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From Missionary Hymn to Samoan Cultural Practice: The Localization of Protestant Choral Singing in Samoa

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Matthew Lee is a Year-13 student at Kristin School, Auckland, New Zealand. With his interest in history and music, and his active participation in the choral space of Auckland, Matthew wrote this paper taking inspiration from the powerful, resonant sounds that Samoan choirs were often able to produce.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Protestant hymn singing, introduced to Samoa through nineteenth-century missionary contact, has been transformed into a distinctively Samoan cultural and communal practice. While the musical materials of Samoan hymnody – strophic form, functional harmony, multipart singing – can be traced to Protestant missions, its historical origin does not fully explain what hymn singing means to Samoan communities today. Drawing on Christopher Small's ethnomusicological concept of musicking, Thomas Turino's distinction between participatory and presentational performance, and postcolonial critiques of colonial knowledge production, the paper argues that Samoan communities localized inherited musical materials through translation, oral and embodied transmission, and integration into *fa'a Samoa*, the Samoan way of life which emphasizes community and mutual responsibility. Three hymns, “Ua Tafa Ata,” “Fa’auta ile Faaola Lea,” and “Tausiga Fai Pea a le Atua,” serve as case studies, combining published notation with an original fieldwork transcription to illustrate how strophic form, harmonic cadence and congregational performance practice support participation, memory and religious expression. The analysis treats musical structure not as an end in itself, but as evidence in a wider argument about community, identity, and cultural ownership.

Keywords

Samoa hymnody, Localization, Musicking, Fa'a Samoa, Participatory performance, Post-colonial analysis, Ethnomusicology, European Pacific colonization, Protestant missions, Choral music, Pacific music

Christian hymn singing occupies a prominent position in Samoan religious and cultural life. Churches are important sites of collective vocal performance, while hymns accompany worship, family observance and major communal events. Many of the musical structures used in these performances can be traced to Protestant missionary traditions introduced during the nineteenth century. Strophic melodies, functional tonal harmony, regular metres and multipart choral textures demonstrate the historical influence of European Christian music on Samoan hymnody, the latter originally placing significant emphasis on rhythm over harmony but emphasising the sense of communal unity produced by music (Stillman, 1993).

Recognition of these musical origins, however, does not fully explain what hymn singing means within Samoa. Describing Samoan sacred music merely as an imported Western tradition risks presenting Samoan communities as passive recipients of missionary culture. It also assumes that the historical origin of a musical form permanently determines its cultural identity. Ethnomusicology instead examines music not only as an organized system of sound (Nettl, 2015; Post, 2006), but as behavior, cultural knowledge and social practice. Over nearly two centuries, Samoan singers have translated, performed, transmitted and interpreted Christian hymns within local structures of family, village, language and religious community.

This paper asks the question: How has Protestant hymn singing been localized as a form of Samoan cultural and communal expression? It argues that Protestant missions supplied important musical and theological materials, but Samoan communities transformed those materials through collective participation, indigenous language, oral and embodied transmission, and their incorporation into *fa'a Samoa* – the Samoan way of life. The music remains marked by missionary history, yet its contemporary significance is evident through its presence in Samoan social practice.

Three hymns provide case studies for this paper: “Ua Tafa Ata,” “Fa’auta ile Faaola Lea,” and “Tausiga Fai Pea a le Atua.” The musical characteristics of these hymns – their harmony, form and melody – provide evidence of Christian musical influence, but are examined primarily as structures that support participation, memory and religious expression. However, the purpose of the paper is not to produce an exhaustive harmonic analysis. Instead, the selected musical evidence will be treated as case studies supporting an ethnomusicological argument about community, identity and cultural ownership.

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Figure 1*Samoan Methodist Church choir in Apia, Samoa*

Note. The Upolu South Synod of the Methodist Church, led by Rev. Atinae Peni, performing at the Choral Exhibition in the 2019 Teuila Festival. Reprinted from “Teuila Fest a Trip Through Memory Lane,” by T. Mata’afa-Tufele, 2021, Samoa Observer (<https://www.samoaoobserver.ws/category/samoa/90415>). Copyright 2021 by Samoa Observer.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Christianity and musical encounter in Samoa

Before sustained European missionary contact, Samoan musical practices were integral to social relationships, ceremony, language, dance and collective memory. Richard Moyle’s account of traditional Samoan music demonstrates that repertoire cannot be understood adequately when isolated from the occasions, texts and social structures through which it is performed (Moyle, 1988). Similarly, Jacob Wainwright Love emphasizes the importance of oral expressive practices and variation within Samoan performance traditions (Love, 1991). These studies discourage the idea of music as an independent object detached from cultural life.

The establishment of the London Missionary Society in Samoa during the nineteenth century

contributed to the rapid spread of Protestant Christianity. The hymns taught were effective tools of religious instruction combining lyrics, melody, repetition and collective participation. Christian teachings could be memorized and transmitted through singing, even among worshippers who did not read Western notation.

Missionaries introduced or institutionalised musical practices associated with European Protestant worship, including strophic forms, functional harmony, multipart singing, regular phrasing and printed hymnals (Stillman, 1993). Such practices were not culturally neutral: the adoption of staff notation, functional harmony and formal hymn structure carried assumptions about correct musical order and spiritual seriousness that were defined by missionary authorities rather than by existing Samoan musical conventions that placed rhythm above harmony. The promotion of hymn singing in some cases coincided with restrictions placed on pre-Christian performance genres associated with non-Christian ceremony, particularly because music, dance and ceremony were closely interconnected within pre-Christian religious and social life. Missionary music was part of a broader encounter involving religious authority, education and European evaluations of indigenous belief and behaviour. European missionaries commonly evaluated Samoan practices through Christian distinctions between acceptable worship and customs they associated with non-Christian belief or moral disorder. As a result, indigenous cultural practices were frequently interpreted through externally imposed religious categories rather than according to Samoan systems of knowledge and meaning (Smith, 2021).

A postcolonial interpretation must therefore acknowledge the unequal conditions under which hymnody entered Samoa. Christian missions possessed institutional power and contributed to the reorganisation or marginalization of some earlier practices. These included chants, dances and ceremonial performances connected with indigenous spirituality, chiefly authority and communal observance. Because Samoan music was integrated with movement, oral expression and social occasion, changes to ceremonial life could also weaken the contexts through which associated songs were transmitted (Love, 1991; Moyle, 1988).

The indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) warns that colonial systems of knowledge have frequently represented indigenous peoples through categories imposed from outside their communities. A similar problem can occur in music scholarship when Pacific performers are described only according to how accurately they reproduce European forms.

Nevertheless, colonial power alone cannot explain what subsequent generations of Samoan singers made of hymnody. Once hymns entered Samoan communities, their meanings were affected by local language, social relationships and performance practices. Translation into Samoan altered the relationship between text, pronunciation and melody, while repeated performance connected hymns with family worship, village churches, funerals and other important communal occasions (Stillman, 1993). Vocal style, collective phrasing and the distribution of musical leadership also allowed congregations to perform inherited repertoire according to locally meaningful expectations. Samoan musicians were not simply the endpoint of musical transmission; they became

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interpreters and custodians of the repertoire. The historical process is therefore best understood as involving both cultural disruption and creative adaptation. Protestant music changed Samoan musical life, but Samoan communities also changed Protestant music by determining where it would be performed, how it would sound and which social relationships it would express. For example, a hymn originally intended to communicate Christian doctrine could become associated with service to a particular congregation, remembrance of deceased relatives or the public representation of a village at a choral gathering. Its meaning was therefore produced not only by its theological text but by the people, relationships and occasions surrounding its performance, illustrating how music can participate in the construction of social identity and place (Small, 1998; Stokes, 1994).

From conversion to localization

The concept of localization moves beyond a simple opposition between foreign and indigenous music. It describes the process through which an introduced practice becomes embedded in local social life and acquires meanings that cannot be explained entirely by its place of origin (Stokes, 1994). Related concepts such as indigenisation and cultural hybridity likewise recognize that intercultural encounters may produce traditions that belong exclusively to neither one of their historical sources (Rice, 2014).

Stillman's comparative study of Protestant hymnody in Polynesia is important because it treats hymn singing as a Pacific musical practice worthy of analysis in its own right, rather than as an imperfect reproduction of the European church repertoire (Stillman, 1993). Her approach directs attention toward linguistic choices, local taxonomies and differences among Polynesian hymn traditions. For example, a translated European hymn tune may retain its tonal melody while acquiring different patterns of textual accent, vocal organisation and congregational participation in different Polynesian societies such as Samoa. Such differences demonstrate that "Polynesian hymnody" is not a single homogeneous style but a group of locally developed traditions shaped by particular languages, denominations and social settings (Stillman, 1993). In Samoa, one of the central processes of localization was translation. Samoan-language hymns did more than communicate European theological texts more efficiently. Translation changed pronunciation, patterns of emphasis, poetic association and the relationship between words and melody (Stillman, 1993). A hymn performed repeatedly in Samoan entered a linguistic world distinct from that of its original composition.

Repeated use further localized the repertoire. As noted from my personal fieldwork observing Samoan services, hymns became associated with particular churches, choirs, villages, ministers and relatives. They accompanied experiences of worship, grief, celebration and obligation. A melody might have originated outside Samoa, yet its most immediate meaning for a singer could derive from childhood services, family funerals or the memory of a community. This demonstrates the difference between historical origin and cultural ownership.

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Ownership does not necessarily mean legal authorship or the erasure of foreign origins. It develops through the people who sing, teach, remember and continually reinterpret a musical practice.

Hymn singing and *fa'a Samoa*

The Samoan localization of Christianity cannot be separated from *fa'a Samoa*, a broad term encompassing Samoan systems of family, service, respect, obligation, relationships and collective identity. Churches became integrated into these social structures rather than existing only as external missionary institutions.

A Samoan congregation is not merely a collection of autonomous individuals sharing a private religious belief. Participation may intersect with extended family, village organisation, age, leadership and service (Shore, 1982). Singing consequently occurs within a network of social relationships and responsibilities. The New Zealand musicologist Christopher Small's concept of musicking helps explain this cultural dimension. Small defines music not simply as a work but as an activity through which relationships are established and affirmed (1998). From this perspective, the identity of a hymn is not located solely in its melody, harmony or composer. Instead, it is also found in the relationships formed among those who sing and hear it. When a Samoan congregation sings, it may affirm relationships among its participants: ministers and congregants, elders and young people, families and the wider community. The collective voice produces an audible representation of belonging through its unity of sound. Even where the music employs tonal harmony introduced through missionary contact, the performance may enact specifically Samoan ideas of participation, service and communal responsibility. Participation expresses the expectation that individuals contribute their voices to a collective undertaking rather than seek recognition solely as autonomous performers. Regular attendance, responsiveness to musical and religious leadership, and support for less experienced singers may also enact the values of service and mutual obligation associated with *fa'a Samoa* (Shore, 1982; Small, 1998).

The American ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino's distinction between participatory and presentational performance provides another useful framework. In presentational music, performers prepare music for an audience, whereas participatory music minimises the separation between performer and listener and values active involvement (Turino, 2008). Samoan church practices can contain both dimensions. A choir may prepare a polished presentation, while congregational singing enables the wider community to become responsible for producing the musical event. The social value of congregational hymnody therefore cannot be measured by technical precision alone. Participation itself may be central to the meaning of the performance. Two communities could sing the same notated hymn yet produce culturally different events because of the relationships created through their singing. In one setting, a hymn may be presented by a rehearsed choir as a public representation of its church, whereas in another it may be sung by an entire congregation during a

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funeral or family service. Although the musical material may be similar, the first performance foregrounds collective representation and preparation, while the second may emphasise shared mourning, kinship and participation (Small, 1998; Turino, 2008).

Language, memory and cultural continuity

Samoan-language hymn singing can function as a form of linguistic and cultural maintenance. This is especially significant in diasporic communities where English may dominate education and public life. Church services provide regular occasions on which younger participants hear, pronounce and memorise Samoan words. Hymns consequently transmit more than doctrinal information. Through metre and melodic repetition, they help preserve vocabulary, speech rhythms and culturally meaningful religious expression. Music can facilitate this transmission because repeated phrases are often remembered more readily when joined to familiar melodies.

The text of “Fa’auta ile Faaola Lea,” for example, directs attention toward Christ as a source of life offered to those who are spiritually withered so that they may live and flourish. The text expresses Christian soteriology, but its cultural meaning is produced when that message is voiced collectively in Samoan. It becomes not only a proposition about salvation but a communal invitation articulated through an indigenous language. Hymns can also preserve intergenerational memory. Repertoire performed at funerals and memorials connects present singers with deceased relatives and earlier congregations. Familiar songs allow participants separated by age or geography to recognize a shared musical and religious vocabulary. In diasporic contexts, such repertoire may maintain an imaginative and emotional relationship with Samoa. The same hymn can be sung in Samoa, Auckland, Sydney or California while accumulating different local associations. Cultural continuity therefore does not require an identical reproduction of village life. It can be maintained through practices repeatedly adapted to new settings.

Choirs, service and collective representation

The church choir may function simultaneously as a musical ensemble, religious organisation and representation of the congregation. Participation requires rehearsal, attendance, cooperation and responsiveness to collective leadership. Choir membership can therefore enact values of service and responsibility rather than functioning only as an artistic activity.

This discipline should not automatically be interpreted as a survival of European missionary order. Samoan communities can appropriate organized choral practice for locally meaningful purposes. A coordinated choir may represent the dignity, unity and religious commitment of its church, and also provide spaces for intergenerational transmission. Experienced singers teach repertoire, pronunciation and behavioral expectations

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to younger members. Learning to sing involves more than reproducing pitch. It includes learning how to listen, how to respond to leadership and how to situate an individual voice within a collective sound. The emphasis upon collective contribution does not eliminate individual agency. Leaders and confident singers may shape phrasing or vocal character, but distinction generally operates within an ensemble committed to coordination. Musical identity emerges from the relationship between individual contribution and collective representation. This contrasts with models that privilege the autonomous composer, definitive score and specialist performer. Samoan church singing may employ Western notation and harmony while organising its social value around participation, service and communal representation. That distinction is central to the process of localization.

Christianity, cultural power and authenticity

Localization should not be romanticised as proof that the history of missionary power no longer matters. Christian institutions contributed to major cultural changes and to the marginalization of some practices associated with earlier religious life. Church participation can also involve complex social and financial obligations rather than uncomplicated communal harmony. At the same time, treating Christianity as permanently foreign creates a different problem. It suggests that authentic Samoan culture can exist only in an untouched pre-Christian past. This assumes a static model of indigenous identity and denies contemporary

Samoans authority over their own cultural development.

Smith's critique of colonial methodology is relevant here because authenticity has frequently been defined by outside observers rather than indigenous communities themselves (Smith, 2021). A practice does not necessarily cease to be Samoan because some of its materials originated elsewhere. The more productive questions concern agency and use: Who controls the practice? What meanings do participants assign to it? Through which relationships is it taught? Samoan hymnody developed cultural ownership through language, local leadership, repeated performance and collective memory. These processes do not erase missionary origins, but neither do missionary origins invalidate its contemporary identity. The tradition is therefore historically hybrid and culturally Samoan. Its hybridity should not be understood as an exact mixture of two stable musical systems. It is an ongoing negotiation in which inherited Christian forms are continually made meaningful through Samoan social life.

CASE STUDIES**“Fa’auta ile Faaola Lea”**

The hymn “Fa’auta ile Faaola Lea” (*Behold the Saviour Here*) is particularly useful because its available

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notation is my original transcription rather than an official denominational edition. This makes it evidence not only of musical structure but of the process through which orally encountered repertoire can be documented and preserved.

Figure 2

Opening of “Fa’auta ile Faaola Lea”



Note. Transcribed by the author from a 2025 Samoan Methodist Church service in Auckland, New Zealand. Created by author, 2025.

Prior to analysis, it should be noted that musical transcription is not a neutral transfer of sound onto a page. Staff notation makes pitch, metre and approximate rhythm available for inspection, but it cannot fully represent collective vocal timbre, social setting, pronunciation or emotional intensity. Nettel (2015) cautions that transcription is an analytical representation constructed by the researcher rather than by the music itself. Considering the idea of reflexivity, it should be noted that this fieldwork was conducted alongside a Samoan friend, whose perspective was taken into account in the transcription and analytical process. This helps establish a “diversity of roles, identities, and self-reflexive experiences in ethnomusicological fieldwork” (Barz & Cooley, 2008, p. 16), strengthening the reflexivity of the analysis.

The score places the hymn in triple metre, marks it Andante and presents the voices in a largely chordal relationship. These characteristics permit a concise comparison with European Protestant hymn traditions. However, their primary importance here is methodological: the notated form makes one dimension of the European tradition visible while leaving the Samoan tradition dependent upon listening and cultural interpretation.

Because this transcription was made directly from a living congregational performance rather than copied from a published hymnal, it also captures a moment of transmission rather than a fixed, authorized text. Minor departures from a “standard” European chorale style, such as slight rhythmic elongation at phrase

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endings or the way the congregation's collective breath shapes the phrasing around the fermata in bar three, are not notational errors. They are evidence of a congregation performing an inherited form on its own terms. In this sense, the transcription itself becomes a small case study in localization: the same four-part chordal texture that would be unremarkable in a European hymnal here documents a specific, dated, located act of Samoan communal singing, tied to a named congregation, a named year and a named diasporic setting. The hymn's title and text, addressing Christ as the one who restores the spiritually withered to life, are given their fullest social meaning not on the page but in the moment the congregation breathes together into that closing phrase. Recalling Turino's (2008) argument regarding participatory and presentational performance, this transcription documents an event that sits closer to the participatory end of that continuum: a moment of collective breath and closure shaped by the congregation itself rather than staged for an audience's benefit, and it is this participatory quality, not the notated chord progression, that gives the hymn its Samoan social life.

"Ua Tafa Ata"

The hymn "Ua Tafa Ata" (The Morning Breaks) is another popular Samoan hymn rooted in European choral influences. Like "Fa'auta ile Faaola Lea," its notation here is an original transcription by the author, though drawn from a different kind of source: a commercially recorded performance by Vili Ieru & Sound of Praise (1996), accessed through Auckland Libraries rather than a live congregational service. This distinction is itself worth noting, as a studio or concert recording typically represents a more rehearsed, presentational rendering (Turino, 2008) than the participatory, in-the-moment congregational singing captured in Figure 2, and the two together illustrate a range of performance contexts in which the same hymn repertoire circulates.

Figure 3

Opening of "Ua Tafa Ata"



Note. Transcribed by the author from "Ua Tafa Ata," performed by Vili Ieru & Sound of Praise, Vol. 4 (1996). Created by author, 2026.

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The ABAB structure of “Ua Tafa Ata” similarly creates points of recognition and return. Repetition gives singers formal orientation and allows collective expectations to develop. Form is therefore not only a compositional device; it helps organise social participation. Once a congregation has internalised the ABAB pattern, singers do not need to follow the printed page verse by verse to know where the music is heading. They can anticipate the return of the A section, preparing breath and volume in advance of a musical arrival they already expect. This kind of anticipatory participation is a specific instance of what Turino (2008) describes as participatory performance: the structure lowers the threshold for confident group entry, because collective expectation, rather than individual reading ability, coordinates the ensemble. The predictability of the ABAB form is therefore not a limitation on musical interest but a resource that a congregation of mixed literacy and experience can rely on to sing together with confidence.

The five printed verses set beneath a single melodic and harmonic frame (as shown in Figure 3) illustrate a further dimension of participatory structure: a congregation of mixed musical literacy can sustain a five-verse hymn because the tune rather than the text carries the primary burden of memory. A singer uncertain of every word can nonetheless contribute to the collective sound by following the familiar melodic contour, entering confidently at points of harmonic return. This matters for the paper’s broader argument about ownership: strophic form, inherited from European hymnody, becomes a Samoan resource for inclusive participation rather than a marker of foreign compositional authority. The hymn’s five verses move from morning imagery toward invocation and gathering, and the recurring ABAB return can be heard as enacting, musically, the very repetition and gathering that the text describes.

“Tausiga Fai Pea a le Atua”

The hymn “Tausiga Fai Pea a le Atua” (God’s Daily Care) serves as another case study for this paper.

Figure 4

Opening of “Tausiga Fai Pea a le Atua”



Note. Transcribed by the author from “Tausiga Fai Pea a le Atua,” performed by Vili Ieru & Sound of Praise (ca.

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1996). Created by author, 2026.

The hymn is notated as *Largo*, considerably slower than the *Andante* of “Fa’auta ile Faaola Lea.” Its harmonic language, moving from the tonic through a clearly functional progression toward cadential closure, is more consistently diatonic than the other two case studies, giving the hymn a settled, hymn-like stability that suits its text of ongoing divine care. The repeated opening phrase, “Tausi polo-a-iga,” sung twice in near-identical melodic shape before the harmony moves forward, functions as a small internal strophe: a miniature instance of the same repetition-as-participation principle discussed in relation to “Ua Tafa Ata,” compressed within a single phrase rather than spread across verses. The ii–V–I cadence in “Tausiga Fai Pea a le Atua” demonstrates functional tonal syntax, but an extended explanation of chord function would move the paper toward conventional musicology. While the existence of the cadence reflects the hymn’s roots in Western functional harmony, it also serves a function in the Samoan social context. Its predictable approach to resolution allows singers with different levels of musical training to anticipate the cadence and arrive together on the final harmony. In this way, a convention inherited from Western tonality supports the congregational production of a unified collective voice. Harmonic arrival coordinates breath, completes a textual phrase and allows a group to experience musical closure collectively.

This collective experience of closure is not merely aesthetic. In a Samoan congregational setting, the cadence functions socially as a shared marker of completion — the moment at which the whole assembly, regardless of individual vocal skill, arrives together. The predictability of functional harmony, often treated in Western musicology as a marker of compositional convention, here does communal work: it allows an entire congregation, including those without formal musical training, to anticipate and participate in the moment of arrival. Harmonic function, in other words, becomes a tool of inclusion rather than merely a structural feature of the score.

CONCLUSION

Protestant missions profoundly affected Samoan choral music. They introduced hymn repertoires, tonal harmony, strophic form, multipart singing and institutions of Christian worship. The case studies retain audible evidence of this history: “Ua Tafa Ata” uses recurring formal material; “Tausiga Fai Pea a le Atua” employs strophic construction and functional cadence; and “Fa’auta ile Faaola Lea” can be represented through Western staff notation. The presence of these structures does not make the performances culturally Western in any simple sense. Samoan communities have incorporated hymn singing into indigenous language, family life, church organisation and collective memory. Hymns communicate Christian theology while also enacting participation, service, respect and belonging. “Fa’auta ile Faaola Lea” demonstrates this layered process particularly clearly. Its Christian text presents Christ as a source of renewed life, while its identity as a traditional

Samoa hymn arises through language and communal transmission. The act of transcribing the hymn further reveals the interaction of oral practice with written preservation.

The localization of hymnody does not depend upon every European musical feature being replaced. It arises because Samoan communities have changed what the music does. Hymns introduced partly as instruments of conversion now support Samoan-language transmission, connect generations, represent congregations and preserve memory across Samoa and its diaspora. This does not turn colonial encounters into an uncomplicated story of cultural exchange. Missionary power contributed to displacement and institutional change. Nevertheless, Samoan agency is equally necessary to the account. Communities did not merely receive Protestant music. They selected, translated, performed, remembered and perpetuated it. Samoan hymnody should consequently be understood as a culturally localized tradition formed through missionary encounter and indigenous reinterpretation. Its harmonies retain traces of European Protestant practice, but its social life belongs to the communities that continue to sing it. Through generations of participation, hymnody has become a Samoan means of expressing Christian faith, collective identity and cultural continuity.

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