

# The Changing Identities of the Tamil Muslims from the Coromandel Coast to Malaysia: An Etymological Analysis

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Abstract: The Tamil Muslims of the Coromandel Coast, South India are people whose trading networks were founded in the prominent port cities located within South India as well South East Asia. In the context of the Malay world, these traders and merchants engaged uncommercial intercourse with the region since the 8th century C.E. They became well-established and known among both locals and the Europeans with certain unique characteristics which evolved periodically in South India as well as South East Asia. Designations towards Tamil Muslims - such as Yavana, Sonakar, Anjuvanam, Chuliar, and Thulukkar - evolved periodically and in parallel to historical developments as well as demographical changes in South India. In contrast, within Malaysia, terms such as Keling, Chulia, and Mamak are made in reference to this community. Some of these terms are predominantly used in Malaysia, which may have derogative connotations and are often misunderstood by local Malaysians.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The word Tamil Muslim denotes a Muslim who speaks the Tamil language as their mother tongue. Tamil Muslims consider their root of origin to be Tamil Nadu, south-east India, lying between the sea and the Deccan plateau. (More,2004:3). They were dominantly found residing in the port towns along the Coromandel coast, including Kalayapatnam, Karaikal and Cuddalore, from as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

Islam made its advent in South India through the sea prior to land expeditions from the Middle East to North India, which paved ways to the emergence of Islamic Kingdoms of Delhi (1206-1526 C.E.) and the Mughal Sultanate (1526-1857 C.E.) The spread of Islam in South India took place through trading networks and maritime activities. Some of the coastal Tamil communities professed Islam as their faith after becoming Muslims through years of contact with Arab traders. Arab sailors and traders established their settlements along the Coromandel coast in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Century C.E and the Malabar coast.

Islam was gradually spread to the hinterland of South India throughout the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

(Bayly, 1989:86). Arab traders used to stay in the Coromandel coast while handling their trade activities. While they were there, they married the local Tamil women. Marriages between Arab traders and local Tamils brought about the emergence of Tamil Muslims with Arab blood, known as the Indo-Arab community. Two groups of seafaring Muslim merchants emerged- the Malayalam speaking Muslims of Malabar Coast, the *Mapilla*, and the Tamil speaking Muslims of the Coromandel coast, known as the *Marakkayar* (More, 17-19). These Muslim communities eventually grew and were known for their different sub-divisions, such as the *Marakkayar*, *Labbai* and *Rawathar* (Thurston,1907:1), who were later identified collectively as the *Chulia* with other South Indians by the British and probably by other European powers as well (Arasatnam,1989:3). Their population increased in number as the growing importance of the Coromandel ports as international multi ports became central to the trade activities between West Asia and Malay Archipelago (Sanjay,2002:95).

Consequently, Tamil Muslim settlements had developed over a time along the east coast of South India, stretching from Pulicat to Colochel in Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin). The majority of the

Muslims resided in the prominent port cities of Thanjavur, Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli. Nevertheless, they also established other port cities such as Pulicat, Nagapattanam, Kilakkarai and Kayalpattanam as part of their settlements (Raja Mohamed, 2004:30). Apart from being prominent, Tamil Muslim trade activities, centres and settlements, and the port cities along the Coromandel coast were also renowned as Islamic cultural centres in South India during 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century (Bayly, 1989:88).

Tamil Muslims had trade as their predominant profession. The local ruler encouraged this profitable activity by providing trade facilities to their coastal areas. There were important ports along the Coromandel coast, such as Porto Novo, Nagapattanam, Nagore, Karaikkal, Adirampattanam, Mandapam, Vedalai, Kilakkarai and Kayalpattanam. Economically, they had extensive trade connections with the Arab peninsular and Indian oceans. In addition, these ports were important routes to Sri Lanka, Melaka and other places in Southeast Asia (Sanjay, 2002:95)

An extensive South Indian trade network with the Malay Archipelago became the continuing platform for the Tamil Muslims with Malaya. Tamil Muslim communities in the Malay Archipelago were established and made contact with since the 8<sup>th</sup> Century C.E in the kingdom of Kedah and during the Sultanate of Melaka throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> Century till the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century (Arasatnam, 1989:17). Tamil Muslim traders and merchants played notable roles in royal affairs as well as trade till the fall of Sultanate of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511 C.E. After this period, they shifted and extended their trade and political influence to other Malay states without the presence of European powers.

Their presence was warmly accepted by Malay rulers. Moreover, Malay Sultans relied upon them the most for the progress and well-being of their states and royal trade activities. Such a scenario paved ways to the development of Tamil Muslims in Johor, Perak, Kedah and Acheh in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. As their importance and influence in trade act grew, the Sultans of the Malay states and the aristocrats appointed them as royal merchants or 'Saudagar Raja'. Furthermore, they were entrusted to the extent that they even married into royal families (Andaya, 1979:86-87). These Tamil Muslim trading community who had already established themselves in other Malay states as well as Kedah, extended their trade activities to Penang after the establishment of a newly founded Penangport by Francis Light in 1786 C.E. (Cullin & Zehnder, 1905:5).

Through they traded and migrated in various forms other than as traders and merchants—such as sojourners and labourers—the Tamil Muslim community from different parts and areas of Tamil Nadu, South India waseventually formed and developed as part of the early residents of a newly established Penang port city. Indeed, the existence of KapitanKeling Mosque, which was dated from 1801 C.E., stands as a beacon of their presence, significance and the roles that the community had in the development of social, economic and cultural aspects of George Town, Penang.

In the context of culture, Tamil Muslims who speak Tamil have integrated themselves into Tamil culture as a shared culture, with some exceptionsto the majority of Tamil Hindus in Tamil Nadu, South India. They incorporated themselves within Tamil culture and traditions, and in fact regard as part of their own (Mines, 1972:20). They did not consider themselves an isolated or marginalised community kept apart from the majority of the Hindu community in Tamil Nadu, but were recognised and respected as a variant of the Tamil community with some unique identities. Historically, these identities evolved gradually and contextually over a period of time from as early as their establishment and gradual growth in Tamil Nadu as well as outside of India, such as in Malaysia.

Particular appellations applied on their identities and divided into main subdivisions and sub-groups accordingly to predominant professions, namely *Marakkayar*, *Labbai* and *Rawather*. In the context of the discussion within the article, these subdivisions stand as part of their overall identities, and are not the main subject of the discourse. Thus, the article only tends to investigate and explore other identities, apart from subdivisions of Tamil Muslims in Tamil Nadu and Malaysia.

## 1.1 Tamil Muslim Identities

Tamil Muslim community was designated with distinct identities from the time Islam was spread in South India, as early as 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Thus, they emerged as a new community attached to their new faith, Islam, among the majority native Tamils of Hindu faith. Overtime, Tamil Muslims were generally identified and addressed chronologically as *Yavana*, *Sonakar*, *Anjuvanam* and *Thulakkar* in South India (Raja Mohamed, 2004:61). Apart from that, Tamil Muslim diasporas that grew in South East Asia, and in particular Malaysia, have been addressed with distinct terms which include *Keling*, *Chulia* and *Mamak*. In fact, historically, these

identities and appellations which evolved in Malaysia date back to the pre-Sultanate of Melaka period to the period of the European colonial powers and currently some of the appellations are used predominantly among the Malaysians. Therefore, the article investigates these identities of the Tamil Muslims etymologically from historical and social perspectives, which appear salient and express an understanding of the Tamil Muslim community.

## 1.2 *Yavana and Sonakar*

*Yavana* was the initial identity of Tamil Muslims in South India. According to the ancient Sangam Literature of Tamil kingdoms in 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., there was a group of people called *Yavana* (More, 2004:4). The term *Yavana* is a Sanskrit word which refers to Greeks, foreigners and barbarians. Historically, the term *Yavana* is only used to refer to the early-period Greeks and Romans. In the later periods, the Arabs, Persians and even Jews were referred to as *Yavana* or *Yona* (Hunter, 2013:172-173). According to More (2004) in the middle and modern Tamil era, only the Arabs or Muslims, which probably also included Tamil Muslims, were referred to as *Yavana*. Prominent Tamil Muslim researcher and author, Raja Mohamed (2004) claims that *Yavana* supposedly and rightfully should refer to the Arabs solely and not to Greeks or Romans. He argues that the trade activities between pre-Islamic Arabs with India coincided with the existence of Arab colonies in coastal areas of India as early as 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.

Meanwhile, trade contact of India with Romans took place after this period and was only proven by Roman coins that were unearthed in many parts of South India. He decisively stresses that the Roman coins dated between 27 B.C to 161 B.C. were most probably brought into South India by the Arabs as they played a salient role as the middlemen of the south seas and used foreign gold coins as a medium of exchange. Furthermore, throughout the period of Pliny and Periplus and even at the height of their power, Romans were not able to extend their influence over Indian trade, which for years remained under the control of the Arabs.

According to Raja Mohamed (2004), the word *Yavana* traces its origin to the Arabic term *Yavan* which is a place name in Yemen, South Arabia. The word *Yavan*, which stood as a place, name must have been the strong hold of *Yavanas*. In some old Tamil poems, *Yavanam* is said to be one of the fifty-six countries around India and it denotes Arabia. From the foregoing discussion it is

convincing that the word *Yavana* may denote the Arabs. After the initial conversion to Islam, the Tamil Muslim community certainly experienced and went through a process of integration and assimilation with the local Tamils socially and culturally. Thus, culturally the Tamil Muslims integrated into Tamil culture, compared to the intact Arabian identities or culture. As a consequence, locally Tamil Muslims were not addressed as *Yavana* since 8<sup>th</sup> C.E.

Later, from the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. onward, Tamil Muslims of the Coromandel coast were being called *Sonakar*, *Sonakan* or *Jonakan*. *Sonakar* is a Tamil word formed from the corruption of the word *Yonakar*, which refers to the descendants of the Arabs. *Sonakam* in Tamil refers to Arabia and its people or those who hailed from the place called *Sonakar*. The usage of *Sonakar* was also found in Malabar among the *Mappila* Muslims. They were addressed as *Sonaka Mappilla*. Furthermore, official records of Ceylon call the Muslim population *Sonakar* (Raja Mohamed, 2004:68)

## 1.3 *Anjuvanam*

*Anjuvanam* was another term used to refer the Tamil Muslims. *Anjumanis* derived from Persian word which literally denotes "congregation". This term was related to the Tamil Muslims' profession as traders. As a trading community, Tamil Muslims that resided at port towns along the Coromandel coast established guilds and associations that catered to their trading members. Due to this fact, Tamil Muslims were also generally addressed as *Anjuvanam*. The word *Anjuvanam* was found on copper plates and inscriptions dated to 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> C.E., which referred to Muslim guilds. Moreover, a mosque in the Tenkasi area of the Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu is known as the *Anjuvanam Pallivasal* to this very day, strengthening this argument. *Anjuvanam* or Muslim merchant guilds operated from areas like *Kottayam*, *Thirhamanapuram* and *Nagapattanam* to promote their trading activities (Raja Mohamed, 72:2004)

## 1.4 *Thullukar*

Tamil Muslims were also referred to as *Thulukkar* or *Thurukkar*. This term literally means a native of the Turkic region, or Turkic people. Though not all the Muslims who frequented the Coromandel coast had come from Turkey, this term is very commonly and popularly applied to all Tamil Muslims by the dominant Tamil Hindu community to this day.

Historically, the attachment of the term with the Tamil Muslims took place as a result of the influence of the subjugation of the South Indian Delhi Sultanate in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, the Sultanate of Madurai formed and ruled Madurai in the 14<sup>th</sup> century C.E. (1323 to 1378 C.E.) for 55 years after ending the rule of Vijayanagar of the Pandyan Dynasty. The natives of Madurai called the Sultanate *Thulukkani* or *Thulukkavanam*. Since this period, Tamil speaking Muslims have been addressed as *Thulukkar* or *Thulukkan*, due to the similarity of Islamic faith between the Sultanate of Madurai and the Muslims (More, 13:2004), while their women-folk are called *Thulukachi* (Raja Mohamed, 70: 2004).

Chronologically, *Thulukkaris* the latest appellation that refers to Tamil Muslims which emerged in South India as mentioned above. Thus, the term is used by the Tamil diasporas in Malaysia as part of their linguistic traditions. As a matter of fact, today the term *Thulukkar* or *Thulukkan* are used by Malaysian Indians of Hindu faith to address Tamil Muslims. Indeed, the term is generally regarded as derogative by some Muslims. Perhaps the historical events and foundation of the birth of the term may serve as factor to this sentiment or it was due to the sentiment of disagreement and detestation among the people of Madurai who lived formerly under the rule of the Vijayanagar Kingdom against the Sultanate of Madurai.

In any case, the term has been applied to the Tamil Muslims to this widely, and with solely different perceptions by Malaysian Indians. Without prejudice, it is believed that the term only serves as a demarcating symbol in terms of identity between the Muslims and non-Muslims among the Tamil community in Malaysia. Without doubt, proper and factual understanding about the etymology of the term *Thulukkaris* likely important in eradicating any misunderstanding and negative sentiments between people of similar ethnicities with different faiths.

### 1.5 *Chulia*

The word *Chulia* appears in the works of South Asia and Southeast Asia authors and researchers based on Dutch and British records. *Chulia* is in fact a prominent term that was widely used by the British in particular to address and refer to the Tamil Muslims and other South Indians in their official documents and records. Generally, the term has different spelling; *Cholia*, *Choliar*, *Chuliar* and *Choolia* (Sandhu, 1969:118; Campell & Samuel, 1801: 16-17)

The term *Chulia* was originally a territorial name, meaning an inhabitant of Chola or *Cola-Mandalam*, referring to the Coromandel coast in South India (Wink 1991: 309). This area was known to the Arabs as *Ma'bar*, the term used to address Tamil people regardless of their internal sub-ethnic divisions, castes and religions. Hence, all Tamil Muslims, Tamil Hindus and others from the Coromandel coast were called *Chulia*. This argument is based on 19<sup>th</sup> century British sources, which refer to both Muslims and Hindus as *Chulia*.

In any case, in due course of time, Tamil Muslims were more dominantly referred to as *Chulia* in Ceylon, Burma and Southeast Asia as a result of their dominance in trade activities in these areas (Raja Mohamed, 2004:71). In certain situations, *Chulia* was applied to refer to a sub-division of the Tamil Muslim community with certain shared identities and backgrounds. For instance, as mentioned by Sanjay Subramaniam (2001), it is found that *Chulia* is also used as an identifier of Tamil Muslims of *Marakkayar*, though they are only a sub-division of the Tamil Muslim trading community. Today, the term *Chulia* is not in use as it was the sole identity created by the British to address the Tamil Muslims and was thus external in nature.

### 1.6 *Keling or Kling*

The term *Keling* is a Malay word which refers to South Indian people. In British records and documents, the term *Kling* is used to refer to the Malay version of *Keling* (Cullin & Zehnder, 1905:9). In *Sejarah Melayu* or the *The Malay Annal*, the term *Keling* is used widely to refer to South Indian traders and merchants. In terms of faith, both Muslims and Hindus are called *Keling*. This is due to it being the name of a place of origin rather than other values or measurements before the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Malay literature of the 17<sup>th</sup> century such as *The Malay Annal* and *Hikayat Munshi Abdullah* refer to South India as *Benua Keling* ("Keling Continent") and *Tanah Keling* ("Keling Soil") (Hamzah Hamdani, 2007:4; Shellabear, 1977:163). The word *Benua Keling* and *Kalinga* are depicted often in the texts of *Sejarah Melayu* referring to South India. The following quotation from *The Malay Annal* depicts the tradition of addressing South India as *Benua Keling* among the Malays in Melaka.

“Hattamaka Sultan Mahmud  
pun  
hendak menyuruh ke benua Ke  
ling membelikain serasahem

*patpuluhbagai....Maka  
Hang  
Nadimdititahbagindakebenu  
aKelingmembelikainitu...M  
aka Hang  
Nadimpergilahnaikkapal  
Hang Isap...”*  
(Shellabear, 1977:163)

This appellation was not only used by the Malays in Malaya but it was observed that the people of the Malay archipelago also labelled the South Indians as *Keling* in antiquity. The term *Keling* has its origin from the name *Kalinga*, an ancient Buddhist kingdom in South India (Khoosalmah, 2009:47). Sarkar (1986) extracted details from Chinese records that depict the arrival of people from Kalinga at central Java. The Kalinga people formed a kingdom with the name of *Ho-Ling* in central Java in 674 C.E. (Sarkar, 1986:71)

According to Chinese records, the term *Ho-ling* is a Chinese word which refers to Kalinga. Moreover, information from some inscriptions prove that most of the people from South India were known as *Ho-ling*, in reference to Kalinga. Based on this argument, it is evident that Kalinga people became the dominant community among the Indians as residents or traders in Central Java. Later, the term *Kalinga* was gradually applied to address the Tamils from South India.

The appellation of the term *Keling* applied to Tamil Muslims traders only later after the decline of Hindu traders in the Malay Archipelago (Fujimoto, 1988:9). During the occupation and rule of Melaka by the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the term *Keling* was addressed towards Hindu traders mainly. This was due to the decline of Tamil Muslim trading activities in the port of Melaka. However, *Keling* referred not only to the Tamil Muslim community but extensively to Indian Muslims and other South Indian communities generally (McPherson, 1990: 44)

From the context of Indian Muslims and in particular Tamil Muslims, the term *Keling* was applied in different forms and contexts in Malaysia. The term was applied towards the community with a diverse definition and perspective by the Malay community in different regions. For instance, in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia that comprises Penang, Kedah and Perlis, the term *Keling* is an exclusive term referring to the Indian Muslim community, whereas in other parts of the country, *Keling* is used by the locals to address Indians with of the Hindu faith rather than Indian

Muslims (Halimah Mohd Said & Zainab Abdul Majid, 2004:18)

As a matter of fact, *Keling* is a sensitive term and highly regarded as derogative by both Muslims and Hindu Indians in Malaysia. For instance, some community members in Malaysia insisted *Keling* be deleted permanently from dictionaries. From July 2003, Selangor and Federal Territory *Angkatan Pelapor India Muslim* (APIM), a non-government organization issued a summons against *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* (DBP) due to the entry of the word *Keling* in the DBP dictionary, the *Kamus Dewan Third Edition*. They demanded that the sensitive word to be struck out from the dictionary. APIM claimed that the word *Keling* and its variant meanings and metaphors simply had bad connotations, cause chaos, disturb the peace and incite hatred, animosity, riots, disharmony as well as disunity. Their appeal, which went to the High Court of Malaysia was however dismissed in 2009. The court ruled that the use of the word *Keling* is allowed in the *Kamus Dewan Third Edition* as the word in the dictionary is for learning purposes (The Star, 2009:5).

Assuming the above event as a case study and an example, here we would like to look at the reality and sensitivity that created by the term *Keling*. Why do Indians, both Muslims and non-Muslims, perceive the term as derogative? If we take a historical perspective, the appellation *Keling* became derogative by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Perhaps the main factor is the arrival of South Indian indentured labours to Malaya brought by the British to work in rubber estates. Most probably their poor socio-economic status associated negative values to the term *Keling* among the locals, particularly in the hinterlands of Malay states.

Such a change of perception, which was impacted by historical changes and migrations, was contradictory to the respected and well-accepted value associated with the term *Keling* by the Indians prior to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is most probably due to the fact that the Tamil Muslims mostly had contact with locals as traders and merchants, whereas the former Indians from South India came as labours.

In light of the discussion above, changes of professions and forms of migrations by the Tamil traders implied socio-economic status. Such factors played vital roles as moulding factors that create stereotypes and set values as well as social measurements among the local Malaysians towards the Indians. Another essential aspect which strikes us in the light of this discussion is that the terms and identities are contextual in nature. These terms measure differently according to different contexts

historically. Hence, it is possible for the term *Keling* to have its preceding status before 19<sup>th</sup> century, thought of here as its 'dignity', based on the transformation of the socio-economic status of the Indian community. Furthermore, the changing attitudes of other ethnically diverse Malaysians may transform their perceptions towards this sensitive term in the future.

### 1.7 Mamak

One of the most interesting cultural refinements of the Tamil Muslim community is the Mamak-man, who is famed for his *tehtarik* ("pulled milk tea"). In fact, the term *mamak* denotes an Indian Muslim man and a Malay of Indian or Tamil Muslim ancestry (Halimah Mohd Said & Zainab Abdul Majid, 2004:17).

According to *Sejarah Melayu*, Indian Muslims, mostly Tamil speaking Muslims, played a salient and significant role in the court of Melaka and in later periods in Malay states as ministers or *Bendaharas* and advisors (A. Bakar Hamid, 1983: 106). In such situations and positions, they married women from royal families and became in-laws to the Sultan, who then called them *mamak*, which means "father-in-law" in Tamil. Sometimes, the sultan married the daughter of a *Bendahara* and during their royal court session, the Sultan would call the *Bendahara* "Mamak Bendahara" or "Mamak Menteri".

For instance, in the Sultanate of Melaka, the term *mamak* was applied to refer to the *Bendahara* of Melaka of Tamil Muslim descent and was addressed as "Mamak Bendahara". It is evident that in some texts of *The Malay Annals* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the appellation "Mamak Bendahara" are found in some dialogs and quotations between the Sultan and *Bendahara* of Melaka in the texts. One of the dialogs in the text of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* depicts is as follows:

"Satelah bagindamendengarsembah Pateh Kerma Wijayaitu, makatitah bagindapada Bendahara Paduka Raja, "Yamamak Bendahara, berilahtempat Pateh Kerma Wijayainiha mpir dengan kampung mamak." Makasembah Bendahara, "Daulattuan ku." (Shellabear, 1977: 63).

The term *mamak* is a corruption of the Tamil word *mama*, which means maternal uncle and it also

refers to a father-in-law (New English-English-Tamil Dictionary, 2006:212). Traditionally the term is used in Malaysia among the Tamil Muslims and to an extent the Indians to address elderly men or strangers to show respect to them. Apart from *mamak*, some local Malaysians, especially in Penang, conventionally apply the word *mamu* instead of *mamak*. *Mamu* is a variant of the term *mamak*, which perhaps come to usage among the locals due to the process of assimilation between the Indian Muslims and Malays through marriages (Wilkinson, 1908:139). This process gave birth to the *Jawi Peranakan* community or hybrid Malays from 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. onward in Penang. To some Indian Muslims, *mamak* is assumed as a slightly derogatory term (Gaik Cheng Khoo, 2010:112). This is due to the tendency of some Malaysians to imply the term referring to a second-class citizen, which is a consequence of misunderstanding the etymology of the term and the firm influence of Malaysia's derogative stereotype of the term. Taken seriously, the term *mamak* appears to be an exclusive term referring to the Tamil and Indian Muslim community, which is Malaysian-oriented in form, whereas other terms such as *Keling* and *Chulia* have shared identities between the Indians generally.

## 2 CONCLUSION

The paper's etymological analysis and its conclusions of the identities of the Tamil Muslims, both in Tamil Nadu and in Malaysia, have an academic foundation and are supported by social and historical facts. As etymology traces the history of a word from its most recent form to its earliest known source, it is essential to avoid misleading perceptions towards the Tamil Muslim community, which may be propagated through its usage in traditions or folk tales.

Of great importance in this analysis is that it attaches to one the ability to analyse the roots of certain terminologies such as *Chulia*, *Keling* and *Mamak*, which are crucial to mould mindset and avoid misleading perceptions among locals in particular about such terms.

This paper hopefully acts as solution to the misunderstandings among multi-racial Malaysians about these terms. Therefore, the article may debunk the stereotypes and misleading claims which had long formed among the locals against the Tamil Muslim community. Such an understanding is crucial in eradicating negative ethnic sentiments and

for promoting respect among Malaysians for the sake of national unity and harmony.

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