

# THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ŠAYH ʿADĪ B. MUSĀFIR'S BIOGRAPHY ON THE BASIS OF ARABIC AND KURDISH SOURCES

Zourabi Aloiane

*Budapest*

## 1 Introduction

While speaking of the Yezidi denomination, we must keep in mind the central position of Šayh ʿAdī within it. The Šayh's teaching, itself impacted by both rationalistic and ecstatic forms of Šūfism, was reflected in the religious views of the Yezidi Kurds.

A number of medieval historians and geographers mentioned Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir: Ibn al-Aṭīr, Ibn Hallikān, Ibn al-Fūtī, Ibn Kaṭīr, Ibn al-Wardī, Abū l-Fidā', ad-Dahabi, as-Samʿānī, and others<sup>1</sup>. The students of Yezidism quote, often and in detail, these medieval authors.

In the present paper, we reconstruct the biography of Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir by adding oral sources of the Yezidi Kurds to the material in Arabic. The Yezidi religious poetry contains valuable material on the history and world outlook of the Yezidi community, but it could not be heard by outsiders and was only recently recorded. In an indirect way, that is, by using poetic and religious symbolism, the Kurdish material discloses the life data of the Šayh which does not contradict the written Arabic sources<sup>2</sup>.

## 2 Biography of Šayh ʿAdī

### 2.1 Previous Inadequate Attempts to identify Šayh ʿAdī

In the past there existed a number of suggestions concerning Šayh ʿAdī's personality (Badger 1852:110-113; Semenov 1927:76; Wigram 1914:104). With regard to the information in two Christian sources of the 15th century, that of an archbishop of Arbīl Ješū ʿAyyāb and that of the monk Rāmīšūʿ, the case is as follows: in the early 13th century, Šayh ʿAdī al-Kurdī did away with the monks and occupied the Christian monastery in Lalish, transforming it into his sanctuary (ʿAlī 1989:81; al-Ḥasanī 1953:12, 20-21).

First of all, these sources, either deliberately or otherwise, identify Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir with his brother Sahr's grandson, whose complete name was Šayh ʿAdī b. Abī l-Barakāt al-Kurdī. The latter person indeed lived in the 13th century and, for

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<sup>1</sup> The best bibliography on Yezidism is by ʿAwwād (1969).

<sup>2</sup> The Kurdish authors and titles are referred to according to Kurdish Latin alphabet.

some reason, was engaged in a struggle with the monks quartered in his patrimonial (at least, as it appeared to him) abode.

Secondly, the interior layout of the tomb of Šayḥ ʿAdī does not have elements characteristic of Christian monasteries (Badger 1852:110). The architecture of the Yezidi buildings provides evidence that they had been erected in pre-Christian times; during the late Roman age, the Christian monks settled in them (Wigram:1914:94).

Thirdly, it is no coincidence that the anti-Yezidi tendencies in these Syrian manuscripts fall within the 15th century. It was a time when the Mesopotamian Christians, being under the patronage of the Muslim rulers, were engaged in activity against the 'infidels'<sup>3</sup>. As Longrigg indicated, the situation with the Yezidis was aggravated by the fact they always were in opposition to all the authorities (Longrigg 1925:8-9).

## 2.2 Data on ʿAdī's Origin

At present, the majority of scholars maintain that Šayḥ ʿAdī b. Musāfir arrived in the Kurdish mountains of Hakkari from aš-Šām (historical Syria). Thus, the Yezidi tradition says:

“Šayḥ ʿAdī came from Šām

In the East [he] got down to work,

Virtue is upon the houses of [our] fathers,

Šayḥ ʿAdī himself is a gift of the Light,

[He is] Light from the house of the Šayḥs”<sup>4</sup>.

The complete name of Šayḥ ʿAdī is: Šaraf ad-Dīn Abū l-Faḍā'il ʿAdī b. Musāfir b. Ismā'il b. Mūsā b. Marwān b. al-Ḥasan b. Marwān (al-Ḥasanī 1953:15).

With regard to ʿAdī's descent, the issue is still debated. al-ʿAzzāwī (1935:29) adduces the two most wide-spread genealogies:

1) ʿAdī b. Musāfir b. Ismā'il b. Mūsā b. Marwān b. al-Ḥasan (or b. al-Ḥakam) b. Marwān;

2) ʿAdī b. Musāfir b. Ibrāhīm b. al-Wālid b. ʿAbdalmalik b. Marwān b. al-Ḥakam b. al-ʿĀš b. ʿUṭmān b. ʿAffān b. Rabīʿa b. ʿAbdaššams b. Zuhra b. ʿAbdmanāf.

At any rate, the Umayyad origin of Šayḥ ʿAdī is almost beyond any doubt. This fact, on the one hand, explains the sensitivity of his followers to Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya and, on the other hand, makes us think of the connections between ʿAdī's, or his successors', teaching and the ideas of the Merwanites. It is noteworthy that as late as in the early 20th century, the sect of the Merwanites in Shugnan (Badahshan) was also called *Yezidiya*<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g., “Kurdskie evrei” 1988:634.

<sup>4</sup> Celil 1978:18. See also: Silêman 1979:100, 104.

<sup>5</sup> The sources prove that the last Umayyad ruler, Marwān II, is a direct ancestor of Šayḥ ʿAdī. Before ascending the throne (740-750), Marwān II ruled over Northern Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan,

Thus, with certain reservation, we can conclude that Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir was an Arab from the once powerful dynasty of Umayyads with Kurdish blood running in his veins.

ʿAdī b. Musāfir was born between 1073 and 1078 in Bayt-Fār in Baʿlabakk, which is situated in the Biqāʿ Valley (present-day Lebanon)<sup>6</sup>. Afterwards, ʿAdī's birth was described through picturesque legends. According to one of them, ʿAdī's future as a Šūfī was pre-determined by events with his father:

"Musāfir b. Ismāʿil, the father of ʿAdī, went to a forest and remained there for forty years. Once he had a dream that someone told him: "O Musāfir! Come out and copulate with your wife, and a Friend of God will come to you, whose fame will spread in the East and the West"<sup>7</sup>. Then, Musāfir came out from the forest and went to his wife. She told him: "I shall not do it unless the Luminary arises." Then Musāfir appealed: "O residents of the city! I am Musāfir, I came because I received an order to climb my mare, and Friends of God will come to those who climb their mares." And thus 313 Friends of God were born to him"<sup>8</sup> (al-Ḥasanī 1953:15-16).

### 2.3 The Baghdad Period<sup>9</sup>

As a young person, ʿAdī b. Musāfir moved to Baghdad and spent the first half of his life there. In this centre of culture and education, ʿAdī learned from the esteemed figures and won respect for his good manners. In Baghdad ʿAdī b. Musāfir was seriously worried about the increasing misunderstandings among Muslims and condemned those who furthered the split in Islam, either deliberately or guided by mistaken considerations.

Another major issue that must be mentioned is the Šayh's attitude towards 'illicit innovations' (*bidaʿ*). As is well known, the notion of *bidaʿ* was always unclearly defined since different dogmatic schools characterised the same action or opinion in different ways, that is, describing them either as an illicit innovation or as a faithful idea hallowed by the Qur'an and Islamic tradition. Therefore, the question of who

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*i.e.* the provinces with a sizeable Kurdish population. Moreover, his mother was Kurdish (Bartold 1966; Semēnov 1927:78-79). Šaraf-ḥān Bīdlīsī informs us of the Kurdish tribe, Sulaymani, which mostly consisted of the adherents of the Marwānians. Part of the Sulaymani tribesmen "chose an iniquitous Yezidi persuasion". Moreover, Bīdlīsī defines Šayh ʿAdī as a subject of Marwānid caliphs (Bīdlīsī, *Šaraf-nāmē* 83, 314).

<sup>6</sup> According to Drower (1941:151-152), the marvellous ruins around Baʿlabakk had an emotional impact on ʿAdī's views.

<sup>7</sup> 'Friend of God' is a term for Šūfī.

<sup>8</sup> *I.e.* 313 associates and/or successors of ʿAdī b. Musāfir.

<sup>9</sup> Sub-chapters 2.3 and 2.4 are chiefly based on the two major sources – ʿAdī b. Musāfir, *Works*; Frank 1911 – which, therefore, are not referred to.

in ʿAdī's view belonged to the *abl al-bid'a* is of great interest. On the basis of the Šayh's works written in Baghdad, we can conclude that the theologians of his circle criticised the following: aš-Šīʿa, al-Muʿtazila, al-Qadariyya, and al-Mušabbiha (Anthropomorphists), which means that ʿAdī b. Musāfir, in general, shared the point of view of al-Ḥanābila. Nevertheless, as early as in the Baghdad period of his activity, Šayh ʿAdī took a great interest in Sūfism, a position which contradicts the attitude of al-Ḥanābila to the theory and practice of Islamic mysticism. This 'inconsistency' can be understood by taking into account that ʿAdī's Sūfism integrates with the Qur'an.

Evidently, ʿAdī b. Musāfir felt cramped and suffocated amongst those theologians who restricted their minds by the Qur'an and the ideas of deceased authorities. The point here is that in the late 11th-early 12th centuries, mysticism attracted many ordinary Sunnīs, who greatly appreciated such characteristics of Sūfī teaching as advocacy of poverty, repudiation of collaboration with authorities and hence – of certain material benefits, and secret charitable deeds in order to avoid earthly glory.

Speaking of ʿAdī's activity in Baghdad, we must pay special attention to the Sūfī Šayh who influenced his treatises and his subsequent life in general. Šayh ʿAdī and al-Ġazālī (1058-1111) could have become acquainted with each other, and in the year of al-Ġazālī's death, the Šayh moved to Hakkari. Another version is that ʿAdī b. Musāfir knew al-Ġazālī's brother Maġd ad-Dīn Aḥmad al-Ġazālī. At any rate, Šayh ʿAdī attended Aḥmad's lectures in Baghdad, including those concerning Iblīs<sup>10</sup>.

In different ways, other Sūfīs influenced the Šayh's teaching, as hinted in the Yezidi sacred book, the *Meshef-i Reş* (Marie 1911:22-39)<sup>11</sup>. Yezidism supposes that the historical personalities are represented in the capacity of seven angels/deities, ruling the universe, by turns, through the will of God. Five of them have been identified by Semënov (1927:77). They are: ʿAbdalqādir al-Ġilānī, al-Ḥasan al-Bašrī, Mansūr al-Ḥallāġ, Qāḍib al-Ban, and Faḥr ad-Dīn Ṭabaristānī al-Qaydī.

ʿAbdalqādir al-Ġilānī (1077-1166), who had gone with ʿAdī to the pilgrimage in 1116, evaluated his piety in the following phrase: "If the prophetic mission was gifted for the diligence, it would be gifted to Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir"<sup>12</sup>. We also know of Šayh ʿAdī's saying about al-Ġilānī which is as picturesque poetically. Once ʿAdī b. Musāfir said to ʿAbdalqādir's disciples visiting him in Hakkari: "Welcome you

<sup>10</sup> Since the issue of Yezidi demonology is a specific subject, we must note that Šayh ʿAdī's views on this topic were in accordance with traditional Islamic theology.

<sup>11</sup> This text's authorship is unlikely to be ascribed to ʿAdī b. Musāfir (Bittner 1911), although Kurdoev (1971) holds an opposite opinion. At any rate, the *Meshef-i Reş* reflects some points linked to Šayh ʿAdī's life and teaching.

<sup>12</sup> 'Diligence' (*muğābada*) in the Sūfī terminology is one of the stations on the way towards God.

who left a sea to come to a brook. I can see ʿAbdalqādir taking the rein of all the saints in his hand and operating the cavalry of lovers of God”.

Ibn Ḥallikān places Šayh ʿAdī in the following chain of the famous Šayhs: ʿĀqil al-Māmbīḡī, Hammād ad-Dabbās<sup>13</sup>, Abū an-Naḡb, ʿAbdalqādir al-Ġilānī, ʿAbdalqādir aš-Šahrazūrī, Abū l-Wafāʾ al-Ḥulwānī.

Apparently, for the sake of confirming the prestige of the Yezidi community through the fame of al-Ġilānī, there is his ‘grave’ not far away from the grave of Šayh ʿAdī, although al-Ġilānī is in fact buried in Baghdad (Drower 1941:156). The tradition says that ʿAbdalqādir was a founder and an eponymous of the *ṭarīqa* Qādiriyya, although in reality, it was founded by his successors after the 13th century (Prozorov 1991:65). This *ṭarīqa* has followers in present-day Southern Kurdistan, district of Kirkuk (Nikitine 1964:315-316). Thus, ʿAbdalqādir al-Ġilānī plays an essential role in the composition of ʿAdī b. Musāfir’s theology and is highly honoured by the Kurds, both Yezidis and Muslims.

Another ‘grave’ situated in that district is that of al-Ḥasan al-Bašrī (642-728). Most probably, this situation reveals a similar intention since the ‘graves’ of al-Bašrī are dispersed throughout the Islamic world. Another supposition is that there exists a mytho-mystical identification between al-Ḥasan al-Bašrī and Šayh Ḥasan b. ʿAdī b. Abī l-Barakāt b. Šahr b. Musāfir (1194/95-1246/47), who played a crucial role in Yezidi history. The fact of al-Bašrī’s ‘grave’, the quotations from the Qur’an at his and ʿAdī’s shrines together with other attributes were designed to protect the Yezidi sanctuaries from Muslim desecration (Badger 1852:112)<sup>14</sup>.

However, the most esteemed personality in the religious folklore of the Yezidis is Abū l-Muḡīṭ al-Ḥusayn b. Maṣūr al-Ḥallāḡ (858-922). In the Yezidi canticles, admiration for him is re-enforced by the grief of his tragic death (Celil 1978:37-40; Silēman 1979:133-139). In general, starting from the assumption that al-Ḥallāḡ was of Kurdish origin, both the Yezidi and Muslim Kurds have created a special image of al-Ḥallāḡ. It is possible that after al-Ḥallāḡ’s execution, some of his followers found asylum in the Kurdish mountains, and, thus, could have joined the *ṭarīqa* ʿAdawiyya.

The two last historical personalities represented in the *Meshef-i Reş* in the capacity of angels are a native of Mosul and ʿAdī’s contemporary Šayh Qāḍib al-Ban and the famous Šūfī Faḥr ad-Dīn Ṭabaristānī al-Qaydī (Ibn ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad b. ʿAmār al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī at-Tāʿim al-Bakrī), who died in Herat in 1210.

<sup>13</sup> In Baghdad, al-Ġilānī attended the school of ad-Dabbās (Prozorov 1991:65).

<sup>14</sup> These measures were especially typical, since cruel anti-Yezidi campaigns were repeatedly carried out by the Muslim authorities. See e.g., ʿAlī 1989:78-79; Longrigg 1925:97, 126, 176, 208, 210, 223, 286.

#### 2.4 In the Kurdish Mountains of Hakkari

In order to attain a Šūfī life, Šayḥ ʿAdī desired to seclude himself from the mundane world and he found a quiet haven in Hakkari. This Kurdish region, once ruled by Marwān II, stretches from the lake of Van to Iran in the East and to Mosul in the West. In the observed period, it lost its independence and became subordinated to the rulers of Mosul (al-Ḥasanī 1953:15-16). Here, close to nature, the Kurds were living. With regard to their religion, the medieval Arab historians relate them to the Zoroastrian sect called Tirāhiyya. According to the monk Rāmīšū<sup>c</sup>, the local Kurds used to summer with their herds in nomads' camps returning to the environs of Mosul in the winter, and the number of their tents exceeded one thousand (al-Ḥasanī 1953:12-13)<sup>15</sup>.

At first, Šayḥ ʿAdī b. Musāfir followed a life of solitude, and the local population invented implausible stories concerning his way of living. By way of illustration, we can mention the legends that the Šayḥ did not eat and never drank. And one day, in order to refute these rumours, the Šayḥ "ate something in the presence of people" (al-Ḥasanī 1953:7).

Here, the Šayḥ appears to carry out the mortification of the flesh and the cult of poverty (*faqr*), of which he was writing in Baghdad in his *Kitāb fihi dīkīr adab an-naḥs*. Gradually, Šayḥ ʿAdī won respect from the local population. Then with their questions and problems, the people started to come to this dark-complexioned, medium-height person whose speeches "fascinated emotionally rather than rationally" (al-ʿAzzāwī 1935:29; al-Ḥasanī 1953:8). There is a story written by the Šayḥ's nephew and successor as a ruler over the Yezidi community, Abū l-Barakāt, which shows that the cult of poverty (*faqr*) was of special significance and success in ʿAdī's Šūfism:

"Once thirty poor men came to my uncle Šayḥ ʿAdī. The ten of them said: O master! Tell us something about the Truth<sup>16</sup>. He told them, and they melted, and on their place the water gulf remained. Then the other ten came nearer saying: Tell us something about the essence of Love. He told them, and they died. After that the last [ten] came nearer and said: O master! Tell us something about essence of poverty

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<sup>15</sup> There exists more than sufficient evidence that the territory of present-day Kurdistan was an important Zoroastrian centre from the ancient times until the Islamic age. As it appears to us, the term *Bah-dinan* (equal to Hakkari, but the latter is also the name of the mountains) traces back to the words "*beh-din/vehdin*" with the literal meaning of 'a good faith', and the suffix for the Plural form, *an*. The word *behdin* is the self-definition of Zoroastrians beginning from the Islamic period, or in other words, the place-name "Behdīnan" could have a descriptive meaning as 'the residence of the Zoroastrians'. See also: ʿAlī 1989:85-86.

<sup>16</sup> The Highest Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) is one of 99 Qur'anic attributes of God. In the Šūfī terminology, the word is the name of God relating to His essence (Prozorov 1991:265).

(*faqr*). He told them, and they rent their garments, and went out naked" (al-Ḥasanī 1953:8).

Surrounded by his disciples, ʿAdī b. Musāfir preached in both Arabic and Kurdish. Before long, Christians, Muslims, and the members of other ethno-religious communities joined the Yezidi Kurds, who had already regarded Šayh ʿAdī as their teacher (Semënov 1927:77). This fact might have promoted the syncretic nature of Yezidism.

The Šayh presents his eschatological views in the two works of the Baghdad period: *Kitāb fiḥi dīkr adab an-nafs* and *Ftiqād abl as-sunna*. Thus, he speaks of Judgement Day and accounts the favours of Divine substances to a man after his death. All these do not exceed the framework of traditional Islamic eschatology. Later, in Hakkari, Šayh ʿAdī might still have been preoccupied with such ideas. The latter supposition is based on two stories from the fascinating book of ʿAdī's miracles, *Kitāb manāqib aš-šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir*.

The first story speaks of a written certificate delivered by the Sultan of Constantinople to a disciple of ʿAdī. This certificate is said to contain the petition to the Most High to keep the Šayh and his accomplices away from the Fire of Hell.

The second story is narrated by Šayh al-Bārīsīqī. Once, Šayh ʿAdī addressed him while they were crossing the village cemetery: "Have you not heard that those buried there appeal to me for help?" Pointing to one of the graves emitting puffs of smoke, Šayh ʿAdī came nearer to it and began to ask God to take compassion on that man. According to al-Bārīsīqī, the smoke immediately ceased, and the Šayh informed him that the deceased was forgiven. To prove this, Šayh ʿAdī asked the buried person whose name was Ḥasan: "O Ḥasan! Do you enjoy your place?" And an astonished al-Bārīsīqī heard from the grave: "Yes, yes".

Essentially, the last story is about punishment in the afterlife with reminiscences of interrogations and tests in the grave. It is remarkable that here Šayh ʿAdī is represented as an intercessor (as in the Yezidi beliefs)<sup>17</sup>.

However, as early as in the late Baghdad period, ʿAdī's *qaṣīdas* reveal motifs of self-deification as a result of the "union with God". After his death, they developed into the idea of the incarnation of a lower deity. According to the Yezidis, alongside the Creator there exists the lower deity incarnated in three images: the beautiful bird – *Melek-Taus*, the young man – Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya, and the aged Šayh – Šayh ʿAdī (Semënov 1927:72-73).

<sup>17</sup> In 1216, Badr ad-Dīn Lu'lu', the ruler of Mosul, defeated the Yezidi Kurds and defiled Šayh ʿAdī's tomb. This shocking event, according to al-Ḥasanī (1953:22-23), explains the Yezidis' belief that after his death, Šayh ʿAdī ascended to Heaven having left a testament. Then, a good angel appeared and said that that place should be regarded as Šayh ʿAdī's grave. Thus, the Yezidi Kurds found consolation in beliefs of Šayh ʿAdī's ascension and, consequently, in his divine essence (see e.g. Bīdlīsī, *Šaraf-nāmē* 83-84).

Material on 'Adī's life in Kurdistan suggests that while he was alive, the idea of his 'divine nature' remained *in embryo*. The stories of 'Adī's miracles (*karāmāt*) and grace (*baraka*) are characteristic of that period when Šūfism slowly becomes a popular religion. Expressive stories such as the following, illustrate 'Adī's pious erudition and holiness:

Once 'Adī' travelled to Mosul at his followers' request. While the whole city was in a joyful excitement, one of the Mosul 'ulamā', called Yūnus, envied Šayh 'Adī's fame and intended to put his religious erudition to the test. However, Yūnus himself was unable to answer a simple theological question that 'Adī asked him. Later, an ashamed Yūnus explained his confusion by a miraculous case: when he was about to answer that question, he saw lions at 'Adī's right and left hands who opened their mouths wide and would gorge him if he dared to say a word<sup>18</sup>.

Afterwards, when the boundaries between the Yezidis and the *ṭarīqa* of 'Adawiya had been fixed, the Kurds began to ascribe their own ideas to Šayh 'Adī. This is a frequent phenomenon in history which intends to consecrate pre-Islamic creeds by famous Islamic personalities.

Šayh 'Adī b. Musāfir said about his mission: "I know that I am given time when nothing soothes me and supports me. But in this time I soothe everything in me and I support it".

Thus, we find Šayh 'Adī b. Musāfir appearing in Kurdish history as a solitary pious person. He won fame amongst the Kurds and their neighbours alike, and in Mosul and Baghdad, too. In Hakkari, the Šayh founded his *ṭarīqa*, the members of which split into two groups after his death. The first group settled in Egypt and Syria and existed as an Islamic *ṭarīqa* until at least the 16th century. The others, chiefly the members of 'Adī's family and the other Šayhs, joined the Kurdish religious group through filling the position of its spiritual leaders (Nikitine 1964:326).

In his declining years (when he was about 90 years old), 'Adī b. Musāfir passed away in the lone house that he had built himself in Lalish<sup>19</sup>. Twice during his life, Šayh 'Adī went to the pilgrimage to Mecca (once, as we have written, in 1116 from Hakkari joining 'Abdalqādir al-Ġilānī)<sup>20</sup>.

This is a general re-construction of Šayh 'Adī b. Musāfir's biography. Other views and suggestions do not appear to be well argued.

<sup>18</sup> As is known, the lions in many cultures are firm guards of divinities.

<sup>19</sup> The exact year of his death is not known for certain: either 555, or 557, or 558 A.H., *i.e.* about 1162 (al-'Azzāwī 1935:29; al-Ḥasanī 1953:15-17). Soon, the tomb of Šayh 'Adī became the organizational and economic basis of the *ṭarīqa*, recalling the Šūfī cloister, *zāwiya*.

<sup>20</sup> Legends of 'Adī's pilgrimages are described by Seabrook (1927:326-327) and Wigram (1914:104-105).

### 3 Conclusion

In this paper we have endeavoured to clarify Šayh ʿAdī's biography to pave the way for further investigations of the formation of his views. We maintain that Yezidism, as well as other Kurdish religious teachings, traces back to the common ancient religious system. Since the Kurdish tribal groups were isolated by the mountainous nature of their country and by political rivalry, the success and failure of Islamization were strongly dependent on disseminators of the new cultural values. As a result, a number of Kurdish local religions came into existence.

The decisive factor in the Yezidi case is the personality and teaching of Šayh ʿAdī b. Musāfir. Thus, the Yezidi case proves that Šūfism was one of the main ways for the introduction of the Kurds to Islamic values and evolution of the Kurdish tradition.

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