

# MODERN MYTH AND JAPANESE CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN MIYAZAKI'S PICTURE BOOK *SPIRITED AWAY*

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**Abstract:** Modern myths remain highly relevant today as they are expressed through stories and symbols that shape cultural identity. *Spirited Away* is one such work, and while previous studies have examined it from the perspectives of culture, identity, hero's journey, ecology, feminism, and postcolonialism, few have analyzed it specifically as a modern myth. To address this gap, this study applies Barthes' semiotic theory to explore how the story constructs modern myths that reflect Japanese culture. The study aims to 1) identify representations of Japanese culture in *Spirited Away*; 2) analyze how modern myths are constructed using Barthes' semiotic framework; and 3) explore the cultural implications of these myths in the story. Using a qualitative approach and Barthes' semiotic framework, the research analyzes signs and symbols at both the denotative and connotative levels. Through this analysis, the findings show that cultural elements such as food, work, names, spirits, and love are transformed into modern myths that naturalize values of identity, togetherness, spirituality, and morality. Thus, *Spirited Away* not only reflects Japanese culture but also communicates ideological messages that influence how people perceive values and social life in Japan.

**Keywords:** *Modern myth; Japanese culture; semiotic analysis; Roland Barthes; Spirited Away*

## INTRODUCTION

Modern myths remain highly relevant in contemporary society. They adapt traditional mythic elements into forms that resonate with modern audiences, such as films, urban legends, and popular culture. Wiesen (2024) views mythology as enduring characters and images that acquire mythological status through cultural use, while Jenkins (2024) emphasizes their adaptation to contemporary contexts. Gehmann (2003) defines modern myths as influential narratives that unconsciously shape people's perception of reality, and Ball (2021) highlights their cultural power regardless of factual accuracy. These perspectives underline that, unlike static traditional myths tied to gods and rituals, modern myths are dynamic cultural tools that evolve through media and technology, shaping collective values and social imagination.

Furthermore, myths play a crucial role in sustaining cultural identity and meaning. Wood (2020) argues that myths convey cultural norms and beliefs, while Evans (2018) stresses their endurance

through relevance and their function in transmitting moral or creation stories. Shynkaruk et al. (2018) highlight that myths form the foundation of cultural reality, shaping unspoken assumptions and personalities. Similarly, Sahoo and Rath (2023) describe myths as deeply embedded in belief systems and expressed symbolically, representing alternate yet coexisting realities. Baklanov et al. (2018) emphasize that myths preserve collective social experience and provide frameworks for social identity. Lovely (2019) adds that myth often serves as the foundation of literature, providing recurring patterns, characters, themes, and symbolic structures. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that myths, whether traditional or modern, serve as powerful cultural artifacts that reflect, preserve, and transform the values and aspirations of society.

Central to this theoretical exploration is Roland Barthes' (1972) concept of myth as a system of signs that communicates cultural and ideological meanings. In his view, signs operate on two levels: the denotative level,

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which conveys the literal or surface meaning, and the connotative level, which produces cultural and ideological interpretations that appear natural or universal. Through this process, myths transform ordinary signs into carriers of deeper values and worldviews.

Throughout literary history, myth has played a crucial role in shaping narratives. From the Greek classics to modern literature, mythological themes have persisted. For instance, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, mythical creatures such as Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed are woven into the narrative to create a fantastical and surreal atmosphere. In the twentieth century, authors like Neil Gaiman continued this trend. In *Coraline* (2002), Gaiman tells the story of a girl who discovers an alternate reality, one that reflects mythic structures that engage deeply with human fears and desires.

A prominent example of modern myth in literature and visual storytelling is Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, first published as a picture book in June 2002. The work has received critical acclaim and international recognition, including the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature at the 75th Oscars. Miyazaki, a renowned director, animator, and co-founder of Studio Ghibli, is widely recognized for his incorporation of Japanese mythological and folkloric elements. His other works, such as *Princess Mononoke* (1996) and *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), include themes drawn from Shinto beliefs and Japanese spiritual traditions. For instance, *Princess Mononoke* examines the conflict between humanity and nature through the lens of forest spirits, while *My Neighbor Totoro* features a benevolent forest guardian that embodies Shinto animism.

*Spirited Away* is highly influenced by Japanese folklore and animistic belief systems. Characters like Yubaba, a witch-like creature, and the bathhouse filled with ghosts and spirits are inspired by Shinto beliefs. As Napier (2001) indicates, these features are

more than just fantasy settings, but they also function as a critique of the tradition between modernity and tradition in current Japanese culture. The story tells about Chihiro, a ten-year-old girl who gets lost in a mystical world inhabited by spirits and supernatural animals. Her mission to save her parents, who turn into a pig, and return to the human world transforms into a symbolic adventure packed with mythological and cultural significance.

The visual beauty of Miyazaki's storytelling often overshadows the deeper themes embedded in his works. Many viewers may not immediately recognize the presence of modern myth, even though these narratives subtly address contemporary issues such as identity, environmental degradation, and materialism. These modern myths require closer study, especially today, when symbolic stories help people understand society's values.

This study applies Barthes' semiotic framework, focusing on the denotative (literal) and connotative (mythic) levels of meaning to examine how cultural signs in *Spirited Away* construct modern myths. Barthes' concept of myth is particularly relevant because it explains how narratives and images transform cultural meanings into seemingly natural truths. Through this approach, the study explores how the signs in *Spirited Away* function as the myth that makes cultural ideas appear normal and easy to accept.

Several main factors influenced the choice of this theme. First, the study examines the concept of modern myth within Japanese culture as depicted in *Spirited Away*. Myth has long been essential to Japanese narrative traditions and continues to be adapted in modern storytelling to address current cultural issues. Second, selecting Hayao Miyazaki as the primary text was important due to his global recognition as an artist whose works are rich in cultural significance and well-known themes. Third, *Spirited Away*'s widespread popularity and cultural impact as both a best-selling picture

book and a critically acclaimed film underscore the research's relevance and accessibility to both academic and general audiences. Lastly, this research contributes to discussions about the role of myth and literature and how mythological narratives are reinterpreted for contemporary audiences.

This research holds urgency and value not only within the field of literary and cultural studies but also for those interested in Japanese culture and mythology. It is hoped that the findings can provide insights into how literature and visual narratives shape cultural understanding and respond to modern issues. In doing so, the study aims to expand readers' appreciation of literary works, foster critical interpretation, and enhance knowledge of the cultural significance embedded in mythological storytelling.

Previous studies of *Spirited Away* have examined themes of culture and identity (Sun, 2020; Mandal, 2022; Napier, 2006), the hero's journey (Noviana, 2019; Wu & Wang, 2022; Callis, 2021), semiotic analyses of symbols and characters (Sanders, 2022; Difitrian & Saleh, 2024; Audrey, 2022), ecological concerns (Lim, 2013; Mandal, 2022), feminism (Papastavros, 2023), and postcolonial readings (Banerjee & Sahi, 2024). However, none of these studies have addressed the work as a form of modern myth through Barthes' semiotic framework. This study fills that gap by analyzing how *Spirited Away* constructs modern myths that reflect contemporary Japanese culture.

This article aims to address three specific objectives: 1) to identify representations of Japanese culture in *Spirited Away*; 2) to analyze how modern myths are constructed using Barthes' semiotic framework; and 3) to explore the cultural implications of these myths in the story.

## METHOD

### Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach with a semiotic method based on Roland Barthes' myth theory to analyze modern myth in Japanese culture as represented in the *Spirited Away* picture book by Hayao Miyazaki. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows the researcher to explore and interpret the complex cultural meanings embedded in the picture book's texts. According to Creswell (2009), "qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). The process involves emerging questions, data collected in a natural setting, inductive data analysis, and the researcher's interpretation of meaning, the element that aligns directly with the objectives of the study. In addition, qualitative research involves procedures such as "purposeful sampling, collection of open-ended data, analysis of text or pictures, and personal interpretation of the findings" (Creswell, 2009, p. 173), all of which are applied in this research to study signs, symbols, and texts that represent Japanese culture and modern myth.

### Semiotic Framework

This study applies Roland Barthes' theory of myth as the analytical framework. Barthes (1972) conceptualizes myth as a second-order semiological system, in which signs at the first level (comprising signifier and signified) are transformed into new signifiers at the second level that carry cultural or ideological meanings. These two levels are understood as literal or denotative meaning (first level) and ideological, mythological, or connotative meaning (second level). This approach is appropriate for analyzing how the cultural symbols in *Spirited Away*—such as food, work, names, or spirits—function not only as narrative elements but also as carriers of broader cultural myths that naturalize values within Japanese society.

### **Research Objects and Data Sources**

The material object of this study is the *Spirited Away* picture book by Hayao Miyazaki, published in 2002 and consisting of 170 pages. Unlike the film adaptation, the picture book was selected because it offers a compact narrative accompanied by visuals that emphasize symbolic representation, making it particularly suitable for semiotic analysis. The formal object of this study is the depiction of Japanese culture, the construction of modern myth, and the implication of the use of modern myth in Japanese culture in the story. Primary data are derived from the textual content of the picture book, while secondary data consist of scholarly books and articles that provide theoretical background and cultural context to support the analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted through several stages: 1) repeated readings of the picture book to thoroughly understand the storyline and identify recurring themes, symbols, and potential hidden meanings; 2) selection of textual elements connected to Japanese culture and modern myth; and 3) categorization of the collected data according to the research focus, which was then organized systematically for analysis. To assist this process, the researcher created an inventory table to record and classify signs and symbols, which later served as the basis for interpretation and reporting. To enhance reliability, triangulation was employed by consulting both primary and secondary sources, and peer feedback was used to strengthen the interpretation.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis procedure in this research is as follows: 1) collecting data in the form of texts related to Japanese culture and modern myth as found in the *Spirited Away* picture book, limited to relevant signs for analysis through Barthes' semiotics; 2) identifying and interpreting signs by examining the signifier and signified, which together form a sign with denotative meaning; 3) analyzing

myth construction, where the sign from the first system functions as a new signifier in the mythological or connotative system; 4) concluding the analyzed myth structure to explain how modern myth is constructed in *Spirited Away* and to reveal its implications for Japanese culture.

### **Researcher's Role**

In this study, the researcher plays a vital role as the primary instrument, actively engaging in the selection, interpretation, and analysis of data according to Creswell's (2009) definition of qualitative inquiry. The researcher's interpretive efforts ensure that cultural signs are analyzed within their social and ideological contexts. This qualitative, semiotic methodology thus provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the cultural significance and ideological messages embedded in the picture book's texts.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This part of the article discusses the picture book *Spirited Away*, addressing the objectives mentioned in the introduction regarding the depiction of Japanese culture in *Spirited Away*, the construction of modern myth, and the cultural implications of modern myths in the story based on Roland Barthes' myth in semiotics theory.

### **Depiction of Japanese Culture in *Spirited Away***

Japanese culture in *Spirited Away* is represented through various elements—food, names, work hierarchy, the coexistence of the human and spirit worlds, magic, manners, reciprocity, and social structure. These elements are not merely decorative but function as cultural signs. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, each sign (signifier and signified) is shown to construct myths that naturalize values and beliefs within Japanese society.

### **Food as Myth**

Food is a central symbol that conveys both punishment and protection. When Chihiro's parents greedily eat food in the spirit world,

they are transformed into pigs. The signifier (food) here carries the signified (gluttony, lack of respect), which at the mythic level becomes a warning against greed and consumerism. In contrast, when Haku gives Chihiro a protective tablet, food signifies survival and belonging in the spirit world. Thus, food in the story functions as a myth about self-control, respect for boundaries, and harmony with nature.

### ***Names and Identity***

Names serve as signs of identity and power. When Yubaba changes Chihiro's name to "Sen," the signifier (name) becomes tied to the signified (loss of personal identity), and at the connotative level, this reflects how systems of authority control individuals. This myth naturalizes the idea that within rigid hierarchies, one's identity can be diminished or reshaped by power structures.

### ***Work, Discipline, and Hierarchy***

The bathhouse reflects Japanese work culture, where hierarchy, loyalty, and discipline are emphasized. The social structure in the bathhouse in the story reflects the Japanese work culture that upholds hierarchy, discipline, and loyalty. Yubaba, as the highest superior, is in complete control. Below her is Haku Yubaba's right-hand man and apprentice. Then, senior workers like Lin and new workers like Chihiro are under them. Each individual has a clear role and must work according to set rules. Chihiro begins as a powerless newcomer but gradually gains respect through effort and perseverance. The sign of "work" here denotes physical labor but connotes values of diligence, resilience, and self-transformation. At the mythological level, work becomes a cultural ideology: survival and self-worth are achieved through dedication and responsibility rather than privilege or strength.

### ***Spirit World and Belief Systems***

The coexistence of the human and spirit worlds illustrates the cultural belief in unseen forces. Statues, river spirits, and supernatural beings signify spiritual presence in daily life. These signs naturalize the myth that humans

live in constant relation to nature and the invisible world, which must be respected. This reflects Shinto-influenced ideologies of harmony between humans and spirits.

### ***Magic, Spells, and Contracts***

Spells, witches, and magical contracts operate as symbols of binding power and social regulation. Magic is not only a narrative device but a sign of cultural belief in forces that shape and protect life. At the myth level, magic represents the naturalized presence of unseen rules and values in society—discipline, obligation, and protection.

### ***Manners, Gratitude, and Reciprocity***

Politeness and reciprocity appear through Chihiro's gestures of bowing, thanking, and returning favors. These signs, while simple at the denotative level, connote deeper values of respect and social harmony. At the mythological level, such practices construct the ideology that relationships are sustained through mutual acknowledgment and obligation.

The depiction of Japanese culture in *Spirited Away* demonstrates how food, names, work, spirits, politeness, and social hierarchy are embedded in the story. However, these cultural elements do not merely function as background details, but they are transformed into symbolic systems that carry ideological meaning. To uncover this deeper level, Barthes' semiotic framework is applied, showing how each cultural element becomes part of a modern myth that reflects and critiques Japanese values. This transition from cultural description to semiotic interpretation highlights the narrative's dual function as both cultural representation and myth construction.

### ***Construction of Modern Myth in Spirited Away***

Through the cultural elements above, *Spirited Away* presents Japanese culture not as background detail but as a sign system rich in symbolic meaning. Using Barthes'

semiotic approach, food, names, work, spirits, magic, and manners are revealed as myths that naturalize values such as discipline, identity, harmony, and respect. The picture book thus conveys cultural ideologies subtly, making them appear “natural” within the story world while reflecting broader Japanese social values.

#### ***Love as a Collective Force***

Love in the story functions beyond romantic affection. It is represented as a rescuing force that binds characters and breaks curses, as when Zeniba says, “Only love can break it.” Denotatively, love signifies emotional connection; connotatively, it symbolizes collectivism and the cultural value of interdependence. This myth naturalizes the ideology that trust and mutual support are more powerful than individual strength, aligning with the Japanese emphasis on harmony and group cohesion.

#### ***Bathhouse as a Social Space***

The bathhouse appears as a literal place for bathing and rest, referencing Japanese onsen and sentō culture. At the connotative level, however, it functions as a metaphor for society: diverse beings coexist, bound by shared rules. While this reflects Japanese ideals of harmony and community, it also suggests the pressures of conformity within a hierarchical system. The bathhouse thus embodies a modern myth of collectivism, where inclusivity is celebrated but individual freedom is constrained by authority and social obligation.

#### ***Spirits as Symbols of Spirituality***

Spirits, drawn from Shinto and Buddhist traditions, are depicted as ordinary companions rather than fearful beings. This normalization of spirits signifies the persistence of spirituality in daily life. Connotatively, it reflects Japan’s cultural ideology of coexistence with unseen forces and the integration of tradition within modern society. The myth naturalizes the idea that spirituality remains a silent but enduring part of contemporary Japanese identity.

#### ***Work as Social Identity***

Work is portrayed as essential for survival—Haku warns, “If you don’t get a job, Yubaba will turn you into an animal.” Denotatively, work is a means of livelihood; connotatively, it symbolizes discipline, moral responsibility, and the foundation of one’s social identity. As a myth, work embodies the ideology that perseverance and productivity define humanity, echoing Japanese work culture. At the same time, it critiques systems where value and identity are entirely tied to labor.

#### ***Gold as Moral Temptation***

Gold in the story sparks chaos and greed, particularly with No-Face’s offerings. Literally, it is a precious and valued material; connotatively, it represents temptation and corruption. Chihiro’s refusal of gold symbolizes spiritual integrity and resistance to materialism. The myth constructed here critiques consumerism and affirms simplicity as a moral ideal. It naturalizes the cultural value of self-restraint and prioritization of spiritual over material wealth.

#### ***Names and Identity Control***

Yubaba’s act of renaming Chihiro as “Sen” strips her of memory and autonomy. Denotatively, the name change signifies loss of identity; connotatively, it represents systems of power that dehumanize and enforce submission. The myth highlights how bureaucratic or hierarchical systems can erase individuality. Yet Chihiro’s recovery of her name symbolizes resistance and the reclaiming of identity, suggesting that autonomy can be regained through self-awareness and memory.

Through the six main myths discussed, namely, love as a collaborative force, bathhouse as a social space, spirits as a symbol of spirituality, work as a social identity, gold as a moral temptation, and name as a symbol of identity control, *Spirited Away* builds a modern myth system that represents Japanese cultural ideology. By combining denotative and connotative meanings, the story conveys important values such as collectivism, simplicity, spirituality,

and criticism of the social system that suppresses identity. The rich use of symbols and signs makes these myths seem natural and plausible within the narrative world. As such, *Spirited Away* not only represents Japanese culture but also shapes the way the audience perceives these values through the subtle and covert mechanism of myth. As Roland Barthes asserts in *Mythologies* (1972), ‘*myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification.*’ This statement asserts that through myth, cultural constructs are disguised as natural and eternal truths. *Spirited Away* is a clear example of this process in its rich representation of contemporary Japanese culture.

### **Cultural Implications of Modern Myth in *Spirited Away***

*Spirited Away* demonstrates how cultural elements are elevated into modern myths that both preserve and interrogate Japanese social values. Through Barthes’s semiotic lens, everyday symbols such as food, work, names, spirits, gold, and love are transformed into narratives that naturalize discipline, collectivism, and spirituality while simultaneously exposing the risks of materialism, conformity, and identity loss. In this way, the text not only reproduces cultural traditions but also offers a critical reflection on the ideological tensions between tradition and modernity in contemporary Japanese society.

Work in *Spirited Away* is depicted as essential for survival. Haku warns Chihiro, “If you don’t get a job, Yubaba will turn you into an animal.” At the denotative level, work means labor in the bathhouse; connotatively, it symbolizes discipline, identity, and moral duty. The implication is a reflection of Japan’s work-centered society, where human worth is often measured by productivity. This resonates with real-world issues such as *karōshi* (death by overwork) and declining

work–life balance. The narrative, therefore, critiques the reduction of identity to labor alone, exposing the pressures of a system where existence is validated only through productivity. Yet this extends globally, as modern capitalist economies increasingly normalize burnout and “hustle culture.” The myth of work thus naturalizes the ideology that human existence is justified through labor, while simultaneously questioning its human cost.

When Yubaba takes Chihiro’s name and replaces it with “Sen,” she strips the protagonist of memory and autonomy. Denotatively, the name change signifies the literal loss of identity; connotatively, it symbolizes how systems of power—whether bureaucratic or capitalist—erase individuality to enforce control. The implication is a critique of modern Japanese society’s hierarchical structures, where conformity often overshadows personal autonomy. Yet Chihiro’s gradual recovery of her name illustrates resistance, suggesting that self-awareness and memory can restore individuality even within oppressive systems.

The bathhouse appears as a literal site for bathing and rest, rooted in Japanese *onsen* and *sentō* traditions. At the connotative level, however, it functions as a metaphor for a collective society bound by hierarchy and shared labor. The implication is ambivalent: on one hand, the bathhouse symbolizes harmony, teamwork, and inclusivity—core Japanese cultural values. On the other hand, it exposes the pressures of conformity, where individuals must submit to authority and social obligation. Thus, the bathhouse embodies the dual myth of collectivism: celebrating communal solidarity while critiquing the suppression of individuality within collective structures.

The spirits in *Spirited Away*—drawn from Shinto and Buddhist cosmologies—are portrayed as ordinary presences coexisting with humans. Denotatively, they are supernatural beings; connotatively, they

represent the persistence of spirituality in daily life. The implication is significant for a modern, material-driven Japan: spirituality is not erased by modernization but remains embedded as an invisible foundation of cultural identity. In this way, the film critiques the dominance of consumerism and reasserts the importance of balancing tradition and modernity.

The gold offered by No-Face generates chaos and greed in the bathhouse. Literally, gold is a precious material; symbolically, it represents temptation, corruption, and consumerism. Chihiro's rejection of No-Face's gold illustrates resistance to materialism, affirming the values of simplicity and spiritual integrity. The implication is a direct critique of Japan's consumer culture, especially in the wake of the post-bubble economy of the 1990s. By naturalizing the rejection of wealth as moral superiority, the myth critiques capitalism while reasserting traditional ideals of restraint (*jisei*) and balance.

Love in the narrative is not confined to romance but functions as a salvific force that breaks curses. Zeniba's words, "Only love can break it," highlight love's role as solidarity, empathy, and collective healing. Denotatively, love is an emotional connection; connotatively, it symbolizes humanism and collectivism. The implication is a critique of excessive individualism and alienation in modern Japan, where phenomena such as *hikikomori* and social isolation are prevalent. Love thus emerges as a mythic antidote—proposing empathy and interdependence as alternatives to competition and estrangement.

In conclusion, *Spirited Away* uses modern myth to explain Japanese values. Taken together, these myths reveal that *Spirited Away* does more than depict Japanese culture; it critiques and reimagines it through myth. In Barthes' terms, myths in the story transform cultural constructs into "natural" truths, but they also expose the ideological systems underpinning modern

society. The implications extend beyond Japan, showing how myths in cultural texts can reveal and challenge the pressures of consumerism, conformity, identity loss, and alienation that characterize modern life.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how *Spirited Away* employs cultural elements such as food, names, work, spirits, love, and gold to craft modern myths. It explains how these myths are constructed and how Japanese culture is represented through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The results of the analysis show that *Spirited Away* subtly conveys social values and criticism by using symbols of Japanese culture. For example, work is portrayed not only as a daily activity but also as a condition of existence; names function as representations of identity and instruments of control; gold symbolizes materialism and excess; and love emerges as a saving force that underpins human relationships. Taken together, these findings indicate that the story does more than reflect Japanese culture. It actively constructs modern myths that naturalize values and social norms. In line with Barthes' concept of myth as an ideological sign system, this suggests that *Spirited Away* participates in shaping contemporary understandings of identity, morality, and social life in Japan.

This study contributes to literary and cultural studies by revealing how *Spirited Away* constructs modern myths as ideological sign systems, demonstrating the intersection of semiotics, culture, and popular media. The findings reaffirm the relevance of Barthes' semiotic theory for analyzing contemporary narratives, showing that myths are not relics of the past but remain active in shaping cultural values and social meanings. Beyond academic insights, the research emphasizes that cultural texts like *Spirited Away* are not merely entertainment but critical sites where ideologies are naturalized, sustained, and reshaped, ultimately influencing how



societies perceive identity, morality, and reality itself.

At the same time, this study is limited by its focus on a single text, the *Spirited Away* picture book, which narrows the scope of cultural comparison. Future research could extend this analysis to Miyazaki's other works or to cultural texts from different countries using the same semiotic framework. Such comparative studies would deepen insights into how modern myths operate across diverse cultural contexts and further illuminate their role in shaping social values and collective identities.

Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of studying modern myths as a way of understanding how contemporary cultures communicate, preserve, and challenge values through symbolic forms. By examining cultural texts like *Spirited Away*, scholars and readers alike can better recognize the ideological power of stories in shaping the social imagination of modern society.

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