

ARTICLE

Who Controls Tradition? Religious Authority, Moral Order, And Belonging in Indonesia: The Case of Sambang Punden

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Abstract

As a multicultural archipelago, Indonesia sustains local traditions that shape collective identity and social order, including the Sambang Punden ritual in Bulukerto Village, East Java, Indonesia. This study examines how Sambang Punden produces religious authority, regulates moral norms, and defines community boundaries through inclusion and exclusion. The research adopts a qualitative design to capture meanings, interactions, and local social dynamics surrounding the ritual. Data were collected through observation of the ritual sequence, in depth interviews, and document review related to the organization and public framing of the practice. Data analysis followed an interactive process of organizing materials, coding key themes, refining interpretations, and triangulating sources, while using the concepts of power and knowledge, discourse, and governmentality as analytical tools. The findings show that the ritual's authority and legitimacy are produced and sustained through the roles of elders, customary actors, and village authorities, while also being questioned by differing religious interpretations. The study further indicates that participation supports moral regulation through social expectations and informal monitoring, and it marks community membership by distinguishing insiders from those positioned at the margins. The implication of this research is that local rituals should be analysed as sociological mechanisms that generate authority, sustain moral governance, and produce social boundaries in village life.

Keywords: Religious Authority; Sambang Punden; Moral Regulation; Community Boundaries; Governmentality

Sebagai negara kepulauan multikultural, Indonesia memiliki tradisi lokal yang ikut membentuk identitas dan keteraturan sosial, termasuk ritual Sambang Punden di Desa Bulukerto, Jawa Timur, Indonesia. Penelitian ini bertujuan menjelaskan bagaimana Sambang Punden menghasilkan otoritas keagamaan, mengatur norma moral, dan membentuk batas komunitas melalui inklusi dan eksklusivitas. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kualitatif untuk memahami makna, interaksi, dan dinamika sosial di sekitar praktik ritual. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi rangkaian ritual, wawancara mendalam, dan telaah dokumen yang relevan dengan penyelenggaraan serta pemingkatan ritual. Data dianalisis secara interaktif melalui pengorganisasian data, pengodean tema, penajaman interpretasi, dan triangulasi sumber, dengan konsep relasi kuasa pengetahuan, wacana, dan governmentality sebagai alat bantu analitis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa otoritas dan legitimasi ritual diproduksi dan dipertahankan melalui peran sesepuh, lembaga adat, dan aktor pemerintahan desa, sekaligus diperdebatkan oleh pandangan keagamaan yang berbeda. Temuan juga memperlihatkan bahwa partisipasi ritual mendorong regulasi moral melalui ekspektasi sosial dan pemantauan informal, serta menandai keanggotaan komunitas melalui batas "di dalam" dan "di luar." Implikasi penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa ritual lokal dapat dipahami sebagai mekanisme sosiologis yang membentuk otoritas, tata moral, dan batas sosial dalam kehidupan desa.

A. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a multicultural archipelago where everyday social life is often shaped through inherited traditions that travel across islands, ethnic groups, and local histories (Amri and Zahidi 2023; Abidin and Saebani 2014). In many rural settings, these traditions are not just “culture” in an abstract sense, but practical routines that help communities organize belonging, meaning, and social order. This is why cultural heritage is often treated as a marker of collective identity, something that distinguishes communities and, at the national level, becomes a symbolic resource of “Indonesian-ness” (Soeprapto and Jirzanah 1996; Khabib and Zafi 2020). Tradition can also be understood as a belief-laden and spiritual activity that becomes embedded in social structure and turns into culture through repetition and acceptance (Citrawati, M, and Fitri 2023). As heritage, traditions are valued as evidence of social continuity and creativity across generations, and they are commonly respected as ancestral legacies that should be protected and reproduced (Davison and McConville 1991; Rasyid 2014).

Previous studies have provided a baseline for understanding how traditions and rituals work in Indonesian society, especially by emphasizing heritage, spirituality, and cohesion. Some works frame cultural heritage as a collective identity project and a social marker (Soeprapto and Jirzanah 1996; Khabib and Zafi 2020), while others conceptualize tradition as a belief and spiritual activity that becomes socially rooted over time (Daradjat 1983; Citrawati, M, and Fitri 2023). Research also highlights how rituals carry aesthetic value and public attraction that can strengthen their social visibility (Djaya 2020), and how rural ritual life can function as a bridge connecting humans, nature, and ancestral presence (Daradjat 1983). More specifically for Javanese contexts, studies note that sacred sites (including ancestral graves) are treated as meaningful social-spiritual landmarks (Irawati, Agustin, and Nandasari

2020), and classic scholarship shows how such ritual practices can reinforce solidarity and shared moral sentiment in community life (Geertz 1976). At the same time, scholarship on cultural continuity often stresses that traditions remain respected because they are seen as ancestral inheritance maintained by later generations (Rasyid 2014), and broader work on Indonesia's archipelagic diversity helps explain why localized ritual variations persist across different island communities (Amri and Zahidi 2023; Abidin and Saebani 2014).

However, this literature still leaves a gap in explaining how Sambang Punden works as an everyday social mechanism that produces authority, moral discipline, and boundaries of belonging in village life. Many studies emphasize meaning, cohesion, spirituality, or aesthetic attraction. However, they rarely trace the concrete processes through which village actors and local institutions define what counts as legitimate belief, proper conduct, and acceptable membership in practice (Djaya 2020; Rasyid 2014). This gap becomes even more visible when the ritual is simultaneously treated as sacred practice and as an object of "cultural preservation," which can reshape how legitimacy and governance are narrated and enacted (Khabib and Zafi 2020).

This study examines how Sambang Punden in Bulukerto Village, East Java, Indonesia produces religious authority, regulates moral norms, and defines community boundaries through inclusion and exclusion. This matters because it moves beyond describing the ritual as "heritage" or "belief" and shows how it actually organizes everyday social order in the village. The research implication for sociology is that local ritual practices can be theorized as concrete mechanisms of authority-making, moral governance, and boundary production in community life.

B. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore Sambang Punden in Bulukerto Village, East Java, Indonesia focusing on meaning, interaction, and social dynamics. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study is interested in how religious authority, moral expectations, and community boundaries are shaped through routine practices and local interpretations, which are best understood through close engagement with participants' perspectives. In line with the research purpose, Sambang Punden is approached as a lived social practice that connects beliefs, norms, and a sense of belonging within village life.

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document review. Observation was conducted by attending and following the Sambang Punden sequence from preparation to the ritual event to note roles, interactions, and the ways shared expectations are communicated in practice. In-depth interviews involved three purposively selected informants, consisting of the village head, a traditional village leader, and a community member, selected because they represent different social positions relevant to the ritual and can provide complementary perspectives on how it is organized, understood, and experienced. Documentation included available village and community materials such as written notes, announcements, or local texts that help situate how the ritual is framed and discussed in the public and institutional context.

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative process that moved between organizing the data, identifying key themes, and refining interpretations as patterns emerged. The researcher coded fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and documents to trace three analytical areas consisting of religious authority, moral regulation, and community boundaries. The analysis also relied on careful description of events and narratives to connect concrete field material with broader sociological interpretations. To strengthen credibility, the study used triangulation

across observations, interviews, and documents, and interpreted the findings using the concepts of power and knowledge, discourse, and governmentality as sensitizing tools for understanding how social order is sustained in village life.

Theoretical Framework

1. Power/Knowledge

Andrew Heywood (2004) even asserts that “all forms of politics basically revolve around power,” indicating that all political activities cannot be separated from the dynamics of power. Power can function as a means of achieving interests, goals, or desires (Siregar 2021). Broadly speaking, according to Foucault (1980), power and knowledge are not two separate domains. Power can impose knowledge that is neutral or abstract. They produce each other, where power shapes what is considered knowledge, and knowledge itself becomes a medium of power.

Furthermore, Foucault explains that power does not only work repressively, but also productively. Power produces knowledge, norms, and truths that shape people's behavior. Foucault calls this relationship the power/knowledge relation. According to Foucault, power is not only held by the state apparatus, but every individual also has power (Sarup 2011). In the context of local culture, every tradition not only preserves ancestral values but also establishes a framework of knowledge that determines what is considered right and proper to do.

2. Governmentality

Governmentality is a practical and technical procedure that aims to regulate how humans should behave (Rose, Malley, and Valverde 2009). According to Foucault (1991), governmentality is the art of regulating behavior. In other words, it is a way for power to work not through direct coercion but through management, direction, and the shaping of

individuals' and populations' so that they regulate themselves according to desired norms. Governmentality itself is a tendency or disposition, not bound to a fixed structure, and works by dismantling and analyzing the mechanisms of power (Putra, Erawan, and Noak 2025).

The process of governmentality involves the rationalization of knowledge that has been historically and evolutionarily shaped by those in power, with the aim of producing a population that consciously adapts without questioning the validity of the knowledge it receives. Foucault's concept of governmentality shows that power does not work through direct coercion, but through the formation of consciousness, the regulation of behavior, and the internalization of norms by individuals and groups.

3. *Discourse*

Discourse is formed through the relationship between social will and the institutional structures that regulate it (Kurniawan and Zubaidah 2023). Foucault explains that discourse is always linked to power. Power works through what is known as domination. The domination referred to here is not only in the form of repressive domination, but also through the production of knowledge that is considered normal, reasonable, and natural (Armstrong 2015). Therefore, discourse becomes an instrument of power that shapes subjects, behavior, consciousness, and social structures. In Foucault's view, discourse is a system of knowledge that not only regulates how a phenomenon is understood and discussed.

Foucault (1972) interprets discourse as a system of knowledge that shapes social reality. Discourse can determine how to speak, think, and act in a society (Nasution 2024). Furthermore, knowledge also sets limits on what is considered true, legitimate, and feasible in social practice. In Foucault's view, discourse is a system of knowledge that not only regulates how a phenomenon is understood and discussed. Furthermore, knowledge

also sets limits on what is considered true, legitimate, and feasible in social practice.

4. Local Cultural Identity

Local identity is an important element in uniting cultural diversity in various regions of the world. By encompassing cultural heritage, traditions, languages, and distinctive values, local identity provides a strong foundation for cultural sustainability and diversity within a region or community (Saputra et al. 2024). It is this cultural identity that distinguishes individuals culturally, and cultural identity can also influence their behavior in a social context (Fitri et al. 2025). The diversity of cultural identities that characterize an ethnic group in society is a valuable asset (Hasan et al. 2024). Local cultural identity is not fixed or unchanging, but rather the result of social construction continuously renewed through various practices, symbols, and narratives within society.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main findings of the study. It discusses how Sambang Punden in Bulukerto Village operates as more than a cultural ritual but as a social practice in which meanings, legitimacy, and belonging are shaped. The discussion is organized around three interconnected themes that follow the research purpose, namely the production of religious authority, the regulation of moral norms, and the formation of community boundaries through inclusion and exclusion. This section shows how Sambang Punden is interpreted as sacred and socially obligatory, while also being framed within cultural preservation agendas that influence how the ritual is understood and governed. In doing so, the analysis highlights the way authority is negotiated among village actors, how compliance is encouraged through shared expectations rather than direct coercion, and

how participation becomes a marker of moral membership in the community.

1. The Sambang Punden Ritual as Cultural Discourse

This study finds that the Sambang Punden ritual cannot be understood solely as a cultural heritage practice. Instead, it operates as a contested religious practice, in which different interpretations of belief, legitimacy, and moral obligation intersect. Field observations show that the local community widely perceives the ritual as a sacred activity connected to ancestral spirits. Many participants believe that attending the ritual is not only a cultural obligation but also a form of spiritual responsibility.

During the Sambang Punden ritual, community members gather around the sacred site, bringing offerings and participating in collective prayers led by traditional elders. The atmosphere is solemn and structured, and participation appears socially expected. Those who are absent are often noticed and later questioned informally by other community members. This moment illustrates that the ritual is not only a symbolic act but also a social event in which expectations, presence, and participation are closely observed and implicitly regulated.

In the context of the Sambang Punden ritual tradition in Bulukerto village, this ritual does not only function as a custom. It also serves as a cultural discourse that frames and shapes community's relationship with its ancestors, nature, and the social structure. The narrative construction related to the sacredness of *punden*, the importance of respecting ancestors, and the collective moral obligation to maintain the continuity of this tradition has been internalized in the consciousness of the Bulukerto village community. Therefore, this tradition is no longer merely understood as a form of local belief, but has also transformed into a collective knowledge system that regulates the perspectives, mindsets, and social practices of residents in understanding their position, social relationships within the

community, and their relationship with the natural environment and cultural heritage of the village. Thus, the Sambang Punden tradition plays an important role in shaping cultural identity and in reproducing social values passed down from generation to generation.

Foucault argues that every discourse is always formed and carried out within a certain power relationship (Foucault 1980). In the context of the Sambang Punden tradition in Bulukerto village, this discourse does not stand neutrally. Rather, it is reproduced by actors who hold power, such as the village head, traditional institutions, and village elders. The strategic position of these social actors within the Bulukerto village community enables them to construct and direct the meaning of the symbolic history of the *punden*, determine the ritual procedures considered valid and correct, and frame the moral values that underlie community participation in the implementation of this tradition.

This aligns with Geertz (1976), who views culture as a system of meaning constructed and woven by humans. Rituals function as an important medium in maintaining and reproducing this system of meaning. In this context, the Sambang Punden tradition is not only understood as a practice of pilgrimage to the ancestors, but also as a symbolic action that represents the relationship between the profane realm of humans and the realm of spirituality that transcends everyday experience. Thus, the Sambang Punden ritual can be understood as a discursive product, shaped through power relations between cultural actors. It also serves as a medium for the reproduction of knowledge that instills values, norms, and social hierarchies symbolically. Furthermore, it functions as an instrument that shapes collective identity, affirming who we are as the Bulukerto community.

Thus, the Sambang Punden tradition that takes place in the village of Bulukerto not only preserves ancestral heritage shape collective identity, and cultural legitimacy and maintains the stability of the social structure.

This tradition is carried out as a discursive device that frames residents' understanding of sacredness, obedience, and cultural continuity, not as a result of social construction, but as natural and inevitable within their cultural order. In other words, the Sambang Punden tradition contributes to stabilizing the social structure of the Bulukerto village community. At the same time, it reinforces the legitimacy of cultural norms and hierarchies that apply across generations in the village community.

2. *Religious Authority and Legitimacy*

Based on field research, there are indications that efforts to preserve the Sambang Punden tradition in Bulukerto village involve a network of power relations among key actors, namely the village government, traditional institutions, village elders, and the community, which plays an active role as a participant. These power relations do not operate in a linear or repressive manner, but also work through symbolic, discursive, and institutional mechanisms. This slowly shapes the community's understanding, internalization, and practice of this tradition in their daily lives.

In practice, the legitimacy of the sambang punden ritual is shaped by different religious actors. Traditional elders tend to justify the ritual as part of ancestral teachings that must be preserved. Meanwhile, some religious figures influenced by more scriptural interpretations question its validity, arguing that such practices are not part of formal religious doctrine. This divergence shows that religious authority in the village is not centralized but contested among actors who hold competing interpretations of what constitutes legitimate religious practice. This indicates that power does not operate through a single authority, but through competing claims of religious legitimacy within the community.

One informant expressed hesitation regarding the ritual: *“Some people say this practice is not part of formal religion, but we still follow it because*

it is our tradition.” (Personal Interview, Informant 1, 2025). This statement reflects an underlying tension between formal religious interpretations and local spiritual practices, suggesting that the ritual’s legitimacy is not universally accepted. This indicates that religious legitimacy is negotiated in everyday practice rather than being fixed or universally agreed upon. This tension, although often expressed subtly, reflects an ongoing contestation over what constitutes “proper” religious practice within the community. This reflects a tension between orthodox religious perspectives and locally embedded forms of lived religion.

In this context, the village government or the village head of Bulukerto occupies a strategic position in the process of institutionalizing the Sambang Punden tradition as part of the local cultural preservation agenda. The tradition, which was originally carried out primarily based on spiritual beliefs and ancestral customs, is now also reconstructed as a representation and marker of the cultural identity of the village of Bulukerto. It also serves as a cultural icon of the village, reinforcing Bulukerto's image as a community rooted in traditional and spiritual values. This dynamic is in line with the concept of governmentality proposed by Michel Foucault (1991), namely the mechanism of how power works through the management of social practices, not through direct coercion, but through the regulation of norms, policies, and the production of discourse that is perceived as rational, legitimate, and reasonable by the community.

The institutionalization of the Sambang Punden tradition in the village’s cultural preservation agenda indicates a transformation from a previously sacred, community-based ritual practice to one administratively managed by the village government’s institutional structure. This process further strengthens *punden’s* position as an important element in the construction of Bulukerto Village's cultural identity. At the same time, it serves a function not only as a spiritual activity but also as a cultural

representation integrated into village development policies, such as in the tourism and locally based education sectors. However, this formalization has the potential to reduce its sacred dimension because this tradition is increasingly within the framework of bureaucratic logic and modern political rationality.

3. Collective Awareness of Society

Based on the findings from the field, it appears that the Bulukerto village community's compliance with the Sambang Punden tradition is not enforced through formal coercion, but rather through a mechanism of internalizing cultural norms and values. The community feels obliged to attend the ritual due to moral pressure from the village. Then there is the fear of being considered disrespectful to their ancestors, as well as a belief in spiritual consequences. This is what Foucault refers to as governmentality, a form of power that works through the formation of consciousness rather than direct coercion. The people of Bulukerto village voluntarily adjust their behavior to the prevailing norms without feeling controlled.

Furthermore, this tradition has also indirectly formed social standards, determining who is considered a good villager, who is obedient to customs, and who does not forget their ancestors and origins. Thus, the Sambang Punden tradition also functions as a subtle social regulatory mechanism that reproduces a structure of obedience without resorting to violence. This is due to the existence of mechanisms of cultural norms and values that construct and regulate the Bulukerto village community to be more obedient, continuing to respect the ancestral customs passed down from generation to generation.

4. *The Production of Identity and Social Solidarity*

The *punden* visiting ritual in Bulukerto village is not only a spiritual practice but also plays an important role in the production of collective identity within Bulukerto village society. According to Hall (1990), identity cannot be understood as something static or essential. Rather, identity is the result of a dynamic process of cultural construction through practices of representation, social interaction, and discursive relations. In this concept, the Sambang Punden tradition serves as a symbolic vehicle for shaping the collective self-definition of the Bulukerto community. At the same time, it serves as an instrument of cultural differentiation from other groups outside their community.

This ritual presents a shared narrative about the origins of the village, the sacredness of ancestors, and the continuity of traditional values, thereby strengthening the sense of belonging to the collective identity as the Bulukerto village community. Through repeated participation in the Sambang Punden practice, the community not only carries out a ritual tradition solely for the sake of preserving customs. They also reproduce their social identity symbolically and performatively. This aligns with Anderson's (2006) concept of imagines communities, in which communities are formed through symbolic practices and collective narratives that create a sense of unity and togetherness, even though not all members know each other personally.

Figure 1.

The Sambang Punden Ritual at the *Keliran Punden*



Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

Through the tradition of the Sambang Punden ritual, all members of the village community can merge into a collective consciousness without any boundaries such as age, economic status, or social strata. Figure 1 shows the Sambang Punden ritual being performed at the *Keliran Punden*. The entire Bulukerto village community sits together under the same roof, without distinction of social status or age. In other words, the Sambang Punden ritual also serves as a mechanism of social, strengthening solidarity among the people of Bulukerto village. At the same time, it also serves to preserve traditions that have become characteristic of the Bulukerto village community's culture and cultural identity.

However, it should be noted that this solidarity is not entirely neutral or sudden. Rather, it arises because of the relationship between power and knowledge. Referring to Foucault (1980) concept, which states that power relations concept, which states that power relations are always present in the production of knowledge and social practices. The shared identity that arises from the Sambang Punden tradition is not formed arbitrarily, but is also influenced by actors who have cultural authority, such as traditional

institutions, village elders, and the village government. Through their roles, an official version of Bulukerto's original cultural identity is formed, which is then legitimized through the implementation of rituals and narratives of cultural preservation. In this sense, the Sambang Punden ritual functions as a boundary-making mechanism that distinguishes between those who are considered culturally and morally integrated within the community and those who are perceived as more distant from its shared values.

5. Discourse Negotiation

The discourse on preserving the Sambang Punden tradition in Bulukerto village has become an arena for negotiation between social actors with vested interests. In other words, the discourse on preservation is not singular and homogeneous. If we look at it through Foucault's (1972) lens, discourse is not merely language or narrative, but a system of knowledge that determines what can be said, done, and considered legitimate within a social order. In the context of the Sambang Punden tradition, at least two dominant discourses emerge and interact in shaping its meaning.

First, there is a traditional religious discourse that views Sambang Punden as a sacred practice connecting humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. It is also understood as a form of respect toward ancestors, who are considered to possess moral and symbolic authority within the community. This discourse is primarily produced and maintained by traditional leaders and community members who continue to uphold Javanese cosmological beliefs and ancestral traditions.

Second, there is a discourse of modern cultural preservation, often promoted by the village government and institutional actors. Within this framework, the Sambang Punden ritual is positioned as a cultural asset, a marker of local identity, and a potential resource for tourism development. Here, tradition is not only interpreted as a spiritual practice, but also as part of a broader agenda of cultural commodification and village development.

The interaction between these two discourses reflects what Gramsci (1971) describes as cultural hegemony, in which dominant actors seek to build social consent through ideological means rather than coercion. In this context, the village government does not directly impose a new interpretation of the ritual. Instead, it frames Sambang Punden as cultural preservation, education, and local pride, allowing this reinterpretation to be gradually accepted across different segments of the community. At the same time, this negotiation also opens space for subtle forms of resistance. Some community members continue to uphold the sacred meaning of Sambang Punden without fully embracing its transformation into a cultural commodity. This indicates that the ritual remains a site of ongoing contestation, where different meanings, interests, and interpretations coexist and are continuously negotiated.

In this sense, Sambang Punden can be understood as a discursive field in which spiritual, cultural, political, and economic interests intersect. This process demonstrates that cultural preservation is never neutral, but is always shaped by struggles over meaning, authority, and social legitimacy (Foucault 1980). These findings suggest that local ritual practices such as Sambang Punden are not merely cultural remnants, but play an active role in shaping moral order and social control in everyday life. This case demonstrates that religious authority does not always operate through formal institutions, but is often embedded in local traditions that regulate behavior, define legitimacy, and structure community belonging. This highlights the importance of examining everyday religious practices as key sites of power, negotiation, and social regulation.

D. CONCLUSION

The study shows that Sambang Punden in Bulukerto Village serves not only as a heritage ritual but also as a social mechanism that organizes religious authority, moral regulation, and community boundaries.

Religious authority is produced and maintained through the roles of traditional elders, customary figures, and village actors who define the “proper” procedures, circulate narratives of sacredness, and claim legitimacy for the ritual’s continued observance, even as some more scriptural voices question its religious validity. Moral regulation operates through socially expected participation, informal monitoring of attendance, and shared fears of being seen as disrespectful or facing spiritual consequences, which encourages people to adjust their conduct without formal coercion. Community boundary making becomes visible when participation signals who is considered a “good” and morally integrated villager, while absence or open doubt can place someone at the margins, especially as the ritual is also reframed by village preservation agendas that reshape how belonging and legitimacy are publicly narrated.

These findings reflect how local ritual life can function as a practical form of governance, where power circulates through discourse, routine, and recognition rather than through direct force. They also highlight that religious authority in village settings is often plural and contested, shaped by overlapping claims from elders, informal religious voices, and administrative actors who each seek to define what counts as legitimate practice. More broadly, the case shows that the boundary between “religion” and “tradition” is not fixed, but negotiated through everyday participation, institutional framing, and the ongoing tension between sacred meaning and cultural preservation.

A key limitation of this research is that it captures Sambang Punden at a particular moment of observation, so it cannot fully show how meanings, authority claims, and participation patterns may shift across seasons, leadership changes, or longer cycles of social change. Further research could use longer-term field engagement and comparative cases across villages to track how the ritual’s authority, moral regulation, and boundary-making evolve under different religious influences and cultural

preservation agendas. The implication of this research is that local ritual traditions should be analyzed sociologically not only as cultural expressions, but as concrete mechanisms through which authority is made, moral governance is sustained, and community boundaries are produced in village life.

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