Gaelic Proverbial Lore in Embo Village

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Traditional Gaelic folk material in East Sutherland

Embo village, near Dornoch in Sutherland, has in this century been one of the chief relic areas for Gaelic speech in the north-east of Scotland. During the decade of the 1960s over one hundred people, or about half of the adult population, used Gaelic as their everyday language. The Gaelic-speaking half of the population is, however, the older half: the younger people speak no Gaelic, and the language will die out completely in Embo within the next forty to fifty years.

East Sutherland Gaelic, including Embo Gaelic, is notable for the aberrance of the dialect and for the poverty, in many areas, of the folk culture. There are no local songs and no internationally-known traditional stories, and according to a Gaelic-speaking schoolmaster who came to Embo during the 1930s, there were none even then (Calder 1960: 290). I have collected only two Gaelic riddles in the course of nineteen months of field work, spread over a nine-year period, in the area: one of these was learned by a local woman from an outsider, and the other is current in English as well and may therefore be a translation. The one or two children's rhymes that survive are apparently translations from the English and co-exist with the English models. Place-name lore is similarly thin.

The poverty of the Gaelic folk culture in general makes the relative wealth of Gaelic proverbs available in Embo striking by contrast. This paper presents the results of work with the Embo family who emerged as the chief source of proverbial lore and with other Embo villagers who were asked to establish a body of truly local material by confirming or rejecting the proverbs provided by the leading tradition-bearing family. A final section presents the proverbs common to Embo speakers which do not appear in Nicolson's collection of Gaelic proverbs (Nicolson-MacInnes 1951).

Encountering the proverbs

The first proverbial material that I collected emerged naturally in the conversational give and take of the Embo household in which I was working most in 1963–4. This was the home of Christina (Teenie) and John Fraser, an Embo couple in their early sixties and early eighties respectively. Sharing their home was Christina's considerably

younger sister Margaret Ross and Christina's slightly older brother Peter Ross. Peter was at home only at weekends, however, and I scarcely knew him at that time.

The Fraser-Ross household was known in the village as an uncommonly rich source of proverbial material, but I had no idea of this then. I simply registered interest and pleasure when proverbs arose naturally in conversation or were quoted in connection with the linguistic work we were doing, and gradually the Frasers began to offer them to me as items of independent interest. After I returned to the United States, Christina, who was more or less literate in Gaelic, even wrote me an occasional proverb in her letters, saying she had forgotten to tell me that one before. But the prevailing pattern with the Frasers was the introduction of proverbial material only where it was germane, for example to counter someone in an argument or to explain an attitude.

After Christina and John Fraser died in 1966, I continued to work in the Ross household with the surviving sister and brother. Peter Ross had retired in the interim and was now at home all the time. In the summer of 1967 I lived in the Ross household for two weeks, and during this period Peter took to producing proverbs and sayings in a steady stream, usually *à propos* of nothing, but simply because he liked them and knew I was interested in them. I learned to come to the breakfast table with paper and pencil because Peter was sure to have recollected several more sayings during the night. Peter is in fact something of a specialist in proverbs, given to saying very little beyond what he can couch in the language of traditional wisdom. This is in marked contrast to his sister Christina, who was extremely loquacious and for whom proverbs formed only a small, though cherished, part of the verbal repertory.

The bulk of the material in my collection of proverbs and sayings comes from Peter Ross and was gathered in 1967–8. Peter alone provided 205 items,[1] only thirteen of which overlapped with the forty provided by his sister Christina during the brief time I had worked with her. Although Peter only rarely gave a proverb which Christina had also given, he very frequently suggested that the proverb he was introducing was common family property by invoking Christina's name: 'Did Christina ever tell you this one?' Peter never admitted to having learned a proverb on the west coast of Scotland, where he spent many years working, or through reading. He commonly introduced his contributions with the kind of reference to his sister Christina already mentioned or with reference to deceased villagers as his sources: 'My mother used to say . . .' or 'The old people used to say. . . .' But he also introduced a good many proverbs simply by saying 'Did you hear the one, . . . ?'

There is no generic term of the type 'proverb' or 'saying' in common use in Embo Gaelic, and Peter's unedited material is quite various. It includes proverbs, maxims, proverbial phrases, and what Archer Taylor has called Wellerisms (Taylor 1931: 201). Also offered by Peter with exactly the same introductory remarks were one riddle, one trick question, one tongue-twister, a few archaic turns of phrase, and one or two lines from popular songs: these are not included in the corpus.

Establishing a corpus of local material

Much of the material given by Peter Ross was suspect in terms of a search for a truly local tradition. There was, to begin with, the fact that there was so much more of it than contact with other local people suggested was current. Furthermore Peter's sister Margaret sometimes disclaimed knowledge of the proverb he quoted. Then there was the fact that Peter sometimes quoted a proverb which he himself could not translate, or a proverb with Gaelic words common in other parts of the Highlands but not locally. Examples of the former are *Faodaidh bean a cothrom dol air bean a caimis* [*sic*], which Peter explained in the following words: 'a rich woman can go anywhere she likes, not a poor woman', without being able to give a meaning for *caimis*; or the rhyming proverb /fanəs u bɪɔs nə l′um er tɔt nə tum/, which I can only give phonemically because the words /l′um/ and /tɔt nə tum/ are obscure. Peter explained that it meant 'you can tell on a person's face', but was unable to translate any part of it directly. He connected /l′um/ with the local word for 'beer', but this is unlikely because the word 'beer' always has a long nasal vowel: /l′ũ:m/. An example of a proverb using a word common elsewhere but not locally is *Rud air clar an aodainn, chan urrainn dha bhith air fholach*, 'A thing on the surface of the face can't be hidden', with *aodann* instead of the local *aghaidh* 'face'. A still more striking example, because Peter's own sister Margaret did not know the proverb and objected to the non-local word, was *Thig uabhar roimh sgrios*, 'Pride comes before a fall', with *uabhar* instead of the local *pròis* 'pride'.

Because of the uncertain provenance of much of Peter's proverbial material, his collection of proverbs and sayings was submitted to a jury of fellow-villagers ranging in size from two to seven individuals as people came and went during the sessions. The proverbs were submitted in English translation and with rare exceptions (*e.g.* where feeling was strong that the proverb was common but the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon seemed to be preventing its total recall) no proverb was accepted as local unless the jury could provide a Gaelic version identical with, or reasonably similar to, Peter's and Christina's.

The local corpus

The Embo jury was able to reproduce eighty of Peter and Christina's proverbs and sayings and claimed to have heard twenty-four additional items without being able to reproduce them. In the process of reviewing the proverbs already in the collection they added just one new saying of their own: to the considerable list of sayings designed to put a young upstart in his place they added *Cha do phàidh e am bainne fhathast* 'He didn't pay the milk yet', which they say is used especially of a young and green man marrying.

Embo is a thoroughly bilingual community where Gaelic and English are used side by side. A number of proverbs are common to both languages, and beyond this the

impulse to translate from one language to the other must be ever present. It is interesting, therefore, that seven of Peter's proverbs were rejected by the jury on the grounds that they were really English proverbs rather than Gaelic, *e.g. 'S olc a' ghaoth nach seid gu math do fear a choireigin* 'It's an ill wind that blows nobody good',[2] and *'Sfhearr am muileach aig seann duine na tràill aig duine òg* 'Better an old man's darling than a young man's slave'. On the other hand one saying common to both languages was specifically claimed as 'a Gaelic one' by one of the jury: *Dé feum a' ghlasadh an stàbull 'nuair a tha na h-eich air falbh?* 'What use locking the stable when the horses are gone?'

Five other shared sayings were simply given in Gaelic with no comment at all, *e.g. Chan fhaigh thu snàthad ann an cruach feur* 'You won't find a needle in a haystack', and *Chan e airgiod na h-uile nì* 'Money isn't everything'. Just once the jury commented that a saying was both Gaelic and English: *Tha an leanabh 's a' chreathall nas glic na 'm fear a tha fulaisgeadh e* 'The baby in the cradle is wiser than the fellow who's rocking it'. These shared sayings were accepted as part of the local corpus, while the sayings identified as English were excluded on the basis of the jury's rejection.

An interesting development was the discovery that the sort of obscurities which originally made many items in Peter's stock of proverbs suspect to me proved to have parallels even within the established corpus of local proverbs. It is evidently not possible to disqualify a saying on this basis.

Sometimes speakers used a word freely in a proverb which they admitted to not knowing outside the proverb, as with *gionach* in **Théid cù gionach a sgaldadh* 'A greedy dog gets scalded'. This word was translated correctly in the context of the proverb although the word 'greedy' had previously been unelicitable from several members of the jury. Furthermore it was mispronounced by two of them as /gin'ax/ rather than /ginax/, suggesting that it was not part of their active vocabulary but rather a relic surviving precariously in the proverb.

In the case of the proverb *Rigidh each mall muileann uair-eigin* 'A slow horse will reach the mill sometime', the locally unfamiliar word *mall*, which survives only in this proverb, was variously translated as 'lame', 'weak', and 'slow'. The proverb is nonetheless widely known and correctly used, since all three translations make sense in the context of the rest of the proverb.

A case where the unfamiliar word is perhaps less guessable from context, and yet the proverb remains current, is **Cha ghabh thu dar gheobh thu, 's chan fhaigh dar 's àill* 'You won't take when you'll get, and [you] won't get when you want'. The translations offered by both Peter and the jury indicated that they understood the meaning of the proverb in a general sense and applied it appropriately to such as finicky people, but when pressed for a translation of the expressions [də s a:l'], which to the best of my knowledge does not occur in the dialect outside this saying, Peter hazarded a guess that [s a:l'] had 'something to do with meat'.

One widely quoted proverb, given by five informants, including one from Golspie, a

* Proverbs and sayings marked with an asterisk are not found in *Nicolson's Gaelic Proverbs.*

village 10 miles away from Embo where proverbs are much less in evidence, is completely obscure in its last half. This last half exists in several variations, none of which makes clear sense. The first half in all versions runs **Cha dhaor am bolla* 'Not dear the boll'. The ending is given variously as /(s) gə fɛtəra/, /s gə vɛtəra/ and /ə bɛtəra/. All speakers agree that the proverb means roughly that a commodity, represented by the boll, is not expensive as long as it's available at all, and one of the attempts at a more or less literal translation runs 'when you can get it', suggesting that the element /fɛ-/ or /vɛ-/ or /bɛ-/ is the local dialect form of *faigh* 'get', which does indeed take the first two of those shapes.[3] Christina Fraser, who was the first to offer the saying, suggested that the second half was a corruption of *gum faigh duine e* 'that a man will get it'. The interesting thing about this proverb is that its obscurity to its users in no way reduces their sense of its effectiveness. They quote it confidently as an embodiment of traditional wisdom in what they believe to be appropriate circumstances, and they had no hesitation in bringing it to my attention. In East Sutherland, clearly, a proverb need not be completely comprehensible to be maintained and transmitted.

The content of the local corpus

The eighty proverbs and sayings in the local corpus cover the usual wide spectrum of traditional wisdom and experience. Certain areas are relatively richly represented, however.

Five proverbs deal with material well-being and the difficulties of securing it:

Chan eil port an asgaidh a' dol. 'There's no free ferry running.'

Cha sheas poca falaimh ri balla. 'An empty purse won't stand against a wall.'

*Gheobh an caithdear na chaitheas e, agus chan fhaigh an caomhnadair na chaomhnas e. 'The spender will get what he will spend and the saver won't get what he will save.'

*Ithidh an t-acras rud 's am bith. 'Hunger will eat anything.'

*'Nuair a bhios a' bhròg agam, cha bhi stocain agam. 'Whenever I have the shoe, I don't have a stocking'.

Another popular theme is the unexpectedness of life and the uncertainty of fate:

*Cha téid an ràthan air an tòn air am bheil thu na shuidhe.[4] 'Don't go guarantee for the bottom you're sitting on.'

Rud a thig leis an t-uisge, falbh e leis a' ghaoth. 'A thing that comes with the water will depart with the wind.'

'S iomadh rud a chì, fear an t-saobhal fhad'. 'Many a thing he'll see, a man who lives long.'

'S iomadh rud a' tachairt eadar a' chreathall 's an uaimh [=uaigh]. 'Many a thing happens between the cradle and the grave.'

'S iomadh rud thig air an laogh nach saoil a mhàthair. 'Many a thing comes on the calf that his mother doesn't expect.'

Fools and foolish behaviour, sometimes contrasted with wise behaviour, are the focus of five proverbs:

Ceann mor air duine glic, ceann cearc air amadan. 'Big head on a wise man, hen head on a fool.'

*Chan eil baile 's am bith gun amadan. 'There's no village without a fool.'

*Cleib Culmhàilidh, cleib a' Phort. 'The Culmally fool, the Ferry fool.' (This is the only saying in which local place-names appear. The saying refers to a local anecdote in which a drunken Culmally man insists on seeing his equally drunken Little Ferry friend home, but is in turn seen home by the Little Ferry man, and so the two spend the whole night walking back and forth between Culmally and the Little Ferry, seeing each other home.)

*'S iomadh rud nì ceann gun chiall air casan gun lùthas. 'Many a thing a head without sense does on feet without strength.'

Tha cuid an duine glic tòn a' phoca, cuid an t-amadan beul a' phoca. 'The wise man's share is at the bottom of the bag, the fool's share at the mouth.'

A number of weaknesses and vices are dealt with in proverbs and sayings, but pride attracts the most frequent comment:

*Cha deach thusa a dhèanamh 's a' chèardaich nas mù na neach eile. 'You weren't made in the smiddy any more than anyone else.'

Cha'n eil comunn aig na h-Iùdhaich ris na Samaratanaich. 'The Jews have no intercourse with the Samaritans.'[5]

*Sàilean àrd, 's pòcaidean falaimh. 'High heels and empty pockets.'

*'S ann dut a rug an cat an cuilean. 'It's for you the cat bore the puppy.'

Suidh gu h-ìosal, 's pàidh gu h-uasal. 'Sit lowly and pay nobly.'

Only persistence among the virtues receives much attention:

*A' chearc a sgrìobas, gheobh i rud-eigin. 'The hen that scratches will get something.'

Rigidh each mall muileann uaireigin. 'A slow horse will reach the mill sometime.'

*'S e straoi ni buaidh. 'It's striving that makes victory.'

All of these themes are further developed in the material Peter adds to the common store. He has three additional sayings on material well-being, six on the uncertainties of fate, two on the behaviour of fools, four on pride, and one on persistence. The rest of his material is thoroughly miscellaneous except for a conspicuously rich stock of proverbs on the dangers and disappointments of love and marriage, on which he offers eight proverbs in addition to the jury's one. As a slightly misogynistic bachelor, Peter delights in these last and he has evidently made a special point of preserving traditional wisdom on this theme.

The style of the proverbs

The couching of proverbial wisdom takes very various forms, as demonstrated already in the proverbs and sayings quoted above. The nearest approach to a proverbial formula is the frequency of the introductory phrase *'S iomadh* 'There is many a . . .', which occurs eight times among the eighty items of the local corpus and is the more striking because the word *iomadh* is not particularly frequent of occurrence outside proverbial matter. The formula 'better——than——', which is frequent in Peter and Christina's material, occurs only once in the corpus established by the jury.

A stylistic device peculiar to proverbs is the juxtaposition of two nouns in the absence of any verb. The two nouns then stand to each other in various relationships, *e.g.* the second is the result of the first (*Cadal fad' 's an t-iomradh teth* 'Long sleep and the hot rowing'); the second is intended to contrast with the first (**Casan iarunn air latha na Sàbaid, 's casan fiadh air Di-luain* 'Iron feet on the Sabbath, deer's feet on Monday'); or the two are intended to represent two of a kind (**Cleib Culmhàilidh, cleib a' Phort* 'The Culmally fool and the Ferry fool').

Imperative sayings (that is, maxims) are relatively rare. Only four occur in the local corpus, *e.g.* **Cha gheall*[6] *nichean do leanabh* 'Don't promise anything to a child.'

Four proverbs use diametric opposites in stylistic contrast, *e.g.* riches versus poverty in the proverb **Cha toir beartas iad, 's cha chum bochdas air falbh iad,* 'Riches won't bring them [children], and poverty won't keep them away.'

What Taylor calls expansions (Taylor: 25–6) are popular in Embo, that is, tag-lines added to a familiar proverbial expression. In the proverb already cited above, *Tha cuid an duine glic tòn a' phoca, cuid an t-amadan beul a' phoca,* the second half would appear to be an expansion when contrasted with the form given by Nicolson, which reads simply *Bidh cuid an amadain am bial a bhuilg.* In another proverb given by Nicolson, *Fear 'an aite fir 's e dh' fhàgas am fearann daor* 'Tenant after tenant makes the land dear', the Embo version gives the reason for the dearness only in a tag (rarely used but generally known): *'S e sin a dh' fhàg am fearainn cho daor, cho luath 's a tha aon duine a mach, tha duine eile a staigh* 'It's that that left the field so dear, as soon as one man is out, another man is in.' Peter thrice added tags to proverbs included in the local corpus. The jury agreed to the tag in the first case (*Tha iasg 's a' chuan cho math 's a thàinig as—ach cha'n eil h-uile h-iasg*

cho blasdail 'There's fish in the sea as good as came out—but not all the fish are so tasty'), although the proverb appears in Nicolson without any expansion. Peter's second tag, which consists of a line running parallel to the first, was rejected by the jury: **Tha iasg 's a' chuan do'n an leanabh nach do rug*[7]*— 's tha feur air fàs do'n an laogh nach do rug* 'There's fish in the sea for the child not born—and there's grass growing for the calf not born.' Peter's third tag is an answer to the proverbial question mentioned above, *Dé feum a' ghlasadh an stàbull 'nuair a tha na h-eich air falbh?*, namely *Faodas e bhith gum bheil acfhuinn luachmhor innte.* 'What use locking the stable when the horses are gone?—Maybe there's a valuable harness in it.' The jury claimed not to have heard this answer before. In one case a jury member actually added a tag to one of Peter's proverbs: **A' chearc a sgròbail, gheobh ise rudeigin, ach a' chearc a grùban, chan fhaigh i dad* 'The scratching hen will get something, but the sitting(?) hen will get nothing.'[8]

Proverbs with rhyme or other word resemblances were not common in the local corpus. The only two rhyming proverbs collected were: *Rud a chì leanabh, nì leanabh* 'A thing a child sees, he'll do', and *Théid reodhadh 's t-earrach troimh bòrd darach* 'A spring frost will go through an oak board'. Two additional proverbs had internal word resemblances: *Suidh gu h-ìosal, 's pàidh gu h-uasal* 'Sit lowly and pay nobly', and **Cha bheir aireachas air toileachas* 'Regret won't catch up with happiness'. Peter included six further proverbs with rhyme or assonance in his larger corpus, two of which had been given by Christina as well, but none of these were reproduced by the jury.

The future of proverbial lore in Embo

With the death of Christina Fraser, Embo lost one of its great proverbial tradition-bearers, and this was clearly recognised by the jury. Christina was a shopkeeper and was in conversation with one or another villager virtually all day long. She was known and cherished as a treasure-trove of proverbs and old sayings, and the jury often said 'I used to hear that one with [*i.e.* from] Teenie'. Although the jury ventured the opinion that Peter actually knew even more proverbs than his sister, his sphere of influence is much more limited owing to the fact that he is something of a recluse and quite taciturn in most circumstances. He was also home in the village only at weekends for part of his adult life.

The role of the Fraser-Ross household in preserving proverbial lore can hardly be over-estimated, at least within the circle of their acquaintance. The jury members mentioned specifically only three sources for the proverbs they knew. (Most proverbs were given without source, as part of the common knowledge of the village.) Twice a member of an earlier generation was mentioned, a father and an 'old auntie'. Otherwise, when a source was given, it was always Christina or Peter who was mentioned. In their own time, Christina and Peter had become a source of proverbial material on a par with vanished earlier generations.

Outside the Fraser-Ross household I only once heard a proverb introduced naturally

into a conversation, and that was from an elderly man now dead, the father of one of the jury members. The jury clearly relished the proverbs we discussed, and they valued Peter highly for his command of proverbial lore, but they themselves seem to use proverbs very little. Beyond this there is the decisive fact that no one under the age of 40 continues to speak Gaelic, so that even passive knowledge of Gaelic proverbs will die out in Embo within the next fifty years. Without Christina Fraser or Peter Ross to act as source and catalyst, no very full corpus of local Gaelic proverbs would be forthcoming, and this collection consequently represents a final page in the survival of Embo's traditional Gaelic proverbial lore. It is entirely possible, however, that the Gaelic proverbs will survive nevertheless through translation and transmission in English. Perhaps an investigation fifty years hence will be able to establish whether this in fact has happened.

Additional Embo proverbs and sayings

The following proverbs and sayings are not included in *Nicolson's Gaelic Proverbs* (material introduced with an asterisk above is not repeated here):

An latha nach bi iad a' bruidhinn ma do dhéibhinn, cha mhór a 's fhiach thu. 'The day they won't be speaking about you, you won't be worth much.'

Bean gun leanabh beag, bean gun leisgeul. 'A woman without a small child, a woman without an excuse.'

Cha deach thu troimh 'n a' mhuileann fhathast. 'You didn't go through the mill yet.'

Cha dug thu salainn do'n a' chat. 'You didn't give salt to the cat.'

Chan eil h-uile facal sireadh freagairt. 'Not every question requires an answer.'

Chan fhaigh thu cloch 's a' chuaraidh. 'You won't get a stone in the quarry.'

Chan fhaigh thu neach a thachaiseas do thòn mar thu fhéin. 'You won't get anybody who'll scratch your bottom like yourself.'

Chan fhaithnich thu an t-each breac dar nach fhaic thu e. 'You won't recognise the speckled horse [*i.e.*, your own property] when you don't see it [*i.e.*, if it's been stolen and you never missed it until you saw it elsewhere].'

Chunnaic thu iad, ach cha dh' fhaithnich thu iad. 'You saw them, but you didn't recognise them [*i.e.* what manner of men they were].'

Fàsaidh caileag fo tuba. 'A girl will grow [even] under a tub.'

Ma dh' fhuiricheas tu taobh an teine agad fhéin, cha chluinn thu nichean a chuireas deuchainn ort. 'If you stay at your own fireside you won't hear anything to vex you.'

Mur toir iad gàire ort, cha tòir iad caoin ort. 'If they [children] don't make you laugh, they won't make you cry.'

Rud nach tig air a' chraobh, thig e air a' mheangain. 'A thing that doesn't come on the tree will come on the branch.'

'S fhaide cuimhne brogach. 'A boy's memory is longer.'

Sguabadh e beul a theine fhéin mu téid e gu neach eile. 'Let him brush his own fireside before he goes to some one else['s fireside].'

'S iomadh rud a chì thu 'nuair nach eil gunna agad. 'Many a thing you'll see [hunting] when you don't have a gun.'

Tha bò sgàrdach sireadh bò sgàrdach.[9] 'A skittery cow looks for another skittery cow [for company].'

Tha cus coin gun choileirean ann. 'There are too many dogs without collars [all after the same thing].'

Tha h-uile fear bòidheach cho fad' 's a tha an craiceann slàn. 'Every man is bonny as long as his skin is whole.'

Tha i air sporan duine eile. 'She [a fat wife] is on someone else's purse.'

Tha iomadh gealladh bòidheach 's a' phòsadh. 'There's many a bonny promise in marriage.'

Théid cailleach ri [=le?] cnoc. 'An old woman will go with a hill.' [*i.e.* even an old woman can do an easy thing, or, take the line of least resistance.]

Thoir leòir tobha do duine agus crochas e e fhéin. 'Give enough rope to a man and he'll hang himself.'

NOTES

1 These 205 items by no means exhaust Peter Ross as a source. They represent only the items checked with the jury (see below) in 1968. At subsequent sessions Peter gave an additional thirty-five proverbs (plus many repetitions of proverbs already given earlier).

2 William Matheson and others know Gaelic variants of this proverb in Lewis and Harris: *e.g.*, *'S olc a' ghaoth nach séid an seòl fear-eigin*, 'It's an ill wind that does not blow in somebody's sail.'

3 John MacInnes has suggested that this may be a fossilised local passive taking the form *faigheadar*.

4 The phrase *na shuidhe* does not conjugate for person in East Sutherland Gaelic: lenition appears with all persons.

5 A Biblical reference (John IV. 9.).

6 This is the normal negative imperative for East Sutherland Gaelic.

7 This is an alternative form of the passive *rugadh*. Either may occur, as in *rugadh mi an seo* or *rug mi an seo*, 'I was born here.'

8 *Grùban* is probably a syncopated and metathesised form of *gurraban*, 'sitting', 'crouching'.

9 East Sutherland adjectives in *-ach* do not palatalise in the superlative.

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