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Elements of Culture in the Folklore of Kelantan: A Preliminary Survey

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ABSTRACT

Malay oral narratives are a literary heritage that symbolises the uniqueness of Malay community in translating their worldview in relation to occurrences of life. This creative storytelling is not merely for entertainment but also as a source of education. This study discusses elements of cultural heritage in the folklore of Kelantan with a focus on the districts of Tumpat and Pasir Mas. In conjunction with various sources of story comprising mythical, legendary, aetiological, and ritual, this research aims at exploring different dimensions of Kelantan's cultural heritage transmitted orally from generation to generation. The research methodology used is qualitative, which utilises interviews and library research. There were five (5) informants interviewed to obtain data in the form of folklore or folktales told by these informants. The data was then analysed thematically based on specific themes. The research findings reveal information pertinent to culture, historical resonances, and communal significance contained in the 11 oral narratives of Kelantan. Results of the study indicated that cultural aspects of Kelantanese folklore can be identified by their stories, which focus on both tangible and intangible heritage elements. The cultural elements in the oral narratives of Kelantan may contribute to a deeper understanding of the Kelantanese cultural landscape and emphasise the importance of oral narratives as a collective cultural repository that has its own characteristics. Thus, there is a need for a sustainability process to preserve the literary heritage of Kelantan for future generations.

Keywords: Culture and heritage sustainability, Kelantan, Malay literature, oral narratives

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INTRODUCTION

Oral narratives are one of the folk literary heritages disseminated orally. The transmission is a form of direct communication, face-to-face, that requires a two-way interaction between a storyteller and a listener. Oral narratives are an important record in human civilisation as they describe the thoughts of society in a nation. It is through oral narratives that a cultural heritage is preserved, as they contain values, beliefs and ways of life; thus, they may become references for the young generation. According to Abu Bakar and Sujud (2013), the concept of folklore or oral narratives that is orally transmitted from one generation to another may point to the idea that the narratives belong to the society 'collectively'. In other words, oral narratives belong to the society that symbolise a collective cultural identity of a society (Abdul Rahman, 2015).

Oral narratives for a society may consist of myths, legends, fables or stories of certain figures or events (Rahmat, 2006). These stories symbolise cultural identity of a place or nation. Furthermore, the contents are often related to culture, environment, place, time, and beliefs that may form the worldview of a society as conveyed by a storyteller. In other words, a society's culture is depicted through its folk tales.

Oral narratives are also culturally and spatially bound. It is no surprise that there are similar patterns of Malay oral narratives in different places throughout the archipelago. In the past, these stories were meant to educate, besides their function as a source of entertainment. Various moral values and didactic lessons conveyed are for exemplary purposes. It can be summed up that Malay oral narratives function as a literary heritage that portrays local genius or wisdom of the community in interpreting their worldview in a creative way.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs an ethnographic method to obtain data on folk tales through a qualitative approach of interviews and library research. The primary source obtained is through interviews with individuals such as village heads, villagers, and old folks. The secondary data are from various digital sources, particularly from databases such as Web of Science, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Science Direct. Apart from this, relevant folktale books are also consulted. These secondary sources were chosen based on the keywords such as folk tale, history of Kelantan, Malay literary heritage, and heritage sustainability. The interview data were analysed using a thematic approach. For the secondary data, a textual analysis is employed in order to reinterpret and discuss relevant concepts or ideas. The document analyses may contribute to the research findings, which are based on the keywords in the study. Places for the fieldwork in this research are limited to two districts in Kelantan: Tumpat and Pasir Mas.

The stories analysed in this study include both primary oral narratives gathered through fieldwork interviews and other stories already familiar within the local oral tradition. While six stories were collected

directly from informants in the districts of Tumpat and Pasir Mas, additional narratives, such as Puteri Endong and Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang, were selected based on their continued presence in communal storytelling and cultural memory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in folklore theory and cultural anthropology, focussing on the symbolic meanings and cultural functions of oral narratives. This approach views folklore as a medium through which communities express, preserve, and transmit their collective memory, values, and practices. By examining these stories as functional elements of social life, the study highlights how they reinforce cultural norms, articulate communal beliefs, and contribute to the continuity of Kelantanese heritage.

The folktales of Kelantan were collected from the two districts, namely Tumpat and Pasir Mas. There are six (6) stories from Tumpat and five (5) from Pasir Mas. The analysis results show that these stories can be categorised into myth, legend, humour, *hikayat*, fable, aetiology, and mystics. The fieldwork in Tumpat has resulted in a collection of six (6) stories, taken from informants in different villages in the area. The stories are Jebak Puyuh, Ajaibnya Sebatang Pokok Suci, Sang Sisik Si Berduri Putih, Beruk Belaan Mistik, Si Pengamal Lapan Roda Kebenaran, and Tenggelamnya Jong Emas Selehor. Meanwhile in Pasir Mas there are five (5) stories has been collected namely Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang, Puteri Endong, Pemujaan Mistik, Belaan Anak Kerak, and Belaan Hantu Raya. The informants are as in Table 1.

Oral narratives or folklore are part of a literary treasure that contains cultural elements. Folklore is a form of two-way communication commonly used by lower-class society, in which it involves a face-to-face interaction. It develops among the people who own these stories collectively, and they reflect their thoughts and cultural identity. In other words, folklore also proves that there is a relation between culture, tradition, and history of the community (Mat Piah, 2006).

Customs and traditions define the cultural landscape of human civilisations by dictating social interactions, ceremonial

Table 1
List of informants

Informants	Age	Sex	Locality	Role
1	60's	Male	Pasir Mas	Head of Village
2	65	Male	Pasir Mas	Villager
3	85	Male	Tumpat	Villager
4	61	Male	Tumpat	Villager/ Businessman
5	75	Male	Tumpat	Villager/ Pensioner

observances, and the commemoration of key life events. These cultural traditions, entrenched in history and profoundly embedded in societal norms, are inseparably connected to folklore, which serves as a reservoir of collective wisdom and creative expression across groups. Based on the research, it was found that there was a relationship between folklore and the embodiment of cultures, which involves customs and traditions in the Malay world, specifically in the folktales of Kelantan. The collected folktales had revealed their values, beliefs, and common identity, including rites of passage, festive celebrations, and communal rituals. 11 folktales were collected in the field, with six (6) in Tumpat and six (6) in Pasir Mas. *Jebak Puyuh, Ajaibnya Sebatang Pokok Suci, Sang Sisik Si Berduri Putih, Beruk Belaan Mistik, Si Pengamal Lapan Roda Kebenaran,* and *Tenggelamnya Jong Emas Selehor* all gained at Tumpat. Meanwhile, in Pasir Mas, there are five (5) stories has been collected, namely *Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang, Puteri Endong, Pemujaan Mistik, Belaan Anak Kerak,* and *Belaan Hantu Raya*. The collected folk stories in the research area include a variety of kinds, such as myths, exemplary stories, animal fables, and legends.

According to Mat Piah (2006), exemplary stories are folk tales that have didactic components, convey a strong moral message, and provide valuable lessons. These exemplary stories tend to be pitched at kids, and their contents are filled with strong moral values based on social, cultural, or spiritual themes. The folktales of Kelantan that are exemplary stories consist of Jebak Puyuh, Ajaibnya Sebatang Pokok Suci, Sang Sisik Si Berduri Putih, Beruk Belaan Mistik, Si Pengamal Lapan Roda Kebenaran, Tenggelamnya Jong Emas Selehor, Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang, Puteri Endong, and Pemujaan Mistik.

Animal fables are a popular traditional Malay folktale. These stories feature animals that can communicate and think like humans. The animal stories also serve as a moral lesson (Fong Peng & Ishak, 2009; Mat Piah, 2006). Examples of such stories based on this research are Sang Sisik Si Berduri Putih and Beruk Belaan Mistik.

Mat Piah (2006) further highlighted that myths in folktales are stories that are considered true and sacred. Myths are associated with God's deeds concerning the creation of man and nature, which typically occurred in the past. They are regarded as sacred and are associated with religious ideas as well as behaviours. Myths in folktales frequently feature supernatural entities and events with characters including gods, goddesses, supernatural beings, and sometimes legendary heroes. The analysis found that stories such as Ajaibnya Sebatang Pokok Suci, Sang Sisik Si Berduri Putih, Beruk Belaan Mistik, Si Pengamal Lapan Roda Kebenaran, Tenggelamnya Jong Emas Selehor, Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang, Puteri Endong, Pemujaan Mistik, Belaan Anak Kerak, and Belaan Hantu Raya are classified as myths. This is demonstrated in the story of *Pemujaan Mistik:*

> *…dio mitok air tlago untuk buat air tawar tu jah dio jampi baco gitu lah tuke urut…* [She requested well water to create "air tawar" (blessed water), and the traditional massage healer would recite incantations over it] (Informant 5, 2021).

This also is illustrated in the story of *Beruk Belaan Mistik*

> *…biaso jamu di buat ore sakit main mokyong tengoh male sapa pagi dio bwat tepi pata tepi kolam… bwat plepah…* [A feast is frequently prepared for someone who is sick during a Makyong performance, which is held from night to morning, on the beach or beside a pond, to relieve the discomfort] (Informant 4, 2021).

Folktales, in summary, are typically inseparable from a society's culture and traditions. Thus, folktales are cultural artefacts that reflect a society's values, beliefs, and customs. Their stories teach moral lessons and mirror society norms, offering insights into familial structures, gender roles, and community dynamics (Mohd Bakhir et al., 2018). These stories contain echoes of historical events, physical settings, and local traditions, which preserve cultural memories and origins for future generations. Folktales also use symbolism and metaphor to convey deeper meanings, which are often based on cultural themes and philosophical ideas.

Culture is a type of behaviour inherited from generation to generation. Daily behaviour may turn into societal practices, thus eventually form what is called culture. Abdul Kadir (1988) defines culture as human relations to their life surroundings. A similar meaning is also supported by Manterys (2018), who further contends that culture is a product of human activities practised by a community. The word 'budaya' (culture) in Malay comes from a combination of two Sanskrit words, 'Buddhi' and 'Daya'. Buddhi means intelligence of mind and reason, whereas Daya may refer to the sound mind that determines human behavioural patterns. The same definition is also discussed by Yusof (2010), who further maintains that culture is related to good deeds and a sound mind. 'Budi' may adhere to the perfect ideals, and 'daya' may mean reasonable mind and intelligence.

Furthermore, the term, 'budaya' from an etymological perspective is from two separate words, 'budi' and 'daya' (Baharom, 2009). The term 'budi' refers to the sound mind of the community in solving any conflicts. 'Daya' is related to the ability in the context of power practised in the community to solve daily problems (Subramaniam, 2015). Thus, budaya (culture) can be defined as having brought benefits to human life because it covers a wide range of positive aspects in developing soft skills, together with the ability to engage in human activities positively and effectively solve conflicts, driven by a sound mind. Endraswara (2006) has summed up culture into six (6) main categories:

1. Culture is a term that covers various aspects such as law, social norms, arts, morals, and other skills possessed by every member of a society.

Thus, culture is a medium that shapes the complexity of human life.

2. Culture can be regarded as an essential item in a heritage tradition.
3. Culture is believed to be a way of life covering aspects of behaviour, habits, values, and life aspirations and all these turn culture into normativity.
4. From a psychological aspect, culture can be seen as a form of human adaptation to his or her surroundings.
5. Culture is also a method or guideline for a society to make judgements between what is right and wrong, thus distinguishing man from animal.
6. However, it should also be noted that the definition of culture is still incomplete and less systematic.

Kaplan and Manners (1972) suggest that culture is not stagnant, as it keeps changing, and it is susceptible to changes. The acceptance of foreign culture makes the local culture more robust, with adjustments that have to be made in accordance with local features, thus resulting in cultural assimilation. Basically, culture can be divided into two: material and immaterial culture. Material culture or tangible cultural heritage refers to the instruments created by humans used in daily life. Immaterial culture, also known as intangible cultural heritage, on the other hand, is related to ways of life in communal life, such as beliefs, arts, customs, and laws.

Kamus Dewan (2005) defines tradition as habits inherited from generation to generation, practised habitually by a community. In other words, tradition refers to the norms or practices related to customary laws in a community. The term tradition may also refer to the living heritage developed in a community in two ways, either spontaneously or created (Ningsih, 2019). Piotr (2007) explains that human life can never be separated from practising tradition, although sometimes it could be contradictory to what a practitioner wants. Piotr also identifies five (5) functions of tradition:

1. Tradition is a wisdom inherited from generation to generation, and it provides a beneficial fragment of history.
2. Tradition becomes a legitimate source for worldview, conviction, confidence, social institutions, and available rules and regulations.
3. Tradition as a collective symbol attesting to the origins of a nation with its available customary laws and regulations.
4. Tradition provides a platform for the community to express its feelings to escape human despair and anxiety brought by modernity.
5. Tradition functions as a proof that the simpler ways of the old days are less complicated, thus it can be treated as a source of inspiration in seeking solace, particularly in facing conflicts or crises.

The study found a relation between history, culture, and tradition in Kelantan folklore. From a historical viewpoint, the formation of Kelantan has its own uniqueness and cultural identity. Cultural elements and traditions in the folklore of Kelantan can be identified as either tangible

or intangible culture. These elements can be found in folktales of Kelantan, where had been discovered in the stories which contents rites of passage, festive celebrations, and communal rituals.

According to the informants, there are several stories about rites of passage in the folklore of Kelantan. The rite of passage is an event or ceremony that occurs throughout the human life cycle, from birth to death (Løyche, 2022). In *Puteri Endong*, the rite of passage is evident when the protagonist undergoes a ceremonial bathing ritual upon reaching adulthood. This reflects Malay customs tied to age and social status:

> *Dio dimandikea dengea air limau dan bungo rampai sebagai tanda puteri doh cukup usio* [She was bathed with lime water and floral sprinkles as a sign of coming of age] (Informant 2, 2021).

In the Malay culture, a rite of passage is a sequence of events or rites that mark key transitions in an individual's life, typically from one social status to another. These ceremonies are deeply embedded in Malay culture and history, and they are frequently associated with significant events that begin as early as birth, followed by marriage and death. Among the ceremonies are *cukur jambul* (head shaving), *berkhatan* (circumcision), *berendoi* (cradle-rocking ceremony), *aqiqah* (Islamic ceremony to celebrate the birth of a child), weddings (merisik, bertunang, and kenduri) and funerals (tahlil). All these ceremonies involve tangible and intangible heritage. Cultural objects include yellow sticky rice, incense, yellow cloth, and religious books/objects. While intangible heritage includes charms and spells. Based on the analysis, research found that stories in the folklore of Kelantan related to the rite of passage are *Puteri Endong, Belaan Anak Kerak, Jebak Puyuh, Beruk Belaan Mistik, Si Pengamal Lapan Roda Kebenaran, Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang,* and *Pemujaan Mistik.* According to Informant 1, the story of *Belaan Anak Kerak* contains aspects of intangible heritage, such as charms and spells:

> *...dio amek air gitu gak dio baco-baco pahtu dio amek berah kunyit dio tabur-tabur gitu lah.* [After reciting incantations over some water, she sprinkled turmeric rice on the surface] (Informant 1, 2021).

Whereas cultural, ceremonial or festive celebrations are frequently used to mark various rites of passage, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death in Malay and local society. Malays also believe the celebrations are necessary for life protection and well-being, combining spiritual, communal, and cultural elements. These festivities feature a rich tapestry of rituals, customs, and traditions that reflect the local culture. According to Mat Noor et al. (2013), their festive celebrations are not only enjoyable times for socialising and commemorating key life events, but also provide an opportunity to seek spiritual blessings, communal bonding, and preserve cultural identity. Special meals are typically provided during local celebrations as

emblems of their culture, rituals, customs, and traditions. Pulut Kuning (yellow sticky rice), ayam panggang (roasted chicken), telur rebus (boiled egg), and various kinds of rice are examples of dishes typically provided to symbolise our local traditions, customs, and some rituals. On the other hand, some of the dishes, like *Pulut Kuning,* are often used to express gratitude for accomplishments and appreciation for guests. These culinary elements hold substantial cultural value, contributing to the ambience of the occasion, and strengthening the community's cultural identity and values. *Tenggelamnya Jong Emas Selehor*, *Pemujaan Mistik, Belaan Hantu Raya, Beruk Belaan Mistik, Si Pengamal Lapan Roda Kebenaran,* and *Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang*, for example, have been observed used this type of dish in their cultural celebrations as illustrated in the story, *Belaan Hantu Raya:*

> *... mace akhir tahun musim tengkujuh kena rehat la kea... tanam ubi ko padi bilo nok gi ko laut smula bwat pulut kuning la smaye hajat. smaye smaye pulut-pulut, dio kato pagi esok kito bwat smaye hajat deh di tepi pata. Pulut tu sapo make? kito lah hok make tu...* [like during the year-end monsoon season, need to take a break…cultivate cassava or rice before returning to the sea. They make yellow glutinous rice as part of a solat hajat (prayer of intention) just before they return. They will perform the solat hajat by the beach tomorrow morning. Regarding the sticky rice, who will eat it? It will be us who eat it] (Informant 4, 2021).

On the other hand, in folklore, communal rituals are collective ceremonies or practices conducted by a community, which are typically symbolic and culturally significant. These rituals serve a variety of goals in the community, including developing social relationships, upholding cultural identity, and celebrating significant occasions. Thus, communal rituals are inseparable from folklore, as they are frequently accompanied by tales, myths, or stories explaining their origins. These rituals can take several forms, including religious ceremonies, seasonal festivals, rites of passage, and community festivities. Based on analysis, communal rituals were found in the stories of Kelantan folktales, especially in *Pemujaan Mistik* and others such as *Ajaibnya Sebatang Pokok Suci, Sang Sisik Si Berduri Putih, Belaan Hantu Raya, Puteri Endong, Jebak Puyuh, Beruk Belaan Mistik, Si Pengamal Lapan Roda Kebenaran,* and *Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang.* In *Pemujaan Mistik,* communal rituals accompanied by myths and magic are described as follows:

> *...kade-kade stengoh tu dio ado unsur-unsur pemujaan mace kemenye pulut kuning telur. dio bwat pemujaan lah pemujaan gano tu dio tahu lah keno sireh spiok baru lah crito bendo tu dio bwat-bwat sireh make ko dio sdiri tu gak.* [Sometimes, it included aspects of ceremonial offerings, like as eggs, yellow glutinous rice, and burning

incense. Only they knew what kind of rites they carried out. The story would only be told if there were betel leaves and lime. Even the betel was prepared for their own use] (Informant 5, 2021).

Hence, based on this explanation, it can be concluded that Kelantan folklore collected in this study includes cultural aspects that are potentially seen through rites of passage, cultural, ceremonial, and communal rituals. The cultural aspects are shown in Table 2.

Therefore, folklore is a rich tapestry of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, involving both tangible and intangible elements such as artefacts, traditions, performing arts, rituals, traditional knowledge and language manifestations. In this research, these factors constitute the cultural fabric of communities, which can be observed by rites of passage, communal rituals and cultural ceremonials as summarised as in Table 3.

The story *Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang*, among others, is a case in point that references festive food rituals explicitly. Such scenes demonstrate culinary elements that carry deep ritualistic and symbolic meanings:

> *Pulut kuning dan ayae panggang disediakan sebagai juadah peringatae untuk roh yang disumpah jadi ikae.* [Yellow sticky rice and roasted chicken were prepared as offerings to honour the cursed soul turned into a fish] (Informant 3, 2021).

Table 2
Cultural elements in the folklore of Kelantan

Stories	Type			Cultural Elements		
	Exemplary	Animal Fable	Myth	Rites of Passage	Cultural Ceremonial	Communal Rituals
Jebak Puyuh	•			•	•	
Ajaibnya Sebatang Pokok Suci	•		•		•	
Sang Sisik Si Berduri Putih	•	•	•		•	
Beruk Belaan Mistik	•	•	•	•		•
Si Pengamal Lapan Roda Kebenaran	•		•	•	•	•
Tenggelamnya Jong Emas Selehor	•		•			•
Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang	•		•	•	•	•
Puteri Endong	•		•	•	•	
Pemujaan Mistik	•		•	•	•	•
Belaan Anak Kerak			•	•		
Belaan Hantu Raya			•		•	•

Table 3
Tradition and culture in the oral narratives of Kelantan

Folklore	Tangible Culture	Intangible Culture
Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang	• Traditional Malay village	• A mystical belief • Taboos
Puteri Endong	• Gardens and swings • Ancestral bracelet • Traditional Malay house	• A mystical belief of spirit • Customary laws • Taboos
Pemujaan Mistik	• Ceremonial objects/ offerings (pulut kuning, ayam golek, garam, and limau nipis) • Copper bowl	• Main Teri (Malay performing arts) • Rituals • Incantation/ spell • Malay funeral tradition • Collective communal action (kenduri) • Taboos
Belaan Anak Kerak	• Yellow cloth (enchanted) • Incense	• Traditional medicine/ Witchcraft • Rituals • Pregnancy taboos • Malay wedding ceremony - Solemnisation
Hantu Raya	• Ritual instrument (Bamboo)	• Malay martial art (Silat) • A Mystical belief • Cosmology • Rituals • The power of invulnerability • Animism
Jebak Puyuh	• Bird traps • Malay house	• Trapping birds • Traditional medicine/ Witchcraft • Rituals • Jungle taboos
Ajaibnya Sebatang Pokok Suci	• Bodhi tree • Sacred cloth • Buddha statue	• Rituals • Animism • Traditional medicine • A mystical belief (the sacred water spirit)
Sang Sisik Si Berduri Putih	• Thai Buddhist temple	• Religious education • Rituals • Incantation/ spell • Jungle taboos • A mystical belief (the sacred water spirit)

Table 3 (*continued*)

Folklore	Tangible Culture	Intangible Culture
Beruk Belaan Mistik	• Fish trap (Bubu)	• Rituals • Witchcraft • Incantation/ spell • Taboo
Si Pengamal Lapan Roda Kebenaran	• Religious books (Buddha Teachings) • The Noble Eightfold Path	• Buddhist education • Rituals
Tenggelamnya Jong Emas Selehor	• Jong (Malay Ship) • Antique treasures / Artifacts	• Witchcraft • A ceremony of noat • Collective communal action (Gotong-Royong)

Analysis of the study also discovered a relationship between the gathered folklore and the Malay community's customs and culture. The collected folk stories clearly demonstrate these similar cultural characteristics. They practise local customs in self-sustaining economies (farming, rice cultivation, herbalism, etc.), believe in mystical components, traditional medicine, supernatural creatures, rituals and worship, self-defence techniques, and other practices. Furthermore, syncretic elements—that is, the blending of Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, and animistic beliefs—are clearly present in the folklore of the studied area.

The gathered traditional tales also reveal the identity of the Malay population, however indirectly. We can learn more about the customs, history, and culture of the Malay people by listening to these oral histories. Folklore, in turn, serves as a cultural heritage custodian, allowing these customs and traditions to be preserved, transmitted, and interpreted by future generations.

CONCLUSION

This article has highlighted selected folktales that serve as rich case studies for understanding Kelantanese culture. The narratives explored, such as *Puteri Endong*, *Jebak Puyuh*, *Pemujaan Mistik*, *Beruk Belaan Mistik*, and *Sumpahan Tragis Ikan Kekacang*, were chosen for their vivid portrayal of cultural values, ceremonial practices, and traditional beliefs. Through these stories, the study offers deeper insight into the symbolic and social functions of folklore within the local community. Folklore stands as a vivid tapestry woven from the strings of human experience, creativity, and society. Its relevance exists not just in maintaining the cumulative knowledge but also the heritage of varied areas in promoting a much deeper understanding of human nature as well as

the world around us. Through the stories and customs, folklore works as a bridge attaching the past to the future, improving our lives with very useful lessons, understandings, and sense of belongingness. We shall then honour folklore in all its types as they may depict the abundant variety of human expression and ensure that the timeless wisdom contained within these narratives continues to inspire, educate, and unite us across time and space.

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