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Language as a Political Stance in the Pre-Indonesian Colonial Era: An Analysis of the Choice of Language in Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *This Earth of Mankind*

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Abstract

In This Earth of Mankind, Pramoedya Ananta Toer portrays the role of the language of Dutch, Javanese, and Malay in shaping the colonial society in Java. Among the three languages, in certain crucial respects, Malay constitutes a more effective language of mass media and communication in the colonies. In the novel, the choice of Malay as the language of communication signifies both the reorientation of civilization and culture in Java and the emergence of pre-Indonesian nationalism.

Keywords: pre-Indonesian nationalism, colonialism, Javanese feudalism, reorientation of civilization and culture

In *This Earth of Mankind*, Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) portrays the way the characters choose among three different languages -Dutch, Javanese, and Malay- and relates their choices to the socio-cultural context of Javanese society, Dutch colonialism in the Indies, and the emergence of pre-Indonesian anti-colonial nationalism. Pramoedya is very meticulous in stating whether a character speaks Dutch, or Javanese, or Malay. In this essay, I will explore how the characters' choice of language is largely related to their political stance and social status. Firstly, I will analyze the social implications of the usage of Dutch, Javanese, and Malay. Then, I will explore the socio-historical background of the Javanese social system. This will further explain why the choice of language by the characters in the novel is of great significance, not only for the novel's description of the social implications of the language preferences, but also because it develops the theme in the novel concerning the emergence of the nationalism of pre-Indonesian society.

The Overpowering Dutch

The story of *This Earth of Mankind* is set in Surabaya, a city in the eastern part of the island of Java, between 1898 and 1904. In the novel, late nineteenth century Surabaya is described as a city of commerce with Tanjung Perak as its harbor. A railway has been constructed, connecting Surabaya to Betawi (Dutch:

Batavia) in West Java. Educational institutions such as E.L.S and H.B.S (the prestigious Dutch-language primary and senior high schools), and S.I.B.A (a school for future Netherlands Indies civil servants) have been established. Together with many other towns in Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Celebes, and Papua, Surabaya is under the control of the Dutch General Governor in Batavia (now Jakarta). Administratively, Surabaya is called the Residency of Surabaya, governed by a Mr. Resident who exercises his authority over other minor towns, such as Wonokromo and the town of B---. Minke, the narrator of the novel, first lives in a boarding house in Surabaya but then moves to Wonokromo. He is an H.B.S student in Surabaya. His father is appointed *Bupati* of B---. His father is one among many other *priyayi*, Javanese aristocrats, who become administrators for the Dutch colonial bureaucracy. As Surabaya is a commercial city in Java, where people from Europe, Australia, and other Asian regions make their fortune, the languages of Dutch, Javanese, and Malay are commonly spoken.

The novel reveals that the choice to use a certain language has deliberate social implications. First of all, language shows the person's social status. For Minke, if a person speaks Dutch, like himself, he must be from the academic circle. Indeed, Dutch is the language used at school, and in his time it has become the language of mass media. The mastery of Dutch, for Minke, is a measurement of a person's level of education and, therefore, of his attitude toward modern, i.e. European, civilization and of his significance in society. His prejudicial judgments are seen in statements like, "What was the significance of a police officer, first-class, compared with an H.B.S. student? At the most he might have been able to read and write a little Javanese and Malay" (120). Though Malay has become the language of commerce in Surabaya –because the key element in the market is the Chinese community which often speaks neither Dutch nor Javanese (Anderson 198)- and though Javanese has been the language of culture in Java, neither written nor spoken Javanese is accorded prestige in colonial society. In short, in a colonial context, the language of the colonizer is what matters. Speaking Dutch, therefore, is significant. It is easy to understand, then, that when Minke finds *Nyai* Ontosoroh speaking Dutch flawlessly, he is so surprised. His given situation allows him only to think that a *nyai* should have been in the lowest rank of the society where Dutch language is rarely spoken. In the same given situation, it is understandable that many think of the mastery of Dutch as the vehicle for upward mobility. More than once, many people –given they are Javanese, Mixed-Blood, or Pure- think that one day Minke will become a *bupati* or a leader or some other important person, knowing that his Dutch is excellent. Speaking Dutch among the Dutch is the ladder which enables one to climb up into rank and position. Minke himself later assumes a Dutch name, Max Tolenaar, for his publication in the *Surabaya Daily News* (109), knowing that the usage of Dutch will give him access to the elite and that the Dutch name will give his publication greater potential for review and readership.

The Dutch language itself would mean nothing for social status in Java if there had been equality among Dutch and Javanese, i.e. the same rights between the colonizers and the colonized. *This Earth of Mankind* shows that speaking the

Dutch language implies the superiority of the colonizers in the legal judicial order. The colonizers, either Pure or Mixed-Blood, who usually assume a family name, are protected by Dutch law. For the colonized, however, who are called the Natives, the protection of Dutch law is given only to some of those who have *forum privilegiatum*, which is the right to be tried under the same laws and in the same courts as the Dutch. The rest of the Natives do not have the rights accorded to the Dutch. The Native's own law, if there is one, is not recognized by the Court of the Dutch. For example, the Muslim law, which has long been commonly exercised in the Javanese community, does not have power to protect the rights of the Natives in the Dutch court. In the case of the marriage between Minke, a native, and Annelies Mellema, an Indo, the Muslim law authorizes its legality, but according to Dutch law, the marriage is illegal, and, therefore, does not exist, as Annelies is underage. This legal inequality creates social divisions in the colonial culture in Surabaya: the colonizers vs. the colonized, the Pure or Indo vs. the Natives, the white vs. the colored.

As related in *This Earth of Mankind*, this legal inequality in turn takes effect in the language one is allowed to speak, especially in the courts of the Dutch. Nyai Ontosoroh, for example, is a *nyai*, and as a *nyai* she is a native who does not possess the rights accorded in Dutch law, and is not allowed to speak Dutch even though her Dutch is flawless and her knowledge of European civilization is even better than the average Pure or Indo woman. In a Dutch court, the Natives are allowed to speak only Javanese. Minke's Dutch is excellent, but because he is a native, the question in Dutch is translated into Javanese before he may answer it. The following passage illustrates vividly this drama of legal inequality in relation to the usage of language:

As if repeating Dr. Martinet's question, the prosecutor asked in Dutch, which was then translated into Javanese: "In which room do you sleep, Minke?" And indeed I refused to answer that malicious question. But with the speed of lightning the question was directed at Annelies and spoken directly in Dutch: "With whom does Miss Annelies Mellema sleep?" And Annelies had no power to refuse to answer. So humiliating giggling and laughter was heard in the courtroom, quite loudly too (286).

Because she is not a native, since she has been recognized by law as the daughter of Mr. Mellema, a pure European, Annelies is questioned directly in Dutch.

The Loss of Javanese

Revealing in "My Apologies: In the Name of Experience" his intention of writing *This Earth of Mankind*, Pramoedya laments that in three and half centuries of colonization, the Javanese never once could win against European power. They maintained a stubborn and unrealistic and untimely dream that Java never lost. In *This Earth of Mankind*, Pramoedya shows plainly that Java has indeed lost. The superiority of the language of the Dutch over Javanese, followed by the judicial

inequality imposed on them, is itself a proof of this loss. Pramoedya seems to suggest that the reason for this loss is the internal flaw of Javanese civilization and culture itself, especially of what Pramoedya calls the *kampung* mentality, in which Javanese language plays its part.

In the novel, the Javanese are pictured with their feudalistic attitudes, blind to technology and science, illiterate, and mythical. Through Minke's reaction toward the amusing technology and science he learns at school and in the city of Surabaya, Pramoedya sets a mirror to show the way the Javanese will react if they see the same things, such as the printing industry, especially zincography, trains and the railways, electricity, and the airplane. Focusing on the details of European civilization in Mr. Herman Mellema's house in Boerderij Buitenzorg in Wonokromo, Minke finds himself being exposed to objects, personality, attitude and behavior which would only let him say, "I'd never seen such things before" (28). This is his note:

This science and learning, which I had been taught at school and which I saw manifested in life all around me, meant that I was rather different from the general run of my countrymen. I don't know. And that's how it was that I, a Javanese, like to make notes -because of my European training. One day the notes would be of use to me, as they are now (16-17).

Pramoedya uses Minke as a mirror for the face of the rest of his "countrymen," the Javanese, in confronting nineteenth century modern development. Does the Javanese language have something to do with the condescending situations described in the novel? Is it true that the loss of Java against European power is *sui generis*, meaning that the reason for this loss is to be found in Javanese civilization and culture itself?

The Javanese language is a stratified language, with *ngoko*, *krama*, and *krama inggil* which depends on whom the speaker is addressing. To his father, Minke will speak *krama inggil* because his father is older and respectable, but to the servant whose status is lower than his, Minke will speak *ngoko* or at most *krama* if the servant is older. Benedict Anderson, whose observation of the crisis of the literature of the Javanese language is reported in *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*, argues that *krama* and *krama inggil* are "not literary language, but an oral and social language" (206) and, thus, they are deeply embedded in everyday Javanese life. *Krama* and *krama inggil* were not part of Old Javanese until the end of the Dark Ages when the ruling class of Java made them vernacular languages. Anderson suggests that the creation of stratification in the Javanese language is a way for the ruling class to try to overcome their impotency when facing society ruled by Dutch power. The spread and development of *krama* and *krama inggil* in vernacular Javanese owe so much to the establishment of Dutch power in Java (1680-1940) which "simultaneously fossilized the Javanese ruling class and feudalized their relations with the rest of the society" (Anderson 206). Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, Javanese society had been structured mentally and culturally according to the stratification

of its language and by its feudalistic social system. It operated according to a colonial standard, not its own.

In *This Earth of Mankind*, Minke's parents and brother represent the upper class Javanese. While Minke's father and brother stand for the Javanese ruling class's attitude, his mother is the cultivator and guardian of Javanese values, principles, and ways of acting. According to her, being Javanese means becoming "the descendant of the knights of Java...the founders and destroyers of kingdoms" whose attributes are *wisma*, *wanita*, *turangga*, *kukila*, and *curiga* (house, woman, horse, bird, and *keris*) (311). House stands for spatial mastery; woman for life, fertility, prosperity, and well being; horse for learning, skills, and advancement; bird for art and beauty; and *keris* for vigilance and courage. In relation to conduct, she says that rebellion is the sign that one is no longer Javanese: "not paying heed to those older, those with greater right to your respect, those who have more power." In an even more provoking formulation, she says, "Javanese bow down in submission to those older, more powerful; this is a way to achieve nobility of character. People must have the courage to surrender, Gus." (130) Minke considers some of these principles misguided as he views them from the modern European perspectives. With such an archaic attitude, Javanese would never move toward modernization and nationalism.

Nyai Ontosoroh and Minke are two characters in the novel that move out from the circle of their Javanese origin. *Nyai Ontosoroh* undergoes a transformation through self study of European civilization and culture under the guidance of her master. That occurs after her father sold her into concubinage, because of which she later decided to detach herself from her father's family circle, her origin. Failing to achieve the status of a wife, she openly admits that she is a *nyai*, a native, a slave to Mr. Mellema but that now with an attitude different from the rest of the Javanese. Minke also experiences detachment from his Javanese origin after he had a conflict with his father and brother. Then, through the encounter with teachers, publishers, correspondence, and *Nyai Ontosoroh* whom he calls Mama, Minke transforms himself to be someone closer to the European ideal. Both *Nyai Ontosoroh* and Minke are personalities that challenge and demand evaluation especially in contrast to the feudalistic mentality in Javanese society. The decay of the feudalistic mentality is seen in the figure of *Sastrotomo*, a clerk, who adopts a crawling attitude in order to achieve position and honor in the eyes of the Dutch ruler. He surrenders *Sanikem*, his own daughter who later becomes *Nyai Ontosoroh*, to *Tuan Besar Kuasa* for twenty-five guilders and for a promise of being made cashier. With the power promised to him, *Sastrotomo* imagines himself as the source of prosperity and a man of honor for his close family circle (79). *Nyai Ontosoroh* rejects this circle, largely because of the trauma of being the subject to a power which entrapped her to the point that she felt she "did not even possess [her] own body" (84). Minke also rejects the feudalistic circle of his family, largely because he knows that the feudalistic attitude in his family is part of the larger problem of feudalism in the Javanese civilization and culture, which was carried on from generation to generation.

Truly, my friends would ridicule me if they could see this play, where a human being, who normally walks on his two whole legs, on his own feet, now has to walk with only half his legs, aided by his two hands. Ya Allah! You, my ancestors, you: What is the reason you created customs that would so humiliate your own descendants? You never once gave it any thought, you, my ancestors who indulged in these excesses! Your descendants could have been honored without such humiliation! How could you bring yourself to leave such customs as a legacy? (121-2)

Being complicated by the lack of education, the lack of awareness of humanity and gender equality, and the lack of legal protection –because indeed there was no law–, feudalism in the Javanese community shaped what Pramoedya called as a *kampung* civilization and culture, which is a vicious circle of civilization without evaluation or a break through to something new. Included within the *kampung* mentality is the way of thinking that errs because judgments are based more on gossip and sentiment than fact. As seen in the novel, prejudice and stereotype become the very heart of the way people judge things or persons. People perceive the world of *nyais* as “low, dirty, without culture, moved only by lust” (54). Further examples of prejudice and stereotype in *This Earth of Mankind* are the changes in people’s behavior and attitude after knowing that Minke has received an invitation from Assistant Resident Herbert de la Croix. Prior to this invitation, Minke was the subject of ridicule and mockery due to his living in *Nyai Ontosoroh*’s house. After the invitation, “there were no further accusations relating to the issue of *Nyai Ontosoroh*.” He notes satirically that “someone who had received an invitation from the assistant resident was immediately immune; it was impossible for him to have done wrong” (148).

In the novel, Pramoedya inserts a short note about the clothing of the kings of Java. The note says that “since Amangkurat I in the 1600s, the clothes of the kings of Java had been designed and made by Europeans” (133). I consider this short note important pointing out how the Dutch worked to perpetuate Javanese feudalism. It is in line with Anderson’s argument that in order to overpower Java, the Dutch did not eliminate the ruling class, but co-opted them to be the administrators of their colonial policy. Anderson further says that after 1830, the Javanese upper class became “the pliant tool of the Dutch in erecting the ruthlessly exploitative *Cultuurstelsel*, in facilitating the depredations of private agrarian capitalism in the Liberal era, and so on till the close of the colonial age” (201). In other words, because the root of their existence was Dutch power, the Javanese ruling class lost ground in their own land and increasingly became impotent before their own people. In Breton de Nijs’s phrase, the Javanese ruling class had become *levende wayangpoppen* (living *wayang* puppets), and the Dutch were the puppet masters (Anderson 201).

The socio-historical analysis of the Javanese language in relation to Pramoedya’s presentation of the nineteenth century Javanese social system in *This Earth of Mankind*’s characters becomes a tool for understanding the novel as “a literary reality” as Pramoedya intends it to be. By literary reality he means that a novel reflects the “downstream reality, whose origin was an upstream reality, that

is, a historical reality" (*My Apologies*). Thus, Pramoedya suggests that *This Earth of Mankind* contains a reorientation and an evaluation of civilization and culture, which is leading toward producing historical reality.

The Emergence of Malay

We have seen that in *This Earth of Mankind*, the presentation of the overpowering Dutch language in Java and the judicial inequality for the Natives is Pramoedya's explanation of the loss of the Javanese against the colonial power of the Dutch. That is not the end of the story, because Pramoedya also introduces the Malay language as an alternative to confront both the Javanese *kampung* mentality and the oppressive power of the Dutch. We will see now how the novel presents another literary reality, which through the assumption of the Malay language, the preliminary steps of a pre-Indonesian national awakening against Dutch colonialism emerges. We will begin with noticing Pramoedya's insistence in introducing *Nyai Dasima* in *This Earth of Mankind*. *Nyai Dasima* is mentioned in the novel three times: first, in Annelies's relating to Minke that she caught a glimpse of *Nyai Ontosoroh* reading it at night (75); second, through *Nyai Ontosoroh* herself in the conversation with Minke in the dining room (110); and third, through the report in a Dutch-language newspaper that mentions the character *Nyai Dasima* as a motivational model of lust and wealth and which raises suspicions about *Nyai Ontosoroh*'s involvement in the death of her master. In the conversation with Minke, *Nyai Ontosoroh* said that *Nyai Dasima* was written by G. Francis in "a truly European style" (110). She has read *Nyai Dasima* herself, one of the works of fiction she has read within the past ten years, which are "concerned with people's efforts and striving to escape or overcome some difficulty" (111). Besides its provoking theme, it is a significant that *Nyai Dasima* is written in Malay.

Presenting Malay as widely spoken by many of the characters in *This Earth of Mankind*, Pramoedya suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century, Malay had become a *lingua franca* and the language of pre-Indonesian literature. In the novel, the popularity of Malay in Surabaya is evident in that it is spoken by the characters of different races, Pure, Indo, and Native. Tuan Besar Kuasa or Mr. Mellema, a Pure European, speaks Malay the first time he meets Sanikem. Babah Ah Tjong, as representative of the Chinese immigrants, speaks Malay. At the court, Malay is spoken by non-Native and non-European (175). In the world of the press, it is indeed that Dutch was the language of the mass media. Dutch, to be sure, is a dominant language, but in certain crucial respects Malay constitutes a more effective language of mass media and communication in the colonies. There are publications in Malay, such as that belonging to Kommer, a European owner (280). In short, Malay has become the language of commerce, politics, and literature. Its use in the Javanese-speaking area is even stronger than the Javanese language itself. The reasons are, first, Malay is a language that does not contain any levels of stratification like that of Javanese; and, second, Malay is spoken by the Chinese community in the larger towns and cities where they have become the key economic force both as producers and as consumers (Anderson 198). Presenting

the popularity of Malay in *This Earth of Mankind*, Pramoedya also suggests that Malay is an element in the colonial Indies that awakens the pre-Indonesian community to the very possibility of anti-colonial nationalism.

In the novel, Pramoedya juxtaposes the introduction of Malay as a literary language with the introduction of the emergence of an ethical awareness among the European scholars and humanists. Both topics function as double points of awakening (Pramoedya calls it *Verlichting, Aufklaerung*) in Minke's sense of anti-colonial nationalism. Minke's awareness of the significance of Malay is triggered by *Nyai Ontosoroh's* introduction of *Nyai Dasima* to him, while his own anti-colonial nationalism is awakened after his conversation and correspondence with the daughters of Herbert de la Croix, Miriam and Sarah.

Minke's anti-colonial nationalism awakening occurs when he starts recalling the story told by Miss Magda Peters, his teacher at H.B.S., about several European liberals and humanists, such as the poet-journalist Roorda van Eysinga—who wrote "The Last Days of the Hollanders in Java," and Eduard Douwes Dekker who wrote *Max Havelaar* or *De Koffievelingen der Nederlandsche Handelsmaatschappij*—*The Coffee Auctions of the Netherlands Trading Company*. Both writers struggled "to improve the fate of the people in the Indies, against both all-European and all-Native oppression" (189). Eysinga assumed the pseudonym Sentot, a Javanese name, while Douwes Dekker took Multatuli (Latin for "I suffered much") as his penname. Under these influences, Minke realizes that the ethical issues of colonialism have been in the air of Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa. Then, through conversation and correspondence with Miriam and Sarah, he becomes more aware of the sociological and psychological concern of the Dutch Eighties Generation, such as Kloo, whose writing—according to Sarah de la Croix—is a bark "at the sky destroyed by the factory smoke, the fields blasted by the din of traffic, under assault by roads and railway lines" (139). Minke also learns about Dr. Snouck Hurgronje's 'Association Theory,' which idealizes cooperation, based on European ways, between European officials and educated Natives, in together governing the Indies, "so that the responsibility would no longer be the burden of the white race alone" (145).

Historically, the European concern with the colonial ethical issue in the Indies is characteristically referred to as *een eerschuld*, which is the Dutch ethical political stance toward the Indies. Many believe that Charles Theodor van Deventer (1857-1915, a Dutch politician), in collaboration with Pieter Broonschooft, a *De Locomotif* journalist, initiated the promulgation of ethical issues with their revelations of the poor conditions and injustices in the Netherlands Indies. Their reports later sparked fierce discussion among humanists in Netherlands. This concern was later answered when at the enthronement of her Queenship on 17 September 1901, Queen Wilhelmina reminded the people of the Netherlands of their moral obligation and debt (*een eerschuld*) to the Natives in the Indies. She actualized her concern into three political acts: the development of irrigation, the promotion of migration from Java to other islands in East Indies, and the advancement of education in the colony. In the area of education, J.H. Abendanon (1852-1925), the Minister of Culture, Religion, and Industry (1900-1905), was

among those who made great efforts to develop schools for all, Natives, Mixed-Blood, and Pure.

Through the juxtaposition of the awareness of the ethical issues in Indies and the importance of Malay, Pramoedya creates Minke as the character in the novel who witnesses the birth of the very idea of liberation and of a new Dutch-free Indonesia. Pramoedya's clear exploration of the growth of this spirit in Minke shows that the novel possesses the genre of that world modern literature known as *Bildungsroman*. First, the novel tells how the spirit of anti-colonial nationalism develops in Minke in the form of a dream. Pramoedya symbolizes this developing spirit in Jean Marais's painting that hangs on the wall: an Acehnese woman resisting the bayonet of the foreign soldier. Then, the novel tells how Minke is anxious to find a way of actualizing his dream, which of course is contrary to his own fear and pride. Minke thought, "Slowly I began to understand: All this was the result of my reluctance to pay the price of entering the world of pleasure, the world where dreams become reality. Multatuli and van Eysinga paid the price but they wanted nothing for themselves. What do my writings mean compared to theirs? Everything I hope and lust after is for myself. The thought shamed me." (189) Pramoedya intends *This Earth of Mankind* to be a call for its readers to change. Through sympathizing with the gradual awareness that takes place in the spirit of Minke, they would claim their own spirit and reorient their own stance (111).

The evolution and revolution in Minke's personality can be documented as follows. In his early life as an H.B.S. student, Minke believed with certainty that the mastery of the Dutch language would open for him the door to knowledge, status, and honor. It was proven true later that his flawless Dutch widens his contacts, first with the academic circle of H.B.S. in Surabaya, and then with the readers of *S.N. v/d. D* where he published his articles in Dutch, and then with the Assistant Resident of B_ after the great success of his translation of the speeches in his father's inauguration as *Bupati* of B—. Minke also believed that the mastery of Dutch would open his mind to European civilization and would change his backward attitude into those more European attitudes, especially with regard to modern progress. While it was true that the mastery of Dutch has brought some positive effects (such as what also occurs with *Nyai Ontosoroh*), it also becomes true for him now that beyond the mastery of language there is a deeper problem called "politics" by Dr. Martinet, the Mellema's private doctor, which the mastery of the Dutch language cannot solve. Minke describes it as "nothing more than a case of the white race swallowing up Natives...[p]erhaps this was what was called a colonial case...a case of swallowing up a conquered Native people" (333). The Dutch Court in Amsterdam decides –unjustly– to give Mr. Mellema's property to Maurits Mellema, the legal son of Mr. Mellema, who in fact never worked for the development of that property, and to transport Annelies Mellema to the Netherlands to be under the guardianship of her step brother. The Dutch Court in Amsterdam does not even recognize the legality of the marriage between Minke and Annelies that had been authorized under Islamic law.

At the crucial moment, when the Dutch, whose language he learned and admired, do not defend his case, to the point of even failing to legalize his marriage and in effect, kidnapping his wife, Minke listens to *Nya'*'s advice to use the Malay language.

...Minke, child, Nyo," she went on in a whisper, as if there were someone else there who was listening in on us, "now you must write in Malay, child. The Malay papers are read by many more people." (336)

By way of translation, he publishes his writing in Malay, the language which a larger community of Natives can access. Though the case failed, nonetheless Minke's usage of Malay influences the Natives themselves. The Madurese movement and Islamic movement are but two examples of this new attempt to defend their rights against their oppressors.

To summarize, through a meticulous exploration of the characters' choice of language, Pramoedya makes *This Earth of Mankind* a literary reality. The socio-historical analysis of the language choices by the characters gives us clues to understand the points Pramoedya wants the readers of his novel to grasp, to evaluate, and to rethink. This includes the colonial practices and policies of the Netherlands Indies, the feudalistic and *kampung* attitudes of the Natives, and the unifying element of Malay for Indonesian nationalism.

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