



# **Cultural Significance and Needs of Japan's Small-type Coastal Whaling**

## **JAPAN SMALL-TYPE WHALING ASSOCIATION OPENING STATEMENT AT THE 52ND IWC**

This is the thirteenth time Japan's small-type whalers are seeking an interim relief allocation (IRA) and seven years since the International Whaling Commission (IWC) voted to act "expeditiously" to alleviate the distress of Japan's coastal whaling communities which the cessation of minke whaling had caused...

And is still causing. The communities are continuing to suffer from IWC's persistent and deliberate denial of its

treaty responsibilities to act "without causing widespread economic and nutritional distress".

Yet again, in sorrow and in frustration, we ask you to act morally and ethically: consider our history and our needs in the context of the ICRW and recognize that an interim relief allocation is both consistent with your conservation responsibilities under ICRW and with your overall treaty obligations.



# GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO JAPANESE SMALL-TYPE WHALING

The people of Japan have relied on the resources of the sea to sustain them since prehistoric times. And for many centuries, whales have been included among the food resources Japanese coastal communities use.

For hundreds of years, whale hunting was conducted using hand-held harpoons. However, in the **17<sup>th</sup> century in Taiji**, there was a new form of whaling developed, using nets, harpoons, and a variety of hunt and support vessels. This **amitori method** then spread from Taiji to many other parts of Japan.

This highly organised form of whaling required a large specialised workforce to capture the whales and process them. These large shore-based factory operations used every part of the whale to prepare many different foods; for insecticide for the rice fields; fertilizer; and for many other useful items from bone, baleen, and leather. The shore-based operations also employed both artisans (making and repairing boats, ropes, nets, barrels, and the tools required for whaling and whale processing) and support personnel.

Thus, where this form of whaling became established — in communities at favourable locations for nearshore whaling — it came to dominate the local economy, diet, and culture. These communities became widely recognized as **whaling villages**. And *amitori* whaling operations were the largest industry in medieval Japan.

However, during the **19<sup>th</sup> century**, the Japanese whaling grounds were discovered by American, European, and Russian whalers, who quickly decimated the large stocks of slow-swimming baleen whales, and

particularly the right whales upon which *amitori*-whaling depended.

To continue whaling, Japanese whalers now had to hunt faster-swimming rorquals (e.g., blue, fin and Bryde's whales). This required Japanese coastal whalers to replace the rowed hunting boats with **motorised catcher vessels**, thus beginning **another technological transformation** in Japanese whaling.

During this period of change and expansion, **small-type whaling** continued, using small motorised vessels operating in nearshore waters and catching small species (e.g., minke, beaked and pilot whales). Production from the small-type whaling operations was relatively limited, given both the small body size of the whales being taken and the small size of the vessels, so the meat landed in the whaling communities was mostly consumed locally.

Small-type whaling vessels (locally known as **minke vessels**) have always operated quite close to shore. An average hunt takes about **13 hours**, with the vessels nearly always returning to port each night. Minkes are usually taken within **20 miles** from shore.

Before WWII, the number of small-type whaling vessels operating in Japan was **never more than 20**. However, with loss of the large-type catcher boats during the Pacific War, there was a rapid increase in small-type whaling immediately following the end of the war, when small fishing vessels were converted into small-type whaling vessels to help alleviate the severe food shortages during that period.

As post-war reconstruction began, the central authorities rationalised the whale



Takashima-maru No. 8

fishery by decreasing the number of small-type whaling licenses (from **a high of 83 licenses in 1947**) and encouraging a smaller number of large-type vessels to

supply the nation's protein needs. Thus, by around 1970, only **nine small-type whaling licenses** remained, and that is the number of licenses today.

## SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE SMALL-TYPE WHALING

### The Nature of the JSTW Enterprise

Small-type whaling today is carried out from the whaling villages of **Ayukawa**, **Taiji**, and **Wada** (all on Honshu and averaging about 4,000 people each) and **Abashiri** (on Hokkaido, with about 43,000 people).

Minke vessels range from **15 to 49 tons** (the maximum the law allows) and operate with **a crew of five to eight**. When — because of the IWC moratorium — minke

whaling was suspended in 1987, the Japanese small-type whaling operation involved **63 whalers working on nine boats**.

In addition, on shore, the vessels might have several full-time flensers, with variable numbers of volunteers (often retired whalers or locals who enjoyed occasional work). As well, there were a few additional workers, usually women, who packed edible whale products in boxes. There were also one or two office workers associated with each small-type whaling operation.

### Summary of Impacts Resulting from the Moratorium on Minke Whaling

The IWC Chairman's Report on the 41<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting concisely and accurately summarised the impacts resulting from the minke whaling moratorium (zero catch limit).

*"In Japan the zero-catch limit has affected individuals economically, socially, culturally and in respect to health. The effects include disruption and failure of small businesses, job loss and employment at less valued positions and/or limited work in temporary or seasonal positions. Because of the nature of small-type whaling the zero-catch limit affects individuals in small villages more than in the industrial centres. The small size of the local economy has required physical moves for individuals and families in order to find employment. High levels of unemployment for former whalers result from the highly specialized nature of their work and barriers to re-employment due to age and the particularities of Japanese employment and fish-*

*eries practices. As whalers enjoyed prestige, their job loss is especially stressful. Within the family interpersonal stress, disruption of rigid gender related division of labour and stress on children occurs. Local businesses depending on whale products have been severely affected and the loss of revenue threatens the survival of such institutions as fishery cooperative associations. Tourism is highly dependent upon the availability of whale meat which also plays an important role in religious observances and community celebrations. These impacts pose a serious threat to the continued survival of these traditional small communities"*

*(Chairman's Report of the 41<sup>st</sup> IWC Meeting in 1989, p.4)*



AYUKAWA



ABASHIRI



WADA



TAIJI

The total workforce engaged in Japanese small-type whaling was **about 100 people in 1987**, of which 75 were full-time employees. This workforce often included vessel owners' wives and sometimes other members of their immediate families.

### Employment Patterns

Recruitment into small-type whaling occurs through the harpooner, the vessel owner, or a member of an owner's family. Many whalers belong to whaling families, as do flensers and whale product processors. This reflects both the **familial nature** of small-type whaling operations and the **cultural importance** Japanese place on following family traditions and thus showing respect to ancestors.

Work on minke vessels does not require formal training. The crew of each minke vessel formed a tight social group, often from years of working together. Crew members continued socialising with one another during the non-whaling season.

And though coastal whaling only occurs during six months of the year, vessel owners usually pay their crews either full or partial wages in the non-whaling season because they expect that the same crew will be available the following year.

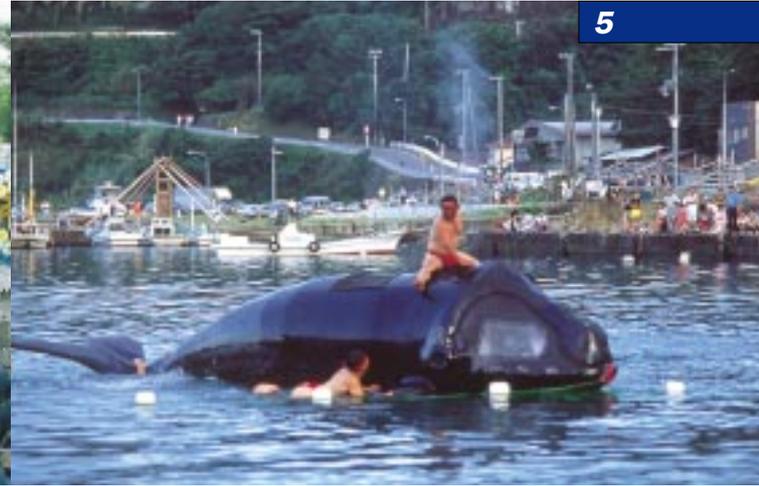
### Culturally-important Aspects of Whaling

Whaling remains a culturally important activity in present-day, and in many former, whaling communities. Thus, in these communities, anticipating each new season, several culturally-prescribed activities occur, as they also do at certain other times during the year.

The importance of whale meat in these communities relates to its **symbolic associations** with a number of positive aspects in people's lives (e.g., health, longevity, vitality); the social and cultural importance of gifts of whale meat; the use of edible whale products in the local/regional cuisines; the important role these cuisines play



Taiji: Buddhist memorial service for souls of whales.



Taiji: Whaling festival recalling old whaling techniques.

in maintaining cultural identity; the cultural value placed on maintaining and transmitting **traditional skills and occupations**; and the fostering of **traditional spiritual values** that connect whalers and their families with their past and with whales.

### Gift Exchanges Involving Whale Meat

In the whaling villages, there exists an extensive system of customary gift-based ritual exchange that occurs before and throughout the whaling season. In addition, in some whaling communities, whale meat gift exchanges occur among all households throughout the entire year.

These gifts are *omiki* (usually sake [rice wine]) given to vessel owners, the vessel herself and the crew; the return gifts are whale meat. Also, if the vessel owner makes any major expenditures for his vessel, he will also receive many gifts (including cash). The return gifts for these are also whale meat.

### The Social Significance of Whale Meat Distribution

All those who are involved in catching and processing a whale receive bonuses or gifts of whale meat. In this way, a considerable amount of whale meat is continually entering informal (non-commercial) distribution throughout the whaling towns. And these are widely shared, leading to the common sentiment that “fish is to buy, whale is to be received”.

### Commercial and Non-Commercial Whale Meat Distribution

It is not possible to place an unequivocal monetary value on ritual, a social bond, or a sense of shared identity. Thus, none of these ritual whale meat distributions should be considered as being purely, or even predominantly, economic transactions. The **true value** of these circulating exchanges are **social and cultural**: they are important because they repeatedly



Picture scroll showing Edo-period whaling operations. (Shoko Museum of Arts)



Chikko, Abashiri, 1959: Flensing of minke whales.

involve almost every person in the community and they are derived from local enterprise whose benefits are widely shared and appreciated. By participating in these community-wide events, local residents collectively reaffirm and validate their **sense of community** by enjoying — indeed celebrating — the seasonal bounty of the sea on which their community depends.

### Religious Observances Associated with Whaling

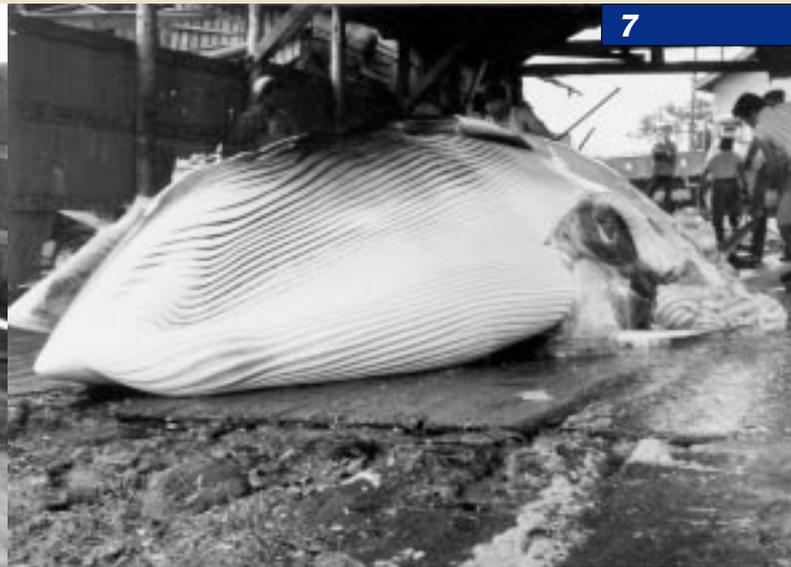
Since earliest times, Japanese have

regarded whales as an important source of food and employment. Thus, whales are intimately associated, more especially in the whaling villages, with a widespread sense of security and prosperity.

Until quite recently — and even now — rural Japanese did not enjoy the prosperity that followed their nation's rapid industrialisation. Thus **the whale**, as an ample provider of community needs, **has remained symbolically important** in those small coastal (often remote) whaling communities.

Within these communities people celebrate many ceremonies, both secular and





religious, to show gratitude and to court divine favour to ensure the benefits of whaling continue. Nor have these religious obligations to whales and celebrations of whaling ended when a village stops whaling.

The local Shinto shrine is important to Japanese society because it defines the geographic and social perimeters of the local community. Throughout the whaling season, the women in the whalers' families visit their local shrines to pray for the whalers' safety, for a good catch, and for the souls of the whales. Shinto priests also officiate at purification ceremonies on board the whaling vessels.

And at the New Year, the talisman for whaling vessel's spirits (*funadama*) responsible for protecting the whaling vessel, are renewed. The owner-operators and harpooners are the principal officiates at this particular ceremony.

Members of the whaling communities also participate in Buddhist ceremonies, two of which are particularly important: first, memorial services for the souls of whales killed; and second, for the souls of whalers who, having taken life, seek forgiveness and spiritual compensation for their loss of merit for having done so. In some whaling villages, virtually the whole community participates in these services.

Shinto and Buddhist ceremonies are often constructed around a communal meal (*naorai*) shared between parishioners and dieties. The centrality of whaling to the community is reflected in the prominence of whale meat in these ceremonies.



# WHALES, FOOD, AND IDENTITY

Eating whale meat is undeniably part of Japanese culture. The pattern is of a series of quite localised (or at most, regional) cuisines which reflect historical whale use practices in that town or area. The whale-based diet in Abashiri and Ayukawa is based principally on minke whale; that of Wada on Baird's beaked whale; and of Taiji, on pilot whales and dolphins.

The whaling villages' strong attachment to their respective whale-based cuisines results from a variety of **cultural and personal valuations** variously associated with hunting, processing, distributing and consuming whales. Clearly, whale as a customary food involves a variety of very positive associations in people's minds, so that contemplating a future without these foods brings worried, indeed depressing, thoughts. Further, research has made it quite apparent that this attachment to the customary whale-based diet is strongly felt by young people as well as by adults.

Residents of Japanese whaling villages often stress that every edible part of the whale is eaten — including not just red meat, organ meats, and blubber, but also types of organs not generally eaten in

western countries today (although in some cases certainly eaten in the not-too-distant past), cartilage, the base of the baleen plates, and many other unexpected delicacies.

## The Basis and Importance of Customary Foods

Food consumption patterns are generally based on many criteria, although the importance accorded these criteria will vary according to culture, locality, and socio-economic status within a given society. Among the criteria are —

- availability;
- symbolic value (associated with longevity, strength, good fortune, ancestral ties);
- actual and perceived health value; and
- historical and social values (involving family and community closeness and traditions).

Researchers have found that the extent to which whale meat in the whaling villages satisfies these varied criteria, compared with various non-whale alternatives, clearly shows that as the core food in a richly varied traditional cuisine, the value of whale meat transcends mere preferences. In one whaling village (Ayukawa), there were 30 different culturally-important occasions, great and smaller, at which whale meat was the chosen centerpiece of a celebratory meal.

## The Social and Cultural Importance of Restaurants and Caterers

**The social and cultural importance of food**, and of **eating together**, is common to all societies. The practice of concluding important social or business interactions with a meal attests to the fundamental role food plays shaping and cementing interpersonal relationships.

In Japan, group activities are far more common than is the case in more individualistic western societies. But Japanese homes are often small. And in small com-



Harpooning a minke whale.

munities, with many relatives, friends, and associates near by, numbers of guests to be invited for events requiring meals often makes celebrating in hotels or restaurants the only practical option.

Thus, in whaling villages, providing whale meat to hotels and restaurants becomes essential, for all such important social occasions must serve whale dishes if the meal is to fulfil its ceremonial purpose.

Encouraging tourists to visit whaling villages is another reason that commercial eating establishments must serve whale meat. Taiji, Abashiri and Ayukawa are all promoting tourism as a way of compensating for their fisheries problems (including whale fisheries) and the limited opportunities they have for alternative economic development.

Internal tourism in Japan is partly driven by the expectations that regional food specialties will be available during one's



Minke whaling: *Takashima-maru No. 8*, mid-1980s.

travels. For this reason, most Japanese tourists visiting a whaling village would be very disappointed if they were not able to eat local whale dishes.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF THE EXTENDED PAUSE IN MINKE WHALING

### Impact of the Moratorium upon the Whalers

Just before the moratorium on hunting minkes, the eight small-type whaling vessel owners were typically sharing a harvest of 40 beaked whales, 50 pilot whales, and about 320 minke whales each year. Obviously the **loss of the minkes** represented a **significant economic hardship**, seriously threatening the viability of these small-scale operations.

The whalers made a one-time adjustment, carrying part of the non-minke quota from 1987 to 1988 because they believed the pause in small-type coastal minke whaling would be short. The IWC (International Whaling Commission) resolution which interrupted commercial whaling said a pause was necessary to allow the IWC Scientific Committee to undertake comprehensive whale stocks assessments and to develop a way of setting catch quotas that would allow whales to be taken

without risk of depleting their populations. This was called the Revised Management Procedure (RMP).

The whalers thought the pause would be short because this resolution called for these **tasks to be completed by 1990** (the work had begun a few years before the moratorium came into effect). The whalers were, therefore, in 1987, looking only to survive for three or four years, until the IWC would review the Scientific Committee's findings and the practicality of resuming sustainable minke whaling.

To help the whalers cope with the supposedly-temporary **loss of more than 75% of their catch**, which the minke moratorium represented, the Government of Japan increased by a small percentage the quotas of non-minkes. The whalers also received some benefit from the predictable increase in whale meat prices resulting from supply shortages.

But these short-term fixes were not enough. Regardless of their landings, whal-



Taiji: Whaling festival recalling old whaling techniques.

ers must meet fixed annual costs of operating and maintaining their vessels and of paying their crews and other overhead expenses. The whalers therefore had to make further accommodations, letting go some crew members and forming joint operations with fewer vessels to reduce operating costs.

Some whale vessel operators tried to diversify their business operations by tuna fishing, salmon-farming, or dolphin hunting. Crew members who lost their jobs tried various forms of inshore fishing or diving for abalone. But none of these endeavours was economically successful; indeed, some lost money by trying work with which they had no experience.

The problem of finding other work was especially difficult in the whaling villages of Taiji and Ayukawa because at the same time the small-type whalers were looking for work, so were many other large-type whalers who lost their jobs when the IWC moratorium also ended the large-type whaling operations in those villages.

### Impacts of the Moratorium upon Whalers' Families

To consider the effects of job loss on whalers' families, it is important to remember that in the whaling villages **whalers were respected individuals**. They were considered generous community benefactors and the primary role models for young men. Many young men aspired to become whalers. And not only did whaling provide prestige to the whalers and to the whaling

village but it also provided a far more secure source of income than could fishing; thus marriage to a whaler was considered very desirable.

As a result, the uncertainty the moratorium introduced led to **stresses far greater than just economic**. Families, as well as individuals, suffered from a variety of social and psychological stresses, and, as a consequence, individuals' and families' health and well-being suffered too.

The ex-whalers had few prospects for alternative jobs in their villages, which meant their families had to make difficult decisions, including moving to find work; moving the family; having one's wife go to work outside the home; using savings to start a small business, or living very frugally to provide for their children's educations.

Although these are universal concerns, it is important to understand them in the Japanese context: in Japan children's education is exceedingly highly valued and it is the mother's paramount responsibility to ensure her children do well in school. This usually requires her to remain a full-time homemaker, not work outside until the children leave school.

Also, in the whaling villages, whalers' families enjoyed considerable social standing because whalers could distribute, from their shares of each catch, gifts of whale meat. But suddenly, with the moratorium on whaling, they could **no longer fulfil these social obligations, which are so vital in Japanese culture**. They felt shame at their lost ability to ensure the continuation of these joyous and eagerly anticipated traditional community practices.

Nor — despite some IWC delegates' suggestions to the contrary — could losing their work because of the imposed moratorium be considered analogous to the dilemmas some Europeans had faced when their fisheries collapsed or their mines went out of business for lack of markets. Minke whales remain abundant — fishermen and whalers see them almost daily; and the market continues to demand the highly-valued food the whalers can provide.

Finally, the sense of moral failure the household head feels because he is unable to continue the family enterprise he inherited is not borne by him alone. It is shared, and acutely affects, other household mem-

bers — bound as they are by Confucian ethics of inter-generational loyalty, indebtedness, and responsibility.

### Impact of the Moratorium upon the Whaling Villages

Predictably, the economic impact of the commercial whaling moratorium in Ayukawa, Taiji, and Wada has caused a **significant ripple effect throughout the local economies and communities**. The FCAs (Fisheries Cooperative Association) not only operate local fish markets and undertake various regulatory and educational programmes; they also serve as important community financial institutions. Whaling had provided a large part of the FCAs' revenues (earned through commissions on sales of whale meat, and on purchases of ice and other supplies and services). After the moratorium, the FCAs' revenues dropped significantly.

Ayukawa and Taiji had both large- and small-type coastal whaling, both of which ended abruptly at the end of the 1987 season. And now that the large-type whaling companies no longer exist, the FCAs can only be revived with increased revenues from small-type whaling. It is most unlikely that the increase will come from non-whale revenues; fish sales have remained stable or declined over the past

several years, and fish farming and other forms of mariculture cannot be further expanded in these areas, and, in many cases, appear to be in financial difficulties.

And apart from the moratorium's serious impacts on the whaling villages' FCAs, loss of whaling revenues also resulted in lost tax revenues, for whalers, as a group, made a disproportionately large contribution to village taxes.

In Ayukawa, another result of the economic downturn is the forced out-migrations of people who have no prospects of finding work in their home town. With so many whaling-related businesses in the village ending because of the moratorium, other jobs became scarce at the same time small-type whalers lost their jobs.

Also, it is a higher proportion of young people who are leaving Ayukawa, making the town concerned that fewer younger people will remain to continue productive work, such as fisheries.

All these problems, plus the negative impacts the minke whaling moratorium has had on the social, religious, and cultural life of the whaling communities have, according to the assessment of an independent Australian-US research team, caused "the fabric of social relationships...to unravel. **The end of whaling means the end of these towns as viable communities.**"



Kushiro, summer 1979: All nine current license-holding small-type whaling vessels ready for departure for minke whaling.

# FAILURES OF EFFORTS TO MITIGATE THE MORATORIUM'S IMPACT



Attempts to mitigate the loss of minke whales from the annual small-type whaling fishery have generally not succeeded because of the communities' limited opportunities and the lack of specialised business knowledge.

Some vessel owners, now operating as joint companies with reduced expenses and by experiencing a rising price for whale meat, have partially eased their financial straits. However, it is the loss of social and cultural institutions that depend on the capture, processing, distribution, consumption, and celebration of whaling and whale food in the traditional whaling districts that represents the greatest loss, both to present and to future generations.

For whalers who lost their jobs, the situation has not improved. Some have found other jobs, but not ones equal in income, social status, or psychological reward. And for their families, it also continues to be difficult, with their futures perhaps permanently changed by the economic hardships which have variously affected all the whaling villages since the moratorium.

The villages themselves also face difficulties. All the whaling villages were seeking to diversify their economies even before the minke whaling moratorium, for in most cases the fishing-based economy wasn't growing, but the need for additional town revenues was.

For most municipalities, tourism development is the favoured strategy for economic development. But only a few have the required financial assets or appeal to tourists or necessary infrastructure to succeed.

Taiji does have such appeal and facilities, but these are seriously lacking in Ayukawa and Wada. Taiji is not only the acknowledged birthplace of Japanese whaling, it also has many natural and man-made attractions and its relative inaccessibility seems not to deter visitors. As well, the local cuisine, an additional attraction for Japanese visitors, is least affected by the

whaling ban, for the Taiji cuisine is based on small cetaceans not affected by IWC actions.

The other whaling villages lack amenities. Wada is accessibly by road, but Ayukawa is some hours drive from the nearest train station. And Ayukawa's and Wada's main tourist attractions — until the whaling moratorium — were that they were working whaling villages. Now they are only pallid images of what they once were. And for some potential Japanese tourists, the possibility that whale cuisine will be unavailable, less diverse, or expensive is another deterrent.

However, the principal impacts of the whaling moratorium, the most difficult ones to address, are not wholly economic. For many, the attack on whaling is an attack on their profession, on the honour of their whaling ancestors, and — by attacking their food culture — an attack on a core element of their culture and their identity.

**“In Japan, the zero-catch limit [on minkes] has affected individuals, economically, socially, culturally and in respect to health.... These impacts pose a serious threat to the continued survival of these traditional small communities.”**

— from the Chairman's Report of the 41st IWC Meeting

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## Photographs

Courtesy of Mr. MIYOSHI Hideshi; Abashiri City; Oshika Town; Wada Town; Taiji Town; Shoko Museum of Arts.

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