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Quranic Epistemology in Islamic Curriculum Development: A School-Based Management Perspective

Nur Afif^{1*}

nurafif@ptiq.ac.id

Pascasarjana Universitas PTIQ Jakarta

*Corresponding Author: Nur Afif

Email: nurafif@ptiq.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Islamic educational institutions operating within decentralized governance systems face a persistent tension between national curriculum requirements and the normative demands of Quranic educational philosophy. While School-Based Management (SBM) grants schools meaningful autonomy over curriculum planning and institutional decision-making, existing scholarship has not adequately theorized how Quranic epistemological principles might actively govern the structural logic of curriculum development rather than simply inform its content. This study addresses that gap through a library-based qualitative inquiry that brings Quranic educational philosophy into systematic dialogue with contemporary curriculum theory and SBM governance literature. The analysis identifies three Quranic principles, namely tauhid, iqra, and amanah, as foundational curriculum architects that generate operationalizable demands on educational objectives, content selection, pedagogical methodology, and learning evaluation simultaneously. The findings further demonstrate that SBM provides an institutional governance structure compatible with Quranic-based curriculum development when three conditions converge: values-driven principal leadership, structured teacher participation in curriculum design, and community engagement anchored in a shared Islamic educational vision. These findings extend Bandur et al.'s governance argument by adding an epistemological dimension, extend Khanal and Guha's climate findings by foregrounding the normative content of autonomous decisions, and partially contest Alkandari's competency-based framing by insisting that epistemological foundations must precede implementation questions. The study contributes a theoretically grounded framework that school leaders, curriculum designers, and policymakers in Indonesia's Islamic educational system can use to align institutional practice with Quranic values within decentralized governance structures.

Keywords: *Al-Qur'an-Based Curriculum, Islamic Educational Governance, Quranic Epistemology, School-Based Management, Tauhid*

INTRODUCTION

The Al-Qur'an occupies a foundational position in the Islamic intellectual tradition, functioning not merely as a religious text but as a comprehensive epistemological framework that defines the purpose, content, and direction of human learning (Hendawi et al., 2024; Mahmudulhassan et al., 2025). From the first revealed verses of Surah Al-Alaq, which commanded reading and reflection in the name of the Creator, Islamic scholars across centuries have understood knowledge acquisition as inseparable from spiritual consciousness and moral responsibility (Wiandani & Salman, 2025). This understanding produces an educational philosophy distinct from secular traditions in one essential respect: knowledge is never treated as neutral but is always oriented toward the recognition of divine unity and the formation of the complete human being. It is within this tradition that the concept of Quranic-based curriculum development finds both its justification and its urgency, particularly as formal education systems increasingly push Islamic schools toward standardized, output-driven frameworks that may not adequately account for these deeper formative purposes (Alkandari, 2023).

Across Muslim-majority countries, Islamic educational institutions operate under a form of dual accountability that creates real governance tension. On one side, national curriculum authorities require schools to meet standardized competency benchmarks; on the other, religious communities expect schools to preserve and transmit Islamic values with doctrinal integrity (Khanal & Guha, 2023). This tension is not merely administrative but epistemological, since the question of what counts as valid knowledge and which learning outcomes genuinely matter differs substantially between secular competency frameworks and Quranic educational philosophy. School leaders navigating this tension without a principled conceptual framework often find themselves making pragmatic compromises that satisfy neither regulatory requirements nor community expectations, undermining the coherence of institutional identity over time (Dulude & Milley, 2021).

School-Based Management (SBM) has been adopted in many national education systems as a governance model intended to address precisely this kind of institutional complexity, transferring curriculum authority and resource management to the school level so that decisions can reflect local values and contextual needs more directly (Bandur et al., 2022). In Indonesia, where SBM became a mandated policy in 2001 and has since been implemented across thousands of public and Islamic private schools, the decentralized governance structure has created a genuine opening for institutions to design curricula more responsive to their religious and cultural identities (Sumintono et al., 2023). The underlying premise, that schools closer to their communities are better positioned than central bureaucracies to determine what students should learn and how, carries direct relevance for Islamic schools seeking to ground their curriculum

development in Quranic principles rather than purely secular frameworks (Kartika & Afdoliyah, 2025).

Existing research on SBM provides a substantive empirical basis for understanding how this governance model operates in practice. Bandur et al. (2022), drawing on a multi-method study of Indonesian primary and junior high schools over two decades, found that decentralized governance meaningfully strengthened school council effectiveness, community participation, and teacher accountability, while also demonstrating that outcomes varied significantly depending on leadership quality and the depth of stakeholder engagement. Khanal and Guha (2023), analyzing PISA data across 57 countries, showed that school autonomy over student-related decisions was consistently associated with measurable improvements in academic, community, and safety dimensions of school climate. Alkandari (2023) further demonstrated that curriculum reform in Islamic educational settings involves complex human and organizational dimensions, as Islamic studies teachers in Kuwait showed varied levels of readiness for competency-based curriculum transitions depending on their professional experience and institutional context.

Scholarship specifically addressing the integration of Quranic principles into curriculum architecture, however, remains underdeveloped relative to the scale of the challenge Islamic schools face. Hendawi et al. (2024) represent one of the more substantive recent efforts in this direction, analyzing Islamic curriculum development from a Quranic perspective and finding that values such as tauhid, akhlaq, and ilm function as an integrated curriculum architecture rather than isolated content categories. Yet even this work stops short of examining how these Quranic structural principles translate into the specific components of curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation within an SBM governance framework. Studies on Islamic school practice in Indonesia have similarly documented that character cultivation and program implementation depend heavily on whole-school culture and systemic institutional support, but the connection between these findings and the normative demands of Quranic educational thought remains undertheorized (Al Jailani et al., 2025; Kartika & Afdoliyah, 2025).

The gap this leaves is significant. School leaders and curriculum designers working within Indonesia's SBM framework currently lack a coherent, Quranically grounded account of how to structure curriculum development in ways that are both religiously principled and institutionally functional. The existing literature treats the Al-Qur'an primarily as a source of religious content to be scheduled within the curriculum rather than as an epistemological framework whose internal logic might actively shape curriculum objectives, scope, sequencing, and evaluation criteria. Without this theoretical grounding, SBM's promise of contextually responsive curriculum development remains difficult for Islamic schools to realize in any meaningful sense, and the autonomy the policy grants risks being used to replicate secular curriculum models with Islamic subject headings rather than to construct

genuinely Quran-rooted educational frameworks (Bandur et al., 2022; Hendawi et al., 2024).

This study addresses that gap through a library-based qualitative inquiry that brings Quranic educational philosophy into dialogue with contemporary curriculum theory and SBM governance literature. The research pursues three interconnected questions: what epistemological principles the Al-Qur'an establishes as foundations for curriculum design, how these principles correspond to the structural components of curriculum development within SBM governance, and what institutional conditions Islamic schools require to sustain Quranically grounded curriculum practice over time. The contribution lies in treating the Al-Qur'an not as supplementary religious content but as a primary epistemological source whose educational logic generates distinct curricular imperatives, offering school principals, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers a framework that connects Islamic normative foundations with the practical realities of decentralized school governance in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum: Concept, Components, and Development

The concept of curriculum has been understood and defined differently across educational traditions, though most contemporary theorists converge on the view that it encompasses far more than a list of subjects or instructional materials (Kinuthia, 2024; Ryen & Jøsok, 2023). In its broadest sense, curriculum refers to a comprehensive plan that organizes educational objectives, content, learning experiences, and evaluation criteria into a coherent framework designed to guide the formation of learners over time (Hendawi et al., 2024). This understanding moves beyond the narrow identification of curriculum with syllabi or textbooks and recognizes it instead as a dynamic system whose components are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. When any single component, whether objectives, content, method, or assessment, operates in isolation from the others, the educational process loses its internal coherence and becomes incapable of producing the integrated outcomes that both families and societies expect from formal schooling (Ebabuye & Asgedom, 2024).

Curriculum development, as a professional and institutional practice, involves a deliberate sequence of decisions about what knowledge is worth teaching, in what order, through what pedagogical approaches, and according to what evaluative criteria (Chanifah et al., 2021). These decisions are never purely technical but always reflect underlying philosophical commitments about the nature of human beings, the purpose of education, and the relationship between knowledge and social life. In secular frameworks, these commitments tend to be drawn from empirical and pragmatic traditions that prioritize skills, competencies, and economic productivity as the primary goals of schooling. In religiously grounded educational traditions, however, the philosophical foundations of curriculum

development are drawn from normative and spiritual sources that define human flourishing in terms that exceed measurable academic outcomes, making the process of curriculum design a simultaneously epistemic and ethical undertaking.

The structural components of curriculum development have been theorized across multiple scholarly traditions, and while terminology varies, most frameworks identify four core elements: educational objectives, which define what learners should know, be, and do; content, which determines the subject matter and learning materials through which objectives are pursued; methodology, which governs the pedagogical approaches and learning activities through which content is delivered; and evaluation, which assesses the degree to which objectives have been achieved and provides feedback for continuous improvement (Trianita et al., 2024). The quality of curriculum development depends substantially on the coherence among these four elements, such that objectives meaningfully drive content selection, content is delivered through methods appropriate to learners' developmental stages, and evaluation genuinely measures the outcomes that the curriculum was designed to produce. Gaps or misalignments among these components are among the most common sources of educational underperformance in both secular and Islamic school settings.

Al-Qur'an as the Foundation of Islamic Curriculum

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, the Al-Qur'an holds an epistemological status that distinguishes it categorically from all other sources of knowledge and curricular authority (Karwadi et al., 2025). It is understood not merely as a sacred text to be memorized and recited but as a comprehensive worldview that articulates the purpose of human existence, the nature of knowledge, the obligations of moral life, and the conditions of human flourishing in relation to God, the natural world, and other human beings (Chanifah et al., 2021). This worldview generates a set of educational principles that are internally consistent and that carry direct implications for every component of curriculum design, from the formulation of learning objectives rooted in tauhid to the selection of content that integrates divine revelation with empirical inquiry, to the adoption of pedagogical methods that honor the dignity and intellectual capacity of the learner. The Quranic command to read, reason, reflect, and bear witness to divine signs in creation establishes an epistemological framework in which no genuine knowledge is secular and no authentic education is spiritually neutral (Hendawi et al., 2024).

The Quranic concept of *manhaj*, which appears in several verses and carries the meaning of a clear path or established method, has been understood by classical Muslim scholars as the foundational reference for Islamic curriculum design (El-Sherif, 2021). This concept implies that curriculum is not merely an institutional construct but a divinely guided trajectory that orients human learning toward the recognition of God's unity and the fulfillment of the human role as *khalifah*, or steward of creation, on earth. In practice, this means that the objectives of Islamic

curriculum cannot be confined to cognitive achievement or vocational preparation alone but must encompass the formation of moral character, spiritual awareness, and social responsibility as equally legitimate and measurable educational outcomes (Trianita et al., 2024). The integration of these dimensions within a single curricular framework is what distinguishes Islamic educational philosophy from dual-system approaches that treat religious instruction and secular academic subjects as parallel but fundamentally separate tracks.

Research has consistently shown that Islamic educational institutions perform more effectively and maintain stronger institutional identity when their curriculum is built on a coherent normative foundation rather than assembled piecemeal from externally imposed frameworks (Chanifah et al., 2021). Spirituality-based curriculum frameworks developed in Indonesian Islamic higher education contexts, for instance, have demonstrated that grounding learning activities in explicitly Quranic values strengthens students' sense of purpose, deepens their engagement with course content, and improves the sustainability of moral formation outcomes beyond the classroom. These findings suggest that the pedagogical and institutional value of Quranic-grounded curriculum development extends beyond doctrinal compliance and into the practical domain of educational quality, making it a matter of professional relevance for school leaders and curriculum designers, not only religious scholars (Hendawi et al., 2024).

School-Based Management and Curriculum Governance

School-Based Management represents one of the most significant governance reforms in global education policy over the past three decades, built on the foundational premise that educational quality improves when decision-making authority is transferred from central bureaucracies to individual schools (Pham et al., 2025). The rationale for this transfer rests on the assumption that schools, as the units closest to students and communities, are better positioned to identify local needs, mobilize relevant resources, and design learning environments that are genuinely responsive to the cultural, social, and normative contexts in which their students live and grow. In practice, SBM operates across several domains simultaneously, including curriculum planning, personnel management, resource allocation, and community engagement, and its effectiveness depends significantly on the capacity of school leaders to translate institutional autonomy into coherent and principled educational decisions (Tri et al., 2025).

The relationship between SBM and curriculum development is particularly significant for Islamic schools, where the autonomy granted by decentralized governance creates both an opportunity and a responsibility to design curricula that reflect Islamic educational values rather than simply replicating state curriculum templates with Islamic subject labels added (Ibad & Fatkuroji, 2024). Studies have documented that SBM implementation varies considerably across national contexts, with consistent patterns showing that schools where principals exercise

strong instructional leadership, where teachers are engaged as genuine partners in curriculum decision-making, and where community stakeholders are involved meaningfully in school governance tend to produce better educational outcomes than schools where autonomy is formally granted but operationally constrained by hierarchical cultures or capacity limitations (Pham et al., 2025). These patterns carry direct implications for Islamic schools seeking to use SBM as a vehicle for Quranic-grounded curriculum development, since the institutional conditions that support effective SBM are broadly consistent with the Islamic educational tradition's emphasis on shura, or consultative governance, and collective responsibility for the formation of the next generation.

Recent bibliometric analysis of four decades of SBM scholarship has confirmed that while the field has grown substantially in empirical breadth, key thematic gaps remain, particularly in relation to how SBM intersects with cultural and religious dimensions of curriculum design (Tri et al., 2025). The dominant literature has been produced primarily in Western, East Asian, and Anglophone contexts and has concentrated on governance structures, accountability mechanisms, and student achievement outcomes, with relatively limited attention to how religious epistemologies might actively shape the curricular decisions that SBM governance enables. This gap is consequential for the millions of students enrolled in Islamic schools across Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Muslim-majority countries where SBM policy and Islamic curriculum values must be reconciled within a single institutional framework, and where neither the SBM literature nor the Islamic education literature alone provides adequate theoretical or practical guidance for navigating that reconciliation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a library research methodology, a qualitative approach that systematically collects, examines, and synthesizes information from existing scholarly literature rather than gathering primary empirical data through fieldwork or experimentation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach is appropriate for the present inquiry because the research objectives are conceptual and theoretical in nature, seeking to construct a principled account of how Quranic epistemological foundations translate into curriculum development practice within an SBM governance framework rather than to measure outcomes in a specific institutional setting. Sources consulted include peer-reviewed journal articles, classical Islamic educational texts, government policy documents, and recent empirical studies drawn from databases including Scopus, Google Scholar, and relevant Islamic education repositories, with priority given to publications from 2021 onward to ensure the currency and scholarly relevance of the theoretical synthesis produced.

Data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach, in which textual sources were read systematically for recurring themes, conceptual

categories, and argumentative patterns relevant to the three research questions guiding the study (Miles et al., 2020). Thematic analysis was conducted inductively across the literature, allowing core categories, including curriculum objectives, Quranic epistemology, SBM governance structures, and Islamic institutional conditions, to emerge from the texts rather than being imposed in advance. The findings are presented as a theoretically integrated discussion that brings these categories into dialogue with one another, with the aim of producing conceptual clarity useful to researchers, school practitioners, and educational policymakers working at the intersection of Islamic educational values and decentralized school governance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Quranic Principles as Active Curriculum Architects

The central finding of this study is that the Al-Qur'an does not merely supply religious content for Islamic school curricula but provides an epistemological logic that can actively govern how curriculum objectives are formed, how content is selected, how teaching is conducted, and how learning outcomes are assessed. This finding emerges from a systematic reading of Quranic educational verses alongside classical and contemporary Islamic scholarly commentary, and it challenges the common institutional practice of treating Quranic integration as an additive exercise, placing religious subjects alongside a secular curriculum core rather than allowing Quranic principles to reshape the curriculum's foundational assumptions. Three principles prove particularly generative for curriculum architecture. Tauhid, the recognition of divine unity, demands that all fields of knowledge be understood as interconnected within a single divine order rather than compartmentalized into secular and religious tracks, which means that science, mathematics, language, and social studies are not religiously neutral subjects but opportunities for learners to encounter and reflect on divine creation (Hendawi et al., 2024). The principle of iqra, as the Quranic command to read, observe, and inquire, establishes intellectual engagement as a religious obligation rather than a merely academic activity, conferring on curiosity and critical thinking a moral weight that secular curriculum theory rarely provides. The principle of amanah, or trust, positions both teachers and students as accountable to God for the quality of teaching and learning, transforming evaluation from a bureaucratic compliance function into an ethical practice rooted in Islamic moral consciousness (Chanifah et al., 2021).

What makes this finding analytically significant is precisely that it moves the question of Quranic-based curriculum development beyond content and into structure. Prior scholarship, including Hendawi et al. (2024), has demonstrated that Quranic values such as tauhid, akhlaq, and ilm function as an integrated curriculum architecture, and the present study confirms and extends this argument by showing how each of these values generates specific, actionable demands on curriculum components. Tauhid demands that learning objectives be written to encompass

moral and spiritual formation alongside cognitive achievement, not as optional additions but as core expected outcomes. Iqra demands that pedagogical methodology privilege active inquiry, reflection, and meaning-making over passive reception, making rote transmission an epistemologically inadequate approach even within Quranic education itself. Amanah demands that evaluation instruments capture character development and spiritual awareness alongside academic performance, which requires Islamic schools to develop assessment frameworks that go beyond standardized testing. These are not vague aspirations but structural requirements with direct implications for how school principals and curriculum designers make decisions under SBM governance frameworks (Trianita et al., 2024).

SBM as a Vehicle for Quranic Curriculum Realization

A second major finding concerns the relationship between SBM governance and the practical implementation of Quranic-based curriculum development. The study finds that SBM creates the structural conditions necessary for Quranic curriculum principles to be translated into institutional practice, but only when three specific conditions are simultaneously present. The first is values-driven principal leadership, in which school heads understand institutional autonomy not as administrative freedom but as a normative responsibility to build curricula that are genuinely accountable to Islamic educational values (Haddade et al., 2024). The second is structured teacher participation in curriculum design processes, where teachers are engaged not merely as deliverers of externally designed lesson plans but as active curriculum makers whose Islamic pedagogical knowledge is treated as a legitimate and necessary resource. The third is authentic community engagement that connects the school's curricular vision to the normative expectations of the Muslim families and communities it serves, creating a form of accountability that is simultaneously social and religious rather than purely regulatory (Pham et al., 2025).

Critically, the study finds that when any of these three conditions is absent, SBM's potential as a vehicle for Quranic curriculum development is significantly diminished. Schools where principals frame autonomy primarily in administrative terms, focusing on budget management, accreditation compliance, and staffing decisions, tend to leave curriculum development to default patterns that reproduce secular frameworks with Islamic labels rather than building genuinely Quranic-rooted educational systems. This finding is not merely theoretical but consistent with what Haddade et al. (2024) documented in Indonesian madrasah settings, where management reform programs improved institutional quality when they integrated governance strategy with a coherent educational vision, but produced more limited outcomes when governance reform was treated as primarily a technical undertaking. The implication is that SBM cannot deliver on its promise for Islamic schools through structural reform alone; it requires a normative

foundation from which curriculum decisions can be derived, and the Al-Qur'an provides precisely that foundation when its educational logic is taken seriously at the level of institutional design (Tri et al., 2025).

Engaging Previous Research: Support, Extension, and Contradiction

The findings of this study stand in a nuanced relationship with the research cited in the introduction, at once supporting some conclusions, extending others, and partially contesting one. In relation to Bandur et al. (2022), the present findings broadly confirm that strong leadership and genuine stakeholder engagement are necessary conditions for SBM to produce meaningful educational improvement, and they extend this conclusion in a direction that Bandur et al.'s empirically focused study does not pursue. Where Bandur et al. treat leadership quality and stakeholder engagement as governance and capacity variables, this study argues that in Islamic school contexts these variables have an irreducibly normative dimension: what counts as strong leadership is not simply effective administration but principled alignment of institutional decision-making with Islamic educational values, and what counts as genuine stakeholder engagement is not only community participation in governance processes but shared commitment to a Quranic vision of human formation. The present findings therefore do not contradict Bandur et al. but add an epistemological layer to their structural argument, suggesting that the conditions for effective SBM in Islamic schools cannot be fully captured by governance frameworks alone.

With respect to Khanal and Guha (2023), whose PISA-based findings showed that school autonomy over student-related decisions was most strongly associated with improvements in school climate, the present study extends rather than contradicts their conclusion while introducing a qualification their quantitative design could not address. Khanal and Guha demonstrate that autonomy produces climate improvement but cannot explain why, since their data do not capture the normative content of the decisions schools make under autonomous conditions. This study's findings suggest that the quality of student-related decisions, including assessment design, admission criteria, and disciplinary approaches, depends substantially on the philosophical framework from which they are made, and that when those decisions are grounded in Quranic principles of human dignity, intellectual accountability, and moral formation, the resulting school climate reflects those values in ways that structurally identical but normatively vacant autonomy cannot produce. This is a meaningful extension of Khanal and Guha's empirical finding and opens a productive direction for future quantitative research testing whether Islamic schools with explicitly Quranic curriculum frameworks show stronger climate outcomes than those implementing SBM without such normative grounding (Al Jailani et al., 2025).

The most substantive tension in the findings relates to Alkandari (2023), whose study of Islamic studies teachers in Kuwait implicitly frames curriculum

reform in Islamic educational settings primarily as a problem of teacher readiness for competency-based frameworks. The present study does not dispute that teacher readiness matters, but it finds that framing Islamic curriculum development in terms of competency-based transition risks reproducing the secular curricular logic that Quranic-based curriculum development is precisely intended to interrogate. The deeper challenge is not equipping teachers to implement externally defined competency frameworks more effectively but building institutional conditions in which Quranic principles actively determine what competencies are defined, which content is selected to develop them, and how their attainment is evaluated. In this respect, the present findings move beyond Alkandari's contribution by insisting that the epistemological question, namely, what framework of knowledge and human formation legitimately governs Islamic curriculum design, must be settled before questions of implementation readiness can be meaningfully addressed (Kartika & Afndoliyah, 2025). Islamic schools that approach curriculum reform primarily as a competency alignment exercise without first establishing this normative foundation are likely to produce graduates who perform adequately by secular standards but whose formation as Muslims remains institutionally under-realized.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how the Al-Qur'an functions not as supplementary religious content but as a primary epistemological source capable of actively governing curriculum development within School-Based Management frameworks in Islamic educational institutions. The analysis demonstrates that three Quranic principles, tauhid, iqra, and amanah, generate distinct and operationalizable demands on each structural component of curriculum design, including objectives, content, methodology, and evaluation, and that when these demands are taken seriously at the institutional level, they produce a curriculum architecture that is internally coherent, religiously grounded, and educationally substantive rather than merely declarative. Furthermore, the study finds that SBM provides an institutional governance structure genuinely compatible with Quranic-based curriculum development, but only when school leadership is values-driven, teacher participation in curriculum design is meaningful, and community engagement is anchored in a shared Islamic educational vision rather than reduced to regulatory compliance.

These findings carry practical significance for school principals, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers working within Indonesia's decentralized educational governance system. Islamic schools that treat the autonomy SBM grants as an opportunity to build curricula actively shaped by Quranic epistemological principles, rather than using that autonomy to replicate secular frameworks with Islamic labels, are better positioned to fulfill both their institutional mandate and their religious identity simultaneously. The study also

contributes theoretically by demonstrating that the persistent gap between Islamic educational philosophy and SBM governance literature can be bridged through a principled reading of Quranic educational logic, and that this bridging work has direct implications for how the conditions of effective SBM are understood in religiously grounded institutional contexts.

This study is not without limitations. As a library-based qualitative inquiry, its findings are conceptual and theoretical rather than empirically tested in specific school settings, and the degree to which the institutional conditions identified here actually produce the educational outcomes proposed requires validation through future field-based research. Subsequent studies employing mixed methods designs across multiple Islamic school contexts in Indonesia would allow the theoretical framework developed here to be tested, refined, and extended, particularly in relation to the measurable relationship between Quranic-grounded curriculum frameworks and school climate outcomes, a question that quantitative approaches drawing on existing large-scale datasets could meaningfully begin to address.

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