer any number of general religious statements about the spiritual world as the best explanation for it. Since the *onisegun* classified as *imo* information about the invisible *emi* that is inferred from observations of visible behavior, *consistency* would require the *onisegun* to use the same appellation of *imo* regarding information about the invisible spiritual world that is inferred from observations of visible phenomena in the physical world. If my observation is plausible, then some traditional Yoruba, indeed some of the best thinkers among them, revere some religious beliefs as known truths (*imo* entails *ooto* or truth). This consequent clearly undermines Hallen's criticism of Horton.

### **3. An unwarranted inference**

Hallen contends that the high epistemic status knowledge and truth enjoy in English-language culture is due to the fact that both concepts are more than personal.

‘Information that is labeled ‘knowledge’ and ‘true’ becomes so, in principle, for anyone. Knowledge and truth thereby transcend the personal, the subjective, and assume the cloak of universality.’ (2000: 20)

In contrast, Hallen argues that ‘*imo*’ and ‘*ooto*,’ the supposed Yoruba equivalents of the two English terms, necessarily involve a personal element that makes them ‘veer markedly toward the subjective.’ (2000: 20). Hallen is careful not to deny the Yoruba an objective notion of truth. His sole point is that *ooto* involves a personal element and that

‘in Yoruba discourse...it has not been possible to identify a single term that conveys a truth that is more than personal, that attaches to propositions or things independently of whoever happens to be experiencing them.’ (2000: 28)

The personal element to *imo* is obviously due to the criterion of *ri*. Hallen bases the personal element to *ooto* on its criteria as well, which he states formally as follows:

$Ri + eri\ okon \supset ooto$  and  $ooto \supset ri + eri\ okon$ . (1997: 62)

Assuming that *ooto* is a necessary condition of *imo*, as the latter's second criterion seems to suggest, and assuming further that the first and second criteria of *imo* are together sufficient for it, the first (sufficient) condition of *ooto* can be justified by the following simple formal argument:

1.  $Imo \supset ooto$
2.  $Ri + eri\ okon \supset imo$
3.  $\therefore Ri + eri\ okon \supset ooto$ .

It is, however, the second (necessary) condition of *ooto* that is directly responsible for its alleged inability to shed the personal element, and Hallen uses the following words of the *onisegun* to justify this condition:

It is *ooto* that this motor vehicle stands here. If people say that the motor vehicle does not stand here, you will say that you use your own eyes to see it - that it is *ooto*. You should not have two thoughts. (1997: 62)

As they stand in translation these words of the *onisegun* do not logically support what Hallen claims be the necessary condition of *ooto*. Since the *onisegun* use *ri* in this passage to justify *ooto*, the most that is derivable from it is that *ri* is a sufficient condition for *ooto*, a claim that makes perfect sense in the case of veridical *ri*. Frankly, I find it hard to believe that Hallen failed to notice this *non-sequitur*.<sup>7</sup> But, given the centrality of the concept of truth in any cognitive system, I find it even harder to believe that Hallen chose to base the meaning of *ooto* solely on one three-sentence quotation. Couldn't Hallen argue, though, that *imo* and *ooto* are so intimately related that since the former is 'subjective' the latter must be 'subjective' as well? This sort of argument might be implicit in the following (rhetorical?) question. 'If *imo* arises from a subjec-

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<sup>7</sup> Might knowing the lead question that elicited the *onisegun*'s response throw some light on how Hallen was sold on to this *non-sequitur*? It might. Unfortunately, though, Hallen has not published his lead questions. According to Mike Reynolds, one of my best African philosophy students, failure to provide these questions is the biggest problem with Hallen's project.

tive base, does it make sense to couple this aspect of experience with a translation of “*ooto*” – “truth” - that in English usage implies, above all, intersubjective agreement?’ (Hallen, 2000: 22) My view is that this question cannot only answered in terms of the specific relation that exists between *imo* and *ooto*. If, as we have seen above, *ooto* is regarded as no more than a necessary condition for *imo*, then the subjectivity of *imo* cannot be used as sufficient evidence for the subjectivity of *ooto*.

#### **4. The relevance of Quine's indeterminacy thesis of radical translation**

Chapter 1 of Hallen's *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft* is devoted to an extended discussion of W.V. O. Quine's Indeterminacy Thesis of Radical Translation. A behaviorist, Quine denies abstract meanings to verbal expressions and accepts only empirical meanings, that is, meanings that can be expressed in terms of immediate physical stimuli. Consequently, Quine classifies all verbal expressions into two groups: observation sentences and standing sentences. Observation sentences comprise all those verbal expressions whose meanings can be readily expressed in terms of physical stimuli, that is, meanings that can be taught ostensively. Standing or theoretical sentences, in contrast, are such that their meanings cannot be taught by ostension as those meanings are not describable in terms of immediate physical stimuli. Quine contends that translations of standing sentences from one language into another are totally indeterminate. That is, given any translation of a standing sentence, a different, equally plausible translation of that same sentences is always possible, and there is no conclusive way to determine which one of the competing translations is the correct one. This obtains because neither of the competing translations can be put to a discriminating empirical test. In contrast, Quine argues that translations of observation sentences can be accomplished with some level of determinacy, since at least some of the competing translations can be ruled out by reference to immediate physical stimuli. Roughly, this is the Indeterminacy Thesis as summarized by Hallen.

Hallen's interest in the Indeterminacy Thesis stems from the fact

that a big part of his project consists of comparing the ‘meanings’ of Yoruba epistemic and ethical terms with those of their supposed English equivalents. Since the Yoruba meanings are proposed in terms of verbal expressions, such as *ri*, Hallen is concerned that translations of these expressions into English might turn out to be indeterminate, making these translations unreliable bases for his desired comparisons. He addresses this concern as follows.

Focusing on the level of criteria and objects for the key epistemic terms *mo* and *gbagbo*, Hallen (1997: 81-84) argues that a significant number of the verbal expressions representing the meanings of these two terms at these levels are observation sentences. Consequently, he contends that their translations into English are sufficiently determinate to serve as stable bases for his cross-cultural comparisons. As examples of the relevant verbal expressions that he regards as observation sentences, Hallen give *ri*, the first criterion of *mo* and the objects of *mo* which he takes to be ‘propositions’ and ‘experiences’. Regarding *gbagbo*, Hallen cites its criteria of ‘absence of *ri*’ and ‘what one is told’ as well as its objects, such as, ‘oral tradition,’ ‘formal education,’ and ‘book information.’ I have argued elsewhere that none of these verbal expressions that Hallen regards as observation sentences are observation sentences in any recognizable sense of the term. Take *ri*, for example. If it is translatable as ‘visual perception,’ then it refers to a complex process whose meaning cannot be taught ostensibly. And I don’t believe it takes much sophistication to realize the ‘theoretical’ nature of the meanings of Hallen’s other verbal expressions.<sup>8</sup>

Hallen (2000: 183) acknowledges my critical discussion of his *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft*. Given his awareness of my criticism, It is surprising to see that, in subsequent works, Hallen continues to treat his translations of the meanings of *mo* and *gbagbo* as if they were immune to the Indeterminacy Thesis. It is even more surprising to see that in *The Good the Bad and the Beautiful*, even though Quine’s name is mentioned several times (e.g., pp. x, xiii, and 42), no effort is made to give

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<sup>8</sup> See Kalumba (1996: 154).

empirical meanings to any of the involved Yoruba ethical or esthetical terms. Did the Indeterminacy Thesis lose its relevance for Hallen's project? If not, he needs to explain why he stopped worrying about the empirical content of the project's key Yoruba terms.

## **Conclusion**

I share the conviction underlying Hallen's project that

'the systematic analysis of ordinary...language usage in...African cultures can prove to be of fundamental philosophical value. (2000: 1)

I also believe that the conclusions of his analytic experiments, so far, are very significant, though, as he himself has admitted 'incomplete' (1997: 85). My hope is that the critique presented in this essay will contribute to the completion of Hallen's worthy project. If my observations are plausible, the work ahead will require revisiting Hallen's original data, or even conducting fresh research. This seems to be the only way precision will be gained on the extension of *ri*, and convincing support be adduced for the criteria of *ooto*. It will also require coming to terms with the relevance of the Indeterminacy Thesis. In all likelihood, these endeavors will call for a modification of some of Hallen's current cross-cultural conclusions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> With minor revisions, this essay was read at the Annual Conference of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, in January 2007.

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