

SUSTAINING ASPECTS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA: CASE STUDY OF WOODEN OBJECTS IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IN ORON, NIGERIA

Michael Abiodun Oyinloye

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: *The care and management of cultural, as well as natural heritage against wane, loss or damage is paramount to Cultural Resource Management. The system of caring and preserving objects and materials in the museum is through preventive conservation to ensure longer lifespan of the objects. This method involves housekeeping and daily inspection of objects in the store and galleries of the Museum in order to detect infection and deterioration. The study, therefore, examined types and functions of carved wooden objects, as well as methods and adequacies with a view to determining their effects at the National Museum in Oron, Nigeria. The study observed more than 3,000 collections in the store, galleries and courtyard of the museum, with about 80% of collections as wooden objects. It also takes cognisance of wooden objects in the museum as national treasure from ancient times as a benefit to our knowledge of tourists, researchers and coming generations. The study gives an overview of the activities of care in the National Museum Oron. It highlights the challenges faced by the museum. It concluded by imploring National Commission for Museums and Monuments in the country to come to the aid of Oron museum by providing conservation laboratory, modern equipment and facilities to improve the level of conservation.*

KEYWORDS: Preventive Conservation, National Museums Oron, Wooden Objects And Cultural Heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, the museum is responsible for the care of tangible and intangible natural or cultural heritage. It has a primary responsibility to protect and promote heritage as well as the human, physical and financial resources made available for that purpose (ICOM, 2006). The 21st century context of museum is “an institution developed by modern society to stop as much as possible the deterioration and loss of objects treasured for their cultural values” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1986; UNESCO, 1987). The primary function of the museum institution on any object it acquires is to conserve, maintain, and guarantee the safety of such object (UNESCO, 1982; 1987; Okpoko, 2006).

Museums in Nigeria are established for the purposes of collecting, preserving, educating, and exhibiting the cultural or natural heritage of the country for information and enjoyment of the public. National museums in Nigeria were basically established to safeguard the cultural heritage from theft, illegal exportation and religious fanatics, and destruction by environmental factors (Oyinloye, 2015). Most museums in Nigeria were set-up in an area where cultural heritage were predominantly present. For example the National Museum in Oron is designed to specifically preserve and protect about six hundred hardwood ancestor carvings (*Ekpu*) which was assembled in a temporary building in 1947 (Fagg, 1963). The unique wooden ancestral male carvings were found in the geographical location of the town. After some years, a plan was drawn in 1958 and construction started and was completed. The museum was open

to the public in 1959. Study on museums show that Oron National Museums was among the first five generations of Nigerian museums: Esie Museum -1945; Jos Museum -1952; Ile-Ife Museum -1956; Lagos Museum -1957; Oron Museum -1959 (Oyinloye, 2015).

This study, therefore, gives an overview of the variety of wooden objects in Oron museum; this variety is in terms of functions, historical background, as well as sources of origin. The study carefully described functional types of object, such as wooden face masks and headdresses, ancestral figures, door panels and house posts, stools, musical instruments, shrine and ceremonial objects. This study focused on the aspects of preventive conservation of wooden cultural objects among other media in Oron museum. This study of preventive conservation of wooden objects in Oron museums throws light on the creativity, skills, usefulness and ancient technology of the carvers who made these exquisite art pieces.

Location and structure of Oron Museum

Oron National Museum is sited at the bank of Oron Beach, which is situated at 1004 area of Oron Idua Assang, Oron museum is unique because it is situated at a waterside. After viewing the exhibition in the gallery, the waterfront offers a serene atmosphere for comfort, as the museum kitchen is a combination of relaxation and enjoyment. The effect of the museum sited by the river side reduces high temperature level in the galleries during the heat period. The museum building shares boundary with Oron beach. This natural setting allows cool breeze from the river into the museum complex day and night. The building consists of two rectangular exhibition galleries situated on the bank of the Cross River lagoon at about 4.05m above the water edge (O. Adeoye, personal communication, February 15th 2010.).

Inventory of collections at Oron Museum

Inventory is the documentation of every object and material in a particular museum. Inventory of objects in Oron museum was taken in February 2010 by the team of curator and other workers. The breakdown of the inventory shows that National Museum Oron has over 3,000 collections in the store and galleries, comprising various media of cultural art production (see detail in Table 1 below). It further shows that the Oron Museum also preserves about 200 pieces of collections for the National Museum Port Harcourt and other institutions in the region. The cultural objects documented cut across varieties of cultural art media. They include bronze/brass, Iron/metal, leather/animal skin, textiles/wools, terracotta, stone objects, manila objects, ivory objects and some of the objects are without distinctive features.

The inventory of the cultural heritage in the Oron Museum revealed the state of health and fitness of all cultural objects in the store and galleries of the museum. In respect to the inventory taken on the museum's collections in 2010, the management has discovered a need to de-accession (remove from list) objects that were not originally Oron museum's collections. This was to eradicate the confusion created about the total number of objects belonging to the Oron Museum. This simply means that the Management of Oron National Museum has decided not to document such cultural objects preserved for other museums in their day book again, so that the museum can have accurate total number of objects registered in the museum.

Table 1: Objects and materials in the museum during 2010 inventory

Medium	Objects in number	Percentage
Wooden objects	2,747	80% of total museum collection
Bronze/brass objects	240	7%
Iron/metal objects	103	3%
Leather/skin materials	36	1%
Textiles materials	71	2%
Terracotta objects	69	2%
Stone objects	35	1%
Manila objects	34	1%
Ivory objects	35	1%
Objects of other Media	69	2%
Total=	<u>3,434</u>	100%
Objects from other museums	178	
Objects displayed in the museum courtyard	6	
Grand Total of cultural objects and materials from 2010 inventory – 3, 666		

Table1 above is the graphic information of inventory taken in Oron National Museum in 2010 by the team of curator and workers at conservation unit (Documentation Unit). The table shows that wooden objects constitute about 80% of the total museum cultural objects. It is on this basis that we analysed the data and findings in this study. There are over 3,000 collections of cultural objects (Table1) in the store and museum galleries. Inventory of cultural collections was conducted in order to know the total collections of wooden and other materials in the museum. The total number helps to know how many of each of the materials can be exhibited and how many can be kept in the store. Inventory gives the curator an idea of the volume of collections in the museum in order to know how to allocate space for all cultural objects in the museum. As the objects and materials increase, the curator would be able to ask for bigger space in the store and galleries. The outcome of collection's inventory may lead the curator and the workers to make some changes to the positioning of the objects in the store. Inventory is to also help the conservator rearrange or repartition shelves, clean and also create free spaces in between two objects.

Organisation of the Oron Museum store

It was observed that preservation of objects in a museum store is similar to bookkeeping in the library, especially in terms of documentary, shelving, numbering and other related activities. The national museum at Oron is not an exception in this regard. The curator informed us that the museum, in February 2010 took inventory of all objects in its care for proper documentation and storage into the computer. This activity is another step in the aspect of preventive conservation in the 21st century museum storage. The curator, Mr. Adeoye, mentioned that the purpose of inventory is to assess the number of objects in the museum and also know their state of health.

We observed the storage room of Oron National Museum is large enough to accommodate her over 3,000 collections, including wooden and other objects enumerated in Table 1. The store is 11,000 metres in length and 7,600 metres in breadth. There are adequate spaces in the store for workers to walk round the shelves freely; also there are various objects of different media in the store that are arranged on different shelves. The museum lends out objects in its collections to other museums and corporate bodies around to showcase for temporary exhibition. The store is segmented into two rectangular shapes joined together for easy walking around in the store. There is also an ante room, a section which is reserved for conservators and researchers to carry out their sorting out and write-ups (O. Adeoye, personal communication, February 15th 2010). The preventive conservation of cultural objects in the Oron museum store is organised according to forms and functions once performed by the objects (ritual, dance, religious, and so on). However, the sculptural wooden objects were arranged in the store in a way that gave easy access to them through location codes in alphabetical order/numbering on the shelves, just as it is in other Museum's store.

Records of objects at the documentation unit

Record keeping and documentation of objects and materials in the museum is a great concern to the museum institution. The number of objects and materials in the documentation unit of National Museum Oron is put at 3,666 in number, from different materials of art production (see Table 1). The objects are partly displayed in the two galleries of the museum, while the remaining ones are under preventive care in the single large store of the museum. Every cultural object in the museum is well documented in the record book of the museum. Every object is recorded in the record book based on material of production and the background history from its source. Record of every object in the store and galleries of the museum are in the care of the documentation unit. To preserve the over 3,000 cultural objects recorded in the museum, the unit has to know and keep the data for other units to work with. There is a table on inventory of museum objects in Oron museum prepared in 2010 (see Table 1). The table gives us a description of categories of objects in the museum and also states their number. Wooden objects constitute about 80% of the museum objects. This shows the importance of wooden objects to the people in this area in the past civilization. It also shows the availability of raw materials for carving different objects.

According to Adediran (2012) the requirements of a good documentation system of a museum are the (a) day book (b) accession register (c) catalogue cards and (d) ledger for the storage. Documentation in the Oron Museum involves taking inventory of all objects contained therein. It helps to take stock of all collections in the stores, galleries and courtyards. The process may be done manually in the first place but must be transferred to the electronic form later.

- (a) Day book is a record or book open for object on arrival into the museum. Every object is entered into a day book as it was acquired, with as much of the required information on the object as possible. Every cultural heritage in the documentation unit of Oron museum is documented in the museum day book. It is in this book that one reads of all information about the objects in the museum. Day book gives the background details of every object as at the time they were being acquired by the museum. Index number is given to every object recorded by the documentation unit and it is by the index number, one can search for any required object in the day book.
- (b) Accessioning is the formal acceptance of acquisition into the museum collection. Every object meant to be kept in the museum must be entered in the accession register.

Accession register is kept in a safe place in the museum, preferably a fire-proof cabinet. Functions of accession register are to: (i) assign a unique number to each cultural object in the museum, (ii) describe object under preventive conservation, and (iii) give detailed history and provenance of cultural objects in the museum.

- (c) Catalogue card is a complete record of everything that is known about every object in the museum's collections. Various types of useful information about an object is written on catalogue card, such as (i) name of museum (ii) object's identification number, (iii) name of object- classification, (iv) entry method (donation, fund, purchase or lender), (v) source of entry (donor, vendor or lender), (vi) date of entry, and (vii) history of object. Cataloguing is to record the full scholarly information about an object. There may be a need for additional information which is contained in the objects' information file; they may include invoices, receipts, letters, newspaper cuttings, conservator's report, photographs, excavator's notes, and so on.
- (d) Ledger - This is a book in which all cultural objects are regularly recorded, especially activities surrounding the object's movement in and out of the museum. Our investigation revealed that over 3,000 objects and materials were documented by the above four means of documentation systems in the Oron Museum (see Table 1 for breakdown). The collections are kept in the store where all objects not exhibited are preserved. The documentation units keep all records of collection in the museum's day book (Okpoko, 2006).

Preventive conservation measures in the museum's store

The preventive conservation of objects was carried out to ensure safety of collection from deterioration and theft. Preventive conservation in the store starts with proper arrangement of cultural objects on the shelves. Another thing being done is to provide adequate spaces in the store to walk around during the daily routine check on the objects. The museum workers walk around the store to see if objects arranged on the shelves are manifesting any trait of deterioration or not. Workers at the conservation unit also make sure that the store is clean; they ensure that windows are securely locked to prevent dust. They also ensure that all entrances are blocked to prevent rats and rodents.

The study raised questions on the issue of why there are many objects in the store than those on display in the gallery. O. Adeoye (personal communication, February 15th, 2010) explained that the policy concerning keeping and display of objects in the museum is universal and the same. This policy states that all objects that have been used before 1980 should go into the store. He stated that the policy is not expected to be static on museum issues but rather dynamic. Therefore, it might be reversed soon in order to offload the store while the recently acquired are displayed. He reiterated that the techniques of the museum preventive conservation are also dynamic and not static. Therefore, in 50 years from now it will seem as if we are just starting conservation in Nigerian museums because we still have a lot to learn and borrow from the expertise knowledge of the British, Canadian and American museums.

Exhibition in the gallery and courtyard of the museum

Exhibition of objects in Oron National Museum is displayed in the two galleries and courtyard of the museum. The collections displayed in the exhibition of the galleries include wooden masks, wooden figures, wooden pillar post, drums, and traditional title-holder's staff. Other

notable media of cultural objects are calabash, ivory, bronze, manilas, iron and metal objects. Another avenue of exhibition in the museum is the courtyard or museum compound. Just like what obtains in other National Museums in Nigeria, stone objects are displayed in the open atmosphere. We also observed a display of *Ohaffia* house post (plate 1) in the corridor or walkway between the store and the galleries. The wooden house post is affixed to the museum ceiling in order to support the roof. This means that the house post is erected under use to serve its traditional purpose of supporting the roof. We also observed other cultural objects displayed in the courtyard, mostly of the stone medium. Among the stone objects displayed in the courtyard are the Cross River monolith and the stone sculpture of the late ethnographer Keith Nicklin erected to serve as permanent exhibition.

There are two galleries in Oron museum. The two galleries are divided by a raffia screen. The two galleries cater for exhibition and displays of cultural objects in the museum. Exhibition in Oron museum is presented in a large rectangular gallery (30 metres by 50 metres) which displays the unique carved wooden objects from the Cross River region and other parts of Nigeria. Items displayed in the museum are skin-covered wooden masks, the *Ibibio-Ekpo* wooden mask, *Calabar Ekpe* wooden mask, *Ekpu* ancestral wooden figure, Annang-Ibibio funerary art. All these are included to make full use of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments' collections and results of the new ethnographic research in the Cross River region. Bunkers used during the Civil War and the craft village have been added to the collections in the museum. The exhibition in the museum is primarily ethnographic in scope. In other words, they consist of objects that are familiar with present generation.

Preventive conservation or maintenance of the galleries and objects in the Oron museum starts with mopping of the floor, cleaning of the show glasses and display stands with soft clothing. The cleaners are already trained on how to clean the gallery infrastructures without having to disrupt objects. Cleaning of objects on exhibition is carried out by technical officers who have technical skills on how to touch and clean wooden objects on display without damaging them. In respect of gallery management, windows are tightly closed to prevent dust from lodging in the intricate parts of wooden objects. The museum compound is swept on a daily basis, and the building structure is cleaned from cobwebs and other particles every week. Grasses in the museum compound are cut regularly as soon as they grow up in order to prevent habitation of rodents and reptiles.

Every object in the gallery is first treated against pests and other forms of destruction before it is displayed in the gallery. Any wooden object that would be exhibited in the gallery has to be certified physically fit to withstand gallery environment before it is displayed. The exhibition officer goes on a regular monitoring until the exhibition is dismantled. The essence of this is to see if any object on exhibition will manifest deterioration or attack by pests. The gallery attendants monitor visitor or viewer of exhibition so that they do not touch objects on display.

Some selected wooden objects for discussion

The selected wooden objects that are discussed represent the varieties of wooden cultural objects hosted by Oron National Museum (see Table 2). Our choice of these objects for study was because they possessed unique aesthetics. They also have performed social and cultural functions at their various places of origin. For example, *Ekpu* is an ancestral wooden figure that played significant roles in the history of the Oron people. The carving of *Ekpu* figure was associated with the belief that the dead ancestor has roles to play in the life of a living person. The image represents the dead who is supposed to carry out all needed support for the living.

Table 2: Wooden objects discussed

Title	Medium of production	Origin of objects
1. Ohaffia house post	Wooden post	Igbo Obu in Abia State
2. Oyumana	Carved wooden-skin covered mask	Boki town-Cross River State
3. Nwa ekpo	Painted wooden figure	Abak in Akwa Ibom State
4. Ekpu	Wooden figure	Oron in Akwa Ibom State
5. Ebieke	Painted wooden figure	Oron in Akwa Ibom State



Plate: 1

Title: *Ohaffia* house post

Medium: carved wooden post in relief form

Place of origin: Igbo Obu hall, Abia State

Dimension: 2.39m height and 0.76m circumference

Plate 1 is a large and tall carved house post that was acquired by the museum from Igbo Obu hall of the Ohaffia. The house post is 2.39m in height and 0.76m in circumference. In Igbo land, a house post is used in the decoration of the entrance to the palace of a prominent Chief. The wooden post is carved with intricate designs which represent certain cultural values of the people of the land. This particular house post was acquired by K.C. Muray for National Antiquity Services (O. Adeoye, personal communication, February 15th 2010.). The post suggests the possibility of the object being carved from Iroko-African teak wood. The natural colour of the house post is brown, which is synonymous with African teak wood. The post is carved with similar motifs and symbols common among Igbo people. The post is carved in low-relief technique. *Obu* house post in the Oron Museum does not have too many deep cuttings or pronounced designs. However, we could recognize the carved objects as spider or scorpion that are not as conspicuously depicted. The documentation records in Oron museum

shows that this giant house post was collected from Abia State in Nigeria (Oron Museum day book).



Plate: 2

Title: *Oyumana* (Skin-covered mask)

Medium: carved wooden mask covered with antelope leather

Place of origin: Boki town, Cross Rivers State

Dimension: 0.22m height and 0.36m in circumference

Plate 2 is a skin covered Janus-faced head mask called *Oyumana*. It is 0.22m in height and 0.36m in circumference. O. Adeoye (personal communication, February 15th 2010) informed us that the mask was carved by Bissong Otu of Ntamante in 1903. It was purchased by the museum from Mr. Nkuya Ochang of Oshie Nkuya village in 1994 amongst the Boki tribe of Ikom division. The mask was last used for masquerade cultural function at dance performance in 1972 (O. Adeoye, personal communication, February 15th 2010). C. N. Akpan (personal communication, September 16th, 2014) noted that *Oyumana* might have been carved from the species of *Oko* tree which are durable.

Historical particularism on the skin-covered mask states that it is popular among Ekoi people of Anyang, Boki, Ejagham, Kemko, and Yako in Cross Rivers State (Julien, 2000; Owezarek, 2006). They are best known for large skin-covered masks which have two or even three faces. There are smaller headpieces which represent a head or the entire body structure (Owezarek, 2006). The unique skin-covered heads represent the other arts in Ibibio region. Here, carved wooden masks are covered with animal skin. It was observed that two types are made: a cap and a helmet mask. The cap mask is mounted on a basketry pedestal and worn on top of the head. It is usually naturalistic representation of women and animal heads. The helmet mask, on the other hand, covers the entire head and rests on the shoulder of the wearer (Federal Department of Antiquities, 1977).

Oyumana (skin-covered mask) in plate 2 showed weathering effects possibly because of the length of time it was carved. The leather covering the carved wooden mask was already torn,

while the wood also chopped off at the centre region of the head. We noticed evidence of some level of internal rupture in the wooden mask. O. Adeoye (personal communication, February 15th, 2010) informed that action was already being taken to stop further deterioration through chemical treatment. He added that the torn leather and decayed wooden objects are better left uncorrected in order to retain their original identities. Mask is one of the fragile and delicate objects in Oron Museum. Therefore, suggest it should be preserved in a glass showcase in the store.



Plate: 3

Title: *Nwa-ekpo*

Medium: carved painted wooden figure

Place of origin: Utu Etim Ekpo, Abak Division in Akwa Ibom State.

Dimension: 0.53m height and 0.38m circumference

Plate 3 is a painted wooden female figure called *Nwa Ekpo* standing on a long rectangular platform with hair plaited in five big ball hairstyles. B. Abassi (personal communication, September 17th, 2014) mentioned that wooden figure of this nature are usually carved from *Mba* (*Funtimia eiasica*) or *Okwe* (*Ricinodendron heudelotti*). The carved figure measures 0.53m in height and 0.38m in circumference. The figure wears a very big necklace on its neck and bangles on both hands, which are stretched forward. It has a long navel and on its waist are three circular rows of beads. It also wears long coiled type of manila on both legs. The body is generally painted with ochre colour and decorated with black marks all over. The bangles, necklace, lips and hair bond all appear in red. The wooden figure depicts the picture of an Ibibio girl from the fattening room. The object symbolises a maiden about to be married to her suitor. It typifies the physical appeal of a beautiful maid in waiting to meet her husband. There are red colour painting of *nsibidi* design made on her face, palm, waist and legs. The design is common among Calabar women especially when young females are preparing for wedding. O. Adeoye (personal communication, February 15th, 2010) informed us that the figure was carved by Akpan Akpan Chukwu of Utu Etim Ekpo, Abak Division in Akwa Ibom State.

The condition of the object is stable and fit for storage, which is why it is still preserved in the Oron museum store. It does not show any area of dent or decay. The painted wooden figure shows fresh and vibrant nature in the colour combination. It also does not exhibit trait of decay and insect attacking any area. It is suitable for preventive conservation in the Oron museum.



Plate: 4

Title: *Ekpu* figure

Medium: carved wooden figure

Place of origin: Oron town, Akwa Ibom State.

Dimension: 0.29m in height and 0.23m in circumference

This is one of the original *Ekpu* ancestral figures (Plate 4) that is under preventive conservation in Oron museum store. It has a very tiny mouth, long and big beard and carries two wooden staffs in its two hands. It is 0.29m in height and 0.23m in circumference. It is of Oron origin in Akwa Ibom State. *Ekpu* figure signifies the spiritual role of the ancestor in the life of a person or community. Carving of *Ekpu* figure shows the confidence reposed in the ancestor.

We tried to compare this figure (Plate 4) with others preserved in the Oron Museum. It was noticed that the *Ekpu* figures were carved in different sizes from a single log of wood. The one in the picture is not as bulky as other preserved in the store. The colour is greyish, while others are dark brown in colour. The carved figure showed traces of warp but no decay was noticed except that the legs did not show definite finger shapes. It is actually different from the replica displayed for viewers in the museum gallery. This object is one of the few in the custody of National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) which has been given conservation treatment against termite and other pests.



Plate: 5

Title: *Ebieke*

Medium: painted wooden figure

Place of origin: Oron town, Akwa Ibom State.

Dimension: 0.36m in height and 0.19m in circumference

Plate 5 is a large wooden face mask with exaggerated facial marks, locally called *Ebieke*. It is 0.36m in height and 0.19m in circumference. We observed the figure carefully and discovered it has a male human head wearing a red cap between two dark horns on the forehead, long bulging eyeballs, serrated upper eyelids, long big nose and puffy cheeks with three tribal marks on each. It also has large ears and mouth carved to the right side of the face and broken beak. The wooden figure is a composite object; it has raffia strands attached to the main figure behind. O. Adeoye (personal communication, February 15th, 2010) asserted that this object is used to commemorate new yam festival celebrations among the Ibibio in a dance and performance. We noticed that some areas of the painted dark colour were faded, while some still retained dark paint as if coated with lacquer. The object must have been treated with indigenous type of wood vanish because of the glossy effect of the figure. O. Adeoye (personal communication, February 15th, 2010) informed us that the object was purchased from Mr. Orukak Eduno through the curator, in 2009. The object showed no deformity or decay. The condition of the object is good for storage in the store and has remained stable under preventive conservation.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To carry out research on preventive conservation of wooden objects in the National Museum Oron, 2,747 wooden objects were examined in February 2010. The number constituted about 80% of the total number of over 3,434 cultural heritages in the 2010 inventory (see Table 1). Thereafter, 5 samples were randomly selected for detailed description in this study because they represent different categories of forms and functions in the sociocultural setting of the past

civilisation in Oron. These selected wooden objects also represent various aspects of human endeavours amongst the Oron people in the historical past. These objects are representations of wooden mask, wooden door panels, wooden house posts, wooden-base drums, wooden divination bowls, wooden head dress, wooden staff, and ancestral figures that had performed one function or the other in past societies of Nigeria. These objects were considered because of the artistic and aesthetic information that can be derived from them. These objects as well speak for the socio-cultural attainment of the geographical locations and ethnic communities where they emanated from.

The study observed that though Oron museum is not as big as some national museums, but it hosts significant objects in the southeast and other parts of Nigeria. The present mode of conservation practice is the conventional preventive method generally used in all national museums in the country. Therefore, it is suggested that the NCMM set up a committee of museum workers to identify other areas of needs in museum to enhance an improved services of care of the cultural objects preserved in the museum.

It is equally imperative to provide the museum with modern conservation equipment, such as X-radiography camera that is able to detect internal rupture in a cultural object. Modern conservation laboratory is also required to conveniently diagnose objects and treat them appropriately. There should be more cabinets and shelves to accommodate objects that would be acquired in future. All these and many more will improve the level of conservation practice in Oron Museum.

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