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TERRITORIAL ANCHORAGE IN THE FRENCH DAIRY EWE SECTOR: HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTERDEPENDENT LOCALIZED AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

JEL classification: Q13, Q18

Morgane Millet*, François Casabianca**

Abstract. *In the eighties, the dairy ewe producers of Pyrénées Atlantiques (PA) and Corsica (CS) faced a crisis: most of the Roquefort (RF) industrial cheesemakers that had collected their milk for nearly a century withdrew from both areas. A new dynamic had to be created: the rebirth of on-farm processing (involving local technical and cultural memory) and the emergence of new processing firms. Local stakeholders created PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) products: “Ossau Iraty” in PA and “Brocciu” in CS. These PDOs are still having some difficulty in building consensus within their local stakeholder systems. The shared history of producing milk for RF cheesemakers (the Roquefort Era) and the period that followed their withdrawal conditioned the situation for both the PA and the CS systems: the last 40 years have been a period of re-appropriation of the production system by local stakeholders (with varying degrees of success and completeness). To analyze this period and the current situation of the PA and CS systems, we have adopted the concept of “territorial anchorage”. This concept implies two things: (i) A geographical area and a system of stakeholders can interact in a dynamic way. A long-term*

analysis provides an overview of how a local system has changed over time. Such an analysis may make the current situation more understandable and shed some light on how it could evolve; (ii) For activities to be linked to an area, there must be a set of links of different intensities and past durations (social cohesion, economic value-added, a recognized terroir). As these links have been recently reactivated or re-created, some elements (e.g. certified cheeses) are becoming territorial resources. These mechanisms are also subject to external forces (co-existence of different processing methods, use of the territory’s image). With the territorial anchorage concept we can compare two territories, the study of each being enriched by examining the other’s trajectory and pattern of links with its area. It may help us to understand the constraints faced in building coherence and autonomy in a cheese production system at different institutional levels (local economy, social and economic organization, policy).

Keywords: SYAL, territorial anchorage, trajectory, interdependence, Pyrénées-Atlantiques, Corsica Island, Roquefort

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1. Introduction

Much has been written about food products and their links with their territory (Bérard et al., 2008; Casabianca et al., 2005; Praly, 2010). The literature tends to show that factors connected with a local area (“territorial resources”) can provide leverage for local development as they enable stakeholders in a given food sector to remain competitive and even to take advantage of difficult production conditions.

These studies draw on the school of thought on localized agrifood systems (Fourcade et al., 2010; Muchnik, 2009). A localized agrifood system (SYAL in French) is defined as “*production and service organizations (agricultural and agrifood units, marketing, services and gastronomic enterprises, etc.) linked by their characteristics and operational ways to a specific territory. The environment, products, people and their institutions, know-how, feeding behavior and relationship networks come together within a territory to produce a type of agricultural and food organization in a given spatial scale*” (Muchnik, 2009). The SYAL is a construct that has its roots in a permanent interaction between men and the space in which they live and work. The concept of “territorial anchorage” allows us to analyze such interactions.

However, most studies involved short term analysis. Our goal is to consider the construction of a SYAL from a historical perspective. Our empirical work focuses on three SYALs devoted to producing ewe cheeses: the Roquefort (RF), Pyrénées-Atlantiques¹ (PA) and Corsica (CS) systems. These three SYALs are interconnected by a shared history. From the late nineteenth century until 1980, a period we call the “Roquefort Era”, RF needed more milk than could be produced locally and used PA and CS as raw material providers. When RF withdrew, PA and CS followed different paths, so their situations today differ (Champion et al., 2013). To explain their current successes and difficulties, we set out here to trace their trajectories back and so understand better (i) how the PA and CS SYALS have been constructed, and (ii) to what extent their present is rooted in those historical elements (local history and impact of the “Roquefort Era”).

To do this we gathered information from the literature and from exploratory interviews². These were conducted during the summer of 2013, in order to better understand the situations in PA and CS and to define the research topic. We interviewed current and former stakeholders in both areas (extension services, institutions, producers and dairy firms). Below, we first spell out our “territorial anchorage” concept. We then analyze the history of the local cheeses in PA and CS that have acquired PDO status. Finally we discuss our main findings.

2. Theoretical keys: Territorial Anchorage and how it fits with SYALs

Territorial anchorage is a concept developed in France to analyze relationships between an object and a territory (Frayssignes, 2005). We will set out the main properties of the approach (1.1) and how we have used it for our analysis (1.2).

¹ Department in southwest France, divided between two strong cultural regions, Béarn and Pays Basque, with no institutional acknowledgment.

² Exploratory interviews conducted as part of thesis work (2013-2016).

2.1. Territorial anchorage

Territorial anchorage is defined as “a localized process of collective learning carried out in order to create resources” (Zimmermann, 1998). We think this definition is incomplete: it makes territorial anchorage a purely intentional process driven by economics, the strategic choice of a firm looking for a long-term localization solution. Although it implies that a territory is not a homogenous, inert space, and that economic activities are localized for reasons other than economic, it still treats a territory as relatively passive, a potential set of resources. It also implies that territorial anchorage is not a reality until stakeholders have consciously decided to create collective value-added from it.

To complete the definition, we use the proposal of Debarbieux (2014) to consider territorial anchorage as an interaction between two processes:

- An active one implemented by stakeholders according to their strategies. This matches Zimmermann’s definition (1998). This type of stakeholder/territory relationship is contextual and intentional: an anchoring action is involved.
- A passive (unintentional) one by which a stakeholder is anchored in a given space. A “territory” is a web that conditions the stakeholder’s reasoning, practices and representations (Crevoisier & Gigon, 2000). This type of relationship is structural. Bérard et al. (2008) develop the idea in connection with traditional food products: beyond rational economics, there is a set of inherited and selected practices which make sense in a given territory. This resource enables local producers to resist environmental change or to enhance social and economic dynamics, but can also become an obstacle to change management.

These are two distinct processes, but they coexist in time and space, conducting a constant dialogue (Frayssignes, 2005). A group of people in a location are permeated by the space they occupy; in return, they influence it by constructing common rules to manage the space and by mobilising its resources. This constant interaction between a group and a territory tightens their bond, makes it irreversible and constitutes territorial anchorage.

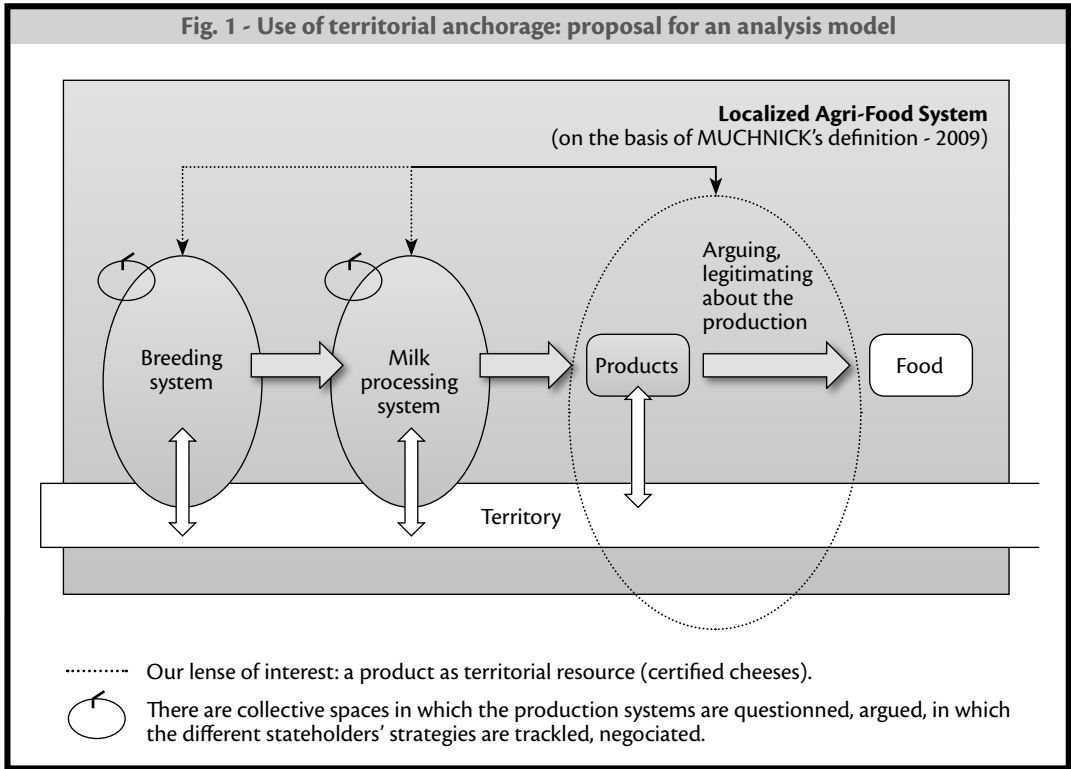
2.2. Dealing with the concept’s systemic complexity: a necessary focus on resources

According to Frayssignes (2005) who used this concept to analyze the interactions between certified cheese systems (specific SYALs) and their territories, territorial anchorage is one of the processes revealed when a group tries to ensure the longevity of its economic activity. In his model, achieving this goal depends on autonomy: “A system is autonomous if it has the ability to govern itself according to its own principles” (Frayssignes, 2001). For this to work, collective rules must be constructed or generated to prevent contradictions arising within the SYAL’s various dimensions: unless its coherence is ensured, the longevity of a SYAL is in jeopardy.

Therefore, we need to characterize the different ways a SYAL relates to its territory (Muchnick, 2009; Di Meo, 1998). There are cultural dimensions (how the area is incorporated in local people’s histories, how it is shared with others), social ones (how collective rules affecting day-to-day practices are built), economic ones (how a territory is harnessed and used to create wealth) and institutional ones (how organizations appropriate a territory or an element (a territorial resource) within it. These dimensions come together to stabilize the joint construction of a SYAL and a territory.

Another feature of territorial anchorage adds to its complexity: the various elements that make up a SYAL constitute a system. Therefore, rather than regarding a SYAL as a black box, we break it down into the main territorial resources the stakeholders are dealing with. Cerdan and Fournier (2007), studying different SYALs and their trajectories, found that a SYAL takes

shape around a technical object combined with a strong organization capable of managing it. A SYAL is a triptych comprised of {man / product (and methods) / territory}. The coherence of the SYAL is to be observed at the level of its main organization. We have adapted this model to our examination of cheese systems (Figure 1).



Working on this basis, we have taken two objects (the certified cheeses currently produced in PA and CS) and analyzed to what extent the object has been activated and appropriated by stakeholders, how the stakeholders have constructed and standardized the practices necessary for its production, how they regulated it (organization), and how the triptych has evolved over a 30-years period.

3. Trajectories of the localized agrifood systems: historical background and analysis of local cheese certification

For many years the particularity of RF cheese was its ripening in the caves of Combalou, (Roquefort-sur-Soulzon, south-western France). Thus it was the cave owners who controlled the particular character of RF cheese. In the nineteenth century, as RF cheese became very popular and demand grew, the cave owners expanded production by extending milk collection southwards from the traditional area (the *rayon*) to CS (in 1892) and PA (in 1903). This form of organization remained for nearly a century: the “Roquefort Era”. Below we set out the main

characteristics of that era (3.1), then the subsequent developments leading to the PA and CS SYALs, particularly the context in which their certified cheeses were created and developed (3.2).

3.1. Background: the “Roquefort Era”

The RF firms have always operated in the same way, using dairies that collect the milk and process it into curd loaves, which are then sent to the Roquefort area for ripening (Delfosse, 2007).

The impact of the RF companies’ activities

In CS and PA, RF firms favored the plains and hills – areas well suited to dairy sheep farming – and made little use of the mountainous areas. Thus the impact of RF activity varied from area to area in CA and PA, in terms of cheese processing systems (abandonment of cheese making) (Arnos, 1934), sheep farming systems (specialization, end of double transhumance) and the organization of the farmers’ work (the introduction of a wage system, with the Roquefort firms employing farmers to produce milk, eroded traditional collective practices) (Renucci, 1970).

For example, in PA, there is a contrast between the Béarn mountains where RF had little impact, so that sheep farming methods and on-farm cheese production continued, and the Pays Basque with its more favorable landforms, where cheese traditions gradually declined in favor of specialized dairy ewe farming for RF firms. Similarly, in CS sheep farmers in hard-to-reach areas kept more strongly their cheese-making traditions (Rieutort, 1995).

The RF system’s structure: maintaining PA and CS as marginal areas

Sheep farmers in PA and CS were not treated as part of the RF system and did not have the same rights as farmers in the traditional *rayon* (Delfosse & Prost, 1998). Since 1925, RF cheese has been protected by law. In 1930 a joint organization of producers and processors, the Roquefort Confederation, was created to implement the law and oversee the RF system’s functioning.

But producers in CS and PA were not represented in this organization; it dealt only with the *rayon* producers (Rieutort, 1995). PA and CS were thus “annexes” – *associats* in French, defined as “spaces tightly dependant or more precisely dominated by an external centre, but which do not entirely lose their personality and whose borders are clearly established” (Delfosse, 2007).

With the “silent” revolution in the French dairy ewe sector that occurred between 1960 and 1980, the “annexes” were no longer needed for RF cheese production (Rieutort, 1995). The RF system was reconfigured: most of the firms quit the “annexes” to focus on the *rayon*. The main RF cheese processor that remained in PA and CS, though on a reduced scale, was Société des Caves (which we shall call RS). That marked the end of the “Roquefort Era” and caused the re-emergence of territorial anchorage in PA and CS, as the Roquefort firms no longer acted as drivers of the production system.

3.2. Trajectories of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) cheeses in PA and CS

Choosing cheese certification to protect stakeholders’ heritage

RS began a strategy of diversification in the “annexes”. It took an interest in local know-how and local cheeses, tending to appropriate local cheese recipes, at least to reinvent them, introducing technology and appropriating the regional cheeses’ image of authenticity. In CS, RS notably decided to process Brocciu, a Corsican cheese made from whey. “Considering the importance the islanders attached to the production and consumption of this cheese, their frustration was surely not only economic but also cultural: this was like a form of appropriation of an element of Corsican identity” (Delfosse & Prost, 1998: p12). In PA, the diversification strategy started earlier, in 1964,

when RS started up a local firm, Pyrenefrom, to process local cheeses; most of them originating from Béarn (Delfosse, 2007).

In order to protect their heritage, CS and PA sheep farmers created their own AOCs (*Appellations d'origine contrôlée*): Ossau-Iraty in PA (1980) and Brocciu in CS (1983). That process was initially driven by farmers who made their own cheeses and who decided to lay down the AOC's specifications in order to exclude RS (Ricard, 1997). Local stakeholders had a reference in mind: the RF stakeholders had ensured strong institutional protection for Roquefort. "*The Pyrenees Producers have been able to make good use of the Roquefort lesson and in 1980 obtained a protected designation of origin for their dairy ewe cheese*" (Delfosse, 2007). Initially, compliance with the dynamic was widespread: most stakeholders in both territories joined in, from the farmers to the newly-created firms.

Initially, the AOCs' specifications and production areas were defined strictly in response to RS strategy. Stakeholders of both territories decided to include all the former RF collection areas even though this might lead to inconsistency or conflict. For instance, despite traditional differences in cheese making and a cultural contrast between Béarn and Pays Basque, the PA stakeholders decided to group them together around the same certification. The name of the AOC reflects this strategy: it is completely made up, putting together iconic areas of Béarn (Ossau Valley) and the Pays Basque (Iraty Forest). This has been controversial, many farmers thinking that it could not reflect the local heritage. In both PA and CS, the core technical specifications are strongly focused on processing recipes. This is because the producers were in a hurry to protect their know-how from appropriation by RS (Sainte-Marie et al., 1995), and also – a less direct reason – because there are no rules on breeding or farming methods in the RF specifications.

Step by step: how Ossau-Iraty and Brocciu evolved

Never having been part of such an institution, local farmers lacked experience of AOCs (legal protection, organization, management). In the eighties, the AOC stakeholders had to face disappointments: the big firms were weakening AOCs in both territories. In PA, the main firm, a newly settled one which had strongly encouraged the creation of Ossau-Iraty, decided to withdraw from the AOC: its managers did not want to comply with the cheese processing rules (which forbade ultra filtration). In CS, some rules were missing from the Brocciu specifications and some local firms and RS took advantage of this, using methods that altered the cheese's traditional characteristics (use of powdered milk, non-traditional heating methods).

The nineties marked a shift for both AOCs. In 1992 the EU introduced PDO legislation; the early nineties also saw changes in France as a whole and in CS and PA (Sainte Marie et al., 1995). In PA there was a production crisis in 1991 with a worrying drop in milk prices. So the stakeholders did more work on their PDO specifications and introduced rules that had been lacking (e.g. named local breeds in PA, recognition of farm-made Brocciu in CS). This involved a long period of hard work to structure the PDOs organizations: they were brought into line with local realities (widespread practice of on-farm processing; rotation of presidency between processors, farmers delivering milk and farmers processing on-farm) and their operating rules were drawn up.

Over the past decade the PDOs' trajectories have differed. In CS, the PDO organization was jeopardized when Brocciu's collective and institutional activity ceased owing to management issues. Stakeholders deserted until 2010 when INAO (French national institute for PDOs)

threatened to abolish it. Currently, the main firms comply with it, as do their milk supplying farmers (at the firms' demand), while most farmers who process on-farm have lost interest in it. More recently, numerous local cheese certification projects have emerged (e.g. Niolu and Bastellicciu). These projects are set up explicitly in opposition to the Brocciu example (Linck et al., 2009) and they are addressing the issue of defining their areas of production, an issue that was evaded for the Brocciu PDO.

In PA, this last decade has seen major changes in Ossau-Iraty specifications regarding the milk, dairy processing and cheese ripening. Obviously, this has not all gone smoothly. There was a crisis in 2005, a conflict between farmers who wanted to quickly add to the rules (restricting dairy production, ending the use of silage) and others who feared such rapid change and the risk of exclusion (silage is quite widespread in the area, and the restriction on dairy volume was not understood as there was no overproduction). A consensus finally emerged: the volume limit has been raised and most of the contentious elements will be implemented in 2017 (ten years after their adoption as future mandatory rules). More recently, stakeholders have clarified Ossau-Iraty's specifications: distinctions are to be brought in concerning cheese from mountain summer pastures and have already been introduced for cheeses processed on-farm.

4. Discussion: territorial anchorage, for how long?

4.1. The dialectic between structural and contextual territorial anchorage

As soon as stakeholders became aware of what their territory had to offer and integrated those elements into the reproduction of their systems, that marked the change from passive to active anchorage, a change reflected in the creation of the two PDOs. However, such a transition needed a path proper to each territory. Some patterns are common to both territories: initially, the cheese certifications were based on the territories' strong identities and the stakeholders' attachment to their heritage. "*Being Corsican, they had recognized each other as co-owners of the Certification, without feeling the need to spell out what that meant [notably] in terms of access to the value-added*" (Sainte-Marie et al, 1995). However, they had to give substance to the specifications. This meant first reifying their heritage, making it possible for action to begin. Then the stakeholders learnt to organize themselves and to draw up rules for mobilizing the resources and managing them over the long term.

Active territorial anchorage also involves making choices. In CS and PA, to mobilize the cheese resources the decision was taken to institutionalize them through PDO certification. Choosing certification based on a single product resulted in eroding a rich local heritage. While everyone acknowledged that there were various types of product in the territory, the stakeholders were in a hurry and this led them to select just one predominant type of product. Stakeholder strategy (both PDO and brands) was to merge Béarn with Pays Basque, and no certification was considered for cow's milk cheese (Cazenave-Piarrot, 1985), which became a lower-value product. Similar erosion occurred in CS. Focusing on Brocciu and making no distinction between goat Brocciu and ewe Brocciu resulted in the minority goat Brocciu receiving no professional attention. In both territories these choices changed the resource base, either in terms of characteristics (mixed goat and ewe cheese giving way to pure ewe cheese and the range of local cheeses becoming much reduced) or in their relationship to the territory (certification based on the traditional RF area instead of the traditional production areas of the local cheeses).

4.2. Construction of autonomy

Structural anchorage is based not only on the shared feeling of owning a collective heritage. It also depends on the existence and building up of common identity references for a particular community living in a particular space. These references emanate from a historical process and selective memory. In our cases, local stakeholders defined “identity markers” (Muchnik, 2009) based both on their representations of RF and on their shared identity. In both CS and PA, RF is a part of local history, an important factor in the collective memory that has influenced stakeholders’ choices and behaviors. The influence of the RF Era can be easily identified in the way the specifications were constructed (external tools, references used).

In both territories, the choice of PDO led to tensions and conflicts. The decisions made regarding the PDO areas and specifications were disputed. As stakeholders attempted to re-appropriate their heritage by basing their action on the tools used by RF (legal protection of RF cheese, and the Confederation), they sought to achieve consistency across the whole sector and unify the different stakeholder strategies. Though this institutionalization seemed unanimous at first, it soon became clear that there were many different representations and practices within one territory. Within each SYAL the negotiations over the PDO were unequal; which is one of the reasons why the place of each PDO is different in each territory.

4.3. Coherence

In CS, it took 20 years of joint work by researchers and cheese professionals to transform Brocciu from heritage to “*a process of social construction and the product of such a process*” (Sainte-Marie et al., 1995). However, this has not been enough. During this last decade, Brocciu seem to have gone back to the reification stage, most of the on-farm processors having quit. The case of Ossau-Iraty is perhaps more nuanced: the PDO specification has been narrowed, and producers have continued to comply with it. However, only one third of the dairy output that meets the specification is processed under the Ossau-Iraty label (Champion et al., 2013).

PDOs like these, based on strong identities, are of interest to dairy firms. In each of these territories they constitute a high-quality product that can help to introduce consumers to the brand’s other cheeses. However, most firms do not need to get much involved in the organization or to concern themselves with tightening the specifications. In fact, most firms have chosen brand strategies other than the PDO approach, building on the powerful public images of Corsica (e.g. Fium’orbu and Corsica brands) and the Pays Basque within PA (e.g. Etorcki, Capitoul and Petit Basque brands) (Ricard, 1997).

PDOs are weakened from both sides: opportunists avoiding restrictive rules take advantage of the PDO’s reputation, while purists do not join the PDO because it falls short of their representation of territorial anchorage. In both territories, other ways of creating value-added have emerged in the last decades. To what extent can all these dynamics coexist within each territory, and what types of territorial anchorage do they refer to?

So territorial anchorage is not necessarily an effective lever for development, despite what some researchers think. While it can boost local dynamics, notably in the face of crisis, the longevity of such actions is uncertain. Finally, as Cerdan and Fournier (2007) wrote, the longevity of a productive system is closely tied to the ability of local stakeholders to maintain the particularity of their product and makes sure it is managed in a manner consistent with the realities of production.

5. Conclusion

The literature argues that a SYAL analysis cannot be done without laying importance on the historical factors that led its construction (Cañada & Muchnik, 2011; Frayssignes, 2001). Our historical study of the French dairy ewe sector confirms the relevance of that. SYAL theorization needs to consider the dynamics of the system and to adopt a more long-term approach in order to better understand current phenomena. Moreover, our comparative analysis of PA and CS helps us to understand the constraints faced in building autonomy and coherence in both areas.

However, under the influence of economics, the SYAL approach often focuses more on consumption trends and their role in the valorization of local products. While we do not deny the importance of such factors, this approach underplays the historical dimension of a SYAL's territorial anchorage. We have shown that local stakeholders' arrangements are not directly determined by market and consumption trends but are evolving under their own power with representations, networks of firms, professional identities and institution building. Taking a systemic view we have highlighted the construction of territorial resources (such as cheese products) and territorial devices (such as PDO syndicates) as forces that can enhance territorial anchorage in their SYALs. The appropriation of these particularities has great potential for strengthening an identity shared by local actors.

This assertion also has policy implications: territorial resources were first considered as a way to ensure social peace in troubled areas (Pays Basque, Corsica), before being understood as a lever for development. Nowadays the Region authorities are keen to subsidize local breeds (in PA and CS) and geographical indications (Ossau-Iraty in PA and new PDO applications in CS).

Thus a food sector becomes a SYAL when territorial factors make a system of it. "*All systems are unstable; their evolution (consolidation/disaggregation) depends on the interaction (forces of cohesion or repulsion) between elements in the systems*" (Muchnik, 2009). We have shown the value of an analysis in terms of territorial anchorage, embedding SYALs as objects in time, following their own trajectory, and in space, involved in interdependencies and searching for relative autonomy.

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