

Losing Diamantino: Local knowledge, visual narratives and socio-cultural animation

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Abstract:

This paper is part of a presentation at the 9th Colloquium of RIA 2019, in Lausanne, and it is addressed to those who find interest in local knowledge and participatory visual methods in socio-cultural animation and community development. It is drawn after the preliminary conversations in the frame of a participatory action-research project in rural communities of the central region of Portugal. It is intended to point out the potential of local knowledge in the context of a socio-cultural community development work, in the aftermath of the 2017 wildfires in Portugal. I will explore the concept of local knowledge and bring forward the importance of this type of knowledge for the debate on public policies and social practices, using contemporary examples. At the same time, I will draw some ideas on the use of participatory visual methods to promote local knowledge and, therefore, to expand peoples' capabilities to participate in community processes that cope with public policies and political decisions.

Key-words: Local knowledge; Participatory video; socio-cultural animation; community development; wildfires.

Introduction

In the aftermath of Portugal's 2017 two brutal fires¹, and after the severe drought that followed it, new policies came out and several debates were happening focusing on the importance of traditional practices regarding fire and water management. This though opened space to explore and understand the importance of traditional local knowledge has a contribution for the construction of public policies.

A few years earlier, when running a project with communities living in remote villages, I have learned that water supply was done with archaic systems and pastures were burned to keep the soil clean and fertile. Diamantino, a local man from a small village on a high slope of the Serra da Lousã (mountain), along with other men, was the one of those who were called to tackle wildfires using a specific firefighting technic. Unfortunately, he and his fellows already passed away. In another small village, on the summit of this same mountain, a group of men built a water pipe to bring down the water from a fresh underground spring to the village's fountain. Nowadays, this water is owned by the municipality who supplied the village with water in every house. If the public water supplying system is privatized, this water no longer will belong to those who found it, piped it and use it. The ones still living in those small villages in the central region of Portugal are old men. Nowadays fire and water issues are managed by local councils or private companies. Communities of this sort are no longer in power of their resources and, the knowledge of Diamantino has no utility. However, wildfires and drought are a natural phenomenon that remains, threatening depopulated territories and its local communities.

¹ There were two brutal wildfires in Portugal, in 2017, in the central region of the country (Centro region). One starting on June 16 and the second starting on October 15. It affected mainly the districts of Coimbra and Leiria. 100 people died from both fires and hundreds of people suffered severe injuries and lost their homes, fields, crops, workshops and businesses.

Nadia Piazza, leader of the Victim's Association of the Wildfires of Pedrogão Grande (AVIPG), points out that fire is part of reality in this region. It is a change of paradigm looking at fire-adapted communities. People must learn how to cope with fire, no matter the prevention policies. She also states that on the day when the fire started, the population felt that there was nothing that the State could do for them. In her words "The State failed. And the man and women in front and behind their responsibilities failed."² In fact, the communication services failed due to high temperatures, thus official rescues, civil protection and firemen could not do much. When the State is not present, the population's skills are the only tool for survival.

Has philosopher Ivan Illich referred in the 70s of the 20th century, people lost their sense to help each other and to organize themselves, once society teaches us to rely mainly on institutions (Illich, 1974). His provocative proposition of reverting the institutions finds echoes on the need for local communities to use their knowledge and methods to cope with diverse adversities that affect their communities. For Ivan Illich, the central mean for knowledge to be shared and, therefore, to be acquired by each person, is communication (Illich, 1973).

In the village of Ferraria de São João, on the south slope of Serra da Lousã, where 40 people live, inhabitants started a community tree-planting campaign. They replaced eucalyptus for cork trees. Cork trees are an endogenous species well adapted to resist wildfires and it was the only kind of tree that did not burn during the 2017 fire. In the same village, it was built a community fire-proof shelter. This is expected to be the first of several other shelters in the area, as part of the project Resilient Villages. At the same time, in the villages most affected by the wildfires, communities and experts are working together to produce knowledge on fire-proof houses. Most of this knowledge results from the communication between the people who experienced the 2017 fire and experts on fire and building engineering. The most used technics relies on traditional materials made from stone, sand and cement. On the opposite side of this region, to the North, we find two examples of how herds of goats are being used as a resource to prevent wildfires. One is run by a local couple and the other by a local non-profit organization. This practice is based on local traditional knowledge of shepherding to keep the forest and fields clean and fertile for agriculture. Local knowledge has been rescued in the aftermath of the 2017 wildfires, following a western trend of revisiting traditional and sustainable ways of living.

Sociocultural animation, when being used for community development, has a role in preserving and promoting local knowledge. Although it relies on traditional epistemologies (commonly understood as ancient knowledge) local knowledge can be a complementary resource to pursue objectives of development towards the future. The voice of local communities must be empowered to participate in the construction of public policies on territorial planning and management, as well as in economic and social policies.

² Free translation from the Portuguese language "Falhou um estado de coisas e o estado da coisa. Falharam homens e mulheres à frente e atrás das suas responsabilidades" (24Sapo.pt, 17/10/2017 available at https://24.sapo.pt/noticias/nacional/artigo/falhou-toda-uma-estrutura-e-resposta-naquele-dia-e-naquele-pedaco-de-portugal-nadia-piazza_23103755.html).

This paper is part of my presentation at the 9th Colloquium of RIA 2019, in Lausanne. I intend to point out the potential of local knowledge in the context of a socio-cultural community development work. I will explore the concept of local knowledge and bring forward the importance of this type of knowledge for the debate on public policies and social practices, using contemporary examples. Links for a further look at these practices are shared in the end of the text. At the same time, I will draw some ideas on the use of participatory visual methods to promote local knowledge and, therefore, to expand peoples' capabilities to participate in community processes that cope with public policies and political decisions.

The information I use for the present paper is part of a preliminary exploratory process that supports a participatory research project on local knowledge and its relationship with community lead processes to cope with territorial adversities, using participatory video as a research and community animation tool. The research will undergo as a case study in four communities of the central region of Portugal.

During the exploratory phase, I became acquainted with local practices (as the fire shelter and goat herds for fire prevention) that rely on local knowledge. I questioned an expert on public policies and territorial planning, Professor João Ferrão (ICS-U.Lisboa) and a well experienced sociocultural animator who deals with local knowledge in this region, *Animateur* José João Rodrigues. Due to several personal and professional factors, the research project has not developed as expected. The participatory video process has not yet started. Thus, it is not possible, in this paper, to share more solid considerations or research products. However, the information and questionings presented here are believed to be of good utility to frame and guide the research work. They might as well suit to deal with the challenges for socio-cultural animation in what concerns to its intervention on community, territory and climate-change adversity issues, using daily technology.

1. Stone, cork trees, goats and cactus: About local knowledge

Local knowledge is a kind of knowledge produced in a specific locality, related to a community and its way of living, consolidated along the times. Since the 1960s the importance of a bottom-up approach on development policies has taken local knowledge to a relevant position, promising new perspectives for development cooperation. (Kapfrerer; Koch&Sedmak, 2016). Indeed, Mahbub ul Haq, the founder of the Human Development concept, wrote that "We cannot plan for people if we start with imperfect knowledge about them." (1995, pp. 5), referring to the lack of knowledge about people's life and wellbeing when running a development plan.

To understand local knowledge is important to look at the critics on how western society has been dealing with knowledge and of the epistemic justice around the social dynamics about the production and access to knowledge. And, of course, how is knowledge related to power. Knowledge is of various forms and covers a range from family values and principles to personal discoveries and, of course to all those contents shared and acquired in formal, non-formal and informal lifelong education. However, when speaking of knowledge, it is commonly understood as a systematic organization of certain kind information. These lead to a general understanding of knowledge as a specific unit of information. Therefore, to the belief that the production, transmission and acquisition of

knowledge is a privilege of some social class of people and in specific contexts. These contexts where, for a long time, religion and science. In the modern era, science has been taken as the main (if not the only) way to validate knowledge. And it has been the privilege of a few social groups.

The monopoly of knowledge from the past, where clergy institutions and noble people where privilege, is far gone as education spread to popular education policies and education for all. It is still not a wide world reality. Paulo Freire's pedagogical thought was of primary importance on the displacement of knowledge through social classes. For Freire, reading and writing were elementary conditions to change one's livelihood and social condition. Social and political participation was only possible when gaining conscience of problems that affect one own. And acting against them could just be possible when having literacy skills. Knowledge is a means to decode the world around one's own and to act on its preservation or change. Knowledge is power, as it is claimed by Jonh Gaventa in his, and Andrea Cornwall's, chapter on Sage Handbook of Action Research (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2015, pp. 468-470). For the authors, "knowledge can be conceived as a resource that determines definitions of what is conceived as important, as possible, for and by whom." (pp. 468). If knowledge is the tool for social change it is also the tool for the construction of social realities. Thus, local knowledge is a social production and, therefore, part of the culture itself (Geertz, 1983, pp. 167-234).

Knowledge is not one only unit of information produced as a result of the scientific method. The epistemic panorama of the 21st century is the result of several critical perspectives on the monopoly of knowledge and on how that limits the processes of development. Indeed, the lack of diversity of perspectives or different pieces of knowledge does not permit societies to solve the problems they have been facing for a long time. According to the sociologist Boaventura Sousa Santos, knowledge has been limited to the dominant model of rationality and intimately linked to the exact sciences or positive paradigms in other science fields (Santos, 2010, pp.11-36). To this Portuguese sociologist, knowledge needed a new paradigm to emerge into a humanistic approach and to articulate in between knowledge diversity. This leads to the idea of accepting other kinds of knowledge, produced at a local level and outside the territories of western rational influence. Santos uses the term "cosmopolite reason" to refer to the knowledge accepted in western societies. He criticises the fact that western societies produce knowledge based on the western perception of reality and then force other societies to use it and function under this paradigm (Santos, 2002). Therefore, Santos claims the need for a new paradigm, as well as the need to understand other realities. This epistemological approach leads to the concept of Epistemologies of the South, which is an idea of validating the diversity of knowledge produced in every context.

The concept of Local Knowledge, as addressed here, was created by the anthropologist Clifford Greetz in the decade of 1980 and can be part of this epistemological paradigm risen by Boaventura Sousa Santos. Local knowledge is a local based knowledge generated by empiric learning over decades or even centuries in a specific context. It is part of local culture, social structure and political power. It has been frequently studied along with the preservation and management of agricultural and natural resources. Dealing with local development can lead to challenging scientific knowledge or even local knowledge itself. Local knowledge is recognized by the UNO as an essential asset for communities to survive and to develop. It can challenge scientific knowledge or complement it. However, local knowledge is always an epistemological positioning in conflict with what

Boaventura S. Santos advocated as the “cosmopolite reason” as it tries to do justice to local contexts (Kapfrerer; Koch&Sedmak, 2016). Recognizing local knowledge is to accept the need and existence of other epistemologies that challenge local and global powers.

José João Rodrigues, a vibrant local *animateur*, traces a relationship between local knowledge and gastronomy, during an exploratory conversation on the topic of local knowledge. Based on his experience he points out two dimensions of how local knowledge has been a structural asset for communities in the rural central region of Portugal: Healing and Feeding. About the first, he mentions the traditional healing products using herbs and prayers. It is not hard to see complementarity between these practices and conventional medicine, as most of the medicine pills are made with elements from plants. The second, is the base of all local economy and, most of all, of all social relations in a community. From agriculture to the daily diet, food is a product of local knowledge. Both these dimensions are, traditionally, in the hands of women, although the processes of production and the formal power roles are of men. For José João, most of this knowledge has been lost or is hidden in families’ memories. In fact, for this experienced *animateur*, local knowledge can be considered the knowledge of (or in) memory.

For João Ferrão, professor and researcher at the University of Lisboa, local knowledge is more than an element of collective memory. Along with this ethno-anthropological perspective, there is a dimension of complementarity between local knowledge and other kinds of knowledge, in contemporary challenges and practices. There is a function associated with local knowledge that brings out the responsibility to include it in the decision debate on public policies on local development. However, for this researcher, and former secretary of state for territorial planning, a political decision on local development requires local, national, European and global perspectives, because local issues are dependent of, or produce, global phenomena.

Complementarity between local knowledge and scientific knowledge can be found in several situations. For example, in the South of Portugal (as in other regions but less expressive), traditional houses are painted white, outside, with limestone paint and a blue bar in the bottom of the walls. The blue bars were believed to keep the “evil eye” away. The blue paint was made of cobalt oxide which seems to repel lizards and snakes. This kind of animals has always been associated with evil in popular beliefs. Traditional building technics in the rural areas of central Portugal are considered the basis of safe fire-proof construction. According to Nadia Piazza head of the APVIG³, experts on fire from the University of Coimbra and local people from the villages where the fire started in June 2017, have been working together to understand how to build safer homes in case of fire. They realized that the people who stayed home during the fire have survived, while the ones who run away died from smoke, flames or accidents due to the lack of visibility. Experts confirmed that materials like stone, sand and cement, which are the basis of traditional building, are resistant to fire. However, glass and chimneys are vulnerable, and that is where traditional knowledge is being complemented with new technologic materials and scientific knowledge.

³ Victims’ Association of the Wildfires of Pedrógão Grande.

Another example is the rekindling of the Indian fig cactus as fire protection. This cactus was used by farmers as fences to avoid the fire to spread out into their properties. Due to the high level of humidity of the cactus, and its capacity to live in drylands, this plant played an important role in farms, some decades ago. However, they relatively disappeared from the rural landscape and were slightly known in the central region of Portugal. In the aftermath of the 2017 wildfires, farmers explored different ways of preventing fire. The Indian fig cactus has been planted again in some properties and it is a two lanes fence in several acres of new-planted pine-tree plantations.

The next example was mentioned early in this text. After the severe damage and drama of the June 2017 wildfire in the area of Pedrógão Grande, the forty inhabitants of the schist village of Ferraria de São João decided to plant new cork trees around the village and to save the old ones that have been planted decades ago to prevent the village from fires. The main idea now was to remove the eucalyptus trees planted around the village. The eucalyptus plantation is an important business in these territories where is hard to live from the land. However, due to the prosperous success of this business and to the weak policies of land management confronting high financial interests, the eucalyptus has entered the housing areas in small rural villages. However, the eucalyptus is easy to burn as its leaves are oily and easily fly away, igniting fires elsewhere, where the wind takes them. The challenge of this village was to revert the eucalyptus increment but at the same time, assure a prosperous future for the local landowners. Thus, part of the land was bought by local activists and cork trees were planted, also were the land is still owned by old locals. This strategy guarantees economic value and ecological sustainability, as cork (the bark of cork-trees) is extracted, without damaging the tree, every 9 years and used in the cork industry.

The last example, also mentioned before, is the community herd of sapper goats as a fire prevention strategy. The traditional activity of shepherding had many effects on the rural territories in the central region of Portugal. Besides the value of milk and cheese, herds helped the land to revitalize and to be clean. Fire is part of the Mediterranean climate phenomena, and part of rural practices (to prepare the land for new plantation) thus, if the fields are clean, the fire will burn relatively low and will not spread into big wildfires as it is happening since the 1980s. The decrease of shepherding and sustainable land use and the eucalyptus intensive plantation are some of the causes for fires to evolve (Ferreira-Leite, Bento-Gonçalves 2013; Lourenço, Bento-Gonçalves, 2001). The local development organization of Miro, in the municipality of Penacova, created a community herd of sapper goats to keep the forest free of combustible materials. Traditional technics of shepherding are being used. A local couple in the area of Góis is also doing this after they lost their house in the 2017 fire. In September 2019 started the first course on shepherding, with 58 students. It is a partnership between the agriculture schools of the polytechnic institutes of Viseu and Castelo Branco, coordinated by regional agriculture and industrial association, and funded by the Portugal2020 grant. The main idea is to promote and increase the cheese industry of the central region. However, there is a strong link between this economic goal and the need for using traditional practices in the management of the land.

Local knowledge is being used to prevent fire. But there are also issues on water management that shall be researched. Traditional practices of water management in the rural villages in this region included a specific system of register and a local strong and special leadership. The research shall address other practices and, most of all it aims to

promote local knowledge as a community resource to be taken into consideration in the design of local and national public policies. This is where socio-cultural animation and community development work play a crucial role as a method to empower people and communities to deal with their development issues.



Figure 1: Village of Ferraria de São João. Cork-trees and burned landscape in the back



Figure 2: community herd of sapper goats

2. From Fogo island to the fire land: about participatory video

It is not easy for small communities to have a voice in a national debate on public policies. Socio-cultural animation is, indeed, a social action to enhance the communities' voice and the voices inside the communities. Visual methods can play an important role here, as tools to empower communities, producing visual narratives. Visual narratives are images that tell stories, and images are powerful resources. If narratives are forged by those who live the stories, visual methods become participated and, then, involve communities in a development process where local people become strongly committed. This is the main goal of participatory video (PV), a participatory visual methodology

considered as an agency asset within communities (Boni et al, 2017; Lunch, 2006;), but also a method of research (Boni et al, 2017; Baumhardt et al, 2009; Lunch & Lunch, 2006). PV stems from a community development experience that took place among fishermen communities in the small remote Fogo (fire) Island, in Newfoundland, Canada, in 1967. The Fogo Island became well known for the success of this experience when professor Donald Snowden, the responsible for a university extension programme, asked filmmaker Colin Low to shoot a set of films about the life and the work of the communities in the island. Instead of filming what they believed to be important about the fishermen's life and work conditions, they placed the cameras in their hands. This way fishermen could express themselves about their community problems and the way that top-down community policies were being imposed (Crocker, 2008). When the fishermen came together to screen their films, they realized they had common problems to be solved. "The films were also shown to politicians who lived too far away and were too busy to visit the island. As a result of this dialogue policies and actions changed" (Lunch, 2006, pp. 11)

The "Fogo Process", as it is called, became a famous example of a successful use of media in community development, although it was not the only one and probably not the first. The process was later exported with great success to other Canadian isolated communities and then around the world. However, not all communities received PV as in Fogo. After a few experiences in the United States of America, which were not that successful, Snowden believed that there was a relationship between media literacy (places with access to images through television and film) and the impact of a Participatory Video process (Crock, 2008).

Nevertheless, Participatory Video has been used worldwide and became a tool to animate community empowerment processes (Webb, 2012). Experiences and writings on PV have shown the potential of this participatory process to promote debate, critical reflection and agency, towards Human Development (Boni, et al., 2016; Boni, Millán, 2015). PV can be delivered in distinct modalities and adapted to different populations or groups of participants. Among many experiences, I outline the ones (that I am more acquainted to) of Fernanda's Baumhardt, with the Red Cross Climate Exchange projects (ProPlanteta organization website); of Valentina Baús' in post-conflict processes, delivered in several African countries (Baú, 2014a; 20014b); of Peter Zoellt about identity issues with Brazilian indigenous people; and the ones researched by Alejandra Boni Aristizabal and collaborators, in Valencia, Spain (Boni et al. 2016a; 2016b; 2017).

My experience using PV to animate groups has shown that PV can be the framework for several kinds of adapted activities. The core is the concern about audio-visual language, which allows participants to reflect on social realities and problems that affect them, and to communicate it (Monclús i Garriga, 2018; pp. 165). PV can be blended with other methods and proposals. My experience of using PV with groups has combined the PV process with Michel Gondry's Be Kind Rewind Protocol, a process based on the principle that everyone can be a filmmaker. The result is a workshop that allows participants to create a 7 minutes video about social issues that affect them, and to debate them, based on leisure, and a rather quick process (4 to 5 hours). Participants are encouraged to use daily visual devices such as mobile phones. Workshops like this are an option for the research on local knowledge in rural communities of the central region of Portugal. Another example on how to adapt PV, are the workshops of social reality reading analysis (*lectura de la realidad social*), conducted by professor Miguel Escobar Guerrero from

UNAM – Mexico, where participants use video to communicate and debate their interpretation of a social problem by the method RAPs – Representación Actuada de una Problemática (Problem Acting Representation) are videos made by participants (Guerrero Escobar, 2016). For Miguel Escobar, we are all illiterate in the world of images and, therefore, the need to learn how to read it and to build it, gave birth to a pedagogy of image as a transformative word (Escobar Guerrero, 2016)⁴.

PV is a bottom-up method that creates opportunities to disseminate information, to exchange knowledge between communities and political decision-makers, for community planning (ProPlaneta website; Lunch, 2006). As described in the conclusion of the San Lorenzo process (Boni et al., 2006b), “PV process can be helpful to co-create practical and experimental knowledge among participants, as well as to foster skills and abilities to take part in a participatory process.” (Idem) Thus, it promotes agency, as one of the essential capabilities to promote processes of human development.

On another end, PV has proved to be useful as a research tool in social sciences fields. Content analysis of visual narratives allows researchers to understand what is not possible to study with interviews or focus-group discussions. By using PV as a research tool in research on local knowledge, I intend to promote community’s conscience on Local Knowledge and to understand how PV can be a resource to extend people’s capabilities to participate in community processes. At the same time, it is expected to reinforce the socio-cultural animation intervention with technological tools and methods that are at hand. However, I believe that socio-cultural animation has a socio-educative responsibility to educate for the good use of visual devices and visual literacy. PV processes can be used with this concern. Future activity in the frame of the research project is expected to bring out specific outcomes on the use of PV to promote local knowledge and to empower communities to participate in the construction of public policies in what concern to territorial issues and climate adversities.

3. Final notes

Power is an important common element related to local knowledge, participation and visual methodologies. In its mission towards community development, the role of socio-cultural animation is to cope with power issues and political decision in different scales, empowering communities to participate in the debates on public policies. In the very preliminary phase of the research project that I am delivering in rural villages of the central region of Portugal, power and political decision are key factors to solve territorial issues. The political decision towards rural regions and its issues, deal with the balance or unbalance of a chain of interdependence relationships between economy, community and environment, mediated by three elements: power, property and knowledge (Ferrão, 2018). Local knowledge can be rediscovered, promoted, complemented with other knowledge and adapted to new challenges, to be used as a resource to cope with fire and drought issues, in community processes. Local knowledge has a function dimension. Permaculture, for example, is a result of traditional knowledge blended with scientific knowledge and technological resources. And it is considered a practice of sustainable

⁴ Free translation from the original version, in the abstract of Escobar’s article on Quaderns d’Animació: “En el mundo de la imagen somos “analfabetas” y por lo tanto la necesidad de aprender a leerla y construirla estimulo el nacimiento de la Pedagogía de la imagen como palabra transformadora que aquí se presenta.” (Escobar Guerrero, 2016)

development, such as it was back in the times when Diamantino and the other men were fighting fire as they so well knew.

Participatory video gives people the tools to express and to share the community's view on how to work for local development. Contemporary technology allows people to create their visual narratives, using images, producing their videos and make it public, on the Internet. Gondry's utopia that everybody has the right to make a movie with no dependence of a budget is now a real possibility that has been materialized. Illich's bizarre proposition of deschooling society, in the 1970s also believed in technology as the resource to share information useful for each one to learn whatever he or she feels to. This is possible with the Internet and its resources. However, there is still the need to educate for image literacy and for the use of cell phones and Internet to capture, save and promote images, as well as how people communicate online. In my experience with PV, there have been many situations when the participant who is responsible for directing the video does not find the video files among hundreds of other images files in his or her smartphone. Sometimes, the editing phase is in jeopardy. Socio-cultural animation has the challenge to educate on the good use of images and technology. It is not a task for urban animation. It is a responsibility for socio-cultural animation in any context, from a territorial to generational approach.

This text was drawn after preliminary questionings, readings and exploratory conversations on the importance of local knowledge for local development, and how participatory visual methods can enhance this relationship. Now, there are two groups (out of four case-studies) interested to deliver a PV experience on local knowledge. As a participatory action-research project, it aims to involve people in the process. There is a need to designate a local mediator and to train community groups to deliver PV projects in the community. The participatory action-research project is expected to bring out more out-comes on the use of PV and visual technologies in rural contexts. As well as on how socio-cultural animation can intervene for local development on what concerns to climate issues.

Links about the practices referred to in this text:

Fire-proof homes and shelter

<http://avipg.org/projetos.php#aldeias-resilientes>

Cork-tree planting to prevent fire

<https://sol.sapo.pt/artigo/573471/ferraria-de-sao-joao-a-aldeia-salva-pelos-sobreiros>

<https://aldeiasdoxisto.pt/artigo/1626>

Community herd of sapper goats:

<http://www.gssdcrmiro.pt/index.php/seccoes/projetos-e-desenvolvimento/rebanho-comunitario>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Product-Service/Miro-muito-mais-que-um-lugar-1512212929079204/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Rebanhos-da-Serra-do-Acor-Rabad%C3%A3o-397052831049512/>

Shepherding course:

<https://www.inovcluster.pt/2019/07/08/5317/>

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