

# Questions in Ama

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## 0. Introduction

### 0.1 *Goal of presentation*

- + questions are an important part of human verbal interaction
- they serve to fulfill the desire to balance the apparent mismatch between speaker and addressee wrt. the information both have
- help to establish and develop the common ground underlying the conversation
- + questions and focus constructions have similar functions: they ask for resp. provide information missing in the common ground of one interlocutor - this is reflected in similar structures cross-linguistically
- + part of our projects work is the investigation of polar questions following the observation that these can have different formal characteristics in some languages, dependent on the scope of focus: on some single element of the clause or on the truth value operator
- study of the structural and functional properties of questions in general in Ama
  
- + the present paper is a first study of questions in Ama; it aims primarily at the description of the different question types in the language
- it also intends to show how questions and focus constructions are structurally related
  
- + in general, three types of questions can be differentiated: constituent questions, polar questions and alternative questions (cf. Krifka 2011: 1744)
- constituent questions and alternative questions ask for special information to fill an open proposition, alternative questions already offer two alternatives for which the proposition holds
- yes/no-questions (polar) principally request the truth value of a proposition – they constitute in most languages two thirds of the questions in a conversation (Mitterer & Stivers 2007: 44)

### 0.2 *General information on Ama*

- + genetic affiliation: Ama: Nilo-Saharan, Eastern Sudanic, Nyimang (together with Affiti)
- + geographic distribution: spoken in Sudan, Kordofan province, in the Mandal hills west of Dilling (at eight mountains: Nitil, Krumiti, Kelara, Salara, Kushi, Foss, Fada (Founy), Kodungung, Kushi) – lots of migrants in Khartoum and Cairo, where the data come from

- no dialectal differentiation
- language seems to be viable, despite the arabophone politic of the government
- number of speakers: given with 70.000 in 1982, many speakers settle outside the core area
- + typological properties:
  - o agglutinating
  - o tone language (with 3 level tones)
  - o 7-vowel system, with *ʊ* and *ɪ* as variants of *u* and *i* with unclear status, centralized *ə* in some environments (Stevenson 1957)
  - o verb-final word order
  - o head-modifier order in the noun phrase
  - o dependent marking
  - o no number marking on the noun, but on the verb, no grammatical gender
  - o case marking by means of suffixes which follow the last modifier in a noun phrase
  - o aspectual differentiation of verbs

+ characteristics of clause structure of main declaratives (1):

- word order: SOV (nearly always given in elicitation)
- in second position (whatever comes before): assertive particle *a* or *ba* (the second one with more emphatic value)
- there might be some other verbal particles, indicating TAM or information-structure

(1) out-of-the blue:

Ábdù	á	ānúŋ	àrbíyā	nyíg
PN	ASS	3S.POSS	car	fix.PFV
[SBJ]	[OBJ		]	[V
[TOP]	[FOC		]	

Audu repaired his car.

+ but: the seemingly strict finality condition for the verb can be canceled by discourse considerations, mainly insofar that all known information might follow the verb → Ama as discourse-configurational language

(2)

[kā	t̥ēg ]	[kāmál	ɖù ]	[kér-ī ]	[gír]-ḏ]?
PC.FOC	give.PFV	PN	DS	wife-DAT	money-ACC
VP	SBJ		I.OBJ	OBJ	

Did Kamal GIVE the money to his wife?

# 1. Content questions

## 1.1 The inventory of interrogative words

	Stevenson 1938	my data	literal translation
who? (all in nominative)	ɲanɛ (sg.) ɲani (pl.)	ɲánɛ̄	who + FOC
what? (all in nominative)	ki ʒagi ɛɲinɛ ɲa, ɲina ki	ki ʒagi àɲí(né) --	thing which what + FOC
which?	wɔnda, ʒagi	wɔnda, ʒagi	? + ?TOP
where?	wun, wunʒa (emph.)	wun, win	
how?	ɲaɗa	ɲaɗa	who + ?TOP
how many?	maɲ(ɛ)	maɲ kam (Arab.)	
when?	ouɲwoɗu	àɲóɗú	what + ?
what time?	sa maɲɛ nyɲaɲ maɲɛ nyɲaɲ wundɛl	--	time + how many sun + how many
why?	ouɲu giɗai	áɲú giɗái	what.GEN + for

Table 1: Inventory of interrogative words in Ama

- comparison of Stevenson's and my data reveals that some of the forms Stevenson recorded are not attested in my data; furthermore, for 'how many', young people now used the Arabic word
- the interrogative pronouns *ɲanɛ*, *ki ʒagi* and *ɲa*, as well as the interrogative modifier *wɔnda* and *maɲ* are inflected for case
- the interrogative adverbs *wun*, *ɲaɗa*, *àɲóɗú* and *áɲú giɗái* are invariable, whereby the latter two already seem to present derived forms from *àɲí* 'what'
- + of interest are also the forms of *ɲánɛ̄* and *àɲínɛ̄* which are built out of a general interrogative pronoun on which the focus marker is suffixed
- evidence for the strong relation of wh-questions and focus constructions which both make use of the same construction
- at least for *ɲánɛ̄*, this form seems to be lexicalized (in nominative case) – accusative is derived from this form

## 1.2 Structural features of content questions

### 1.2.1 Subject questions

- interrogative pronouns are *ɲánē* for human, and *àɲínē* for non-human subjects, as well as the interrogative modifier *ɬagi* and *man* which follow the noun they modify
- interrogative phrase is always in sentence-initial position
- in most cases, there is a final question marker *a* – there is no clue for the moment to determine when it occurs
- no assertive particle allowed
- same structure as in answer to such a question – only difference is the lack of the declarative particle in the question and the lack of the final question marker in the answer
- whether there are differences in intonation is a matter of further research

(3) **ɲánē**                      kùbè-ḡ      bér      á?  
who.FOC                      glass-ACC    break.PFV    Q  
WHO has broken the glass?

(3a) **bùḡíṅé**    bá      nē      kùbè-ḡ      bér.  
little\_girl    ASS    FOC    glass-ACC    break.PFV  
THE LITTLE GIRL broke the glass.

(4) question marker in clause-final position  
**ɲánē**      án      tèlèì      à    á      sá      ɲón?  
who.FOC    1S.ACC    see.PFV    Q    1S      watch    take.PFV  
WHO saw me when I took the watch?

(5) no final question marker?  
**ɲánē**      wâr      á    ḡsò      ɬāl?  
who.FOC    want      ?    food-ACC    eat.PFV  
WHO wants to eat food?

(6) interrogative phrase with ‘which’  
**wá**      ɬāgí      nè      wáḡà      nyàlá      wání-àgāg?  
people    which    FOC    speech      one      speak.IPFV-DIR  
Which people speak the same language to each other?

### **àḡì nē in subject position – question for whole event (all-new question)**

(7) àḡìné      ḡé      à?  
what.FOC    do.PFV    Q  
What happened? {My car broke down.}

(8) é    wà      ḡū    ḡéē      "àḡìḡē      yóḡ    tí            yī    tūḡū?"  
and people   DEF   say.PFV    what.FOC    2S    catch.PFV    2S    cry.IPFV  
And the people said, "What happened to you that you are crying?"

### **1.2.2 Questions for non-subject constituents**

- + included here: direct and indirect objects, obliques, adverbial phrases
- + two different structural types:
  - in situ questions: interrogative phrase takes normal position in the clause, mostly with final question marker, interrogative word is inflected for case
  - ex situ questions: interrogative phrase occurs sentence-initially, mostly no final question marker, interrogative word not inflected for case (= cleft construction)  
→ reflects focus constructions for non-subjects
  - in situ questions occur much more often in my data

### **ḡā - who (human objects) – ex situ question**

- difference to subject question: no final marker, after clefted phrase, the background clause is introduced by the conjunction

	<b>object question</b>		<b>cf. subject question</b>
(9)	ḡānê	é    kér    tíḡé?	ḡánê    kàmál-úḡ    tíḡé    à?
	who.FOC	CNJ    woman    call.PFV	who.FOC    PN-ACC    call.PFV    Q
	WHOM did the woman call?		WHO called Kamal?
(9a)	kàmál-úḡ    bá    nē    é    ín    tíḡē.		
	Kamal-ACC    ASS    FOC    CNJ    3S    call.PFV		
	She called KAMAL.		

- no instance of in situ question with human object in my data

**áŋĩ(-ḍò) – direct object**

**ex situ question**

- (10) àŋíné            é      kér      ɬál ?  
what.FOC        CNJ woman eat.PFV  
WHAT did the woman eat?

**in situ question**

- kér            áŋĩ-ḍò      ɬál      à ?  
woman        what-ACC eat.PFV Q

àlfúl bá nê      é      kér      ɬâl.

bean ASS FOC CNJ woman eat.PFV

It was the BEANS that she ate.

kér      á      àlfúl-ó      ɬâl.

woman ASS bean-ACC eat.PFV

- (11) yĩ      Mariam-u      áŋĩ-ḍò      ɬég      à?  
2S      PN-ACC      what-DEF      give.PFV      Q  
WHAT did you give to Mariam?

- (11a) á      núnj              kítáab-ū      Máriaam-únj      ɬég.  
1S      2S.POSS      book-ACC      PN-ACC      give.PFV  
I gave YOUR BOOK to Mariam.

**ŋánō - indirect human object**

(12) in situ

- yĩ      wój              kítáab-ū      ŋánō      ɬég      à?  
2S      1S.POSS      book-ACC      who.DAT      give.PFV      Q  
To WHOM did you give my book?

(12') ex situ

- ŋánē            á      yì      wój              kítáab-ū      ɬég?  
who.FOC      ?CNJ      2S      1S.POSS      book-ACC      give.PFV  
To WHOM did you give my book?

- (12a) á              Máriaam-únj      ɬég.  
1S\_ASS      PN-ACC      give.PFV  
I gave (it) to MARIAMA.

- (13) I      ŋanō              kúḍò      ɬég?  
2S      who.DAT      goat.ACC      give.PFV  
To WHOM did you give the goat? (Stevenson 1938: 91)

### **àṅí in non-verbal questions**

(14) nò      àṅí      nḗ              à?  
DEM    what    be.IPFV        Q  
What's that?

(14a) kìtáabú        ā        nḗ.  
kìtáabú        bā        nḗ.  
book-ACC      ASS    be.IPFV  
It's a book.

### **áṅí-ḍò – VP questions**

(15) kḗr              áṅí-ḍò              ʃíé              à?  
woman          what-ACC        do.PFV        Q  
What did the woman do?

(15a) kḗr      á      fùl-ó              ʃâl.  
woman ASS bean-ACC    eat.PFV  
The woman ate the beans.

### **áṅí-ḍò – SoA question**

(16) {Audu loves his car. Yesterday I saw that he took care of it.}  
ínḍū              àṅí-ḍò              ʃíē              á              ānúṅ              àrbíy-èì?  
3s.DEF          what-DEM        do.PFV        Q              3S.POSS        car.ABL  
What exactly did he do with the car?

(16a) ínḍū              nyìg.  
3S.DEF              fix.PFV  
He fixed it.

### **ṭáḡí ‘which’**

(17) as object, ex situ  
waḍa    ṭáḡení              í      tāwēēn  
speech    which.?FOC    2S    say.PFV  
What do you say? (lit.: Which speech do you say?)

(18) object in situ

é nyúŋ kér nō bɛ́jí ʦáǵí nē?  
and 2S.POSS woman DEM house which be.IPFV  
Eh, your wife from which place is she?

(18a) ʦàná ā né ɖ-áũ.  
PN ASS be.IPFV ?-LOC  
She is from Tunde.

### **áŋú ǵìǵáì - why?**

(19) ex situ

áŋú ǵìǵáì né à wánò sigin-au né-ɖì?  
what.GEN for FOC ?CNJ people.DEM prison-LOC be.IPFV-P  
Why are those men in prison?

(20) in situ

é kòì ʦérgēny-ō áŋì ǵáì ɖéí á?  
and man donkey-ACC what for hit.PFV Q  
Why did the man hit the donkey?

### **‘what happened that ...’**

(21) má, áŋì-nê ʃié-ì yí kóǵŋ-ɔ ŋɔf-ti-ɖì.  
my\_mom, what.FOC do.PFV-?Q 2S face-ACC not\_being\_happy-?-P  
Mom, why are you angry? (lit. Mom, what happened that you are not happy? )

### **unclear cases – ‘why’**

(22) éwú, é wìdɛ́ŋ nó ùn ŋáŋì há máì?  
yes, and girl DEM ? who NEG know.IPFV  
of course, why you don’t know this girl?  
{you know her, is the guy not your relative, the father of the girl?}

(23) ŋáné ɲè wùlù-go fér bídǵál há féǵí?  
who.FOC son first-ORD.ACC ? tomato NEG find.PFV  
Why couldn’t the first child find the tomatoes?

**ḡāḡā** - how

(24) in situ

ínḡō ḡē é nyún gósō ḡù ḡāḡā á súḡō éyí ...  
3S.DEF say.PFV C NJ 2S.POSS bull DEF how ? give.birth.PFV ?

He (the fox) said “How could your bull give birth?”.

(25) in situ

bóbwēr, à ká ḡāḡā táí?

no, 1S FUT how go.PFV

No, how can I go? {The Arabs will catch me over there.}

(26) ex situ

ḡāḡā né yǐ há wàr é ká mádrás-àù táí?  
how FOC 2S NEG want.IPFV CNJ FUT school-LOC go.PFV

Why can't you leave for school? (lit. Why don't you want to go to school?)

**máḡ** – how many

(27) ā wór-ō máḡ wò áḡá ...

1S year-ACC how have.IPFV ?whatever

How many years I have ... {I entered secondary school.}

(28) ē àtáḡ é, ē wór-ò kám wō hán

and now CNJ, CNJ year-ACC how\_many(ARAB) have.IPFV it.is

and now, I have many years (here in Cairo), {and the white people (United Nations) opened an office for us (in Cairo).}

**wún** - where?

– seems to be used only in situ

(29) kér wún nè táí à?

woman where COP go.PFV Q

Where did the woman go?

(29a) òḡúbá-wó táí.

Europe-ACC go.PFV

She went to Europe.

- (30) ín ɖú wún nè?  
 calf DS where be.IPFV  
 {and said: my friend, the cow has given birth.} Where is the calf?

**àṅɖú** - when

- (31) in situ  
 é nyéṅ kwáí ɖū àṅɖú múí?  
 CNJ 2S.POSS.sibling man DS when leave.IPFV  
 When is your brother leaving?

- (31a) āṅí néṅ kwáí ā ìróù múí.  
 1S.POSS sibling man ASS tomorrow leave.IPFV  
 My brother is leaving tomorrow. (Cairo 2011)

- (32) what time? (Stevenson 1938: 94)

ex-situ

nyijaṅ wundɛl nɛ i ka mɔ  
 sun what FOC 2S PC.FOC leave.PFV

in-situ

I nyijaṅ maṅɛ mɔ a?  
 I a sa maṅɛ mɔ a?  
 I a sa maṅɛ ka mɔ?  
 2S ?FUT sun / time how\_many PC.FOC leave.PFV Q  
 what time will you leave?

### 1.3 Summary

	interrogative word	position	final question marker
Subject	ɲánē àɲíné	ex situ	+
Object	ɲánē àɲí(né)	ex situ	-
	áɲī-ɖò	in situ	+
where?	wun, win	in situ	+/-
how?	ɲaɖa	ex situ	-
		in situ	+/-
when?	àɲóɖó	in situ	+/-
why?	áɲú gìɖáì	ex situ	-
		in situ	+

Table 2: Structural properties of interrogative words in Ama

+ in general, nearly all interrogative words can occur ex situ and in situ – in dialogues, nevertheless, there is a strong tendency that they occur exclusively in situ (with the exception of subject questions)

- this finding mirrors focus constructions where subject focus has to be marked by a cleft construction, whereas non-subject focus may be expressed by a cleft, but most often it uses an in situ strategy

+ as for the final question marker, it seems to be obligatory in subject questions – by this, the speaker disambiguates between ex situ subject and non-subject questions

- in non-subject questions, the final question marker is optional, or rather, the conditions for its use are not yet clear

- it might be that it is only used when the speaker wants to make sure that the question is understood as that, otherwise, the language is very economic

- or, it is possible to think of the question marker as tonal element only – that is a matter for future research



(34b) expected answer

yéì, ká                    ɲ̀n-éì.  
yes, PC.FOC            take.PFV-PASS  
yes, it is stolen.

- polar questions asking for confirmation or non-confirmation of the truth of a proposition can normally simply be answered with “yes” or “no” (this kind of polar question is mostly found in conversation)

- when it is intended to ask whether a specific constituent fulfills the open proposition, the structure used is the same as in focused declaratives - in this case, it might be sufficient to answer with “yes”, but a negative answer necessarily requires a correction

### 2.2.1 Truth value of whole proposition

(35a) kákā kúḍ-̀̀ ká            táṛá?  
PN    goat-ACC PC.FOC buy.PFV  
DID Kaka buy a goat?

(35b) yéì, kákā bā kúḍ-̀̀ ká            táṛá.  
yes, PN    ASS goat-ACC PC.FOC buy.PFV  
Yes, Kaka REALLY bought a goat.

(35c) bwér, ká            há            táṛá.  
no, PC.FOC NEG buy.PFV  
No, she didn't.

+ question is marked by *ka* before the verb – clearly indicating scope on truth value operator, cf. (36)

(36) {Audu loves his car. Yesterday I saw that he washed and polished it.  
And he did not fix it?}  
positive polarity: affirmation  
ká        bá    nyíg.  
PC.FOC ASS fix.PFV  
He DID.

- answer could be simply “yes” or “no”

- in the positive answer, particle *ba* has to be there; *ka* makes it sure / without *ka*, the sentence would not be appropriate to that question

### 2.2.2 Focus on subject

(37a) Kákā né é kúḍ-ḍ táṛá?  
PN FOC CNJ goat-ACC buy.PFV  
Did KAKA buy a goat?

(37b) yéī, ín bá né (kúḍḍ) táṛá.  
yes, 3S ASS FOC (goat) buy.PFV  
yes, SHE bought.

(37c) bwér, kā bá há táṛá, é Àmíná né táṛá.  
no, PC.FOC ASS NEG buy.PFV, CNJ PN FOC buy.PFV  
no, she didn't, but Amina bought (it).

- + question is marked by
- subject cleft (cf. ex. (3))
- followed by background clause (may be introduced by conjunction é)
- in clefted part, no assertive particle allowed (as in second part of (37c))
- no final question marker
- negative answer must include a correction of the false statement

### 2.2.3 Focus on object

(38a) kákā kúḍ-ḍ táṛá?  
PN goat-ACC buy.PFV  
Did Kaka buy a GOAT?

(38b) yéī, kúḍ-ḍ bā táṛá  
yes, goat-ACC ASS buy.PFV  
yes, she bought a GOAT.

(38c) bwér, bár-ḍ bá táṛá.  
no, cow-ACC ASS buy.PFV  
no, she bought a COW.

- + question has structure of normal statement
- no special particle allowed, i.e. also no focus marker for predicate-centered focus
- following my informant, simple answer with 'no' would have been possible (contrary to expectation)

### 3. Alternative questions

+ structurally, they show features of content questions and polar questions:

- final question marker
- no interrogative word
- no word order change

(39) wáḍá wên áḍà míḍìṛḍò kání ā?  
 talk speak.IPFV or song.ACC sing.IPFV Q  
 (watching a video clip) Is he speaking or singing?

(39a) ín índù wáḍā nákō wén, wòn kwáì.  
 3S, 3S.DS talk only speak.IPFV 1S.POSS man  
 He is only talking, my friend.

(40) kákā né ē kùḍ-ḍ t́áṛā àḍá Àfíē ā?  
 PN FOC CNJ goat-ACC buy.PFV or PN Q  
 Did KAKA or Afia buy a goat?

(40a) kákā bā né t́áṛā.  
 PN ASS FOC buy.PFV  
 KAKA bought it.

(41) àṅíné ā, kár áḍà kàḵél né à?  
 what.FOC Q, female or male be.IPFV Q  
 What is it, a boy or a girl?

(41a) kàr á nē.  
 female ASS be.IPFV  
 It is a girl.

### 4. Summary

+ formal encoding: the three different question types also differ structurally in Ama

- content questions: interrogative word, word order change possible, (optional) final question marker

→ shows a mixed pattern, as only subject questions have to have the interrogative word obligatorily in sentence-initial position, for all others the in situ position is preferred (but ex situ probably possible)

- alternative questions: no word order change, no interrogative word, final question marker

- polar questions: no word order change, no interrogative word or question marker  
 → polar questions are the least marked questions in Ama, as it is in many languages of the world

+ role of intonation: needs more investigation – a short look at differences between statements and corresponding polar questions does not show a clear difference in intonation – maybe there is a final low tone marker for polar questions  
 - but this low tone cannot be taken as tonal leftover of a segmental question marker, as those found in wh-questions are not always low toned (sometimes clearly high!)  
 → this analysis will be done within the next weeks

+ relation to focus constructions: functionally and structurally, questions are closely related to focus constructions  
 - functionally: questions ask for missing information, answers provide this information (and should provide exactly and only this), following the scope of the question (maybe on a lexical element, but also on some sentential operator)  
 - structurally: in most cases, questions and their respective answers show the same basic structure, i.e. they are symmetrical  
 - exception 1: ex situ wh-questions do not necessarily trigger ex situ answers  
 - exception 2: answers in Ama are characterized by the dropping of all already known information, so that the answers are often elliptical

+ lack of the assertive particle as diagnostic element for questions  
 - assertive particles never occur in dependent clauses, but only in main declarative clauses (as for instance in answers to questions) – but: also not every main clause has such a particle, cf. beginning of a picture description in (42)

(42) wá      āsà      nē-ḍī      á,  
 people   three   be.IPFV-P   ?TOP,  
 é      tīr      tūāg      wél      bībī ...      àrárán      wó-ḍī.  
 CNJ   together   sit.IPFV   house   different.   RED.near   have.IPFV-P  
 There are three people, living together in different houses near each other.

é      nyàlā ḍù ḍá,      é      wél      àzáhári-ū      wùḍāṅ      né.  
 CNJ   one   DS   TOP   CNJ   house   blue-GEN   person   be.IPFV  
 and one is the blue house person.

(and one is the red house person.)  
 (and one is the green house person.)

é     ɖī     ééē,     ìŋ     é     ɬìláì     ɖá  
 CNJ   then   eh,   3S   ?   go.PFV.P   TOP  
 ɬùn-ɔū     tá     fíní-áù     bàdèìg     é     ɬíɖàr,  
 night-LOC   ?   sleep-LOC   start.PFV.P   CNJ   lay\_down.PFV.P  
 ... and when they went to sleep at night, ...

(the story continues without any assertive particle in clause-second position)

- + in general, the use of *ba* in texts is very restricted
- in three narratives (191 clauses), *ba* occurs exactly four times (once in direct speech (43), once at the beginning of the story, twice in focus constructions)
- in three free discussions (now analyzed 170 clauses), *ba* occurs more often (8 times), but often in fronted topic constructions, for confirmation and as answer to questions (44)

(43) {And Bigmouth caught the rabbit, and the rabbit said,}  
 yī   bā   ɬóm-ɔ     tùúl   tí     è     yī   āŋ   hā   tí  
 2S   ASS   wood-GEN ?   catch.PFV   CNJ   2S   1S   NEG   catch.PFV  
 You caught a piece of a wood, and you did not catch me."

(44) {Are you born Ama, my man?}  
 à     bá     àmá-ɖ-áū     kú     súŋèì  
 1S   ASS   Ama-DS-LOC   ASS   be\_born.PFV  
 I am born as Ama.

→ thus, the value of the lack of the assertive particle as diagnostic element is not really high, but maybe together with intonation it helps to interpret (polar) questions as questions and statements as statements

## Abbreviations

ABL	Ablative	INF	Infinitive
ACC	Accusative	IPFV	Imperfective
AD	Addressee	LOC	Locative
ADV	Adverb	NEG	Negative
ASS	Assertive	OBJ	(Direct) object
BEN	Benefactive	P	Plural
BG	Background clause	PASS	Passive
CAUS	Causative	PC.FOC	Predicate-centered focus
CNJ	Conjunction	PFV	Perfective
COND	Conditional	PN	Proper name
COP	Copula(tive)	POSS	Possessive
CQ	Constituent question	PST	Past
DAT	Dative	PURP	Purpose
DECL	Declarative	Q	Question
DEM	Demonstrative	RED	Reduplication
DS	Different subject	S	Singular
EMPH	Emphatic	SBJ	Subject
FOC	Focus (marker)	T.FOC	Term focus
FUT	Future	TOP	Topic
GEN	Genitive	V	Verb or vowel
HAB	Habitual	VN	Verbal noun
ID	Ideophone		

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