

**RESEARCH PAPER****Beyond the Binary: Exploring the Cultural Identity and Practices of the *Hijra* Community in Lahore****Dr Huma Pervaiz**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the cultural patterns of *Hijras* (transgender individuals) in Lahore. Marginalized due to their queer identity, *Hijras* are often compelled to live within their own distinct culture. The study investigates how these cultural traditions shape their communal lives and interactions with broader society. *Hijra* culture, developed through historical stages, adapts to contemporary needs. Though largely excluded, *Hijras* play specific roles during special occasions like weddings and the birth of male children, where their visibility increases. Outside these events, they face issues of acceptance, humiliation, and molestation. This research uses oral history methods, collecting data from 60 *Hijras* in Lahore through interviews and case studies. The sample includes *Hijras* from different age groups and areas of the city. Data is analyzed using narrative and comparative techniques. (Valerie J, 2010, p.46) To contextualize primary sources, secondary data from newspapers, reports, research articles, books, and internet sources are also incorporated.

Keywords: Community, Culture, *Hijra*, Lahore, Marginalized, Society

Introduction

In Lahore a sizable community of *Hijras* are living in these specific areas. (Census Bureau of Pakistan, 2023). *Hijras* of Lahore draw some consolation from their splendid past as they consider themselves the descendant of the *Khawaja Saras* of the Mughal courts. They were engaged in the state affairs and were care takers of *Harems* (Mubarak Ali, 1993, p. 65). Owing to this fact, most *Hijras* prefer the term *Khawaja Sara* for them. They were well known figures in Chinese, Ottoman and Indian Civilizations where the role of *Harems* played a significant role in state affairs. However, the process of marginality started with the arrival of British in Indian subcontinent. They, *Khawaja Saras*, were considered sodomites and British imposed many restrictions on them (Alok Gupta, 2009). *Hijras* are still treated on the basis of the colonial morality.

Hijra is a term that is more frequently used for Eunuchs in the subcontinent. Serena Nanda (an Indian anthropologist) writes that *Hijra* is an Urdu word used for natural as well as for castrated *Hijra* but impotency is central to the definition of *Hijra*. The term *Hijra* has become quite current now a day. It refers to all kinds of Eunuchs. *Hijra* is also a peculiar attitude and behaviour for a person tends to behave like a woman, he is derisively called *Hijra* but in a true sense *Hijra* is combination of masculine and feminine traits, or maybe it is missing/loss of both.

Any individual who joins the *Hijra* community subsequently becomes part of its peculiar culture, and he/she also derives his/her identity from that culture. Traditional *Hijras* are very strict in following these customs because they think that they are essential to their survival, as they get support from the community through this subculture. The subculture includes language, a way of living, relationships with each other, occupations, customs, norms and beliefs.

Literature Review

There are a few historical, linguistic and anthropological studies on *Hijras* in South Asia during the last two decades. The most notable work in the field of History is done by Emma Kalb (2023), her focus is on the Eunuch life in Mughal harems and she depicted their multifaceted role which they performed during medieval times, the author undoubtedly presented the Eunuchs' pictures as important being those services were needed as harems guardians, *Munsabdar*, and nobles. Another important work is of Shahdab Bano (2008) who provides a fresh insight on the Eunuchs' role in Medieval times especially during Sultanid period (1206-1526) as an important part of aristocracy.

Among South Asian authors, most notable work is done by Serena Nanda (1991). Her ethnographic accounts demonstrate the historical as well as mythical past of *Hijras* of India and discuss the socio-economic organization of *Hijra*. Kira Hall (1997) contextualizes the social position of *Hijras* and use of verbal insults in India. Gayatri Reddy's (2005) focus is on the marginalization of *Hijras* of Hyderabad (India) she traces their history in Hyderabad from position of royal patronage to the context of modernity and nationalism. She also discusses how *Hijra* perceive the gender and sexual identity and shape their own lives. Jessica Hinchy (2019) demonstrates the effort of British rulers of north India to criminalize the *Hijras* because hijras were regarded as queer identity and ungovernable under British rule. Adnan Hussain's (2012) work on Eunuchs of Bangladesh and Pakistan highlights the cultural plurality of *Hijras* in South Asia. Shahnaz Khan (2016) highlights the struggle of Eunuchs to achieve their rights in Pakistan. My work is different in this regard that it focused on *Hijras* of Lahore and underscore their marginalized status and highlights their cultural patterns which make them more visible in our society.

Guru- Chela relation

Social organization of *Hijras* is the main pillar of the community. This factor not only holds the community together, but also provides them with a space to live in as 'the other' of society. The *Guru-Chela* (*guru is considered as mother or teacher of Hijr and chela is disciple of guru*) relation is one of the most important aspects of their socialization within the community. To be a *chela* of a well-known *Guru* is a sign of respectability. Every *Chela* is often recognized by the name of the *Guru*, and a good measure of respectability and difference is attached to the *Guru*. It is obligatory for every *Hijra* to have a *Guru*, which makes them respectable within the community. The *Guru* should always be an experienced being because it is his duty to impart the art of dancing on the community, and to teach other skills, such as how to ask *wadai* (alms which the *Hijras* receive at the birth of male child) and deal with clients.

One cannot become a *Guru* until the necessary conditions of becoming the *Guru* are fulfilled. The *Guru* must have experiences and capability to settle disputes among the *chelas*. After becoming a *Chela* of a *Guru*, it is compulsory for every *Hijra* to follow instructions of *Guru*, otherwise *Chela* has to face punishment or exclusion from the community or physical punishment. Exclusion from the community means no other *Guru* take her as a *chela* and she will be deprived the privileges one can inherit from the *Guru* the community. *Hijra* may work alone it is considered a punishment deprives her of the community support and out in the community. If the *Hijra* wants to attain respect in the community then she must follow the instruction of the older and experienced *Hijra* or *Guru*. Selection of a *Guru* is a tradition/custom is known as '*Rasm-e-Gadi Nashani*'. The entire community is invited on the occasion and the elders of the community announce the name of New *Guru* with consensus on the death ceremony. When the will of the deceased is not present, the closest and the most experienced *Chela* is considered a *Guru* without any doubt and conflict. The new *Guru* inherits all the property including *chelas* left by the deceased and no other member of her

family can claim for her property. It is considered the code of the *Hijra* culture that the *chelas* will be the heirs of the *Guru* property not her family member.

The status of the mother was accorded to the *Guru* due to her responsibilities such as: taking care of her *chelas*, arranging food, clothing, pocket allowance and residency. The hierarchical relations of *Guru-Chelas* not only provide economic support to the family, but also smooths relations build a social network. The social organization is very supporting in the sense that it provides economic support to sick and older *Hijras*. Within the family, *Chelas* of a *Guru* live as sisters. *Gurus* are called Wadi ammi (*Gurus' Mother*) and *Guru's* sisters are called aunty. In this way, the *Hijras* find their own family and relations. These relations are forged from that which they are deprived.

A female eunuch, Hinna, told during an interview that

She loves her *Guru* and gives all the money to her because she is my mother, and she does not feel any shame to tell the others that I am a eunuch, but her parents felt shy to divulge that reality. We, *Hijras*, live in the house of *Guru* as sisters and our *Guru* assigns different duties to us. She runs the house as the mother. We have great respect for our *Guru*(*Guru Humiyon*, July 17th 2023, Sialkot).

One who performs pilgrimage of Muslim sanctum 'Mecca' is considered a man of respectability within the commune, and the word *Haji* is used for him by the community. The evidence suggests that not many *Hija* pay brief visits to the mosques. It may be because of their negligence or ignorance of religious rituals and conventions. One Famous *Hijra*, *Haji Mukthere*, are during an interview with the Daily Jung news that some prosperous *Hijras* often spend their money for noble causes, and claimed that various mosques were built by the contributions of the *Hijras*(Tahir Sarwat ,1991). Although *Hijras* are often denied entry to the mosques because of negative social responses there, are many Famous *Gurus* who had known as *Haji* throughout the Pakistan. They discontinue their dancing and singing in Ramadan and Moharram.

The general belief is that the members of the localities often discourage *Hijras*; therefore, they are bound to have their own separate areas. But it is not the whole truth because the majority live in common residential areas. *Hijra* houses are called "*Deras*". Ibbetson mentions that "In Punjab the *Hijra* is usually a *Deradar*, i.e., attached to '*dera*'..... In a '*dera*' a *chela* succeeds his *Guru*, his accession being celebrated by a feast to the other inmates of the *dera*." Ibbetson's observation still holds true today.

Castes of Hijras

Hijras are living not only as a community, but they also have their distinctive castes as well, tying them in a bond. The people belonging to an ethnic group come together that is organized around traditional occupation. *Hijra* is considered a caste including many sub-castes (*Goths*) through which they are recognized within the commune. The most common and well recognized castes among *Hijras* are *Marzaie* and *Chandni*.

Marzaie are the inhabitant of *Heera Mandi* for many generations and are considered sacred descendants of the *Khawaja Saras* of the Mughal courts. *Chandni* are considered outsiders. There are many other castes such as *Rakey*, *Matrany*, *Lambywasiya*, *Malkany*, *Kami*, *Mony*, and *Shahany*, which determine their social status within the commune concept of superiority in terms of caste also prevails in the commune as in rest of the society. '*Shahany*' is considered the superior among other castes of *Hijras*. here is no other information available on their caste hierarchy so it is surmised that *Shahany* might be having some link with Syed or Shahs, hence they are deeming superior to other cast. The *Hijras* to feel proud of hauling from a superior caste. Another very interesting view about the castes of *Hijra* is that they are divided in four sects *Mirza*, *Rona*, *Chandni*, and *Mahwati*. *Mirza* are

considered kings (Chaudhary) and their decisions are accepted in the entire *Hijra* community they are considered inferior to *Mirza*. But it is also accepted or admitted that *Mirza* and *Chandani* are the superior castes within the *Hijras* commune.

Individuals from all castes of society such as *Sayyid*, *Shaikh*, *Gujar*, *Julaha*, etc. are welcomed in the commune (Ibbetson, 1911, p. 332). There is no objection of caste to join the community, however after joining it, it is essential for everyone to be recognized according to the specific *Hijra* caste, which is given according to the social and historical background.

Traditional occupations of the *Hijras*: Dancing and Singing at Auspicious Occasions

To dance at auspicious occasions is regarded as the most accepted profession of *Hijras*. It is accepted by almost all the *Hijras* that dancing is a relatively respectable profession through which they earn their livelihood. It seems that those *Hijras* who live more traditionally are stricter to their code of living, however the underlying reality is that they have very few professional options. They are not allowed to do anything except dancing and singing which is, for them, a most prestigious and honorable way of living. Here, dancing and singing is used in a specific connotation, which means they are bound to dance and sing on the occasion of marriage or at a childbirth, particularly male children. They are invited on the occasion to entertain the people, but sometimes they themselves intrude into the marriage ceremony to get the *badhai*. They are dressed up in women's clothes with heavy jewelry of silver. Under the supervision of their *Guru*, they attend the function in groups of four or six. They have drummers who play the drums and harmonium, which is prerequisite to dancing and singing. The musicians are sometimes hired, but often they are the permanent part of the group (Eunuch Dolly, May 25th 2023). Newly transformed *Hijras* accompany the group to get professional training from the seniors to dance and learn how to extract *Badhai*. *Hijras* dance on the beats of drums and they sing in their heavy voices. They dance on the Indian and *Punjabi* songs but prefer mostly *Punjabi* songs to dance.

The *Hijras* also receive *Badhai* at the birth of male child. When asked from one *Hijra* how they get information about the birth of male child? He smiled and said,

‘ You want to know even our secret network. It is very simple that the people invited us on some auspicious occasion to dance and bless the new child, but it is also the duty of one member of our group to get information about the birth of new child in the areas which has been divided among the different groups of *Hijras* and no one is allowed to cross the boundaries of one group’ (Eunuch Mahwish, Nov 2nd 2023).

Their network is organized in such a way that no one can exploit the rights of others, and if it happens, it may turn into a severe conflict among the *Hijras* groups which is discussed and sorted out in the meeting of the elders. At the birth ceremony of a child, the *Hijras* perform dance and sing folk Lories. One *Hijra* said “people become very happy at the birth of male child that’s why whenever we hear about the birth of male child, we are happy because we expect reasonable sum” (Eunuch Akhtar, Nov 9th 2023). The birth of the female child is not considered an occasion of happiness in some families, therefore they preferred to ask *badhai* at the birth of male child.

One *Hijra* said “it is the most pathetic time in the life of *Hijra* when we have to dance and sing on the birth of the child and bless them for happy life which we cannot get throughout the life. I love the children, but the God has deprived us from this blessing (Eunuch Mumtaz, March 10th 2023).” *Hijras* receive harsh as well as pleasant comments from their audience. They are often treated well on such occasions but sometimes they are abused, especially by the uneducated people.

The *Hijras* are found of dancing and singing. Some refuse to accept that “they are sex workers,” and many of them accept that their basic source of income is singing and

dancing, and it is considered as a 'symbol' because of which their recognition is ascertained. It is not an obligation for the *Hijra* of other countries, such as European nations, to select dancing as a profession, but in the subcontinent, it is a significant part of how the *Hijras* express their femininity. Dance is the major source for *Hijra* to express their womanhood by dancing in female clothes. Dancing skills are compulsory for the entire *Hijra* community. Dancing and prostitution have been associated with each other in Indian subcontinent for millennia. Prostitution as an institution was developed because of the fusion of two cultures of ancient Hindu and later Muslim civilization. There was the concept of religious prostitution in Hinduism where, in temples, the girls married Gods and perform ritual dances and provided sex (Louis, 2006, p. 27). The *Hijras* of India dance in the temple of *Bahuchara Mata*. *Hijras* of Pakistan also consider dance a respectful occupation that is somehow derived from the traditions of Hindu *Hijras*.

Many of them prefer to learn dancing from their *Guru*. When a *Guru* selects *chela*, she keenly observes her talent for dancing. It is in the interest of both parties to have dancing skills. When a new *chela* starts to learn dancing from the *Guru*, she touches her *Guru*'s feet and then begins her dance. Some of them are very fond of *Kathak* dance, but it is not necessary for everyone to learn this form of dance. *Ghungaroo* (ankle bells) is the essential part of dancing which, according to a *Hijra*, "provokes her to dance and help her to forget every pain of her life (Eunuch Karishma, Dec 11th 2022)."

Singing and dancing are very closely linked. It is often seen that *Hijras* are not good singers due to their heavy voices, but they try their best to be as good as possible. Many *Hijras* have a male member who not only plays harmonium and drums, but sometimes also sings song for them. Many *Hijras*' interest in singing urged them to get proper training, but due to their voice quality, they often quit.

Style of clapping

Hijras clap in a peculiar style and is an essential part of their culture. The style of clapping is the recognition of their identity as third gender. *Gurus* teach her disciples this clapping technique. When I asked one *Hijra* why her clapping style was eccentric? She replied that whenever we want to show that we are *Hijra* we clap in this way. (Eunuch Ali Shah, April 14th 2022). The *Hijras* also dance at other ceremonies like Aqeeqa and Birthdays, but now it has become rare as middle-class families cannot afford it and the upper-class families prefer women rather than *Hijras*.

Prostitution among *Hijras*

Prostitution is considered a lucrative source of income for some *Hijras*. Perhaps it is now a major source of income, but it is not considered a traditional way of earning money. Most of them do not accept it and claim that the *zananas* (transvestites) are involved in such activities. However, a few *Hijras* claim this and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among them also testifies that *Hijra* are widely engaged in sex business. During an interview with 'The News' a famous Eunuch Sunny said, "we (eunuchs) do not like to be treated as prostitutes, but the cruel world won't let us decent" (Waleed, 1996). The beautiful and charming *Hijras* can earn easily from sex business. The *Hijras* engaged in prostitution use various methods and standing alone on the side of the road in posh areas in attractive outfits. *Hijras* come out of their abodes in search of their clients, and sometimes the people interested in *Hijras* visit their *Deras* Particularly, those who prefer them women. One *Guru* said "we, *Hijras*, are not sex workers. Our occupations are singing, and dancing and I train my *chelas* for that purpose. If I come to know that our *chelas* are engaged in the sex business, then I can expel them from the group (Eunuch Noori, Jan 10th 2023)." It is outside the bound of respectability. Some *Hijras* say that prostitution is prohibited by the *Gurus* however some claim that their big source of income is prostitution, and this is the only way through which we can earn enough. So it is beyond any doubt that whether they accept it or not, most of them are homosexuals'

prostitutes. Sinha also mentions in his account 'on the *Hijras* of Lucknow That the major motivation of the *Hijra* is satisfaction of the individual's homosexuals urges through which they derive satisfaction(A,P Sinha, 1999,p. 10).

Most of the *Hijras* nurse trenchant views regarding *zananas* that are engaged in homosexual activities. They contend that due to their abominable activity people often blame them. Ibbotson's 'account on *Hijras*' also claimed about the homosexuals' activities of this class in Panipat and Delhi:

Another institution in panipat is *Zanana* mandli.... they learn to dance and sing and pass days in indolence. They can be recognized by their matak chal (behaving like women). Each of them has husbands....in Delhi *Zananas* is a recognized class: they hire khotas or upper storeys of the shop like prostitutes.....all member of *zananas* mandli are impotent men given to sodomy, though some of them are married and have children. They are prostitutes, remarked a eunuch 'if we acted like them, how could our Jujmans allow us to come near them? They have deprived the prostitutes of their means of livelihood we are not such(Ibbetson, 1999,p.332).

The conflict between *Hijras* and *zananas* is not new, and it is not other than the prostitution, which condemned them to live separately. However, many *Hijras* prefer to do their traditional work which they have been doing for centuries. Having said that, one cannot deny that with the passage of time, prostitution among *Hijras* has become quite institutionalized.

Castration Rituals of *Hijras*

The ritual of castration or emasculation in the life of *Hijras* has a great significance because it changes their entire world and makes them a part of the world of marginalized. Castration is perceived to be a sign of respectability, which is called '*Nirban or Nirvana*'. It is done through the operation which may take their life, but they do it to achieve a sacred power. *Nirban* holds respectability among the *Hijras* and it is not considered as a precondition of being a part of the community because many of them are not castrated and still they are allowed to live with them. They are allowed in the community with the expectation that with the passage of time they will eventually get castrated. In both cases the "desire of being women" is very prominent and castration is the only way through which they can get rid of their maleness. Some of them are of the view that after castration we can become *Hijra* in the true sense of the term, not man, not woman, but only *Hijra*. Castration may be the climax of their unsatisfied desire and as admitted by many that 'we find our true self after castration, and it is considered as time of the completion of every *Hijra* who feels unsatisfied and incomplete with the male body and has female soul (Eunuch Bobby, March 13th 2023).'

The ceremony of castration is celebrated warmly within the community because it is considered as the time to impress the dual selves how one is going to sacrifice herself to become a true one. The Guru or Quacks usually do the crude operation. It is illegal in our country and many cases has been reported against the doctors for making youngster into Eunuch. *Lahori Gate, Mozang, Qainchi, Chungi Amer Sidhu, Shahdra* and *Kamoki* remained the popular places where this type of operation was done. It is too risky, but it is often done at the risk of life to end the conflict "who I am?" The *Hijra*, who is being castrated, is dress-up like bride and all his friends are called upon on the occasion. Gifts and prayers are bestowed on him because it is the crucial time in the life of *Hijra* that may cause death if the operation is not carried out well. A *Guru* says(duingan interview),

'If you want to live a life of *Hijra*, castration is essential, otherwise you are not *Murat* you are a man, our identity is that we do not have lust for woman, and woman do not feel

fear from us if we are not castrated it means we deceive the people who consider us *Hijras*(Eunuch Nargis, Dec 12th 2023)‘.

The castration also brings the social boycott from the family and youngsters who belongs to economically deprived class and uneducated background. All the *Hijras* admitted that we carry the operation on our own choice, not by force and it is also true to some extent that the inclination towards womanhood does not emerge at once it takes long time and castration is the climax of this unresolved conflict of being born with wrong body.

Marriage Ceremony of *Hijras*

It is believed that *Hijras* are not capable of leading a married life, which is not true. They get married but it is different in the sense, according to many *Hijras*, they marry as a woman (which is successful or not it is out of debate). In the eunuch’s language *Giriya*(husband or lover of eunuch) is the person with whom *Hijra* spent her days and nights as a wife, and he provides her financial support. In case, if *Giriya* is not well off, the case is being reversed. The relation is a type of agreement. *Hijra* can live separately with the *Giriya* after seeking permission from the *Guru* but then *Giriya* has to pay the *Guru* for his favorite *Hijra*. The *Giriya* announces to tie a knot with *Hijra* and the marriage ceremony is arranged. These marriages often take place with natural eunuchs but now the *nirban* and *zananas* also have such type of relations. When a person wants to live his life with *Hijra*, gets permission from the *Guru* who decides everything necessary with the person and after the discussion *Guru* allow her chela for the so-called contract of marriage.

Then it is properly announced in the commune that *Hijra* is going to marry. The bride and the groom do the whole expenditure and they also give the expensive gifts to the *Guru*. Other *Hijras* participate in the marriage ceremony as the sisters of bride. The *Hijra* bride wears the red dress and jewellery and other *Hijra* dance at the ceremony and *Guru* distribute the sweets. *Hijras* celebrate their ceremonies at night and except *Hijras* no one is invited. These marriages are not actual marriages and do not last very long. Many *Hijras* are of the view that men often deceive them and subsequently change their loyalties. One eunuch Saniya pathani said about the marriages of *Hijras* that these marriages are never successful because we cannot give birth I married a person and left everything for him and give him lot of money and tried to perform all the duties as a wife even I handed my house over to that person but at last he deserted me on the pressure of his family and said I cannot give birth to his child and now it is an end(Eunuch Saniya, March 22nd 2023).

Most of the *Hijras* make a similar claim “men are not reliable in this relation, and they often leave them”. On the other hand, some do not accept it and say it does not happen we are *Hijras* not ordinary men and women, how one can marry us. Most of the *Hijras* get married without thinking about their future and those who are much conscious about their future deny this fact, but this is very important custom in commune and most of them live with their beloved ones.

Funeral of *Hijra*

One of the mysteries about the life of *Hijra* is their death ceremony. What the *Hijras* do when someone among them is passes away. How is the *janaza* (funeral) offered? These are the mysterious questions that need to be explained because mostly people are unaware of them. It is commonly accepted that no one has ever seen the funeral of a *Hijra* or not anyone claim that he has attended the funeral of a *Hijra*. There are many questions about the death ceremony of the *Hijras* which are yet to be answered. Some claimed that they do not participate in the funeral. They stay at home and the dead body is handed over to some people of the locality who bury it as a male. Those who are close to their family, their dead body is handed over to the family but those who live in community their body is handed over to some members of respective locality said by a *Guru*. One thing is clear that the

problem is not posed to *Zananas* because most of them are married and remain attached to their families. The things become far more complicated for those who have left their families and live within the commune are in other words the families do not accept them with the identity of the *Hijra*.

It is commonly asserted that no one has ever seen the funeral of eunuch; and the superstitious belief is that when they are about to die, they disappear.....Eunuch dread a dead body, and when one of them dies none of them dare approach the corpse. All that they will do is to cry and weep like women, and it devolves by custom on their *Badhi* neighbours to wash the dead body and carry it to the graveyard. As the eunuchs are looked upon as impure, the *Badhis* never admit that they serve as their coffin-bearers and the popular superstition is thus strengthened (Ibetson,p,332) .

It is also asked from many *Hijras*, do they have their own graveyard, no one of them assured in the affirmative. They do not have a separate graveyard. Our dead bodies are buried in common graveyard. It is very interesting to know as we have discussed earlier that *Hijra* community has its own customs and rituals which are often talked about in frank manner, but death ceremony is just the one thing which they do not want to properly explain. Some try to avoid talking about the old age and it appears they have no clear vision or idea about the old age or death and life after death. It may be possible that the people do not have any interest to know about it. It may be possible that they attend it in male dress which is a contradiction in their character. Different myths can be attached with them about the death and burial. This is one point where the community has different views and myths and many of them like to be silent. *Hijra* have dignified silent on this point of view by saying "God knows well what happened" that remains a mystery that needs to be unrevealed by sociologist or anthropologist.

Conclusion

The cultural patterns of *Hijras* help them interact with society within their *Hijra* identity. On the other hand, the culture of *Hijras* also creates a bond that not only holds them together but also forms a community with its own organized set of rules. However, while the cultural setup of *Hijras* aids their communication with both society and their community, it is not enough to make them respectable citizens in society. With the advent of social media, the voices of *Hijras* have reached everywhere, bringing attention to issues related to identity, sex, and economics. The *Hijras* remain optimistic that one day they will gain a measure of respectability.

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