



Semarak International Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture

Journal homepage:
<https://semarakilmu.my/journals/index.php/sijisc>
ISSN: 3036-020X



Stress Management According to Traditional Minangkabau *Adat*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 January 2025

Received in revised form 3 February 2025

Accepted 16 June 2025

Available online 30 June 2025

Keywords:

Lifeworld; Minangkabau; stress management

ABSTRACT

Stress and how to handle it became more and more significant in recent years. This study paper investigates the traditional customs (*adat*) and way of life of the Minangkabau society, exploring their potential to alleviate stress-related issues. The researchers discovered that the Minangkabau *adat* promotes certain strategies for stress prevention and reduction. Through a qualitative research methodology involving unstructured interviews and a literary analysis of *adat* texts, it was revealed that the primary emphasis was on prevention, with a significant focus on communal life. Culture-specific components should prevent the occurrence of stressful situations. In addition, this research took into account the phenomenological idea of the lifeworld in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding. A person who experiences a crisis that goes back to stress has a different experience of how their surrounding are perceived. The conventional lifestyle aims to provide a consistent and secure way of living. Thus, the intervention methods recommended by the traditions should aid in restoring a peaceful and stable way of life.

1. Introduction

Stress is one of the most urgent topics nowadays. According to the American Psychological Association, stress is affecting an increasing number of people, especially those in the younger generation [2]. Nevertheless, this is a global phenomenon that has escalated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, it is crucial to examine stress management from several viewpoints. In this research article, the researchers look at a traditional way to handle stress. They look how the traditional Minangkabau way of life might help the Minangkabau people to deal with stress. It is argued that the social and cultural background plays an important role in handling stress, and therefore a regional approach might be promising.

It is essential to define stress. The World Health Organization (WHO) provides the following definition of stress:

Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation. Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives. Everyone

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experiences stress to some degree. The way we respond to stress, however, makes a big difference to our overall well-being [33].

An individual who experiences stress has distinct behavioral patterns, and each culture possesses its own unique response to stress. In this article, it is argued that the Minangkabau have their own specific way to deal with stress. Certain cultural contexts may encourage individuals to repress the open display of their emotions, while others may permit or even encourage such expressions. Consequently, there are various strategies for managing stress. The first and most important one is to avoid stressful situations.

1.1 Factors and Effects of Stress

There are numerous studies that cover the topic of stress. In research by the Mental Health Organization in the United Kingdom, there were the following factors that caused stress [18]:

- i. The health situation: This comprises not only the concerns of one's own health situation but also the health conditions of friends and relatives.
- ii. Debt
- iii. Comparing with others: This can be in the workplace or among friends.
- iv. Body image: In general, this issue affects more women than men.
- v. Housing: The rising cost of renting flats or houses is a contributing factor.
- vi. Stress at work.

The mentioned points must be kept in mind for further discussions. This study aims to explore an alternative viewpoint. In general, there is a tendency that the emic (local) point of view should be considered. A mere Western-centric perspective was criticized from many viewpoints. As a result, some psychological approaches, such as indigenous psychology, attempt to incorporate a local understanding [26].

In this research, a phenomenological approach seemed promising as it considered the perceptions of the people who were affected by stress. The lifeworld has an influence on how to perceive the world. Therefore, it could be assumed that a change in perception might change the stress level.

1.2 Stress Reduction: Advice from Science

There are many publications about stress and how to reduce it. The well-known Mayo clinic advises the following points [17]:

- i. To get active.
- ii. To avoid unhealthy habits.
- iii. To meditate.
- iv. To laugh more.
- v. To connect with others.
- vi. To become creative.

It will be interesting to see whether the traditional way of life prescribed by the customs included some of these points too.

1.3 The Minangkabau Society: Some Background Information

This chapter provides a description of the key elements that make up the Minangkabau society. This is necessary in order to understand the major traits and terminology. The Minangkabau people live in the region of West Sumatra and are renowned for their kinship system. The society is structured in a matrilineal manner, indicating that the children are considered part of the mother's matrilineage [14,25,28]. Typically, the husband relocates to the wife's residence. Thus, the maternal uncle (the *mamak*) plays a crucial role in raising his nieces and nephews.

The inheritance system follows the matrilineal line [3]. There is a communal property that will be inherited within the matrilineage. However, the core family retains a property that they individually acquired.

The Minangkabau society is well-known among social scientists. The reason is that they follow the mentioned matrilineal social structure, but they are also known for an Islamic way of life. This interplay led to many publications with a major focus on the kinship system. However, in this article, the researchers want to look at another perspective, namely whether the traditional concept of the Minangkabau customs (*adat*) helps to reduce the stress level of an individual.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Stress became a significant topic, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Research in Indonesia showed that it affected the students [1]. Indeed, stress has become a global phenomenon, and it is worth noting that it has garnered increasing attention as a research subject, mostly because of its association with physiological diseases [27,34]. Hence, it is useful to examine how a conventional system manages stress and determines if these techniques could be beneficial for psychologists.

1.5 Research Objectives

In this research, the following research objectives were formulated:

- i. To illustrate how a traditional way of life can manage stress.
- ii. To discover whether the Minangkabau has its own way to manage stress.
- iii. To examine the application of the phenomenological idea of the lifeworld in stress management among the Minangkabau society.

1.6 Literature Review

A very significant article was published by Amri Marzali [16]. In his article, he illustrated the precarious situation of men. On one side, the men have to fulfill their role as fathers, and on the other side, they are also *mamak* and have some responsibilities toward the nieces and nephews. This creates a tense situation where men are constantly searching for stability. Even in regions beyond West Sumatra, there can exist a highly volatile condition. In previous studies, Mitchell observed that a disproportionately large number of individuals from the Minangkabau community were receiving treatment in mental clinics [20]. It must be stated that Mitchell's research focused on Jakarta. Thus, he deduced that the conditions prevailing in an urban setting give rise to ambiguities that may lead to psychological disorders. Radjab also described that there is an inner conflict for men. Another

reason is the inheritance system, which might lead to internal stress because the men might have difficulties supporting their daughters and sons [24].

Ute Marie Metje authored a captivating research publication. She conducted her research in the West Sumatran city of Padang [19]. In her book, she describes many cases that also contributed to stress: sometimes young children have to follow the high expectations of their parents. This leads to exhaustion and a lack of social contact. Other causes are more severe. Metje describes the story of a girl who is molested by her employer. The fascinating element of Metje's book is that the stories are lively, and the reader can get a good picture of the positive and negative effects of the way of life in an urban environment.

Karl Heider published two notable books that pertain to the psychology of the Minangkabau. In his book, *Landscapes of Emotion. Mapping Three Cultures of Emotion in Indonesia*, he described that different cultures might have a different concept regarding emotions [11]. Some cultures might discourage people from openly expressing their feelings, and others might have the opposite concept. Such a research result is very important because it shows that there are different forms of stress levels between different societies. The Minangkabau culture incorporates the marginal position of men, a feature absent in other regions. In his other work, *The Cultural Context of Emotion. Folk Psychology in West Sumatra*, Heider looked in greater detail at the specific situation of folk psychology in West Sumatra [12]. It was detected that folk psychology is based on a concept that has its foundation on the *adat* motto '*alam berkembang jadi guru*' [the unfolding nature serves as a teacher]. People can learn from the elements of nature. The people can make observations, for example, if a cat mother sees that her child is stressed, she may apply a specific kind of behavior.

Some critical readers might argue that the research results of the discussed publications show that the traditional understanding of the Minangkabau custom is not able to handle stress otherwise, there would not have been a high number of Minangkabau people who were admitted to psychiatric clinics. However, psychiatric disorders are also related to a lifestyle to which people are not used. For example, if someone leaves their homeland, then he or she might face difficult situations to which they have no answer. On the other hand, modern influences have the potential to alter the traditional social structure. Sometimes there is a growing poverty among the elderly because they were neglected by their children [7]. Therefore, it is essential to know that traditional values comprise a set of behaviors, and these values should prevent stress.

2. Methodology

This study employed a comprehensive approach, combining literary research that examined traditional literature, namely traditional proverbs and classical texts and stories, with qualitative research involving interviews with Minangkabau *adat* experts.

The researchers extracted the most relevant points of *adat* texts. In the traditional understanding, there are three major representatives: the leader of the matrilineages (the *penghulu*), the Islamic scholars (the *ulama*) and the intellectuals (the *cerdik pandai*). Therefore, these scholars were asked about various topics. It must be stressed that the Minangkabau village communities are relative autonomous communities (*nagari*) [13].

The researchers used a phenomenological approach that is related to the concept of the lifeworld [29]. The concept assumes that the social situation determines how we perceive and experience the outside world. Therefore, acquiring a different social status or advancing in age may alter this perception. An example could illustrate that: A person might have little income. However, the cost of living for him and his family is quite high. Therefore, he works hard. Nonetheless, he has to pay his rent, debts, and so on. All of these circumstances lead to stress. However, after some years, the man

gets a good job offer, and from that moment on, he has a good income. His social status has undergone a transformation, resulting in a shift in his perceptions. The income is sufficient, and so he has no stress regarding his former situation. This example is easy to understand and shows how a change in the social conditions leads to another perception.

Berger and Luckmann focus on everyday life [4]. Individuals engage in social interactions and collectively construct a shared subjective experience known as intersubjective reality. This term means that two or more people share a common subjective understanding of their surroundings. In this research it will be analyzed in how far the perception changes. This means that a similar situation might be stressful for one person but not for the other in the field of stress. There are specific criteria that might play a role, like the internalization of religious values. A devout Muslim may have assimilated the belief that patience and tribulations are fundamental aspects of human existence.

3. Results and Discussion

In the introduction, some of the most relevant factors that cause stress were listed. In this paper, it will be argued that traditional values and ways of living help to reduce stress. However, this does not mean that there is no stress. Of course, there are many components that lead to stress. In this paper, there will be a focus on the regional-specific components.

It was detected that the first important element was to avoid situations that are related to stress. However, it could still be possible that the person is getting stressed. In such a case, there are also techniques that help.

3.1 Avoidance of Stress

One of the key aspects is to prevent circumstances that result in stress. The Minangkabau *adat* has special features that effectively mitigate stressful situations. A crucial aspect is that a significant number of individuals are aware that specific proverbs provide valuable guidance on how to lead one's life. It is assumed that the forefathers, Datuak Katumanggungan and Datuak Perpatih Nan Sabatang formulated some of these sayings. In Figure 1, the factors that help to avoid stress are mentioned.

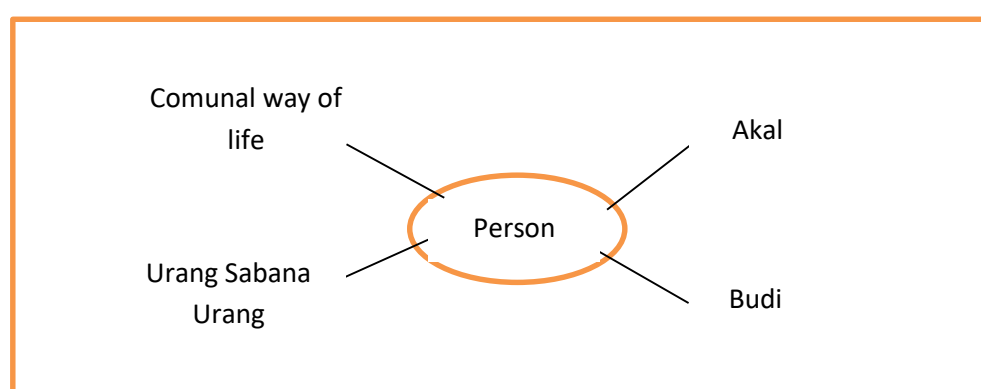


Fig. 1. Traditional Minangkabau ways to avoid stress

In the ideal case, all the points mentioned in Figure 1 play a role in the daily life of the individual. He or she participates in the communal way of life in a way that is prescribed by the Minangkabau *adat*. This means that a person follows etiquette and a refined way of life. Good character traits (*budi*) prevent the occurrence of conflicts, which would lead to stress. Furthermore, a person must employ

their intellect. This refers to the term *akal*. It is advisable to refrain from acting impulsively without taking into account the potential consequences.

Finally, the *adat* looks at the constitution of a human being. 'The true human' (*urang sabana urang*) should have certain predispositions that must be considered. For example, health and safety is an essential element that must be taken into account by the people in charge. All the points in Figure 1 are interwoven and will be explained in the following chapters.

3.1.1 Living in a Community

The Minangkabau society has various features that govern individual behavior to prevent conflicts. Proverbs are highly popular. They possess the capability to provide a form of guidance. Every person must be aware that he or she is part of society and must adopt its role.

Barek samo dipikua, ringo samo dijinjiang. [If it is heavy, (we) carry it together on (our) shoulders; (if it is) light, (we) carry it together in (our) hands] [6].

This proverb highlights the importance of individuals conducting themselves in a manner that is conducive to social interaction. Together, it is possible to overcome difficulties. This might include stress prevention, but it can also refer to an active handling of stress. If someone cannot be efficient due to stress, then other people might help. A good example might be the topic of debt. It was already mentioned that debt is a factor in stress. In a communal way of living, the person might forward the problem to the matrilineage, and if necessary, they might help. For example, they can even pawn parts of the communal land. There are a number of traditional sayings that regulate living in a community.

Duduak surang basampik-sampik, duduak basamo balapang-lapang. [Sitting alone in a narrow space, sitting together in a wide area] [22].

This saying illustrates that if we sit alone, then all becomes 'narrow'. It will be more challenging to solve complex issues. On the other side, if there are people who can support us, then it will become easier to find a solution.

Residing in a community entails the presence of obligations. It is crucial to prevent the dissemination of confidential information (*aib*) to unauthorized individuals. This action would disrupt the balance and result in stress. Conflict and tension can result in disharmony and contribute to feelings of stress.

3.1.2 Raso Pareso and the Importance of Akal

In traditional Minangkabau understanding, there is a differentiation between *raso* (feeling) and *pareso* (checking) [23,35]. It is important for individuals to use caution in their behavior. Let's say a person meets another individual who insults him. In such a case, the person should weigh the possible consequences. One could perhaps choose to retreat, disregard, or express dissatisfaction with the conduct of others. A human being has *akal* (reason and intellect), and that distinguishes him or her from an animal. Hamka, a Minangkabau scholar, identifies some indicators that demonstrate if an individual effectively utilizes their intellectual capabilities [10]:

- i. A person with *akal* is farsighted and considers the consequences of his or her behavior. It should be avoided to hurt the feelings of the counterpart.
- ii. A person who uses their intellect lives in a way that evaluates their own values. Therefore, such a person lives in a way that consists of useful action. On the other side, a human being should fight evil behavior. A person with *akal* knows that he or she has some deficiencies and tries to improve them.
- iii. A person with good intellect also has a noble character. He or she does not want to attract attention and will only answer questions if asked.
- iv. If someone has *akal*, then he or she looks for a companion who has a good character and is more knowledgeable. If these characteristics are fulfilled, then someone can improve their own behavior.
- v. A person with *akal* is not worried about the problems in this world. He or she knows that this world will not last forever.

Considering the potential outcomes, individuals may choose to behave in a manner that avoids conflict and stress.

3.1.3 *Urang sabana urang*

Urang sabana urang (the 'true' human) is a concept that assumes that there is a natural disposition in an individual [5,32]. Every human being consists of four elements: water, air, earth and fire [30]. Furthermore, it must be considered that there is the human body and the soul. In the ideal case, there is equilibrium and harmony. The Minangkabau *adat* emphasizes certain points:

- i. Everyone in the community plays an important role and has to fulfill his or her role. Some people are inclined toward manual work, while others prefer intellectual work. Each individual has the right to follow his or her interests while helping the community prosper.
- ii. Every person has an inherent religious inclination (*fitrah*). A person is born with such an inclination, and the community has to make sure that the community member can live according to religion and fulfill its obligations like praying, fasting, and so on. The soul needs spiritual development that makes it resistant in case of difficulties.
- iii. To know the own potential and interests. The matrilineage might use and pawn the communal property to support the family if there is a need (for example, to pay the study fees).
- iv. A person must have a good *akal* (intellect). All the matters that endanger good cognitive development should be avoided (like drugs, alcohol etc.). Stress is also an element that influences the *akal*. Therefore, stressful situations should be avoided or prevented.

3.1.4 *Budi*

The term *budi* refers to a good and refined character. In Minangkabau society, there are many ideals that describe such a behavior. It might regulate how to behave, like the way to respect elders or how to address a person.

According to the Minangkabau scholar Hamka, the Islamic concept of a good character (*akhlak*) closely aligns with the topic of *budi* [9]. He emphasizes that a person with a bad character could face severe repercussions in the hereafter. A good character can help when a problematic situation comes up. For example, if a person is kind and behaves in a good way, then there will be fewer conflicts with others. Furthermore, a person with good *budi* might know how to control his anger or lust. Hamka

emphasized that these elements are inherent in men and necessary for survival [8]. However, a human being possesses intellect, which enables him or her to ponder about the consequences of their behavior.

3.1.5. Tolerated forms of 'deviant' behavior

The Minangkabau society emphasizes refined and well-mannered behavior. However, it is not always easy to behave in such a way. Sometimes, a person might be frustrated or cannot adjust in a proper way. Men and women have to fulfill different roles. For men, their way of life can be challenging because, after marriage, they live in their wife's house and must adapt to its rules. Nevertheless, they must conduct themselves appropriately. However, the culture allows two major ways of behavior that contradict such a refined form of life. One element is the communal pig hunt. Such a hunt is totally unstructured and sometimes quite chaotic. The men go around, shout, and together with their dogs the whole situation seems confusing and contradicts the refined way of life. Another way is to encourage so-called rowdies (*parewa*) to move to the city and find work. If they choose to remain in the community, efforts will be made to incorporate them into the social framework. For instance, individuals have the opportunity to become instructors of martial arts, specifically *pencak silat*, and engage in competitive events.

It must be noted that society tries to integrate a person who is considered to be mentally ill into their daily lives. In his autobiography Darman Moenir described that his mother became mentally ill [21]. What is interesting is that the mother can still live within the community. She was not oppressed, and that could help to return to a normal behavior step by step.

3.2 Strategies for Managing Stress

There are two distinct manifestations of stress: acute stress, which occurs sporadically, and chronic stress. The second category may lead to specific illnesses such as heart disease or psychiatric disorders [27]. In each of these circumstances, it is imperative to address and manage the problem. In an urban environment, individuals may seek medical care from physicians. Nevertheless, within traditional societies, there exist diverse explanatory models [15]. A medical disorder might be caused by invisible entities, sorcery, and so on. Society has its own ways of finding the correct treatment. This also applies to the management of stress.

3.2.1 Implementation an Islamic way of life

Minangkabau *adat* stresses that it is based on Islamic law. Various well-known phrases mention this. The following is well-known throughout Sumatra:

Adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah [The *adat* is based on the shariah (Islamic law), the shariah is based on the book of Allah (the Qur'an)].

In the 17th and 18th century there were Sufi orders that had a network of prayer houses in different regions. The students learned from various scholars. For the Sufis, the cleaning of the heart and the emphasis on the hereafter played a crucial role. However, there were still many un-Islamic elements prevalent, such as the smoking of opium or gambling.

The 19th century witnessed the occurrence of the Padri War, which derived its name from the Padri movement. This movement aimed to establish a more orthodox interpretation of Islam [31]. The Padri conflict reached its climax with the Padri War, which took place from 1821 until 1837. Even

though the Dutch army was victorious, the Minangkabau society integrated Islamic values that should also help in the daily life.

A person who is faced with a stressful situation has to understand that this world lasts only for a limited period of time. Trials and difficult situations must be understood in an Islamic way. In the Minangkabau society, there are three important representatives within a village community, the heads of the matrilineal clans (*panghulu*), the religious scholars (*ulama*), and the intellectuals (*cerdik-pandai*). The *ulama* have the task of teaching Islamic values and encouraging the people to live accordingly.

In the research setting, the Sufi orders were not that influential any more. Many young people seemed to neglect their teachings. However, there was one exception. Namely, the *tarekat* of the *Naqsyabandiyyah*. Their *surau* remained accessible at all times, allowing the community to freely visit the local representative. Occasionally, he would counsel someone experiencing hardship to relax and reside in the secluded *surau* for a few days. Unmarried males residing at the prayer house is a common practice in Minangkabau society. However, this tendency is declining.

3.2.2 Treatment

In the village community of this research, there were healers who could help. Sometimes, family members encourage people who were faced with stressful situations to consult an expert. One member of a local Sufi order (*tarekat*) encouraged a person in distress to recite *Surah as Sharh* on water seven times and drink it afterwards. The wording of that Surah is as follows:

(1) Have We not opened your breast for you (O Muhammad)? (2) And removed from you your burden. (3) Which weighed down your back? (4) And have We not raised high your fame? (5) Verily, along with every hardship is relief, (6) Verily, along with every hardship is relief. (7) So, when you have finished (your occupation), devote yourself to Allah's worship. (8) And to your Lord (Alone) turn (all your) intentions and hopes. (Qur'an, Surah 94).

It can be seen that the Surah directly refers to the topic of hardship. However, the Surah also emphasizes that the hardship is temporary and will eventually come to an end. The person who is faced with stress should have a strengthened vital force.

During the research, it was possible to observe a concrete case:

A woman experienced distress due to her spouse engaging in an extramarital affair. She was unable to cope with the circumstances, and as a result, the crisis escalated. She proceeded to disregard her physical appearance and developed psychological issues that resulted in peculiar conduct. The matrilineage had to intervene. The elders convened and deliberated on how to respond. A decision was made to seek the advice of a traditional healer, often known as a *dukun*. A group of women accompanied her to the secluded abode of the healer. The healer employed a conventional treatment. The woman was able to reside in the residence of the healer's family. Next to his residence, there was a large garden rich with plenty of vegetables and fruits. The woman was compelled to remain and work in the garden during the day. After some days, she calmed down and could go back.

The described case is quite interesting. The idea that the unfolding nature is a teacher is one traditional concept of the Minangkabau. Therefore, it is no surprise that the healer decided that the patient should calm down in the realm of the 'teacher'. Her mind could calm down as she was busy harvesting fruits and vegetables in a remote place.

In this article, it became evident that the Minangkabau concept of stress includes the effects on the communal way of living. A person grows up in a village community and learns how to become part of society. The men and women live in their respective environments, and have to adjust to their roles. In traditional villages, the boys (if they reach a certain age) have to move to the prayer house (*surau*) of their matrilineal [25].

The socialization process is very important for young boys and girls, as they learn how to behave in certain situations. In the field of the lifeworld, there is a world that is easily reachable and shared with the counterpart. In the Minangkabau village, the two people use the same language and have a similar worldview. Nonetheless, a person might experience stress. This can be the case when a person experiences a sudden incident or if other people treat a person badly.

The traditional prescribed lifestyle intends to change the lifeworld in so far as it tries to put the individual from his or her direct surroundings. There is a change in the spatial sphere. The person might live in a remote place surrounded by nature or join a retreat of a Sufi *tarekat*. The change of the location helps to create an atmosphere that is different and calm. Slowly the stress level decreases.

In the field of psychology, there are different ways on how to act in the case of stress. There are many recommendations, like positive thinking or various techniques of relaxation. The traditional *adat* values also such methods; however, they take the local worldview into account. A good Muslim will have to internalize that a positive opinion in relation to Allah is necessary as He (swt.) knows what is best. Maybe, a person wants a high position in a company, but his inner character is 'not ready.' He could become greedy or corrupt. To remain in the old position would be better. Relaxation is also stressed in traditional values, and there are different ways to achieve it: A believer might join a group of *zikir* (remembrance of Allah) in the local *surau* or just ponder about the beauty of nature. All of these ways help to reduce stress.

4. Conclusion

It was shown that the Minangkabau society has its own way of dealing with stress. In the villages, the people grow up with traditional values and ideas. Nonetheless, there are situations that might be stressful for an individual. Therefore, there are certain ways to prevent stressful situations. In a communal form of living, it is important to maintain harmony and, if necessary, to restore it.

This article does not intend to romanticize traditional village life. There are elements that might be 'problematic' and are subject within society itself. The main objective was to show that there are traditional ways to handle stress. These traditional forms are part of the lifeworld and are respected by the local population. Therefore, they can assist in reducing the stress level. Further research can detect in detail how such methods help a person in distress.

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