

THE JOURNEY OF STRUGGLE FROM COLONISATION TO OCCUPATION AND EMANCIPATION: THE CASE OF EAST TIMOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the protracted struggle of the people of East Timor for self-determination, a journey marked by centuries of colonial rule, a brutal 24-year occupation, and a resilient, multifaceted resistance movement. The narrative begins with the end of over four centuries of Portuguese colonisation in 1975. This paper analyses the tri-dimensional nature of the Timorese resistance: the armed struggle led by the Fretilin-backed FALINTIL in the mountains, the clandestine front urban youth movements, and the diplomatic front championed by exiled leaders. The paper argues that despite overwhelming military and political odds, the fusion of these resistance fronts, combined with the unwavering spirit of the Timorese people and the shifting post-Cold War geopolitical landscape, culminated in the 1999 UN-sponsored referendum and the restoration of independence in 2002. By synthesising historical accounts, post-conflict analysis, and scholarly works on resistance and international relations, this article demonstrates the ultimate triumph of East Timorese, which reshaped regional dynamics and provided a significant precedent for the right to self-determination.

Keywords: East Timor, Self-determination, Indonesian occupation, Resistance, Decolonisation, FALINTIL

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INTRODUCTION

The story of East Timor is a profound testament to a nation's resilience in the face of immense historical adversity. Situated in Southeast Asia, its journey to sovereign statehood is a complex narrative of colonialism, the Cold War geopolitics, brutal occupation, and an inflexible struggle for self-determination. For over four centuries, the territory was a neglected outpost of Portuguese direct colonial rule of violence (Kammen, 2015, p. 96). Moreover, the end of this long colonial era did not, bring peace and freedom the Timorese people desired. Instead, it began with a far more violent chapter in their history in 1975 with occupation by Indonesia (Hägerdal, 2007).

The catalyst for this dramatic shift was the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal, which triggered a rapid and chaotic process of decolonisation across its empire (Durand, 2011). For East Timor, this meant an abrupt withdrawal of colonial power, leaving a political vacuum that local parties, primarily the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) and the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT), sought to fill. After a brief internal conflict, Fretilin declared independence for the Democratic Republic of East Timor on November 28, 1975 (Elliott, 1976). This declaration of sovereignty was tragically short-lived. Just nine days later, on December 7, 1975, neighbouring Indonesia launched a full-scale invasion and occupied the territory (Gunn, 2009).

The Indonesian government, under President Suharto, justified the invasion with the rhetoric of anti-communism, portraying Fretilin as a Marxist threat that could destabilise the region (Leifer, 1976). This narrative found a receptive audience in Western capitals, particularly Washington and Canberra, which were deeply entrenched in Cold War thinking and viewed a stable anti-communist Indonesia as a crucial regional ally (Roberts, 2019; Kimura, 2012). The invasion was thus met with international complicity and silence. The United States of America and Australia, among other Western countries, provided diplomatic cover and crucial military assistance to Indonesia, supporting the annexation effectively (Connelly, 2022; Retboll, 1980).

Indonesia formally incorporated the territory as its 27th province, 'Timor Timur'. A move was never recognised by the United Nations, however; stood for 24 years, backed by overwhelming military force and a geopolitical climate that prioritised strategic alliances over international law (Weatherbee, 1981).

The ensuing occupation was catastrophic for the Timorese people. It unleashed a wave of systematic violence, including mass killings, forced displacement and starvation used as a weapon of war. The widespread use of torture was recorded by the Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação, (CVAR), Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation, in East Timor. The human cost was staggering, with scholars and human rights reports estimating that between 100,000 and 200,000 people, up to a third of the pre-invasion population perished as a direct result of the conflict and occupation-related policies (Kiernan, 2017, p. 105). This period has been described by many, including the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) in East Timor, as constituting acts of genocide (Thaler, 2021). Yet, in the face of this immense suffering and international neglect, the spirit of Timorese nationalism and the will to resist was not extinguished. An organized and multifaceted resistance movement emerged, fighting on multiple fronts, in the mountains, in the towns, and across the world's diplomatic corridors to keep the dream of independence alive (Carey, 2007, pp. 374-401). This paper explores the arduous struggle of the Timorese people, analysing the historical context, the nature of their resistance, and the eventual triumph that reclaimed their independence and sovereignty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The body of literature on East Timor's struggle against colonialism reflects the complex interplay of local resistance, regional power dynamics, and international law that defined the conflict (Durand, 2011). Scholarly work can be broadly categorised into several streams: early colonial resistance, the dynamics of the Indonesian invasion and occupation, the multifaceted nature of the Timorese resistance

movement, and the international political context that shaped the conflict's trajectory and resolution.

Early historical accounts, such as Hägerdal (2007), challenge monolithic views of Portuguese rule by detailing pre-20th-century Timorese forms of resistance. Moreover, it examines rebellions and factionalism between 1650 and 1769, illustrating a long-standing tradition of local agency and opposition to foreign domination, providing crucial context for the later nationalist movement. The end of the colonial period is analysed by Feijó and Pereira (2023), who frame Portugal's exit as "decolonisation without self-determination", highlighting the chaotic nature of the withdrawal that left the territory vulnerable to Indonesian expansionism in the garb of anti-communism (Fibiger, 2021). The immediate prelude to the invasion and the Indonesian rationale are described by Leifer (1976). Weatherbee (1966) presents Portuguese Timor as a potential problem for Indonesian foreign policy due to the clash between Indonesia's revolutionary ideology and its pragmatic interests.

The 24-year occupation and the immense violence are a central focus of the literature. José Ramos-Horta (1996) provides an insider's perspective on the "unfinished saga" blending personal narrative with political analysis. The genocidal nature of the occupation is rigorously argued by Thaler (2021) and Kiernan (2008), who draw parallels with other mass atrocities and situate the violence within a framework of state-sponsored terror. Moreover, Totten and Parsons (2013) provide harrowing evidence-based accounts of human rights abuses, forming the bedrock of transitional justice scholarship about East Timor.

Glassman (2003) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how a seemingly powerless group challenged a structural power for liberation. Therefore, multifaceted armed struggle, led by FALINTIL (Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste), is a recurring theme. Franks (1996) offers a crucial gendered perspective, highlighting the vital and often overlooked role of women as informants of the clandestine network, and symbols of cultural resilience. This internal resistance was complemented by a

sophisticated diplomatic front, whose efforts are well documented as primary evidence (Ramos-Horta, 1996).

However, the international dimension is critical to understanding the conflict's longevity and eventual resolution. The role of key state actors has extensively been scrutinised. Lee and Wendy (2000) contend that Indonesia was in secret talks with Australia on the future of East Timor and its probable assimilation into Indonesia. Therefore, both countries were of the view that an independent country with communist leaning was not in favour of both countries. Kimura (2012) and Gorjão (2001) provide detailed re-examinations of Australian and Portuguese foreign policies, exposing the often-cynical calculations that prioritized relations with Indonesia over Timorese self-determination. Connelly (2022) focuses on Australian policy through the lens of neocolonial violence. The broader geopolitical context, particularly the Cold War influence has also been highlighted, which provides greater material (Roberts, 2019). The shift in post-Cold War geopolitics and the rise of humanitarian interventionism are seen as critical turning points favouring the resistance in East Timor (Wheeler & Dunne, 2001). Southgate (2019) has analysed the lack of ASEAN in East Timor conflict owing to its principle of non-interference. The final years leading to the 1999 referendum and the challenges of reconstruction of the territory through peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations were instrumental for the right of self-determination by the people of East Timor (Della-Giacoma, 2012). Moreover, Fox and Soares (2003) have emphasised re-building the nation of East Timor "out of the ashes".

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative, historical-analytical research methodology has been employed to gather data for this research. The primary approach is a comprehensive review and synthesis of secondary source materials to construct a coherent narrative and analysis of East Timor's struggle for independence. This is an appropriate method for this study, which provides a broad yet detailed overview of a complex historical period,

drawing upon a wide range of established academic and expert sources.

The foundation of this study is based on the literature, which represents a cross-section of key works about the conflict in East Timor. These sources can be categorised, as collective strength and suitability for this analysis are academic journals. Glassman (2003), Gorjão (2001), Hägerdal (2007), and Strating (2014) provide rigorous, discipline-specific analyses of the conflict's various facets. Their research offers theoretical framing, detailed historical investigation, and critical perspectives on international policyies. Moreover, foundational texts such as José Ramos-Horta's *Funu* (1996) offer an invaluable participant-observer perspective. The centuries of genocide in East Timor (Totten et al., 2013) and *Out of the Ashes* (Fox & Soares, 2003) bring together multiple expert voices to cover specific themes like human rights atrocities and post-conflict reconstruction. Furthermore, Connelly (2022) and Birmingham (2015) offer focused narratives on Australian policy and the events of 1999, respectively. However, Kimura (2012) and Tsuchiya (2018) have covered the East Timor conflict in their PhD theses, which have not yet been published but these studies represent dedicated knowledge and contain original insights and exhaustive detail. They provide granular analysis of specific time periods like Australian foreign policy from 1974-1978 and themes of constructing the identity of the people of the East Timor. Furthermore, Retboll (1980; 1998) provides a detailed information documenting about East Timor conflict from the Indonesian invasion in its original form, while the second series gives accounts of the developments of the conflict and records the indigenous resistance movement. Moreover, foundational documents, the CAVR report (cited on the ETAN website) are crucial. These materials provide sufficient data, eyewitness accounts, and policy analysis of on-the-ground investigation. These documents offer an understanding of the human rights violations and the challenges faced by the resistance movement in East Timor.

Moreover, this research involved several stages. First, each source was reviewed to identify its central argument, key evidence, and contribution to the overall understanding of the East Timor conflict and the struggle for emancipation. Second, the information was thematically categorised according to the historical context, nature of the resistance, international dynamics, and post-conflict legacy. Third, the sources were synthesised to build a multi-layered argument, where different scholarly perspectives are brought into conversation with one another. For instance, the diplomatic history provided by Kimura (2012) is used to contextualise the resistance narratives described by Ramos-Horta (1996) and Franks (1996). However, Elliott (1978) provides details of the events that unfolded in East Timor after the Carnation Revolution in colonial Portugal and its effects on the political struggle for the right of self-determination and subsequent emancipation. By grounding the analysis firmly in this robust and diverse body of literature, this paper aims to produce a reliable, academically sound, and comprehensive overview of its subject matter.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Portuguese Occupation and Indigenous Resistance

The Portuguese traders found sandalwood in 1511 and began to settle by establishing a church in East Timor. The Portuguese settlement of Goa, an Indian sub-continent possession became a trade route to East Timor with the support and cooperation of local East Timorese kingdoms led by a *Liurai* (Kings) and continued ruling and exploiting trade and taxes (Jarnagin, 2012). The city of Dili was made a central place to control the countryside. Smaller or bigger rebellions against the Portuguese rule remained in action but could not overthrow the colonialists (p. 76). There had been a struggle of controlling the island of Timor by Dutch and Portuguese, which, resulted in wars. However, in 1913, the International Court of Arbitration decided to divide the island which West Timor became part of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) and the control of the Portuguese on East

Timor was recognized (Deely, 2001).

According to Durand (2011), the people of East Timor have resisted heavily Portuguese colonial rule and present historical evidence of violence against the people of East Timor from their early colonisation to the end of colonial subjugation. However, the attention to grave consequences was only reported and highlighted during the Indonesian invasion and occupation from 1975 to 1999. The people of East Timor have been subject to the greatest violence since their colonisation in the early 16th century by the Portuguese. As usual, the colonising powers have been brutal and merciless in unleashing violence against the colonised. Therefore, East Timorese was no exception. Owing to their resolve, the people of East Timor had been outraged with the colonizers. New forms of oppression in terms of seizure of land, forced labour and head tax had been the hallmark of the Portuguese autocratic rule in the territory of East Timor (Kammen, 2015). The slave trade was one of the harshest commotions in which people were transferred out of East Timor. The people of East Timor have faced unabated violence for centuries, starting from 1700 to the end of the Portuguese abrupt departure from the territory. However, the Portuguese departure was one of the greatest blunders in the history of decolonisation. Sensible prevalence could have averted the catastrophic outcome in the form of occupation of the territory by Indonesia (Durand, 2011).

Indonesian Occupation and Indonesianisation

The 24-year struggle of the East Timorese people against Indonesian occupation was a fight for national survival waged against overwhelming odds. It was a multifaceted resistance considered a 'Total War' fought not only with guns in the mountains but also speeches in the halls of the powerful corridors. The success of the movement lay in its ability to sustain different fronts of armed, clandestine, and diplomatic resilience for national liberation. Marker (2003) calling the struggle for independence by the people of East Timor was of a unique feature, and describes:

The resistance had an exceptional character. It had no support as many resistance movements namely; Palestine, Kashmir, Angola, Mozambique, and Afghanistan had on their side. The close neighbours Australia and New Zealand had already supported Indonesia against East Timor resistance including members of the ASEAN. Therefore, lacking any support, the resistance in East Timor existed on their own for a long period of twenty-two years."

The government of Indonesia carried out different programs to destroy the Timorese identity and Portuguese cultural heritage in East Timor to surrender for 'Indonesianisation'. The Portuguese language was abolished with Indonesian and Tetum, the local Timorese language. There was also a program of educational subservience to the Indonesian government (Jarnagin, 2012).

Struggle for Independence:

National Council of Maubere Resistance (CNRM): Xanana Gusmao, the resistance leader established "The National Council of Maubere Resistance- CNRM" in 1987 by with three fronts viz Armed Front, Front Clandestine and Diplomatic Front to keep the resistance alive and continue (Stephan, 2006). To encompass all resistance forces at one platform, the establishment of CNRM was hoped to be a body to provide an umbrella to all the political ideologies and nationalists for reinvigorating the liberation movement. It was a strategic step towards converging the resistance into an unwavering and inherent binding force as well (Niner, 2000). Here is a brief of all the three fronts of resistance.

Armed Resistance: The most visible front was the armed resistance, led by the *Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste* (FALINTIL). It was established on the 20th of August 1975 in political conflicting interests with *União Democrática Timorense*, UDT, known as Timorese Democratic Union, as a response from *Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente*, FRETILIN or known as the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor

(FALINTIL/F-FDTL, 2005). Initially, FALINTIL the military wing of Fretilin, retreated to the mountainous interior following the 1975 invasion and waged guerrilla war against the far larger and better-equipped Indonesian military. In the early years, FALINTIL suffered devastating losses as the Indonesian army launched massive "encirclement and annihilation" campaigns, which, combined with forced resettlement and famine, led to the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians and fighters (Kiernan, 2017, p. 115). Despite being pushed to the brink of collapse by the early 1980s, a core group of fighters under the leadership of Xanana Gusmão regrouped and transformed FALINTIL from a party-affiliated group into a truly national resistance force, unifying different political factions under a single command (Stephan, 2006). Their persistence was more of guerrilla warfare than symbolic which proved itself that the Timorese people were alive and that Indonesian control was never absolute (Ramos-Horta, 1996).

Clandestine Front: The network of supporters in the towns and villages who provided food, medicine, and intelligence to FALINTIL due to the fear of facing harsh reactions from both the Indonesian army and the FALINTAL. This movement included students, government employees, and ordinary citizens. The youth were the element of the resistance against the Indonesian army. At a later stage, the young generation that had grown up under Indonesian subjugation began to realize that it was time to organize and contest the occupying power. The youth movement organized demonstrations and publicized human rights abuses to the outside world. A group of twenty-nine students scaled the American Embassy in Jakarta to the ground in protest over abuses in East Timor (LA Times, 1994). It provided sufficient clues to the outside world about what was happening in the territory (Stephan, 2006).

The role of women in this clandestine network was also fundamental (Franks, 1996). Women served as couriers hiding messages and supplies, and maintained the secret communication lines which provided resistance movement enormous support for fighting back

the guerilla war (Jardine, 1994). The women folk supported families and communities back home as men were in hiding for resistance. There was a greater desire to preserve their culture and identity, which was being stripped away with force (Weatherbee, 1981). Their contribution was not only greater but also extremely crucial for the resistance movement to survive as well as fight back.

The Santa Cruz Massacre on November 12, 1991, proved to be a critical moment. It got immediate attention the world over and perception in the Western world started to change. Solidarity movements grew their support for the merciless people of East Timor. It was a memorial procession in Dili, to bury a comrade who was killed by the Indonesian troops. By not allowing the procession, the Indonesian forces opened fire on hundreds of peaceful pro-independence demonstrators, killing an estimated 271 people (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Crucially, foreign journalists filmed the massacre, and its footage was smuggled out of the country and broadcast worldwide, providing undeniable visual proof of the brutality of the occupation. This event awakened the consciousness, which broke the silence of those who were complicit earlier with Indonesia. The incident galvanized solidarity movements across the globe, particularly in Australia, Portugal, and the United States, and put sustained pressure on Western governments to reconsider their support for the Suharto regime (Birmingham, 2015).

In November 1992, in a concealed move Xanana Gusmao, the Commander-in-Chief of FALINTIL, was arrested from Dili by the Indonesian forces. It was a great setback to the resistance movement. His trial commenced on February 1, 1993, and in May 1993, he was found guilty and awarded life imprisonment. Amnesty International in its August 1997 brief about Xanana Gusmão's arrest and trial had reported that *"Xanana Gusmão was captured by the Indonesian Armed Forces on November 20, 1992. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in May 1993 under Article 108 of the Indonesian Penal Code, rebellion, Law no. 12 of 1951, illegal possession of firearms, and Article 106, attempting to separate part of the territory of Indonesia. The sentence was commuted to 20*

years by Indonesia's President Suharto in August 1993." (Amnesty International, 1997).

According to the International Commission of Jurists, the court did not provide a fair trial to Gusmao. After his arrest in Dili, the capital of East Timor, he was shifted to Bali, Indonesia. Within a week after his arrest, he was interviewed Indonesian governor of East Timor, which was telecast on local TV on December 1, 1992, in which he appealed to his comrades to give up the armed struggle and surrender to the Indonesian Government. This was an act of coercion, intimidation, and complete volte-face (180-degree opposite) that a person who has been in armed struggle for seventeen years would not do such thing (ICJ, 1993). Amnesty International viewed the trial as in violation of international as well as domestic standards for fairness. Moreover, he was subjected to psychological ill-treatment in the form of sleep deprivation (Gusmao, 2000, p. 200). Xanana Gusmao remained behind bars since his sentencing in the Cipinang prison of Jakarta. The mounting pressure from the international community, and Western countries. The United Nations representative Jamsheed Marker played a crucial role in securing the release of Xanana Gusmao and providing him an opportunity to participate in talks for the future of the people of East Timor. Moreover, the role of Nelson Mandela was of paramount importance and the government of Indonesia agreed to shift Xanana Gusmao from prison to "House arrest" in central Jakarta on February 10, 1999. In the wake of the historic May 5, 1999 agreement concluded between Indonesia and Portugal under the auspices of the United Nations, he was released from jail on May 7, 1999 (Marker, 2003, pp. 19-61). Earlier, Marker even considered him a junior Mandela (Marker, 2003, p. 35).

Diplomatic Front: The third front of the struggle was diplomatic. José Ramos-Horta, an exiled journalist, and teacher worked tirelessly as the reprehensive of the Timorese people. Based in Australia, he and his colleagues lobbied at the United Nations, petitioned different governments, communicated to the media, and built a global network of support successfully. However, the Cold War realpolitik made

their job difficult owing to almost non-existent resources and facing different odds, trying every effort to keep the "Question of East Timor" alive on the international agenda (Ramos-Horta, 1996). The Santa Cruz Massacre of November 12, 1991, and the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize awarded jointly to Ramos-Horta and Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo rejuvenated the struggle for the right of self-determination to the people of East Timor. Bishop Belo, head of the Catholic Church in East Timor, used his position and campaigned to awaken the world in support of human rights abuses in East Timor and hold a referendum. Therefore, the Church provided sanctuary to the oppressed and it became a crucial organization in the wake of violence and brutalities.

Therefore, the indigenous resistance along with diplomatic campaigns the world over created a collaboration that Indonesia could not sustain. The end of the Cold War, the 1997 Asian financial crisis that weakened Suharto's regime, and mounting international pressure finally forced a change. President Suharto resigned and HJ Habibie became president who within weeks took a strong decision about East Timor. The former foreign minister of Indonesia, Ali Atalas described the situation in East Timor as "Pebble in the shoe." Therefore, he felt that the situation was inconvenient and could lead further to instability, and the conflict needed to be resolved (Alatas, 2006, p. 18-19). Moreover, President of Indonesia BJ Habibie viewed East Timor as a colonial manifestation by Indonesia and decided to allow the people of East Timor to decide their future. According to President BJ Habibie of Indonesia, the Australian Prime Minister convinced him to accede to a referendum for the people of East Timor (ABC News, 2008, November 16).

In 1999, B.J. Habibie unpredictably agreed to the United Nations-sponsored "popular consultation." In the referendum held on August 30, 1999, despite a campaign of terror and intimidation by Indonesian-backed militias, 78.5% of the Timorese people voted for independence. This act of defiance triggered a final, scorched-earth rampage by the militias, but it also triggered decisive international

intervention. Therefore, the United Nations paved the way for the restoration of independence on May 20, 2002 (Wheeler & Dunne, 2001). The people of East Timor achieved their independence after duress and coercion. It was a testament to their power against seemingly intractable structural forces (Glassman, 2003).

CONCLUSION

The journey of the people of East Timor from a forgotten colonial possession to a sovereign nation is the captivating struggle for national liberation in the late 20th century. It was a strategy or battle with multi-layered resistance that came to fruition for the right of self-determination against a backdrop of international indifference and brutal repression. The people of East Timor changed the political reality that was thrust upon them more than two decades ago. The success of the resistance could be ascribed to its multipronged strategy. The armed struggle of FALINTIL in the mountains was no match to the powerful Indonesian army yet it did not concede defeat and defied with power and constant struggle to disrupt the strong Indonesian army.

The resistance provided advantage to the other fronts like clandestine movements carried out by youth and women. It provided the fighters sigh of relief who also documented atrocities in the conflict zones. The urban centres organized civil disobedience that ultimately exposed the brutality of the Indonesian occupation to the world. Moreover, the tragic incident of the Santa Cruz massacre created empathy the world over for the victims. Whereas, the 1996 joint Nobel Peace Prize award to Ramos-Horta and Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo revitalized the struggle for the right of self-determination to the people of East Timor.

The exiled diaspora was at the forefront of the diplomatic campaigns for transforming the international narratives towards supporting the struggle internally as well as externally by skill-fully navigating the corridors of power. Therefore, shifts in the geopolitical landscape compelled Indonesia to allow the people of East Timor for their right

of self-determination.

The end of the occupation in 1999, however, came with a price. The violent reaction by Indonesian-backed militias that followed the referendum left the territory in ruins. The reconstruction of the territory was a monumental task to build a new country "out of the ashes." East Timor faced the immense challenges of establishing democratic institutions, rebuilding its infrastructure, and fostering economic development. Furthermore, it had to confront the profound legacy of trauma and injustice left by the occupation. The establishment of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR) was a critical step in this process, providing a forum for truth-telling and community reconciliation.

In conclusion, the case of East Timor is a powerful lesson in the dynamics of decolonisation, the failures of the Cold War foreign policy, and the enduring power of people's demand for sovereignty. The international community, particularly nations like Australia and the United States of America, bears a heavy responsibility for its decades of complicity in the suffering of the people of East Timor. According to Wheeler and Dunne (2001), the ultimate UN-led intervention in 1999 was supposed to be the "Responsibility to Protect" principle but the struggle carried out by the people of East Timor against a powerful occupying nation is deeply rooted in the independence movement that was protracted and very difficult to achieve. Their epic struggle would remain an important and inspiring episode in the history of self-determination.

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