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Tourism Resources in Ethiopia: Huge Possession Versus under Utilization

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Abstract:

In the contemporary world of globalization, tourism industry which involves the movement of people and exchange of goods, services, ideas and experiences, has become the main sources of foreign earnings for different countries in the world. Ethiopia, with its exceptional natural beauty and cultural prosperity, has been identified to have considerable potential for tourism development. The three governments that successively came to power since the opening of tourism organization in Ethiopia in the early 1960s made efforts to use the cultural, historical and natural heritages as source of foreign earnings through tourism and to speed up national development. The governments took various measures ranging from opening of a government institution in charge of regulating and managing tourism to developing tourism resources around tourist sites. Regardless of this effort, the tourism industry faced various obstacles and challenges. This paper aimed at identifying the major challenges for the effective utilization of the immense tourism resource of the country and highlighting the prospect for tourism development and indicate possible solutions to problems. To that end, secondary sources and primary materials including archives and other relevant reference materials were consulted. Knowledgeable informants who were serving at different levels and various institutions related to tourism industry were also interviewed. Descriptive and historical research method was applied, and the data gathered was systematically organized, cross-checked and interpreted for its reliability before arriving at a final conclusion.

Keywords: *Tourism potential, tourism products, tourism development, attraction, heritage*

1. An Overview of Tourism in Ethiopia

1.1. Ethiopia's Potential for Tourism

According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1997:2), tourism is defined as the activity of people traveling to and staying in places outside their environment for not more than a year for leisure, business, conference, and other purposes. The emergence of tourism as an industry is a recent phenomena dating back to the end of the Second World War. But now a days tourism industry has become an important economic activity and source of national income for many countries in the world. In reference with this, some nations like Spain, Mexico and Kenya have developed successful tourism industry which has become the main source of their foreign currency earnings (Douglas Pearce, 1997:2)

Ethiopia is one of the few countries in Africa that have endowed with various and immense attractions. The country possesses what most economically developed and major tourist generating nations do not have. Located in the tropics, Ethiopia has a variety of climates ranging from semi deserts to the alpine climates, and it is a country sometimes referred to as "Thirteen Months of sun shine". Ethiopia is also a land of wide variety of flora and fauna species some of which are not found anywhere else in the world. Because of its mountain ranges and the relationship of these to the sources of great rivers, the names "Roof of Africa" and "Water Tower of Africa" have both been attributed to Ethiopia (K.A Cherian, 1974; Ayalew Sisay, 1998:38) Ethiopia is also fortunate in having a number of fascinating cultural, historical and archaeological heritages which are considered to be the most significant assets for tourism development. Those heritages that reflect the culture and history of the country include music, dance, literature, handicrafts, museums, paintings, churches, mosques and any other places of worship (Ayalew Sisay, 1995:32)

Regardless of the country's rich potential for tourism, tourism as a source of economy is not well developed and tourist attraction resources are not utilized properly. It is, therefore, viable to highlight the major efforts, challenges and prospects that obstruct tourism development.

1.2. Methods and Materials

This study is entirely dependent on both primary and secondary sources. In the category of primary sources included are archival materials and manuscripts. Moreover by adopting purposive sampling method knowledgeable informants who had been working in tourism and related service providing institutions were interviewed. As to the secondary sources, the works of other scholars on different aspects and sectors of the tourism industry were consulted. The data collected from those sources were systematically analyzed.

1.3. Development of Tourism in Ethiopia

1.3.1. Historical Background

Ethiopia has been visited by a number of travelers, missionaries, merchants and explorers since ancient times. Mentionable among them are Francisco Alvarez of the 16th century, James Bruce of the 18th century and R.E. Cheeseman and Paul Henze of the 20th century each of whom contributed his own account about Ethiopia. Although it is doubtful to say that all travels made by those early missionaries, merchants and explorers are considered as tourism, it is hard to deny that they might have similar motivations with that of modern tourists. In any case, the suggestions and recommendations offered by those early visitors and writers remarking Ethiopia as an area of exceptional natural beauty and cultural prosperity had much to do with promoting the country's potential and for the subsequent increase in number of visitors to Ethiopia (Mohammed Amin, 1995:89). Later on, with the increasing flow of tourists to Ethiopia encouraged the imperial government to include tourism industry in the second Five Year Plan (1963-1967) for economic development.

In reality, however, it was the establishment of the Ethiopian Tourist Organization as an autonomous public authority by orders No. 36/1964 that marked the beginning of tourism in Ethiopia. Some of the most important objectives of the Ethiopian Tourist Organization were to plan and implement programmes promoting tourism and to encourage the establishment and maintenance of tourist facilities. Thence forward, until the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974, the influx of international tourists to Ethiopia and the commensurate increase in revenue from tourism industry signaled and encouraged the trend of development in the sector. Nevertheless the absence of facilities had incapacitated the organization and made it unable to discharge its responsibilities (Ayalew Sisay, 1995:35; Economic Commission for Africa, 1968:115).

During the period after the revolution, the ideological alignment of the *Dergue* with the Eastern Block, the command economic policy adopted by the government and the security problems associated with the Ethio-Somali conflict and the continued civil war in the country had adversely affected the development of tourism in Ethiopia. In fact, having understood the role of tourism industry in the economic development of the country, the *Dergue* government had incorporated the tourism sector in its economic policy adopted in 1975. Four years later, when the national economic and cultural development programme was launched, the government restructured the Ethiopian Tourist Organization to Ethiopian Tourism Commission by Order No. 198/1979 (Ethiopian Tourism Commission, 1982:9).

The new commission was, therefore, entrusted with responsibilities to expand and promote tourism at home and abroad, to develop, classify and standardize accommodation and recreational facilities and to co-ordinate with other institutions for the conservation of natural and cultural heritages. Under the Ethiopian Tourism Commission, various operations were also reorganized to facilitate tasks related to the development of tourism. Among others the Ethiopian Tourist Trading Corporations, the National Tour Organization and the Catering and Tourism Training Institute are the most important institutions (*ibid*).

However, because of its command economic policy, socialist government of Ethiopia (ruled 1974-1991) nationalized the private enterprises, which had been operating during the imperial regime, made private sector investment and participation in tourism industry impossible. Moreover, its restricted foreign relation with western powers, origin of most of the tourists visiting Ethiopia that had been emanated from its hatred to their ideologies became major obstacles for tourism development in Ethiopia. In addition, in the face of incessant civil wars in Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s, almost all programs and objectives designed by the *Dergue* government to encourage tourism in the country became ineffective. In connection with this, Tony Hicky has described the situation that, "Tourism in Ethiopia was a boom that had started in the early 1960s but was then aborted by the military takeover of power." (Tony Hicky, 2001:2). Similarly, a statistical data from the former Ethiopian Tourism Commission shows that the period between 1974 and 1991 is characterized by significant decline in the flow of tourists to Ethiopia. During the period, the 'country's image was almost identified with prolonged civil war, recurrent drought and famine. Hence, revenue from the tourism industry drastically reduced (World Bank, 2006:16; Ethiopian Tourism Commission, 1994). There was also lack of promotional and tourism marketing strategy as well as lack of awareness on the part of the host community.

1.3.2. Tourism Development in the Post 1991 Ethiopia

Following the overthrow of the *Dergue* in 1991, the flow of tourists was gradually increased right up until the Ethio-Eritrean war of 1998/1999. The transformation of the country from communist dictatorship to a federal democratic system and from command to free market economy has probably encouraged private investors to re-involve in the activities related to the tourism industry (Tony Hicky, 2001:3). As a result of this, a number of private hotels, restaurants, tour and travel agencies and souvenir shops began to operate in some major towns of the country. At the same time, the government took initiative to consider tourism promotion activities which had its own contribution to make the country benefit much out of the tourism industry.

The most important achievement in the period was possibly the attempt made by the current regime to decide the authority and duty of the central and regional governments to promote tourism in Ethiopia. Accordingly, the regional tourism bureaus were established by proclamation No.43/1993 with the responsibilities of developing and promoting tourist accommodations and recreational facilities, identifying, conserving and promoting tourism resources in the respective regions. Moreover, the tourism bureaus are responsible to license private service facilities and control their standards as well as to coordinate other institutions for the expansion of tourism (Proclamation No. 26, January 1993:259).

However, the absence of clearly stated tourism development policy until 2009, critical shortage if not total absence of professionals, poor infrastructure and facilities around tourist spots and sites have continued to be major constraints of the sector. External to the subject, the national and international peace and security problems associated with the Ethio-Eritrean war of 1998/1999 and the spread

of terrorism respectively have their own effect in discouraging tourists from making travel to Ethiopia.(Mitch Odero,2002) Therefore, from this one can understand that without peace and security tourism is unthinkable industry.

With the proceeding of economic liberalization in post Ethio- Eritrean war, the government resumed to play a leading role in the governance of tourism .The Private sector now began to take many of the operational and commercial roles and the private investment in hotel and accommodation encouraged.(World Bank,2006:18). In cognizant of the importance of establishing a central government institution that regulates and coordinates the stakeholders in tourism industry, the government of Ethiopia upgraded the tourism commission into Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2006. In the same year the commission reorganized and promoted to ministry as Ethiopian Culture and Tourism by Proclamation No 471/2006(Tourism Development Policy of Ethiopia, 2009:2). Giving high priority to tourism in its development strategy, the government of Ethiopia also sets up short and long term strategies for the tourism sector. Tourism resources afterwards have been taken as driving force for economic growth in all development plans like Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to end poverty (PASDEP), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Growth and Transformation plans (GTPs) (MUDC, 2011:6)

The Ethiopian government gave high priority to tourism because the tourism sector has at least after the 1990s been accepted as a development strategy to alleviate poverty. Tourism by way of enabling the nation earns foreign currency, is believed to stimulate economic growth and help to maintain balance of payments. Moreover, in the post 1990s, Ethiopia tourism accepted as a tool to revitalize the country's bad image and a means of promoting its cultural, historic and natural assets (World Bank, 2006)

2. Contributions of Tourism to Development

For least developed countries such as Ethiopia tourism is taken as an effective instrument for poverty alleviation and to its integration into the World economy (Ajala O.A, 2008:75). Tourism involves the movement of people, the exchange of goods, services, ideas and experiences which play a significant role in the economies, social and cultural developments of different countries. From the viewpoint of its economic importance, tourism is usually considered as an industry which enables a country to earn a considerable amount of foreign currency (G.Shirji, 1996:65)

Apart from their expenditure for transportation, accommodation and catering, overseas visitors to Ethiopia want to buy national souvenirs and various kinds of local art and craft products. In this regard, the Ethiopian Tourist Trading Corporation is engaged, among other things, in the sale of Ethiopian articles and souvenir to foreign diplomatic residents and tourists. (Ethiopian Tourism Commission, 2002:40). In this regard tourism contributes to national development by way of providing employment opportunity and by adding the Gross National Product (GNP) of a country through what is known as "Multiplier effect" on domestic productivity.(World Bank,2006:15) . Accordingly, it provides a stimulus for the growth and refinement of indigenous industries. This is better explained by Joseph Ouma's words as "... resident and foreign tourism stimulate productivity to satisfy the demand of visitors who, while on the tour, do not produce goods or remunerative services. Tourism, therefore, keeps in productive employment of goods and service" (H.Robinson, 1976:126; Joseph Ouma, 1970:30)

In terms of job creation, the fact that tourism is a labor intensive service industry makes it an invaluable source of employment, especially for less developed countries like Ethiopia. It invites a large number of people with a wide range of jobs from the unskilled to the highly specialized personnel to be tied up to the sector. Explaining this fact, Emmanuel de Kadt argues that, "the most obvious and immediate benefit of tourism is the creation of jobs and the opportunity for people to increase their income and standard of living" (Emmanuel de Kadt, 1976:11)

In addition to the economic benefits, tourism also plays a significant role for the sociocultural developments of both visitors and the local inhabitants. Tourism brings into contact peoples of different nationals and social values which in turn enable different people to understand one with the other's way of life. Tourism offers the host community the opportunity to create friendship, to learn about the outside world, and it gives way to new perspectives. Experiencing different cultural practices increase insight and appreciation for different approaches to living. By learning more about others, difference among people of various ethnic groups becomes less threatening and more interesting. Moreover, the interest of tourists in local culture and history provides opportunity to support the preservation of historical artifacts, and it encourages domestic tourism. The coming of tourists to the destinations leads to the betterment of social services and social utilities, which is enjoyed by the local population. Regarding this issue, McIntosh has described that, "the highest purpose of tourism is to become better acquainted with people in other places which further understanding and appreciation."(Robert McIntosh, 1984:113)

Experiences from many developing countries, including Ethiopia have shown that tourism is one of the major factors in stimulating the conservation of natural, cultural and historical heritages of an area. It also encourages the "revitalization" of traditional arts, crafts, dance, music and financial assistance for the maintenance of museums, cultural facilities and activities (Inskeep Edward, 1991 :370). Moreover, more recently tourism has been playing a very significant role in changing the country's "bad image". As described in the preceding discussion, until the recent past Ethiopia was identified with bad fortunes like famine, war, drought and poverty. But nowadays, largely because of disclosure of its various attraction sites and tourism resources, Ethiopia is recognized by the European Council on Tourism and Trade/ECTT/ as the "Perfect Cultural Destination"(Ethiopian Herald, Sunday July 19,2015:7)

In spite of its economic, social and cultural contributions, tourism usually brings negative impacts to the host community. Some of the significant costs associated with tourism are: increase in alcoholism, expansion of prostitution, theft of heritages, illicit trafficking, dependency, begging and distortion of facts and history. Consequently, unless tourism is guided in a planned and careful manner, its disadvantage could be higher than its benefits. By giving an emphasis on the point under discussion, Kream remarked that, "Tourism is a goose that not only lays a golden egg but also fouls its own nest." (Inskeep Edward, 1991:370-371)

3. Major Problems for the Expansion of Tourism in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's potential for tourism and the importance of the sector in the process to realize sustainable development is understood. Nevertheless, the performance of the tourism industry in Ethiopia is still far behind the neighboring tourist receiving African countries like Kenya and Tanzania which possess less natural and cultural heritages as compared to Ethiopia. If the country has to exploit its resources to the maximum of its extent, means of mitigating obstacles for developing tourism, sustainably and strategically should be found out. In this regard, it is obvious that the development of tourism industry in one country presupposes certain conditions to be met. Among others progressive and reliable development policy, skilled manpower, transportation, accommodation and promotion facilities are of prime requirements. (Valen Smith, 1998:125)

In order to attract significant number of tourists, destination sites need to be protected and managed properly with the participation of the concerned stake holders including the host community to provide facilities in sufficient quality so that to make more attractive to visitors. Focusing on the importance of these facilities for tourism development, Joseph Ouma argue that, "It is impossible to realize progressive and vigorous tourism without the construction and maintenance of essential tourism facilities." Similarly, Richardson has also mentioned that, "the quality of transportation, accommodation, advertisement, postal and banking services are the main factors for the development of tourism.(Joseph Ouma, 1970 :22; Richardson, 1972:4.)

However, in Ethiopia those important facilities to embark on the development of successful tourism industry, though some progresses, are lacking either because of the general problems of the country or the problems associated to the sector itself. Destination competitiveness analysis by some scholars indicate that Ethiopia is still lagging behind other tourist destination countries in creating and supporting facilities such as tourism infrastructure(Yabibal Mulualem,2010:2). This implies that the private investment at operational and commercial section of the tourism sector need to be encouraged, and the room for developing tourism infrastructure should be widely opened to the participation of the private business owners and to the community around sites. In this way, the public/government and the private sector are expected to work harmoniously (World Bank, 2006)

Though skilled man power is a necessary component for the promotion and development of any institution, the tourism sector in Ethiopia is suffering from critical shortage of trained personnel. To the surprise of every one, until recently almost all of the working staff in the sector does not have any professional qualification related to tourism except little exposure to short term trainings (Shimelis Alebachew, 1998:65)

The other obstacle hindering the effective operation of tourism in Ethiopia is the problem related to transportation and accommodation. As long as tourism is the result of journeys and temporary stays of people out of their home areas, the provision of goods, transportation and accommodation system is an important factor for the development of tourism industry. Therefore, a place which wishes to attract tourists should be accessible by the different modes of transportation (H. Robinson' 1976: 43). In this regard, the Ethiopian Air Lines is playing a very crucial role in linking the country with major tourist generating countries. In addition to the air line's transportation service to major and well known tourist sites such as Gondar and Lalibela from the country's capital Addis Ababa, good efforts has been made to link destinations in highway road transport. However, still there are no sufficient transport facilities and infrastructures to get access into tourist sites in remote rural areas and to satisfy the needs of tourists. As a result of this, many attraction sites in Ethiopia remained to be inaccessible and unvisited. Even the operating motor roads that lead to the remarkable attraction sites are not comfortable so that tourists are usually discouraged from touring to those sites (Shimelis Alebachew, 1998:42) Ethiopian lakes also constitute important tourism resources and there is a considerable tourist demand to visit the lakes. Hence, though attempts are made to provide motor boats, recent research has shown that there is a significant problem in number and quality of the operating boats. (Misgie Birara, 2004:40)

Once they get there at the destination, tourists want to find somewhere to stay and somewhere to eat and drink. Thus, any region which deserves to be visited by a large number of tourists should have accommodation facilities of different standard that could provide what the tourists require. (Peter Trigg, 1996:72) Tourists are often more attracted by unique features of the destination. They are, for example interested with facilities designed in conformity with indigenous architecture and local decor than the imported foreign style features (Harry Mathew, 1978:49). In connection with this idea, McIntosh has rightly described that, "... Attention must be given to this subject(local culture) since one of the major reason why people travel is to immerse themselves in an area totally different from their own".(Robert McIntosh' 1984: 209) However, almost all tourist class hotels in Ethiopia lacked local traits and their design is similar to that of the western architectural makeup. As a result of this, foreign visitors to Ethiopia may leave the country with some feeling of dissatisfaction about accommodation and other facilities. Moreover, the concentration of tourist class hotels in Addis Ababa and some other major towns of the country located far away from places of interest to visit and lack of skilled manpower in the field of communication, reception, and food preparation and catering have been major problems associated with accommodation (Ayalew Sissay, 1998:14)

The other area of poor performance in the activities of the tourism industry in Ethiopia is the promotion aspect. According to B.G Gaidoni, the first and most urgent task in the process of building tourism industry must be the creation and diffusion of the tourism image of an area. (B.G.Gaidoni, 1970:6) Tour operators which used various kinds promoting their destination like media, both print and electronic, interactive marketing which involves two way communication and direct selling of the product play very significant role in creating good image(Mahilet Seleshi, 2011:15). However, the presence of a large number of untrained and non professional tour operators and tour guides in Ethiopia implies that the tourism potentials and its products are not yet properly promoted to increase international tourist flow to the country's tourist destinations.

Hence, the promotion and advertisements of attraction sites to induce the interest of potential visitors is not properly done. In fact, attempts are being made to promote tourist sites, of Ethiopia through the sales agents of Ethiopian Air lines. Nevertheless, indirect promotion may lead to misinformation about the nature of tour and the sites to be visited which in turn would create mistrust and

frustration on the part of the tourists. Even those attempts in the field of advertisement geared largely towards attracting foreign tourists whereas domestic tourism is given little attention or totally forgotten (Misgie Birara, 2004:42)

Another important service which has much to do with development of tourism industry is the activity of travel agents, tour operators and tourist guides. Expressing the role of tour and travel agents Medlik has written that “A travel agent is an expert knowledgeable in schedules, routing, currency, lodging, pricing, regulations, destinations and all other aspects of travel opportunities. In short the travel agent is a specialist or counselor” (Burkart Mediik, 1974: 62) In the Ethiopian context, however, many of the tour operators and travel agents with the exception of the National Tour organization are in their infancy stages. Moreover, almost all of them use staff out of profession. Tour operators compete both in terms of the product they sell and image of the destination they create. Having such a crucial responsibility of influencing and persuading the tourists and developing a positive image of destinations, unprofessional personnel may be inappropriate and undesired image may itself resulted in dissatisfaction on the part of customers. The incompatibility of images created by unprofessional officers of tour operators and the realities of the destination leads to tourist dissatisfaction (Mahlet Silesh,2011:13)

The increase in number of illegal tourist guides has also become a serious problem for the development of tourism in Ethiopia. These guides usually trouble foreign tourists in misinforming and asking extra payments for their inefficient services. Recent research shows that most tourist guides lack efficiency in communication with foreign tourists, and still they are not well acquainted with Ethiopian history in general and the facts related to the respective cultural and historical heritages is particular.(Misgie Birara,2004:50)

In addition to the already discussed problems, lack of community awareness and participation, poor coordination among institutions, Ethiopian’s geographic distance from the tourist generating countries and the stiff competition from certain East Africa countries such as Kenya are the other problems obstructing all attempts in the development of tourism in Ethiopia (Ethiopian Tourism Commission, 1968:246).However, most of the problems discussed earlier are not the impossibilities, because given time, effort and commitment; they could partially or totally be eliminated by a system of priority.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Several travelers’ accounts and research findings have remarked that Ethiopia, with its beautiful scenery, agreeable climate, diverse culture, colorful history and friendly people, is a country of considerable potential for tourism industry. However, the country could not yet be categorized under the group of the main beneficiaries out of tourism. This is because of the fact that the sector suffers from lack of attention and provision of substandard facilities. Consequently, it is likely to say that, the mystique and curiosity about Ethiopia could be short lived if the demand for tourism is not properly matched with a supply of basic tourist requirements. Thus, emphasis on rectifying the situation for immediate and comprehensive solution must be given urgent priority. Indeed, having observed the recent endeavor of the government to formulate tourism development policy, to produce professionals in the field and the prioritization of tourism development in the Growth and Transformation Plan(GTP), one can optimistically state that the New Ethiopian Millennium have created a new source of inspiration to effectively utilize the untapped tourism potential of the country.

In any case, having identified some of the major problems that deter the effective utilization of tourism in Ethiopia as described above, it is necessary to suggest the following points which could be considered as part of the possible solutions, and would probably help to enable the country to realize sustainable tourism development.

- It is apparent that in the absence of professionals there will be no institutional development. Hence, it is imperative that the tourism sector should be equipped with skilled man power so as to successfully undertake the main activities of managing, marketing, researching and promoting tourism industry in Ethiopia. Thus, all employees who have any connection with the tourism sector including development coordinators, promotion experts, tourist guides, catering staffs should be well trained professionals with basic or advanced professional knowledge and skills.
- As it is mentioned so far, the dependence of tourism on imported goods and services is one of the negative impacts for tourism development in Ethiopia. Therefore, to minimize such problems, attempts should be made towards the “localization of tourism”, which simply means greater utilization of local talent, goods, services and decoration. For this purpose it would necessarily be important to create sufficient awareness on the part of the local community and encourage them to make strong economic cross-sectional linkage among potential local producers. This would maximize the socio economic and cultural benefits of tourism for both the local residents and foreign tourists. The local community should also be invited to take part at their capacity in the planning, promoting and controlling processes of tourism development programmes. This may enable them to adapt tourism in harmony with their needs and the local context.
- Transport facilities which convey tourists to the various tourist attraction sites in Ethiopia should be improved. At the same time, tourist service institution of every kind should be organized around the remarkable attraction sites which would encourage tourists to stay longer time in the region and make the local community benefit much out of tourism industry. Efforts should also be made to offer technical advice and controlling mechanisms to improve the quality and sanitation of accommodation, transportation and entertainment facilities.
- Attempt should be made to promote tourism potential of Ethiopia in a wider scale using the latest means of communication network system. It is also important to induce private investors through incentives to make them play an active role in the promotion and advertisement of tourism.
- Domestic tourism should be encouraged and strengthened which would enable citizens to know more about their country, and it increases their feeling of love for their country. Moreover, domestic tourism encourages the local population to take part in the conservation and promotion of heritages which is believed to be strong foundation for the expansion of tourism.

- Periodical programme activities like exhibitions reflecting the natural, cultural and historical heritage of Ethiopia should be arranged at a national and regional level. Besides, cultural institutions such as museums, galleries and archive centers should be established to promote the cultural industry of tourism at the regional, district and the site level. This may help the general public to understand, appreciate, and protect the cultural heritage for sustainable use and indeed to transfer to the generations to come of the country in general and the respective locality in particular.
- Joint promotion mechanisms should be established among the neighboring East African tourist receiving countries, and cooperation in planning for transportation, pricing and other elements of tourism development activities is also recommended.

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