

# Multicultural Communication and Survival Strategy of Ahmadiyya in Tawangmangu, Indonesia

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Ahmadiyya community in Indonesia often receive physical attacks from other Islamic communities that accused Ahmadiyya as not-Islam. For some Indonesians, Ahmadiyya holds a contentious Islamic identity, which for some people adulterates the cardinal canon of Islam. However, the Ahmadiyya community in Tawangmangu, Indonesia, experiences a reasonably inverse condition. By smartly managing cultural relations with local citizens (non-Ahmadiyya), Ahmadiyya's people seem to live in harmony with the residents. The empirical study revealed that the Ahmadiyya community in Tawangmangu established multicultural relations in daily life by carrying out cultural approaches. The cultural approaches were intensive acculturation and integration with the host community. The Ahmadiyya community even used a football academy to attract the local community to engage indirectly in a social activity. Under this strategy, Ahmadiyya successfully maintains its original identity without disturbing local identities, cultures, and wisdom.

**Key words:** *Ahmadiyya, local community, multicultural communication, integration, Indonesia.*

## Introduction

In the post-1998 reformation, the sectarian-based multicultural conflict has become one of the crucial issues in community life in Indonesia. Minority groups, in general, are often targeted by both physical attacks and other forms of persecution. Generally, these attacks and persecutions were carried out by the majority groups in the local area. The issue that often becomes the trigger for the conflict is related to the alleged deviation of religious rituals. A study (Rohmatin T. , 2016), for example, stated that from 2007 to 2010, there was an increase in the trend of acts of violence and persecution of minority groups, especially against the Christians, Ahmadiyya, and Shia. Other data (Juditha C. , 2016) stated that from the 1990s to

2008, there were 274 cases of violence in the name of religious conflict. This is undoubtedly a serious problem that must be resolved amid the diversity and multiculturalism of the Indonesian society.

In the context of international law, the issue of protection and minority rights becomes an endless discourse. Some countries became the pioneers of the protection of minority groups, such as Hungary, through the law focused on minorities in 1849 (Péter L. R., 2003) and Austria in 1867 through similar laws (Staatsgrundgesetz vom 21. Dezember 1867, 1867). Furthermore, the world organisation through the United Nations has also guaranteed the rights of minority groups initiated by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. This was stated clearly in the following General Assembly resolution 47/135 of December 18, 1992 Article 1:

States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity” (General Assembly resolution 47/135, 1992).

In other words, the international community, through the United Nations, actively wants the minority groups to be treated and adequately protected by their rights. Accordingly, equal treatment of minority groups is an essential pillar of democracy (Swain A. , 2008) (McGann A. , 2006). However, challenges occur everywhere and minority groups tend to be marginalised for various reasons. This is what happened to the Hindu and Christian groups in Bangladesh (Murshed, 2014), in Africa (Appiagyei-Atua, 2008) and North Ireland (Plog, 2003) which related to the rights of indigenous groups and the dynamics of state democracy.

In the context of Indonesia, even though persecution and violence are often carried out by the majority group, in some cases of Islam, for example, the unbalanced framing also becomes a separate issue when persecution befell against Muslims (Mahmudah, 2016). Therefore, this article becomes interesting when there are minority groups, but they managed to survive amid the majority and diversity of people's lives, especially in Tawangmangu, Indonesia. The main purpose of this article is to find out what multicultural communication strategies are used by the Ahmadiyya group so that they can survive in diverse communities, especially in Tawangmangu, Indonesia. This article is divided into the following sections, i) about minority groups in Indonesia, ii) background of Ahmadiyya groups in Tawangmangu, Indonesia, iii) strategies for multicultural communication of Ahmadiyya groups in Tawangmangu, Indonesia, iv) conclusions.

### **Persecution against Minority Groups in Indonesia**

Discriminatory treatment of minority groups occurs in various parts of the world. This is triggered by the majority-minority discourse, which always arises in the occurrence of

dynamics in the political conflict, social change and identity, assimilation of the population, and issues of discrimination and marginalisation. In addition, the context of the majority-minority also has several dimensions, such as aspects of number, socio-political, economic, social status, (Seyranian, Atuel, & Crano, 2008) (Ritzer, 2014) (Laurie & Khan, 2017) and even appearance (Mehelloua, Ramdanib, & Adetunjic, 2019). The definition of a minority in particular still seems ambiguous and has many interpretations (Poerwanto, 2004). In Indonesia, for example, even though the ethnic Chinese belongs in the minority group, economically it is the majority compared to the indigenous population. Also, Muslim groups are the majority according to the demographics, but they are politically a minority. However, the majority-minority discourse, especially in Indonesia, is always narrated in the context of a number of demographics that affect the social, political, and economic maps (Leonardelli & Brewer, 2001). In this case, of course, minority groups are considered as vulnerable groups and need protection, especially when they often are at the receiving end of discriminatory treatment. The issue of persecution against minority groups in Indonesia tends to be more detrimental to Muslims. Similarly, if the persecution befell an Islamic group, it is also very disadvantaged by massive news framing. Persecution befalling Islamic groups is common everywhere, but it usually receives less attention than the persecution against any other group (Akbaba & Fox, 2011; Peach & Gale, 2005; Fetzer & Soper, 2005). Again, in the context of Indonesia, Muslims experience complex problems in the aspects of majority-minority relations, especially in political issues (Effendi, 2003; Mutawakkil, 2009).

Ahmadiyya in Indonesia is considered one of the minority groups that often becomes the main target of attacks by the majority. The majority group referred to is none other than the Islamic group. The definition of the Ahmadiyya as a minority group in the majority context is also fairly unique in this discourse because usually minority group narratives are specifically ethnic-based demographics that have implications for the dynamics of national politics. This happens in Malaysia (Nakamura, 2015), China (He, 2017), or Australia (Jakubowicz, Collins, Reid, & Chafic, 2014). For the Ahmadiyya the ethnicity demographic does not have a significant effect on the Javanese ethnic composition, for example. However, its presence caused controversy and vulnerability related to religious ideologies that clashed with the ideology of the local population (Farkhan, 2012; Rahim, 2014; Andi Putra Ishak & Mustaffa Abdullah, 2016).

It was noted that several incidents of violence involving Ahmadiyya occurred in various regions in Indonesia. In West Java, for instance, the Ahmadiyya group was involved in an incident in Kuningan, Bogor, Majalengka, Sukabumi, and Banten. Similar incidents occurred, in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, Surabaya and Madura. In most of these cases, the persecution of the Ahmadiyya occurred. However, in all of these cases, all were triggered by the controversy over the Ahmadiyya teachings that could not be accepted by the Islamic group majority. The government's own policy also triggered the complexity of this problem through the Joint Decree of the Minister of Religion, the Attorney General, and the Minister of Internal

Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia No. 3/2008 concerning the Warning and Commands to Followers, Members, and/or Management Members of the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation (JAI) and Citizens who failed to resolve the case (Lukman Nul Hakim, 2011; Rofiqoh Zuchairiyah, 2012; Abdul Gaffar, 2013).

However, the tragedy in Banten that killed Ahmadiyya residents has caused fear to spread among these Ahmadiyya residents. The incident had a real impact on the fear in most Ahmadiyya members, especially in Central Java Province, for example, in the cities of Semarang, Kudus, Tegal, Kendal, Salatiga, Karanganyar, and others. In Karanganyar, for example, in the tourist area of Tawangmangu in the village of Kalisoro, the Ahmadiyya mosque froze all of its activities. The frozen activities were marked by a statement signed by two Ahmadiyya representatives, Nashir Sumardi and Aziz Suyatmo. As a result, the Ahmadiyya group dissolved voluntarily in the presence of the Head of Tawangmangu District and Kalisoro Village Head. However, the Central Java Ahmadiyya Regional Leadership Council later revoked the statement of freezing the activities in 2011 (Lembaga Studi Sosial dan Agama (eLSA), 2011).

The case in the Tawangmangu Regency as the location of this study shows interesting facts regarding the Ahmadiyya persecution. The researcher conducted preliminary observations on October 16, 2015, and December 26, 2015. The field observations on October 16, 2015, showed that the statement of dissolution appeared as a result of a scenario from the police officer who served at that time. The Ahmadiyya congregation leaders in Tawangmangu claimed that they were invited to have dinner several times with police officials and talked about the existence of Ahmadiyya in Tawangmangu. Suddenly, however, the police invited journalists in a press conference and asked the Ahmadiyya congregation to declare themselves to disband in front of the public (Interview, 16 October 2015).

On December 26, 2015, the researchers returned to Tawangmangu. The date falls on a Friday and long holidays on weekends, as well as long holidays for the end of the year. Tourists crowd in Tawangmangu. When the prayer call echoed, tourists flocked to the mosque. Al Mubarak Mosque, the center of Ahmadiyya activities in Tawangmangu, echoed the call to prayer as other mosques. As it turned out, local residents who were not Ahmadiyya also included tourists together to perform Friday Prayers at the Al Mubarak mosque. This means that, at the location, the Ahmadiyya congregation was accepted by the surrounding community and even lived in harmony. Therefore, the researchers felt challenged to find the answers to whether the Ahmadiyya strategy as a minority group was accepted by the surrounding Muslim community in the majority amid various controversies. In the following section, the authors present the Ahmadiyya background in Indonesian Tawangmangu as the location of the study.

### **Ahmadiyya Background in Tawangmangu, Indonesia**

Many writers have discussed the history of the Ahmadiyya both at the international level and in Indonesia. Those reviewers, for example, review the Ahmadiyya in the United States (Umar, 2016), in Europe (Jonker, 2014), and South America (Bal & Sinha-Kerkhoff, 2005). There have also been many writers who specifically examine the history of the Ahmadiyya in Indonesia (Farkhan, 2012; Abdul Gaffar, 2013; Andi Putra Ishak & Mustaffa Abdullah, 2016; Lukman Nul Hakim, 2011; Muhtador, 2018; Zulkarnaen, 2005; Fadli, 2007; Azizah, 2016; Alkatiri, 2016). There are only three researchers who specifically focus on Ahmadiyya in specific areas such as in Kudus Regency (Rosyid, 2011), in Tasikmalaya Regency, West Java (Zuldin, 2013), in Kuningan Regency, West Java (Syukur, 2017). There is a similarity in this study with the three studies, for example, the research method that uses direct observations in these areas to find out the history of the Ahmadiyya. The three, however, were more focused on the roots and causes of the Ahmadiyya conflict in the three regions. None touches on the aspects of multicultural communication as of this study.

After the researchers performed a pilot project in 2015, the researchers determined to find out more details about the history of Ahmadiyya in Tawangmangu. The researchers returned to Tawangmangu on Friday, October 16, 2016. We immediately met the Ahmadiyya Tawangmangu figure, Ahmad Saddam, who lives in a house on the west side of the Al Mubarak Mosque with a wife and three children who were still in school at the elementary school level. Ahmad Saddam welcomed us with great hospitality. Ahmad Saddam has only been practicing as an Ahmadiyya preacher in Tawangmangu for three years. Previously, Ahmad Saddam became an Ahmadiyya preacher in Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta. Ahmad Saddam said that:

Ahmadiyya in Tawangmangu are relatively well-received by local residents, especially since the Ahmadiyya followers in Tawangmangu are native citizens. In general, Ahmadiyya residents are concentrated in the Kalisoro area, which is located about 1.5 kilometers from the Tawangmangu Market. From Tawangmangu Market to the east (towards Sarangan, East Java), precisely in the entrance to the tourist forest area (Interview, Anonymous)

As an Ahmadiyya follower, Ahmad Saddam had experienced discrimination when he was assigned to Kendal. The village and sub-district officials were unwilling to arrange for his Identity Card (KTP) and Family Card (KK) for their transfer administration because they already knew that Ahmad Saddam was an Ahmadi, a term referring to the existence of someone as an Ahmadiyya follower. According to him:

I have never been discriminated against again since I move to Tawangmangu (Interview, 16 October 2016).

In other words, since moving to Tawangmangu, Mr. Ahmad Saddam has never experienced persecution and discrimination, as happened in Kendal, Central Java, where he previously lived. In Kendal, he has been known as an Ahmadiyya by the community and has even been identified by government officials at the village level. Even to administer population documents, which are the rights of all citizens, he cannot obtain it due to these discriminatory actions.

As the centre of Ahmadiyya activities, the Al Mubarak Mosque is right in the east of Ahmad Saddam's residence. This mosque is located about 200 meters south of the provincial road segment that crosses Tawangmangu in the direction of Sarangan. Tawangmangu and Sarangan are two areas that are destinations of many local tourists. These tourist areas are famous for being beautiful and inexpensive. A marker that shows this mosque is owned by the Ahmadiyya Indonesian Jamaah (JAI) is its logo in the upper front of the mosque building.

**Figure 1.** Logo of Ahmadiyya in the Masjid Dome



**Source:** Personal documentation

We arrived on Friday, which is a big day that requires all Muslims, especially men, to perform Friday Prayers. We attended the Friday prayer in Al Mubarak Mosque, and the preacher (khatib) was Ahmad Saddam's colleague, Nashir Sumardi. In his khutba, Nashir Sumardi emphasised many times the importance of tolerance among Muslims. About sixty worshippers filled the Al Mubarak Mosque on that day. Ahmad Saddam said: "In fact, on a long weekend, worshippers can double." The tourists who occupy the villa around the Kalisoro tourist forest area make the Al Mubarak Mosque a place of worship. Ahmad Saddam stated:

This mosque is open for anyone to worship. Not only Ahmadiis observed Friday prayers, but also other non-Ahmadiyya residents (Interview, Ahmad Saddam, 16 October 2016).

After Friday prayers, Nashir Sumardi came to us. Apparently, Ahmad Saddam had reported our arrival to him. After shaking hands and we introduced ourselves to each other, Nashir Sumardi told us how the Ahmadiyya initially entered Tawangmangu. Initially, in the 1970s, there was a police officer who was doing exercises in the Kalisoro area, Tawangmangu. Nashir Sumardi was a teenager at that time. According to his memory, most of the Tawangmangu residents at that time did not know Islam well. In full, Nashir Sumardi stated:

During that year (the 1970s), there were still many residents of Tawangmangu who adhered to animist beliefs. Many people still cannot recite the Quran. Then there was an Ahmadiyya member who was also a police officer who was participating in training here; he taught the population to recite the Koran. Initially, children are invited to practice karate, then recite. He happened to be an Ahmadiyya. So, actually, the one who introduced Islam to the people of Tawangmangu, especially Kalisoro, was the Ahmadiyya (Interview, Nashir Sumardi, 16 October 2016).

As time went on, the followers of Ahmadiyya in Tawangmangu continued to grow, and eventually, the management of the Tawangmangu branch of the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation was formed. In 1982, the Al Mubarak mosque stood on land purchased by the Ahmadiyya followers in Tawangmangu. In this mosque, the Tawangmangu branch of the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation routinely conducts recitation activities, which are divided into recitation for adult male worshippers, recitation for adult female worshippers, and recitation of children, and also joint recitation of all age groups. Therefore, it was very interesting that the Ahmadiyya could eventually be accepted by the community even as a minority group. The following section explains the critical strategies of the Ahmadiyya in Tawangmangu, West Java, to be revealed in order to be a lesson, especially for the Ahmadiyya group in various regions in a very plural Indonesia.

### **Locality in Multiculturalism: The Ahmadiyya Strategy to Survive**

Inclusiveness in religious rituals is undoubtedly an essential point in accepting Ahmadiyya in Tawangmangu, Central Java and is in the middle of the majority group's ideology. As it is known, the majority in Indonesia in particular and Southeast Asia in general, the Islamic groups are dominated by the Syafii school (Mulyosari, 2009). This dominance is indeed inseparable from the journey of Islamic preaching in Indonesia, which was primarily driven by Wali Songo (Freitag & Clarence-Smith, 1997; Sunyoto, 2014) until the teachings of the Shafi'i schools were

deeply attached to people's daily lives (Ali, 2011; Woodward, 2011; Hasib, 2015). This is not an easy job for the Ahmadiyya group, which is known to be different from the local population.

This inclusiveness was sought by the Ahmadiyya group in Tawangmangu to be accepted by the local community. Multicultural communication is the strategy of the Ahmadiyya community, by adapting to local culture, including being involved in various activities. According to Ahmad Saddam:

We try to be actively involved in community activities. The closest mosque from the Al Mubarak Mosque is the Muhammadiyah mosque, but we can still get along well. Even during the reflection night of Indonesian Independence Night, I was appointed to recite prayers. Everything goes harmoniously (Interview, 16 October 2016).

In other words, what Ahmad Saddam and the Ahmadiyya group in Tawangmangu did has practiced a pattern of multicultural communication. With this strategy, it is undoubtedly easier for the Ahmadiyya community in Tawangmangu to establish communication with the local community. However, the efforts of Ahmad Saddam are not without obstacles. This is because the Ahmadiyyah group in Tawangmangu was also affected by various issues, including being influenced by the national political constellation. One of those was also influenced by escalation due to the persecution of Ahmadiyya groups in several regions in Indonesia. In 2011, for example, the Ahmadiyyah in Tawangmangu group was under intense pressure to disperse. The demand turned out to be due to the pressure on the Ahmadiyya group in Bogor West Java, which had become a national issue. In other words, the repression of the Ahmadiyya group at the national level affected the pressure on the Ahmadiyya group in the region. According to Nashir Sumardi:

At that time, there was a repression of the Ahmadiyya at the national level, as indicated by the attack on Ahmadiyya activities in Parung, Bogor, West Java. The dynamics affected the followers of Ahmadiyya in Tawangmangu, who had previously lived in harmony with the local residents. For several days the Al Mubarak mosque was guarded by the police. Before the activity of freezing occurred, he was invited to have dinner and discuss it with a police officer. A few days later, the police official invited journalists at a press conference and made a one-sided statement that the Tawangmangu branch of the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation was declared disbanded.

This incident hit the Ahmadiyya group of Tawangmangu, who have long been accepted and lived in harmony with the local community. The Ahmadiyya group Tawangmangu is increasingly psychologically depressed due to the massive media coverage, especially after the

one-sided freezing of the Ahmadiyya by the Indonesian police. The coverage by local media is even more painful because the local communities can access it. The local media covering the news were Solopos, Joglosemar, and Radar Solo. There were allegations that the Ahmadiyya group of Tawangmangu was trapped in a political scenario. According to Nashir Sumardi:

Ahmadiyya representatives felt that they were trapped through a series of meetings packed in a dinner, which ended at a press conference regarding the dissolution of the Tawangmangu branch of the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation.

Although the one-sided action by the Indonesian police was rejected by the Central Java branch of the Ahmadiyya group, it has become vulnerable to the on going conflict amid extensive news coverage in the mass media. In addition to the news in the mass media, the statement schemed by the police led to continuing implications. As a result, the Ahmadiyya group of Tawangmangu was increasingly depressed. They even received threats from certain groups, and these groups forced the Ahmadiyya group of Tawangmangu to disperse. As a result of the threat, the Al Mubarak mosque was guarded by the police.

In its development, there were differences of opinion among police officials in Karanganyar regarding the fate of the Ahmadiyya in Tawangmangu. There are police officials who consider that the statement of the dissolution of Ahmadiyya Tawangmangu caused a new conflict in the community. According to Nashir Sumardi:

After a statement of disbanding was made, we went straight to the police station to clarify. To note that so far, we have had good relations with government officials and the local police. The principle is that we have been in touch with both the government and the community.

This dynamic certainly made the Ahmadiyya group in Tawangmangu more aware of designing various strategies to survive and be accepted by the local community. Ahmadiyya, in the context of the study of multicultural communication, is seen as a social unit that develops a culture. In addition, Ahmadiyya, especially in Tawangmangu, can also be said to be a social group that develops culture, a set of rules, rituals, customs, and other characteristics, which then become their own set of identity (Schement, 2002). This can be seen from the existence of the Ahmadiyya group, which has a set of rules, rituals, customs, and characteristics that are different from the majority Muslim community. For example, the Ahmadiyya congregation has its own mosque, which aims no more than to show its existence. Although some of the real differences were exhibited by the Ahmadiyya group, they were well received by the local community.



The narratives of Nashir Sumardi and Ahmad Saddam indicate how Ahmadiyya followers in Tawangmangu succeeded in acculturating culture with local residents through two approaches. First, a structural approach is carried out by fostering good relations with government officials, including the police. Second, through a cultural approach that is carried out by being actively involved in cultural activities by local residents in Tawangmangu. This cultural approach makes Ahmadiyya identity owned by followers of Ahmadiyya Tawangmangu less exclusive since it can blend with the cultural locality in Tawangmangu.

Another interesting cultural approach carried out by the Ahmadiyya followers in Tawangmangu is to be willing to gather together with other Islamic organisations, such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama (NU). In multicultural communication, the acculturation model carried out by Ahmadiyya followers in Tawangmangu can be seen as a model of acculturation of integration (Treebe, 2007; Kha Lee & Green, 2010; Chan, 2014; Li & Chen, 2017). On the other hand, the Ahmadiyya Tawangmangu group also assimilated in which according to Neulip (2002: 345), occurred when individuals who came to new cultures let go of their native culture and accepted new cultures from a more dominant local culture (host culture). In this context, the Ahmadiyya community in Tawangmangu has succeeded in acculturating and assimilating. This was demonstrated by their willingness to follow local traditions, and at the same time, they maintained the Ahmadiyya tradition. With this acculturation model, the Ahmadiyya followers in Tawangmangu can be accepted by local people.

Specifically, Ahmadiyya Tawangmangu has a cultural approach through sports. The Ahmadiyya community is aware that sport can be a tool for multicultural communication that can be accepted by the local communities. As a popular sport in this country, Speak Bola (Soccer) is chosen as the means to get closer to the local community, especially young people. Therefore, Ahmadiyya Tawangmangu founded the Al Mubarak Football Academy (SSB). This method is considered acceptable amid the lack of facilities and sports coaching, especially football in the local community. By utilising a field belonging to the local village government, soccer training initiated by the Ahmadiyya is held every Friday after Friday Prayer.

**Figure 2.** Ahmadiyya Football Academy



**Source:** personal documentation

In its endeavour, the Ahmadiyya Football Academy “Al Mubarak” has successfully recruited almost twenty-five students. Interestingly, all students involved in the football academy are the local community, and the school does not only invite Ahmadiyya members. The Ahmadiyya Football Academy “Al Mubarak” is also consistent not to force the students to embrace and follow its Ahmadiyya ideology. The football academy continues to teach football techniques to the students and how to become a professional footballer who has a sportsmanship spirit. Local students are free to practice their religious beliefs regardless of the ideology and type of rituals. Ahmad Saddam insisted:

That the establishment of a football school was motivated by the concerns of the decreasing number of children who recite the Quran. To increase the interest of the children to recite the Quran, the Ahmadiyya Tawangmangu administrators then took the initiative to establish a soccer school, called SSB Al Mubarak. Children who join this soccer school are required to deposit memorisation of short letters in the Qur'an. Memorising this short letter is a substitute for the costs of participating in SSB Al Mubarak, so children do not need to pay for participating in soccer practice.

This means that the idea of establishing the SSB was more driven by the enthusiasm of the Ahmadiyya to educate the local children to learn about Islam. The activity clearly shows that the Ahmadiyya prioritises local children's religious education, which is the foundation of the Islamic religion. The Ahmadiyya has no ambition to influence and then recruit these children to become Ahmadiyya. They prioritise true da'wah to invite the children to recognise their religious teachings, which are mostly the same ritual without having to force them to become members of the Ahmadiyya. Therefore, it is natural that this strategy makes the local community respect the Ahmadiyya community in the region. This cultural approach makes them more acceptable to society since the important point is that Ahmadiyya is considered to have a contribution to the surrounding community and one of which is through a soccer school.



## **Conclusion**

The Tawangmangu branch of the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation can establish multicultural relations with the residents. This was evidenced by the Ahmadiyya people being able to carry out acculturation with the integration model, for example, with their willingness to follow the local traditions and, at the same time, they retain the Ahmadiyya tradition.

In addition, the cultural approach carried out by the Tawangmangu branch Ahmadiyya Congregation was quite successful. Such as, by carrying out a cultural approach to government agencies and the community. With the success of the Ahmadiyya Community, they have multicultural relations through acculturation, and their cultural approach can now live in peace in Tawangmangu.

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