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Moral economies in the community of Norwegian folk music practices

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the moral outlooks and obligations that are intertwined in the teaching and learning processes of the traditional folk music community in Norway and how moral aspects affect the development of professional identities. Theoretically, we combine the concept of a community of practice with a moral economy perspective. This allows us to see that professional folk musicians are positioned between two different moral economies, one that builds on voluntary values and gift exchange and another that builds on professional ideals of the market-based economy of the music industry. In this way, we extend existing knowledge on teaching and learning processes by specifying the moral content that is learnt by participating in the practices of the folk music community. Being socialised into the moral outlook of the Norwegian folk music community means internalising specific norms and values that create moral obligations and shape social contracts.

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Folk musicians; teaching and learning processes; community of practice; moral economy; gift exchange

Introduction

Being a professional musician does not fit into the folk music environment. (Eva)

A core characteristic of the Norwegian traditional folk music community has long been that teaching and learning processes are integrated into ordinary performing activities. This has taken place in a form that goes beyond what we usually understand as formal educational practice. Newcomers have learnt from old-timers in what can be described as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). In recent decades, however, Norwegian folk music has been characterised by professionalisation (Arnestad 2001; Berge 2008; Johansson and Berge 2014). The genre has been integrated into the formal education system at different levels, from extracurricular schools of music and performing arts (Jordhus-Lier, Nielsen, and Karlsen 2021) via high schools to higher music education (Apeland 1998; Arnestad 2001; Berge 2008). Today, formal education practices coexist with the traditional teaching and learning practices of the folk music community.

As the quote above from our informant Eva indicates, the identity as a professional might be experienced as troublesome for musicians who have their roots in the traditional folk music community. This has to do with a clash of moral outlooks associated with different sets of norms and values associated with the identity of being a musician. Most of the professional folk musicians interviewed in this article have 'grown into' the traditional musical culture and later, through formal

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education, have become professional. They talked about a musical childhood in a music community that was largely built on volunteering by older people who knew their craft. Accordingly, the folk musicians felt a moral obligation towards the community where they were initially trained, an obligation to give back to the community from which they themselves had received so much. However, this moral obligation often came in conflict with developing professional careers and the musicians found themselves in a cross-pressure. A central point in theories of community of practice is that joining a community means that one is expected to live by its norms and values and that one develops an aligned identity (Lave and Wenger 1991).

In this article, we investigate the moral obligations that are intertwined in the teaching and learning processes of the traditional folk music community in Norway and how they collide with the ideas and requirements of working as professional musicians. By doing so, we suggest that our knowledge of how norms and identities are inherent aspects of the teaching and learning processes of communities of practice could be extended if we utilise a more precise conception of the moral content enmeshed in such processes. For this purpose, we combine the concept of community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) with a moral economy perspective (Fassin 2009; Palomera and Vetta 2016; Thompson 1971). By studying professional folk musicians through these lenses, we aim to understand how training within a community of practice comes with implicit moral expectations and specific social contracts (Cruess and Cruess 2020) that folk musicians have to deal with when forming their professional identities. We ask the following research questions:

- (1) What moral outlooks are implicated in the teaching and learning processes of the traditional folk music community?
- (2) How do folk musicians develop their professional identities in relation to these moral outlooks?

Empirically, the article is based on a qualitative interview study of 57 professional musicians in Norway, representing a breadth of musical genres, instruments, professional roles and places of residence. In the following section, we first discuss the existing research on the teaching and learning processes of folk music. Second, we introduce the theoretical framework of community of practice and moral economy. Third, we present how the folk music informants in our study reflected on how moral obligations were part of their folk music learning. We end with a discussion of the implications of the moral aspects of learning in the community of folk music practice.

Folk music, informal learning and music education

A trend within music education research in the last 20 years has been a greater interest in exploring music-making and learning outside schools, so-called informal music practices (Folkestad 2006; Green 2001). Research has also explored how and with which encounters informal learning can be implemented in formal music education and pedagogy (Karlsen and Väkevä 2012). Informal or nonformal music making is also a core element of community music as a practice and pedagogical concept, where music *leaders* (as opposed to teachers) facilitate music without any set curricula (Higgins 2012). Folk-, traditional- and indigenous music has long been a research object in ethnomusicology, though ‘often [omitting] questions of musical transmission’ (Sæther 2010, 48). A specific interest in folk music within the scope of music education research has recently sought to conceptualise the specific learning that emerges *au naturel* in a non-formal setting (Mans 2007; Sheridan and Byrne 2008; Tullberg and Sæther 2022; Wood et al. 2021) and critically reflect on what happens when this music becomes the subject of formal teaching, for example, within higher music education (Schippers 2010).

Research on the educational practices of Scandinavian, and in particular Norwegian, folk music is scarce (Olsen 2007). Recently, however, von Wachenfeldt (2015) examined teaching ideologies in Swedish folk music. Ideologies manifesting a form of *authenticity* (valuing autodidactic learning and learning directly from other musicians over formal education, learning by ear over musical

literacy and local variations in the music over standardisation) were prominent, even after folk music had become professionalised and included in formal education. Similar ideologies can be found in Norwegian folk music. When folk music was included in higher music performance education in Norway in the 1990s, there were a number of dissenting voices from the folk music community (Tønsgren 2015). Scepticism towards academisation was rooted in a fear of losing the tradition-preserving functions that the local folk music community alone had been responsible for. Henningsen (1999) and Arnestad (2001) pointed out that the local, voluntary and informal organisation of folk music education in Norway has lost some of its traditional role as a hub in local communities, among other things, due to the spread of extracurricular schools of music and performing arts. Dahlberg (2013) demonstrated how traditional values in the folk music community, such as cultivating tradition through learning, performing and teaching songs from a particular geographical region, can come into conflict with music students' desires to broaden their musical repertoire and musical practices.

Community of practice, moral economy and gift exchange

As in much of the research accounted for above, this article adopts a sociocultural perspective on learning in which knowledge is acquired and shaped by participation in cultural activities. The core term *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) is used to understand that learning takes place in a community and through participation in social practices; hence, the learning is *situated*. In Lave and Wenger (1991), the term community of practice was used to describe how novices became full members of a group through a process called *legitimate peripheral participation*. Here, we use this perspective to describe folk musicians' learning paths from beginners to professionals.

The term *learning* in this context exceeds substantive knowledge, for example, learning to play a folk music instrument. It also exceeds the musical, theoretical and skill-related aspects related to that activity. Learning in this context also includes the social and contextual aspects of knowledge. Learning changes how we see ourselves; hence, learning is also about identity formation (Wenger 1998). A *community of practice* refers to the learning process that occurs when people collaborate over time on a common interest. In the narrow sense, this means being engaged in folk music in itself. In a broader sense, this points beyond the music, where cultural artefacts, such as language, gestures, attitudes, stories and traditions, following the musical culture at large, are also shared. Tullberg and Sæther (2022) apply Wenger's (1998) term *reification* to analyse similar cultural artefacts within the Swedish folk music community and how these shape and give meaning to practice. Reification can refer to concrete objects, such as musical instruments and musical literacy. Reification can also be abstract artefacts, such as ideas. Thus, the process of reification, according to Wenger, is when we '[...] project our meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, having a reality of their own' (Wenger 1998, 58). Tullberg and Sæther analyse the identity of the *Spelman*¹ as an example of the reification of an idea. We argue that the values associated with the folk music community, as described in the selection of the studies above, are similar reifications.

Kenny (2016) finds the community of practice framework to be highly applicable when describing 'the inter-relatedness of music and social interaction' (15) and for analysing how musical learning evolves, relationships are formed, and knowledge is constructed within a community. She uses the term Community of Musical Practice (CoMP) to emphasise the context specific activity of shared music-making and cultivating musical interests.

In order to develop a deeper understanding of how norms, values and identities of the community of folk music practice in Norway work as moral outlooks and obligations, we introduce a moral economy perspective. Moral economy is a perspective in which economic activities, in the broad sense, are viewed through a moral and not just a material lens (Carrier 2018). It relates to how moral sentiments and norms govern what is seen as acceptable or unacceptable economic behaviour in different spheres. This point of departure is well suited for analysing the sense of cross-pressure

that professional folk musicians experience when navigating between the economic landscape of the music profession and the norms of the educational practices of the folk music community.

When Thompson (1971) coined the concept of moral economy, he proposed a framework that stressed the agentic capacity of people who are bearers of traditional norms and moral evaluations of a community to oppose unfair and destructive economic practices. While Thompson saw the 'old economy' as the moral economy, in contrast to the market economy, it is now widely acknowledged that norms and moral expectations are woven into any economic organisation, including market-based economies (Palomera and Vetta 2016). While Thompson emphasised perspectives from below, such as those of the working classes, later contributions have developed this to include, in principle, all social groups (Fassin 2009). Moreover, this perspective opens to viewing economic activities as part of the processes of recognition (Sayer 2005). Moral economies, in this way, are linked to how economic practices are, at the same time, moral practices where the moral worth of different groups is at stake. In the case of folk music, this idea can be further specified by Mauss's theory of gift exchange.

Mauss (2001) argued that a gift relationship represents a social contract that involves three duties: the duty to give, the duty to receive and the duty to reciprocate. According to Mauss, an important characteristic of gift giving is that it is apparently selfless, voluntary and unidirectional, but that in reality, it has a bound and utility-oriented character. Gifts create commitment, social bonds and boundaries of what is seen as acceptable and appropriate behaviour.

Based on recent understandings of moral economy, our intention is not to distinguish between a 'moral' and a 'less moral' economy, for instance, on the one hand, the gift economy of the traditional folk music community, and on the other hand, a modern market economy of the music profession. Rather, we argue that they represent different moral economies with different norms, senses of obligation and identities.

Research method

This article is part of a research project (Røyseng, Stavrum, and Vinge 2022) aiming to provide new insight into the structures, roles and opportunities that exist and shape the lives of professional musicians today. The empirical material consists of 57 qualitative interviews with professional musicians conducted between August 2020 and February 2021. The sample is varied in terms of age, gender and place of residence and the informants represent a breadth of musical genres, instruments, roles and practices. The sample is in other words in line with Patton's purposeful, maximum variation sample, thus allowing us to document both unique and diverse variations in the material and also 'identify important common patterns that cut across variations' (Patton 2002, 182). The interviews were semi-structured (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015), and revolved around issues such as musical upbringing, formal and informal learning, creative strategies, finance and sources of income, thoughts on cultural policy, inclusion and exclusion, to name a few. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min and was translated in verbatim. Ten of the informants were folk musicians, all with a higher music education. The ethical aspects of the project have been approved by Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

In a collective qualitative analysis (Eggebo 2020), we identified and developed analytical categories emerging from the material. In this process, folk musicians stood out compared to musicians from other genres. They expressed moral obligations to their music community in a way that other musicians with higher education did not. Thus, evidence of gift exchange and moral obligations was not initially perused in the data collection process, nor included as an initially analytic category, but emerged abductively (Bryant and Charmaz 2007) through the collective qualitative analysis. Therefore, in this paper we focus particularly on the interviews with folk musicians. When it comes to musical practice, these can be characterised along a continuum between *traditional* folk musicians and *crossover* musicians. Traditional folk musicians work primarily with the dissemination of traditional music at concerts, at dance gatherings and in recordings. The

continuation of traditional material in courses aimed at children and young people is also part of these folk musicians' professional work. For others, the genre *folk music* is a starting point and they combine the preservation of traditional musical practice with the exploration of new artistic ideas, often in combination with other genres. Such *crossover* musicians often find their audience outside the traditional folk music audience and outside the arenas for the dissemination of traditional Norwegian folk music. In the following analysis, we start by illustrating the strong community aspect of Norwegian folk music. Subsequently, we describe the moral obligations enmeshed in the practice of the community.

Growing into the community of folk music practice

The informants represented different entrances to the field of folk music and different learning trajectories in becoming professional musicians. The majority grew up in a folk music community and, through professional studies at a music academy, entered the professional music scene. They come from rural districts in Norway with strong traditions of folk music or from families with generations of people who played instruments or who were active in the community in other ways. One informant said that folk music was a natural part of her upbringing, in many ways so commonplace that she did not think it was something she could work with professionally.

I grew up with folk music and was taught from a young age. I have danced a lot of folk dances and sung as long as I can remember. When I was in high school, I started thinking that I could become a professional musician, but it wasn't on my mind that much; it was just a part of me – doing folk music. (Ann)

Another informant had a similar story. Several members of her family played and performed folk music. She says that from a very young age, she listened to a lot of her mother's music and what she practiced and took part in rehearsals at the local *spelemannslag*.² Training was something that took place outside organised formal schooling.

We met in the *spelemannslag* once a week. There were more and more people of my own age who started playing. So we were some young people, some kids ... and the oldest was my grandfather. It was such a big environment. There were so many people doing it. (Robin)

It is often in a community where children, young people and adults interact that the training has taken place. The activities have largely been driven by volunteerism: Local youth groups, groups of fiddlers, accordion clubs and dance groups often managed by older enthusiasts who create environments for cultural activity and musical training. Several informants stated that they started training in folk music before folk music instruments were offered at the extracurricular schools of music and performing arts.

The village where I grew up had an active cultural scene. So I was involved in everything I could be involved in. It was before the establishment of extracurricular schools of music and performing arts. When I grew up, everything was based on voluntary work. Everything I learnt, I learnt in that environment. (Eva)

This environment extends beyond the local activity of training, concerts and dance performances. The informants also talk about trips and gatherings, meeting other young people and significant figures in the folk music community – musicians whom novice folk musicians can sit next to and learn from.

It is a collective education and you are taught in an environment that is, in a way, equally important. When folk music enters music education institutions, it is one-on-one teaching, which is not so common within the tradition. It's more group stuff and disorganised in a way. It is an environment with all levels ... and parties, dances, weddings and so on. It is more than just having to teach a young person a particular song. It is to make sure that they are in an environment and that there are people around them who will learn it: a package. (Eva)

Eva describes the 'package' as extending beyond the domain of instrument tuition. It is not just about learning an instrument but about taking part in a culture. Furthermore, it is not only

about absorbing language, codes and stories. It is also about being socialised into specific sets of norms, values and identities – learning dances and songs with local affiliation, participating in gatherings and managing and passing on a tradition. Other informants who work professionally in the folk music genre but who do not share the same *coming-of-age* narrative as Eva confirm her points:

Unlike many musicians I know, I didn't grow up with folk music. The environment is quite niche and everyone knows everyone, so it took a while before I felt a sense of belonging. And I somehow felt I couldn't call myself a folk musician until quite recently. Now I say I am a folk musician, but at the same time ... (Peter)

It is striking that for this informant, the norms of the community meant that growing into an identity as folk musician was something that took quite a long time.

Community norms of voluntary values

When young people in this environment become interested in learning more, they look up various teachers, also outside their local environment, either at short meetings, dance gatherings, in private settings or in longer master-apprentice relationships.

In my youth, I might go to the house of someone who played [my instrument], take a recording cassette with me and ask if I could record some songs (...) I had to push myself quite a lot in a good environment that inspired me to learn more without having a teacher serving me everything on a silver platter. (Robin)

In addition, after specialised and individual training, the informants described a large degree of voluntary work.

I've tracked down some old people myself ... Tips about a guy who plays the fiddle, who lives up by that lake in the woods over there. So I contacted him and ... As it was then, no one got paid. (Brian)

Another informant similarly underlined the generosity on the part of the old teachers to teach – it is part of the environment's culture to share their knowledge.

At folk music gatherings, I met other musicians and I asked straight out if I could learn from them. I was always welcomed. I think it is mostly like that in the folk music community, you are welcomed if you show interest and want to learn. In the beginning, most of my teachers were people I had learnt from for free. Much has changed with the extracurricular schools of music and performing arts. (Adam)

Training has now become more professional. Folk music is included in the extracurricular schools of music and performing arts, and several folk musicians teach their instruments professionally through such formal training. This represents a break with the values and norms of volunteerism and creates challenges and dilemmas in the identity formation of professional folk musicians who have received much from the community. An informant reflects on this 'before' and 'now' perspective in traditional trading.

I really wanted to go to [name of fiddler], but I was so in awe of him that I didn't dare. It felt like going home to Bruce Springsteen and learning a song from him. It is perhaps a slightly tighter timeframe today as well, like you're wasting someone's time if you sit with a fiddler in his spare time. These old-time fiddlers have regular paid-day jobs outside of music. It feels like you can't settle down there for days and learn new tunes, as one did in the older days. (Susan)

The moral aspect is expressed in Susan's reflections: In order to get something from the community, you have to give something back. In Susan's case, it might have been easier to travel to this fiddler if he worked as a professional and was paid to teach. With other informants, an expectation to continue to contribute to the environment, to refine the musical material and to teach, as a form of repayment for everything one has received, has been embodied.

Giving back to the community

Several informants said that, as adolescents, they were involved as instructors and teachers in the community they belonged to. Teaching was a natural part of the culture. You received training

from the more competent and you preserved what you had learnt by playing the music and teaching it to others. In other genres, it is likelier to be able to distinguish between those who perform and those who teach and where teaching is considered a lesser valued form of music making (Bull and Scharff 2021, 681). This is less likely to be found in folk music. Here, it seems that teaching and performing are, to a greater extent, an integrated practice. When asked whether one experiences a greater status as a performer or as a teacher, one informant replied:

Hmm ... first I was going to say yes. But then I realised that in the community I am a part of, it is most common to do both. So, it's very common for us to, for example, have workshops. There are a lot of workshops in folk music, and that's something everyone does. (David)

Another informant replied that she does not distinguish between the two activities but refers to both teaching and practicing as doing 'musical work'.

Teaching compared to being a musician – it's kind of the same thing I do when it's just me – only that I do it with someone else. You work with the same things, only that I am on someone else's journey. (Robin)

A third informant said that teaching is part of the work that has to do with folk music itself as a practice and culture and can be understood against the background of the informants' stories about growing up in a community. It is about the 'silent' social contract: that you must pass on what you have received.

When you are a folk musician, you have a responsibility to teach. That is why pedagogy within folk music is so important, without us talking about it so much or that it has been stated or written down. This training thing is so incredibly woven into the music, the educational aspect. (Eva)

Therefore, teaching is one way to give back to the environment and to pay for everything you have received from voluntary, free teaching. Some informants experienced a challenge in foregrounding their identity as professional musicians who wanted to be paid for their work. They feel expectations from the community to step in as volunteers themselves.

I reflect on it quite a bit because I feel a responsibility for the things I have learnt, especially because I have learnt this for free. A teacher spent hundreds of hours on me to teach an interested student and pass it on, and I will probably have to spend quite a few hundred hours over the next 40 years to clear my conscience. (Adam)

The last statement in Adam's quote underlines the gratitude and reifies the moral obligation he feels towards his teachers and his community. Another informant articulated a corresponding sense of responsibility.

The older you get, the more you get a sense of responsibility. It is a part of the contract when you are a folk musician that what you received, often in a voluntary environment, you also have to pass on. You have been welcomed with open arms and have been trained in a tradition, and then you must do the same for the next generation. That is how all traditional music has survived – from person to person. I think all folk musicians feel that responsibility. (Eva)

This transaction, which is described above, does not only apply to education. It also comes into light when folk musicians look for old sources and preserve music through recordings or sheet music. The transaction is also manifested when the folk musicians introduce tunes used in a concert with information of whom the tune was learnt, its origin and successively some narrative affiliated with it. From a gift-exchange perspective, we consider such an homage not only as a ritual contextualisation of the performance, nor just solely as a nice gesture, but as a moral obligation to reciprocate. The transaction is also expressed when the professional musician returns to their community to perform professionally. Eva elaborates:

The professional musician does not belong to the finely meshed system of the folk music community. It represents an outside culture that is a parasite in the genuine voluntary community. This attitude is still quite strong in the community. It is about finances and identity. [As a professional musician], you have to argue

that you have to get paid. The community has forgotten that [the older traditional musicians] had regular paid work besides the music. Being a professional musician does not fit into the folk music environment. (Eva)

This quote clearly illustrates how the moral obligations of participating in the community of folk music practice come into conflict with developing a professional identity and career and the expectations of getting paid.

Concluding discussion

The aim of this article has been to investigate what characterises the learning processes of the traditional folk music community of practice and the associated moral outlooks and how these affect the identity formation of professional folk musicians. Most of our informants had a musical upbringing where learning was situated within a community of practice. Their processes of learning carry many of the same characteristics described by Lave and Wenger (1991). As young, legitimate peripheral participants, they were included in a practice where musical skills and knowledge gradually were adopted, learnt and mastered together with others and with guidance and tuition from more competent people. As we have demonstrated, teaching and learning processes are deeply integrated into many of the common practices of the traditional folk music community. Indeed, integration means that performance activities and education activities are seen more or less as two sides of the same coin. By participating in these practices, community members learn the norms and values of the community, which can be specified as a moral outlook in which the logic of gift exchange is central. When teaching and learning in a community of practice take the form of gift exchange, it also serves the function of binding people together – to strengthen and sustain the community. When newcomers learn from old-timers, they are expected to pass on what they have received and take part in different kinds of events as volunteers. Thus, moral obligations and expectations as well as ideas about good and legitimate ways to be a folk musician are interwoven in the learning processes. Accordingly, this creates cross-pressures on the part of professional folk musicians who have continued their training in the formal system of higher music performance education. They have developed an identity in line with the voluntary values and gift exchange logic of the traditional folk music community. At the same time, they have internalised the values of the professional musician as a part of the music industry, including the expectations of making a decent living from their professional work.

Our results both align with and extend previous research on the teaching and learning processes of the folk music community. In von Wachenfeldt (2015), these values, such as valuing learning by ear over musical literacy, are considered ideologies underpinning the culture of folk music practice. In Tullberg and Sæther (2022), these values are conceptualised as *reifications* (Wenger 1998): processes of objectivisation that create joint references of meaning in the community. In Dahlberg (2013), these ideologies or reifications created tensions between traditional values and personal artistic ambitions in a young music student. We extend this knowledge by specifying the moral content that is learnt by participating in the practices of the folk music community. Being socialised into the moral outlook of the Norwegian folk music community means internalising specific norms and values that create moral obligations and shape social contracts. To specify this aspect of communities of practice more precisely, we have introduced the moral economy perspective. This allows us to see that professional folk musicians are positioned between two different moral economies, one that builds on voluntary values and gift exchange and another that builds on the professional market-based economy of the music industry. We argue that these moral economies are important elements in identity formation and that moral aspects are important in such processes.

Previous research on the development of the professional identities of musicians and other groups of artists has foregrounded the quest for symbolic recognition. The artistic field has been described as a social arena where symbolic rewards, for the most part, are seen as more desirable than economic rewards (Bourdieu 1993; 1996; Mangset et al. 2018; Menger 2006). Accordingly,

becoming a professional musician means that you are conditioned into the peculiarities of the dos and don'ts of how to make a living in the musical profession. While the quest for symbolic rewards has been a main focus in previous literature on artistic careers, we have recently argued that ideas of what is seen as fair, just and legitimate from a moral perspective have been similarly underplayed (Røyseng, Henningsen, and Vinge 2022). As we have seen in this article, the lives of professional musicians, at least folk musicians, are not only governed by the quest for symbolic rewards, but also by norms, values and moral obligations. This has implications for our understanding of recognition. While symbolic rewards in the broader field of professional musicians, often viewed through a Bourdieusian lens, have been seen as related to artistic quality and valuation, we find that in the community of folk music, another symbolic reward is also prominent, namely, being recognised as one who gives back to the community.

This study has shed light on the dynamics between the different identities of amateurs and professionals in the field of music. These dynamics are central to many musical genres and the study might have implications for future studies of such issues by foregrounding the moral aspects involved. As this study has focused solely on Norwegian folk music, it would be interesting if future research investigated whether the intimate relationship between communities of practice and moral economies is similarly important in other genres or in other national contexts. On a general level, the relationship between the perspectives of communities of practice and moral economy deserves further theoretical development than the purpose and format of this article allow.

Notes

1. Traditional fiddler
2. *Spelemannslag* refers to an organised group of people learning and playing music together, usually a group of fiddlers, though other instruments, such as the accordion and accompanying instruments, can be included.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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