

SOME ASPECTS REGARDING SHEEPHERDING AND ITS ROLE IN THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE DRĂGOIASA-TULGHEȘ MICROREGION

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ABSTRACT. – *Some Aspects Regarding Shepherding and its Role in the Local Development of the Drăgoiasa-Tulgheș microregion.* Alongside crop growing, sheepherding has always been one of the more important occupations of the local population, agriculture and sheepherding being, in fact, inseparable occupations. The pastoral economy of the Drăgoiasa-Tulgheș depression string fits in the mountainous type landscape, with a massive domination of hayfields, natural pastures and grazable forests, which encompass the slopes as well as the higher areas. The period for grazing lasts between 130-150 days for cattle and 150-180 days for sheep. The pastures are used from May to October, while the hayfields, after the collection of hay. For the animals that are not „taken up” the mountain in summer, people use the hayfields and pastures found in communal areas, a phenomenon encountered only in Corbu and Tulgheș. We also mention the fact that some settlements such as Gălăuțaș, Sârmaș, Subcetate, Rușii Munți, Monor, Șieuț do not have enough pastures, renting pastures from Toplița, Bilbor and Borsec. Lower, within forest areas, there are clearings, mostly artificial, called „smizi” (smidă), where grazing is forbidden as they contain plantations of tree saplings. However, when milk output is lower due to colder days or lack of grass, the shepherds go down with their herds to these plantations, or on recently deforested lands, where grass is plentiful, but they do it secretly and quietly due to the fines enforced for destroying these plantations, or due to the bears that can be found in these areas. A significant part of the rural population is in an intense seasonal movement from the permanent hearths towards temporary ones and the other way around, which emphasizes the existence of two types of sheepherding: local sheepherding, frequent in almost all the settlements of the depression string, taking place from spring until autumn in stationary, or mobile sheep dens, or with no den whatsoever, within the limit of the village, and an agricultural sheepherding, with sheep dens in the mountains, beyond the limit of the village, that takes place during warm months on the slopes of Căliman, Giurgeu, Hășmaș and Bistricioarei Mountains. In general, the best pastures are those found on southern, south-western and south-eastern slopes, and especially on gradual ridges with a lot of sunlight and heat. The quality of pastures also depends on the manner in which they are used. For example, the introduction of cattle and horses, which graze on the old grass that sheep refuse, allows the development of young grass, thus improving the food quality and quantity of sheepherding products. Some of the most important grazing sites are: *Stegea, Șuvăriște, Dobreanu Mic, Dobreanu Mare, Aluniș, Iuteș, Fața Bilborului, Șestina, Muncelu, Secu, Șesul Comarnicului, Runc, Bâta, Șăștina Barasău, Bălajul, Fețele Putnei.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this space, sheepherding is an ancient activity, with typical forms of organisation, having a sedentary character and an old terminology. Orbán Balázs (1869) states that, in the Căliman Mountains area, during summer, there were approximately 60,000 sheep and 15,000 cattle, belonging to the „Mărgineni” shepherds: *„At the end of summer, the mărgineni headed to Moldova and went down through the land of Bilbor, or went over the Drăgoiasa towards Dorna. In this transhumance, many herds belonging to sheepherders remained in the Land of Bilborului during summer, buying hay from the locals”* (I. Manciulea, 1928).

The pastures spread on the edge of the depressions, as well as in the higher mountainous area, in sunlit clearings, crossed by clear springs, are stimulating factors for pastoral activities, which forms, even now, the basis of living in this mountainous area.

The start of the pastoral season varies depending on the inception of spring, in general the period between the 23rd April (St. George) and the 14th October (St. Paraskeva).

The organising shepherd or the sheepfold chief begins his activity in early spring, having significant duties such as hiring shepherds or collaborating shepherds, and deciding which mountain will the herds climb.

2. THE SHEEPFOLD – TRADITIONAL BASIC HABITAT

The gathering of the sheep at the pen takes place from 1st until the 10th of May, at the place where the sheepfold is erected, following a strict custom: the sheepfold chief and the shepherds go to the sheepfold in the early hours of the morning, waiting for all the locals to bring their sheep and include them in the flock, after which the sheep owners remain for one more day in order to help organise the sheep enclosures, the hut, and the other utilities necessary for a proper operation of the sheepfold.

Two or three weeks after the establishment of the so-called *associated sheepfold*, there is a second major event, called *sheep measuring*, which usually takes place on the 21st of May (St. Great Emperors Constantin and Elena), or in many cases on the Sunday before Pentecost.

People come to the morning milking, after which they leave with the sheep to the pastures, the shepherds staying behind, after which, at noon, the flocks return to the pen so that they can be milked.

In the past, the quantity of milk was measured with a fir stick called „*mertic*”, which was introduced vertically in the bucket or „*șuștar*”, on which a sign was made. There were actually two *mertics*, one that was kept by the host, and one by the sheepfold chief.

For the poorer locals, that had fewer sheep, the milk was measured in a smaller bowl, using a different size stick, called „*tandalic*”. The measured quantity of milk determined the cheese quota, which the owner received when he collected the cheese from his sheep. After 1970, these customs are no longer used, the sheep are gathered at the sheepfold chief’s house, after which the shepherds, alongside some of the owners, take them up the mountain.

Besides the festivities of sheep measuring and shearing, there is also *the custom of the cheese calling*, an occasion when the relatives of the owners and of the shepherds are allowed to attend, when the sheepfold chief serves the guests with „*balmoș*”, made with „*jântuit*” and sheep butter. Each owner can follow up the sheep during the noon milking, after which he receives the agreed quantity of cheese.

The organisation of shepherding as an associated sheepfold is based on verbal contract between sheep owners and shepherds, regarding the payment for shepherding.

In the past, payment was in nature only, from the product surplus, while recently a new form arose „shepherding for money”, plus products, directly proportional with the shepherds experience. The true art of shepherding is knowing how to milk so that sheep do not lose their milk and how to make good cheese not only for sale, but also to promote the flock. The pastoral hierachy is also something important, being traditionally known, including several shepherds: *sterparul*, who leaves with the barren ones each day and sometimes stays at the pen, *strungarul*, regularly a child, whose role is to guide the „sheep at the pen”, *the milking men*, who always remain at the milking grounds and the *organising shepherd* or *the sheepfold chief*, with the most important contributions regarding the management of the sheepfold and with the cheese preparation.



Fig. 1. Sheep milking at the „spătări”.

40-50 meters away from the sheepfold there is *the sheep pen*, situated in sheltered areas, slightly inclined, so that on rainy days there is no mud, having a hexagonal or octogonal shape, built out of a mobile light fence, to allow for its movement in a short amount of time.

At the back of the pen there is a large gate for the sheep to enter, and on the opposite side, which is always directed uphill, there are three or four openings, used to milk sheep.

Above them, there is rudimentary roof (*comarnic*) to protect the shepherds from rain, and to avoid creating mud there is a wooden plank.

„*Spătările*” are the small doors through which the sheep come out to be milked. On both sides, there are the shepherds waiting for them, sitting on logs or on stools. The one who guides the sheep with a stick in his hand stand between the sheep and pushes them towards the doors, yelling „*Brâ la strungă*” from time to time. „*Târla*” or „*çoşarul*” is the place where sheep sleep at night, situated near the sheepfold.

In terms of organising *cowcotes*, a system in which dairy cows are tended all summer in the mountains, this is done using the criteria of association, frequently between a relative small number of 7 to 10 people, according to the relation degree. A small group of owners look for shepherds, usually poor or orphan children and young men, either locals, or from Moldova (Pipirig, Neamţ County).

The dairy products are made by those who own cows, and go to the cote to gather the milk. The milk is measured and given to the one who makes the cheese to administer, writing in a special notebook the quantity of borrowed milk. In the past, this task was done on a cylindrical or square piece of wood called *răboj*, with markings done by knife, in the following manner: a line meant a large bowl, while half a line a bowl. This system helped keep the ancestral organisation, so that the loan was compensated between the owners, no debt remaining, each autumn, when leaving for the mountain.

The cote is a construction complex made of wooden materials, mostly situated close to the forest line, in sunlit clearings, on terrains with a gradual incline, as well as close to water sources (springs), between 1,000-1,200 meters to more than 1,700 meters in altitude.



Fig. 2. Mixed mobile sheepfold.

Choosing the spot is done by the cote chief together with the animals' owners.

Each cote is surrounded by a courtyard and a fence, which restricts the access of animals in the cote, a space where the „*comarnic*” and a large wooden table for storing different products are located. Close to the cote, mostly in the back, there are pens for pigs and calves.

Another particular construction found in cotes with large cattle is the „ocol”, which has a round shape, mostly situated close to the forest, for shelter during rainy or hot days, being fitted with two or three gates made of the poles, between which more sticks are inserted, sticks that allow the closing and the opening of the „ocol” (locks). Depending on the weather, at an interval of two weeks-one month, and when the ocol has more than 80% manure, the decision is taken to move it in a new, clean place, thus naturally enriching the soil („târlitură”). The *cobâr* is an ancient device, used for the shepherds rest, situated on the other side of the cote, near the ocol, to allow for a better protection and monitorization of animals.

Depending on the grazing areas that belong or have been rented by the commune hall, each locality of this area has a variable number of sheepfolds: for Bilbor, sheepfolds in the Căliman Mountains (Dobreanu Mare; Cășița; Stegea with seven cotes: Preluca, Izvorul Rece, Poiana Mare, Cioate, Poiana din Mijloc, and two cotes in Dosul Stegii; Poiana Dușii), in the Bistricioarei Mountains (Alunișel; Alunișul Mare; Plopi; Harlagia; Fața Bilborului; Muncelu; Șăstina Barasău; Arsuri; Pârlitura; Runc; Comarnic).

The sheepfold has existed in the area ever since the beginning of pastoral activity, its main usages being the storage of the cote’s belongings, offering overnight shelter to shepherds, as well as preparing and storing dairy products.

The traditional cote is made of round wooden beams, comprised of two rooms, covered by fir bark and more recently by shingle, wood or metal sheet. The first chamber contains, in a corner, near the entrance to the cote, the hearth, permanently fed so that the fire does not die, using thick dry wooden blocks. There are also beds („*priciuri*”), covered by a layer of moss or fir branches. The dairy products are also made here, and then they are stored in the next chamber (pantry), in order to dry, and then being distributed to the animal owners. This room also stores the shepherds food and clothes.

With Romania’s inclusion in the European Union, the so called „*systematic cote*”, began to appear, with three rooms, bedroom, special place for making cheese pentru prepararea, and a pantry. In the area at hand there are over 60 cotes, seven being situated near Drăgoiasa and Glodu depressions, more than 40 are situated in the administrative territory of Bilbor commune, six at Secu, three on the administrative territory of Borsec, seven at Corbu and six at Tulgheș.

In September 2008, Tulgheș inaugurated the first modern sheepfold in Romania, constructed following European standards, on a land given by the Tulgheș Local Council, 4 km from the center of the commune, in a place known by the locals as *Șăstina Barasău*.

The construction of this cote took less than two months, and is part of the Carpatian II Project, managed by the *Animal Breeders Association of Tulgheș*, with support from the American foundation *Heifer Project International* and the „*Dorna*” *Mountain Agricultural Association*.

Even though from the outside it looks more like a lodge, its interior follows the specifications of the European Union. This cote, made of wood, has running water, sewage system, electrical power, platform for milking apparatus, and a milking device. It also has two bedrooms for the shepherds, and, as an unusual aspect for a Romanian cote, it has sinks and a shower. In order to insure that the dairy processing follows all the sanitary standards, the shepherds also have a processing chamber and one for the dairy maturation, where only the chief can enter.

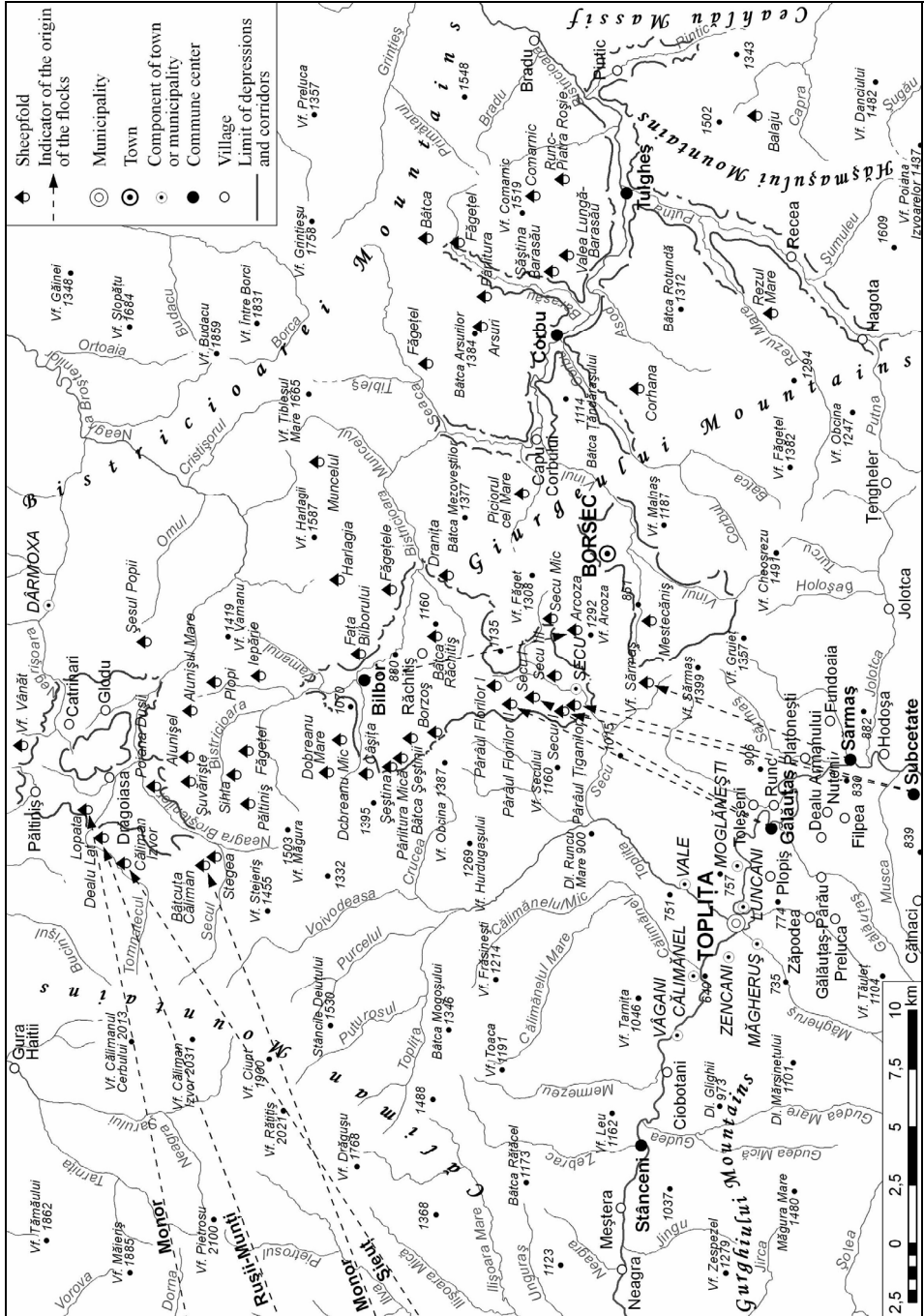


Fig. 3. The localization of sheepfolds in the Drăgoiasa-Tulgheș Depressionary Alignment.

Everything was installed with the aim of insuring sanitary standards and an adequate production circuit. This is a novelty in the area, and a model for promoting traditional, fresh dairy products. As for the certification of the products from this cote, it will be acquired in the very near future, being an essential condition for marketing them.

This modern cote represents the first construction of this type in the country, and its inauguration was promoted by the media, the construction expenses exceeding 150,000 lei.

The shepherds of this cote manage 700 sheep and 100 cattle, and the number of animals will surely grow as the investment will gain momentum and its initial costs will be recovered.

Following the same model, in 2010, a modern cote was built in Corbu (Arsuri), a project started by the „*Văleanca*” Corbu sheep and cattle breeders association, with the support of the same American foundation and the „*Dorna*” Mountain Agricultural Association.

The intent is to certify the Corbu cheese, which is made following a traditional recipe.

2. 1. The Tools of a Sheepfold

Regarding the tools of a traditional sheepfold, we mention the following items: „*budaca*”, „*budăcuța*”, made of fir wood, with a larger mouth, having a handle on one side made of a longer stave of wood, being used to make cheese; „*donița*”, also made of fir parallel staves of wood, this being used for milking cows; „*fedeleșul*”, again from staves of fir wood, with lids on both ends, the one at the top having a square wooden cork.

This is used to prepare and store sour milk, having wooden or metal rings on the outside, with distinguishing marks on the stave, used by locals (mostly one's initials); „*putina de lemn*”, used to store and transport „*jântița*”, whey and „*jântuit*”; „*bribideul*”, built in the shape of star with circles made of young fir branches, used to „*drub*” the „*străgeata*” and obtain an uniform mixture that will eventually become sweet cheese; „*tăujerul*”, a wooden bat with a caved in end and opened like a floral cup, use to mix „the cottage cheese whey” and not burn the „*urdit*” cauldrons; *the large 100 litre cauldrons*, made of aluminium, used for „*urdit*”; *the measure pot, the large wooden spoon, the sieve*, a dense linen, through which milk is strewn, which is the pouted in the „*budacă*”; „*hârzob*”, a wooden circle which is woven with aluminium wire in the form of loops, on which the sieve is placed; „*bărbânda with sour whey*”, made of wood, with a round lid, used to prepare and store sour whey, and to store „*burduf*” cheese in the household; *the polenta pot; the milk measure*, made of aluminum, with a floater graded up to 15 liters; „*comarnicul*”, a wooden roof under which the evening milk is put until morning, in large aluminum cauldrons, placed on „*wooden pitchforks*”, made of young spruce roots (similar to a tree like hanger). The fact is that, in a sheepfold, the „*donița*” is replaced by a milking bucket, tighter at the neck, which always comes with a cup, with two handles, made of wood, usually sycamore, with a 0.5 liters capacity.

Due to the fact that butter is also made in these sheepfolds, the „*budârloi*” (*churn*) is also among the tools used, made of fir staves, having a lid on top that has a hole in the middle through which the „*bribideu*” is inserted, which, through repeated vertical movements, leads to the transformation of sour cream into butter (*churning the butter*).

After demands from the European Union, cotes no longer use wooden tools and pots, instead using stainless steel or aluminum.

2. 2. The Description of Cheese Making Technology

Cheese preparation technology is an extremely complex process, that requires, besides the specific tools, following several conditions in its processing.

The milk from the „doniță” or bucket is poured in the „budacă” or cauldron that is covered by a sieve, nowadays made of a thick canvas. The warm milk from the „budacă” is given a *clot*, made from the stomach of a lamb or young calf, in order to achieve better quality.

The clot also includes a bit of unboiled milk and some salt. The clot prepared in lukewarm water is poured in the „budacă” with the big wooden spoon, in direct proportion with the milk, so that the cheese does not come out all coarse and frail.

Lately, most people who prepare cheese replaced the clot with pills, or with powdered clot, bought from veterinary pharmacies, that leads to a faster fermentation of milk.

When the milk is cloted, the „*străgeata*” is obtained, which is cut with the big wooden spoon, as a symbolic sign of the cross. The cheesemaker then waits for approximately 5-10 minutes until the whey rises above the cheese, after which the *bribideu* is used to churn it until one gets something resembling milk, but much thicker.

This (*străgeata*) is gathered by hand until there is nothing left on the sides of the *budăcă*, then, by using the large spoon, one gathers the cheese in one place.

The cheese is separated into 3-4 pieces, using a wooden knife, put in a *budăcuță*, then pressed by hand until all the whey drips away, then broken into very small pieces, squeezed by hand again, resulting a thicker whey, called „*jântuit*”. It is taken out of the *budăcuță* and put in a sieve, which is then hung on girders, in the pantry, so that it can drain for one or two days.



Fig. 4. Storing cheese at the cote.

After the whey's drainage, the cheese is put on shelves so it can dry and ferment. After roughly 15-20 days, if it is not too cold, the cheese is fermented and processed to obtain bellows cheese. Until it is not fermented, the cheese is called „green”, and cannot be eaten or sold.

„*The green cheese*”, being pressed, it juices, while the fermented one produces butter. People and shepherds also know it after the colour of its crust and after its taste.

The sweet whey, gathered in the „budacă”, is poured in the „urdit” cauldron, which is then hung in the whirlpool (a wooden device set above the fire), in order to boil and get the *cottage cheese*. After boiling, the cottage cheese gathered after pouring one or two litres of sour whey, is collected with the wooden spoon, and put in the „cottage cheese” sack so it can drain. If the gathered cottage cheese is mixed with boiled whey, one gets „jântița”, which is first course eaten by shepherds at noon or in the evening, or for the tourists that may visit that particular cote. The cottage cheese whey is sometimes used to wash the dishes, as well as food for the dogs, and when it goes sour as vinegar substitute in the kitchen.

These cheese making processes are described according to the recountal of older people, with many years of experience in such matters, at the same time being an art and a skill from the part of the cote chief and the shepherd, so that the cote can gain fame.

At many cotes, the evening milking of the cows is performed earlier (around 18⁰⁰), after which the cows are allowed to graze again, in the nearby clearings, until nightfall, a custom known as „*porneală*”, with the aim of getting approximately the same amount of milk in the evening as well as in the morning.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Shepherding is an economic activity whose sphere is not limited solely to animal husbandry, but also includes the capitalization of animal products. As pastoral life mostly takes place outside the villages, far away from their hearths, it is natural for the milk to be processed at the cote, while the obtained products (cheese, urda, etc.) to be used for the needs of the household, and only then for the market.

The average cheese quantity is 6-7 kg/sheep and 40-50 kg/cow, while the total annual quantity obtained in the Drăgoiasa-Tulgheș area is more than 300 tons. The products are sold in the markets of Toplița, Gheorgheni, Miercurea Ciuc, Borsec, Reghin and Vatra Dornei, while the milk is sold to the milk processing plants in Târgu Neamț, Reghin and Vatra Dornei, that buy cheaper by at least 25-35% of the market price.

The number of persons employed in these activities is approximately 534, while the salaries are between 800-1,200 lei/month, depending on their experience.

The ethno-touristic impact of shepherding is manifested on several levels, such as the antropization of the mountain areas, through cotes, the tools and the traditional products obtained, the temporal-pastoral activities and their reflection in folklore.

The cotes are traditional basic habitats from the mountain areas, with seasonal character, that function as small units of complex production, especially dairy, following traditional methods, many of them being situated on touristic paths or in their vicinity, acting as resting areas for tourists or even overnight shelters where one can serve traditional products, such as *cheese polenta*, *balmoș*, which is also prepared out of corn flour, with urdă and some sour whey to give it a bit of a sour taste, thus being more easily consumed, „*topcitul*” made of yeasted cheese, grounded in a bowl that is being heated in order for the cheese to melt, and then eaten with polenta. Sometimes, to make it even tastier, the cheese is mixed with some diced onion.

Among the traditional foods from the cote, I would like to mention: *jântița* (a mix of „urdă” and whey), *bread with pig fat*, „*cheese lump*” etc. The tourism generating

activities include „*The Shepherds Festival*” from the Bistricioara Basin, organised in Tulgheș, the first edition being the one in 2010, while in 2011, at Toplița, the first edition of the „*Sheep measure*” took place.

As this practice is frequent in the area, the locals were able to celebrate through dancing and singing, as many folk artists from the area took to the stage. The shepherds demonstrated how to milk a sheep, but also how to make cheese and urda. In the future, the plan is to use this event as a tourism generating factor, due to the multitude and diversity of cotes, where traditional dairy products are prepared, deeply embedded in the culinary and cultural tradition of the area, whose diversity is due to the height of the pastures and the particular production techniques.

In conclusion, one can say that, despite the fact that the geographic conditions of this mountainous area are not entirely favourable to the development of communities, sheep and cattle husbandry have excellent conditions to develop, which in turn has positive effects on the entire area through the products it delivers. The aim of this activity is to satisfy the household needs, while the product surplus is capitalized in order to cater for additional needs.

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