International Journal of Education, Vocational and Social Science
https://e-journal.citakonsulindo.or.id/index.php/IJEVSS
E-ISSN : 2963 4954
IJEVSS

The Relationship Between Pesantren And Students' Guardians From The Perspective Of Rousseau's Social Contract Theory

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between pesantren and students' guardians through the lens of Rousseau's Social Contract Theory. Amid the structural transformation of pesantren into hybrid institutions integrating traditional authority and modern digital management, tensions increasingly emerge between institutional regulations and parental interventions. Previous studies on pesantren management have predominantly focused on leadership, digitalization, and accountability, leaving a gap in analyzing the sociological dynamics between guardians and pesantren as a moral contract. This research employs a qualitative-descriptive case study approach, involving participatory observation and in-depth interviews with key informants, including the kiai, education managers, student affairs officers, and representatives of guardians. Data were analyzed thematically using Rousseau's concepts of General Will, Particular Will, sovereignty, and the role of The Legislator as interpretive frameworks. The findings reveal that disciplinary violations by guardians—such as forced leave permissions and unauthorized visits—reflect not merely technical noncompliance but a philosophical failure to internalize the collective

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will of the institution. The erosion of "pasrah" (trust-based surrender of authority) and the persistence of emotional intervention demonstrate a shift from affective commitment to calculative commitment. This study contributes theoretically by contextualizing classical Western political philosophy within Islamic educational institutions and by repositioning guardians as moral subjects of an educational contract. Practically, it recommends revitalizing contract literacy, strengthening data-based permission systems, empowering local guardians as discipline ambassadors, and utilizing digital platforms to reinforce institutional trust. Reconstructing the pesantren–guardian relationship on the foundation of collective sovereignty is essential for sustaining educational integrity and character formation.

Keywords: pesantren governance; social contract theory; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; general will; parental engagement; Islamic boarding school management

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (pondok pesantren), as Islamic educational institutions with deep historical roots in Indonesia, have undergone significant structural transformation over the past decade. Originally characterized as informal institutions grounded in sincere devotion to the kiai, pesantren have evolved into complex organizational entities that integrate modern management systems, digitalization, and public accountability (Yugo, 2025). This transformation reflects not only administrative change but also a broader institutional reconfiguration in response to contemporary social and educational demands. Within this evolving landscape, the relationship between pesantren and students' guardians can no longer be understood merely as a conventional teacher–student interaction. Instead, it has developed into a complex social agreement involving the delegation of authority, shared expectations, and negotiated responsibilities. Guardians do not simply entrust their children for instruction; they enter into an implicit contractual relationship that shapes governance, discipline, and moral formation within the boarding school environment.

This phenomenon can be analytically examined through the framework of social contract theory as articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's conception of a collective agreement, in which individuals relinquish aspects of their natural freedom in order to secure civil and moral order, provides a relevant theoretical lens for understanding the evolving dynamics between pesantren institutions and guardians (Rousseau, 2018). The delegation of educational and caregiving authority to pesantren mirrors the philosophical logic of contractual submission to a

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collectively recognized authority.

Thus, the contemporary transformation of pesantren is not solely managerial or technological but also philosophical. The institutional shift toward modernization redefines the moral and social foundations of the pesantren–guardian relationship, positioning it within a broader discourse on collective sovereignty, authority, and shared responsibility. By situating this relationship within Rousseau's theoretical paradigm, the complexities of trust, authority, and institutional legitimacy in Islamic boarding school governance can be more comprehensively understood.

Rousseau postulated that a just society emerges from a “contract” in which each individual relinquishes their natural freedom—often wild and driven solely by personal desire—in order to obtain civil freedom under the protection of the “General Will” (Dahlbeck et al., 2024). This transformation does not eliminate freedom but elevates it, converting instinctive autonomy into morally regulated participation within a collective order. The General Will, in Rousseau's conception, represents the common interest that transcends individual preferences. It is not merely the sum of private desires but a unified orientation toward justice and shared welfare. Through this framework, obedience to collectively agreed rules becomes a form of self-governance rather than submission to external domination (Dahlbeck et al., 2024).

In the context of pesantren, students' guardians voluntarily transfer the authority of care and education of their children to the institution. This act of delegation mirrors Rousseau's contractual logic: guardians consent to institutional discipline, curriculum structures, and boarding regulations as part of a broader educational commitment. By enrolling their children, they symbolically enter into a moral and social agreement with the pesantren community. This surrender of authority is grounded in the expectation of achieving collective benefit (maslahah), particularly in terms of character formation, mastery of religious knowledge, and the cultivation of students' independence (Shofwani et al., 2025).

The pesantren, therefore, functions as the embodiment of a collective will that seeks to shape morally disciplined and spiritually grounded individuals. However, the transition from the guardians' particular will to the pesantren's general will frequently generates sharp friction. Emotional attachments, personal preferences, and immediate family considerations often clash with institutional discipline and collective educational goals. This tension reflects the ongoing struggle between individual autonomy and collective sovereignty inherent in Rousseau's social contract framework.

The tensions that increasingly emerge at the gates of pesantren today reflect what

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Rousseau describes as the conflict between the Particular Will and the General Will (Institute, 2025). This confrontation becomes visible when individual preferences collide with collectively established institutional norms. What appears on the surface as a simple disagreement over regulations in fact represents a deeper philosophical struggle between private desire and shared moral order.

Students' guardians often carry remnants of their “natural freedom” into the institutional sphere, attempting to intervene in pesantren regulations for the sake of immediate emotional comfort. Such interventions include forcing leave permissions for non-urgent reasons or visiting students outside designated hours (Dyer et al., 2022). While these actions may be motivated by affection and concern, they reflect the persistence of particular interests over collective commitments.

From the perspective of social contract theory, these behaviors illustrate the dominance of the Particular Will over the General Will. Rousseau emphasizes that a stable and just community can only function when individuals subordinate personal impulses to collectively agreed principles (Foundation, 2025). When guardians selectively comply with regulations, the moral coherence of the educational contract becomes fragile.

In the pesantren context, the success of education depends heavily on the integrity of this social contract. Total adherence to collective rules—regarding discipline, boarding life, and institutional authority—is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving the pesantren's noble educational objectives (Foundation, 2025). Without such commitment, the formation of character, independence, and spiritual maturity cannot be consistently realized.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Rousseau's Social Contract Concepts within the Pesantren Ecosystem

Rousseau's Concept	Philosophical Description	Application in the Pesantren–Students' Guardians Relationship
State of Nature	Individuals act based on instinct and personal interests (Amour de soi).	Parents raise their children based on subjectivity and emotional attachment without fixed regulations.
Social Contract	A voluntary agreement to	The registration process and

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Rousseau's Concept	Philosophical Description	Application in the Pesantren–Students' Guardians Relationship
	submit to collective authority for mutual protection.	signing of willingness by guardians to comply with pesantren regulations.
General Will	A collective will directed toward public interest and justice.	Disciplinary rules, curriculum, and pesantren regulations designed for the success of all students.
Particular Will	Individual desires that often conflict with the common good.	Sudden requests for leave or illegal visits for the sake of parents' emotional satisfaction.
Popular Sovereignty	The highest power resides in the collective will represented by law.	The legitimacy of pesantren regulations recognized by the community of guardians as a moral standard.

The transformation of pesantren toward a hybrid model that combines traditional values with digital management systems such as SIMATREN demonstrates the institution's effort to clarify the boundaries of this contract in a transparent manner (Shofwani et al., 2025). This shift reflects an attempt to strengthen institutional governance while maintaining the moral and spiritual foundations of the pesantren tradition. However, the effectiveness of this technology ultimately depends on the philosophical awareness of students' guardians regarding their position as parties to the social contract. Without internalizing their moral role within this agreement, digital systems alone cannot ensure compliance or trust. This study therefore aims to examine how this relationship functions in practice and to identify the points of communication failure that give rise to disciplinary violations committed by guardians.

Although the literature on pesantren management has developed rapidly, the majority of studies focus on aspects of kiai leadership, educational digitalization, or economic independence (Yugo, 2025). There remains a gap in the literature that specifically explores the sociology of the

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relationship between students' guardians and the institution through the lens of classical political philosophy, particularly Rousseau's social contract theory. Existing research tends to position guardians as objects of management (stakeholders), rather than as subjects of a contract who possess a moral obligation to relinquish their natural freedom (Byerly, 2013). Moreover, studies on communication barriers between parents and boarding schools often stop at technical solutions, without addressing the deeper roots of the problem, namely the crisis of trust and the failure to internalize the institution's general will (Dyer et al., 2022).

The main problems identified in the field research indicate a degradation of guardians' commitment to the agreed social contract. These problems include:

1. Dysfunction of Permission Regulations: the phenomenon of guardians insistently requesting leave for students on grounds that do not meet official criteria, such as non-essential family events. This disrupts students' learning rhythm and undermines curriculum consistency (Waziroh et al., 2026).
2. Violation of Geographical-Temporal Boundaries: parents residing near the pesantren frequently violate visiting hours and send food from outside, indirectly creating social inequality within the dormitory and weakening students' independence (Dyatmika et al., 2026).
3. Cognitive Failure of Regulations: guardians' lack of understanding of rules despite prior socialization, indicating that initial orientation is treated merely as an administrative ritual rather than a transfer of value commitment (Yugo, 2025).
4. Erosion of Trust (Pasrah): the low level of total surrender in entrusting children to the institution. Guardians often retain full control over their children, hindering the pesantren's ability to form students' character comprehensively (Dyer et al., 2022).

The research indicates a shift from kiai-centric management toward professional, data-based management (Shofwani et al., 2025). However, this study offers novelty by integrating Rousseau's theory to analyze guardians' behavior. It argues that guardians' violations are not merely disciplinary issues but manifestations of a failed transformation from “natural man” into “citizens of the pesantren.” The originality of this research lies in applying the concept of The Legislator (the kiai as lawgiver) to guide guardians in understanding the general will above their personal desires (Dahlbeck et al., 2024).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive approach using a case study method at a

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pesantren representing a managerial transition from a traditional to a modern system. The selected site reflects an institutional transformation in which classical religious authority coexists with contemporary management structures, making it a relevant context for examining social contract dynamics within Islamic boarding school governance.

Data collection was conducted through participatory observation and in-depth interviews with predetermined key informants. Participatory observation enabled the researcher to directly examine daily interactions, institutional practices, and patterns of rule compliance within the pesantren environment. Meanwhile, in-depth interviews were used to capture the subjective perspectives of actors involved in the pesantren–guardian relationship.

The first key informant was KH. Erman Rifa'i, the caretaker (pengasuh) of the pesantren. He provided insights into spiritual leadership and articulated the institutional vision of the General Will. His perspective was central to understanding how authority, discipline, and moral objectives are philosophically framed within the pesantren system.

The second informant, Ustadz Ahmad Achbar, who is responsible for educational management, contributed data regarding curriculum disruptions resulting from violations of permission regulations. His testimony clarified the academic implications of guardians' interventions, particularly how forced leave requests affect learning continuity and instructional consistency.

The third informant, Ustadzah Rahma, who oversees student affairs and caregiving, offered insights into daily interactions and violations of visiting rules. Her observations illuminated how geographical proximity and emotional considerations influence patterns of rule-breaking and dormitory discipline.

The fourth informant, Ibu Bunga Hati, representing students' guardians, provided a subjective parental perspective regarding the dilemma between affection for children and adherence to institutional regulations. Her narrative revealed the emotional and moral tensions experienced by guardians when navigating the boundaries between personal will and collective commitment.

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion verification (Saputro & Sukiman, n.d.). Rousseau's Social Contract Theory was employed as an interpretive framework to analyze interview and observational data. All citations and references were prepared in accordance with the Chicago Manual of Style (CIMOS) 17th Edition, as requested.

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Table 2. Methodological Matrix and Supporting Data

Component	Description	Source/Reference
Paradigm	Interpretivism / Qualitative	(Yugo, 2025)
Key Informants	Kiai, Ustadz, Ustadzah, Students' Guardians	Internal Interview Data
Instruments	Interview Guide & Observation Sheet	(Karim et al., 2023)
Analysis Technique	Thematic & Comparative (Social Contract)	(Dahlbeck et al., 2024)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings of the field research reveal that the relationship between the pesantren and students' guardians is currently in a paradoxical condition. On the one hand, there is formal recognition of the pesantren's authority; on the other hand, there is practical resistance to dormitory regulations. Based on the results of interviews and observations, several key findings were identified that validate the research problem.

1. Emotional Intervention in Permission Regulations

Based on interviews with Ustadz Ahmad Achbar, it was recorded that the rate of student absenteeism due to “forced” leave requests by parents reached concerning levels on certain days. Parents frequently arrived with emotionally driven reasons, such as “the child misses the atmosphere of home” or “there is a distant family thanksgiving event.” These requests, although framed in terms of affection and concern, often disregarded the institutional criteria established by the pesantren.

From Rousseau's perspective, such actions represent an expression of the Particular Will, which undermines the order of justice by granting privilege to one student over others who remain committed to dormitory discipline (Nitish Yadav, 2026). When individual emotional interests override collectively agreed regulations, the equilibrium of the social contract becomes destabilized.

The inability of guardians to perceive the long-term consequences of these interruptions—particularly on the consistency of memorization and the comprehension of classical Islamic texts—demonstrates a failure to understand the ultimate purpose of the educational contract. Instead

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of supporting the formation of disciplined and independent learners, these interventions risk weakening the continuity and integrity of the pesantren's pedagogical objectives.

2. Geographical Proximity as a Challenge to Discipline

Ustadzah Rahma reported that guardians who reside within a close radius (less than 15 km) tend to perceive the pesantren as an "extension of home" rather than as an institution possessing full sovereignty. This perception weakens the psychological boundary between family space and institutional space, leading some parents to treat boarding regulations as flexible rather than binding.

Field observations revealed the frequent occurrence of unauthorized visits conducted through "back routes" or the delivery of food at the gate outside official visiting hours. While these actions may appear minor, they gradually erode the authority of institutional rules and normalize selective compliance with dormitory regulations.

This phenomenon generates social jealousy among students who come from distant islands or remote regions and do not have similar access to parental visits or external provisions. Rousseau emphasizes that a social contract must create equality among all members of the community (Dahlbeck et al., 2024). When geographical proximity is used as justification for violating rules, the principle of equality within the dormitory collapses, undermining the collective foundation of the pesantren community.

3. Communication Gap and Cognitive Understanding of Regulations

Interviews with Ibu Bunga Hati revealed the human dimension behind these violations. She acknowledged that the initial socialization of rules during student admission was highly intensive, making it difficult for guardians to remember the details comprehensively. The density of information at the beginning of enrollment often resulted in partial retention rather than deep understanding.

However, beyond a mere issue of memory, there is a tendency among guardians to engage in what can be described as "moral negotiation." They understand the regulations textually but fail to grasp them substantively. In practice, this means that rules are acknowledged at the surface level yet remain open to reinterpretation when confronted with emotional or situational pressures.

This misunderstanding aligns with Rousseau's concern that people are often "blind" to their own true interests and therefore require continuous guidance from a lawgiver (The Legislator) who can illuminate the meaning of the general will (Dahlbeck et al., 2024). Without such guidance, the internalization of institutional values remains incomplete, and compliance

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becomes conditional rather than principled.

4. Crisis of Pasrah and Caregiving Authority

KH. Erman Rifa'i emphasized that the essence of pesantren education lies in ta'alluq, a strong spiritual and emotional bond among students, guardians, and the kiai. This bond forms the moral foundation of trust upon which the educational process is built. Within this framework, the act of entrusting a child to the pesantren is not merely administrative but deeply spiritual and relational.

However, he observed a decline in the degree of pasrah (total surrender or trust) among guardians. Many parents formally entrust their children to the institution while still attempting to dictate how their children should be educated. This attitude resembles citizens who wish to enjoy the protection of the state yet refuse to pay taxes or comply with traffic laws. Such partial submission weakens the integrity of institutional authority.

In social contract theory, refusal to submit to the General Will signifies a choice to return to the chaotic "state of nature," where personal impulses override collective order (Foundation, 2025). In the pesantren context, this regression ultimately harms the students themselves, as it disrupts the consistent moral and disciplinary environment necessary for comprehensive character formation.

Table 3. Summary of Field Findings Based on Informants

Informant	Problem Focus	Main Findings
KH. Erman Rifa'i	Vision & Authority	Decline in the value of pasrah due to the logic of educational consumerism.
Ustadz Ahmad Achbar	Curriculum	Learning disruptions caused by forced leave requests that do not meet official criteria.
Ustadzah Rahma	Dormitory Sociology	Violations of visiting hours by local guardians undermine equality.
Ibu Bunga Hati	Parental Perspective	Dilemma between missing their child and complying with complex regulations.

Discussion

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The analysis of the field findings indicates that pesantren today are not merely facing technical disciplinary problems, but rather a philosophical crisis in understanding the educational contract. Rousseau argues that true freedom is not doing whatever we desire, but obeying the laws that we have collectively established for the common good (Dahlbeck et al., 2024).

1. General Will vs. Will of All

Many students' guardians are trapped in what Rousseau calls the "Will of All," which is merely the sum of individual desires that are often self-interested (Nitish Yadav, 2026). This aggregation of private wishes may appear democratic on the surface, yet it does not necessarily reflect the collective good. Instead, it represents a convergence of personal interests that may conflict with institutional stability.

For example, imagine one thousand guardians each wanting their child to return home for one day per month. For each individual parent, one day seems insignificant and harmless. However, from the institutional perspective of the pesantren, this would result in the absence of approximately thirty students every day, thereby disrupting the continuity and stability of collective instruction.

The "General Will" of the pesantren, by contrast, establishes that no student may return home except in emergency situations, in order to safeguard the educational quality of all students. This principle prioritizes the integrity of the collective learning environment over individual preferences. The rule is not designed to suppress affection, but to protect academic consistency and moral formation.

Guardians' compliance with this regulation constitutes a form of participation in the sovereignty of the pesantren (Paul, 2020). By subordinating private interests to collectively agreed rules, guardians affirm their role as moral partners in the educational contract, rather than merely consumers of institutional services.

2. The Role of the Kiai as Interpreter of the Contract (The Legislator)

In situations where students' guardians experience value disorientation, the role of the kiai becomes crucial as The Legislator. According to Rousseau, the lawgiver is a figure capable of transforming human nature from isolated individuals into members of a greater collective entity (Dahlbeck et al., 2024). In this context, KH. Erman Rifa'i functions not as a tyrant, but as an educator who guides guardians to look beyond momentary longing and to understand that dormitory discipline is an investment in their children's independence and character formation.

The modernization of management through digital systems such as SIMATREN should therefore be understood as a supportive instrument that enables the kiai to enforce justice

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objectively. Through transparent and data-based governance, the institution minimizes perceptions that rules apply only to those without direct access to leadership, thereby strengthening fairness and institutional legitimacy (Shofwani et al., 2025).

3. The Dialectic of Pasrah and Accountability

The concept of pasrah in pesantren is often misunderstood as total passivity. However, when viewed through the lens of social contract theory, pasrah represents an active act of entrusting authority based on trust. It is not the absence of agency, but a conscious decision to delegate caregiving and educational authority to an institution believed to act for the common good. Problems arise when this trust is eroded by negative news about pesantren circulated on social media—such as reports of violence or bullying—which leads guardians to become excessively protective (Dyatmika et al., 2026). As a result, a social contract that should be grounded in affective commitment gradually shifts into a calculative and transactional commitment (Brown et al., 2019). In responding to this challenge, pesantren must strengthen managerial transparency while preserving their essential spiritual character, ensuring that accountability does not undermine but rather reinforces institutional trust.

Table 4. Reconstruction of the Relationship through Rousseau's Paradigm

Relational Dimension	Current Condition (Crisis)	Ideal Condition (Social Contract)
Authority of Rules	Regarded as negotiable restrictions.	Regarded as instruments of collective freedom.
Guardians' Compliance	Based on surveillance.	Based on internalization of the initial agreement.
Communication	One-way and administrative.	Dialogical and based on strategic partnership.
Technology	Merely a tool for monitoring grades and finances.	A medium for strengthening social contract commitment.

This research provides significant theoretical and practical contributions to the development of Islamic educational management in the contemporary era.

1. Theoretical Contribution

Academically, this study successfully contextualizes Western political philosophy

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(Rousseau) within a traditional Islamic institution (pesantren). It demonstrates that universal principles concerning sovereignty, the general will, and the social contract can be employed to analyze sociological behavior within religious communities. This study also enriches the literature on pesantren management by introducing the dimension of "guardians' citizenship" as active subjects within the educational ecosystem (Byerly, 2013).

2. Managerial Implications for Pesantren

Based on the findings, pesantren are recommended to undertake the following strategic measures:

a. Redesign of Rule Socialization: Transform the pattern of rule dissemination from merely reading regulations into a philosophical discussion forum addressing the question, "Why do these rules exist and how do they protect your child?" Guardians must be involved in understanding the logic behind each restriction (Dyatmika et al., 2026).

b. Formalization of the Psychological Contract: Add a clause of inner commitment in the enrollment agreement, emphasizing the delegation of caregiving authority (pasrah) within the boundaries agreed upon according to Islamic law (shar'i) and state law (Dyer et al., 2022).

c. Optimization of Digital Systems for Trust Building: Utilize applications such as SIMATREN not only for financial transactions but also to provide regular updates on students' character development, so that guardians feel reassured and do not perceive the need to engage in physical intervention or unauthorized visits (Shofwani et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

The relationship between the pesantren and the students' guardians in the perspective of Rousseau's Social Contract Theory is a bond aimed at transforming natural freedom into moral and civil freedom for the students. Violations committed by guardians, ranging from forcing permission to take students home to visiting outside official hours, indicate the incomplete awareness of the institution's "General Will." Guardians often still act as isolated individuals (particular will), rather than as responsible members of the pesantren community.

Misunderstanding of regulations and the low attitude of "pasrah" reflect a wide communication gap between the ideal vision of the kiai and the emotional reality of parents. To address this, the pesantren cannot rely solely on physical firmness or digital systems. A revitalization of the social contract is required through continuous education for guardians so that they understand that every dormitory restriction is an instrument to liberate their children from

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dependency and moral decay.

1. Strengthening Contract Literacy: Pesantren must routinely hold seminars on “Pesantren Contract-Based Parenting” to align parents' expectations with the reality of the dormitory system.
2. Data-Based Permission Policy: Utilizing a strict yet transparent digital permission system, where the reasons for permission can be objectively verified to avoid jealousy among guardians.
3. Empowerment of Local Guardians: Appointing guardians who live near the pesantren as “Discipline Ambassadors” who help educate their peers, rather than becoming parties who frequently violate rules due to geographical proximity.
4. Digital Trust Node: Increasing the intensity of positive content through social media and internal applications to counterbalance negative media stigma and strengthen guardians' confidence that their children are safe under the protection of the pesantren contract.

By restoring this relationship to the track of collective sovereignty, the pesantren will be able to maintain the integrity of its education while fostering harmonious and productive relationships with guardians. This social contract is not intended to restrain, but to ensure that all community energy is directed toward one point: the emergence of a generation of students who are intellectually excellent and spiritually steadfast.

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